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The Skeptic in the Newsroom



THE ISRAEL
DEMOCRACY
INSTITUTE

The Skeptic in the Newsroom

Tools for Coping with a Deceptive World*

By Zvi Reich and Yigal Godler

*This booklet was written for the Project for the Encouragement of Skeptical Thinking by Journalists, an initiative of the Israel Democracy Institute.

Introduction:

What Is Skepticism?

The booklet of questions you are holding is part of the Israel Democracy Institute's initiative to improve journalistic coverage by encouraging reporters to think skeptically. It contains a series of questions that journalists should, and often must, ask themselves before they publish their articles.

The questions are arranged around four focal points that invite journalistic skepticism: information (the first chapter); news sources of information (the second chapter); the working methods used to gather data and carry out studies that are later covered by journalists (the third chapter); and the methods used by journalists (the fourth chapter).

Why are the questions raised by this booklet left unanswered? Because questions are the tools and soundtrack of skeptical thinking. They serve the overburdened journalist by condensing what is vital and relevant for reporting and are a bridge between general ideas and concrete coverage. The questions are offered as a reminder, a springboard, and a practical outline for skeptical thinking.

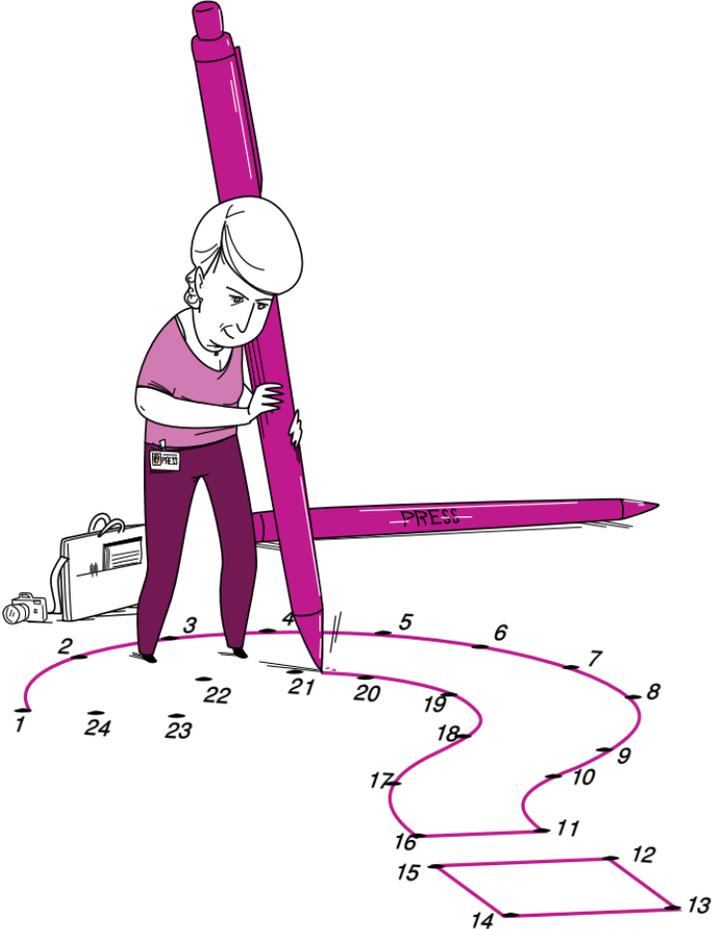
A note to reporters:

The questions are deliberately rhetorical. To presume to answer them ourselves is tantamount to trying to replace you, the reporter, even though we were not there, as you were, inside the situation being covered. We are unacquainted with the details, circumstances and precedents, and are not responsible, as you are, for what is published under your byline. You and your editors are in a position that allows you to answer these questions in accordance with the best details you were able to obtain by the time of publication. The questions are formulated in the first-person singular in order to keep them in a format that reporters can easily pose to themselves in real time.

Why skepticism? Why now? Journalism is undergoing a crisis. Fewer (and increasingly overworked) journalists are acquiring less in-depth familiarity with their fields of coverage and the journalistic immune system is becoming less capable of withstanding the forces of spin and deception. This makes skepticism now, more than ever, essential for high-quality journalistic work.

Skepticism has many benefits. It serves as a built-in "bullshit detector" (as journalism scholar and Professor Tony Harcup put it), a self-defense mechanism against manipulative information and news sources. Skepticism also increases a journalist's self-awareness, illuminating certain facets of the profession that are often gray and ambiguous.

Chapter 1: Skepticism of Information



Skepticism starts with information. When we say “information,” we mean not only the basic raw material that is used to present a credible journalistic picture of what is taking place outside each person’s immediate experience, but also the information that people use as a basis for often crucial decisions on individual and public affairs.

However we may define information, reporters are flooded with it. They are constantly surrounded by a huge quantity of statements, documents, messages, posts, and firsthand experiences “from the field.” The time it takes to question every single rumor and statement is more than the life span of even the longest-lived journalists.

Even if a journalist is suspicious about the information, the matter will not necessarily conclude with a journalistic inquiry. In some cases, no such inquiry will even be launched. Yet even journalists with minimal ethical standards must still obtain and provide information. In order to do this, they must learn to make critical distinctions between information that is more credible and information that is less so — and for that, they need a healthy dose of skepticism.

The popular image of the work done by different professional fact finders such as journalists, detectives, intelligence agents, and archaeologists is that of putting puzzle pieces together. We would rather use a different analogy: connecting the dots. In this game, if you connect the dots properly, you end up seeing a rabbit, a face or the Eiffel Tower. If the dots represent the raw facts of a story (such as an apartment kitchen, a corpse, and a knife), the

lines between the dots connect to form a story, providing us with a meaning, a framework, and a form that we can understand and convey (in this instance, let’s say, the story of a murder).

Journalism of course is a much more complicated affair than connecting the dots. First, the dots do not come with numbers. Second, you can never be sure that you have been given all the dots. And third, the sources that offer you a description of the dots also make sure to simultaneously connect them, according to their own interests. In this situation, one of the important challenges that you face as a journalist is how to avoid connecting too few dots with roughly drawn lines.

Journalists tend to think about information in terms of black and white, true and false. But the most challenging and common information in the journalist’s daily life is actually gray.

Raw information

- Why am I receiving this information? Who else knows about it?
- Why is this information arriving now? Does the timing have to do with other information that was published recently?
- Do the manner and timing in which the information reached me indicate something about the interests behind its exchange? What influence do these interests have on the way the information should be handled?
- Does this information contradict other facts that have reached me?
- Is the information incomplete or manipulative, trying to lead me to the desired conclusions of its news sources?
- Which missing pieces of information are needed to get a complete picture of the story? What can be concluded from the fact that some information was excluded?
- Does the information look too good to be true? Why haven't I heard about it before?
- Can information of this magnitude be fabricated without anyone finding out?
- Does the information deal with an actual event or is it manufactured for another purpose?
- Is the information too preliminary to warrant publication?

- Could this information contain half-truths that are no less misleading than lies?
- Is confidentiality regarding the ways in which I obtained the information unavoidable, or does it conceal manipulation and insufficient evidence?

Verification

- Does this report contain information that could damage my reputation if it were published exactly as I received it?
- Is there any solid evidence that can confirm or refute this information? If so, what should that information look like? Where can such evidence be obtained?
- Does this information stand up well against contradictory evidence?
- Is it enough to merely cite the information or is it critical to test its validity?
- Is there actual evidence that supports this information, or do I lean toward accepting it because it dovetails with accepted social, political, or journalistic assumptions, conventions and norms?
- Are internal contradictions evident in the information? Do these contradictions necessarily render it invalid?
- Are the facts asserted in this information actually visible? Are they documented or recorded somewhere, or are they simply someone's thoughts?

- Might I be giving too much weight to intuitions, impressions, and gut feelings?
- Would it not be better to check this information myself rather than take a risk by assuming that it has already been verified by the media outlet that had previously published it?
- Is this story truly complex, or is someone trying to obscure the facts so as to escape responsibility or to conceal the weakness of his arguments?
- If the information were to be examined more deeply, would it be publishable?
- Can anyone tell from going over this story which parts of the published information I had confirmed, which of them I had not managed to confirm, and which details could not have been confirmed?
- When information appears to be non-verifiable, is there nonetheless something I can do to ensure responsible reporting?
- Did I do enough to come close to describing events accurately?

Before publication

- Might I have connected too few dots, forcing the lines into a coarse pattern?
- Could connecting those same dots nonetheless result in a completely different picture? If so, wouldn't it be

more appropriate to inform the readers and listeners as part of the report, in order to make sure that they understand where the information ends and where my inferences and interpretations begin?

- Did I provide satisfactory answers to the questions that the information brings up?
- What arguments and evidence can “the other party” in the story present? Would it not be better to address the other party at the outset?
- Was I too quick to dismiss important information because it seemed, at first glance, too complex to explain to the public?
- Did I focus on significant information or merely on facts that could be easily ascertained?
- Will dealing with the nuances of this story make the report more realistic and significant, yet just as interesting?
- Is the report too close to what I would like the case to be, or to what interested parties would have the public believe?
- Have I published a report about a similar instance or topic in the past? Did the reactions, errors or denials in that previous story invite some second thoughts about this one?
- At the end of the day, am I satisfied with the general impression that the forthcoming report covers?

Chapter 2

Skepticism of News Sources



Skepticism toward news sources is necessary because, in most cases, information does not reach the journalists on its own. It is almost always conveyed by human sources of information. As the journalism scholar Leon Sigal wrote, "News is not what happens, but what someone said has happened or will happen."

According to Thomas Patterson of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, reliance on human news sources is becoming more and more bankrupt as a journalistic tool for conveying knowledge about reality. Although reliance on others is the main tool of the journalistic profession, its effectiveness is threatened by the increasingly manipulative nature of news sources and public relations practitioners, whose influence pervades large segments of society.

Sigal compared the relationship between journalistic sources to the relationship between lighting technicians and photographers. Without the technician's beam of light, reality remains in darkness, impossible for the photographer to capture. He points out that not all sources are equally powerful flashlights. Journalists are attracted to the brightest ones, and not necessarily out of considerations for the lighting. The power of the beam is often a reflection of the social, economic, and political hierarchies that exist outside the newsroom.

Trusting news sources is vital not only in journalism but also in many other fields that are essential for the functioning of modern society. Even scientists rely on their colleagues'

reports without being constantly skeptical of them. We therefore suggest a skeptical approach tailored to each kind of source, as well as to the circumstances, motives, history and background of the story being covered. Each of the most popular sources in journalism (senior officials, experts, spokespeople, public-relations professionals, and rank-and-file citizens) is open to doubt as to its credibility and biases. Even databases can be biased; the numerical and technological elements they contain impart an aura of unassailable, unbiased objectivity that journalists would do well to question.

News Sources

- Did the source truly give me valuable information?
 - What does the source stand to gain from this report? Who stands to be hurt by it?
 - How do the source's interests reflect upon the information and the way in which it should be handled?
 - What is the relationship between the information that the source reveals and that which he/she is trying to obscure?
 - What is the source's main interest: to describe reality, whitewash it, or change it?
 - Do the facts that the source provided tell a different story from the one he/she is trying to present? What affects the quality of his/her interpretation?
 - Is the source trying to represent opposing voices as inferior or even silence them? Do his/her attempts to smear others justify portraying him/her in an equally critical manner?
 - Intuitively, does the source arouse in me a feeling of trust or mistrust? Are there any more substantial reasons for me treating him/her differently?
- Did the supposed veracity of the source's statement lead me to trust him/her or were there extraneous factors like him/her senior position, appearance, status, credentials or rhetorical skills? Did he/she gain my trust simply because he/she somewhat resembles me?
 - What about the source's statements justifies reporting them literally as they were delivered to me? What requires adding context, background, or qualifiers?
 - Do my additions contribute more than general cynicism and an attempt to have the last word?
 - Is the source's anonymity necessary in this report? Did I at least prevent him/her from using the cover of anonymity to smear a third party?
 - Did I provide enough hints about the anonymous source's affiliations to enable readers to reasonably assess his/her arguments?
 - Can I find another source that is willing to stand behind similar information instead of relying on one source that insists on remaining confidential?

Verification and precision

- Can I confirm the credibility of the information that this source is providing me? How?
- Is it enough to present the claims and counter-claims of each party, or does the report require me to look more deeply into which claims are better substantiated?
- Isn't my direct impression, based on what I see with my own eyes, more reliable than accounts relayed by sources, no matter how credible they may be?
- Even if this source has never misled me before, can I still trust him under the current circumstances?
- Does the fact that I am relying on this source for the first time necessarily put me at higher risk? What is the probability that he is nonetheless trustworthy?
- Am I able to distinguish between real experts and pseudo-experts whose public acclaim surpasses their actual expertise?
- Might I be developing an overblown story from a source's gaffe?

Public relations

- Doesn't the one-sided nature of a spokesperson or PR professional render his/her information less reliable?
- Would I rely on this source if he/she were not a spokesperson or PR professional who provided me with his/her seemingly ready-for-publication information?
- Would it be responsible for me to rely on the spokesperson's release without at least hinting at the fact that it originates as public relations material?
- Is there a reason not to attribute this information explicitly and openly to a public relations firm?
- Once I have removed the superlatives, bias, self-aggrandizement, and blatant self-interest, have I truly succeeded in neutralizing the item's PR spin?
- Wouldn't it be better to ignore this press release and work on another item of greater interest to the public? Would it not be better to use this release as a lead for obtaining information from other sources?
- Wouldn't adding background details about the company, the product, or the incident to the information given to me by a PR professional render my report more meaningful?
- Is a PR professional's interest to maintain his credibility enough to guarantee the veracity of his information?

Chapter 3:

Skepticism of Statistics and Studies



Statistics and research discoveries are among the most prevalent, and often the most significant, kinds of information in post-industrial societies. Findings of this kind serve as a basis for day-to-day political and individual decisions. They also shape essential aspects of life in modern society such as health and education services, food safety, economic decisions, work, and unemployment. Therefore, in order not to mislead the public, it is important to take a skeptical approach toward the methods by which data is collected, processed, and presented.

Journalists who have not acquired a background or expertise in the fields they cover could end up blindly putting their trust in renowned and respected think tanks, being deceived by impressive-sounding researchers and studies, or simply cutting and pasting studies' conclusions in their news reports. They may fall for the mistaken notion that if two events take place consecutively, the earlier event caused the latter one to occur. Inexperienced journalists also risk engaging in uncritical coverage of biased and misleading studies, overlooking conflicts of interest and cases where social values have trickled into scientific work.

Although most journalists have not been trained in research methods and are not able to understand various kinds of scientific publications in depth and read them critically, many find themselves reporting time and again about trends in the economy, education and crime, or about new research findings in the social sciences. Those who do this on

a regular basis, such as political correspondents who report on public opinion poll results or health correspondents who report on the results of medical studies, need to develop higher standards of understanding the fields they are covering. They must develop the ability to assess research findings and statistics independently, without necessarily having to equal the expertise of researchers in the field.

Research

- What is the purpose of this study?
- Who initiated and conducted it? What are his/her interests?
- Is it enough to simply report the study's conclusions? Is it possible to reach a logical, reasoned assessment of its findings without being aware of the study's background: data-collection methods, goals, those who commissioned and funded it, and its limitations?
- To what extent do the findings correspond with the interests of those who conducted the study, those who ordered it, or who funded it? Are the findings sufficiently convincing despite this statement?
- On what is the data based? Was it collected in a professional and systematic manner?
- Do the data really support the conclusions that the researchers present? Is the fact that researchers emphasize certain findings at the expense of others justified?
- What alternative conclusions do the data make possible?
- Do the data reflect overly low or exaggeratedly high levels of precision?
- Are the phenomena that the study attempts to measure clearly defined?
- Do the verbal descriptions match the figures?

- How can I avoid a gross error in processing the data?
- How do I develop an understanding and ability to independently assess data in fields in which I am expected to be an expert?
- Which expert source in the field can I consult with in order to assess the study more critically and thoughtfully or be exposed to other points of view?

Opinion polls

- What are the interests of those who commissioned the poll? Why are they revealing the poll results now?
- Have those who conducted this poll managed similar studies recently? What were the findings? Where they also offered for publication?
- Do those who commissioned the poll have an interest in obtaining certain results? If so, does this invalidate the results?
- Did those who conducted the poll emphasize the most important and interesting findings, or are there other findings that should be highlighted?
- What was the wording of the original questions? Were they worded clearly? Did they avoid loaded expressions and phrasing that gave preference to certain answers?
- Are the questions related to beliefs or behaviors?

- Does the spectrum of choices provided to respondents as part of close-ended questionnaires cover the relevant range of options?
- When I detect differences between population groups in a study, can I tell if these differences are significant or fall within the range of the maximum margin of error?
- Does the respondents' composition represent society as a whole? Were any population groups left out?
- Does the poll provide all the required data: the identity of the person or the polling institute who conducted it, the date of the poll, sample size, sampling procedure, the percentage of those who refused to answer, the way the poll was conducted, wording of the questions and answers and maximum margin of error?
- Is the research institute that conducted the poll well known? Is it reputable?
- When was the poll conducted? Was it conducted during a sensitive time period, such as when security tensions were heightened, elections were held, a military operation was carried out, disaster or other mishap occurred? What is the probability that the poll's timing influenced its results?
- Does the communications channel chosen for the poll (i.e. landline or cellular telephone, an online survey) lead to misrepresentation of certain populations with higher or lower access to these channels?
- On elections polls, does the poll show, separately, the percentage of respondents who intend to vote and

the percentage of those who are undecided? Does it explain its working assumptions regarding these populations and the procedures that were used to ultimately try to decipher their voting patterns?

Scientific studies

- Was the study published in a reputable scientific journal where anonymous peer review is customary?
- Who conducted the study? What are their backgrounds and accomplishments? Is the topic of the study within their area of expertise?
- Did I at the very least take care to read the abstract, discussion and conclusions? Did I examine the study's limitations and customary statements about the identity of the funders, and the potential conflict of interest?
- Do I understand how the study was conducted and which tools it employed? Who can help me understand?
- Are the findings surprising? Reasonable? Do they match the findings of previous studies? If not, is there a convincing reason for that?
- Do the findings make it possible to answer the research questions? Do they do so unequivocally?
- Are the data that were actually collected identical to the data described by the researchers as relevant to the research questions?

- Does the presentation of the findings convincingly address with alternative explanations?
- Do the conclusions go beyond the findings and the limitations of the study?
- In a study about a new medication, do the findings validate the effectiveness of the new medication only relative to the placebo, or also to medications that are already in use?
- In a medical study, is sufficient attention paid to the risks of a new medical treatment or only its advantages?
- Do the terms that the study uses have a special meaning in scientific jargon? How can such terms be translated into everyday language?

Experiments

- Does the experiment compare at least two groups?
- Am I clear on the cause and effect according to the study?
- How were the subjects assigned to different groups? Was the division random or deliberate?
- Are the groups large enough to make the test statistically significant? Are the results significant?
- In its attempt to isolate factors, did the experiment stray too far away from the conditions in the natural

environment in which the phenomena being tested usually takes place?

- Are there other factors not mentioned in the report that can affect the results of the experiment?

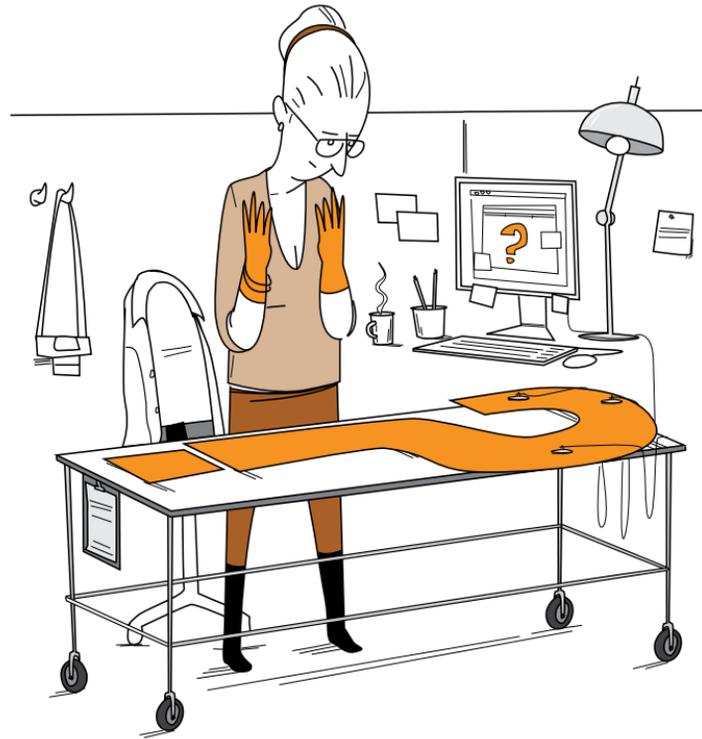
Databases

- Does the use of a database actually make new insights possible?
- By whom, when, and for what purpose was the raw data collected into the database that was used for the study? By which method?
- To what extent do the decisions of those who constructed the database limit my uses of it?
- What is the probability that errors, such as duplication, partial data, and confusing categorization will creep in because of the data collection methods?
- Could the processes of locating, loading, and analyzing the data have ethical implications, such as violations of privacy?
- Which methods of analysis does the database allow? Is it arranged in logical categories?
- For what level of detail does the database allow?
- Is the database overloaded with details?

- Does the assignment call for data processing or statistical skills that I do not possess?
- Is it right to rely on a large database when the phenomenon I'm interested in is so rare?
- Might the information that is the most valuable to me be inaccessible in this database? Can that be compensated for with alternative or supplementary databases that are available at no charge or for payment?
- Can causality be concluded on the basis of the data in this database?
- If someone else were to analyze the same data, would that person reach the same conclusions?
- Are the original data files accessible? Can I look at them myself or with the help of professionals? Isn't it appropriate to make them accessible to the public?
- Does the visualization of the data in graphs create exaggerated drama or promote a certain interpretation?
- Is the proportion between the data and their graphic representation consistent throughout?
- Does the visualization of the data contradict natural laws and basic human inclinations (for example, a descending line indicating an increase, the color red indicating cold, or the color blue indicating heat)?

Chapter 4:

Skepticism of Journalistic Methods



Finally, we cannot cast doubt upon all the links in the chain of information production while turning a blind eye to reporters. Not only is the influence of reporters on what makes the news and what is omitted too much to ignore, but that influence is also susceptible to such extraneous elements as professional biases, the tendency to toe their colleagues' line, cover conflict situations to the exclusion of all else, dwell on news that is negative and dramatic, and view widespread social phenomena as if they were simply personal matters.

Although journalism is not a profession according to strict sociological definitions, journalists have certain things in common with the practitioners of other occupations. Practitioners of different professions suffer from a compromised ability to look at oneself from the outside, put their techniques under critical observation and find alternative methods of behavior. Many journalists like to think that each one of their reports is a unique mixture of circumstances and nuances. But in reality, journalists do not reinvent the wheel. They do not decide anew what the classic structure of a news item is, what is considered a good question at a press conference, when it is important to confront interviewees with their own past statements, and whether they ought to report the story behind the story rather than be satisfied with a politician's version of events.

Experience is not the only thing that journalists accumulate. They also develop fixations, thought patterns, and loyalty to sources of information and organizations. When they report about conflicts, they may even take it upon themselves to

decide who the good guys and bad guys are to be. Some reporters do not always notice how their usual sources not only connect them to reality, but can also cut them off from it.

But journalists can do more than change the way they investigate and report the next story. They have more leeway to shape the nature of their work over the long term, beyond the way they cover a particular event. They can build up their knowledge, expertise, and the skills they need to cover stories independently, critically, and with added value to the reader.

Journalistic judgment

- Whenever something looks obvious to me, do I stop and ask myself, “Why is this so?”
- Is this story really a matter of public interest, or have I been swept away by the desire to align with sources, colleagues, or competitors? Have I tried to scoop competitors in order to receive a high rating?
- Does the systematic refusal to publish items related to this field put it under the journalistic radar, until there is not even a chance for a debate over its importance?
- Do long-term trends, ongoing processes and developments (such as feminization, secularization or political polarization) — that shape the lives of citizens more than any drama or scandal — constantly pass under my radar?
- Am I aware of my audience’s need for information, keeping in mind the various hats they wear as citizens, voters, parents, taxpayers, HMO members, members of pension funds, vehicle owners, and so on?
- Would this story even be reported but for the providers knowing about journalists’ weaknesses for such material?
- Does my reluctance to educate my audiences lead me to omit significant background from my reports that could improve public understanding of major issues?

- Have I done everything possible to ensure that audiences that are not knowledgeable about the topic will understand the significance of the information and its possible effects?

Gathering information

- Have I gathered enough information to know what I am talking about?
- Have I allowed myself permission to not drill deeply into a topic on the assumption that the public will not understand it or won’t be interested in it anyway, and that the story will not get prominent coverage in any case?
- Is there really a good reason to assume that the truth is out there “somewhere in the middle?” Would additional probing strengthen the position of one of the parties involved?
- On the other hand, doesn’t my effort to provide a bottom line go too far for a story that is so complex and has no clear and definitive solution?
- Could this coin have more than two sides, which would justify bringing in more than two opinions?
- While negotiating with sources about the conditions for making their information available to me, did I compromise too much? Did these compromises make it easier for certain parties to push through a twisted version of events and to divert attention away from important questions?

- Am I attentive enough to new information, even when that means dropping a story that I have already spent so much time on developing?
- On the other hand, do I give up too quickly on stories just because influential actors and their experts succeed in confusing me and my editors?
- Do I really know how to listen without putting words into the mouths of interview subjects?
- Was the effort I put in worthwhile just to get the expected denials?
- Was I precise not only in getting the quotes right, but also in presenting the source's intentions? Did I take statements out of context?
- Have I already reported on all the details relevant to the past and present so that I feel free to speculate about the future?

Editing and presentation

- Might I have taken this story a bit too far in my desire to create a catchy headline?
- Did I inflate insignificant aspects of the story and downplay major ones?
- In my attempts to describe conflicts, conspiracies and power plays, did I end up with a story that is a bit larger than life?

- Do all the illustrations, reconstructions, and visual pyrotechnics make the story gratuitously graphic, straying beyond the actual information I possess?
- Did I use too many worn-out clichés?
- As an editor, did I make an exaggerated use of the claim that there is no space in the paper or newscast, even though it is I who caused the space shortage myself by choosing to publish less important stories?
- Whenever I need to shorten an item, do I tend to cut out background and context that are essential to understanding it?
- Wouldn't it be better for me to admit how little I know about this item rather than sound like a know-it-all?
- Wouldn't the presentation to the public of evidence such as documents, photocopies, videos, and audio recordings mobilize more trust in the story? Wouldn't greater transparency help with that?
- Could it be that there is no "meat" left on the story after all the hype?

Work routines

- To what extent am I a pawn on the chessboard of my news organization, my managers, and my news sources?
- To what extent is my obedience expressed in biased coverage, self-censorship, and internalization of the “commander’s spirit” in the newsroom?
- Am I aware of how a story that my editor assigned me was born? Can I guess what agreements were reached with the sources behind my back?
- As an editor, do I facilitate real dialogue with the reporters and give appropriate weight to their superior knowledge of the subject matter and the details of the story?
- Is there a realistic chance that I will sincerely listen to a reporter when he questions my decision as an editor?
- As an editor, do I give my reporters enough support to concentrate not only on specific and anecdotal events, but also on ongoing patterns and trends?
- As a reporter, am I aware that my editors do not necessarily know what is most important, interesting or worthy of emphasis in this item? Have I tried succinctly and clearly to make them aware of this?
- Are simple channels for corrections accessible to anyone who finds a factual error in my media outlet?
- Do I make the required corrections quickly, transparently, and without being clever about it?

- When an error gets into an item of mine, do I encourage the publication of a correction or do I do everything I can to keep it from being published?

Long-term journalistic career

- Has my coverage become too predictable over the years? Has it become locked into opinions, routines, accepted practices and news sources?
- Am I able to break away from rigidly accepted conventions? Can I imagine alternative situations and orders of things that go beyond the boundaries of the familiar and the intellectual orthodoxy of the establishment?
- Have I become addicted to collecting information from hand to mouth in a way that keeps me from developing expertise and delivering journalistic value?
- Is my voice swallowed up in the media cacophony because I hew to the required coverage angles and accepted emphases, focusing my energies on pursuing stories that have no real public worth?
- Can readers guess in advance which side comes out as the good guys in my stories about conflicts, such as those between employees and employers, big business and government? What am I doing to fix this predictability?

- Is it possible that my regular sources are cutting me off from events more than they are connecting me to them?
- Am I aware of the overt and implicit ways in which my sources, prejudices, background and supervisors try to shape my perception of reality?
- Is my circle of sources closed because of a gross division into two categories: those who are credible until proven otherwise and those whom I see as liars until they prove to me that they are not? What are they and I missing because of this division?
- Do sources that do not come from my own socioeconomic and ethnic background, level of education, and age group succeed in reaching me? Do I succeed in reaching them?
- Do I manage to minimize the number of incidents in which populistic and manipulative sources succeed in getting exactly the kind of coverage from me that they had planned?
- Am I sufficiently exposed to new methods of gathering, investigating, analyzing, and presenting information?
- Over the years, have I expanded my professional autonomy, diversified my sources, and reduced my dependence on a closed group of fixed contacts and PR professionals?
- Am I improving my abilities to build creative and effective bypass routes for cases in which the usual channels are blocked?

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