

## THE TRUTH...S

Informing is educating. The information given should be precise. If it's not, the information is lacking, and it's not truthful. Informing is bringing context. If this context distorts the information, it's manipulating. A journalist's first commandment is to bring honest news.

### RESPECT THE TRUTH

Respecting the truth is scrupulously examining the facts. The facts, even if you're present when they occur, can be deceiving. You should take time to understand what you're seeing so as not to make false interpretations. *For egg: in the street, I see a man hitting another man. It seems to be clear: I'm seeing an aggressor and a victim. But isn't there something else, beyond the appearances?*

### THE IDENTIFYING PROCESS

There's a methodical process to follow to see the truth in what you see and relate it as faithfully as possible.

When you're on the scene:

- Keep in mind you're only seeing fragments of the truth.
- Wonder about the true meaning of what you've seen.
- Confront your interpretation with other witnesses (*"Did you see what I saw? I'm not quite sure... What did you see?"*).
- Put the facts in context.
- Put the facts in their continuity.
- Don't pick and choose, truncate or interpret the facts.
- Get your article proofread to make sure it's understandable and not misleading.

When you're not on the scene:

- Make sure the testimonies are believable.
- Fact checks the witnesses' claims.
- Ask officials for their point of view.

- Be cautious in your writing *“According to the police...”*; *“According to this witness...”*

## LOOK FOR THE TRUTH

When personal or collective interests stand in the way of the truth, it's your civic duty as a journalist to find it. But looking for the truth doesn't mean you should use any and all means available. Respecting privacy and human dignity are keystones of journalism. Besides, in public interest affairs, looking for the truth is a legitimate goal, but a journalist is neither a cop nor a judge. His means of investigations are limited. He should know it and accept it.

When somebody deliberately prevents you from finding the truth, ask for transparency.

- Write a mail asking for answers.
- Tell your readers about your hardships.
- Keep a planner of your researches.
- Keep proofs that you mean well.
- Admit your mistakes.
- Correct them.

## DON'T BECOME OBSESSIVE

Sometimes, finding the truth becomes an obsession, especially when many people/things stand in your way. The need to find it can become risky: what if, once discovered, it's not what the readers were waiting for? You might distort it. Such a risk most often exists when the journalist forgets that he must be impartial and privileges a hypothesis. If he only writes about the facts he's discovered in his article when they confirm his hypothesis, it's dishonest. There's no absolute truth.

## SOURCES

To properly inform your readers, you need to be well informed yourself. The journalist needs trustworthy sources to help him separate real news from false news, and to broadcast truthful information. But using your sources well necessitates precautions and processes similar to those that help you identify the facts.

### FOUR TYPES OF SOURCES

1/ **Officials.** These are all the sources that hold public authority: the government, state departments, or administrations... Advantage: they are listed, easy to find and bring official news. The journalist MUST possess in his address book the contact info of all these spokespeople. Make a list of them and contact them as soon as they take up office... while they're still honored to get recognition from the press (direct phone lines, home address...).

2/ **Intermediaries.** These are all the sources with social legitimacy: associations, professional organizations, political parties, syndicates, etc. They work as forces of opposition and bring officious news. If he takes the time to build honest links to these natural allies, the journalist gets complementary information and precious expertise. Write up a list of such interlocutors and start trying to "tame" them.

### AN EFFICIENT FORMULA: THE ACCREDITATION

When dealing with officials and intermediaries, it's in the journalist's best interest to clarify his own job. He can do so by asking officials for an accreditation, for himself or his coworkers. All governmental organizations and social bodies would rather deal with identified interlocutors among the press. Voluntarily engaging in this type of role-play helps day-to-day interaction.

Typical letter of accreditation: *“To the Secretary of XXX, It is my pleasure to inform you that, starting today, so as to help facilitate our work relationship, we are entrusting our esteemed colleague A..R... with the task to cover all your formal activities, within the framework of our mission of information towards the general public.”*

When dealing with intermediaries, most of the time, the journalist doesn't need an accreditation. What matters is building a relationship based on mutual respect, to decide on a means to communicate that guarantees anonymity for the source, and to come to an agreement on the way the information the source brings you without the authorities' knowledge should be treated.

3/ **Personal sources.** These are the discreet, or even secret, sources a journalist knows inside power and professional circles. He gains them through his work and ethics. He manages to build a relationship of trust with interlocutors that detain unknown or hidden information. The journalist should never reveal their identity to anyone, including his hierarchy. He can be held accountable for what they bring.

Official sources + intermediate sources + personal source = a good informant network

4/ **Occasional sources.** These are spontaneous sources, offered testimonies brought on by the circumstances. Be wary: identify the source, check its motives, dig into their indications, get them to talk beyond what they want to say, double check their statements thanks to independent sources. When in doubt, ask the newsroom whether it's a good idea to publish such information. Be wary of sources that tell you what you want to hear straightaway.

## MASTERING THE BALANCE OF POWERS

There's always a balance of powers between the journalist and his sources. There's a dominant, who gives the info to the one who needs it. On one side, stands the offer, on

the other, the demand. Managing this power imbalance asks for savoir-faire and skill. Your source always wants to gain something – personally or professionally. You're always at risk of being manipulated. Sometimes there's little room for maneuver, but it's still there. It's a matter of conscience. Don't be fooled. You need to find equilibrium. Sometimes it's okay to return the favor; sometimes it's not honorable. It's less bad to fight with your source than to dupe your reader.