

[Trust and verification in an age of misinformation 1.2](#)

Transcript Module 1.2

Hi folks,

Welcome back to week one. We've gone through how journalists and journalism organizations have typically built trust. Now we're going to talk about how they have typically practiced verification.

As background, we looked at how, early on, verification wasn't really something that early newspaper publishers were doing. But over time we saw the professionalisation of journalism, and so verification came to be something that was really talked about more, and it got to the point where it was really venerated and put on a pedestal within journalism.

Let's talk about three key things. The first is this ritual of verification and also the veneration of it -- putting it on a pedestal and where that came into journalism. What does it look like in practice? How has it been taught and how have journalists practiced it traditionally? And then the last thing is we want to talk about one really specific form of verification, which was really from my point of view the most systematic way that it was done in journalism -- which is the type of fact-checking that was done mostly at American magazines starting in the 1920s up until today.

Alright, so I mentioned in the previous lesson the book "The Elements of Journalism." It's a great book. One of the things they say very early on in the book readings is that journalism's essence is a discipline of verification. So when you boil it down in their view, what journalism is about is the gathering of information and the verifying of that information. It is about us separating ourselves from others by really being focused on this discipline. I think that is still true in many ways today, and so we have verification as a cornerstone of journalism.

And as I said, it's kind of put on a pedestal a lot. The way that this really represented itself early on was of course with the boasts where there wasn't actually any kind of practice and a systematic way doing behind it. But then over time we started to get a lot of slogans in journalism. So this is a very famous one, mainly in American journalism: "If your mother tells you she loves you, check it out." And this is something that Jay Rosen talks a lot about in our guest speaker video this week as well that I hope you'll see and watch.

This was a slogan that came from a news organization in Chicago and it's something that gets repeated a lot in journalism. The idea here is that it's really also about trust; it's like trust no one and trust nothing. You as a journalist must put up your barriers to everything and verify everything, and so "check it out" was kind of at the core of what that suggestion, what that requirement, was. Okay, somebody tells you something, now you have to go check it out so you

talk to people, you gather information, you go to expert sources, you get statistics. And so this is the language of verification that we have. But the thing that's really interesting for me at least is that when you look at a lot of journalism textbooks, getting up even to more recently, there wasn't really a section on "here is how you do verification." So we have something that is hugely valued, something that is sloganized and boasted about, but it's not really taught in a systematic way. There was a great research study done about five years ago where researchers in Canada talk to a variety of practicing journalists -- award winning journalists in many cases -- about how they practice verification and there was no single way. They also look through textbooks and found there was no single way of teaching verification. So we have something that's really valued, we have something that's talked about and kind of hammered into the brains of journalists, but it's not really backed up by specific things that people are supposed to do. This is, I think, a difference between what it's been in the past and today.

You would talk about multiple sources, you would talk about calling experts, you would talk about shoe-leather reporting, getting out on the street and interviewing people to find information, but what we have today in our new media environment is the need to formalize this a lot more. We need to use a lot more tools but we need to combine it with these values that have been there for a long time.

One of the authors of that paper talks about "verification being seen as a strategic ritual -- something that legitimizes a journalist's social role as being demonstrably different from other communicators." So this is the other piece of verification and one of the reasons why we talked about it so much in journalism is that it distinguishes us. The "Elements of Journalism" says it's the essence of us. What they're talking about here is that this distinguishes us from other actors, and in "The Elements of Journalism," this is I think as close as we get to really formalizing what verification has really looked like.

So they talked about "seeking out multiple witnesses, disclosing as much as possible about sources, or asking various sides for comment, all signal such standards." Seeking out multiple sources is of course I think one of the core things that has always been talked about in relation to verification. "This discipline of verification is what separates journalism from other forms of communication such as propaganda, advertising, fiction or entertainment."

So again, verification is at the core of what distinguishes journalists, but also you know it's been something that we boasted about and talked about and had slogans for, but something that journalists had to get on-the-job and figure out and do. Now, I said the most systematic way of doing verification was what's called fact-checking at magazines. As I say, this was primarily something at big American magazines, but it caught on in some other places. The magazine in Germany, Der Spiegel, still has I believe about 70 people in their research and documentation department who will check the articles that are being published, They also work as researchers supporting journalists to find good quality information. But here's a little quick pocket history on magazine fact-checking: Time magazine is recognized as the first, or one of the first, They started having fact-checkers in 1923 who would take an article that had been written by a

journalist and go through and recheck every single fact. Everything that was checkable they would recheck it. They would call up the people that were interviewed etc etc. New Yorker, a famous American Magazine start doing this 1927. To this day they still have one of the larger fact-checking departments in magazines in American journalism, and it started to spread.

So by the time we get to the 1970s and 1980s, if you were a big and trusted American magazine, you must have a fact-checking department. The way it worked was pretty similar from one magazine to the next. Fact checkers identified every fact, every statistic, every name in an article, and they went to other sources to confirm it. They used the reporters' notes from interviews and other things, but they would also go and seek external confirmation, which is a really core piece of verification. They would contact all sources that were quoted, and they wouldn't really read back all their quotes exactly, but they would talk to them again to make sure that you know the things that they were expressing are also what's reflected not only in the interviewers' notes or recordings but in the article itself.

The last thing I note here is it's a closed system. And this becomes important as we get to week three and talk about verification today. This happened all before something was published, and it happened within the organization. It was not something where the journalists were out there calling upon the public to help them and participate with them and verify something. It was a closed activity, and the idea was that by the time the magazine article was published, it should be perfect or as close to perfect as humanly possible.

The other little piece of trivia about fact-checking is that the first people who did it at American magazines were almost exclusively women. The reason for this frankly was that it was not seen as really high importance or high-status work. It was seen as something that a young secretary type woman would do, so it had sexist origins. For a long time it was women who were doing a lot of factchecking. This is one of the co-founders of Time Magazine talking about the fact checkers that he hired. He said that "any bright girl who really applies herself to the handling of the checking problem can have a very pleasant time with it and fill the week with happy moments and memorable occasions."

So it's seen as women's work. It's valued, but it's not valued so much that they would have the men do it. The men were the editors, and the women were the fact-checkers, so it reflected what was going on in society over all in terms of gender differences.

The last thing I want to show you about magazine fact-checking is just here's an example of what it looks like when a fact checker goes through an article. So in this case we have them using a highlighter and using markings on the page. They put a line through all of the words that are not facts. In this case this is actually an example from Der Spiegel, the German magazine. Then they highlight things that are facts or proper names. They go through and once they first read the article and mark up all the things that need to be checked, they start to go through it and mark what they have checked. And so it is very painstaking work. There is a certain type of person who excels at it.

So let's summarize what we've gone through here. The first thing is that, as we saw in the building trust piece, verification is a cornerstone of journalism. One of the things that people who really looked at verification say is that it's an act and something we talk about to help distinguish us from other people like those who work in communications and those engaged in propaganda. It's a venerated thing, and we put it on a pedestal, but it hasn't been taught or practiced in a systematic way.

And the last thing is that the one place where that's probably true was in magazine fact-checking, primarily at American magazines. It was a systematic practice, but it was not that widespread. Strangely, given that we value verification so much, it was seen as lower-level work.

Today, I think we're going to look at it in week 3 why it's now important to make it systematic. It's important to see it as not only important but also something that every single person at every level within the profession needs to be doing. So that concludes our video lectures for Week 1. I hope you watch our guest lecture with Jay Rosen. We've got some questions for you and a quiz and look forward to seeing you in the forums.