Truth, Bias, and Neutrality

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Truth is central to journalism

But it can be a messy, complex thing!
Realism Perspective

- Realism perspective: Truth is a judgment that accurately describes, or corresponds with, the way the world is, distinct from subjective human perspectives
  - Dominant perspective among journalists in the United States
  - U.S. journalists typically contend that “facts” exist, and conveying facts is an important aspect of journalism and getting at truth
Unemployment Rate as Fact
Facts Can Be Tricky

• When audiences say they “just want the facts,” the question becomes: Which facts?
• There are multiple ways to measure complex facts
• Journalists have to work within confines of time and space
• Journalism isn’t just about listing facts; it’s about making sense of them
Beware of “Alternative Facts”
Journalistic bias can be defined as prejudice toward certain ideas, issues, perspectives, or groups or individuals in the production and distribution of journalistic content.
Types of Journalistic Bias

- **Issue bias**
  - Proclivity toward certain kinds of issues

- **Framing bias**
  - Propensity to frame issues through particular prisms

- **Source bias**
  - Differential treatment of a story depending on who the main actors are, or proclivity to give certain kinds of sources a larger voice

- **Visibility bias**
  - Amount of attention or prominence given to certain kinds of issues, frames, or sources
Neutrality and Balance

- Journalists may combat allegations of bias by claiming to be neutral
  - Claim enacted by capturing and broadcasting oppositional viewpoints and giving them equal weight
  - This is, itself, a bias within journalism (especially in U.S.)
False Balance and Working the Refs

Source
Accuracy is central to doing journalism

but accuracy is not enough for satisfying the truth
Accuracy ≠ Truth
Accuracy must be supplemented by commitment to truth

We can call that commitment truth-seeking
Truth-Seeking

- Involves an objective approach to journalism
  - Journalists systematically observe and record developments
  - Interview sources with intimate knowledge
  - Verify claims by seeking out generally accepted facts
  - Produce the most plausible representation of the development
- Process does not claim there is no bias; instead, it tries to mitigate it
- This process is common in the U.S., but there are other approaches journalists believe allows them to get at truth
Key Takeaways

- Facts should be considered critically
- There are multiple forms of journalistic bias, such as issue bias, framing bias, and source bias
- In the U.S., journalists typically strive to appear neutral and to offer balanced accounts
- Accuracy is an essential component of truth, but it is not equivalent to truth
- Journalists will typically strive for truth-seeking by systematically using best practices in journalism