

Accuracy

A media organisation is likely to be judged on the accuracy and reliability of the journalism it produces. That journalism must be well sourced, supported by strong evidence, examined and tested, clear and unambiguous. We don't need to have the whole story, but we need to be totally transparent in declaring what we know and what we don't know and making clear the difference between verified fact and rumour and speculation.

A media organisation will always be judged on the accuracy and reliability of the journalism it produces.

Some will succeed by offering alternative material, such as gossip and rumour, and they will be building a business strategy based on some people wanting to read unsubstantiated information. Others might decide to take the risk involved in running one-sided reporting that claims to be investigative. But for those who believe journalism should be trusted and reliable, accuracy is an essential first step. It means your journalism must be:

- well sourced
- supported by strong evidence
- examined and tested
- clear and unambiguous.

We don't need to have the whole story, but we need to be totally transparent in declaring what we know and what we don't know and making clear the difference between verified fact and rumour and speculation. Speed and accuracy

Accuracy comes ahead of speed. If you are not sure, hold fire. Being first and wrong is not a model to aim for. Being right, always reliable and measured is.

Those who trust you will be prepared to wait for your version. In fact they might use your coverage to check whether a hastily prepared item by a competitor has any truth in it.

Caution is particularly needed if the topic is controversial. In such cases, too much haste can cause lasting damage to your news brand. Most major news providers require:

- first hand sources
- double-checking of facts
- validation of material submitted
- confirmation of two reliable sources

- corroboration of any claims or allegations made.

It is also important to have your own sources. Don't just chase those used by others. They may not be reliable. Build your own trusted contacts and turn to those. Contributors

Be cautious about people offered up to speak on an issue. They might be being promoted for a reason other than to accurately inform the public debate. You need to take care to examine the motives of those offering contributors and

those offering to contribute.

Don't take for granted what you read on a third party website. It might look professional and it may sound convincing, but that doesn't mean it is true.

If you lift material from an online site you are running a great risk, especially if you reproduce it word for word. It is fine to research information and check it out yourself, but you must never take as fact information that is published elsewhere.

Don't be fooled by images, videos, audio and reproduced documents. Digital manipulation is rife. In the past, an edit in a filmed interview often had to be covered by what is known as a cut-away shot, which took the viewer's eye away from the point in the interview that was being edited. Now, with digital manipulation, that is no longer necessary. So don't be taken in by what you see and hear in audio/video footage. It might have been altered.

Unless you know the person who created the material, and are absolutely sure they are genuine and honest, remain cautious until you have verified it. Or, if you feel you must refer to it, qualify and qualify again so that your users don't think you are recommending the material as proven fact.

When people turn to you they expect you to deliver facts. You can refer to material gathered elsewhere, but always qualify it by saying that this material is from another source, and state that source. It is also worth adding that you have not been able to verify the information given, if that is the case. Keeping notes and records

Most reporters, when they start work for the first time, are given a notebook and told to keep it safe and never throw it away. You never know when you may have to refer to your notes as evidence in a legal case.

Accurate note taking is essential. The usual rule is that notes must not only be accurate, but they must also be reliable and contemporaneous.

That means that you need to have spoken to reliable sources at the time an incident happened, rather than jot down from memory casual conversations long after the event. The latter is unlikely to stand up in a court of law.

You will also need to keep records of the research you carried out in reaching your conclusions. These should all be contained in your notebook, or, in the case of those using computers, in folders and files. Protecting sources

Always keep a track of all bookmarks and email correspondence relating to your stories. However, where anonymity has been requested and where it is essential, please make sure that your records do not identify the source you have interviewed.

You must always make sure that you protect your sources. Great care must be taken when you agree to anonymity and an 'off the record' briefing, but once you have agreed to it you must honour it.

Remember, you need your anonymous source to agree to you using as much information as possible without identifying them, particularly if they are making serious allegations, so that the audience is not misled and can put some value on what they say.

Anonymity also raises some ethical issues about misleading the public. You might agree to any of the following to disguise identity:

- a voice-over
- blurred images
- false locations
- false names
- false age.

These are fine as long as you make it clear that you are using such techniques and state clearly why you are using them. However, increasingly, media organisations are being caught out for misleading the public. You must not use any methods that could be seen as a false representation of the truth.

When agreeing to anonymity, try to ensure that the person you are interviewing agrees to you sharing their identity with your senior editor.

It might be hard for you to use the material if those who are in charge of the output are not able to make their own judgement as to the authenticity of the person and the information they are offering. It will also help protect you and your sources in the long run.

The old rule about having a second pair of eyes to check your work for errors is worth extending to fact checking. Double check and then check once again, just to be sure.

If you are dealing with an anonymous source who is making serious allegations you will need to refer up to senior editors before proceeding. They will need to decide whether:

- the story is of significant public interest
- the source is credible and reliable
- the source is likely to be in a position to offer sound information
- there are any legal issues
- anyone's safety could be at risk
- a response to the allegations can be found.

If you agree to press ahead with the interview, then you need to make clear to the user/audience/reader the conditions under which the material was gathered. We must never mislead our audience. Reconstruction and archive material

Accuracy also covers reconstructions of events. These should be as near as possible to the actual event. Where they are not, that also needs to be made clear.

If you can get by without staging a reconstruction, try to do so. Reconstructions can confuse the audience.

So too can the use of library material. Always make it clear where the material is from, when it happened and the circumstances surrounding the event.

Never use library material to represent a current event without saying so. Apart from it being dishonest, you are likely to be caught out.

Seasons change, people paint their properties, roads get widened and bypassed, street signs change. Library and archive material doesn't keep up with such changes.

This is particularly relevant in the fast-moving world of UGC (user-generated content) when what you say in your output is likely to be clipped, rehashed, copied, reused and quoted within seconds. You need to make sure that in no way your output can be misrepresented. The truth is, you can't, but you can take all reasonable measure to avoid the pitfall. Misleading the audience

The concern over misleading the audience has recently been extended to some everyday journalistic practices that most in the profession considered to be the norm. Issues such as:

- reverse questions added after the interview ends
- noddies and two-shots (where the interviewer or the interviewee gives body-language signals in response to questions asked or answers given)
- cut aways to cover edits
- set up shots to lead into the interview
- overlay shots that show the interviewee at work.

All these can be fairly innocent editing techniques used to make a long and sometimes boring interview more digestible, however, they can also be used to mislead. Be careful how you use them and do so bearing in mind that the methods you use need to stand up to scrutiny and could we end up being required to do so. Third-party material

Take care with third-party material.

Always make clear that the material is from others and that you have not verified and checked it. Such material could cover financial reports, traffic reports, sporting results and weather reports.

Simply say 'according to...' or 'it's being reported by...' and you are covered. Attribution is key.

However, in contentious issues, you will also be judged on who you turn to, so those sources you use need to be balanced and representative of the widest opinion base in order to protect your credibility. Sourcing such information is part of your commitment to accuracy.

At times you will want to build a report around statistics. Sometimes those statistics are offered to all news outlets via the wires. Even so, it's worth qualifying. 'According to...' is useful in these circumstances.

It's also wise to consider adding the margin of error, particularly with trends. It is conceivable that businesses, political parties and individuals may make important decisions based on what you say. Qualify your comments and you are less likely to mislead and also less likely to be called to account. Admitting mistakes

The willingness to admit mistakes is another part of the drive to be accurate.

This has become all the more important in the age of online archives, although it has always been the case that old newspaper cuttings could result in an inaccurate report being circulated again years later.

Your news organisation will have a correction strategy.

In the online world, it's worth considering having a special section for this where all errors are clearly listed along with the correction that was made at the time. It is a valuable reference point and is part of your commitment to your audience to operate transparently and to be accountable.

On 10 October 2005, the Guardian newspaper ran a story in print and online about an alleged incident in southern China.

Under the headline 'They beat him until he was lifeless' the article continued, "How democracy activist in China's new frontline was left for dead after a brutal attack by a uniformed mob."

A week later, the newspaper's 'readers editor' Ian Mayes, who is also the president of the Organisation of News Ombudsmen, wrote a retraction in the same newspaper and online. The headline read 'Seeing and believing in China' and continued, 'The readers' editor on mistakes made by a reporter under pressure'.

This shows how the Guardian was quick to investigate and how it published the retraction. I also throws up more issues about accuracy. If you read both links, particularly the piece by Ian Mayes, you will pick up some important tips about how those on the newsdesk should judge material filed by correspondents in the field. These cover issues such as:

- the length of time the correspondent has been know
- the situation s/he was in
- the likely stress they were under
- working to tight deadlines
- distance and inability to communicate directly
- fear and trauma.

The role of the editor is to consider all these while also aiming to deliver the news to the audience as quickly as possible. It is a difficult balancing act, but one which is essential if a media organisation's reputation for accuracy is to be preserved. Exercises

- We are covering a riot and see a man lying unconscious by the roadside with blood pouring from a head wound. Police officers are fighting back an angry mob. We take a picture of the man. What will the caption read?
- There has been a strike at a steel works. The union claims all its 100,000 members were out on strike, but the employer says 50% turned up for work and defied the picket lines. You had reporters at the gates of the steel plant all day and there were no reports of anyone crossing the picket line and you have no footage of anyone reporting for work. How do you report the situation?
- In the Guardian case (above) what should have been the main questions the desk editor have asked in order to make sure the filed report was accurate?

This site has used the BBC's Editorial Guidelines as the basis for these short modules on values and ethics. We sought and were given permission to quote from the guidelines and to develop the themes to the extent that they are no longer an accurate reflection of the BBC's stance. These guidelines contain a mix of regional experiences and sensitivities which have been used to develop the guidelines and give them local relevance. These pages are not endorsed by the BBC. MHM would like to thank the BBC for allowing us to use its material.