Project report

Truthful journalism

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The "Truthful journalism" research project widely examined truthfulness of the material gathered and published by journalists. The project assessed the importance of facts in journalism, source critics and critical exploitation of the sources in journalistic information gathering, information confirming methods, transparent correction of errors, and the significance of journalists´ confirmation practices regarding public trust in journalism. Additional research subjects were interpretation and significance of "truth" in the freedom of information decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and the requirements of truth in PR-activities. Moreover, three MA-theses were carried out during project about (i) truthful web journalism, (ii) internet errors and their corrections and (iii) bloggers´ views about accuracy of journalistic material.

Research materials of the project consisted of previous research, internet blogs and discussions, interviews of Finnish journalists and a visit to the American Fact Check organization based in Philadelphia.

Main findings

A journalistic story examines its topic more or less insufficiently because choices in story preparation strongly cut down alternative information. Part of the information used in a story is emphasized at the expense of other information.

Critical evaluation of sources concentrates on their importance, relevance, independence, expertise and knowledge. Information is judged on the basis of its quality, accuracy, specificity and weight as evidence. Usually, sources as such guide the needs for investigations and topic choices.

Relevant objects to evaluate the story ensemble are the context of information, its abundance or insufficiency, mutual emphasis, representation and evidence for argumentation.

To describe as successfully as possible the topic of a story, information should be not only truthful and relevant but also have a sufficient context to the topic. Inaccuracies may result from misleading, overemphasized, aggravated, colored, or provocative information. Also, someone´s opinion or point of view can be understood as a fact, which in reality is false or rests on journalist´s misinterpretation of truthful

information in a story. A story can mislead its reader because of false context, information not connected to the topic, lack of relevant information regarding the topic, less important information emphasized at the expense of more relevant information or non-comparable information compared to each other. In addition, unrealistic causality may be created to issues covered in a story.

Every-day journalistic practices do not necessarily require careful confirmation of information accuracy. Journalist may for instance choose sources because of their effortless availability, positive experiences of previous cooperation or even at random. In every situation, accuracy of information is not questioned, and truthfulness of a story may depend solely on diverse use of sources and their faithful reference.

Publishing results

Project results were presented at the University of Jyväskylä in March 2015. In addition, report of project was published in a printed and e-book "Todenmukainen journalismi" (in Finnish) (https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/46081). Manual about confirmation of facts in journalism ("Varmistusjournalismin työkäytännöt") was published in the Internet (https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/45701)

Besides the reports, information about the project and its results were discussed in a "Todenmukainen journalismi" blog (htp://todjou.blogspot.fi/) and Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/518447964879000/)

Project gained media publicity in Finnish newspapers, magazines and radio among others in an international Journalism Research News portal ("Truthful journalism and what´s hampering it") (http://journalismresearchnews.org/truthful-journalism-and-whats-hampering-it/)