

College Guild
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

JOURNALISM CLUB

Unit 3 of 6 The Truth

A good journalist cares deeply about the truth and commits to presenting the truth to society. Editor Greg Kesich says that good journalism is “a system of verification”, testing every fact with a series of questions so that you know your sources are credible and your own biases aren’t slipping in. Even though there are a lot of journalists out there who share these values, there are a lot of people out there telling conflicting stories. In Unit 3, we’ll learn about journalism that obscures the truth and journalism that seeks to reveal the truth.

Sensationalism

Sensationalism is defined as “the use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement.”

1. How would you put this definition into your own words?

The National Enquirer is a publication that is often found in the checkout lines of supermarkets. It is full of sensationalist journalism and comes with ridiculously dramatic covers.

One National Enquirer cover from October 2015 featured a photo of Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton with the headline “Hillary: 6 Months to Live!”. The cover even had a quote from an unnamed “top aide” saying, “Clinton won’t make it to the White House.” Below this cover is a photo of Clinton in April 2018, alive and well. The picture of her on The National Enquirer cover is taken out of context and probably edited to make her look sickly. The quote is probably made up. Still, publications like this are dangerous, because some people will always believe that they are legitimate news.

2. What factors might make people vulnerable to believing an article like this? Explain.
3. Do you think it’s morally wrong to publish “news” like this if you know it’s not true, or do you think the responsibility is on readers to decide what they believe? Explain.
4. What might tip you off, as a cautious reader, that an article seemed exaggerated or untrue?



Another National Enquirer cover makes accusations about then President Barack Obama being unfaithful to his wife, Michelle. It also says that Michelle has “dirt” on Barack. Although there have been many articles attacking the Obamas, there has been nothing negative printed about the current first lady, Melania Trump! An article even said that the Trumps’ relationship was “stronger than ever”.



5. Explain what the effect would be if the pictures on the cover were replaced by the above picture of the Obamas looking madly in love.
6. Design a cover for The Enquirer. Have fun with it!

Fake News

During the election of 2016, candidate Donald Trump declared any source of news that didn't portray him in a favorable way to be “fake news”. He attacked reputable television stations and newspapers. As president, he continued to build a rivalry between the government and the press. He invented his own facts. His advisor, Kellyanne Conway, called these lies “alternative facts”.

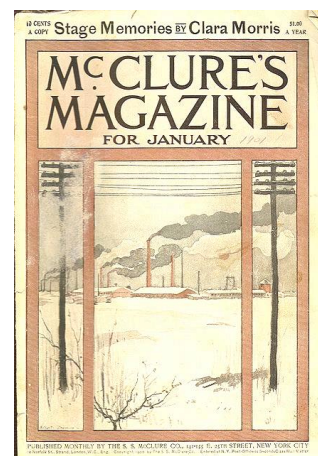
7. Do you believe that there are such things as alternative facts? If so, name one.
8. How might a rivalry between the government and the press affect the American people?
9. What would be the appropriate response from a professional television station or newspaper if it made a mistake in presenting facts and got caught?

Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism is a type of journalism with the goal of discovering the truth. It became important in the 20th century because of the work of a group of journalists called “muckrakers”. Muckrakers dug up dirt on established institutions to expose them as corrupt. They showed that established government leaders were acting immorally and sought to anger the public about unsafe working conditions, child labor and urban poverty. McClure's Magazine was an influential muckraking magazine.



Muckraker Ida Tarbell (1857-1944) wrote a book called The History of the Standard Oil Company which was first published in McClure's Magazine in nineteen pieces from 1902 to 1904. This book attacked the business practices of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. By tracking down public documents around the US, Tarbell found that the company used questionable tactics to stop companies that got in its way.



Rockefeller is, as of 2018, widely considered to have been the richest American of all time. He was not happy with how Tarbell portrayed him and his business. One of Rockefeller's banks even threatened the

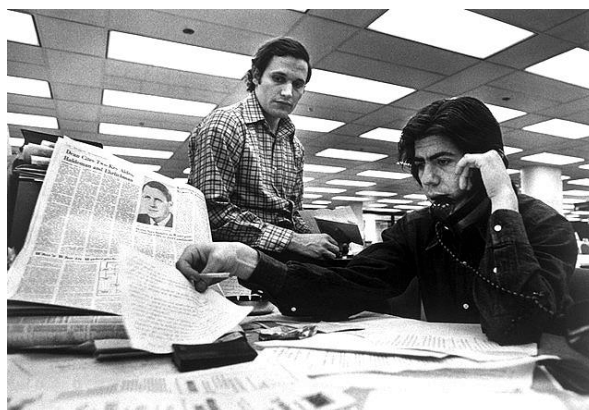
McClure Magazine's financial status. Tarbell didn't stop, and eventually Standard Oil was dissolved as a monopoly and new laws were created to limit the power of big business.

10. If you could interview Ida Tarbell for an article about her work, what are 3 questions you would ask her?

Another journalist who worked for McClure's Magazine around the time that Tarbell did was Frank Norris. Norris once said, "The People have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

11. Write an article for McClure's Magazine in which you expose corruption at an imaginary company.

The Watergate scandal was another big moment for investigative journalism. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were young reporters at *The Washington Post* in 1972 when 5 men broke into the Democratic National Committee's headquarters to bug it. Initially, the break-in didn't seem like a big deal. However, as Woodward and Bernstein investigated, they followed a trail of money that connected the break-in to CREEP (The Committee to Re-elect the President), top government officials and The White House. The current President, Richard Nixon had known about the break-in and tried to cover it up. Because of the investigation, Nixon resigned before he could be removed from office. Gene Roberts, former managing editor of The New York Times said that Woodward and Bernstein's work was "maybe the single greatest reporting effort of all time". See the appendix for excerpts from articles by Woodward and Bernstein.



12. Describe three challenges these young reporters may have faced in their investigation.

13. Write a letter to a friend from the point of view of a journalist who just discovered a major cover-up scandal.

Woodward and Bernstein wrote a book about their experience entitled All the President's Men (1974). This book was adapted into a movie two years later.

14. If you were to direct your own movie about investigative journalists, what would it be about and what actors would you choose to star in it?

One critical character in All the President's Men remained anonymous for 31 years after Nixon resigned. His alias was "Deep Throat". In 2005, Deep Throat was finally revealed to be former FBI Associate Director Mark Felt. Felt secretly met with Bob Woodward in a parking garage to give him key information about the scandal.

Using anonymous sources is sometimes necessary in journalism, though it is not ideal. Here is what The New York Times has to say on the subject:

Under our guidelines, anonymous sources should be used only for information that we think is newsworthy and credible, and that we are not able to report any other way.... Besides the reporter, at least one editor must know the identity of the source. Use of anonymous sources in any story must be approved by a high-ranking editor, usually a department head like the International editor or the Washington bureau chief, or their deputies. When the anonymous sourcing is central to the story, it generally must be approved by an even higher-ranking editor like a deputy managing editor.

- 15. What are three reasons sources may insist that their identities remain anonymous?**
16. Write a news article in which you reference an anonymous source.

WikiLeaks is an international organization that publishes leaked materials from anonymous sources. Releases on WikiLeaks can have major implications on the world. For example, before the 2016 presidential election, WikiLeaks released some of candidate Hillary Clinton's emails. This leak was very harmful to Clinton's campaign. Investigators found strong evidence that Russians hacked into the Democratic National Committee server to get the emails, then sent them to WikiLeaks. The Russians wanted to help Donald Trump get elected and are even suspected of working with Trump and his team.

- 17. What similarities do you see between the Russian scandal and Watergate?**
18. Some say WikiLeaks is a valuable way to make government transparent and hold leaders accountable, while others point to incidents like the one above and argue that WikiLeaks allows for injustice. What do you think? Write an essay explaining your view.



Serial is a podcast hosted by a woman named Sarah Koenig (Kay-nig). Koenig is a woman who cares deeply about the truth, and in 2014 she began Serial. In each season of Serial, she tells a different story, a piece at a time. In Season 1, Koenig investigates the 1999 murder of a teenage girl to try to find out if the man in prison for the crime (her ex-boyfriend) actually killed her. In Season 2, Koenig looks into an incident that happened during the war in Afghanistan when a soldier intentionally walked off his post and was kidnapped by the Taliban. Koenig and her team interview numerous people to try to get to the truth. At the end of each season, she shares her own conclusions, but takes great care to give listeners all the evidence they need to make their own judgments.

- 19. If you were to devote a lot of time to an investigative journalism project like Sarah Koenig did with Serial, what would you choose to investigate?**
20. For The Enquirer, McClure's Magazine and WikiLeaks, what would be the biggest advantage and biggest disadvantage to working at each company?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Sources

<https://www.wikipedia.org>, <https://www.nytimes.com>

Appendix

Excerpt from The Washington Post: “Bug Suspect Got Campaign Funds”

By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward | August 1, 1972

A \$25,000 cashier's check, apparently earmarked for President Nixon's re-election campaign, was deposited in April in a bank account of one of the five men arrested in the break-in at Democratic National Headquarters here June 17.

The check was made out by a Florida bank to Kenneth H. Dahlberg, the President's campaign finance chairman for the Midwest. Dahlberg said last night that in early April he turned the check over to “the treasurer of the Committee (for the Re-election of the President) or to Maurice Stans himself.” Stans, formerly secretary of Commerce under Mr. Nixon, is now the finance chief of the President's re-election effort.

Dahlberg said he didn't have “the vaguest idea” how the check got into the bank account of the real estate firm owned by Bernard L. Barker, one of the break-in suspects. Stans could not be reached for comment.

Reached by telephone at his home in a Minneapolis suburb, Dahlberg explained the existence of the check this way: “In the process of fund-raising I had accumulated some cash...so I recall making a cash deposit while I was in Florida and getting a cashier's check made out to myself. I didn't want to carry all that cash into Washington.”

A photostatic copy of the front of the check was examined by a Washington Post reporter yesterday. It was made out by the First Bank and Trust Co. of Boca Raton, Fla., to Dahlberg.

Thomas Monohan, the assistant vice president of the Boca Raton bank, who signed the check authorization, said the FBI had questioned him about it three weeks ago.

According to court testimony by government prosecutors, Barker's bank account in which the \$25,000 was deposited was the same account from which Barker later withdrew a large number of hundred-dollar bills. About 53 of these \$100 bills were found on the five men after they were arrested at the Watergate.

Excerpt from The Washington Post: “FBI Finds Nixon Aides Sabotaged Democrats”

By Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward | October 10, 1972

FBI agents have established that the Watergate bugging incident stemmed from a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage conducted on behalf of President Nixon's re-election and directed by officials of the White House and the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

The activities, according to information in FBI and Department of Justice files, were aimed at all the major Democratic presidential contenders and -- since 1971 -- represented a basic strategy of the Nixon re-election effort.

During their Watergate investigation, federal agents established that hundreds of thousands of dollars in Nixon campaign contributions had been set aside to pay for an extensive undercover campaign aimed at discrediting individual Democratic presidential candidates and disrupting their campaigns.

"Intelligence work" is normal during a campaign and is said to be carried out by both political parties. But federal investigators said what they uncovered being done by the Nixon forces is unprecedented in scope and intensity.

They said it included:

Following members of Democratic candidates' families and assembling dossiers on their personal lives; forging letters and distributing them under the candidates' letterheads; leaking false and manufactured items to the press; throwing campaign schedules into disarray; seizing confidential campaign files; and investigating the lives of dozens of Democratic campaign workers.

In addition, investigators said the activities included planting provocateurs in the ranks of organizations expected to demonstrate at the Republican and Democratic conventions; and investigating potential donors to the Nixon campaign before their contributions were solicited.

Informed of the general contents of this article, The White House referred all comment to The Committee for the Re-election of the President. A spokesman there said, "The Post story is not only fiction but a collection of absurdities." Asked to discuss the specific points raised in the story, the spokesman, DeVan L. Shumway, refused on grounds that "the entire matter is in the hands of the authorities."