



VERIFICATION HANDBOOK

AN ULTIMATE GUIDELINE ON
DIGITAL AGE SOURCING
FOR EMERGENCY COVERAGE.

European
Journalism
Centre



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Chapter2:

Verification Fundamentals: Rules to Live By



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In 1996, I did a project on an American high school [girls basketball team that had won the Iowa state championship 25 years earlier⁴](#). I interviewed all 12 members of the Farragut team, as well as the star and coach of Mediapolis, the team Farragut beat for the championship.

I asked them all how Farragut won the game. They gave different, often vivid, accounts of the same story: Mediapolis star Barb Wischmeier, who was 6 feet tall, scored easily on the shorter Farragut girls early in the game, and Mediapolis took the lead.

The Farragut coach sent Tanya Bopp, who was barely 5 feet, into the game to guard Wischmeier. Bopp drew several charging fouls (some remembered specifically that it was three or four fouls) on the larger girl, who became flustered and less aggressive. Farragut came back to win the game.

I didn't question these consistent memories in my reporting, but learned almost by accident that they were exaggerated. One of the girls loaned me a video of the game. I watched the whole game, looking for details that would help my story. I wasn't challenging anyone's memory, but when I finished the tape, I thought I must have missed something. So I watched it again.

Tiny Tanya Bopp drew only one foul on the larger girl. It did fluster the Mediapolis star and was the turning point of the game, but it happened only once. All those firsthand accounts I had heard were inaccurate, fueled by the emotions (joy or anguish) of an important moment in their lives, and shaped by a legend that grew from the game.

The legend - and the opportunity to honor it by debunking it - gave me a great narrative thread for [my article⁵](#) but also taught me a lesson in verification: Don't trust even honest

witnesses. Seek documentation.

Legends are fine, and even fun, for athletes and fans reliving the glory days of a legendary sports team. But journalists, activists or human rights workers must deal with the truth and must be committed to finding and telling the truth, especially in an emergency situation.

Whether we're assembling the tale of a natural disaster, a breaking news story or a bit of popular lore, storytellers must remember that we hear the product of faulty memory or limited perspective. If telling the truth is our goal, verification must be our standard.

We need to look and listen earnestly to the stories of our sources, watching for opportunities to verify. Does the source have a (new or old) video, photograph, letter or document that can offer verification or detail, or perhaps correct a foggy memory? And when we're supplied with this material, especially in emergency situations where time is tight, we need to investigate it and apply the fundamentals of verification.

Regardless of the moment and your role in it, the principles of verification are timeless and can be applied to any situation, be it breaking news, a natural disaster or the retelling of a apocryphal tale from a quarter century earlier.

The Essence of Verification

One of journalism's most treasured clichés, spouted by seasoned editors who ruthlessly slash other clichés from stories, is: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

But the cliché doesn't tell the journalist, or humanitarian professional, how to check it out. Verification is the essence of journalism, but it also illustrates the difficulty of journalism and the need for high standards: The path to verification can vary with each fact.

So this handbook won't present journalists, human rights workers and other emergency responders with one-size-fits-all simple steps to verification, but with strategies to check it out - whatever "it" is, and whatever motivation or role you have.

The question at the heart of verification is: "How do you know that?"

Reporters need to ask this question of their sources; editors need to ask it of reporters. Reporters, editors, producers and human rights workers need to ask the question in the third person about sources they can't ask directly: How do they know that?

Newsroom coach Rosalie Stemer adds a second question that illustrates the multilayered process of verification and the ethic of persistence and resourcefulness that verification demands: How else do you know that?

As we question sources and material, and as colleagues question us, we need to seek multiple sources of verification, multiple paths to the truth. (Or, to finding holes in the data or story before we act on it.)

Verification employs a mix of three factors:

1. A person's resourcefulness, persistence, skepticism and skill
2. Sources' knowledge, reliability and honesty, and the number, variety and reliability of sources you can find and persuade to talk
3. Documentation

Technology has changed how we apply all three factors: The 24/7 news cycle and rise of social media and user-generated content require us to gather and report as events unfold, making swift decisions about whether information has been sufficiently verified; digital tools give us new ways to find and reach sources; databases and ubiquitous cellphones with cameras give us massive amounts of documentation to seek and assess. Successful verification results from effective use of technology, as well as from commitment to timeless standards of accuracy.

The need for verification starts with the simple fact that many of our information sources are wrong. They may be lying maliciously or innocently passing along misinformation. They may have faulty memories or lack context or understanding. They may be in harm's way and unable to provide everything they know, or unable to see the full picture of events as they unfold.

Our job is not to parrot sources and the material they provide, but to challenge them, triangulate what they provide with other credible sources and verify what is true, weeding from our work (before we publish, map or broadcast) what is false or not adequately verified.

Each of the many verification paths that we might take has its flaws: In many cases, and especially in emergency situations, we are increasingly presented with an abundance of official sources and can find firsthand sources, the people who actually saw - or even participated - in the events in question. But those accounts can be flawed.

West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin told reporters in 2006 that 12 of 13 miners trapped underground had been [rescued from the Sago mine](#)⁶. What reporter wouldn't run with that story?

But the governor was wrong. Twelve of the miners died; only one was rescued. The governor relied on second- and thirdhand accounts, and was not challenged on how he knew the miners were alive. We need to question seemingly authoritative sources as aggressively as we challenge any source.

New Tools

Documentation has changed with technology. The video that helped me debunk the legend in 1996 wouldn't have been available from one of the team members if I'd tried doing that story 15 years earlier (though I still could have watched it by going to the archives of the TV station). And in the years since I used that video for verification, the availability of cellphones and security cameras has increased the amount and importance of video documentation. But the ease of digital video editing raises the importance of skepticism. And, of course, any video catches only part of the story.

Technology has also changed how we find and deal with sources and information. As participants and witnesses to news events share their accounts in words, photos and videos on social media and blogs, journalists can more quickly find and connect with people who saw news unfold both by using digital search tools and other technologies, and by crowdsourcing.

We can use new tools most effectively by employing them with those old questions: How do they know that? How *else* do they know that?

That old cliché about checking out Mom's love? I verified the source (the old Chicago City News Bureau) from multiple online sources: the [Chicago Tribune](#)⁷, [AJR](#)⁸ and [The New York Times](#)⁹. Even there, though, legend complicates verification. A 1999 [Baltimore Sun](#)¹⁰ article by Michael Pakenham said legend attributes the admonition to the bureau's longtime night city editor, [Arnold Dornfeld](#)¹¹ (as three of the articles linked above do), but "Dornie said it was another longtime editor there, [Ed Eulenberg](#)¹², who actually said it first."

Your mother probably does love you, as she says. You can verify that by interviewing her friends and family, by digging up photos and videos where she shows or expresses her love. Find some letters or Facebook updates that express her affection. Document the gifts and actions that show her love. Then do the same thing on every article, every event and every project.

Case Study 2.1:

Using Social Media as a Police Scanner



Anthony De Rosa is the editor-in-chief at [Circa](#)¹, a true mobile-first news organization. He was formerly the social media editor at Reuters and has over 15 years' experience as a technologist for companies such as Newmark Knight-Frank, Merrill Lynch, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Reuters Media. In 2011, he won the award for Best Storytelling Innovation from Reuters for live coverage of events using blogging and social media, and recently won a journalism award from el Mundo. He tweets at: [@AntDeRosa](#)².

The medium by which we're gathering information may change, but the principles of verification always apply. Challenging what you see and hear, seeking out and verifying the source, and talking to official and primary sources remain the best methods for accurate reporting.

At Circa, we track breaking news from all over the world - but we publish only what we can confirm. That requires that we use social media to monitor breaking news as it happens so we can apply verification.

Remember that the information on social media should be treated the same as any other source: with extreme skepticism.

For the most part, I view the information the same way I would something I heard over a police scanner. I take in a lot and I put back out very little. I use the information as a lead to follow in a more traditional way. I make phone calls, send emails and contact primary sources who can confirm what I'm hearing and seeing (or not).

In the case of the 2013 shooting at the Los Angeles airport, for example, we observed reports from the airport coming from eyewitnesses and contacted LAPD, the LA FBI field office and the LA county coroner. If we couldn't independently verify what we saw and heard, we held it until we could.

Even in cases where major news organizations were reporting information, we held back until we could confirm with primary sources. Often these organizations cite unnamed law enforcement sources, and as we've seen with the Boston Marathon bombing, the Navy Yard shooting, the Newtown shooting and other situations, anonymous law enforcement sourcing is often unreliable.

Using TweetDeck to monitor updates

If social media is a police scanner, TweetDeck is your radio. There are a few ways you can create a dashboard for yourself to monitor the flow of updates.

I build Twitter lists ahead of time for specific uses. My list topics include law enforcement for major cities, reliable local reporters and news organizations for major cities, and specialized reporters. I can plug these lists into columns on TweetDeck and run searches against them, or simply leave them up as a monitoring feed.

Small plane lands in the Bronx

Here's how I used searches on TweetDeck during the January 2014 emergency landing of a small plane on a Bronx expressway to unearth breaking news reports and to triangulate and verify what I saw.

I noticed several tweets appear in my main timeline mentioning a plane landing on the Major Deegan Expressway in the Bronx section of New York, which is not a normal occurrence.



NYC Fire Wire
@NYCFireWire



Bronx *Plane Down* Major Deegan Expy. E-81 confirming a small plane down, no fire, appears to be an emergency landing.

[← Reply](#) [↻ Retweet](#) [★ Favorite](#) [⋮ More](#)

49

RETWEETS

6

FAVORITES



12:28 PM - 4 Jan 14

The plane landed around 3:30 p.m. local time in New York. (The tweet is dated in Pacific Standard Time.) This was one of the first tweets to report the landing. I follow a couple of NYC area accounts like, which act as a sort of police scanner for what's going on in the area. I won't report it until I can back it up, but it's useful to have as a potential alert to dig deeper.

After seeing the initial reports, I proceeded to run a search on TweetDeck using its ability to show tweets that only have images or video. I used the search terms "small plane" and "Bronx."

1

Q "small plane bronx..."

Content Showing Images and videos, matching 'small plane bronx'

Users Any

Engagement Any

Alerts None

Previews Off · S · M · L

Share Clear Remove

NYC **New York City Alert**... 1m
Bronx: Major Deegan Expy at East 233 St. 3 injured after small plane lands on the Major Deegan Expy.
pic.twitter.com/T1cmSQiSr8
Open



Mark Spourer retweeted

KGW News @KGWN... 7m
Small plane makes emergency landing on Bronx expressway
bit.ly/1cQaEQX
pic.twitter.com/HH56fslz9N
Open



The above results showed that credible local news sources were reporting the plane landing, and they had images. I also found additional information and images from a wider search of all tweets that used a location filter (within 5 miles of New York City) and the keywords "small plane" and "bronx":

Q "small plane bron..."

Content

Showing all Tweets

matching small plane bronx, near

excluding Enter words to exclude

written in any language

retweets included

Users Any

Engagement Any

Alerts None

Previews Off · S · M · L

< > Share Clear Remove

 **Stuart DiMartini** @s... 35s
 Small plane makes emergency landing on Bronx expressway, no major injuries reported
nj.com/news/index.ssf...
 Open

 **soulupdates** @soulu... 53s
 Small Plane Crash Lands On Bronx Expressway, No One Dies: If you are traveling northbound on the Major Deegan ...
bit.ly/1i5O73v
 Open

Ryan Pollydore retweeted

 **New York City Alert...** 8m
 Bronx: Major Deegan Expy at East 233 St. 3 injured after small plane lands on the Major Deegan Expy.
pic.twitter.com/T1cmSQiSr8


 Open

I also searched within my specialized list of verified accounts belonging to New York State and City agencies, and used the location filter again. These credible sources (below) helped confirm the event.

NY State/City Age...

Content

Showing all Tweets

matching plane

excluding Enter words to exclude

retweets Included

Users Any

Alerts None

Previews Off · S · M · L

Edit list

Share Clear Remove

plane down on Deegan Expressway. #FDNY firefighters removing plane's fuel. pic.twitter.com/a4xcEALmj



Open

FDNY @FDNY 1h

Now: Plane on Deegan Expswy. Three non-life threatening injuries. No cars affected. #FDNY removing plane fuel. pic.twitter.com/V03PIQng1



Open

NYPD NEWS @NYPD... 1h

A Cessna plane made an emergency landing on Major Deegan Expwy at Exit 13 minor injuries ALL N/B lanes closed pic.twitter.com/cg1fsA1Jkt



Open

At this point I contacted the public information office for the FDNY to confirm what I saw and ask for any other details they might have. I was told there were three people on board, two passengers and a pilot. We were later told the make/model of the plane, the name of the person the plane was registered to, and the hospital the pilot and passengers were taken to. Social media led us to the event - but we had to track the details down the old-fashioned way.

Feeling we had properly run down enough credible information to get started, we filed our story (see below). The Circa app offers readers an option to “follow” a story and receive push updates as more information is added. Our process is to get a story up as soon as possible with verified reports and continue to push out updates. TweetDeck allows us to get a jump on a developing story and seek out reliable people (law enforcement, primary sources) we can contact to confirm the validity of social media updates. In some cases we contact the person who sent the information to Twitter and try to determine if they’re reliable.

The image is a screenshot of a news article from the Circa app. The top left corner features the 'circa' logo. The top right corner has the text 'FREE IN THE APP STORE' and a green button that says 'GET THE AP'. The main headline is 'Small plane makes emergency landing on Bronx expressway'. Below the headline is the date and time: 'U.S. - JANUARY 6, 2014 3:20PM'. A sub-headline reads: 'A private plane was forced to land suddenly along the Bronx's Major Deegan Expressway.' Below the text is a wide photograph of a city street with a large red billboard for a Ford Focus. On the right side of the image, there is a vertical stack of social media sharing icons: a plus sign, a speech bubble, Twitter, Facebook, and Google+.

Building a body of evidence

The information you’re seeing on social media should be the first step toward trying to verify what actually occurred, rather than the final word.

The key is to observe as much as you can, take in information and compare it to other content and information to build up a body of evidence. Find ways to corroborate what you find by directly contacting and verifying the people who are connected to the content you find.

As I said, treat social media as a police scanner.