



Part 6 - Researching and Fact Checking in the Newsroom

By

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There is a considerable difference between handling the challenges of breaking news and dealing with the less- hectic demands of assignments that allow time for preparation. A high-intensity editorial metabolism comes into play when researchers have to dig up facts and background in a hurry to support coverage of a breaking news story ... Errors can occur at any point in the production process: Information can be wrong, sources interviewed on video can provide inaccurate quotes or an unfair context, inferences in the script can be unfair, conclusions can be overstated. The copy and video editing and the fact checking should ensure that the final script is fair, accurate and balanced. *Best Practices*, p 27

“Fact Checking” are words we have heard often in the last several years. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word **fact** as — “something that has actual existence; a piece of information presented as having objective reality.” The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as — “something that is known to have happened or to exist, especially something for which proof exists, or about which there is information.” When someone says they are ‘checking’ a fact, it means they

are ‘verifying’ that the fact is true by comparing it with a source, original, or authority (*Merriam-Webster*).

And there we have, as they say, ‘the rub.’ Who or what is the source? Who or what is the authority? Just because someone says they are a ‘fact checker’ does not mean they ‘know’ the facts, know how to ‘find’ the facts, or are even interested in making sure the ‘facts’ are really ‘facts.’

A ‘real’ fact checker is someone who knows how to discover the truth of a subject and tell the truth about what they discover — even if it doesn’t make their family, friends, or employer happy. Making people ‘happy’ is not in any **real journalism** handbook I’ve ever seen. Telling the truth often has the opposite effect on people journalists know. Journalism is not about winning a *popularity contest*. Real ‘fact checking’ is about confirming that something written or stated is in fact, a ‘fact’ — the truth.

Researching Sound Bites

Av Westin, network news executive and author of [*Best Practices for Television Journalists*](#) (The Freedom Forum's Free Press/Fair Press Project, 2000), interviewed me and dozens of other journalists for his book. We were promised 'no direct attribution in this handbook, an arrangement that assured maximum candor' from those interviewed (p 7).

One of the reasons I think many current 'fact checkers' are so bad at their jobs is that they don't do sufficient 'research' before publicly announcing the results of their 'fact checking.' It's almost as if they either 'know everything' or have an agenda because of how quickly they announce their 'checks.' As a long-time career journalist I know how long it takes to fully check facts for most stories because of all the details that have to be corroborated. Also, you must contact every 'other side' of each story to make sure no 'stone' is left unturned.

Here are some of the participant responses in the journalism handbook about the importance of research. Keep in mind that Mr. Westin talked with me and other journalists in 1999 for his book (published January 2000).

“Accuracy is getting it right. Balancing is making sure that the other side gets its say. It’s as basic and simple as that.”

“Learn the nuts and bolts. The first thing you do is read as much as you can. Then start making calls.”

“You get zillions of documents to look at. That’s part of the news-gathering process. Slow down and look at all those things.” *Best Practices*, p 27

Another issue is ‘fairness.’ Westin put it this way — “Conduct the inquiry with an open mind. Avoid the tendency to see the story through the lens of your own perceptions.” p 28

I so wish that today's 'fact checkers' would do that. What I often see are responses written by people whose minds are closed because they see stories through the lens of their own perceptions. The shame is that too many news consumers trust these fact-checkers to actually know what they're saying or writing. The fact-checkers often get it wrong, which means the public gets it wrong. From my perspective as someone who covered news and managed news teams for decades — that's horribly WRONG!

Fact Checking Sound Bites

Here are some journalist ‘sound bites’ from 25 years ago about **fact-checking** —

“Sometimes we say we know something because so-and-so said it. Well, just because so-and-so said it doesn’t mean it’s a fact. We have to have a second source on it, or we have to have some kind of documentation.”

“Take the script and go through it line by line. Ask stupid things like, ‘How do we know his first name is James?’ You’ve said the wrong name over and over and over to yourself so you don’t know if it’s the right name anymore. You can easily think you know things to be true when they may not necessarily be true.” *Best Practices*, p 28

Here are some bullet points from Av Westin about the topic of ‘fact checking’ —

- Go through the script line by line
- Challenge every fact
- Be aware that you may think something is true when it is not
- Ask basic questions, such as, “How do we know this is his name, occupation or real role in the story?”
- Be meticulous about the sources for the story
- Know what their biases are, what their agendas are and whether they can speak with authority on the subject
- Be skeptical of the accuracy of quotes
- Demand a second source or other documentation to affirm the accuracy of each quote
- Double-check print articles that are the basis for television news stories. Newspaper or magazine articles can be wrong. Don’t assume the story is factual or balanced or fair just because it has been printed in the

local newspaper. Call the sources and re-report the story.

Wise advice from Av Westin — 25 years ago. That's what modern 'fact-checkers' should be doing, but too many of them are not. They need to read Westin's handbook and go back through the basics of journalism outlined in this Subtack series about *Real Journalism*.

Conclusion

Many of today's professional 'fact checkers' need to go back to school. They need to learn from the professionals who were doing news from a quarter century ago, at least. Being 'modern' doesn't make things better or right. In fact, much of modern journalism is flat-out 'wrong' and has made our profession a disgrace to the audience and journalists who care about real journalism.

Let's get some wisdom back into journalism. Let's make it 'real' again. Let's do the kind of journalism that news viewers, readers, and listeners can 'trust' again. We have a long way to go to accomplish those goals, but there's no time like the present to get started.

Part 7

In the next part of this special series I'll share about '*The Line Between Fair and Unfair, Legal and Illegal in the News Coverage*' Here's a 'tease' from Av Westin (25 years ago) —

Reporters and researchers assigned to dig out facts before actually going into the field are frequently confronted with people who may be reluctant to talk to them. There are steady complaints from the public about being misled by reporters, producers or researchers.
Best Practices, p 41



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee