

The following chapter was provided by John McManus and describes The SMELL Test, “a way to distinguish ethical journalism from propaganda, fake news and junk journalism.” The chapter comes from his recent book, *Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web*, and includes several classroom activities

The SMELL Test

Everybody is sitting around saying, 'Well, jeez, we need somebody to solve this problem of bias.' That somebody is us.

~ Wilma Mankiller, late Cherokee leader

Some fake news is obviously ridiculous. Take a gander at this image from a website called Worldnewsdailyreport.com.

SYRIAN REFUGEE RENOUNCES ISLAM AFTER TASTING BACON FOR FIRST TIME

April 5th, 2016 | by [Bob Flanagan](#)



“It tastes like heaven!” simply puts [sic] Rakim Shaheed, newly employed at a downtown Toronto butcher shop. “I took one bite of a club sandwich my boss prepared for me and I almost fell off my chair,” he told local reporters. “It was like a burst of flavor hit my taste buds and shook me like an earthquake” he recalls, visibly still emotional. “I can’t believe no one ever told me it was so good,” he adds.¹

But other fabricated articles have fooled many citizens,

been shared widely on social media and perhaps changed the outcome of national elections.²

The simplest way to discover if a news article is misleading or fake is to check it out on a legitimate fact-checking website, such as Snopes.com, Poltifact.com, or Factcheck.org. However, these sites only examine the most popular frauds, and rarely as soon as they appear.

A second method is to enter the gist of the story, e.g., "Pope Francis endorses Trump," in a search engine such as Google or Bing. Look for two things: First, whether a reputable news outlet, your nearest big city paper or a national paper such as the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*, or a reliable broadcast network, such as NBC or NPR, has reported it; Second, check whether it's being contested or called out as false, or as advertising. (We'll discuss online ways of vetting news in detail in chapter 11). If professional news organizations aren't reporting it or are describing it very differently, you'll know to doubt the story you are evaluating. Exclamation points, WORDS ALL IN CAPS, inflammatory language, name-calling, broad generalizations are all characteristics of fake news.

This chapter describes a third way – thinking critically about the content of the article. To reveal hidden bias – commercial or ideological – and distinguish more reliable information from less, use the SMELL test. It can be applied to any statement purporting to be factual in any medium, from face-to-face to Facebook to Fox. Here's how it works:

S is for **Source**. Who is providing the information? A traditional news outlet, a special interest group, a neighborhood blogger, the Ku Klux Klan? We'll be asking whether they know what they're talking about. And we'll be looking for conflicts between the source's self-interest and our interest in honest information. The presence of such a conflict doesn't invalidate the information, but it does alert us to a likely slant.

M is for **Motive**. Why is the source providing this information? Is it primarily designed to inform, persuade (including sell), or entertain? If persuasion is the goal, we'd be more skeptical, wary of cherry-picked evidence. Entertainers aren't bound by facts at all.

E is for **Evidence**. What evidence is provided to support the thesis or gist of the story or message?

L is for **Logic**. Does the evidence logically compel the

L is for **Logic**. Does the evidence logically compel the generalizations or conclusions? Are they compatible with what we already know?

L is for **Left out**. What is missing either through ignorance or intention? Which relevant facts or stakeholders are absent or marginalized?

Information can be unreliable for three reasons: because it's deliberately biased, unintentionally biased, or simply inaccurate. Intentional bias is usually carefully hidden. Like a python draped on a tree in the jungle, it depends for its effectiveness on camouflage. Unintentional biases, in contrast, are so deeply embedded in our way of seeing the world that we don't notice them even though they lie in plain sight. We take them for granted as true or natural, the way that only a hundred years ago federal law considered women unfit to vote. Finally, information can be unreliable due to simple ignorance.

Not long ago, many of us could rely on the natural enemy of bias and ignorance – robust professional journalism. As such journalism recedes, however, we need to learn how to spot unreliable information ourselves and warn others. We need to become information *detectives*, taking a magnifying glass at least to those messages that most affect our well-being.

A test case: Global warming

Let's test-drive the SMELL test on a controversy that was at full boil in 2017 – whether or not man-made global warming is real or a hoax. Since it affects the whole planet, the issue is about as consequential as you can get. And with President Trump and his Environmental Protection Agency director dismantling the Obama administration's efforts to reduce greenhouse gases, no news topic is more contested. Here's the top of an article from the British tabloid *Daily Mail* that my conservative friends sent me:³




Stunning new data indicates El Nino drove record highs in global temperatures suggesting rise may not be down to man-made emissions

- Global average temperatures over land have plummeted by more than 1C
- Comes amid mounting evidence run of record temperatures about to end
- The fall, revealed by Nasa satellites, has been caused by the end of El Nino

By DAVID ROSE FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

PUBLISHED: 18:52 EDT, 26 November 2016 | UPDATED: 00:23 EDT, 27 November 2016

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FEMAIL TODAY

▶ Aloha! Flip Or Flop's Christina El Moussa shows off her bikini body as she hits the beach in Hawaii
Shared yet another sizzling snap 

▶ Bathing beauty Kate Upton flaunts her famous hourglass figure in skimpy halterneck bikini on romantic break 

Global average temperatures over land have plummeted by more than 1°C since the middle of this year – their biggest and steepest fall on record.

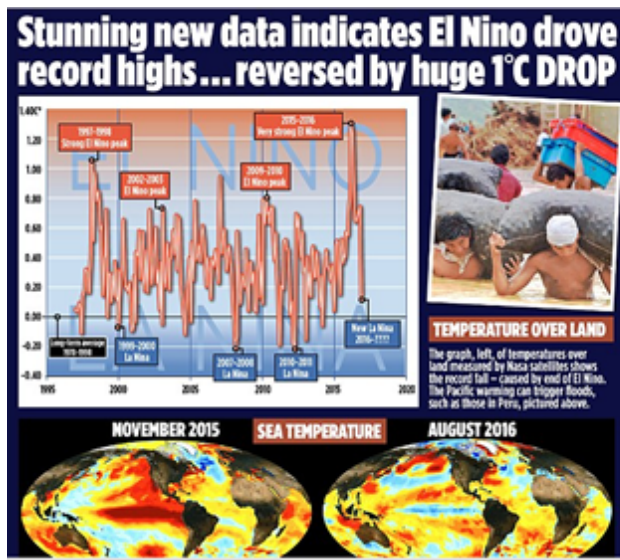
The news comes amid mounting evidence that the recent run of world record high temperatures is about to end.

The fall, revealed by Nasa satellite measurements of the lower atmosphere, has been caused by the end of El Nino – the warming of surface waters in a vast area of the Pacific west of Central America.

with fiancé Justin Verlander

► 'I got that from my dad': Kendall Jenner reveals she's not as 'girly' as her famous sisters while looking a dream in lingerie for Harper's Bazaar

► She IS on the guest list! Meghan Markle is said to be attending



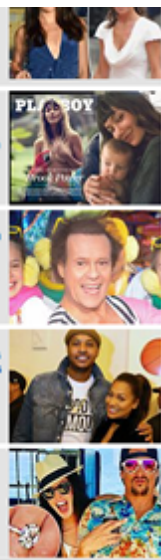
Pippa's wedding on Prince Harry's arm despite her 'no ring, no bring' rule (but there's a catch)

► New mom Brook Power is named Playboy's Playmate of the Year, posing nude on the magazine's cover just five months after giving birth to a son

► Richard Simmons hospitalized in California while 'battling severe indigestion' - marking the first time he has left home in over THREE years

► Carmelo Anthony 'slept with dancer who is now PREGNANT with his baby'... as it is revealed he has split with wife La La after seven years Before pair broke up

► He's engaged! Kid Rock proposes to longtime girlfriend Audrey Berry with large diamond ring... 10 years after divorcing Pamela Anderson



S: Who is the Source of the information?

Analyzing the source of information is the first and most important step in vetting. There are several layers to consider.

The simplest case is when *individuals*, perhaps colleagues at school or at work, provide information about something they have *witnessed*. But usually there are at least two levels of sources: immediate – the person speaking, and secondary – the source(s) of his/her information, e.g., heard it from a friend, read it in a book, saw it on TV, etc. If the latter, we'll need to look carefully at our friend's source material.

Information from *institutions*, e.g., websites or other media, typically has three levels of sources: 1) the organization itself; 2) the author whose name is on the article; and 3) the source or sources the author relied on for raw material.

Each layer acts as a filter. Each alters the information for its own purposes and in accord with its own biases. The more links in the information chain, the more opportunity for distortion. (Remember the telephone game where one person whispers a message to another and by the end of the chain, it's unintelligible?) So, whenever possible, it's a good idea to go directly to the source closest to the original event. As a practical matter, that's often a media outlet. The Web makes this easy to do.

To keep things simple we can usually combine the author

To keep things simple, we can usually combine the author and organization levels when the information-provider is an institution such as a media company. As we saw in chapter 5, most authors work with editors and colleagues and all must comply with standards set by the owner. Those standards are enforced because the institution's reputation and freedom from law suits are at risk regardless of which employee authors the information. So unless the article was produced by someone *outside* the organization, such as a guest editorial, we can streamline our analysis to two layers – the institution providing the news or information and the sources quoted within the article.⁴

"As anyone in the business will tell you, the standards and culture of a journalistic institution are set from the top down, by its owner, publisher and top editors."⁵

~ Carl Bernstein, investigative reporter and author

Let's begin our credibility audit with the outermost level – the individual or institution providing the information. It's convenient to judge the reliability of a provider by reputation: "Marcy has never lied to me before," or "The *New York Times* has a reputation for accuracy." That's a valuable shortcut when we know the source well. But there's another way that's less vulnerable to our own blind spots. Whether it's an individual friend or colleague, a website such as The Daily Kos or the Drudge Report, or a national organization, such as NBC News or the *New York Times*, all sources can be judged on three logical criteria, which form the acronym PIE:

1. *Proximity* to the event or whatever information is provided. Was the source an eye- or ear-witnesses with unobstructed access? For information, was the source in a position to know first-hand? Or is the information hearsay passed on from others? When the provider is an institution, such as a news organization, we can ask whether its agent or reporter – or better, multiple reporters – were able to observe events for themselves? How about the sources they quote? The closer the source to the action and the less obstructed the view, the better our chances for reliable information.

2. *Independence*, or freedom from conflict of interest. Does the source stand to gain from telling the story, or

describing it in a particular way? Self-interest is such a powerful perception-bender that we're always wise to discount information for any advantage it may generate for the source.

3. *Expertise* or lived *Experience*. Is the source knowledgeable, having studied, supervised or had prolonged experience that would lend confidence to his/her report? For news media and other institutional information-providers, does their agent have specialized knowledge, e.g. a reporter covering courts who has a law degree, or long experience covering the subject?

The referring source: The friend who sent me the climate change story is a very successful and wealthy engineer living in South Carolina. His libertarian brand of conservatism goes as deep as orange on carrot. Every link he sends me fits his personal ideology, but that doesn't mean they are inaccurate. However, when I fact-check them, some turn out false. So I begin my analysis with a skeptical, but open, mind.

The institutional source: I looked up *The Daily Mail* on Wikipedia. I found that the paper is the second most popular in Britain, that it leans conservative, and is owned by Jonathan Harmsworth, 4th Viscount Rothermere.⁶ More conservatives than liberals doubt that humans are warming the planet, at least in harmful ways. So a conservative bias is likely to minimize human-caused global warming.

Sources within the article: The first named source is Dr Gavin Schmidt, head of NASA's (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) climate division, but rather than supporting the headline that global warming is due to a natural cause – El Nino (a warming of the Eastern Pacific ocean near the Equator) – the author writes that Dr. Schmidt "claimed that the recent highs were mainly the result of long-term global warming." (The word "claim" is often a give-away that the author doubts the claim.) Dr. Schmidt would seem to have a top PIE score as he heads a deeply resourced scientific effort by a neutral party, the U.S. government, to study climate change. In the following paragraphs Dr. Schmidt is referenced three more times, in each case contradicting the claim in the story's headline that global warming has resulted from the El Nino rather than man-made emissions.

The next source referenced is Bob Walker, Mr. Trump's science advisor. But his comment is pulled from another article.

rather than an interview. And he's paraphrased saying NASA's budget for studying the climate, \$1.9 billion, was likely to be "axed," not whether the climate is changing. So no need to chart him.

Only after 19 paragraphs does the author report on an interview with a source supporting the headline: "Professor Judith Curry, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, and president of the Climate Forecast Applications Network, said yesterday: 'I disagree with Gavin. The record warm years of 2015 and 2016 were primarily caused by the super El Nino.'" Professor Curry would appear to have a high PIE score. Entering her name in a Google search I learned that she decided to retire early from her professorship and had been criticized for her conclusions about climate change.⁷ Nevertheless, she appears to be an accomplished climate scholar, although one of the few on her side of the issue.

The third and final source was David Whitehouse, identified as "a scientist who works with Lord Lawson's skeptic Global Warming Policy Foundation." Whitehouse is quoted saying: "According to the satellites, the late 2016 temperatures are returning to the levels they were at after the 1998 El Nino." And paraphrased: "the massive fall in temperatures following the end of El Nino meant the warming hiatus or slowdown may be coming back."

Wikipedia describes the Global Warming Policy Foundation as "a think tank in the United Kingdom, whose stated aims are to challenge 'extremely damaging and harmful policies' envisaged by governments to mitigate anthropogenic global warming."⁸ In other words, the foundation's purpose is to minimize or repudiate the threat of man-made global warming. Mr. Whitehouse is not a climate scientist, but was a science reporter for the respected BBC.⁹ Here's how I'd chart the sources, using their initials:

Assessing Source Credibility with the PIE Chart			
	Low	Medium	High
Proximity	DW		GS, JC
Independence	DW		GS, JC
Expertise		DW	GS>JC

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Most journalists who tackle a highly controversial topic interview many more sources. But if it's only three, they will choose the most informed and rational they can find from each side of the issue and then select a neutral expert to guide the reader/viewer beyond "he said/she said" confusion.

Dr. Curry is a good pick for the side disputing global warming. Mr. Whitehouse, however represents a foundation that has already closed its mind on the issue; not a great choice if your purpose is informational. As the head of NASA's climate division, Dr. Schmidt is a great choice for the role of neutral expert. NASA has no vested interest in the issue, but does have resources – far greater than those available to a university professor – to investigate it.

However the author, David Rose, casts Dr. Schmidt, as merely an *advocate* of the position that humans are warming the planet, rather than a *neutral* expert. The *Daily Mail* frames the story as two advocates agreeing with the notion that the planet is warming due to a natural climate cycle versus one advocate for the alternate view, as if all three viewpoints were equally free of conflict of interest and well researched. It's kind of like siding with a former college basketball player and a fan of the Boston Celtics against LeBron James in an argument about how to play the game.

M: What is the source's *Motivation*?

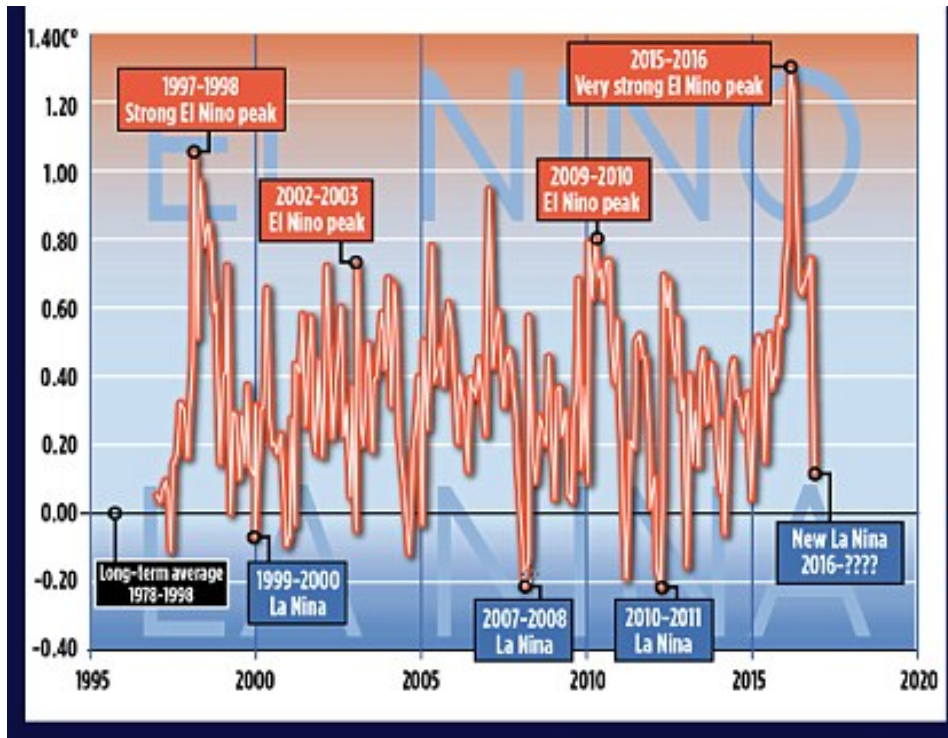
The tone of the story seems mostly informational with both pro and con sources. I found only one hyperbolic sentence, but it was in the headline and thus set the tone of the article: "*Stunning* new data....". Nevertheless, I'll stick with an informative motivation rather than persuasive.

E: What *Evidence* is provided to support the story's thesis?

The thesis or gist can be found in the headline: "Stunning new data indicates El Nino drove record highs in global temperatures suggesting rise may not be down [sic] to man-made emissions." Giving the *Daily Mail*, the benefit of the doubt, I'll assume "down" means "due" in American English.

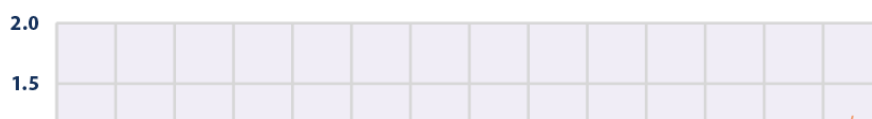
Beyond the sources quoted, who are contradictory, Mr. Rose provides a graph, an image of the planet showing El Nino, two photos and three video clips. The combination of graphs, images and multiple video clips gives the appearance of a well-researched article. But let's look below the surface.

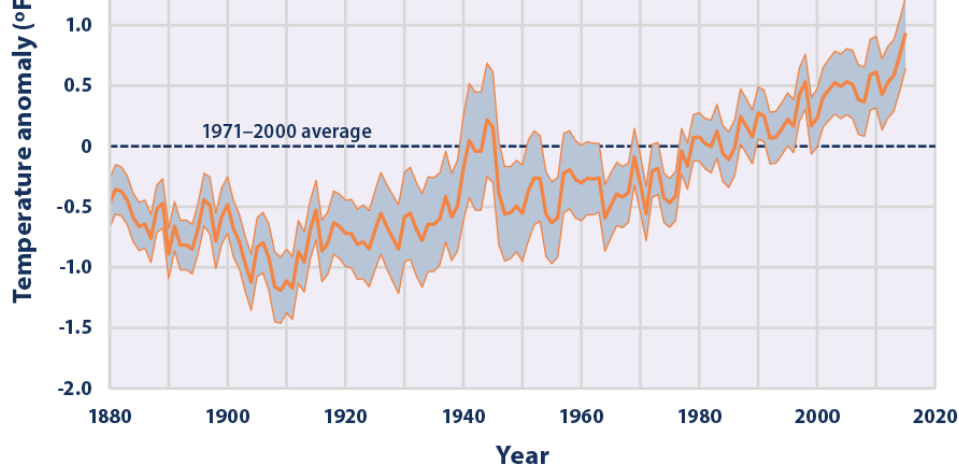
The graph is key:



While the source of the graph is unclear, it's labeled as "Temperatures over land." Given that only 29 percent of the earth's surface is covered by land, and because land doesn't absorb heat the way water does, there's a disconnect between claims of *global* temperatures and *land* temperatures. The graph also reveals that the vast majority of these temperature data points between 1998 and 2016 are about half a centigrade *higher* than the graph's baseline, the average between 1978-1998, *whether or not it was an El Nino year*. So even on land, temperatures have risen regardless of El Nino.

The article has a second color-coded image of ocean temperature patterns. You can see the El Nino fading. But no claim of falling temperatures is made. Given the importance of ocean temperatures in measuring climate change, I Googled "ocean temperature changes over time." I found this graph from the Environmental Protection Agency:¹⁰





It shows a long-term increase in ocean temperatures that cannot be explained by occasional El Nino events – a second direct contradiction of the story's thesis.

The two photos included in the article also provide no evidence for the story's thesis. One shows a flood in Peru. The other is of President Trump. The first video included actually contradicts the story line and explains how global warming works. The second shows NASA images of the formation of the 2014 El Nino, which no one disputes. The third video shows a flood in California. Flooding is actually a sign of global warming as a warmer atmosphere can hold – and dump – more water.

L: Does the evidence *Logically* compel the conclusion?

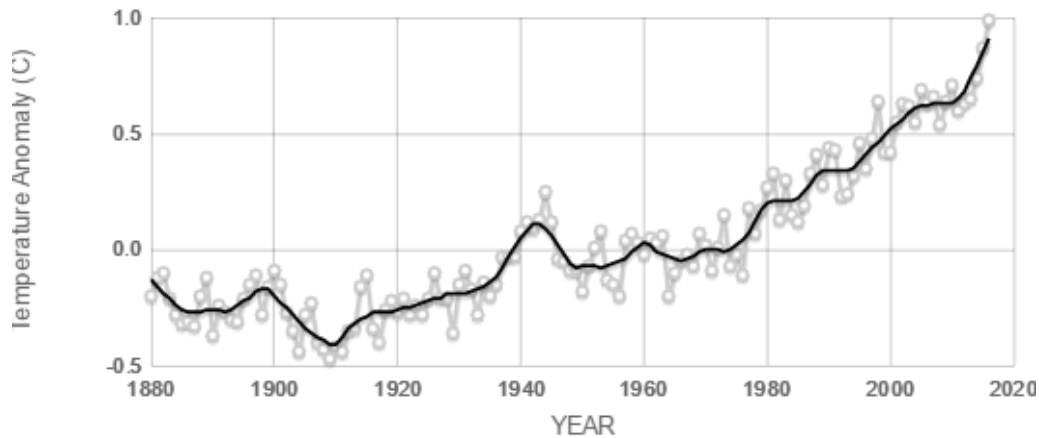
Notice that the headline contains some "weasel" words: "Stunning new data indicates El Nino drove record highs in global temperatures *suggesting* rise *may* not be down to man-made emissions [italics added]."

The evidence presented only shows a 1 degree Celsius drop in *land* temperatures in one year. But land temperatures in the graph fluctuate every year. So it appears the *Daily Mail* is claiming a *single* year's fluctuation in *land* temperatures can be generalized to the entire planet as a *trend*. Climate science, in contrast, is careful to collect data over the *entire globe across many years* before it declares a trend.

L: What's *Left out* of the story?

A Google search for "global climate change," revealed that 2014, 2015, and 2016 have each set record high temperatures. That's quite an omission in a story about global climate change. The fading El Nino may keep 2017 from setting another record, but a full view of climate data shows El Nino events are bumps on a deeper and longer trend as the planet warms. Here's

on a deeper and longer trend as the planet warms. Here's NASA's graph charting global temperature change since 1880 (with 0 set as the average between 1951 to 1980 and the black line representing 5-year means; the circles show annual means):¹¹



Source: climate.nasa.gov

Conclusion: The *Daily Mail* story is fake news of the most dangerous sort – the kind requiring some analysis to detect. Presenting land temperatures rather than global temperatures appears to be either a deliberate effort to mislead or "stunning" journalistic incompetence. The wonderful news is that with a few clicks you can find all the data needed to unmask a fraud.

Trouble-shooting the SMELL test

Not every analysis is as straightforward as the *Daily Mail* article allowed. Let's go back through the SMELL test for issues that might arise given the variety of news and information on offer in the digital age.

What to do when the *Source* is unclear

Legacy news media – the ones that pre-dated the Internet such as newspapers and broadcast stations – are easy to identify as sources. But news providers born on the Web can pose a problem. So how can you apply PIE (Proximity, Independence and Expertise/ Experience) criteria when the source is unfamiliar? Or it has a vague name wrapped in stars and stripes, like "Citizens for American Progress"?

Legitimate Web-only information sources will *always* disclose who they are on their home page or with an "about us" link. If the producer of the content isn't identified, or seems at all coy about describing him/her/itself, believe *nothing* from it. The primary reason an information-provider – whether on a website or online video or in a viral email – chooses not to identify, or to misidentify itself, is to disarm the audience. Detection

mis-identity, itself is to disarm the audience. *Deception automatically invalidates content.* Treat such sites or email messages like poison ivy. Even if you're itching to, don't enable contagion by forwarding.

To evaluate independence from conflicts of interest – the I in PIE – you'll need to know who sponsors the information-provider – the major donors. Unless it's obvious, websites and other media providing news and information should always state who pays the bills. If the source draws support from advertisers, pay attention to the goods and services in the ads and compare them to the information provided. The greater the similarity between ads and content, the less trust you should repose in the information. Rational advertisers rarely pay to be placed in a critical environment.

If the information source is unfamiliar, investigate it by entering the name in Google or another search engine. Don't trust any sources you haven't vetted to discover their qualifications and sponsorship. Political influence groups, industry trade associations, and some think tanks have been known to adopt misleading names to disguise their self-interest.

Consider the Foundation for Lung Cancer: Early Detection, Prevention & Treatment. Who could wear a whiter hat – or lab coat? But the *New York Times* discovered that the foundation was covertly underwritten almost entirely by the parent company of Liggett, a major cigarette maker.¹² In a story about a massive recall of eggs possibly tainted by salmonella, the *Washington Post* website added what it thought was a helpful link to a site called the Egg Safety Center (www.eggsafety.org). To the *Post's* embarrassment, the site turned out to be run by a PR firm for the United Egg Producers rather than a source of impartial expertise.¹³ Even professional journalists need to look beyond that innocent or patriotic name.

In chapter 1, we saw how unreliable the *New York Times* turned out to be in reporting on Iraq's attempts to purchase aluminum tubes as if it were proof of an effort to develop nuclear weapons. So it's useful to apply our PIE criteria to sources quoted *within* a particular message or news account, as we did with the climate change article.

Credible information will *always* include the sources who provided it, identified by position and usually by name. Only sources who would suffer harm from being named should be permitted anonymity, and even these should be identified by

position, e.g. "a person who attended the meeting."¹⁴ These identifiers are necessary to help us recognize their biases and decide how much to believe of what the source says. They also get the source on the record, creating accountability. (People speaking with full attribution are normally more careful about their comments than those permitted anonymity. That's why we should always give greater credence to named sources.)

Documentary sources – books, reports, memos, etc. – can be classified by their author(s)' PIE score. The greater the number of sources, the more diverse their backgrounds, and the higher their PIEs, the more trustworthy the story. Also notice diversity because, as we saw in chapter 4, people see the same thing differently depending on their self-interest, and across social "fault lines" of race, class, gender, etc.

How do you discern the information-provider's *Motivation*?

Have you ever engaged in a conversation where you thought the other person was merely informing you and learned too late that it was really a sales pitch? With media, it's often unclear whether the source has gathered our attention primarily to inform, persuade, or entertain.. There's money to be made and influence to be had by cloaking the source's intent.

Governments and corporations often produce content that appears purely *informational*: Oil companies so devoted to environmentalism they portray themselves as jolly green giants; banks lending a helping hand simply to prosper the community; and prospective soldiers promised that they can somehow "be all that [they] can be," if they volunteer for an organization that will train them to kill.



In April 2017, Pepsi launched an ad on YouTube featuring model Kendall Jenner joining an ethnically diverse group of attractive young actors staged as a street protest. In the climactic

attractive young actors staged as a street protest. In the climactic scene as the faux protesters face a line of actors dressed as police, in slo-mo Ms. Jenner hands a can of Pepsi to a handsome young "cop," who smiles after a long pull. Peace reigns on the street and everyone gets along, thanks to Pepsi.

While probably well-intended, so many people thought the ad trivialized the Black Lives Matter protests and police violence against poor black people that Pepsi pulled the ad after only a day and apologized. If the soft drink maker hoped to show solidarity with young – hopefully thirsty – protesters, they missed the mark. Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., tweeted sarcastically: "If only daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi."¹⁵

As we saw in chapter 6, source motivation also can be masked when advertisers seeking the credibility of journalism for thinly disguised commercial messages, pressure news organizations. To avoid being fooled, it's useful to learn the characteristics that reveal motivation.

The most obvious tip-off to a source's motivation is the tone established in the content, including images and sound. Trust your instinct. If it *feels* like the real intent is to persuade, or provoke a laugh or sigh, it probably is. Here are the characteristics of content primarily designed to inform, to persuade, and to entertain.

Content designed to inform

Informers follow the rules of empiricism stated at the close of chapter 7. They stress established facts and careful, specific observation. Every assertion of fact that's not based on common knowledge or the author's direct observation is attributed to a source fully enough for the audience to apply the PIE test.

Informers practice fairness – dispassionately presenting all relevant sides to an issue in a context that aids audience understanding. No cherry-picking of facts to favor one side over another. Informers are careful to include the perspectives of all major parties with something at stake in the issue or event reported.

Informers are faithful to evidence rather than ideology. Informers prefer nuance (shades of gray) over black and white because life rarely demonstrates such sharp contrasts. They employ short, logical inferences to reach their conclusions. They

avoid sweeping generalizations. They practice transparency (explaining how they know what they claim to know and warning about what they don't). The format is descriptive rather than argumentative. Except possibly for empathy, the presentation is unemotional. Anger, fear, titillation – all retard reason. No judgment of right or wrong is proffered. No action is called for. Other than being concerned, you get the impression that the source cares little about what conclusion you draw or how you behave in response to the information. Photos and videos are used to document the text. They are neither choreographed nor posed. Natural sound predominates. Music is rare.¹⁶

These, by the way, are the standards of empirical reporting and what the best news organizations mean by objectivity.

Content designed to persuade

Because life is complicated and we are busy people, society also gains from principled persuasion that simplifies and explains. Persuasion is principled if it is: 1) true to the relevant facts, rather than manipulating or distorting them; 2) logical in that the evidence provided supports the conclusions drawn; and 3) transparent – content is labeled as opinion or commentary with the author fully identified so we can assess his/her proximity, independence and expertise/experience.

Opinion writers "are not entitled to get the facts wrong or to so mangle them that they present a false picture,"¹⁷

~ Clark Hoyt, former public editor of the *New York Times*

During the 2012 Republican presidential primaries *New York Times* op-ed columnist Gail Collins repeatedly stretched Clark Hoyt's standard in describing a 1983 incident in which candidate Mitt Romney put the family's Irish setter, Seamus, in a wind-sheltered portable kennel on the roof of the family station wagon on a summer vacation trip to Canada. Even in a column devoted to Newt Gingrich's legacy, Ms. Collins couldn't resist writing that "Mitt Romney drove to Canada with the family Irish setter strapped on the car roof."¹⁸ This was after fact-finding website PolitiFact cited Ms. Collins for mentioning the incident in 17 previous columns.¹⁹ By implying that the dog was tied to the roof without protection, the anecdote manipulated the truth

to make Mr. Romney seem inhumane.

Principled persuasion

Principled persuasion usually takes the form of an argument for a particular view of something: Where informers lay out the relevant facts and let readers or viewers decide what they mean, commentators provide a preferred meaning. They often make judgments. Sometimes they call for action. Persuaders often apply an overarching ideology – perhaps pragmatic, liberal, conservative or libertarian – to create a simplified and coherent explanation of events and issues. But there is no attempt to disguise it.

If there is debate, it is civilized and respectful: No name-calling, personal attacks, taunts, shouting, or making fun of opposing persons or positions. There can be disagreement, but all sides listen to the others rather than talking over them. Images and sound are generally similar to those produced when the purpose is to inform.

Unprincipled persuasion

Unprincipled persuasion involves some type of deceptive manipulation of the information presented or lack of care with fact claims. The tone is often emotional rather than logical. In broadcasts, conflict is common, because as CNN chief Jeffrey Zucker knows, it attracts an audience. In their smart book about intentional bias in messages, *UnSpun*, Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson warn specifically about efforts to shut off thinking by arousing primal emotions. "If it's scary," they write, "be wary."²⁰ I'd add: "If they shout, tune it out."

Look for slogans and catch phrases such as "death taxes," "common sense solution," "socialist," "one-percenters," "makers/takers," "snowflakes," or "fat cats" which are often tested in focus groups for how they play on the ears of target audiences. Images are sometimes digitally-altered and always chosen to provoke a specific reaction. They may significantly distort what they purport to describe. Music is sometimes played over words and images to heighten the emotional impact, much as it might be in a motion picture. If you've ever watched a political ad, you know it can be a potent brew.

Content designed to entertain

An entertainer may, but need not, adhere to facts. Logic, evidence, and fairness matter little. Exaggeration, even absurdity,

evidence, and fairness matter little. Exaggeration, even absurdity, are common. Emotion, however, is essential. To be successful, entertainment has to move you, even if it's just a smile or cringe. Dramatic images and music are carefully selected and sequenced.

It's tempting to overlook entertainment as a motivation because its primary function is to enthrall us and what it describes is often openly fictitious. But as the English social philosopher/nanny Mary Poppins observed, "a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down." Entertainment can leapfrog our rational faculties to exert powerful social effects, including fooling us.

Lauren Feldman, a communication professor at American University explained: "When audiences are exposed to political humor or satire, they are less likely to oppose the information in the message or question whether it is fair or accurate. Ultimately, it can affect the perceptions of a candidate."²¹

Satirists such as Alec Baldwin and Melissa McCarthy on Saturday Night Live, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert when they were on Comedy Central, cartoonist Gary Trudeau and Bill Maher of HBO have understood as well as did Aristophanes and Jonathan Swift that humor can be uniquely persuasive. It can disarm our skepticism like a woman panhandling with a baby in her arms.

According to Professor Feldman, Tina Fey's impression of then Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin on Saturday Night Live hurt the McCain-Palin ticket in 2008. It earned SNL its highest overnight ratings in 14 years. And her impersonations became the most viewed videos on NBC's Website during the election year. Millions more watched them on YouTube and Hulu.com. CNN began referring to them as the "Tina Fey effect," and speculated that Ms. Fey's version of Ms. Palin became confused in voters' minds with the real candidate.²²

"Satirical news matters," wrote Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, author of a study published in 2017 and professor of communication at Ohio State University. "It is not just entertaining – it has a real-life impact on viewers." She found that viewers tended to select comedy that matched their political views. Even though they knew the programs were not factual, their political views were strengthened by viewing. Satire also generated political interest. "These results suggest that satirical news can engage people who otherwise would avoid political news," she added.²³

Novels, plays, motion pictures, and cartoons often inform and persuade as well as entertain. Prior to the American Civil War, Harriet Beecher's Stowe's widely read account of the brutality of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made the practice real – and repugnant – to Northerners. In 1862, Ms. Stowe met President Abraham Lincoln who reportedly quipped, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!"²⁴ American Studies Professor David S. Reynolds called it "the most influential novel in American history and a catalyst for radical change both at home and abroad."²⁵

To avoid being fooled, it's useful to subject satire and fiction to a modified version of the same criteria used for establishing the reliability of news and other information presented as factual. Even if the characters and setting are fictional, do they fairly illustrate the reality they purport to describe? We can ask, for example, how Ms. Stowe learned about plantation life (by looking at her online biography). Was she free of conflicts of interest? Was her primary purpose to entertain or inform, or to persuade? We can also apply the remainder of the SMELL test.

What *Evidence* is provided to support the thesis or gist of the story or message?

Some information-providers possess the confidence of the framers of the Constitution: They believe what they assert as true to be self-evident. They make naked assertions, offered as if there is no need to attribute a claim of fact to an authoritative source, nor to assemble evidence for generalizations.

When providers offer no source or evidence for their claims, we have no choice but to fall back on our assessment of the provider's own credibility and, if mediated, the reputation of the institution on whose pages, airwaves or web-site the information appears. A distinguished professor writing within his/her expertise for a news outlet that forbids conflicts of interest and checks facts may merit trust, but we should be skeptical of less qualified information-providers, particularly if they are working *outside* of institutions with a reputation for integrity. As a former journalist whose wary editors warned "if your mother says she loves you, check it out," I encourage you to be uncomfortable with the "trust me" school of evidence.

How do you know that?

To avoid being fooled whenever we hear an assertion about what's real or true, we should ask: *How do you know that?*

"I heard it on the grapevine" won't do. There are only three adequate answers: 1) I witnessed it; 2) I learned it from one or more sources (documentary or human) who rank high on the PIE source reliability matrix described earlier; 3) It logically follows from information provided in answers 1 or 2.

Trustworthy information-providers should attempt to *confirm* or *verify* at least the most consequential or controversial claims of their sources. Verification means finding at least one other source, independent of the first and with a strong PIE score, who provides a similar description of an event. It's irresponsible to just hand over the megaphone of the media even to prominent sources – *especially* to prominent sources – enabling them to broadcast misinformation. Verification has become even more essential in our present sharply partisan political environment where candidates' spinning is as constant as their grinning and once something is posted on the Web it can metastasize at fiber optic velocity.

"Loosening standards of accuracy and verification"

Partisan pundits and politicians have been emboldened by changes in news media. At the close of 2009 and beginning of 2010, the Project for Excellence in Journalism surveyed mainstream news executives. One key finding: six in ten said the Internet is changing the fundamental values of journalism. "And their biggest concern is loosening standards of accuracy and verification, much if it tied to the immediacy of the Web." One broadcast executive wrote: "I worry that journalistic standards are dropping in that blogging and celebrity gossip and Tweets are being confused with reporting and editing that passes a rigorous standard."²⁶

It takes time to find and interview reliable sources; even more time to check their fact-claims. Plus, their responses lengthen and complicate news reports. And all those attributions – "according to Jones," "Smith said," "Adams responded" – slow the reader or listener down. Given the understaffed, constant-deadline, multi-media newsrooms of the early 21st century, it's more important than ever for us to ask: "How do you know that?" of our news and information sources and to map the sources they quote on the PIE chart.

Before the era of digital recording of images and software such as Photoshop that allows it to be completely altered so seamlessly that it is difficult to detect, photos and film were seen as the gold standard of evidence. Cameras, we said, don't lie. They capture reality without bias. And they don't forget.

The apparent unblinking objectivity of cameras was always an illusion, however. Even in the old days when news photographers wore bandoliers of spooled film cartridges, they often posed their subjects to make the images more dramatic.

But the subjectivity of image creation is even more basic. Anyone who has pointed a camera knows that the images captured show only what's in focus within the lens at a given moment. Left unseen is everything that happened before and after the picture or the video clip was shot and everything that happened in other directions and locations. Editing narrows and manipulates this thin slice of reality even further. "Images are always mediated, and those who choose the angles, shots, et cetera, shape our perceptions," according to Arthur Asa Berger, a professor of visual communication at San Francisco State University.²⁷ Seeing should *not* lead to believing. (More on this in chapter 9.)

Does the evidence *Logically* support the conclusions drawn?

The fundamental question here is "Does this make sense?" and we can profitably ask it at two levels: 1) Externally – "Does this make sense in light of everything else I know?" and 2) Internally – "Is the evidence provided *within* the report adequate to support the conclusions reached?"

Obviously, the more you know, the better your answer to the first question will be. (Assuming what you know is correct.)

That's why it's important to keep up with news from reliable sources. Information that jars you, that's "too good to be true," or that perfectly fits your biases, is particularly suspect. It requires an especially rigorous approach to question two about its internal logic.

Dissonant information puts us on alert. But we are most easily fooled when the answer to question one about whether the new information squares with the old is either "yes" or "I don't know." Because of this vulnerability, we can't stop with question one. For news or information that really matters we have to

one. For news or information that really matters we have to examine the internal logic.

Common media logic failures

Whole books are devoted to logic. Here I want to focus on seven related reasoning fallacies and failures of due diligence common to news and information-providers.

1. Non-sequiturs: derive from a Latin phrase meaning "it doesn't follow." Politicians frequently promise the sky only to deliver hot air. A frequent theme is that cutting taxes for the wealthy stimulates so much growth, tax revenues will actually rise despite lower rates. As *New York Times* columnist and Nobel-Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman pointed out when the Trump administration floated the idea again in 2017: "history offers not a shred of support for faith in the pro-growth effects of tax cuts. In other words, supply-side economics is a classic example of a zombie doctrine: a view that should have been killed by the evidence long ago, but keeps shambling along, eating politicians' brains."²⁸

In March 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson brushed off a 29 percent proposed cut in the State Department budget. He told reporters: "The level of spending that the State Department has been undertaking, particularly in the past year, is simply not sustainable," He explained that current spending reflected the "level of conflicts that the U.S. has been engaged in around the world as well as disaster assistance." The implication was that the level of conflict would decline, making the cuts a reasonable adjustment. He then promised that the department would undergo a review of programs and would "be much more effective, much more efficient, and be able to do a lot with fewer dollars."²⁹

The same budget that was "not sustainable" for the State Department, *added* \$54 billion for military spending. That's more than the entire State Department budget for 2016. So it doesn't follow that the government could not have afforded to continue present levels of spending for diplomacy (which seeks alternatives to military engagement). There was also no evidence that the "level of conflicts that the U.S. has been engaged in around the world" was lessening. To the contrary, President Trump was escalating military involvement in Syria and Yemen, about to attack a Syrian air base with cruise missiles, and threatening a military strike on nuclear-armed North Korea. Finally, Secretary Tillerson offered no support for the almost certainly counter-factual statement that the department could "be

certainly counter-factual statement that the department could "be more effective" with almost a third fewer dollars.

Such magical thinking is common not just in government but in the corporate world. Because journalists often fail to point out the illogic of their sources, we have to evaluate them ourselves to avoid being fooled.

2. Overgeneralizations: Conclusions should stretch over evidence as tightly as a swimming cap covers an expensive hairdo. There should be little room for doubt to seep in. The evidence presented, plus common knowledge, should compel you to accept the information-provider's conclusion. The broader the conclusion, the more evidence is required.

A frequent type of overgeneralization occurs when anecdotes are presented as proof of something larger. Anecdotes are personal stories – vignettes – that providers properly use to add human interest to their articles. But a series of anecdotes doesn't prove anything, no matter how poignant they may be. They are merely a few data points that might easily be contradicted by other personal accounts the information-provider didn't have – or take – time to gather.

So a news report in which several teachers tell vivid personal stories about students today failing to take school as seriously as young people did 20 years ago doesn't mean that the current generation is less engaged, nor even that teachers agree on this. Had the provider interviewed other teachers, s/he might have reported just the opposite conclusion. Neither would have been logical. *Only a sample where every member of a group has an equal opportunity to be included and the number interviewed represents a majority or a number large enough to allow statistical tests of significance can support generalizations about that group.*³⁰

Beware of any generalizations or assertions that are not based on *systematic* evidence-gathering. Otherwise you may fall prey to examples selectively chosen from among contradictory cases to make a point.

Sweeping generalizations go hand-in-hand with imprecise quantifiers like "many," "largely," "a lot," "somewhat" and "up to (some number)." But how many is "many" or "a lot?" "Many" indicates number, not a proportion; it may not come close to a majority. How much is "somewhat?" "Up to" includes every number below it. Such words should alert us to a lack of definite facts or numbers, information that's incomplete if not misleading.

misleading.

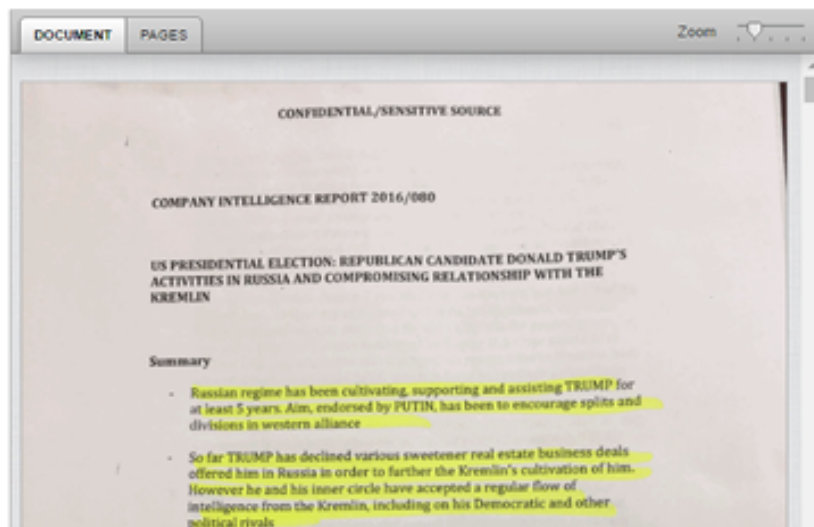
3. Innuendo: Innuendo hints that something is true without stating it outright. It's what you read between the lines. When they want to proclaim a conclusion they cannot fully support with facts, information-providers are tempted to rely on innuendo.

On January 10, 2017, the online magazine BuzzFeed published a story titled: "These Reports Allege Trump Has Deep Ties To Russia." The article told about a former British intelligence agent hired as an opposition researcher by Democrats who claimed that Russian agents had compromising information about Donald Trump cavorting with prostitutes on a business trip to Moscow some years earlier. The story suggested that Russian agents were using the threat of exposing the information to blackmail Mr. Trump into favorable policies toward Russian leader Vladimir Putin. News of the dossier had been kicking around official Washington for some months and alluded to previously in other media reports. However, BuzzFeed took a further step. It embedded in its article the raw 35 page intelligence report with all of its salacious details, with this rationale: "Now BuzzFeed News is publishing the full document so that Americans can make up their own minds about allegations about the president-elect that have circulated at the highest levels of the US government."³¹

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Read the report here:



Liberals exulted. Here, they said, was the explanation for Mr. Trump's former and continuing ties to Mr. Putin and his

Trump's oft expressed admiration for Mr. Putin and his reluctance to condemn the Russian seizure of the Crimea in Ukraine. It fit their prejudices (and to be honest, mine) perfectly.

A storm of protest followed, led by conservatives, but also joined by some liberals and editors of mainstream news media who called it an irresponsible cheap shot.

To be fair, BuzzFeed's article contained a variety of cautions, calling the information in the dossier "unverified," and pointing out a couple of minor factual errors. But by publishing the raw report, they were, in effect, saying "this is something important for you to know." What they were *not* saying is "this is going to get us millions of new online visitors. It will generate lots of buzz."

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics states: "Verify information before releasing it," especially information damaging to someone's reputation. And under the section titled "Minimize harm," "Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do."³² BuzzFeed violated these norms. It could have described the existence of the report, as more responsible news outlets did, without detailing any alleged sexual escapades until the federal investigations, which BuzzFeed noted were underway, determined the validity of the report. Instead, BuzzFeed succumbed to commercial bias.

Innuendo is often cloaked in suggestive words, such as "may," "perhaps," "seems," and "appears." Sometimes these are more appropriate than more definitive words, like "is" or "will." The best a reporter can do at times is to say something "appears" to be the case, perhaps describing something that can't be observed, such as a person's motive. But these words can also be used to convey a false impression. That happens when the evidence presented in the article falls short of establishing what the author implies is likely to be true.

4. Lack of context: Civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson once said that "text without context is pretext."³³ In July, 2010, the late founder of Breitbart News, Andrew Breitbart, provided an example. He posted a video on his website that appeared to show Shirley Sherrod, the Georgia rural development director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, admitting discrimination against whites. The video, however, was maliciously doctored. The unedited version, which surfaced a few days later, showed just the opposite: how Mrs. Sherrod had *overcome* her bitter feelings about whites, who had murdered her father, in order to

help a white farmer with a government aid program. But before the truth came out, Ms. Sherrod had been vilified by Fox News' Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly (the latter later apologized). She was fired from her job and denounced by the NAACP faster than a knee jerks when struck by a doctor's rubber mallet, only to be reinstated and praised days later by shame-faced officials.³⁴

Taking comments out of context is hardly a tactic of conservatives alone. On Jan. 3, 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain interrupted a question at a campaign stop. It began, "President Bush has talked about our staying in Iraq for 50 years..." Mr. McCain cut in to say, "Maybe a hundred." Then he added, "We've been in Japan for 60 years. We've been in South Korea for 50 years or so. That'd be fine with me as long as Americans are not being injured or harmed or wounded or killed."³⁵

Liberal and Democratic websites, political opponents, even some news programs such as "Democracy Now," reported the "hundred years" quip but not the important qualifier – "as long as Americans are not being injured." It made McCain appear insensitive to the human and monetary costs of the war. At minimum, context requires us to consider the words surrounding those reported, as well as the occasion or location of the words quoted.

It can still be difficult to detect a lack of context, but the Web now offers multiple versions of major stories, particularly at the national and international level. Try to find reports from news organizations operating across bias fault lines, such as nationality or political ideology. Check reports against each other to fill in missing or misleading emphases. Increasingly, online news articles are followed by comment boxes. Sometimes (amid considerable flatulence) you'll find context there. Pay particular attention to reactions from those sources named in the article. More on this in the final chapter.

5. Flawed comparisons: These comprise two general types – incomplete comparisons and apples to oranges.

Incomplete comparisons

If crime, disease, accidents, test scores, gasoline prices, inflation, or what-have-you is up or down, or if anything is better or worse, always ask, "compared to what?" At minimum, the comparison should include raw numbers and a percentage increase or decrease from a previous or baseline period, e.g., the

average price of a gallon of regular gasoline in the U.S. rose 21 cents last year, a 7 percent increase from \$3. Both numbers are needed because when the base is small, even a little change can represent a large percentage. Add one to one and you have only one more, but a 100 percent increase. At the other extreme, if the base is very large, even a substantial increase in number may represent only a small percentage change.

Comparisons also ought to include contextual baselines. Saying the average tuition charged by American universities has increased fourfold from 1990 may be misleading without a comparison to the overall inflation rate. Almost everything is more expensive now than it was 30 before. It would be more accurate to compare the increase in tuition in constant dollars, so it's not exaggerated by inflation. Or to compare the proportion of a typical family's income that's consumed by tuition then versus now.

If a trend is claimed there must be at least three data points, preferably more, over a reasonable period of time. That period should be long enough for whatever is being measured to change beyond the range of normal fluctuations. Weekly tallies of new claims for unemployment benefits, for example, bounce around enough that a clear picture of employment trends ought to stretch across at least a month, preferably six months to a year.

Inappropriate comparisons

Superficial similarities can mask differences so large the comparison is misleading. In 2002 Saddam Hussein was cast as the new Hitler. It made him seem more threatening and bolstered the case for war. While both were brutal dictators who gassed some of their countrymen, the scale and context of these atrocities and the power of the Iraqi vs. Nazi war machines relative to their neighbors was clearly a peanut to pumpkin comparison. In 2012, another national leader, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, invoked comparison with the Nazis, this time with Iraq's neighbor Iran. *New York Times* former Jerusalem Bureau Chief Ethan Bronner wrote: "For Mr. Netanyahu, an Iranian nuclear weapon would be the 21st century equivalent of the Nazi war machine and the Spanish Inquisition – the latest attempt to destroy the Jews."³⁶ Before you accept a comparison, check for both qualitative and quantitative similarities.

6. Mistaking correlation for causation: Brain researchers

have a saying about brain cells – neurons: "What fires together, wires together." The architecture of the brain is associational.³⁷ So it's not surprising that we often think that because two things happen at about the same time, one causes the other. In its eagerness to report diet and medical breakthroughs, the press may jump on studies that associate some risk or benefit with a particular vitamin, herb, diet, or exercise regime. Remember the fascination with vitamin C, beta-carotene, vitamin E, and eight glasses of water a day? None fulfilled early expectations. Recently vitamins E and D have been stripped of their capes and super powers, and coffee is in the telephone booth shedding its mild mannered reputation and emerging as a "wonder drug" protecting against prostate cancer, stroke, breast cancer, diabetes, liver disease and Parkinson's.³⁸

Scientists require at least three conditions to be met before saying A likely caused B. First, A must precede B. Second, A and B must be correlated or associated in some predictable way. (For example, an increase of A, say proportion of people vaccinated, leads to a decrease of B, perhaps an illness.) Third, the relationship between A and B must not be a mere coincidence. Ice cream sales correlate with drownings. But they don't cause them.

"That very issue of correlation and causation is key to anything you have to say about any kind of social science research."³⁹

~ Edward Schumacher-Matos, former National Public Radio ombudsman

Causality, like truth, is a human construct. Careful observation and logical inferences may build a body of evidence that A causes B, but because humans see reality incompletely and subjectively, we can never be absolutely sure there's no other factor really causing B. Science can never finally *prove* that A causes B, only that it's *probable*.

Complicating matters, the conditions that affect us most have *multiple* causes. An economic recession, for example, may be fathered by the combination of lax government regulation of

hastened by the combination of lax government regulation of financial markets, a wave of defaults on house mortgages, and a contraction of money to lend. Furthermore, *different sets of causes* can lead to the same effect. A recession might be caused primarily by the puncture of a speculative "bubble" in stock prices, or by excessive national debt, or by a sharp rise in the cost of oil and other basic commodities.

Nevertheless, the notion of cause and effect helps us reduce the great buzzing confusion of life to a more manageable set of patterns. These increase our ability to understand, predict, and sometimes control what's happening around us. Such utility makes claims of cause and effect common components of news and information.

Most leaps from correlation to causation involve more plausible links than between ice cream cone sales and drowning. An example is the idea that watching sexually explicit programs leads to fooling around. Consider how this front-page *Washington Post* story from 2008 begins:

Teenagers who watch a lot of television featuring flirting, necking, discussion of sex and sex scenes are much more likely than their peers to get pregnant or get a partner pregnant, according to the first study to directly link steamy programming to teen pregnancy.

The study, which tracked more than 700 12-to-17-year-olds for three years, found that those who viewed the most sexual content on TV were about twice as likely to be involved in a pregnancy as those who saw the least.

"Watching this kind of sexual content on television is a powerful factor in increasing the likelihood of a teen pregnancy," said lead researcher Anita Chandra. "We found a strong association." The study is being published today in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics.⁴⁰

"Watching ... is a powerful factor" equates *correlation* (those who watched the most sexual content were more likely to impregnate or become pregnant than those who watched the least) with *causation* (watching those shows was a *cause* of those teen pregnancies). It's certainly possible that watching such programs is a cause of teens becoming sexually active, but this study does not, indeed *cannot*, prove that. By its design, it doesn't establish time order – that the TV watching preceded the sexual activity. What if sexually active teens prefer such programming more than abstinent ones who may find it distasteful? In other

words, what if becoming sexually active leads to watching more adult programs?

7. The fundamental attribution error: In our individualistic American culture, we tend to over-emphasize personal *character* to explain other people's behavior and underestimate the surrounding *circumstances*. Social psychologists call this reasoning flaw the fundamental attribution error (FAE) because it's so prevalent, so commonsensical.⁴¹

Ironically, our desire to protect our self-esteem appears to override the FAE in one instance – when *we* misbehave.⁴² Then we're only too happy to blame circumstances and absolve our character. Thus the jerk down the street speeds because he disregards others' safety. It's his heedless character. But we speed when we're in a hurry. The circumstances warrant it.

Harvard ethicist Michael J. Sandel provided a real world example: In Congressional hearings Wall Street bankers pointed to difficult circumstances beyond their control to explain the financial collapse of 2008. They were not responsible for the losses at their firms, they maintained. But a year earlier when the economy and their companies were doing well, *voila!* they *were* responsible – and thus deserved their lavish salaries.⁴³ We're good at looking for situational causes when our own behavior is called into question, but otherwise, we discount it.

Of course, character does count. Those who develop virtuous habits often make better decisions for themselves and others even under adverse circumstances. But the evidence for the situation *also* affecting our actions is overwhelming.⁴⁴ People who grow up in desperately poor, crime-ridden neighborhoods that lack successful role models (psychologists say, "you have to see it to be it") and effective schools, are much more likely to be arrested than those who grow up in safe neighborhoods with good schools, positive role models and financially secure parents.⁴⁵ Such spirit-sapping social conditions breed crime as surely as stagnant pools are nurseries for mosquitoes. Yet we routinely attribute people's success or failure almost entirely to character.

It's profitable to exploit the FAE

The FAE is a logic short circuit that news media exploit with saturated crime coverage. In addition to being cheap to gather, episodic reports of law-breaking – especially violent incidents such as murder, assault and rape – attract a large audience. Fresh

such as murder, assault and rape attract a large audience. Fresh cases occur daily. In both text and video, they've become a news staple, like grains at the bottom of the nutrition pyramid. But relatively few stories explore the social conditions and political decisions that encourage criminal behavior, much less the solutions to such problems.⁴⁶ The implication? It's personal. Some people simply choose to break the law. Circumstances are irrelevant, not worth reporting.

Talk shows on TV, and particularly radio, boil over with this unsophisticated way of presenting the world. Many hosts sow resentment to reap ratings. Sometimes big corporations or the wealthy are demonized. But more often these pundits assail liberal defenders of the poor, especially the black and brown poor, who are described as parasites extracting tax dollars from those who work hard and play by the rules.⁴⁷

Social consequences

This simplistic way of thinking and reporting has serious consequences. Take the criminal justice system as a case in point. If you think crime is caused by people who are inherently bad, punishing them with lengthy jail terms seems appropriate. As a result, we Americans have the highest documented incarceration rate in the world.⁴⁸

Taxpayers in 18 states now spend more on prisons than universities.⁴⁹ And rather than focusing on rehabilitation that might assist inmates returning to society to become productive tax-payers, most states punish them in over-crowded conditions that render them angry and unfit for employment.⁵⁰ After serving time, punitive laws deprive felons of rights to vote, eligibility for public housing, food stamps and other forms of assistance. In seeking work they are usually asked to reveal any convictions, further crimping their chances for employment.⁵¹ Seventy-seven percent of those who have served their terms in state prisons return within five years. For federal prisons the recidivism rate is 45 percent. Such churn places additional burdens on police and courts, not to mention the toll on victims of subsequent criminal behavior.⁵² Assuming *people* are bad, rather than the *circumstances* of their upbringing, perpetuates the crime problem and creates a drag on the whole of society, not just the target population.

Finding what is *Left out* or marginalized

It's usually more difficult to notice what's missing or

consigned to the margins than what's present and center stage. Consequently, omission and marginalization are among the most powerful and subtle means of introducing bias. They can be either intentional, subconscious or simply an oversight. The effect, however, is the same: an incomplete description of an event or issue renders a warped impression. The degree of distortion corresponds to the extent that what's missing is important to making sense of the news or information.

As we saw in chapter 5, we are all practitioners of manipulation by omission and marginalization. Who among us volunteers our warts to potential employers or romantic interests? And when confronted, who doesn't downplay his/her flaws. Institutions – corporate and governmental – are no different in their relations with news media and the public.

In the spring of 2008, official Chinese news media focused on the violence of Tibetans protesting for greater freedom from China's government while eliminating from the picture any sign of violence on the part of Chinese police. Further, state media described Chinese investment in boosting the standard of living in Tibetan provinces but not suppression of Tibetan culture. It was a carefully managed, one-sided picture. And it was apparently effective across most of China in generating public sympathy for the government and resentment of Tibetans.⁵³

Omission is most obvious when a controversy emerges and one side is quoted, but not the other. Or one side is allowed to speak both for themselves and for their opponent. Omission is least perceptible when a small piece of the mosaic of an issue or event is missing. For example, in the run-up to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, most Americans were ignorant of bitter disputes within government intelligence agencies over how the Bush administration was using the data about Iraq. "Many journalists knew about this, yet few chose to write about it," wrote Michael Massing in the *New York Review of Books*.⁵⁴ It was the failure to include legitimate dissenting voices within the U.S. intelligence community that led the *New York Times* to apologize for its pre-war reporting on May 26, 2004.

To find missing facts, look for missing stakeholders

Often missing facts are linked to missing stakeholders. The most likely to be overlooked are the least powerful. To see which individuals or groups affected by the matter at hand should be included, but aren't, try this: After reading the story, list the major stakeholders. Then go through the news or information a

second time and note:

1. Which individuals or groups are included and which are not? Do those included have at least one person in a leadership role speaking for the group?
2. Which individuals or groups are mentioned most, particularly in the top half of the article (since readership drops off with length), and which least?
3. Which stakeholder's views are privileged and which are marginalized? Privileged viewpoints are ones that shape the direction of the article, perhaps becoming the angle or frame the reporter chooses for the premise of the story – usually the lead. Marginalized viewpoints are mentioned only in passing or challenged either by the author or another source.

Let me conclude with a humbling caution. The SMELL test can make it more difficult to fool you, but not impossible. A clever information-provider can selectively interview, selectively quote, selectively point the camera, and selectively edit to deceive us. If the topic is unfamiliar, we may strain to know what doesn't make sense and to recognize what has been left out. And if no other news outlet covered the event, we may be at the mercy of the single source. More than once during my doctoral dissertation when I was able to accompany local television journalists in the field, I witnessed them grossly misrepresent reality in a way only those who were present would recognize.

That's why detecting bias should be a *social* enterprise. How it can be will be addressed in the final chapter. But first we must add one more tool to our detective kit – how to "read" video and images.

Exercises and Discussion Topics

1. Apply the SMELL test to any news article you think is primarily designed to inform you.
2. Apply the SMELL test to any news article or commentary you think is primarily designed to persuade you.
3. Find an article beginning on the front page of the local newspaper and analyze the story's sources using the PIE chart.
4. Look in any news medium for examples of any kind of logic

problem described in the chapter. Be sure to say which kind of problem you found and explain why.

End Notes

¹ "Bob Flanagan" (4/5/2016) "Syrian refugee renounces Islam after tasting bacon for the first time," <https://worldnewsdailyreport.com/syrian-refugee-renounces-islam-after-tasting-bacon-for-first-time/>. In addition to being ridiculous, Muslims may find it offensive.

If you click on the "About us" tab, and then scroll down to "disclaimer," under an image saying "News you can trust," and read to the last line, you'll see this sentence: "All characters appearing in the articles in this website – even those based on real people – are entirely fictional and any resemblance between them and any persons, living, dead, or undead is purely a miracle."

² Craig Silverman and Jeremy Singer-Vine (12/6/2016) "Most Americans who see fake news believe it, new survey shows," BuzzFeed, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fake-news-survey?utm_term=.bbjBe72j6#.jfxp4eLwW.

This poll found that 75 percent of a national sample believed fake news headlines that they had remembered seeing. Other studies have used different methods and reached more conservative conclusions, including the finding that credibility was most influenced not by the name of the news organization associated with the report, but the reputation of whomever forwarded it to the subject. See "'Who shared it?: How Americans decide what news to trust on social media," The Media Insight Project (2017), http://www.mediainsight.org/PDFs/Trust%20Social%20Media%20Experiments%202017/Social_Media_Experiment_Topline_2017.pdf.

³ David Rose (11/26/2016) "Stunning new data indicates El Nino drove record highs in global temperatures suggesting rise may not be down to man-made emissions," Daily Mail.com, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3974846/Stunning-new-data-indicates-El-Nino-drove-record-highs-global-temperatures-suggesting-rise-not-man-emissions.html>.

This is a good place to warn that Google rankings are based on a proprietary algorithm (a one-size-fits-all set of computer instructions), *not* on any assessment of the trustworthiness of the information provided on sites. When I entered "Is El Nino responsible for global warming?" the *Daily Mail* entry above was the seventh item (of 886,000) and listed on the first page of search results. Placement doesn't guarantee reliability.

⁴ The primary exception to this reduction of author and institution into a single blended source is for commentators who are experts themselves. Institutions allow considerable independence to guest experts who write op-ed articles and commentators with advanced degrees, such as a physician writing a medical column or a lawyer interpreting court decisions. In such cases, it's useful to evaluate the credibility of the commentator as well as the institution and the sources cited.

⁵ Carl Bernstein (7/18/2011) "Murdoch's Watergate," *Newsweek*, p. 5.

⁶ Wikipedia (accessed 4/19/2017) "Daily Mail," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daily_Mail. You may have been warned against trusting Wikipedia. I use it as a place to begin an investigation, but not usually to end it there.

⁷ Wikipedia (accessed 4/19/2017) "Judith Curry," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Curry.

⁸ Wikipedia (accessed 4/19/2017) "Global Warming Policy Foundation," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Warming_Policy_Foundation.

⁹ Wikipedia entry on global warming cited above.

¹⁰ United States Environmental Protection Agency (accessed 4/21/2017) "Climate Change Indicators: Sea Surface Temperature," <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-sea-surface-temperature>.

¹¹ NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS), (accessed 4/21/2017) "Global climate change: Vital signs of the planet," <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/global-temperature/>.

¹² Gardiner Harris (3/26/2008) "Cigarette company paid for lung cancer study," *New York Times*, p. A1, national edition, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/26/health/research/26lung.html?_r=1&ref=research&oref=slogin.

¹³ Bill Kreuger (9/9/2010) "Egg industry Website gets boost from media during salmonella recall." Making sense of News, PoynterOnline, available at: <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/making-sense-of-news/105509/egg-industry-website-gets-boost-from-media-during-salmonella-recall/>.

¹⁴ Some critics of journalism take an absolutist view: no unnamed sources should be allowed, period. But given how secretive – and vindictive – corporations and government agencies have become, I think this is unrealistic. Reporters should always try to get sources to speak with full identification, even if they have to pass over some who wish to go unnamed. However, if a source with uniquely valuable information is both unwilling to go on the record and likely to suffer retribution if named, I think it's permissible to offer that source anonymity. But only if three other conditions are also met: 1) the reporter provides enough information for us to determine the source's proximity to the issue or event, his/her independence, and expertise/experience; 2) any accusations of mis- or malfeasance are independently confirmed by a second source; 3) to avoid being used as a shield for cheap shots, only fact-claims are permitted – no opinions.

¹⁵ Daniel Victor (4/5/2017) "Pepsi Pulls Ad Accused of Trivializing Black Lives Matter", *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html?_r=0.

¹⁶ The most prominent exception I can think of is Ira Glass' *This American Life* on NPR, which introduces a sound track under the narration. More recently, other news producers have been adding music to add drama and interest, such as the Center for Investigative Reporting's *Reveal* program.

¹⁷ Clark Hoyt (6/1/2008) "Entitled to their opinions, yes. But their facts?" *New York Times* Week in Review section p. 12.

¹⁸ Gail Collins (1/29/2012) "Newt's real legacy," Sunday Review, *New York Times*, p. 1SR.

¹⁹ Politifact.com (9/13/2011) "Truth-o-meter: Mitt Romney and the dog on the car roof: one columnist's obsession," <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/sep/13/gail-collins/mitt-romney-and-dog-car-roof-one-columnists-obsess/>.

²⁰ Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2007) *Unspun*, New York: Random House, p. 26.

²¹ News staff, *Science 2.0* (10/12/2008) "There's An Expert On The Political Effects Of Late-Night Comedy - And She Says Tina Fey Hurts McCain's Campaign," http://www.science20.com/news_releases/theres_an_expert_on_the_political_effects_of_late_night_comedy_and_she_says_tina_fey_hurts_mccains_campaign.

²² Heather A. Dean (summer, 2010) "'I can see Russia from my house: Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin as a template for media coverage in the 2008 presidential election,'" master's thesis, San Diego State University, http://sdsu-dspace.calstate.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10211.10/461/Dean_Heather.pdf?sequence=1.

²³ Jeff Grabmeier (1/23/2017) "Not just funny: Satirical news has serious political effects," Ohio State University, published in ScienceDaily, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170123115741.htm>. Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, Simon M. Lavis. (2/2017) "Selecting Serious or Satirical, Supporting or Stirring News? Selective Exposure to Partisan versus Mockery News Online Videos." *Journal of Communication*, 2017; Vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 54-81, DOI: 10.1111/jcom.12271.

²⁴ Ohio History Central (undated) "Uncle Tom's Cabin," Ohio Historical Association's online encyclopedia of Ohio history, <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=1405>, accessed 5/23/2011.

²⁵ David S. Reynolds (6/14/2011) "Rescuing the real Uncle Tom," *New York Times*, p. A21, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/14/opinion/14Reynolds.html?_r=1&hp.

²⁶ Project for Excellence in Journalism, (4/12/2010) "News leaders and the future," pp. 2-4, http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/news_leaders_and_future.

²⁷ Arthur Asa Berger in discussion with the author (6/17/08)

²⁸ Paul Krugman (4/24/2017) "Zombies of voodoo economics," *New York Times*, p. A21.

²⁹ Motoko Rich (3/16/2017) "Rex Tillerson, in Japan, says U.S. needs 'different approach' to North Korea," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/16/world/asia/rex-tillerson-asia-trump-us-japan.html>.

³⁰ John McManus (7/1/2000) "How to read political polls like a pro," Grade the News, <http://www.gradethenews.org/dreamhost%20files/pagesfolder/Pollstory3.htm>.

³¹ Ken Bensinger, Miriam Elder, and Mark Schoofs (1/10/2017) "These reports allege Trump has deep ties to Russia," BuzzFeed, https://www.buzzfeed.com/kenbensinger/these-reports-allege-trump-has-deep-ties-to-russia?utm_term=.kaEl2e6Ee#.mxlAY1PX1.

³² Society of Professional Journalists (Accessed 4/26/2017) Code of Ethics, <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

³³ Jesse Jackson (1994) quoted in Sheldon R. Gawiser and G. Evans Witt, *A Journalist's Guide to Public Opinion Polls*, Westport, CT: Praeger, p. 111.

³⁴ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Shaila Dewan and Brian Stelter (7/21/2010) "With apology, fired official is offered a new job," *New York Times*, p. A15, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/us/politics/22sherrod.html>.

³⁵ Kate Phillips (3/27/2008) "McCain said '100': Opponents latch on," *New York Times*, p. A22.

³⁶ Ethan Bronner (3/28/2012) "2 Israeli leaders make the Iran issue their own," *New York Times* p. A1, national edition.

³⁷ Dean Buonomano (2011) *Brain bugs: How the brain's flaws shape our lives*, New York: W.W. Norton.

³⁸ Drucilla Dyess (5/18/2011) "Coffee: New Wonder Drug Found to Cut Prostate Cancer Risk," Healthnews.com, <http://www.healthnews.com/Categories/Family-Health/Coffee-New-Wonder-Drug-Found-to-Cut-Prostate-Cancer-Risk>.

³⁹ Neil Conan (10/11/2011) Talk of the Nation, interview with Edward Schumacher-Matos, <http://www.npr.org/2011/10/11/141240659/npr-ombudsman-ponders-journalisms-big-questions>.

⁴⁰ Rob Stein (11/3/2008) "Study first to link TV sex to real teen pregnancies," *Washington Post*, p. A1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/02/AR2008110202592_pf.html.

⁴¹ Lee Ross (1977). "The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process." in L. Berkowitz Ed., *Advances in*

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⁴² Dale T. Miller and Michael Ross (1975) "Self-serving biases in the attribution of causality: Fact or fiction?" *Psychological Bulletin* 82 (2): 213–225.)

⁴³ Michael J. Sandel (2009) *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 18. The CEO salary data earlier in the paragraph also came from here.

⁴⁴ See Lee Ross, cited above.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the social ecology approach pioneered by the Chicago School, e.g., Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay (1942) *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*, The University of Chicago Press; Gary Becker, "Crime and Punishment," in *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 76 (2), March–April 1968, p.196-217; and R. Kornhauser (1978) *Social Sources of Delinquency*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴⁶ John McManus and Lori Dorfman (2005) "Functional truth or sexist distortion," *Journalism*, 6(1): 43-65.

⁴⁷ See Ellen Hume (2003). "Talk show culture," *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications*, Vol. 4, <http://www.ellenhume.com/articles/talkshow1.htm>; also John Halpin, James Heidbreder, Mark Lloyd, Paul Woodhull, Ben Scott, Josh Silver, and S. Derek Turner (6/20/2007) "The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio," http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/06/talk_radio.html.

⁴⁸ Wikipedia (undated) "Incarceration in the United States," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarceration_in_the_United_States, accessed 7/6/2011.

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⁵³ David Lague (3/18/2008) "China premier blames Dalai Lama for 'appalling' violence in Tibet," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>

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html?ref=asia](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/world/asia/18access.html?ref=asia).

⁵⁴ Michael Massing (1/29/2004) "Now they tell us," *New York Review of
Books*, [http://www.nybooks.com/ articles/archives /2004/feb/26/now-they-
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