

Commentary: Considering the credibility of news stories

By Laney Salisbury

Published 6:24 pm, Saturday, January 28, 2017

With another college semester under way, I will ask several dozen new journalism students the question I always ask:

"What does a reporter do?"

It's an easy question to answer, and they usually get it right: Seek the truth. Get the truth.

It's when I ask them how they know the news story is true that they struggle. I can understand why. Journalists don't often explain what they mean by the "truth." If they did, perhaps fewer readers would be so vulnerable to fake news.

"Journalistic truth" is not an intellectual concept discussed in philosophy courses, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel describe in the textbook our class uses. It's more matter-of-fact, anchored in the shoe-leather methods and madness of the profession. Today's story could very well be tomorrow's correction. Get used to the idea.

Good journalists do evaluate and verify the evidence they find on their deadline-driven journeys, but what readers don't know, or forget, is that these journeys are often chaotic, strewn with real and metaphorical IEDs. Sources misremember or lie. New facts emerge. The need to inform, competition with other news outlets, and an audience ravenous for updates mean truth gathering must get done quickly.

When children and adults were shot down at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012, for example, news organizations, working off police information, published the name of the murderer as Ryan Lanza. Hours later, news outlets corrected themselves — after Lanza posted on his Facebook page, "It wasn't me." It was Ryan Lanza's brother, Adam.

Should reporters have double-checked or at least withheld the name? Yes. The police sources were unnamed. A person's reputation and safety were at stake. Easy for me to say: I am sitting behind a laptop in the calm of hindsight.

The Newtown story was not fake news. The reporters "simply" got details wrong. In a crisis, like in the urgency of a tragedy, reporters scramble in their genuine intent to inform. They talk to sources who are scrambling as well. Mistakes happen when people of any profession rush. This does not justify errors. It means readers need to be skeptical, and more than ever in this age of constant news streams fed by thinned-out news rooms.

Sometimes, all a reporter has is the version that is presented. President Donald Trump has called unsubstantiated claims that Russia has compromising information on him "phony stuff." It's true that's what Trump said. But is it the truth? We don't know that yet.

News is frustrating. Often, there are no immediate answers, no matter how much readers want or need absolute clarity. To ask if a news story is true or false is too absolute and meaningless. The better question is "How credible is it?" That question forces readers into the mindset of a reporter working a story. Evaluate the evidence the reporter cites. If there's none, it's not credible. If it's uncorroborated, it rates low. If sources are unnamed, be careful. Is the evidence second-hand?

Look up the byline. Has the reporter published before? No? Then, it's suspicious. Newbies getting a big story or covering the Vatican on their first day happens more in the movies than in life.

Much of the fake news that hits social media tends to be one-off bombshells that take aim at deeply held religious or political beliefs. These stories strike at our instinct to share and connect with each other over an "OMG" moment. But in the world of real news, OMG stories are rare. Usually, some dogged reporter has been covering an issue for months, providing a front row seat to the slow unraveling of some company or politician's career.

Readers should demand high standards from journalists. And they should demand that Google and Facebook better monitor fake news. But readers also have to adopt higher standards for themselves. Pressing "share" should be a considered decision, not an impulsive one.

Laney Salisbury is an author, reporter, and a lecturer in the Journalism Program at the University at Albany.