

News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors

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Abstract

More than 300 local news stories from two West Coast dailies were reviewed for accuracy by the persons who had been reported on. Accuracy rates in this study generally replicate those found previously. The closer the acquaintanceship between the newsmaker and anyone on the news staff, the less likely an error will be perceived by the newsmaker. Close acquaintanceship also appears to ameliorate the impact of errors on the newsmaker. So-called subjective and objective errors do not appear to be distinguishable by their seriousness.

The tradition of formal accuracy surveys began in 1936 with Charnley [4], who mailed 1,000 news items clipped from three Minneapolis dailies to persons named in the stories, asking for their perceptions of inaccuracies. In 1965, Brown [3] tested 200 stories from 42 Oklahoma weeklies, and in 1966 Berry [1] compared the accuracy of three San Francisco Bay Area dailies on "spot" and "anticipated" news stories. In 1967 and 1968, Blankenburg [2] examined the accuracy, over time, of two West Coast dailies, one rural and one suburban. Then, using part of Blankenburg's sample, Grey and Lawrence [6] in 1968 amplified the mail technique by conducting personal interviews on accuracy with both newsmakers and reporters.

The 1967-68 mail surveys were among several tools used by the author in exploratory research on two community press councils—groups of interested laymen who have volunteered to advise their local publisher on the community's information needs and to evaluate the performance of the newspaper.

The two newspapers with councils were the rural Bend (Ore.) *Bulletin*, whose circulation was about 8,500, and the suburban Redwood City (Calif.) *Tribune*, circulation 21,000. Among other things, a press council is expected to encourage, through its com-

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ments and sheer presence, greater accuracy in reporting; thus the accuracy survey is one of several tools appropriate to press council research.

But what is "accuracy?" News accuracy is broadly defined here as truthful reproduction of an event or activity of public interest. An inaccuracy is a flaw in the reproduction. For many elements of a news story there is no accessible independent criterion of accuracy, and the investigator turns to the newsmakers—persons who have been reported. Operationally defined, an inaccuracy is a news story error that is noted by a person who is "significantly mentioned" in the story. An inaccurate story is one that contains at least one such error.

A person who is "significantly mentioned" is one who is named as a witness to, or a participant in, the event covered. For example, if a story reported the appointment of a civic committee, the official making the appointment would be "significantly mentioned" and so would the chairman of the committee if he were quoted or present at the time of the appointment. The new members, if merely listed, would not be deemed significantly mentioned. In general, the person surveyed is one who has first-hand knowledge of the event.

Because the sample includes every person who is significantly mentioned in a local story, the same story may be evaluated by more than one newsmaker; a 100-story mailing involves, on the average, 135 newsmakers. However, for most of the analysis only one response to a story is used—that of the earliest-mentioned person in the story. It is assumed that he has the fullest knowledge of the event.

In the Berry and Blankenburg surveys, subjects were asked whether they noticed any of 14 types of error that ranged from misspelling to misplaced emphasis. Some of the 14 error types are deviations from objective fact and are called, after Berry, "objective errors." Others result from mistakes of judgment on the part of the reporter as he fashions his reproduction of reality; for example, a reporter may treat one portion of an event at too great length. Such mistakes of judgment noted by respondents are called here "subjective errors."

As assigned by Berry, subjective errors include omission of information necessary for a full understanding of the event, overemphasis of some aspect, underemphasis of another, or a misleading headline. The categorizations are open to debate. Faulty headlines and misquotations do not fit easily into either class.

In the 1967–68 study of press councils, the accuracy technique was used to provide descriptive information of the two newspapers; to test for changes in accuracy over time; to examine accuracy perception in relation to reader evaluation of the newspapers; to gain information on the impact, or “seriousness,” of inaccuracies; and to extend the body of knowledge on how accuracy may be improved.

A *caveat* is in order. This kind of accuracy survey relies on the perceptions of the individual being reported, and his involvement may color his judgment, particularly if the story, as well as an error in it, reflects unfavorably on him. For example, a person who finds himself mentioned in a police story may well be biased in his perceptions of accuracy, and the finding of an error may owe as much to his myopia as to misinformation on the police blotter. A citation of inaccuracy is probably more valid if a second respondent to the story concurs. (Multiple respondents agree on accuracy in about half of all cases.) Still more valid is concurrence on accuracy between the subject and the reporter; a shortcoming of the mail technique is its reliance solely on the person reported.

METHODOLOGY

The press council study retained the basic accuracy procedure of sending clippings with a two-page questionnaire and cover letter. The mail technique is valuable for its convenience (it can be conducted at some distance from the locale under study), its relatively low cost, and the high number of subjects who can be queried. On the other hand, mailed questions cannot be explained by an interviewer, nor can interesting responses be readily probed.

Only local news stories were used because of the problem of locating the subjects of out-of-town accounts. Advertisements, editorials, and special-interest news, such as sports, women's, and

financial, were excluded in order to make the sample more manageable and to avoid the types of reporting for which standards of accuracy are elusive (e.g., local sports stories are forgiven their optimism, and all brides are beautiful).

The accuracy survey does not come close to measuring the whole newspaper, but it does cover a crucial fraction of it. A reader's opinion of a newspaper's accuracy is probably formed largely by local reporting, whose product he can most readily compare with actuality. It is also this portion of the newspaper that justifies the paper's role as a public watchdog. Certainly a press council takes its longest looks at local reporting.

The investigation consisted of four mailings during the period from November, 1967 to late May, 1968. Clipping and mailing began on a selected date and continued until a requisite number of stories—at least 100—had been mailed. Consecutive weekday issues were used.

The stories were mailed on the same day they were published in order to reach the subjects while their memories were still fresh and their interest high. The questionnaire began with a simple query as to the general accuracy of the story. If the account was thought to be inaccurate, the subject then answered more detailed questions about the several types of error, beginning with the objective and ending with the subjective. These detailed questions have the virtue of requiring the respondent to consider all types of errors and to review the story carefully.

All stories were logged before mailing, and a code sheet was prepared for each. Preliminary coding consisted of noting the log number, the number of paragraphs, and whether the story was bylined. Before mailing, the story was proofed for typographic errors, the only type of inaccuracy determined by the investigator. After an appropriate interval, a second query was sent to nonrespondents, complete with the story, a new cover letter, and a condensed schedule.

FINDINGS

In the surveys summarized in Table 1, inaccuracies were found in about half of all stories. The high rate of accuracy in Brown's survey may be due to the greater amount of time a weekly news-

Table I
 Four Newspaper Accuracy Surveys Compared
 (Typographic Errors Included)

	Newspapers Used	No. of Stories	No. of Errors	Mean No. of Errors Per Story	Response Rate	% of Stories Accurate
Charnley (1936)	3 metro dailies	591	455	.77	59.1%	54%
Brown (1965)	42 small weeklies	143	123	.86	72	59.5
Berry (1966)	2 metro, 1 suburban daily	270	412	1.52	75.8	47.3
Blankenburg (1967-68)	1 suburban, 1 rural daily, twice each	332	389	1.17	75.5	40.1

paper has for processing the news, or to the less controversial content of weeklies.

Surveys Compared

The inaccuracies listed in Table 1 include typographic errors as determined by the investigator. Actually, very few respondents noted typographic errors in the 1967-68 study, although a high number had been discerned before mailing. (Later tables present accuracy rates with "typos" excluded.) The low visibility of typographic errors relates to the findings of Greenberg and Razinsky [5] in an experiment on the effects of copy laden with technical errors. They concluded that many errors may have been ignored by the readers and that "one has to be extremely deviant in his use of the language code before an accumulation of errors will affect the receivers."

The high response rates are due in part to the involvement of the newsmakers. It is not uncommon for respondents to scribble a note of thanks for the opportunity to express themselves about a story or the newspaper in general. This phenomenon suggests an abiding frustration in some readers who want to talk back to the newspaper but feel incapable of expressing themselves effectively. They may also have some legitimate doubts as to whether a critical letter would be published.

Table 2 presents errors ranked according to frequency. Sins of omission are among the most frequently noted inaccuracies. Errors of emphasis, too much and too little, are about equally frequent, and this finding suggests that newspapers are hewing to a middle course.

Influences on Accuracy

What affects accuracy? The pressure of time is an influence on the frequency of objective errors, according to Berry [1]. He also found that stories derived from personal interviews were among the most accurate, and that stories acquired from telephone interviews or police reports were among the least accurate.

This suggests that face-to-face interaction aids accuracy; the reporter and newsmaker communicate more efficiently during the news-gathering if their contact is unmediated by a telephone or

Table 2
 Error Ranks in Two Newspaper Accuracy Surveys
 (Shown as Percentages of Total Errors Found)

Type of Error	Berry (412 Errors)	Blankenburg (389 Errors)
Omission*	16.0%	12.6%
Misquotation	13.1	11.8
Typographic and spelling	12.9	34.5
Inaccurate headline*	12.9	7.7
Overemphasis*	10.2	6.7
Underemphasis*	10.2	8.5
Name wrong	7.0	3.6
Figures wrong	5.6	5.1
Title wrong	3.1	2.3
Age wrong	2.2	.5
Address wrong	2.2	1.0
Location wrong	2.2	2.1
Times wrong	1.7	2.3
Dates wrong	1.7	1.3
	100.0	100.0

* Defined by Berry as "subjective" errors; other regarded as "objective."

someone else's notes, and a more accurate story is the result. A rival explanation is that the newsmaker tends to be less critical of a story written by someone he has met than of one produced by an unknown cog in an impersonal machine; whether the story is "really" more accurate or not, the newsmaker simply notices fewer mistakes. Both explanations, but particularly the second, incline us to examine accuracy in terms of acquaintanceship with the newspaper staff.

Each newsmaker was asked how well he happened to know anyone on the newspaper, excluding carriers. Those who indicated a high acquaintanceship ("know well enough to speak to" or "know very well") reported about one third fewer errors than those who had a low acquaintanceship, and the difference is statistically significant. (See Table 3.)

Perhaps respondents were loath to find errors in the work of a "friend." Are other classes of newsmakers more or less inclined

Table 3
Error Rates by Degree of Acquaintanceship^a, Occupation, and Sex

	Errors per Respondent
High acquaintanceship	.64 ^b
Low acquaintanceship	1.03
Bend: public officials	.67
Bend: all others	.40
Males	.78
Females	.90

^a High: "Know very well," or "Know well enough to speak to."

Low: "Don't really know anyone," or "Know the name or face."

^b $t = 3.124$ at 328 df ; $p < .005$. Other differences not significant.

to see mistakes? If any occupational group is sensitive to errors, it would seem to be government officials. Often considered adversaries of newsmen, officials are expected to be finicky about their own coverage. Responses of known city and county officials in Bend were examined. While their rate of error perception was higher than that of all others, the difference is not significant. (See Table 3.) Nor is there a significant difference in error perception between men and women.

In addition to deadline pressure, the interview mode and level of acquaintanceship, staff quality also bears on accuracy. Over a period of time, a stable and mature news staff would be expected to exhibit a high accuracy rate with some seasonal fluctuations. But we might hypothesize that if the staff is disrupted and undergoes unusual stress, its accuracy rate will drop.

The study shows a striking deterioration in the Bend *Bulletin's* accuracy between the early and late administrations of the survey (as opposed to no deterioration in the Redwood City *Tribune*). The proportion of stories gathered first-hand by reporters did not drop, nor did the mean level of acquaintanceship. But during this period of time one experienced reporter retired and was replaced by a cub. Another reporter ran afoul of the law. In the spring the general manager advanced to a larger newspaper, and the publisher, who took an active editorial role, had to limit his participation because of illness. Additionally, the second accu-

racy survey coincided with controversial local elections when newsmakers may have been particularly critical of coverage.

Error Seriousness

Earlier accuracy surveys did not ask how "bad" an error was. Presumably, some kinds of inaccuracy are more "serious"—distressing to the newsmaker—than others. The present study experimented with an item that asked respondents to rate the seriousness of an erroneous story on a seven-point scale. Unfortunately, the questionnaire lacked room for a seriousness scale of each individual error, and the single item had to suffice for one or several errors in a story. It remains possible, however, to compare seriousness ratings with levels of acquaintanceship, frequency of errors, and the objective or subjective character of the errors.

Error seriousness relates to both the number of errors perceived and to the level of acquaintanceship (which, as we have seen, relate to each other). As the number of errors in a story increases, so does the seriousness of the inaccurate story ($r = .43$ at 104 *df*; $p < .0005$). At the same time, with error frequency held constant, there is a tendency for persons who have a higher acquaintanceship to report lower seriousness. A negative correlation between error seriousness and acquaintanceship was found ($r = -.20$ at 100 *df*; $p < .025$).

As to differences in seriousness between subjective and objective errors, it was hypothesized that subjective errors would be considered the more serious because the newsmaker might feel the reporter was making prejudicial (not "honest") mistakes, and because matters of judgment are more open to question. For each newspaper, seriousness ratings were in the hypothesized direction, but the subjective-objective differences reached statistical significance only for the Redwood City *Tribune*, where the frequency of subjective errors also was higher ($t = 3.99$, at 45 *df*; $p < .0005$).

We cannot say that subjective errors are naturally "worse" than objective errors. The salience of the story or error to the newsmaker may make more of a difference than the subjective or objective basis of the error. An objective error about the future date of a meeting may well be more serious to the president of a PTA

than a reporter's subjective underemphasis of the meeting's agenda. Future accuracy investigators who are interested in error seriousness might wish to determine how important the story is to the newsmaker and how he rates the seriousness of each distinct error. We would then have a better perspective on the meaning of the individual types of mistakes and how they affect the respondent.

Accuracy and Evaluation

An accuracy survey is not an ideal vehicle for probing public attitudes toward the press. The sample is non-random, the subjects are personally involved in the news, and there is no room in the typical accuracy schedule for a full battery of attitudinal items. But the opportunity to compare opinions toward the newspaper with perceptions of accuracy is attractive. One obvious hypothesis is that persons who find errors will state a lower opinion of the newspaper than those who find none. The answer to the question of whether error—perception adversely affects evaluation, as far as this study was able to probe it, is no. The mean evaluations of error finders were not significantly lower than the means of those who found none.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The mail accuracy survey is a relatively simple instrument that can provide rich, though sometimes ambiguous, data on one aspect of a newspaper's performance. Basically, it is a survey of participants in local news events. A large number of subjects can be surveyed, and response rates are usually high. However, answers cannot readily be as probed as in personal interviews.

Continuing studies of media accuracy are of potential value to both the newspaper and its readers. A publisher could profitably conduct regular accuracy surveys on his newspaper; so could a reporter who wishes to examine his own performance. The public appears to welcome a chance to respond.

The present study joins its predecessors in finding that newsmakers report errors in about half of all stories, and that among the most frequent nontypographic errors are those of omission, misquotation, headlines, and emphasis.

Additionally, this study produced these findings:

1. A high degree of acquaintanceship between the newsmaker and the newspaper staff is an aid to accuracy.

The present study revealed that an ongoing close acquaintanceship between the newsmaker and anyone on the news staff results in fewer errors. High acquaintanceship may enhance communication between the reporter and the subject, or inhibit error perception, or both.

2. Close acquaintanceship also appears to ameliorate the impact of errors.

Newsmakers who reported a high degree of acquaintanceship with anyone on the newspaper staff not only reported fewer errors than newsmakers of low acquaintance, but also judged the errors to be less serious.

Subjective and objective errors probably cannot be distinguished in terms of seriousness. A simple error can be as hurtful as faulty emphasis. To the newsmaker, the innocence of the mistake is of little moment; its effect, not its cause, is what hurts. We need to know more about the seriousness of individual errors in connection with the importance of the story in the life of the newsmaker.

3. Local news accuracy can worsen rather abruptly.

In a modest longitudinal study we find that performance on accuracy is not necessarily stable, and that staff disruptions and environmental stresses appear to have deleterious effects. One implication of this finding is that a fair picture of a newspaper's accuracy can be drawn only if its output is surveyed more than a few times. Another is that a publisher who is interested in maintaining accuracy should make appropriate investments in staff satisfaction and stability.

4. General satisfaction with a newspaper does not appear to be greatly influenced by an occasional notice of an inaccuracy.

Respondents who perceived errors did not exhibit a significantly lower opinion of the newspaper than those who saw none. However, this study examined the error/evaluation relationship only in the mass of respondents. Doubtless some individuals—perhaps some rather influential ones—lower their opinion of the newspaper when it contains errors.

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