
Transcript: The Integrity of Information in Mass Media

In part I, we briefly highlighted the importance of integrity in scientific research, which we described as foundational for life-sustaining industries and services. However, so far, we have discussed the importance of academic integrity narrowly within the context of your degree at UNB. In part III, we move beyond university walls to consider the importance of honesty and accountability in the global context of information practices.

While encouraging you to behave ethically, the practice of academic integrity in university also strengthens your ability to evaluate and question the integrity of information in the broader world. By “the broader world” we mean the information landscape that you interact with and contribute to every day.

This video offers tips on how to further develop your ability to evaluate and question the integrity of information, based on real-life scenarios where information integrity was compromised. The misinformation perpetuated in fake news, by sensationalist reporters or other biased parties, encourages ignorance, bigotry, and even violence. Our examples demonstrate that when the principles of honesty and accountability in the mass media become compromised such lapses have the potential to end careers, cause social unrest, and undermine global health.

When reviewing our examples, consider these indicators of **information integrity**.

- **Reputation of the news source:** Is the source a tabloid, a newspaper, a network newscast, a news magazine or a blog? The standards of evidence, the commitment to objectivity, the motivation to serve the public good, all of which affect credibility, vary considerably depending on the type of news source.
- **Author’s credentials:** Is the author affiliated with a legitimate news organization or research institute? Are their credentials and educational profile readily available for verification?
- **Verification and corroboration by other news sources:** Can you find other, distinct media outlets commenting on and reporting the information in question?
- **Acknowledgment of alternative viewpoints:** Does the information reflect strong cultural, political, ethnic, or other biases or does it reflect a balanced and objective presentation of the issues?
- **Quality of evidence used and news production practices:** Can the information be attributed to reliable sources? Can the claims of a source be supported by concrete evidence? In the case of academic publications, are **peer-review*** standards followed?

***Peer-review** is a process where experts in a given field are called upon to evaluate potential publications. These experts, known as referees, assess the quality of the writing and research and may suggest changes to the original work before it is deemed fit for publication or presentation.

Lack of information integrity can unjustly end careers

A blog post from the conservative website BigGovernment.com accused Shirley Sherrod, an African-American official in the U.S. Agriculture Department, of racism (Breitbart News, 2010). Breitbart News based this accusation on a short excerpt they published from a 43 minute speech that Sherrod delivered at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's 20th Annual Freedom Fund Banquet. For a clickable link to her full speech, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/shirleysherrodnaacpfreedom.htm>

Breitbart News took Sherrod's statement about failing to help a white farmer out of context and falsely presented it as evidence of her racism against white people. Her statement was part of a longer anecdote meant to illustrate how, early in her career, she struggled with but worked to eradicate her own racial prejudice (Bauder, 2010). Fox News Channel perpetuated this story without investigating the context of Sherrod's statement and without asking her for comments as did the United States administration which fired her from her job as director of rural development in the Department of Agriculture (Bauder, 2010). The administration eventually apologized to Sherrod and offered her job back, which she declined (Stolberg, Dewan, & Stelter, 2010).

Breitbart's blog post undermines journalistic integrity by deliberately misrepresenting Sherrod as a racist in order to advance this publisher's agenda. The reputation of this publication as politically extremist, the writer's failure to consider alternative view points, the absence of verification and corroboration by distinct media outlets, other than Fox News Channel, and the use of misleading footage as evidence are all indicators of diminished integrity of information in this story.

References

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Lack of information integrity can cause social unrest

Unverified claims, when made public, can have devastating consequences. Isikoff and Barry (2005) of *Newsweek* alleged that staff at Guantanamo Bay detention center disrespected the Qur'an as part of their interrogation strategies. The reporters wrote, "Sources tell *Newsweek*: interrogators, in an attempt to rattle suspects, flushed a Qur'an down a toilet" (para. 1).

Several days after the *Newsweek* publication of this short sentence, violent protests with death casualties swept the Middle East (Hertzberg, 2005; Seelye, 2005). Hertzberg argues that *Newsweek's* short statement caused public outrage in Muslim countries. For instance, Hertzberg quotes the Pakistani politician Imran Khan saying, while holding the issue of *Newsweek* in his hand: "This is what the U.S. is doing—desecrating the Koran" (para. 3).

Though *Newsweek* retracted its story, the publication defended its reporting practices, such as the use of an anonymous Pentagon official who had provided reliable information in the past (Seelye, 2005).

The mere possibility of the desecration of the Qur'an based on the testimony of an anonymous source, without tangible proof, fails the threshold of evidence required for information integrity, especially given the detrimental consequences that such a revelation would have on international relations between the West and Muslim nations. Also, the story was not verified and corroborated by other media outlets—another indicator of diminished integrity of information in this story.

References

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Lack of information integrity can undermine global health

In part I of his blog post "VRM: Special Report," Lord (n.d.) the founder of the Vaccine Resistance Movement website, presents a loosely structured attack against the California state government for approving the California Senate Bill 277. This bill removed exemptions from the vaccination requirement for entry into the California school system in June 2015. Lord writes, "The freedom to choose what goes into your body, or into your child's bloodstream, is non-negotiable" (para. 6). He articulates the reasons for his militant stance in other parts of his blog post.

For instance, in part III, he argues that measles vaccinations compromise the immunity of parents and children and lead to the development of more aggressive measles strains. He follows this argument with strings of long direct quotes from medical doctors, however, he provides no actual references to peer-reviewed publications in medicine and/or epidemiology. He moves on to argue that measles vaccines

are unsafe for infants due to many adverse side effects and, yet again, provides strings of long direct quotes from medical doctors without actual references to peer-reviewed publications. Opponents of Lord's anti-vaccination stance have argued that the recent outbreaks of infectious diseases, such as measles, mumps, and rubella, made preventable by childhood immunizations, have made a comeback due to the persistent efforts of anti-vaccination supporters (Brody, 2015; Hotez, 2017).

When assessing the integrity of information in this blog post, the factors that draw our attention include the author's credentials, his strongly biased tone, and the quality of evidence used. Lord's credentials are unavailable for scrutiny. He appears to have no background as a health professional, a student of biological or medical sciences, or formal training in journalism. His failure to acknowledge alternative viewpoints in order to present a more balanced perspective is another factor that undermines his credibility. So does the absence of references to any scientific evidence in support of his claims. By scientific evidence we mean any ideas and assertions that have been published in peer-reviewed journals and have therefore been vetted by experts.

References

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