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Gatekeepers of Truth at American Newsmagazines*

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How does one regulate truth? This paper reports on one of the few roles in our complex labor force employed solely as gatekeepers of truth. It describes an ethnographic field trip into the back offices of fact checkers in three American newsmagazines. I document how checkers strive to discover truth and ferret out falsehood, construe fact and error, organize suspicion, gather corroborating or incriminating data, devise and interpret an idiosyncratic evidentiary law for news accounts, and negotiate with colleagues over facticity. The paper shows how stories change (or fail to do so) as checkers exercise their craft -- often by ritualistic adherence to deadening methodological routines and always on deadline. The finding that fact checkers scrutinized text on average about three times per column inch and that half of the words ultimately printed in the magazines had been investigated by these gatekeepers should give social scientists considerable pause about our own gatekeeping practices.

This article has been peer reviewed. If it were presented in a court of law, it would be subject to rules of evidence and the adversary process. If it had appeared in a newspaper or on television, editors and perhaps a lawyer would evaluate its veracity. If published as a book, some combination of editors, peer reviewers, or lawyers might peruse it. If disseminated on the information superhighway, it would receive no oversight at all. But if it appeared in many magazines, the article would be subject, not only to the standard editorial or legal review, but also to the scrutiny of *specialized on-site* overseers of truth. *These magazine gatekeepers, called fact-checkers, researchers, reporters, reporter-researchers, assistant or associate editors (or some other combination of these terms) are largely invisible. They rarely receive a by-line; stories provide no indication that they have been checked. Yet mastheads of major newsweeklies suggest that, for roughly every three or four correspondents or writers employed by the magazine, a fact checker is working behind the scenes.*[1] And lest the oblivious reader assume that fact-checking represents some recent fad or esoteric practice, *checkers have been plying this invisible craft at least since the 1920s (when Time established a research department), and for publications as diverse as Newsweek, Ms., Sports Illustrated, the National Enquirer, PC Magazine, Esquire, Reader's Digest, Golf Digest, and Vanity Fair.* To give you a sense of how unchecked this -- and any other non-magazine -- article really is, I italicized every word or assertion in this paragraph that I believe would give a fact checker pause and lead to further inquiry.

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[1] These figures are very rough because mastheads convey more about rank and seniority than about the division of labor; it is difficult to tell which of several tiers of editors actually edit or administer or write and which ones actually fact check. This ratio varies considerably for other kinds of weekly magazines and for the monthlies. An article published in the *Columbia Journalism Review* fifteen years ago notes that its magazine uses a part-time checker, some hire free-lancers, and others (like the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Nation*) rely only on their copy departments for checking (Ridder 1980, p. 59). A recent informal survey of newsstand mastheads finds a fact checker at *National Geographic* and *Esquire*, two at *Vogue* and *Ms.*, five at *Macleans*, six at *Vanity Fair*, and twelve at *Reader's Digest*. Even the *National Enquirer* employs nine researchers! Few of these publications have many staff reporters or writers either.

In order to learn about the practice and contribution of fact-checking to the journalistic enterprise, I visited three large national newsweeklies -- two general newsmagazines and one specialized sports publication -- over five weeks in late 1986 and early 1987. There I observed thirteen fact checkers (some veterans, some newly hired) check fifteen stories about business, sports, international affairs, or movies -- articles that ranged in length from one column inch to several pages. In most cases, I observed the entire course of the research process, trailing checkers from morning often until very late into the night, just as a new employee would. That meant sitting in their offices, accompanying them to the library, listening to their phone conversations, reading the files of reportage and newspaper clippings they read, observing their interactions and formal meetings with writers, editors, and other fact checkers, joining their colleagues for lunch and dinner, reading the computer screen over their shoulder,[2] and engaging in long conversations while we waited for a story to be edited. For a few stories, especially the big ones where checking occurred over the course of several weeks or at the hands of more than one individual, I observed only pieces of the research process. To get a sense for what I might have missed, I went through several

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[2] The fact checker's computer terminal provides a marvelous window on the entire editorial process. The complete evolution of a story -- from the so-called "files" of reportage sent in by correspondents in the news bureaus, to the queries and memos sent between the researcher and the correspondents, the writer's drafts of the stories, each edited version of the story, the picture captions and headlines -- are all accessed by the fact checker's computer terminal. Indeed, this nifty software -- used at all three magazines I visited -- permits editors and checkers to highlight their changes and queries in distinctive type faces, thereby allowing an observer to readily determine who is responsible for each change in a story. Because it provides such a facile yet complex medium of communication, the introduction of computers has decreased face-to-face interaction among journalists at the magazines -- thereby easing the difficulties of observational research in a large, complex organization.

hundred pages of records assembled a few weeks earlier by three fact checkers working on a complex, fast-breaking cover story in order to reconstruct the process, if only retrospectively.

At each magazine, the head of research initially assigned me to a section of the magazine or to specific fact checkers whose work I was to observe. As assignments were completed, stories killed or delayed, I would wander over to watch another checker in the section. Despite some success in observing researchers to whom I had not been assigned and the ease in overhearing the conversations of still others, this limited sample undoubtedly overrepresents the more experienced, thorough, and energetic researcher. And surely my presence inspired even greater care, conscientiousness, ardor, resourcefulness, and uncompromising gatekeeping among this already exceptional group.[3] This presumed bias is actually desirable; by looking at the most competent and dedicated checker, one can get a better sense for the efficacy and limitations of this form of social control when it works best.

Still, I have reason to trust the generalizability of these observations. Although checkers may be initially sensitive to the presence of an observer and, indeed, the process of explaining how to check a story may lead to greater care and thoroughness, the novelty (or, in social science jargon, the problem of "reactivity") wears off quickly. Fact checkers have a tremendous

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[3] Take two examples. Late one night as their story was closing, a young fact checker was trying to persuade a very senior writer that a change was necessary. Unable to explain the subtle distinction that troubled him after numerous attempts, the fact checker finally sheepishly muttered in frustration "no one else seems to see a problem; let's go on." "NO! You're saying things I don't want this woman to hear!" the writer quickly responded. After several more futile attempts at clarification, they quietly moved on. That same night a different researcher and writer were engaged in a tough and heated encounter. At one point, the writer stopped and offered me a soft drink, explaining that I could get it at the end of the hall. As I was about to leave the office, he joked that now they'll have a chance to <u>really</u> talk.

amount of work to complete on deadline and, as these deadlines approach, sixteen hour days begin to loom, exhaustion sets in, and the observer becomes a familiar compatriot, defenses wear thin and the time and energy to engage in unnecessary thoroughness to impress outsiders evaporates. I observed shortcuts taken, mistakes made, moral compromises struck, and animated arguments explode frequently enough to assure me that I was not merely attending a well-rehearsed performance.

In addition to observing fact checkers, I formally interviewed the heads of research at the three newsweeklies and at another weekly magazine and engaged in extensive conversations with deputy research heads, writers, editors, and lawyers at the three magazines I visited. I also attended several story conferences and a "picture show" in which photographs are selected for the magazine.

I distributed an earlier draft of this article to the research heads and a few of the fact checkers back in 1988 to make sure that my account rang true and checked again in 1995 to learn of any significant changes in the role or practice of fact checking in their magazines. I was heartened to get reports that routines are pretty much the same, perhaps epitomized by the fact that at least one magazine distributes my original draft to new interns undergoing training. Significant changes since the original fieldwork are noted, where appropriate, in the text.

Gatekeepers of Truth

Regulating truth is a difficult business. Because information asymmetries lie at the heart of principal-agent relationships, coping with the potential abuse or misuse of information represents a fundamental element of fiduciary law and sociological formulations about trust (Arrow 1985, p. 28; Moe 1984;

Frankel 1983; Clark 1985; S. Shapiro 1987) and an increasing problem in complex differentiated societies. Yet because information is fleeting and constantly changing; neither tangible nor zero-sum; easy to distort or fabricate; readily hidden by physical, temporal and social barriers; and sometimes shrouded in technical jargon unintelligible to laypersons; it represents an elusive target for a social control system. In many ways, these difficulties are magnified in the social construction of the news.

The news has been described as "the first rough draft of history" (Goldstein 1985, p. 241), rightly so because its social organization insures that some errors will be made. The sources of inaccuracy in the news develop on many fronts. First, of course, is the matter of timeliness -- deadline pressures, the fascination with breaking news, the paramount desire for the scoop and to be first -- that means that journalists rush to press before they have learned the full story. Other temporal issues compromise the accuracy of the news as well, in particular, the retrospective character of much reportage and the necessity of relying on second-hand accounts (what courts would often dismiss as "hearsay") of events that occurred prior to journalistic knowledge or attention. Because journalists are not always eyewitnesses to the events they cover, they

> ...need to reconstruct what happened from bits of evidence. In trying to establish truth this way, reporters operate under severe handicaps. They lack the detachment and perspective of historians, the precise techniques of scientists, and the most rudimentary tools of law enforcement: subpoena power to compel testimony or the production of documents and the authority to wiretap or to lawfully search a stranger's premises (Goldstein 1985, pp. 111-12),

not to mention penalties for the commission of perjury. In many instances, therefore, journalists rely on outside sources to get their story, sources who may not be eyewitnesses either and who are rarely disinterested and, if

cooperative, may consent to interviews only because they have instrumental goals they hope to realize or axes to grind. Confidential sources provide further difficulties, since readers are unable to evaluate their credibility and because anonymity provides a shield that protects lies, biases, and other sorts of misstatements.[4]

Because journalists often cover secret, private, or embarrassing events, the likelihood of cover up or deception threatens the possibility of accurate accounts. The distance of many news events from the centers of journalistic enterprise further precludes the possibility of eyewitness accounts or access to rich data or multiple forms of evidence. And, from a social science research perspective, journalistic methods leave much to be desired. They rely on incredibly small samples that are far from random or representative; their interview methods are usually highly reactive and the possibility of interviewer effects are rarely entertained or readily dismissed.

The social organization of the collection and presentation of news compounds the inherent problems of data access that already compromise accuracy. First, the journalistic enterprise, particularly as structured at newsmagazines, is largely collective -- where multiple correspondents, writers, researchers, photographers, camera persons, photo researchers, artists, various levels of editors, headline and caption writers, those responsible for formatting the page and fitting text to the allocated space, lawyers, and copy desks collaborate in the news product. Although collective

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[4] Moreover, "the problem with the anonymous quote is that it holds no one accountable, and there is great potential for someone with an axe to grind -- including a reporter -- to malign or ridicule from the safety of anonymity" (Goldstein 1985, p. 220).

responsibility provides some opportunities for triangulation[5] and decreases those for the fabrication of news, it more regularly fosters inaccuracy. Messages change as they travel through various tiers of news preparers, inconsistencies are subtly incorporated, and crucial information slips through the cracks. Second, news is a mixed medium; the juxtaposition of words, pictures, graphics, voices, still and action shots, the specific and the generic can convey many different -- and some inconsistent -- stories.[6]

Third, journalists have limited space and time to tell their story, to get it "right," to provide proper context and corroboration. (Indeed, in television, the viewers see and hear the story only once, unable to review the evidence and reevaluate the flow of the argument as they might with a written

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[5] In popular usage, "triangulation" refers to a surveying or navigation technique in which unknown points or distances are located or measured using trigonometric principles applied to triangular grids. In social science, the term refers to the use of multiple methods and two or more independent measurements in order to increase research validity. The rationale is that when "a hypothesis can survive the confrontation of a series of complimentary methods of testing, it contains a degree of validity unattainable by one tested within the more constrained framework of a single method" (Webb et al. 1966, p. 174). Take two examples of triangulation from my research: In a story described in some detail below, the circulation of files of reportage among correspondents in several news bureaus in Europe and the Mideast resulted in the discovery by a colleague in a nearby bureau of a few minor errors and an overreaction to the events reported by the primary correspondent. In a different case, at 1:30 A.M. one morning, as a bowling story was about to close, the last set of fresh eyes to review the piece discovered a misinterpretation of bowling strategy that had eluded the reporter, fact checker, and three editors.

[6] A story, about the diversion of American technology to the Soviet Union from products exported abroad, reported that sophisticated look-down radar, now standard equipment on the Soviet MiG31, had been stolen from products sold to legitimate foreign customers. The magazine photo researcher was only able to find a picture of a MiG23; unfortunately, this aircraft did not use the purloined technology. The researcher lamented that it's not like they can send a photographer to the Soviet arsenal and simply photograph the proper MiG. The writer, in exasperation, suggested that they simply use the caption "Disregard these pictures; they have nothing to do with this story," a caption that -- if candor truly prevailed -- would describe many of the pictures displayed in newspaper, magazine, and television news.

account.) Errors thus can occur by omission, necessitated by these limitations of space and time, as well as by commission.[7]

Fourth, newsmagazines provide weekly news summaries and analyses in which writers telescope and synthesize many more events and information in a single story than do traditional news reporters. In the first week after the Oklahoma City bombing, the *New York Times* published ninety-seven articles (and accompanying photographs and graphics) on the tragedy -- ranging from accounts of the rescue efforts and the investigation to pieces on terrorism, names and profiles of the victims, the heroes, profiles of the suspects and of the various towns through which they passed, right wing extremism, militias, bomb-making technology, connections to Waco, selflessness and philanthropic responses, the grieving, insurance implications, the displaced, the lawyers, the psychological toll, bias against Muslims, selection of the bombing site, helping children deal with tragedy, bomb-threat hoaxes, forensic techniques, teddy bears sent to families of the victims, and so forth. Admittedly, over a matter of days, much of the daily reportage became redundant and repetitious; still the scope of coverage was vast. The three national weekly newsmagazines, on the other hand, each carried between five and nine stories related to the bombing which collected the perspectives and information reflected in the hundred-odd newspaper items, but that also added perspective

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[7] On an almost-completed business story that I was observing, the fact checker and writer received a copy of the formatted mock-up, only to learn that the space had been cut by 40%. The writer began furiously scrolling up and down the computer file, cutting a clause or sentence here, a paragraph there; virtually every passage about which the two had been debating over questions of accuracy suddenly disappeared from the screen. A moment or two later, the writer looked up, blew his fingers and, with a look of pride and editorial machismo, scratched his chest. The researcher's face conveyed terror about the possibility that these rapid-fire cuts had altered the story's context; eliminated necessary explanations, qualifications or caveats; or juxtaposed data in new ways that might lead readers to draw the wrong conclusions.

and analysis that would attract even diligent readers/viewers of the daily news to the magazine. This synthetic and analytic writing style, unlike the conventional inverted pyramid of traditional newswriting (in which information is listed in decreasing order of importance), provides much greater opportunity for error, misinterpretation, improper balance, oversight, and subjective judgment.

Finally, news is a competitive business in which newspapers, magazines, subscriptions, or advertising minutes must be sold and in which news organizations and different kinds of news media vie for circulation. The result, often, is news that is more dynamic and snappy, easy to read, attention-grabbing, and colorful (literally, as dramatic pictures edge out dull black type or drab talking heads). Journalists develop conventions to grab and keep the reader/viewer's attention -- they emphasize examples over explanations, events and outcome over process; they tend to personalize the news by conveying abstract themes and conflicts through the experiences of one or two supposedly typical individuals. In pursuing these competitive strategies, interest in the marketplace may edge out concern for accuracy.[8]

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[8] One story I observed provided an account of a 600-page report of a study that examined the efficacy of U.S. export controls on commercial products that have potential defense applications and their impact on forgone exports and the U.S. balance of trade. The edited draft of a rather dry summary of an even drier report was filled with "TKs" (see note #27) -- asking for examples of innocuous high-tech products now restricted, of turn-key technologies, of models of computers on the restricted list, and of the kinds of products recommended by the study panel to be cut from the list. The editor's obvious desire to spice up the story with quaint and colorful examples was impeded by the fact that the report contained no examples, archival sources about the restrictions were outdated, the Pentagon correspondent was unable to supply any examples, and the potential candidates scoured from previous stories and clips -- computer printers, ball bearings, video games, bank teller machines, personal computers, oil drilling equipment -- included some products in each category that were not subject to restrictions. The inclusion of examples, then, posed serious accuracy problems; without them the story was far too dull for a popular newsmagazine.

News is a business and, increasingly, a big business. News organizations have always been beset by the conflicts of interest inherent in covering local communities while reaching for advertising dollars from the same local institutions they cover (Goldstein 1985, p. 92). But, as large conglomerates buy up newspapers and television networks, the corporate interests of the owners provide even more profound conflicts of interest institutionalized within the news organization that compromise the objectivity of coverage.[9]

This cursory review of some of the sources of inaccuracy in the news indirectly contrasts journalistic conventions about veracity with some of those in social science and law. I do not wish to tout the latter as somehow objectively or morally superior or even necessarily more accurate. Indeed, I am scrupulously avoiding here an epistemological discussion about truth or accuracy or even a more mundane operational definition of these slippery concepts. The argument is simply that the values and social organization of the news business promote some ways of knowing over others. Their conventions often create different understandings of the world than would those of an ethnographer, a survey researcher, an adversarial court proceeding, or a witch trial,[10] and, like their counterparts, sometimes lead to errors of omission or commission.

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[9] How is NBC, for example, to cover the misconduct of General Electric, its parent, or CBS to cover the dangers from, torts allegedly committed by, and regulation of the tobacco companies owned by its parent company? Moreover, as Tom Goldstein notes, these large news conglomerates are also likely to have business dealings with the government -- over regulations, licenses, tax benefits, and mergers that require government approval -- relationships that are "not compatible with the press's primary function -- watching over the government" (1985, p. 97).

[10] And, of course, one can find considerable variation in conventions about veracity among news organizations themselves.

This account of the social organization of news gathering and reporting illuminates some abstract themes that beset intelligence activities of all sorts -- the expanding physical, social, and temporal distance between the "reporter" and the events that he or she hopes to describe. Take a simple example of reporting on events:[11] Except where they are eyewitnesses to the event -- or they orchestrate the event themselves, as in an experiment, simulation, or sting operation -- most storytellers suffer from physical and temporal distance from the events about which they tell. They weren't there to see it or only realize they want to tell the story after it has already occurred. Having missed the opportunity to be an eyewitness, they have several alternatives: to listen to audiotape or view photos, film, or videotape of the event, if any were taken; to ask eyewitnesses to describe what they've seen; or to search out records, descriptions, letters or memoranda, physical evidence or other artifacts left by the event.

But each of these intelligence strategies tend to increase social distance as well: What impact on the account does the very act of asking about it make (the problem of "reactivity," in social science parlance)? What difference does it make who of the many eyewitnesses we ask? Why are they talking to us? How do we know if they're telling us the truth; what are the incentives to exaggerate, deceive, or dissemble? Did the actors distort the physical evidence to cover up their acts or even plant erroneous artifacts to point responsibility in a different direction? Why were these records created? Why do some events get recorded and others not, and do we know which are which? What implicit sample selection bias have we embedded in our account by using

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[11] Obviously, where the reporter is describing feelings, intent, opinion, causality, social influence, explanation, process, and the like, the intelligence task becomes significantly more difficult.

the available records to tell our story? What crucial information is omitted from the records or systematically distorted? Do the concepts and categories reflected in the records mean the same things to us as they did to the recorders? And so on.

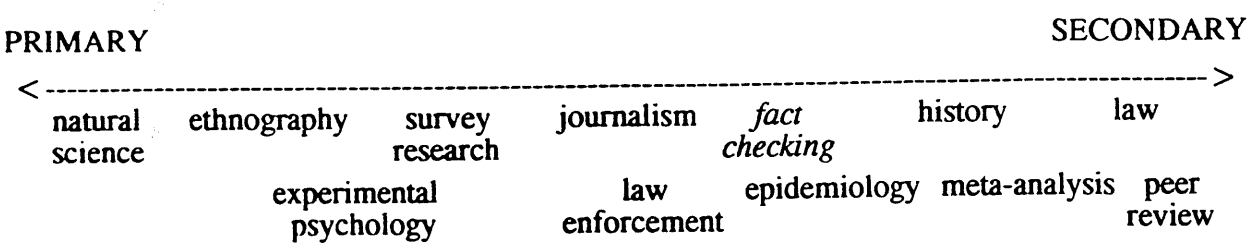
Eyewitness or observational methods can be reactive as well. Posting observers at the site of an event may change it. The presence of observers may force it to go under cover, encourage actors to perform better or make them more nervous. Or the seeming support or interest of observers may inflame the passion or bolster the flagging commitment of an otherwise ambivalent crowd. Moreover, the very word "entrapment" suggests the reactive potential of social experiments or sting operations -- by creating enticing opportunities, ease of access, and unusual incentives, they may induce parties to do things that they normally would not. And, of course, observation itself is profoundly social: one's listening post affects what one will hear; the physical and biographical lenses through which we see affects what is seen. A wide-angle, zoom, and close-up lens take in very different sights.

The point is not that there is truth and approximations to truth. The point is that the extent of physical, social, and temporal distance that must be traversed determines the methods that reporters in all walks of life use to get and tell their stories and to approximate truth.

Figure 1 situates a few familiar intelligence activities on a continuum that measures the social, physical, and temporal distance between the data collectors and the phenomena they wish to describe. Note that the plotting is rough -- often there is more variation within categories than between them -- and that the ends of the continuum are not displayed. At one extreme, I've plotted those who work with raw or primary data, collected first-hand. At the other extreme are those who work with secondary, usually retrospective, data

collected second-third-fourth-fifth-hand, and often involving very reactive methods. (Reactivity of measurement -- a form of social distance -- is what differentiates those primary-data disciplines located on the left half of the continuum.) Intelligence activities located on the left side, then, are relatively close to their data, those on the right are not.

FIGURE 1



Even this modest article and the narrow social world from which it issues illustrates the continuum's range. It was created using ethnographic methods on the left side of the continuum, reviewed by my peers working from the far right, and concerned with an intelligence role located between us. Not surprising, the three of us face different problems of truth-telling and employ different methods for doing our job.

As one moves along the continuum, the strategies for socially constructing and regulating truth diverge, mostly because of these differences between primary and secondary data. Strategies on the left, applied to the creation of primary data, tend to be methodological; those on the right, attuned to the use and analysis of secondary data, tend to be inferential.

Regulatory regimes for maximizing truth in primary data are both prospective -- oriented to the process by which truth is socially constructed by its originators -- and retrospective -- oriented to examining, analyzing, and

assessing the truth by its recipients.[12] Prospective systems of social control play a major role because of informational asymmetries between those who generate the data and those who use it and the intrinsic difficulties of validating accounts once they have been released. Moreover, cultural values that celebrate free expression, uninhibited public debate, academic freedom, and democracy as a marketplace of ideas, bridle at efforts to regulate, censor, suppress, or restrict certain kinds of expression. It is therefore generally more effective and politically palatable to get information "right" in the first place than to try to regulate it after the fact.[13]

Prospective regulatory systems devise structural arrangements and methodological or procedural rules for the collection or creation of data that seek to insure validity and reliability, on the one hand, and uniformity or replicability, on the other. They develop conventions about sampling, randomization, control groups, double blind tests, statistical inference, nonreactive methods, objectivity, anonymity, replication, operational definitions, and measurement to create or amass raw primary data and to fabricate "truths" according to familiar conventional formulae.

Retrospective systems of social control are employed by those institutions on the right side of the continuum as well as by many of those who regulate primary data collectors on the left. They devise rules of evidence, models of inference, and intelligence technologies to ferret out lies or reconstruct the truth as they sift through secondary data to whose creation they were not privy. They are guided by rules of evidence about sources or witnesses,

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[12] See also Reiss' (1984) distinction between compliance/premonitory and deterrence/postmonitory regulatory systems.

[13] Though see M. Shapiro (1986, pp. 885-6).

admissibility, privilege, bias, expertise, circumstantial evidence, statistical inference, and the like. Analysts methodically read between the lines, using logic, skepticism, analytic and inferential methods to determine whether there are inherent inconsistencies in the "text" that don't ring true or arouse suspicion. They ferret out reactivity, examining the ways in which accounts have been socially constructed. They develop intelligence or surveillance techniques to amass corroborating or incriminating data. They triangulate data wherever possible, collecting independent sources and multiple measurements that bear on the validity of the original claims. Moreover, these regulatory systems develop technologies to ascertain the authenticity or veracity of these secondary sources: physiological assessments of dissembling (polygraphs, facial expression or body language analysis) and forensic analysis of documents, corpses, physical artifacts, handwriting, or voice recordings.

Intelligence systems located on the right do not rely exclusively on these evidentiary rules and inferential methods. They also strive to reduce the physical, temporal, and social distance to their data; they strain to move to the left, where the truth-telling is easier. When journalists and investigators work undercover or employ a kind of participant observation, when they orchestrate a sting operation, they do so to collect primary data -- to be eyewitnesses to the events they hope to report. When the former cover staged news (a scheduled sports event or press conference) or the latter surveil the highways with radar or the telephone lines with a wiretap, they too are amassing primary data.

A cursory look at Figure 1 might suggest that disciplines on the left are about making truth, those on the right about policing truth. Those in social control roles -- from law to peer review, insurance claims adjusting to tax

auditing -- do tend to populate the right side of the continuum, scientists the left. But social scientists who work with secondary data -- historians, epidemiologists, or meta-analysts -- are also found on the right. Moreover, though some institutions do more policing than others, policing is always a component of telling stories or creating truth and an increasingly important one for those who must bridge vast chasms of physical, social, and temporal distance in securing data.

So, although fact checkers do more policing than journalists, their position slightly to the right of journalists does not evince their greater regulatory role. Rather, it reflects their greater distance from the sources of the news. Unlike journalists, most of whom work in the field and interact directly with the subjects of their stories, fact checkers work in sterile offices high atop New York skyscrapers, mostly with archival materials and documents. Indeed, except for considerably shorter temporal distance that affords them some opportunity to re-report their stories and to consult with experts and informants, their work habits resemble their historian neighbors to the right.

Historiography epitomizes the inferential model of social control. Historians work with the documents constructed by others -- armed with skepticism, the ability to read between the lines, a refined bible of evidentiary rules, primitive forensic instincts, an imagination about intelligence gathering techniques, resourcefulness about triangulating alternative data sources, an eye to sample selection biases, suspicions about what might be missing, as well as some formal methodological rules that mimic those for constructing primary data (about selecting samples of secondary records, for example) -- to create a larger truth. Perhaps the biggest difference between historians and

fact checkers is that, while former have years and often decades to get their story right, the latter typically have hours.

Gatekeepers of the News

Fact checkers, of course, are not the sole regulators of the truthfulness of the news, nor even the sole prospective mechanism of social control in the newsroom. The traditional social controls of the press are implicit in the journalistic process itself: its norms, procedural rules and conventional standards about which journalists are socialized[14] and the oversight role exercised by editors (Breed 1955; Darnton 1975; Lapham et al. 1985) and occasionally lawyers (S. Shapiro 1989), with letters to the editor and corrections columns to respond to failures of oversight or procedural norms (American Society of Newspaper Editors 1986; Whitney 1986). In recent years, a few selected news organizations have experimented with other retrospective mechanisms of self-regulation: ombudsmen (Mogavero 1982; Tate 1984; Glasser and Ettema 1985), press councils (Rivers et al. 1972; O'Malley 1987), so-called "ethical audits" (American Society of Newspaper Editors 1986; Meyer 1985), and special internal investigations to respond to alleged journalistic lapses (Benjamin 1984), but few of these experiments have taken hold.[15] Only one

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[14] Journalism is not a profession. Journalists face no educational requirements (not even a high school diploma, let alone undergraduate or graduate training in their craft) and hold no credentials. Indeed, many elite news organizations often bypass "j-schools" in the hiring of new journalists, recruiting them instead from prestigious liberal arts programs (Jerold Footlick, personal communication, 1987). Therefore, occupational socialization is generally haphazard and unsystematic, more often acquired through on-the-job training than through the formal education associated with systems of professional credentialing.

[15] OMBUDSMEN: Newspaper ombudsmen were first introduced in this country about twenty years ago; today there are not even fifty in all of North America. Their responsibilities generally include investigating and responding to readers' complaints and serving as in-house critics; some also write a newspaper column.

PRESS COUNCILS: The National News Council, an independent, non-profit, non-

role can be found in American journalism that is exclusively oriented to the social construction and regulation of truth -- that held by magazine fact checkers[16] (Friedrich 1964; Ridder 1980; Blow and Posner 1988).

Fact checkers are a heterogeneous group. I observed nine men and five women[17] -- probably an overrepresentation of males -- but magazine research is no longer dominated by women as it has been in the past.[18] Researchers tend to have one of two career trajectories: a minority who enter, enjoy the work style and stay on in a research or administrative role, often for 15 or 20 years, and a growing majority who hope to use a few years of fact-checking

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governmental, voluntary organization, was founded in 1973 to hear, investigate, and adjudicate complaints about inaccurate or unfair reporting of the news; after continued problems with funding, participation, and cooperation, it dissolved about ten years later. Some states, like Minnesota, some Canadian provinces, Australia, and a few other nations also maintain press councils.

ETHICAL AUDITS: Philip Meyer (1985) proposes that newspapers conduct ethical audits to give them "the benefit of an independent check on [their] moral condition, just as an accountant evaluates [their] financial condition." For example, some newspapers send accuracy-check questionnaires to the subjects or sources named in stories.

INTERNAL INVESTIGATIONS: For example, the CBS self-scrutiny over its broadcast "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception" that culminated in the noted Westmoreland libel suit (Benjamin 1984).

[16] Although one major newsmagazine that did not have fact checkers when I conducted my research in the late 1980s does now, research staffs in most magazines are smaller. This trend reflects the changing economics of magazine publishing and financial cutbacks at many newsmagazines.

[17] In order to protect the anonymity of the men and women I observed, and to avoid stereotypes, I will consistently use the male gender in describing the fact checkers I observed.

[18] A (now somewhat offensive) 1964 article about fact checking observes: "The checker, or researcher, is usually a girl (sic) in her twenties, usually from some Eastern college, pleasant-looking but not a femme fatale. She came from college unqualified for anything, but looking for an "interesting" job. After a few years, she usually feels, bitterly and rightly, that nobody appreciates her work" (Friedrich 1964, p. 60).

experience as entree into a reporting or writing position at the magazine or at some other news organization. Many of the fact checkers I observed did some private writing on the side and appreciated the erratic schedule of research for its opportunities to work on freelance projects. Others did occasional writing or reporting for the magazine on stories that they were not also fact checking.

Although checkers are relatively young on average (many in their 20s and 30s), few are recruited out of college. Candidates usually have some post-graduate training (in law, international relations, foreign language or area study, business, religion, etc.) or journalistic or professional experience. Although they tend to specialize in a particular beat (business, national affairs, media, or type of sport, area of the world, kind of artistic expression), they are expected to be generalists and to be capable of checking any story.

The process of fact checking is strikingly similar across the three magazines observed. In fact, they use the same computer software for writing, editing, and checking stories. The complete evolution of a story -- from the so-called "files" of reportage sent in by correspondents in news bureaus around the world, to the queries and memos sent between the researcher and the correspondents, the writer's drafts of the stories, each edited version of the story, the picture captions and headlines -- are all accessed by the fact checker's computer terminal. Indeed, this nifty software allows editors and checkers to highlight their changes and queries in distinctive type faces;[19] compares each subsequent version of the story, so that subtle changes do not

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[19] Which allows an observer to readily determine who is responsible for each change.

escape the attention of the checker;[20] and imposes some controls by only permitting access to certain passwords at particular stages in the evolution of the story.[21] The fact checker's computer terminal therefore provides a marvelous window on the entire editorial process.

With some variation by publication and type of story and in the kind of jargon used to describe the process, a fact checker's week takes the following course. A story conference by each section of the magazine, held the night the magazine closes its previous issue or first thing at the beginning of the new week (which could be a Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, etc., depending on when the magazine goes to press), generates a tentative list of stories for the forthcoming issue. (This list usually changes radically -- often completely -- as the week unfolds.) Fact checkers are assigned to one or more of these stories; they work alone except on very long stories that may be divided among two or three researchers.[22] Correspondents in the bureaus are sent computer

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[20] While simultaneously generating an audit trail that can be consulted if a post-mortem analysis is ever necessary.

[21] For example, once a writer has signed off on a story, he or she cannot access the story to make any changes. Although writers often know the fact checker's computer password that would allow them access to the story, this feature theoretically makes it impossible for the writer to restore parts of a story that have been cut or altered by the checker.

[22] In the past, fact checkers scrutinized all materials printed in the magazine. This is still true in the sports magazine. However, both of the news magazines now print a small number of pieces that are checked only by the writer. This reflects both the diminished staffing and resources for research departments and the fact that newsmagazines are producing some stories that are more like newspaper articles and, at least theoretically, less prone to error. Stories are more likely to go unchecked where they are written by columnists or book or movie reviewers or where the story is less complex and the writer, a specialist in the field, is doing his or her own reporting and not relying on other correspondents. In these instances, the writer, like the newspaper reporter, is responsible for fact checking the story, though receives some additional backup and oversight by the copy desk. Cover stories and other complex pieces as well as the traditional magazine story, created by a tangled collaboration of multiple correspondents, reporters, and writers continues to be fact checked.

messages which inform them of the proposed stories and enumerate a series of queries about which they should report. Through the early part of the week, correspondents respond to these queries transmitting files via computer that may contain a summary or transcript of an interview, official statements, comments from academics, statistics or financial data, description of a press conference or a newsworthy event, a technical report, news or legal analysis, or drafts of parts of the story.

Fact checkers occupy themselves early in the week gathering reference materials and newspaper clippings from the magazine's extensive library,[23] books, scholarly periodicals, reports, and other documents; reading over the correspondents' files; watching the relevant sporting event or news conference on television or videotape or viewing the movie, where possible; reading the major newspapers' coverage of the story; and perhaps doing some local reporting. They begin to get a sense of the shape of the ultimate story, some of its evidentiary problems, and the kinds of data that they will need to verify the story's assertions.

Late in the week, an in-house writer will take the accumulated files and other research materials and draft a story. For all stories in one magazine I studied and for some stories in the others, correspondent/reporters (who may not be in residence) write their own stories (called "writing to space," a

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[23] The large newsmagazine's library or "morgue" holds tens of thousands of books or government documents, several hundred periodical subscriptions, electronic databases, and hundreds of thousands of biographical, corporate, and subject-matter newspaper and magazine clipping files. Not surprisingly, since the time of my research, libraries have become significantly -- in the words of a former research director -- "electronicized," with access to many media databases as well as the Internet. Though even back in the 1980s, fact-checking departments had on-line access to "Nexis," an electronic newspaper database, as well as the wire services.

convention more like that of newspapers and which is becoming increasingly popular in the newsmagazines), thereby eliminating one stage of the writing and checking process (and one opportunity both for making additional mistakes and for discovering them). This first version of the story is then transmitted to a senior editor heading the particular section of the magazine. The researcher begins selectively checking the draft, mindful that the story may change considerably through the editing process, and usually sends a series of queries to the correspondents asking for additional information or to confirm that particular assertions or interpretations in the story are correct, that quotations have not been taken out of context, and so forth. (Because multiple bureaus around the world often contribute reportage to a given story, the problem of negotiating deadlines across various time zones becomes both tricky and often frustrating.[24])

After the senior editor has finished, the story is transmitted to the correspondents who worked on the story for their comments or corrections, to the second editor in a generally three-tiered editorial hierarchy, and, in some magazines, to the legal department.[25] It is now usually the day before or the day the magazine will close. The fact checker now begins in earnest -- a pro-

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[24] Fact checkers take great care in timing queries to the correspondents. For example, they will stay late to get out their queries to the Asian bureaus so that the correspondents can gather information while the checker in New York is sleeping.

[25] Lawyers review stories for potential privacy or libel problems. In most magazines, legal review is initiated at the behest of the fact checker or editor. However, at a handful of magazines, lawyers routinely examine every story as a matter of policy. For more on legal pre-publication review, see S. Shapiro (1989).

cess that may well span the next 12 or 18 hours or more -- scrutinizing a story that may not even fill a quarter of a page in the magazine.[26]

After the checking is complete, the researcher meets or confers with the writer on each problem or recommended change, an interaction that can, on occasion, become rather animated and less than friendly as their divergent interests in technical accuracy vs. sharp flowing prose collide. The story, of course, has not yet completed its evolution. The two highest tiers of editors may make additional changes that need to be checked or requests for new information that must be supplied.[27] Moreover, once the photos or illustrations have been selected and formatted on the page, the text of the story must be modified to fit the page, a process described by the color of the pencils used in the pre-computer age to delete excess verbiage. This usually means cutting the story (by an editor, writer, or researcher) -- often significantly -- and creating a reasonable risk that deletions or additions have changed the flow, meaning, or context of the story or introduced new unchecked information. So the researcher scrutinizes the text again, along with the photographs, captions, and headlines, to insure that they are reasonable, accurate, appropriate, and consistent. Finally, in one of the magazines I observed, the story is read by a completely fresh set of eyes, whose recom-

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[26] Checkers learn to anticipate and accommodate the highly uneven working hours of their week. Several complained to me that even on vacations, they cannot fall asleep before 2 or 3 in the morning on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, or whatever night their magazine closes.

[27] Magazine editors often like to add fresh examples, greater facticity, or local color to the story and may ask for relatively trivial information like the brand of cigarettes the subject was smoking or his height, the color of a building, the former occupation of a political figure, and the like. These queries for additional information to be supplied by fact checkers are notated as "TK" -- "to kome," intentionally misspelled so that this notation does not inadvertently become part of the story.

mended changes are also overseen by the fact checker. When all is complete and accurate, the researcher releases the story to the copy desk, where it is proofread and then sent on to production, and then files away all of the drafts and reference materials used to check the story.

Facts

Checkers develop various conventions for marking up the story. Some draw wavy lines under words that express an opinion or that do not need to be checked. Others underline or highlight everything in the story considered a factual assertion and then cross out each word as adequate documentation has been found. Some dot every letter in a proper name or every word in the story to indicate that the word has been checked for spelling as well as factual accuracy. Many use elaborate color codes; red generally indicates that the word has been checked against the most authoritative source available, black that the best available -- but not infallible -- source (a newspaper article or wire service report, for example) confirms the assertion. (Most of the newsmagazines insist on at least two of these "black-check" sources.)

Underlying these conventions, of course, is some operational code that defines what constitutes a checkable fact, a rather subtle distinction that, according to one research director, takes at least a month to learn. There are the straightforward assertions: a person's name and title; the name of an organization or government agency; the spelling of a proper name; the geographic location of events described in the story; the identification of a figure or scenes depicted in a photograph; unambiguous facts such as a person's age or birthplace or height, the number of floors in a building, the final score in a sports event or the names of the athletes who scored the points, the color of a shirt, the date of an historic event, the charges in an indict-

ment, and so forth. Over time, researchers tend to become walking encyclopedias and founts of esoterica that they have accumulated in their research; their conversations take on an odd orientation to and reverence for facticity. Jay McInerney's novel about a young fact checker, *Bright Lights, Big City*, provides a flavor for this occupational hazard (though in most important respects, I find the book and its movie adaptation wrong about fact checkers):

> "Is she pissed," you ask.
> "I wouldn't put it that way," Wade says. "I like that word better the way the British use it--colloquial for intoxicated: e.g., Malcolm Lowry's consul getting pissed on mescal in Quauhnahuac, if I remember the name of the town correctly."
> "Can you spell it," you ask.
> "Of course. But to return to your original question..." (p. 19).
>
> [About to be reprimanded for sloppy work, the fact checker ponders:] If you were Japanese, this would be the time to commit seppuku. Pen a farewell poem about the transience of cherry blossoms and the fleet transit of youth, wrap the sword blade in white silk, plunge it home and pull it upward, rightward through your intestines. And no whimpering or sour expressions, please. You learned all about the ritual while checking an article on Japan. But you lack that samurai resolution (p. 25).

In a classic critique of the "fetish of the facts" in newsmagazines, a journalist argued:

> It doesn't matter if the story is slanted or meretricious, if it misinterprets or misses the point of the week's news. That is the responsibility of the editors. What matters--and what seems to attract most of the hostile letters to the editors--is whether a championship poodle stands thirty-six or forty inches high, whether the eyes of Prince Juan Carlos of Spain are blue or brown, whether the population of some city in Kansas is 15,000 or 18,000 (Friedrich 1964, p. 61).

A more recent critique of fact checking echoes these sentiments, noting "philosophical doubts about whether devoting limited resources to catching the kinds of things fact checking catches is the best way to serve the larger cause of printing the truth" (Blow and Posner 1988, p. 23). Two former *New Republic* fact checkers explain:

> The theory of fact checking is that even the tiniest details are part of a larger whole, like bricks in a building. For the sake of credibility--a term fact checkers invoke with reverence--all the facts have to be right. If we get the color of someone's shoes wrong, that destroys the credibility of the article... It also affects the reader's faith in the magazine. If one brick crumbles, the whole structure is weakened.

But, after listing a long series of trivial and mocking anecdotes that reflect this "fetish of the facts," the authors conclude that "facts aren't really that important. A few factual errors don't undermine the crucial essence of a story" (p. 25).

This notion of the fetishism of facts, though certainly apparent in the activities of all of the fact checkers I observed, is trivialized and highly exaggerated. The fact checkers scrutinized much more than these readily verifiable factual assertions. They painfully struggled over more subtle questions: Is the evidence credible? Does it support the conclusions drawn? Is the datum or quotation presented in the appropriate context? Is a word being misused or does a vague turn of phrase permit an inaccurate interpretation? Does a sequence of verified facts lead to a false conclusion? Is an assertion fair and balanced? Does the story show all sides of the controversy? The character, incidence, and resolution of these dilemmas will be considered in some detail below. Suffice it to say that their relationship to operational codes that define facts is at best problematic.

A focus on error rather than fact provides one strategy for trying to understand these codes and their boundaries. I asked each of the research directors I interviewed what constituted an error and spoke at length with fact checkers about their worst mistakes and noted the rationalizations that accompanied decisions to allow material they found problematic to stay in a story.

The research directors were all mystified when I asked them to define error. Their answers tend to support the factual fetishism argument. As one director responded quite matter-of-factly, an error is "something that we publish that turns out to be wrong." To another, "there are gray matters of opinion, judgment calls made by writer or reporter. An error is limited to name, number, place, date. It is tangible, reflects a standard you can agree on using official or reputable sources. Matters of tone, thesis, what is included or not included are not errors." And even the fact checkers, when describing their biggest mistakes, listed objective errors. Although the subjective misstatements, the stupid opinions, the unfair characterizations, the inappropriate analogies, the risky inferences based on flimsy evidence clearly galled and preoccupied them as I observed their work, it was on these matters that they ultimately capitulated or compromised.

In all three magazines when errors are discovered -- usually by challenges from readers -- fact checkers responsible for the story must complete a memo in which they defend the article if, on further inspection, they still consider it right or fill out a formalized multiple-copied report with a correction and explanation of why the article is wrong. Correction forms are sent to the library where copies are filed in all related reference materials so that mistakes are not repeated. Some errors are acknowledged by printing the reader's challenge in the "letters to the editor" column in the magazine and, on occasion, a serious or sensitive mistake may be officially corrected in the column.

The errors reports are also cumulated and used to generate sensitive in-house estimates of error rates per issue and, in at least one magazine, to prepare periodic reviews for the staff that list and classify errors by sec-

tion of the magazine, source, and the process by which it was made.[28] A list of errors from several summary reports I was shown also confirms an emphasis on objective facts over matters of subjective judgment and context (though not to the exclusion of the latter). For example, a name was misspelled, a picture caption misidentified the subjects, the photograph of an airplane was run upside down, a date was wrong, a Pakistani was incorrectly identified as an Indian, a phrase from a folk song was misquoted, a chart was interpreted as indicating that 22% of blacks are illiterate rather than that 22% of illiterates are black, a map of the United States put Rhode Island in Connecticut, and so forth.

What Do Checkers Check?

Mindful of the systemic sources of inaccuracy in the news noted earlier, fact checkers set out to keep the gates of truth as best they can in the day or two or several hours or weeks that they are allotted. My observational research provides a perspective on the kinds of concerns and suspicions that fact checkers investigate. I recorded each item in a story that gave a checker pause and then tracked the efforts the researcher took to evaluate the claim, the output of his or her inquiry, and the final disposition of the matter. All told, fifteen stories (four concerning business, four on international affairs, four about sports, and three movie reviews) generated a data base of 541 pauses.[29] These stories varied in length from a one-column-inch

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[28] I.e., was the error made by the correspondent, by the fact checker, by the photo department, by the copyreaders, when the story was cut to fit the allocated space, in the production process, or was the information, obtained in good faith from a trusted source or reference book, erroneous?

[29] Unfortunately, I was unable to observe fully the checking of eight of these stories (on which two or more researchers were working simultaneously or which were checked over the course of two weeks or more). So the number of pauses I observed is undoubtedly lower than the total number scrutinized by the checkers in these fifteen stories. Still, what I was able to observe is distrib-

note (less than 50 words) to 147 column inches (11 pages with 15 photographs). The median length story in the sample spanned 11 column inches (roughly two-thirds of a page with a picture); only four of the stories exceeded one page in length.

The vast majority (87%) of these "pauses" or matters investigated were initiated by the checkers themselves. However, inquiries also arise at the behest of others. Correspondents sometimes object to the way a story has been written or edited; follow-up of their concerns accounts for 6% of the researchers' inquiries. Editors (2% of the pauses) raise questions to the fact checkers about the context of a quote, an ambiguous passage, a sense that a conclusion might be overstated, and the like; lawyers (1%) about sensitive or potentially defamatory assertions. The researchers investigate these matters raised by their colleagues. They also respond to requests from writers or editors for additional information not contained in any of the correspondents' files or research materials or for new or better examples, noted in the story "TK" -- "to kome" (e.g. "Doe, who is TK years old," -- see note #27) -- which account for 4% of the pauses. Because of our interest in the unique

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uted fairly randomly. I watched the first few days of a multi-week project and the last few hours of a major cover story. I observed a checker who worked on the first third of a story and others who checked all but the last few details on some others. The sample, though undercounted, is not biased in this regard (i.e. it doesn't overrepresent particular kinds of concerns, or those that tend to remain unresolved for a longer period of time, etc.). There will be some analyses in the paper, though, for which I will have to exclude these eight stories because the data are incomplete in ways that are consequential for the analysis. Moreover, the sample does not represent all types of magazines or even all of the substantive themes that a general newsweekly would address, nor (as I explained earlier) was the sample of stories selected in random fashion. Still, the data provide a useful start to a more systematic understanding of this gatekeeping process.

contribution of fact checkers to the news product, the analyses to follow will focus only on the 469 inquiries that checkers initiated themselves.

A count of at least (and undoubtedly considerably more than -- see note #29) 469 pauses arising in fifteen stories provides a strong indicator that researchers spend some time perusing their stories and consider a good number of the assertions contained therein. Indeed, an examination of the seven stories that I was able to observe fairly completely suggests that fact checkers pause about 3 times per column inch in the median story (this ranges from once to fourteen and a half times per inch). Another and perhaps more striking indicator of the extent of oversight: half of the words ultimately printed in an average (median) story generate a pause (this ranges from a low of 32% to a high of 87%[30]). And this proportion is deceptively low both because it does not reflect those matters examined, found wanting, and cut from the final version of the story and because it is based on a denominator that includes trivial figures of speech (articles, conjunctions, and the like) not included in the numerator.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1 presents the nature of the concern that gave rise to the pause. The table is also organized to give voice to the research director's conceptions of error, described earlier. It differentiates pauses into four clusters based on the extent to which checkers inquire about clear, straightforward objective facts with right or wrong answers ("name, number, place,

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[30] The heavily scrutinized stories (14.5 pauses per inch, 87% coverage) were one-inch stories, where it was obviously necessary to pack in a great many facts without too much opportunity for innocuous background. The next most examined story (6.9 per inch, 60%) was a somewhat longer 3.5 inch note. The longest story in this set of comparisons (27.5 inches -- 2 pages with lots of pictures) fell precisely at the median.

TABLE 1: NATURE OF THE PAUSE

16% CLEARLY OBJECTIVE MATTERS:

- 16% Proper noun, title, spelling

35% RELATIVELY OBJECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- 18% Basic factual information
- 3% Location correct?
- 2% Date correct?
- 8% Reference to something, event that preceded story
- 3% Quote correct?
- 1% Caption, illustration, headline correct?

25% LESS OBJECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- 19% Did event happen as described, description correct?
- 3% Ranking, comparative assertion, something never before happened
- 3% Discrepant information

24% SUBJECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- 1% Evidentiary question, sourcing, credit
- 1% Characterization of intent, belief, feelings
- 1% Reference about what is likely to happen in future
- 3% Incorrect connotation of word, phrase, jargon, wrong word
- 1% Concept lacks operational definition
- 5% Conclusion, analysis, inference, interpretation of facts, true facts lead to wrong conclusion, data misinterpreted
- 1% Apt analogy, juxtaposition of two facts
- 1% Balance, emphasis, seriousness of charge, exaggeration
- 1% Ambiguous, confusing
- 1% How to convey technical legal information
- 1% Characterization of typicality, central tendency
- 4% General feel or tone of a place or personality
- 1% Generalization from specific information; general expression implies too much
- * More information needed to be correct or make sense, too vague
- * Use of example
- * Qualifier unnecessary, qualification appears too speculative or suspicious
- * Fairness

(469) TOTAL CASES

date") for which authoritative ("red check") sources exist or rather consider more subjective assertions and judgment calls for which there are rarely right or wrong answers (the so-called "gray matters" whose breech does not constitute error to the practitioners).[31]

As noted at the top of the table, sixteen percent of the pauses are for names and other proper nouns; fact checkers routinely stop at virtually all of these -- the familiar and the unfamiliar to make sure that they are being named, identified, and spelled correctly. Is James Baker III the Secretary of the Treasury and do we include the "III"? Do we call Bobby Inman, "Bobby" or "Robert"? Do we hyphenate a corporate name?[32] Is it Kmart, K mart, or K Mart? Who is "Gyro Gearloose" and how does he spell his name? How do we refer to the "National Academy of Sciences"? (Even though the researcher had a copy of their letterhead, he questioned the usage. "It doesn't hurt to have other verification," he told me.) Do we call German currency "marks," "deutsch-marks," or "d-marks"? Do we include the matrimonial names in Spanish surnames? Is it the Plaza "Accord" or Plaza "Agreement"? What is the official title of the source cited in the article and what is the proper spelling of his name? And so forth.

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[31] Journalism researchers also distinguish between objective and subjective errors. Berry (1967) fashioned a 14-category classification of objective and subjective errors that continues to be used by contemporary researchers. He classified omissions, inaccurate headlines, overemphasis, and underemphasis as subjective errors; objective ones included typographic and spelling errors and wrong names, figures, titles, ages, addresses, locations, times, and dates. Surveys of news sources who were asked to comment on the accuracy of stories in which they are mentioned yield estimates of subjective errors as a percentage of all errors that range from 36% (Blankenburg 1970) to 63% (Tillinghast 1982).

[32] A poem -- supplied by a corporation often in the news and mounted on a researcher's office wall -- reminded: "...You can praise or berate us, but please don't hyphenate us..."

Next, there are what the research director called the number/place/date questions -- matters that are still objectively incontrovertible for which authoritative sources can be found, but which are perhaps a bit less easy to verify conclusively than proper spelling or title -- which comprise a bit more than a third of the pauses. Researchers almost automatically stop when they read these basic factual assertions -- a public figure's age, the score of a hockey game, the value of the dollar in yen at noon New York time on January 9th, the charges in an indictment, census figures for or the number of churches in a midwestern city, the number of parliamentary seats held by a political party -- or statements that date or place particular events -- the date of an upcoming election or of a major securities transaction, a birthplace, the site of a peace conference or sporting event, whether a named street is in the red-light district, and so forth.

Researchers also pause at references to events or conditions that preceded the story -- infractions committed by a sports franchise in its early years, previous movies directed by the director of the film under review, the former drug and alcohol rehabilitation of a news figure or the out-of-wedlock child another fathered as an adolescent, reference to previous terrorist attacks, etc. They routinely examine quotes included in the story to make sure that they have been reported verbatim; where they are not, researchers may delete the quotation marks. (Correspondents are responsible for the accuracy of first-hand quotes. Researchers' concerns about whether quotes are in context or properly interpreted would be classified as subjective and not collected in this category.) Many checkers also scrutinize photographs, illustrations, and their captions to make sure that the figures or events depicted are properly

identified, appropriate, and, along with headlines, consistent with the text.[33]

The next category, reflecting a quarter of the pauses, is characterized by claims about which there are fewer authoritative sources for verification or for which evidence may be inconclusive or equivocal. Many stories describe people or events -- a bombing, the spectators at or the sequence of a sports event, the trading floor of a financial market, the response of the crowd at a political rally, the emotional state of a recently-charged stock swindler. Checkers often questioned the basis of such descriptions and their accuracy. "Can we say he raised his arms in glee, or must we say he outstretched them; were his arms raised to each side perpendicular to the body like a basketball referee signalling a time out?"[34] Others paused at passages that make comparative statements, rank the size of a firm or the relative accomplishments of a sports figure, toss out the number of persons or organizations that have ever accomplished the act of note before, or declare that no one has ever before attained some status. While these assertions may be relatively objective statuses about the salient actor (that he or she has accomplished some-

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[33] For example, a sequence of photographs showing a bowler hurling the ball down the alley and then jumping in delight was captioned to indicate that he had just thrown a strike. The researcher asked the editor whether we know that this is the frame after a strike; the editor responded that he assumed so because the bowler was so happy. The researcher was skeptical about this conclusion, examined the negatives from several rolls of film, discovered that the photos were out of sequence and objected to the caption. (It was changed.) As one publication reminds its researchers, captions are the most widely read words in the magazine and, therefore, must be checked as carefully as the text.

[34] On this very subject, a recent article described tensions in the fact checking department at the *New Yorker* in light of a series of embarrassing gaffes. It cited the example of a fact checker who asked Art Garfunkel "whether he had -- as a "Talk of the Town" writer had written -- gesticulated nervously with his hands during an interview. Then the fact-checker went on to double-check, asking the singer if he still had both arms." (Shugaar 1994).

thing x number of times or is of a given size), the comparative portion draws upon data regarding the status of every possible counterpart -- and considerably clouds the possibility of assessment.[35] Checkers also pursued further inquiry when they discovered disparate, seemingly contradictory, or inconsistent objective information in the story.

Finally, roughly a quarter of the pauses reflect more subjective questions, those gray matters the research director suggested could not result in "error."[36] As the large number of entries on the bottom of Table 1 suggests, these questions reflect varied concerns which generally pertain to evidence, the presentation or interpretation of information, generalization, and, on rare occasions, fairness.

Threshold evidentiary questions involve evaluations of the quality of evidence used to support allegations in the story. For example, a fact checker questioned suggestions in a story about the Mideast that Israelis were behind a particular terrorist attack because they were derived from a single -- and not very reliable -- source. A different story referred to incidents of particularly paranoid behavior displayed by a sports celebrity; the researcher, who had heard the gossip in the past, disbelieved the evidence. In another

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[35] One checker I observed paused at the statement that no one had ever before tried to do something. "How can you possibly know that," he asked. After checking all the reliable sources that suggested that -- whether or not anyone had tried -- no one had succeeded, and after some informal epistemological soliloquies, the checker decided he was "picking nits" and dropped the matter.

[36] A much larger proportion (71%) of the inquiries or research triggered by outsiders -- correspondents, writers, editors, and lawyers -- pertained to subjective matters. Of course, because of the safety net provided by fact checkers, they have less reason to worry about the accuracy of objective facts and inquire about them mainly when they want researchers to unearth additional facts (i.e., when they ask for a "TK:" the bowling champion, puffing on TK [brand of cigarettes] between frames and, later that night, downing TK [brand of whiskey]...).

case, the problem was one of sampling. The story alleged that a boxer's workouts were attended only by male spectators. Because the reporter had attended only two sessions in the course of several months of daily workouts, the researcher did not find the evidence compelling; besides, the boxer's spokesperson disagreed with the description.

Checkers also question whether the evidence is sufficient to support the inference drawn -- for example, about the intent or feelings of an individual or community or about what is likely to happen in the future. One story suggested that it must be especially galling for a sports legend to have to concede that his son is doing even better at the sport than he did; another story indicated that fans of a football team felt betrayed by the sexual misconduct of one of its players. Researchers paused at both of these assertions, given the lack of direct evidence about such feelings. Another commented to me that the writer was trying to get inside the subject's head; how does he know? Newsmagazines often try to project the outcome of a particular incident: that the Sandinistas are likely to oppose the Arias proposal, the current President of an Asian country is bound to be the winner in the next elections because his opposition is divided, an upcoming prize fight will be the richest fight in boxing history (when the gate receipts that contribute to the purse are yet unknown), etc. These and other projections that lack a firm evidentiary basis gave fact checkers pause.

Many of the entries in the last category of Table 1 pertain to matters of presentation or interpretation of the evidence. Researchers question the use of particular words or jargon and what words convey operationally: Are "clean rooms" and "semiconductor production lines," "strippers" and "topless dancers," "rape" and "sexual assault," or "housewives" and "married women" interchangeable expressions? Is it politically loaded to use "Palestine" to refer

to a place? The assertion that a corporation "continues to insist" makes it sound obstinate, when other evidence suggests that it is not. The story refers to a sports figure as a "nobody"; how might one operationalize this concept so that the description is checkable? In presenting foreign currency figures, should we use the close of trading in Tokyo, New York, or San Francisco (and have we been consistent)?

Researchers also closely scrutinize the inferences or conclusions that are drawn from the data they have checked: Is a Central American official really jeopardizing his ties with the U.S. by attempting to be an honest broker in the Nicaraguan conflict? Is a boxer's right hook his most potent weapon? They question analogies or the juxtaposition of facts: Can one liken the organizational form of a sports franchise to the United Way? Does speaking in the same breath of right-wing and left-wing death squads in a Central American nation (in the interest of balance) put an inordinate share of the blame on the left? Checkers question the overall balance or emphasis of the piece or the possibility of exaggeration: One noted that the role of European involvement in terrorism, a relatively important theme in all of the reporting from the correspondents in the field, had been deemphasized in the story. Another questioned whether calling a series of incidents of sexual misconduct a "scandal" was overkill. Researchers are also on the lookout for expressions or explanations that are confusing or ambiguous, or that seemingly convey technical information inaccurately.

A third sort of subjective question concerns matters of generalization, a common problem, given the narrative style of the newsmagazine. Researchers pause at descriptions of typicality: Is the value of the average American home $100,000? Do boxers usually train for a fight for a year and run eight to ten miles a day while training? They question the general tone or feel for a

place or a personality. One story tried to provide a sense of a particular community -- that it is a church-going town and a good place to raise kids, but is also a town that is a hard place to live in if you are black, where blacks lead a fishbowl sort of existence and feel uncomfortable walking down the street, where it's impossible to get a "black" haircut, and where even the maids are white. The checker, of course, questioned all of these general assertions and spent quite some time trying to gather evidence to support them. Then there is the matter of overgeneralization or generalizing from fairly specific information, for example, stating that a celebrity has tried "everything" (in reference to drug use) or using a specific incident (that a fighter allegedly spit on a picture of his opponent before he entered the ring) to create the more general impression that he is vicious or mean-spirited.

On rare occasions, the problem is not overgeneralization, but unnecessary use of qualifiers. One researcher paused when he read that an investor apparently unloaded his stock in order to get a capital tax loss; since sources quoted him as saying that was why he did it, the term "apparently" was inappropriate and, according to the checker, made the story look unnecessarily speculative. Researchers also pause where information is vague and thereby misleading. For example, one story alleged that the district attorney dropped a case because he couldn't get a conviction; the checker felt that the statement was misleading unless explained. Was it because he couldn't get enough evidence or because the jury was unlikely to believe the witnesses, etc.? Others question misleading or inappropriate examples; one checker objected to the example of an (8-bit) Apple computer because the story was concerned with 16-bit computers.

Finally, researchers pause over matters of fairness or racial or sexual stereotypes (perhaps inadvertently) conveyed in the story. One checker, for example, questioned whether citing a study that found that 90% of sexual assaults by college athletes are committed by black players would simply feed ammunition to racists without making any major contribution to the story. While not even 1% of the pauses pertain exclusively to questions of fairness, many of the previous concerns (about wording, inference, tone, generalization, juxtaposition, balance, and the like) implicitly reflect concern for this issue as well.

One can use the data in Table 1 to appraise Friedrich's critique of the "fetish of the facts" in newsmagazines, though it is not entirely clear whether the empirical glass is half full or half empty. In some powerful sense, the glass is indeed half empty: objective or relatively objective matters outnumber subjective questions three to one. But there are other ways of evaluating the relative concern for getting innocuous facts right over assuring that accurate data are used, interpreted, juxtaposed, and conveyed credibly and fairly. These indicators afford a somewhat different interpretation.

For each of the pauses observed, I gathered data on the overall magnitude of the inquiry (the amount of time consumed, number of sources consulted, and complexity of the analysis). Though researchers may pause less frequently for subjective matters, they devote considerably more effort to evaluating these claims. Almost three-quarters of the subjective questions led to a moderate or substantial investigation, compared to well less than half of the more objective pauses.

Moreover, many of the stories had what I would call one or two "preoccupying themes," assertions in the story or its overall tone that the checker

found profoundly troubling, on which he or she spent inordinate amounts of time looking for more data, consulting and arguing with colleagues, soul searching, seeking compromises or more palatable solutions. These typically were among the last stray matters that the checker signed off on before the story was closed -- reflecting the hope that the checker could find a sympathetic ear in a more senior editor, could win over an obstinate colleague, could find that more acceptable turn of phrase, would unearth some definitive evidence, or would be able to delete the troublesome passage if the story turned out to be too long.

The preoccupations were invariably subjective -- questions of balance, fairness, evidence, juxtaposition. Sometimes, the assertions were not factual but matters of opinion and theoretically immune from fact checker scrutiny; but researchers persisted because they felt these ill-considered opinions made the magazine look foolish or stupid. One story featured the heroic accomplishments of a high school athlete, the son of the coach of a professional team. The researcher became troubled when he learned that two other members of the son's team contributed at least as much (in points scored and other such objective measures) to the team's success. Another story told of a licit securities trade that allowed the seller to take a tremendous capital loss on the transaction and thereby substantially reduce his income tax. The fact checker objected to a passage in the story that suggested that the transaction was financed by the U.S. Treasury (because the seller saved so much tax) and to the implicit implication that this legitimate form of tax avoidance was somehow unsavory. "It gets me mad when liberals do this," he complained. "The implication is not true; he simply got to keep more of his money." A different checker was preoccupied with two assertions of rather different import in his story on Central American politics: a reference to right-wing

and left-wing death squads in the same sentence (wrongly implying that they were equally responsible for massive killings in the area) and a passage that suggested that the mutual respect and admiration between two leaders in the region were derived from their interest in sports -- one jogs, the other does karate (the checker found the notion ridiculous, particularly given the different qualities of the two sports and the absence of evidence that they even discuss these interests or that it makes a difference in their rapport). Another researcher was very troubled by a preview of the styles and personalities of two contenders to an upcoming prize fight. He found the story unfair toward one of the two, wrongly portraying him as an animal.

Many of the objections raised by the checkers in these four examples did not prevail; the troubling passages remained in the stories as before or with small qualifiers or caveats. Researchers, of course, are not accountable for these "gray matters." But both quantitative and qualitative observations from my research reject a mindless obsession with or fetish of facticity. Researchers pay strict attention to objective facts -- and there are lots of them. But their most significant efforts and passionate inquiries are generally reserved for the more subjective questions. Indeed, on occasion, checkers act as advocates against those supposed gatekeepers of subjective truth, the editors, who -- they felt -- were not minding the gates. And, so, from other vantage points, the glass is half full.

How Checkers Check

Perhaps the most challenging story from a checking perspective that I observed was a one-page international piece that alleged that Israel was waging a widening secret naval war against PLO ships off her coast. The story wove a web of circumstantial evidence, reporting on incidents (in Athens,

Lebanon, Cyprus, Tunisia, Italy, Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea) spanning a year and a half. It suggested that Israel was responsible for sinkings, bombings, interceptions, or capture of various Palestinian ships, a PLO headquarters and naval base, and a car transporting the chief of PLO seaborne commando operations -- the assassination around which the story was pegged. No officials would go on record to confirm or deny these allegations, so the inferences were generally circumstantial. This was an "enterprise" story -- an exclusive "scoop" of sorts -- that had not been reported anywhere else and, therefore, about which it was more difficult to find corroborating evidence. At one point, the fact checker complained to a correspondent in the Mideast about the dearth of press reports and other data sources; he responded with delight that none of the competition was paying attention to these developments.

Not only did the relative inattention of the press, the circumstantial nature of the evidence, and the silence of official sources contribute to the difficulty of the checking task. The location of the events contributed as well. The story was reported by journalists in three different news bureaus in the Mideast and Europe, with slightly different interpretations of the events in question, working in time zones at odds with each other and that of the checker in New York, who had to wake them from their sleep or postpone inquiry to consult on bothersome issues. Much of the potential source material was in Arabic or Hebrew newspapers -- unavailable in the U.S., incomprehensible to the researcher, and, in any event, highly suspect as very partisan, inaccurate, and untrustworthy accounts of matters political in this region of the world. Moreover, it is the nature of the terrorism and assassination business for there to be many competing claims about responsibility for particular incidents, many of those planted by the killers themselves to

mislead officials. Because events were so far away and long past, there was little ancillary local reporting that the checker could undertake to investigate problematic elements of the story.

When I joined the fact checker, he had already been working for a day searching for confirmation of a long list of incidents named in a half dozen files already sent from the Mideast correspondents, some of which would most likely figure in the finished article. He checked the timing and location of these incidents, the type of vessel involved, number of casualties, type of weapon, modus operandi of the attack, and the like. He had been through the magazine's extensive clipping library on the PLO, terrorism, the Israeli military, etc., had consulted *Facts on File*, Nexis (a computerized newspaper database), the wire services, research reports, maps and geographical dictionaries, reference books (including publications on the Mideast issued by the State Department, the CIA, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and had consulted all prior stories on these incidents that had been previously reported in the magazine.

The fact checker sent queries to the Mideast news bureaus, listing the evidentiary problems and asking for sources on particular incidents, noting disparities in information and asking correspondents to resolve them, raising questions about problematic substantive assertions. He circulated the files of reportage among the bureaus and asked correspondents to comment on the findings and analyses of their colleagues in the other bureaus; the researcher thereby discovered modest disagreements about the seriousness and tone of the story's central allegations and additional skepticism about some of the evidence. As correspondents responded to the queries, wiring new evidence and additional sources, the researcher evaluated the new materials (especially careful to confirm that they were not citing each other and providing

redundant rather than corroborating evidence) and wove these new sources into his documentary checklist. In between these inquiries, he tracked down the more objective facts -- how to spell various Arab names and vessels, the number of years it took the Israelis to track down the killers from the Munich massacre, the dates of various peace initiatives, and the like.

After the story was drafted by a writer in New York, the fact checker went through the correspondents' files line by line and examined how they were used in the story.[37] He then continued to search for corroboration of the incidents that remained in the story, wiring each edited version to the three Mideast bureaus for comments and corrections and prodding the correspondents to unearth better evidence. As the correspondents responded with lists of problems in the various drafts of the story (you've got to say the hydrofoils are Palestinian-owned, "murder" should be "death," etc.), the checker incorporated their suggestions into the story. He apprised the senior editor of the evidentiary controversies that remained in the article; particularly troubling was a major assertion that Israeli agents were behind a certain bombing that was supported by only a single source (unfortunately, their most direct competitor, colloquially called "Brand X").

As the story went through its three tiers of editors, the researcher ran a computer program that highlighted every change made from one version to the next, and checked to make sure that insertions or modifications were accurate and that deletions did not distort the story's context. We worked that second day until 3:00 A.M. and another eight and a half hours the next day, until shortly before that issue of the magazine closed.

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[37] For example, while the file said that officials "will not confirm," the story read that they "flatly denied" certain allegations. The checker changed the expression.

In contrast, take the most "checkable" story I observed -- a two page (about one page of which was comprised of photographs) report of a national bowling tournament which described the game and provided some personal profiles of the major contenders past and present. In stark contrast to the Mideast story, evidentiary sources of considerable credibility abounded. This was orchestrated news; journalists knew about the tournament in advance and reporters were there to observe and photograph it. Indeed, the tournament was televised, so that fact checker in New York could also watch it and record it on videotape for future reference. The subjects of the story agreed to be interviewed; in fact they willingly disclosed and commented on their problems with drug and alcohol abuse for the record. The sport has a public relations office delighted to get coverage and willing to answer or gather data on any question raised by the fact checker. As in many sports, the Professional Bowling Association publishes an annual media guide and accurate annually updated record books that profile the players, document their records, winnings, tournaments, and the like. In order to participate in a tournament of this sort, bowlers had to be major contenders and, therefore, there was considerable prior coverage and extant background information on any potential winner. A sports tournament has a beginning and end and, therefore, journalists do not have to worry about staying apprised of breaking news. And so on.

Still, despite the ease of coverage and the wealth of reliable data, the fact checker spent more than fifteen hours checking 86 pauses in a story just a few column inches longer than that on the Israeli navy (whose researcher spent a little more than twice the time examining 61 pauses). Even when the evidence is unquestioned and readily at hand, when all parties to the story agree to cooperate, when even the embarrassing and sensitive assertions are freely disclosed, when journalist and fact checker work in the same time zone,

it still takes considerable effort to examine an uncomplicated -- but fact-laden -- article thoroughly.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

My description of the research surrounding the Israeli navy story, though condensed and a bit superficial, still illustrates many of the methods by which fact checkers evaluate their stories. Table 2 provides a more systematic list of investigative strategies undertaken by the researchers I observed at all three magazines and broken down for the two general news magazines and the specialized sports magazine separately. It was necessary to differentiate the magazines for two reasons. First, the two general newsmagazines use a system of correspondents in the field who report on the news and writers in New York who take the correspondent's files and write the stories; at the sports magazine, reporters (often in the field) write their own stories -- thus eliminating another set of eyes to scrutinize the story and usually another written version of the account to compare with the final product.[38] This difference is reflected in the second and third rows of Table 2, which indicate that about a quarter of the investigative strategies at the two general newsmagazines involve consulting with correspondents or reviewing their files of reportage, compared to 1%[39] of those employed by checkers at the sports magazine. The second reason I broke down the aggregate distribution is evident in the table itself. For reasons to be elaborated shortly, the spe-

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[38] The reporters in the sports magazine (unlike the correspondents in the newsmagazine) do send the fact checkers all of their notes, a list (and telephone numbers) of all the persons with whom they spoke, and copies of other source materials they consulted.

[39] In this case, researchers scrutinized files sent in by stringers -- usually newspaper reporters who provide occasional freelance research regarding local elements of a bigger story.

TABLE 2: INVESTIGATIVE STRATEGY

Two General Newsmagazines	Specialized Newsmagazine	All Three Magazines	
3%	4%	3%	Nothing, knows it's right
16%	0%	8%	Consult with bureau, correspondent
8%	1%	4%	Check correspondent's files
22%	13%	17%	CONSULT OTHER REPORTAGE:
12%	8%	10%	Newspaper or magazine clips
3%	2%	3%	Check own magazine's clips
2%	0%	1%	Check wire service
4%	*	2%	Check Nexis
1%	2%	2%	Check library biographical or corporate files
31%	11%	21%	CONSULT REFERENCE MATERIALS:
15%	4%	10%	Reference books
1%	6%	4%	Media guides, production notes, press releases, record books
6%	*	3%	Facts on File
3%	1%	2%	Gazateer, atlas
4%	0%	2%	Government publications
2%	*	1%	Documents, annual reports
14%	67%	42%	INTERVIEWS, PERSONAL CONSULTATIONS:
4%	37%	21%	PR person, movie studio, chamber of commerce
1%	4%	3%	Expert, consultant
*	2%	1%	Ask subject of story
*	13%	7%	Ask associate of subject, lawyer
0%	3%	2%	Ask similarly positioned person
2%	4%	3%	Interrogate reporter, how do you know that?
5%	3%	4%	Ask colleague
1%	0%	*	Consult with editor
0%	1%	*	Check photograph
2%	1%	2%	Watch game, film, read book
1%	1%	1%	Miscellaneous strategy
2%	2%	2%	Don't know strategy
337	365	702	TOTAL CASES
5%	4%	5%	USED NO STRATEGIES
46%	74%	64%	USED ONE TYPE OF STRATEGY
22%	13%	16%	USED TWO TYPES OF STRATEGIES
13%	5%	8%	USED THREE TYPES OF STRATEGIES
11%	1%	5%	USED FOUR OR MORE TYPES
3%	2%	3%	DON'T KNOW
179	290	469	TOTAL CASES

cialized magazine uses a rather different approach to fact checking and, because its number of pauses is so large (its articles are generally much longer and generate many more pauses), it weights and thereby distorts the overall distribution.

With the exception of eyewitness accounts and first-hand quotations directly obtained by the correspondent which need not be checked,[40] most researchers consider the correspondents' files to be at best "black-check" sources; an independent source must be consulted to validate their disclosures. As a research manual published by one of the magazines admonishes checkers, "You, not the correspondent, bear responsibility for a mistake that could have been avoided by solid library checking." Therefore, fact checkers augment consultations with correspondents and review of their files with the examination of other reportage and reference materials.

Because general newsmagazines are produced weekly and tend to report on breaking news, there is frequently considerable coverage of their stories in the daily press and wire services. Most of the magazine sections I observed receive several daily copies of the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* and get the Associated Press wire on their computer terminals. Because newsmagazine articles tend to be more synthetic and analytic than daily newspapers, telescoping the week's developments and the historical backdrop on a news event, old newspaper clippings frequently provide relevant corroborating evidence as well. The large newsmagazines maintain impressive morgues that cumulate massive collections of clippings on

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[40] And researchers will attempt to verify these as well if they make very serious or significant allegations or if they seem inconsistent with other information collected. Although quotes are the responsibility of the reporters, researchers are expected to check any factual information contained therein.

even relatively obscure individuals and organizations, nations, cities, events, relationships, commodities, and phenomena.[41] Twenty-two percent of the fact-checker inquiries I observed at these general newsmagazines (13% at the sports magazine) scrutinized newspaper or magazine clippings,[42] wire service reports, or computerized newspaper data bases. (Since the decision to consult other reportage usually meant scrutinizing dozens of clips, the 22% figure seems in some ways deceptively small.)

As one editor commented to me, it is ironic that magazine researchers rely on non-fact-checked newspaper articles to check their stories. That is why magazine research departments encourage checkers to seek out other sources of

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[41] As described in note #23, newsmagazine libraries have undergone a revolution since the time of my research in their greater reliance on electronic information sources. This is perhaps epitomized by the *Mother Jones* masthead, which named two fact checkers back in the late 1980s and now identifies LEXIS as its research department. Though these changes have apparently transformed magazine libraries, their impact on fact checkers has been surprisingly far less substantial. Reliance on electronic databases is limited by both hardware and financial exigencies. Few fact checkers' computer terminals in the two news magazines are hard-wired to the Internet or to the various databases. Moreover, the subscription and access rates for for-profit companies to many of the databases is still prohibitively expensive to peruse them idly. So, although libraries may respond to queries by judiciously scouring electronic materials, when necessary, most fact checkers pursue their queries the old-fashioned way (by calling the library and waiting for printed confirmation). Fact checkers at the sports magazine apparently do simple electronic searches themselves. Research department heads also tell me that materials on electronic databases have more errors than even their print versions and include a much wider range materials of variable accuracy. They observe that, with the proliferation of information in electronic form, it is more difficult to be critical and skeptical about the reliability of sources, to tell the good from the bad. All of my informants tell me that they are particularly wary about materials on the Internet. The sports magazine uses the Internet only to gauge fan reactions and not for substantive information.

[42] Among the stories I observed, checkers consulted not only the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*, but also *Newsday*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Financial Times*, the *New York Post*, *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the Associated Press and Reuters wires, and many others.

data and insist on two or more newspaper clips to confirm a given assertion and why researchers prefer to confirm with materials from previous issues of their own fact-checked magazine. One does not get the sense, though, that checkers consider more reliable their fact-checked magazine competitors than non-fact-checked newspapers; if anything, I sensed the opposite.

More frequently (representing a little less than a third of all strategies in the general newsmagazines and about a tenth of those in the sports magazine), checkers consult reference materials -- also rarely fact-checked -- many of which are available in their libraries. These include general references (*Who's Who*, gazateers and road atlases, the Bible, the *Government Manual*, *Facts on File*, *Current Biography*, the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, the *World Almanac*, encyclopedias, telephone books) and specialized reference materials in the researcher's particular beat (*Standard and Poor's Directory*, *Europa Guide*, the *Trade Name Directory*, *Jane's Fighting Ships*, *The SEC Monthly Statistical Report*, *Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory*, *The Rules of the Game*, *The Filmgoer's Companion*, corporate annual reports, financial databases, scholarly journals, compendia of federal statutes, biographies, etc.). Beats that welcome systematic press coverage often generate specialized reference materials and press releases which researchers will also systematically consult. This is particularly true of professional sports which issue media guides and other record books at the sport, league, and team level and movie studios which provide extensive production notes to film reviewers and produce continuity scripts (verbatim transcripts of a film that checkers can consult when evaluating the accuracy of quoted dialogue). Less frequently, fact checkers will seek out specific documents that bear on a story -- indictments or civil complaints, government technical reports, promotional literature, transcripts of speeches, and the like.

Several of the researchers I observed also keep their own beat records, cumulating press releases, scholarly materials, statistics, scores, and scrapbooks of clippings which they consult regularly. Over time, checkers develop fine-tuned experientially-based opinions about the accuracy and reliability of particular kinds of information covered by each information source.[43] Because of their obsessive professional ideology surrounding the making of mistakes, fact checkers tend to remember the occasions in which they were burned by a source or reference book and avoid these sources in the future or else hold them to much higher standards of proof.

The next item in Table 2 -- "Interviews or Personal Consultations" -- most differentiates the general and specialized newsmagazines; about one-seventh of the inquiries by researchers in the former and two-thirds of those in the latter used these methods. In both types of newsmagazine, fact checkers consulted with their colleagues or editors to gather additional data or to solicit their advice or expertise in evaluating an assertion or its supporting evidence. For example, a business story reported that sophisticated American technology had been stolen and diverted to the Soviets who now employ it on their MiG31 aircraft. Unfortunately, the photo department of the magazine was only able to obtain a picture of a MiG23 plane which had already been formatted on the page and couldn't easily be switched. The fact checker called the Pentagon correspondent to inquire whether it was possible that the purloined technology had been used or tested on the MiG23 (it hadn't). In

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[43] For example, *Who's Who* is considered reliable on name spellings but, because it is based on self-reports, cannot be trusted on birthdates -- particularly of celebrities, who have strong incentives to misrepresent such information. Film production notes are considered reliable sources of information about the current production but less so when they report on previous films or the former projects of production staff (especially if they involved different movie studios).

another case, a researcher worried that a quote from a U.S. official regarding the declining value of the American dollar in international markets was at odds with the data and consulted with the writer about whether they should note this discrepancy in the story.

In other instances, particularly where reportage was first-hand and there was no other corroborating evidence available, researchers interrogated the reporter or correspondent as to the basis of the information disclosed:

> Were all quotes in the story made directly to you? How do you know that? Where were you? He told you that directly? So you were in the hotel bar with him? He ordered another Jack Daniel's in your presence? So he had more than one? What did he tell you about drugs? We can say <u>everything</u> available? Why did he disclose this to you? He didn't mind talking about it? He's not going to mind seeing a story about that in print?

On virtually every story I observed, checkers conveyed a very refined sense of the expertise, trustworthiness, accuracy, and degree of care generally taken by the various journalists with whom they worked and seemed particularly chary of those with whom they had problems in the past.

Although fact checkers at both the general and specialized newsmagazines tend to consult with or interrogate their colleagues at the same rate (7%), those at the specialized sports magazine were much more likely to consult personally with other news sources as an integral part of the research process. Three-fifths of their inquiries involved interviews with outsiders, compared with one-tenth that proportion (6%) at the general newsmagazines.

Most often fact checkers consulted with those in public relations roles -- press liaisons or sports information directors of college or professional sports teams or leagues to whom they would direct questions about team history, sport records, disciplinary action against a team, attitudes of the fans, styles or technique of particular players, even questions as esoteric as the brand of cigarettes the bowling champion was smoking during the final

frames of the tournament;[44] media representatives and archivists of movie studios to whom they would direct questions about the undisclosed location of a film, the number of heads on a fictional character, a line of dialogue from the film, the medical condition of one of its characters, or the identity of a old-time cartoon character; officials at the local Chamber of Commerce with whom they would verify the number of churches in town, its major industries, its racial and ethnic composition, the names of certain streets and of its airport, etc. Researchers are wary of these spokespersons, though; they are "paid to spout the party line" and, therefore, some information they disclose cannot be trusted. Like the experientially-based ratings of published reference materials, checkers learn who in their beat can be trusted[45] and about what sorts of information. They also learn to ask questions in ways that make it difficult for informants to give ill-considered answers (for example, instead of asking how many bowlers younger than thirty hold a particular record, they would ask the spokesperson to name them).

Fact checkers often maintain a list of consultants in their beat who they will call when unable to find information elsewhere. During my observations, inquiries were made to a sports statistical clearinghouse and to another organization which keeps high-school baseball records to confirm information in several stories and to clear up some apparent errors in the record book, to a congressional staffer to ask about U.S. policy in Central America and to

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[44] Because these press officials are themselves covering the sport and preparing press releases, they have an incredible amount of information readily at hand to supply the fact checkers.

[45] During my observations, researchers complained that some movie studios are less reliable than others or that sports information directors representing college teams have much thinner skins than those representing professional sports franchises and are, therefore, less candid and forthcoming.

verify some projected budget figures on assistance to the region, and to a boxing expert to inquire about the reputations and styles of particular boxers (is x really a southpaw? what ever happened to y?). Other researchers call the news sources or subjects themselves who were quoted in the story; one fact checker even called a source quoted in a newspaper clipping to make sure that the writer's interpretation of the quote was appropriate and in context.

Given the difficulties of securing access to or the cooperation of the subjects or sources of news, the awkwardness of bothering them yet another time, or the risk that, upon reflection, sources may deny (or simply forget) their original disclosures, checkers sometimes consult instead with associates of these subjects. Researchers queried sports managers or coaches, financial advisers, defense lawyers, corporate counsel, film producers and their spouses. And checkers will, on occasion, talk with persons in positions similar to the subjects of the story to see whether characterizations ring true. One story painted a broad portrait of life for blacks in a small mid-western city. The researcher spoke at length with a long-time black resident:

> Is it okay to say that a black guy cannot get a proper haircut here? There are no black barbers? Is it fair; if it's not, just say so... If black people say that they feel uncomfortable walking down the street, are they overreacting? Cause people are staring at them? You do; you think we're off the mark on that? ...Would it be difficult to be black in a small town like this?... The story says a kid calls his mom and tells her that even the maids here are white. It's a new one on you? It's an appropriate story, though, not out of line?

The personal consultation strategies described above exemplify a different style of magazine research that, in essence, approximates re-reporting the news. As much as possible, fact checkers search out data sources different from those consulted when the story was originally reported and written, hoping that independent sources of evidence might more effectively ferret out mistakes or improper inferences. While checkers at the general newsmagazines

usually turn to the correspondents who reported the story originally when they have questions about the accuracy and interpretation of evidence, those at the specialized magazine try to find some independent source of information that bears on the same question and, when they cannot, will interrogate the reporter. From an observational perspective, this means that, at the former publications, I would watch the fact checker sit before his or her computer screen and carefully craft dozens of queries to the correspondents about virtually every pause in the piece and then wade through piles of wires sent back from the news bureaus;[46] at the specialized newsmagazine, I would eavesdrop on telephone conversations between the checker and sources, their associates, and experts in the field. As one of the researchers I observed there remarked, "my life is on the telephone."

I decided to visit the sports magazine because journalists and some fact checkers I had observed at the general newsmagazines had told me about the different investigatorial strategies employed there. The magazine presented a particularly interesting comparative case, since it was a member of the same corporate magazine family as one of the general newsmagazines I had observed, even sharing the same library, computer software, legal staff, and fact-checking jargon. When asked about the sources of their unique habits, these

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[46] An example (from the story about export restrictions on high-tech American products) of a few of the dozens of queries sent to the correspondents who originally reported the story: "Is it correct to say that the group argued that, despite the elaborate export restrictions, the Soviets manage to obtain about 70% of the sensitive technology they seek, either from the U.S. or from other sources? What exactly makes petroleum drilling equipment a sensitive item -- we say the Pentagon argues that it would help the Kremlin to fuel its war machine? If not right, please clarify. Is it okay to say that the controls cost more than $9 billion in foregone exports annually along with nearly 200,000 lost manufacturing jobs? Did the panel recommend that Washington abandon controls on exports like oil-drilling and general industrial equipment; are these correct examples?" The fact checker, in short, simply restated the story's claims.

sports researchers, if they could find some explanation, tended to attribute these practices to vague historical traditions at the magazine.

Curiously, though, their investigative practices resembled those of a beat at the third general newsmagazine -- movie reviews -- more than those of their corporate counterparts who checked more general news stories. While a quarter of the inquiries pursued by fact checkers in the other general newsmagazines involved consultation with correspondents or the examination of their files, this was true of 1% of those pursued by the sports researchers and none of those by the movie researcher. In contrast, practically all of the examinations of reference materials specially prepared for the media, observations of the events being reported on, and interviews with outsiders -- sources, associates, similarly located persons, or public relations officials -- were undertaken by the film and sports researchers.

The commonality of the investigative styles in sports and movie reviews reflects the social organization and opportunities of their beats. Both report on stories that involve predictable upcoming events which provide lead time for developing sources and which can often be observed by the fact checker. Neither deals with breaking news or events located at such a distance that they cannot be directly covered:[47] both involve subjects that seek out media attention and try to facilitate greater (and better) coverage with accessible public relations departments and specially devised press materials,

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[47] Of course, some sports events occur close to deadline and create difficult strategic problems (like when a fact checker got caught in air traffic trying to fly back from the Boston Marathon and deliver his story on deadline) and some events -- like the Olympics or a prize fight -- can be held tens of thousands of miles away. But, because its staging is predictable, coverage can be arranged if the story is important enough. Then there is the occasional unexpected sports scandal or drug overdose death; here checking is more likely to mimic that of general news reporting.

documentation, reference books, and news subjects more willing to cooperate with reporters. Neither needs or is able to rely on the reportage of its competitors for checking purposes -- movie reviews tend to be prepared before the film's premiere and to be published by all news outlets more or less simultaneously right before the film opens (so there rarely are other newspaper or magazine clippings to check); sports coverage is open to all and deficiencies of access or the retrospective nature of weekly reporting on breaking news that confounds the reporting on general news stories does not apply here. In short, fact checkers in these beats have easier access to generally more reliable evidentiary sources; they "re-report" the news because it is possible to do so.[48]

Finally, as noted near the bottom of Table 2, fact checkers will pursue other strategies. They may inquire more carefully about a photograph or diagram used to illustrate the story in order to ensure that it accurately corresponds to the written message. In one instance, the researcher went back to the numbered negatives to determine whether a series of photographs were being printed in sequence (as the caption implied). Where a story is based on a recorded event, a book, or a featured piece of equipment, checkers will try to view the evidence themselves -- to watch the sports event (if only on videotape), read the book, view the film, or examine the equipment. For a story featuring a piece of office equipment, the checker borrowed the device from a vendor, brought it and its videotaped instructions back to the office,

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[48] A sports researcher was showing me how checkers scrutinize photos and captions for accuracy. The picture was of a masked hockey goalie and I innocently inquired how they are able to verify his identification. With a mild look of scorn, he pointed to the number prominently displayed on the goalie's shirt and, in a way, summed up all the differences in fact-checking this sort of beat -- "This is sports!"

and experimented with it before checking the story (discoveries made during this test-run required that the story be modified).

The total number of cases reported at the top of Table 2 is quite a bit larger than that in Table 1 because, for roughly 30% of the pauses, researchers evaluate more than one kind of evidence. They check newspaper clippings and consult *Facts on File*, for example, or speak with a press agent, review the media guide, and interrogate the reporter about the basis of his or her disclosures. The multiplicity of evidence occurs, at least in part, because so many of the sources on which checkers rely are not authoritative ("red-check" sources) and must be corroborated with independent information. As noted on the bottom of Table 2, the reliance on more than one type of investigative strategy is quite a bit more common for the general newsmagazines (47%) than for the specialized sports magazine (19%), in part because the better sources and more conclusive evidence available to fact checkers at the latter means that they do not have to spread their investigative nets as widely, in part, because there are no separate correspondents (distinct from the writer) with whom to consult.

Checkers at the general newsmagazines also expended more effort on average in evaluating a given assertion. A subjective measurement of the amount of time devoted to an inquiry, the quantity and diversity of data examined, and the complexity of the analysis indicates that almost half of the inquiries about a given pause were minor; checkers only needed to consult an easily accessible reference book, make a quick telephone call, look over a few newspaper clippings sent by the library to confirm the assertion. Similar proportions (about 45%) of researchers at the general and specialized magazines conducted inquiries of moderate scope; and about 8% of the inquiries overall (12% of those at the former and 5% of those at the latter publication) were sub-

stantial -- spanning many hours and involving many trips to the library, numerous phone calls, endless cables to and from the news bureaus, and complex analysis of inconclusive documents.[49] Even though many of the inquiries are relatively minor, because news accounts generate so many questions about which researchers pause, checkers spend many hours investigating even one-column-inch stories and days or weeks on the longer or more complicated ones.

The Outcome of Research

Magazine editors and research directors keep close track of the number of mistakes that appear in their publication. To my knowledge, though, no one has ever investigated the impact of fact checking on the overall accuracy of these magazines (for example, what would happen to error rates were fact checking discontinued?).[50] I have described a long, tedious, ambitious, very expensive[51] labor-intensive operation that saps the energy of scores of young journalists every week. Do their often valiant efforts significantly ferret out error or do the stories come to the fact checkers relatively error-free to begin with? Or, worse yet, do the stories leave the fact checker's computer

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[49] As noted earlier, these more substantial many-sourced inquiries generally pertained to subjective themes in the story.

[50] A recent anecdotal account of fact checking by former practitioners of the craft at *The New Republic* asserts that it is not their "impression that we [*The New Republic*] do much worse [with respect to accuracy] than other publications that invest large chunks of money and prestige in fact checking (Blow and Posner 1988, p. 23). Later the authors recount that "Not a single fact checker interviewed for this article said that he or she had ever checked an article that didn't have at least a few mistakes. Tom Teal of the *New Yorker* once informally surveyed an issue of the magazine. He found that before checking the issue contained about 1,000 mistakes" (p. 24).

[51] Ridder (1980, p. 60) reports that the *National Enquirer* spent $13 million in 1976 to establish a 28-person research department. Many of the larger newsmagazines must spend more than a million dollars each year on fact checker salaries alone.

queue still laden with inaccuracies, misstatements, and distortions? What would happen if -- like newspaper reporters -- magazine journalists were responsible for the accuracy of their copy? Does fact checking create a moral hazard problem like that in insurance, in which those covered by this special safety net behave more recklessly? In short, does the backup of fact checkers encourage carelessness or indifference by reporters, writers, or editors?

It is impossible to answer all of these questions with these or any other data. In a few instances, one can venture a guess, though these inferences often raise more questions than they answer. For example, fact checkers are somewhat less likely to find errors in stories that most resemble the conventions of newspaper journalism -- where reporters or correspondents write their own stories "to space" (31% of the pauses turned up errors) -- than where correspondents transmit their files to separate writers in New York to draft the story, as traditional newsmagazine conventions dictate (49% turned up errors). Now one possible interpretation of this finding is that correspondents writing to space, because they will be by-lined for their work, exercise greater care and are better able to scrutinize and control the editorial process and thereby reduce error (i.e. that fact checkers may indeed be superfluous and create a moral hazard problem). But one can come up with equally compelling alternative interpretations of this finding: (1)Perhaps fewer mistakes are made when one tier (the writer) is removed from a complex and cumbersome editorial hierarchy. If true, newsmagazines, in particular, because of their complex organizational structure, do need fact checkers. (2)Fewer mistakes can be detected when the writer is removed. This may be so because the possibilities of triangulation are reduced, many of the reference materials are now with the correspondent in the field rather than with the writer -- and subsequently, the fact checker -- in New York, or perhaps because fact check-

ers themselves exercise less care when the writer is not present on the premises. (3)The few stories in which correspondents are now allowed to write to space are atypical of the more conventionally written pieces in the magazine and less error-prone.[52]

Like the "dark figure of crime" problem that besets analyses of crime rates based on police reports, the number of errors unearthed by fact checkers does not tell the full story. But, like official crime statistics, the story is still very much worth the telling. At the conclusion of the checking process, researchers make an assessment of the statement captured in the pause. They judged a little over half of these assertions (56%) accurate, proper, or acceptable, 17% of them "wrong,"[53] and 15% "improper."[54] (As an informal working definition, wrong statements are those about which it is generally obvious

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[52] Anecdotally, the heads of the research departments at the two news magazines told me that writers are "sloppier" with stories that will be fact-checked than with those that they alone have responsibility for checking (see note #22). Though some of this "sloppiness" reflects leaving many TKs (factual detail "to kome" that they want the fact checker to unearth -- see note #27) in the story.

[53] Some examples of erroneous assertions: A sports story featured the eleventh high school baseball player in the country to hit two grand slam home runs in one inning; he was the 7th. Another story referred to the U.S. antarctic military base at Christchurch, New Zealand; in fact, it was a commercial airport, called the "Operation Deepfreeze Airbase." A review of a movie adaptation of a book set in Honduras indicated Honduras as the setting of the film; the film adaptation simply took place in an unnamed Central American location. A different story suggested that the efforts of a Central American leader to be an honest broker in the Nicaraguan conflict was jeopardizing his ties to the U.S., as reflected in U.S. aid reductions; in fact, declining U.S. aid resulted from automatic Gramm-Rudman budget cuts and, moreover, aid figures had been set long before his involvement in the Nicaraguan peace negotiations.

[54] Some examples of improper statements: A boxing story indicated that one of the contenders spits on a picture of his opponent before he enters the ring; this generalization was based on a single incident reported in one newspaper article of questionable credibility and never picked up by any other paper. A story from Central America projected that the Sandinistas are likely to oppose the Arias proposal. The researcher felt that, although they oppose it in principal, because the U.S. is lukewarm on the proposal, it seems plausible that the Sandinistas may endorse the plan for public relations value. A fact

how they ought to be corrected, improper ones are those about which a choice of remedies is more problematic.) For another 13% of the pauses, I was unable to ascertain a final judgment, either because the assertion was cut from the story for some other reason early in the process before checking was complete or because I was away from the desk observing another story or not informed when the researcher reached a conclusion. Of those inquiries about which I know the conclusion reached, then, a bit more than a third were found wrong or improper -- a decent return on the magazine's investigative investment relative to other policing organizations.[55]

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Table 3 breaks down these findings for those pauses for which I could ascertain the final judgment. As noted in the left column of the table, the likelihood that the assertions were found to be correct after fact checker investigation decreases significantly and incrementally from the clearly objective (81%) to the subjective (43%). Because researchers are accountable

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checker also questioned an article which stated that two high school athletes will attend Indiana University in the fall, since they merely had signed letters of intent.

[55] Take a few examples from other organizations: A survey of newspaper editors found that, on average, editors estimated that they discovered at least one error in 68% of the stories (note that this estimate is per story and not per pause) they edited (Singletary et al. 1977, p. 788). A study of large urban police departments reported that less than 1% of the time officers spent on routine preventive patrol yielded a criminal incident worthy of attention (Reiss 1971, p. 96); a different study estimated that a Los Angeles patrol officer could expect to detect a burglary once every three months and a robbery once every fourteen years (President's Commission 1967, p. 12). With considerably better returns, Securities and Exchange Commission enforcers discover violations in 64% of the investigations that arise from their market surveillance program (S. Shapiro 1984, p. 127). The IRS Taxpayer Compliance Measurement Program audits find that about half of all returns are in noncompliance with the law (Kinsey 1987, Table 1).

TABLE 3: FINDINGS OF THE INVESTIGATION

	FINDINGS			
NATURE OF PAUSE	Acceptable	Wrong	Improper	Total Cases
Clearly Objective	81%	14%	6%	(72)
Relatively Objective	78%	17%	5%	(142)
Less Objective	53%	32%	16%	(95)
Subjective	43%	14%	43%	(100)
TOTAL	64%	19%	17%	(409)

for the objective matters, they check everything as a knee-jerk reaction -- even things they know are correct.[56] I was rather startled during my observations when a checker came across the name of a common federal regulatory agency in his beat and cavalierly declared that he knew that its name and spelling were correct (they were, of course) and moved on. I can think of no other instance where I observed this again at any of the magazines. As a result of this occupational practice, the files of a completed story literally burst from dozens of xeroxed sheets of paper, taken from reference books, directories, government manuals, annual reports, and the like, which contain a single name or age, address, title, or date underlined. These sheets -- often supplied by a call to the magazine library asking for a "red (i.e. authoritative) check" on a particular person or organization -- fulfill but one function: to prove that these objective facts have been checked. This practice provides a slightly different perspective on the debate about the fetish of the facts: the objective categories are swollen with patently correct assertions that trigger automatic, but trivial, evaluation.

Since fact checkers exercise more discretion over whether to inquire about subjective assertions, it is not surprising, then, that higher proportions of them than of the routinely-examined objective matters turn out to be prob-

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[56] Fact checkers routinely explained to me that, despite their extensive knowledge about their beat, when they check they assume that they know nothing. A researcher, formerly employed by a wire service, described how someone sitting at a computer terminal at the wire service would shout out a query about how to spell an obscure sports figure's name; here we will go to the library to check the spelling of Pete Rose, who we write about every week. Often as they verified the obvious, researchers would share an anecdote about some previous occasion when the obvious turned out to be wrong and this seemingly mindless practice saved their skin.

lematic.[57] Also not surprising, given the nature of what is at issue in an objective or subjective question, when objective passages turn out to be unacceptable, they tend to be factually wrong (71% of them); unacceptable subjective issues tend, rather, to be improper (75% of them).

Upon the discovery of error, fact checkers make provisional corrections in the story (noting all but the most trivial spelling correction in a distinctive typeface on the computer screen so that their revisions can be differentiated from those of the editors). After the suggested fixes are complete, the researcher meets with the writer (or editor if the story was written to space by a reporter who is out of the office) to go through each error and negotiate each recommended change. These sessions usually take a matter of minutes, though I have observed meetings of more than an hour's length on complicated or problematic stories.

Writers and editors generally appreciate being backstopped by fact checkers and willingly go along with the fixes they propose or some variant of them. But, despite their shared respect for accuracy, researchers and the other journalists sometimes depart over their relative preference for literal "truth" as opposed to one for simple, compelling, melodious prose. So, on occasion, the exchange can become rather testy and impatient. The following is an excerpt of such a negotiation between a writer (who, on other occasions, served as a fact checker) and fact checker who disagreed over how to describe the sequence in which certain products came on the market. Their angry dialogue could be heard down the hall:

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[57] In contrast, the survey of editors cited in the previous note found that editors indicate that 87% of the errors they uncover involve spelling, grammar, or typographical errors (Singletary et al. 1977, p. 788).

WRITER: "So you agree with that? ...So what's wrong with this? This is driving me crazy. How would you phrase it? ...But that muddles it up. This was the first by three months. It arrived recently, followed by this. What do you think it means? That's not too hard to comprehend." [The writer has become annoyed and a bit bullying.]

RESEARCHER: "I am changing... You can say what you want, okay?"

WRITER: "I still don't understand what's wrong. ...That's what the fucking sentence says. ...Isn't that correct? I want you to explain yourself so I can understand it. Let's get straight what matters and what doesn't matter. What matters is... ...That's something that wouldn't matter to any ordinary reader. ...Give me a complete sentence without interrupting yourself. ...This is basically a garbled sentence."

In a less confrontational disagreement, a researcher, checking a story about the declining value of the dollar, credited the *New York Times* with printing an unauthorized White House claim that had the effect of driving the dollar even further downward. The writer disagreed, indicating that the newspaper couldn't "affect the price of shinola"; they may like to think that they have that effect, but the price was going down anyway. The writer then cut off the discussion and scrolled down the computer screen. As he did so, the researcher's hand began to pivot slightly -- body language that suggested that he hadn't really finished arguing, while simultaneously realizing that he had lost. Of course, since the researcher was standing behind the writer (so that they could both view the computer screen) the gesture was lost on the writer.

Because writers tend to have more experience and higher rank in the status hierarchy of the magazine, they can be rather successful at times in bullying fact checkers into acquiescence. It would be "improper," though, for readers to draw the conclusion that intimidating or highly adversarial confrontations occur with any regularity. Indeed, the sentiments of one of the researchers I observed more accurately characterizes the relationship in most cases:

> I like to think that I'm the writer's lawyer. I have to defend something, arguing the writer's case. The relationship should not be adversarial. My posture should be to assume that it's right and find the confirming evidence. Substantive fights occur with the editor, not the writer.

When writer and fact checker cannot reach agreement, the fact checker confers with the editor. When the fact checker and editors disagree, the preferences of the latter tend to prevail.

Researchers and editors have four basic options when they encounter a problem: they can leave the troublesome passage as is, change it, cut it from the story, or kill the story.[58] Table 4 presents the ultimate disposition of the pauses (as reflected in the published magazine text), broken down by the nature of the error. Note from the first column of the table that even accurate passages are sometimes modified when more expressive language is found or cut from a story that has exceeded its space limits. Still, a much higher proportion of these unproblematic assertions remain in the story unchanged (87%) than those found wrong (9%) or improper (22%). Editors do something about 85% of the passages found wanting, though they are much more likely to do so for clearly or relatively objective errors (95%) than for the subjective ones (73%).

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

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[58] This last option is rarely used to respond to the kind of problem unearthed by a fact checker. One very short story about a young swimmer was killed, when the researcher discovered that she had already received considerable attention in a previous issue of the magazine. As a result, this story seemed inadvertently to be damning her with faint praise. I thought that they had killed another sports note about the heroic accomplishments of a high school athlete, the son of the coach of a professional team, when the researcher discovered that two other members of the team contributed at least as much to the team's success (one of the "preoccupying themes" described earlier). However, the story did appear in a later issue of the magazine.

TABLE 4: OUTCOME OF THE INQUIRY

	FINDINGS			
OUTCOME	Acceptable	Wrong	Improper	Total
No Change	87%	9%	22%	62%
Change	5%	79%	64%	29%
Cut Assertion	7%	10%	13%	9%
Kill Story	*	1%	0%	*
Total Cases	(262)	(77)	(67)	(406)

Hence, about 15% of the difficulties overall (and more than a quarter of the subjective ones) unearthed by fact checkers ultimately appear in the story unchanged. This collection of objective and subjective errors is a mixed bag. Less often than one might expect, the problem is trivial or picky and checkers decide, with some ambivalence, to drop the matter. A comment attributed to SEC officials actually came from a single spokesperson. A movie review suggested that no one has ever before attempted to make a film of a particular ballet, an inherently unknowable assertion. After determining that no one had ever succeeded at that task, the fact checker concluded that he was "picking nits" and decided to overlook the obvious misstatement. The same review referred to the "Balanchine production," obscuring whether the reviewer meant Balanchine's choreography or rather the New York City Ballet's dancing; again the checker decided to live with the relatively minor ambiguity.

More often, researchers feel strongly about the need to correct the misinformation, but are unable to convince the writer or editor -- for example, the confrontation, described earlier, where the writer simply dismissed the researcher's insistence that they credit the *New York Times* with contributing to the decline of the dollar and scrolled ahead on his computer screen. A story, noted earlier, about sexual misconduct by professional athletes cited, in passing, a newspaper survey that found that 90% of the sexual misconduct by college athletes is committed by black players. The fact checker felt that these data simply fed racist stereotypes and argued that they should be cut from the story. A long, reflective, rather analytical dialogue between the researcher and his editor ensued, the editor suggesting that full disclosure on matters of this sort sometimes has the opposite effect. The editor agreed to reflect more on the issue, but ultimately did not relent.

A different sports story featured two contenders to an upcoming prize fight; the checker felt the story came down too hard on one of the boxers -- characterizing him as a brawler and citing anecdotal evidence to suggest that he is paranoid, volatile, an animal, and a bum. The researcher critiqued this characterization, anecdote by anecdote and assertion by assertion, using a checker's traditional bag of tricks -- pointing out factual error, questioning the evidence, noting inappropriate inferences created by the juxtaposition of information, citing overgeneralization, sloppy language, and the like -- and then delivered several impassioned arguments to the editor about the overall tone of the piece. Although he scored an occasional victory on some minor points, he profoundly lost the battle, all the while mystified about why the editor continued to pursue this wrong-headed course.

For a different researcher, the explanation for inaction came not from an obstinate colleague, but rather his own inability to fashion a remedy that would not make matters worse. His preoccupying theme, to which I have referred several times before, involved the suggestion that right-wing and left-wing death squads were responsible for the slaughter or disappearance of more than 100,000 civilians in a Central American nation. Because those on the right were overwhelmingly more culpable -- the correspondent's data indicated by 200 to 1 -- the checker felt that the interest in balance was placing an inordinate share of the blame on the left. He modified the text to read "right-wing death squads and left-wing guerrillas," but, still troubled, cut all references to those on the left. After a colleague reminded him that the magazine would get hundreds of letters from irate readers, he reluctantly restored the clause about left-wing guerrillas.

Perhaps the easiest solution to a discovery of error is simply to cut a troublesome passage from the story, the course taken for 10% of the wrong and

13% of the improper statements. To the delight of one fact checker, that fate befell one of his "preoccupying themes," cited earlier -- an international story which had suggested that the mutual respect and admiration of two Central American leaders came from their mutual interest in sports (one jogs and the other does karate) -- when the story turned out to be too long. That this option is only slightly more common for erroneous passages than for accurate ones (7% of the latter are cut), suggests its limited value. Editorial surgeons are more apt to repair the damaged organ than to excise it. Thus, most of the troublesome passages (79% of those found wrong and 64% of those considered improper) are changed in some way, more than half of the time according to the recommendations of the fact checker.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Table 5 describes these changes. The greatest range of modifications follow the finding that a statement is improper. About a fifth each were modified by replacing a word or phrase;[59] by adding or clarifying information;[60] by deleting information, making the allegations or descriptions less

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[59] For example, "Palestine" becomes "Mediterranean region," "terrorists" become "commandos," "stripper" becomes "go-go dancer," "they're back in the assassination business" becomes "revived the hit teams."

[60] For example: "Everything" becomes "booze, cocaine, and marijuana;" or "as witnesses told it" becomes "according to an indictment." "[The President's] attempt to be an honest broker in the Nicaraguan conflict is jeopardizing U.S. ties" was changed to "[The President's] critics believe his attempt to be an honest broker in the Nicaraguan conflict is jeopardizing U.S. ties. This year American military aid was slashed to $2.4 million, less than half the 1986 level. While [his countrymen] suspect that the reduction is Washington's way of showing its displeasure, U.S. officials deny that. Congressional sources say the decrease was merely the result of Gramm-Rudman budget cutting."

TABLE 5: NATURE OF THE CHANGE

	FINDINGS		
NATURE OF CHANGE	Acceptable	Wrong	Improper
Correct Information	0%	68%	5%
Change Word	14%	3%	18%
Add Information	64%	5%	20%
Delete Information	14%	12%	20%
Qualify Assertion	0%	7%	18%
Tone Down Assertion	7%	3%	16%
Other	0%	2%	2%
Total Cases	(14)	(60)	(44)

specific or more vague;[61] and by qualifying the statement or adding a disclaimer.[62] A slightly smaller proportion of these improper passages where revised by toning down the assertion, using more conservative figures, or understatement. Only 5% of these revisions involved correcting the information presented. In contrast, the vast majority of passages found factually wrong and changed were simply corrected (68%); editors chose to delete or restate more vaguely a much smaller proportion (12%) of these erroneous assertions and tinkered with the prose in other ways even less frequently.[63] Finally, where editors choose to revise accurate statements, it is usually to add information or to clarify an assertion (64% of the changes) or more rarely to change the wording or to delete certain information.

On The Methodology of Checking Facts

> In theory the policeman is responsible for the prevention of all crime, but informally he distinguishes between those crimes that are seen as a direct challenge to his authority and place and others--no matter how terrible--that do not directly threaten him. ...For the policeman, the determining factor of any crime's importance is its setting. He defines the location of all crimes by the deceptively simple distinction between "inside" and "outside." These terms have nothing to do with his notion of privacy or with the legal definitions of private and public places, but derive from his conception of his work. A crime committed outside

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[61] For example, "Apple computers" becomes "some personal computers," a MiG31 becomes "latest Soviet MiG aircraft," "billions of dollars" becomes "massive amounts."

[62] For example, "is the most fiscally fit" becomes "reputedly the most fiscally fit"; "He is so paranoid that he switched dinner plates" becomes "He has been said to be so suspicious as to switch plates at dinner"; or "His workouts are attended only by male spectators" becomes "He trains before a crowd that is predominantly masculine."

[63] Not surprisingly, given the correlation between the subjective nature of an assertion and the likelihood that an error will be judged improper, the more objective errors are simply corrected (67% of the clearly objective ones compared with 8% of the subjective ones), while the subjective errors receive a mix of fixes that add, delete, reword, qualify, and tone down information.

> may actually occur inside a building, while a crime committed inside may take place on a public street. Outside means any location a patrolman can be reasonably expected to see while on patrol. If a burglar breaks into a building through a rear door or cuts a hole in a roof, his act is considered an inside crime, because the patrolman had no chance to notice anything amiss, even if he was patrolling alertly. If a person is assaulted in his back yard or mugged in an alley, it is an inside crime, despite its occurrence in a place legally defined as public. But if a burglar breaks open a front door to gain entry, it is an outside crime, because there is no reason why the patrolman should have missed it as he passed. Any outside crime is an affront to the patrolman's notion of himself as a guardian of his territory, an occurrence which suggests to his superiors that he was not doing his work properly (Rubinstein 1973, pp. 339-40).

> Scientists implicitly discriminate "reputable" from "disreputable" errors. By reputable errors we mean those that occur in spite of investigators having lived up to the prevailing methodological rules of the game and of having taken the normatively accepted procedural precautions against error. When such errors are eventually detected, they do not become occasions for condemning the investigators responsible for them. They are regarded as reflecting unavoidable hazards of research. In contrast, disreputable errors are those resulting from the neglect or violation of methodological canons and procedural precautions. Once spotted, they damage the standing and reputation of the scientist who has fallen into error (Zuckerman 1977, p. 110).

These passages from studies of police officers and scientists illustrate two of the tensions that those in the intelligence business face -- the impossibility of omniscience and the inevitability of error. The police officer's distinction between inside and outside crimes and the scientist's between reputable and disreputable error represent strategies for delimiting "excusable" error, mistakes that arise despite conformity with standard procedural or methodological routines for which practitioners are not considered culpable. This paper suggests that journalism is intrinsically fraught with error, that fact checkers catch and "correct" a great deal of it, but that errors still slip through their safety nets and find their way into the magazine. Not surprisingly, fact checkers talk about and differentiate error in ways that parallel their colleagues in science and law enforcement.

Because they sit hermetically sealed in an office or carrel in a New York skyscraper, fact checkers are profoundly cut off from the news they cover -- much more so than scientists in their sterile laboratories or police officers on their rounds who never venture outside their patrol car. Researchers must rely on others -- rarely colleagues, indeed, mostly strangers -- to be their eyes and ears. And workload and severe deadlines further constrain their ability to inquire. Fact checkers, too, encounter inside crimes or errors -- patently normal allegations whose falsity they could not possibly suspect from their vantage point, routine procedures, and traditional sources. One magazine calls these "inside crimes" errors that result from "erroneous information"; the mistakes were made by credible, consistently reliable ("red check") sources that fact checkers had no reason to disbelieve.[64]

So fact checkers differentiate between "outside" and "inside" errors -- those that they could and those they could not possibly see from their peculiar look-out. Take three examples. A researcher told me of the worst mistake he had ever made. More than ten years before, he was checking a story reported by a stringer that indicated that the Vice President of the U.S. was snubbed when foreign dignitaries did not meet him at the airport during an official visit. It turned out that the 36th paragraph of a *Washington Post* story had indicated that the Vice President of the country did greet his counterpart at the airport -- hence, the researcher missed an "outside crime." "I felt terrible; I was physically sick. I was called on the carpet for it, despite the fact that it was obvious that the stringer didn't even go to the airport and made this up." (If, on the other hand, editors at the *Washington*

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[64] Though a deputy research head told me that he "doesn't really believe in the concept of erroneous information -- usually the researcher or correspondent has done something wrong."

Post had cut this 36th paragraph from the story, the researcher would not have been guilty of error because it would have been "inside.") On a different story I observed, an article appeared in the *New York Times* the last morning of the checking process (and the day the magazine closed) that reported a new government policy decision that invalidated a central claim of the story. I commented that it was lucky that the *Times* printed the story that day so that it was possible to make the necessary changes. The researcher brushed off my remark; "If it hadn't, we might look stupid, but not inaccurate." Finally, a different researcher told me about a story they did concerning a record-breaking yellowfin tuna catch. He subsequently received a complaint that two people had caught bigger tuna. However, "fishermen" have ninety days to report a record catch to the "fish people," he told me. They had not yet reported these catches when we did the story. How could we have known? "I'm not going to lose sleep over that kind of thing."

This issue of losing sleep comes up routinely, both in conversation and in practice. Another fact checker told me, "There are avoidable and unavoidable errors. When I go home at night, I need to know that I've done everything I can. Maybe I do too much..." So researchers differentiate between inside and outside, reputable and disreputable error and structure their priorities, obsessive concerns, and sense of failure or culpability around this distinction. Temporal matters figure into the distinction as well. Researchers frequently commented that, if there were more time, they would question a trivial assertion or pursue yet another source or piece of corroborating evidence regarding a troublesome passage; less frequently, they noted that they were being particularly dogged or thorough because there was still plenty of time. And, on stories where checkers felt that the norms of appropriate notice or leeway had been violated, researchers seemingly relaxed their notions about

necessary standards of care. "They say we should have two sources, but this story came in late and that's [consulting only one source] all I can do." So the designation of disreputable errors must take into account, not only the accessibility and reliability of sources, but the time available for scrutiny as well. What is an excusable error in a story checked on deadline in two hours would probably not be in a story in preparation for two weeks.

One of the perverse consequences of this understandable orientation toward error is that intelligence practitioners become oriented to process and procedure more than to outcome. Take the police example:

> The majority of all murders and aggravated assaults occur inside and therefore they are not "on" the patrolman. Once he accustoms himself to being in the presence of the battered and gory remains of the victims, he does not display much concern about these crimes...although he knows they arouse considerable public agitation (Rubinstein 1973, p. 341).

Fact checkers concentrate as well on errors that, if made, would be "on" them. They vigorously pursue facts about which they are capable of finding disconfirming evidence. They go by the book, relatively oblivious to the sources of error or systematic biases in the evidence they routinely consult. A silly mistake that they should not have made is more of an affront than a subjectively serious, but reputable, error. Indeed, the horror stories checkers tell concern mundane objective "outside errors"; the subjective preoccupying themes that haunt them while checking a story quickly escape their memories and guilty consciences once the story closes. It is what they should have known and didn't more than the egregious errors that standard fact-checking methods would not have uncovered that horrifies the fact checker.

So researchers ritualistically abide by routine procedural norms. One of the checkers I got to know complained to me about the somewhat degrading ritualism of method: "I don't want to spend my life putting black dots over

everything." But when I noted later on that researchers at other magazines didn't "dot," he was horrified -- "How are they checking if they're not dotting? How do they know they've covered everything; how do you know they've checked it?"

Conclusion

In this manuscript I have been reckless and cavalier about concepts like "right and wrong," "truth and falsehood," "proper and improper," "objective and subjective," "facts," "correct," "error," and so on. To belabor their deeper meaning would paralyze a fact checker and -- since I came close to going "native" with my research subjects -- would have paralyzed me as well. Instead of belatedly exploring the philosophical underpinnings of this research, its language, and its methodology, I think it would be more illuminating to examine the nature of my incipient cooptation and its implications for a sociology of knowledge as well as a conception of truth.

Sociologists and journalists, despite their different methodologies, are in the same business -- of trying to describe and explain the nature of social movements, behavior, organization, institutions, and power. Perhaps one of the reasons why I was so drawn to this research came from my frustrations over the years with journalistic coverage of my "beat" -- journalists seemed to get "wrong" virtually everything that I knew anything about.[65] As I lived in their world as a participant observer and journalism foundation fellow, I found our ways of knowing constantly colliding.

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[65] I am not alone; every social scientist with whom I speak about this research discloses the same frustrations as well as their experience as an often-misquoted, frequently-misinterpreted news source.

Over time, though, as I came to develop a more intuitive understanding of what it means to check facts, I became somewhat estranged from the conventions and assurances of my own social science discipline. Too often I found myself staring into the computer screen late at night as I tried to write up the day's field notes in a quandary about what to say. My recollections were unacceptably vague. What I thought was a verbatim quote that I had dashed off earlier in the day in one of my frequent visits to the bathroom seemed to be missing something. Have I distorted the sequence of events? What precisely did he say? What was the name of that book? Have I telescoped several interactions into one account? What was I to put down; ought I to say anything at all if I can't get it "right"? I found myself paralyzed as the standards of telling a credible story journalistically were insinuating themselves into the trusted methods of my own discipline. But the most horrifying event came later when I returned to my academic office from a few weeks in the field to go over page proofs of an article for a scholarly journal and found myself inexplicably on the telephone with a public information office, interrogating them -- as a fact checker would -- about whether I should be referring to "Citicorp" or "Citibank" in some innocuous example in a footnote.

Part of my romance with journalistic conventions involved lusting for my own fact checker (not to mention for a writer who could turn my jumbled notes and convoluted insights into masterful prose with an ease that seems to elude most academics). Now that I had learned how careless and inattentive a data collector I was, how nice it would be to have my own safety net, not to mention someone to delegate the drudgery of the perfectionism to which we all aspire. But from a safe academic distance, the object of my lust, though still remarkable, seems a bit less ideal.

Embedded in the methodology of fact-checking are a number of paradoxical assumptions. It is okay to check stories with newspaper articles and reference books whose publishers do not employ fact checkers. Researchers are trained to accept uncritically what is perhaps most problematic and vulnerable to inaccuracy -- those mundane assertions, eye-witness descriptions, and quotations reported in the correspondent's files. Fact checkers are not responsible for errors contained therein because they are necessarily "inside" errors (see also Blow and Posner 1988). In researchers' offices and carrels one hears more talk about responsibility, what one could be expected to know, and "ass-covering" or "ass-saving" strategies, than about "truth."

Then there are related questions about the practice and efficacy of triangulation (the use of multiple independent methods to increase validity). Fact checkers review newspaper clips to ensure that facts in the story are correct; most likely they are the same clips the reporters used when they wrote their original files. Indeed, some of the clips are based on the same sources or the reportage of others and thereby duplicate mistakes while providing seemingly independent voices. Researchers cable correspondents in the news bureaus with queries about problematic assertions in the story. Because correspondents are not asked to document their answers when they respond to the cables, one doesn't know whether they gathered independent information or simply repeated their initial assertion. When I asked a fact checker about this possibility, he replied, "My job ends here and I can't control what they [i.e. correspondents] do." At some magazines, reporters will list the names and phone numbers of the people they interviewed; when researchers confer with these sources are they re-reporting the news or merely duplicating it? Is this triangulation in action or rather formalized

redundancy? Do researchers provide an independent set of eyes or do they verify assertions with the same data that originally generated them?

In short, do fact checkers strive to discover truth and ferret out falsehood, or do they follow ritualistic methodological routines that provide thick blinders that make it possible to move ahead in an empirical morass on deadline? Unquestionably they pursue the latter course. But the deviations from this course -- which are not uncommon, especially among the more seasoned and experienced fact checkers -- suggest the even greater promise of this unique form of self-regulation. This paper has repeatedly documented the exceptions to a ritualism of method: the considerable attention and allocation of effort to matters other than mere objective facts, the subjective preoccupying themes in practically every story that obsess checkers, the heated battles researchers relentlessly wage with their colleagues over journalistic improprieties for which the former are not accountable, the meta-methodological inquiries that checkers pursue about the quality of evidence from standard sources and the creative strategies they devise to transcend their limitations, and so on. A ritualistic conformity to method is peppered with ample exceptions that demonstrate that fact checking has lost sight of neither the forest nor the trees.

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