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William A. Tillinghast

San Jose State University, [William.Tillinghast@sjsu.edu](mailto:William.Tillinghast@sjsu.edu)

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by William A. Tillinghast

# Newspaper Errors: Reporters Dispute Most Source Claims

*Deep probe of disagreements suggests errors are really differences of opinion between sources and reporters.*

Research on newspaper accuracy has shown that news sources contend that about half the newspaper articles citing them contain at least one mistake<sup>1</sup>—usually a misquote, omission or distorted emphasis.

But, most of the half dozen studies which examined errors in newspapers excluded the reporter from the analysis, concentrating almost entirely on the perceptions of news sources. One study which did look at reporter response found that a reporter's focusing on a particular element of a story, considered an "extremely newsworthy angle" by the reporter, can be considered an error of overemphasis by the source.<sup>2</sup>

Reporter-source disagreement over such things as story angle and even whether the reporter considers a source-perceived error to actually

be an error has been neglected in past research. This investigation was designed to look at reporter perceptions of error, as well as source perceptions, and to determine some of the causes of error in newspaper stories. The study examines whether error varies by reporter experience, by deadline, and by type of content or length.

Although reporter views are generally not known, the number of stories containing error, according to sources in five major source accuracy studies dating from the 1930s, ranges from 40% to 60% of all locally produced news items.<sup>3</sup> The perceived rate of error in these five studies ranges from three to six mistakes in every four stories. Between half and two-thirds of these source-perceived errors are judgmental determinations, depending on how misquotes are classified.

Berry<sup>4</sup> listed subjective errors as including omissions, distortions of

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Dr. Tillinghast is associate professor of journalism at San Jose State University. This study was part of a research project funded by the American Newspaper Publishers Association.

underemphasis and overemphasis, and faulty headlines. Misquotes were considered as objective errors along with typographical errors involving spellings, times, dates, addresses, titles, facts or numbers. However, Blankenburg<sup>5</sup> notes that headlines and misquotes do not fit easily into either class.

Other studies have found that inaccuracies appear to increase or decrease depending on content, news story structure and the time available to process the information. Although mistakes in general news items occur at a rate of .75 to 1.5 errors per story, specialized issue stories, such as science, have an error rate of 2.16 to 6.2 errors per story.<sup>6</sup> The number of error-free stories ranges from a low of 9% to a high of 31%.

In addition, the inverted pyramid is considered a hazard to accuracy<sup>7</sup> because it is harder to understand than a narrative structure.<sup>8</sup> Finally, although more time to process information lessens the occurrence of objective errors, it increases the rate of subjective errors.<sup>9</sup>

Studies concentrating on the causes of error have found reporters and sources agreeing on two main causes of subjective error: insufficient background information and news desk editing policies.<sup>10</sup> A survey of editors cited reporter haste and carelessness as major causes of error with editing only a minor contributor.<sup>11</sup>

This accumulated knowledge helps point out a lack of specific information in the three research question areas:

1) Do reporters agree with sources on the amount of error in the

news? Do they agree on the type of error?

2) Do crime or government news contain more or less errors than general news? Is deadline-related error a function of time available to gather information or of time available to write it? Do more experienced reporters make fewer errors?

3) Do reporters consider errors in general and their admitted errors to be caused by the same factors? To what extent do they attribute source misperception of something as an error?

Examination of the reporter perspective should contribute to a more effective method of pinpointing error causes and areas of source-reporter disagreement. Once pinpointed, errors are more likely to be eliminated, and disagreements more likely to be understood even if not resolved.

### *Methodology and Background*

The author spent four weeks in the summer of 1980 observing newsroom news flow, time pressures, staff-management structure and esprit de corps at two Knight-Ridder newspapers, the morning San Jose *Mercury* and the afternoon San Jose *News*, which serve the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay area.

Each day, nearly all bylined locally produced news items were categorized by length and content. The respective city or metro desk editors evaluated each story in terms of deadline pressures.

The articles were then mailed to the news sources along with a questionnaire seeking source perception of error. The 270 returned articles, 54% of the original sample, were

then evaluated by 47 reporters who completed questionnaires on specific source claims of error in their copy.

The morning *Mercury*, circulation about 156,000, and the afternoon *News*, with about 68,000 circulation, share the same newsroom. Although the two papers do have separate city desk structures, as well as separate general assignment and police reporters, pool reporters who work for both papers cover the major beats—city hall, county government, science and environment—plus handle the investigative reporting. The photographers also work for both papers.

The *Mercury-News* has six area bureaus and a statehouse bureau. The papers combine Saturday and Sunday editions which are produced by the *Mercury* staff with some copy contributed by the *News* reporters.

### *General Findings*

Sources said 47% of the 270 locally produced news articles contained errors. The sources classified 246 mistakes, an error rate of .91 per story. Both the overall amount of perceived inaccuracies and the type of error percentages perceived are comparable to prior findings.

If a news source spots what he or she considers to be an error in the paper, the odds are about two to one that it is a subjective, rather than an objective error.<sup>12</sup> The 63% perceived subjective errors were classified as: omissions, 19%; misquotes, 10%; underemphasis, 9%; overemphasis, 9%; headline distortions, 6%; and the “other” category, 10%.

Slightly more than one third of all source-perceived errors were objective errors. The breakdown of this 36% was: general factual errors, 21%; wrong numbers, 5%; misspelled names, 4%; other misspellings, 2%; and wrong ages, times, dates and locations, 1% each.

### *Reporter Agreement*

Excluding headlines, normally not the responsibility of the reporter, sources specified 200 news copy errors and said that only 53% of the stories were free of error. However, reporters disputed 78% of the error claims. And even when reporters agreed that a particular article contained mistakes, the reporters said half of them did not contain as many errors as the sources said.

The reason reporters dispute more than three-fourths of the source claims of error may not be brushed off simply as source misperceptions. If such were the case, reporter disagreement would be fairly consistent across different groups of reporters. Such is not the case.

Although all reporters are more likely to disagree than to agree with sources on charges of error, the older, more-experienced reporters are significantly more likely to agree. Table 1 indicates reporters over age 35 and those with more than 10 years professional experience are about three times more willing to admit they made a mistake than are their younger, less-experienced colleagues. The latter sharply dispute source claims, disagreeing with about 85% of the source claims of error.

However, the more professionally mobile a reporter has

**TABLE 1: Reporter Agreement/Disagreement With Source Claims of Error**

Reporter's Age	Number of Errors	Percentage Of	
		Agreement	Disagreement
35 Or Younger	109	14%	86%
36 Or Older	91	40	60
$X_2 = 17.96; p < .001$			
Number of Years In Journalism			
Under 10 Years	89	16%	84%
10 Years Or More	111	33	67
$X_2 = 8.63; p < .01$			
Number Of Papers Worked For			
1 Or 2 papers	59	47%	53%
3 Or More Papers	141	16	84
$X_2 = 21.44; p < .001$			
Type Of Error			
Objective Error	84	46%	54%
Subjective Error	116	5	95
$X_2 = 21.44; p < .001$			

been, the less likely the reporter is to agree with sources who claim there are mistakes. Reporters who worked on only one or two newspapers were about three times more likely to agree they had erred than were the reporters who worked for three or more newspapers.

Just as important as reporter experience in agreement is the type of error being claimed by the source. The fact that reporters appear to agree with only between 20 and 25% of the source claims is misleading unless the type of error is considered.

Although reporters are willing to admit about half, 46%, of what

sources consider to be objective errors of fact, misspellings or inaccurate numbers, the reporters rarely agree with subjective error claims. The reporters dispute 95% of the source claims of omissions, misquotes and distorted emphases.

### *Variations in Error*

Structural constraints on the news were perceived as having a direct effect on news error but reporter experience and deadline pressures were not. Sources claim longer stories contain more mistakes than shorter items and that certain topics, notably general interest and govern-

mental news, contain more mistakes than do other stories. Deadlines appear to have an indirect effect while reportorial experience had no impact at all.

Logically, as stories get longer, the chances for error are greater. Sources said 40% of the items less than 10 inches long contained errors but a significantly larger 63% of those over 20 inches in length were said to have mistakes in them.

Although sources in previous studies were more likely to claim errors in articles dealing with science, education and other specialty news topics, the sources in this study did just the reverse. Only

32% of the specialty news items, most of which were education and transportation stories, contained mistakes compared with nearly 63% of the general interest news stories, 58% of governmental news and 40% of the police and court coverage.

The errors perceived by news sources do not vary appreciably by deadline pressures but this may be because of the direct effect of time constraints on content, which does affect source perception of error.

In Table 2, city and metro desk editors indicate afternoon *News* reporters had less advance knowledge and less time to write than did other reporters. While less than one in

**TABLE 2. Deadline and Content Differences By Reporter Assignment**

	Mercury Reporters	Stories By Pool & Bureau Reporters	News Reporters
<b>Time Knew About Assignment</b>			
Under Two Hours	(54) 17%	(103) 30%	(69) 72%
Two Hours Or More	83	70	28
			$X_2 = 49.20; 2 \text{ df}; p < .001$
<b>Time To Write Assignment</b>			
Under 1 Hour	(82) 16%	(214) 43%	(116) 86%
1 Hour Or More	84	57	14
			$X_2 = 106.23; 2 \text{ df}; p < .001$
<b>Content Category Of Stories</b>			
General News	(64) 33%	(117) 18%	(41) 29%
Local Government News	28	38	10
Crime & Court News	23	24	24
Specialty News	16		37
			$X_2 = 15.86; 6 \text{ df}; p < .02$

five morning *Mercury* articles due on the day of assignment had to be turned in within two hours, nearly three-fourths of the afternoon paper's articles were due that soon.

The time factor is even more marked in terms of the editors' assessment of the amount of time available to write. Although *Mercury* reporters had more than an hour to write about 85% of their articles, *News* reporters had that much time for only about 15% of their stories.

Such differences in morning and afternoon times are what one would expect and they become significant only because of their impact on news content. More than 60% of the morning *Mercury's* staff coverage focuses on general news and local government news compared with less than 40% of the afternoon paper's focus.

Since the papers are sister publications, stories may be produced more leisurely in the afternoon for morning publication and then picked up on the next afternoon news cycle.

### *Causes of Error*

Sources, reporters and editors do not agree on what is the most likely cause of mistakes, whether it is reporter haste, carelessness, lack of time or reporter and source misunderstandings.

Sources consider reporter haste as a more likely cause of error than reporter carelessness, lack of interest or lack of preparation. Fifty-four percent of the 89 sources citing error causes said haste was a likely cause. Carelessness was said to be likely by 31%; lack of preparation, 24%; and lack of interest, 12%.

The reporters who agree with sources on the errors attributed to them consider their own carelessness as the major cause. The reporters indicate it was a probable cause in 68% of the errors, followed by source-reporter misunderstandings, 43%, and lack of time to gather information, 41%. Editor-introduced error and lack of reporter interest were ruled out as causes by the reporters.

However, in discussing the typical causes of errors in general, reporters differed both with the city and metro desk editors and, to some extent, with their perception of what caused their own admitted errors.

Although the reporters said their own errors were mainly caused by their carelessness, Table 3 indicates they consider lack of time to background, gather information and write the story as the most likely cause of error in general.

City and metro desk editors assert that error is centered in the reporter-source relationship. Some 90% of the editors said misunderstandings between reporters and sources were a likely cause of error while 78% said the reporter's inaccurate paraphrasing of the source was a likely cause.

When reporters disagree with the source on whether something is an error, the reporters attribute the source misperception to the source's viewpoint. About 60% of the reporters in 44 such examples said source involvement in the news situation prevented a clear view of it. Just under 40% of the reporters also felt the source might be mistaken because of having a pet project to promote. News complexity

**TABLE 3. Reporter and Editor Views Of Typical Causes of Error**

<i>Reasons</i>	Percent Saying Likely Cause	
	Reporters (N=46)	Editors (N=9)
No time to get background information before event.	81%	33%
Not enough time to gather information.	66	56
Not enough time to write the story.	59	13
Editors edit too much out of most stories.	56	33
Not enough space to include everything.	55	44
Reporters and Sources misunderstand each other.	55	89
Editors change the wording too much.	51	22
Contradictory information from other sources.	48	45
Reporters are careless.	35	56
News events are very complex.	34	22
Inaccurate paraphrasing of source.	32	78
Reporter not understanding the topic.	31	33
Lack of direction on what news peg is wanted.	29	33
Reporters aren't interested.	27	11
Not enough journalistic training of reporters.	19	22

and lack of source preparation were considered generally unlikely causes of source misperception.

### *Discussion*

This study examined news accuracy perceptions of news sources, reporters and editors on the amount of error, its causes and the conditions that create it.

Variations in the perception of error are extensive. First, sources say nearly half of all news items contain mistakes. Secondly, reporters dispute four-fifths of those claims.

Other major findings include: 1) reporters particularly disagree with source claims of errors on matters of judgment; 2) younger, less-experienced reporters are the most likely to disagree with the sources; 3) er-

ror causes vary as sources cite haste, reporters cite carelessness and editors cite misunderstandings; and 4) more narrowly focused news items, such as crime, courts, education and transportation, are said to contain less error than general news or local government news.

The fact that reporters agree with about 20% of the source claims of error means that even reporters admit that the average reader will be reading mistakes in two out of every 10 stories read in the newspaper.

This agreed-upon error rate becomes more likely to increase, and at the same time much harder to reduce, because news items perceived as containing the most error are the bread and butter general and governmental news, the same categories which are probably more likely to increase in volume.



The different rates of error by content leads to the speculation that the well-defined and narrow parameters encompassing most specialized news situations may give both the source and the reporter similar perspectives and thus less chance for misunderstandings.

By contrast, governmental news often tends to be diverse and involving many individuals while general news focuses on events and individuals not normally in the news nor easily pigeonholed into easily-described contexts. It is likely that in the latter contexts, reporters and sources evaluate events from different perspectives.

Further evidence for the idea that sources and reporters do not judge the news situations similarly is indicated by the high level of disagreement and by the variations within that disagreement.

Reporters disagree with 80% of the source claims of error. The fact that older, more experienced reporters are more likely to admit error than their younger, less-experienced colleagues suggests overall error is probably higher than reporters will, or can, admit.

However, such a tendency is overshadowed by the fact that reporters do not even agree half the time with the sources on the objective errors of fact. And even this pales in comparison with the almost complete reporter disagreement with sources over subjective errors.

Since such evaluations are largely independent of the facts or judgments being labeled, it appears logical that future avenues of fruitful research might involve an examination of the broader aspects of the newsgathering process. This would include closer scrutiny of the relationships of the news participants to the news events as well as to each other and to the reporters, and to the types of events most likely to be perceived as prone to error.

In any examination of error, an implicit assumption is that once it is diagnosed, error can be corrected. Such an assumption presumes agreement on the error. The absence of agreement found in this study suggests that much of what is perceived as error is instead a difference of opinion.

## NOTES

1. Michael Singletary, "Accuracy in News Reporting: A Review of the Research," *ANPA News Research Report No. 25*, January 25, 1980.

2. Gary C. Lawrence and David L. Grey, "Substantive Inaccuracies in Local News Reporting," *Journalism Quarterly*, 46:753-57 (1969).

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Readers Give Papers an A for Accuracy," *Editor & Publisher*, February 13, 1965; Fred C. Berry, Jr., "A Study of Accuracy in Local News Stories of Three Dailies," *Journalism Quarterly*, 44:482-90 (1967); William C. Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors," *Journal of Communication*, 20:375-86 (1970); Hal Marshall, "Newspaper Accuracy in Tucson," *Journalism Quarterly*, 54:165-68 (1977).

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8. Jean Kerrick, "The Inverted Pyramid Style and Attitude Change," *Journalism Quarterly*, 36:479-82 (1959).
9. Berry, *ibid.*
10. Lawrence and Grey, *ibid.*
11. Michael Singletary, Giles Max and Warne Mead, "How Editors View Accuracy in News Reporting," *Journalism Quarterly*, 54:786-89 (1977).
12. Misquotes were reclassified as subjective errors in this study after a close examination, based on Blankenburg's observation of classification difficulty, indicated specific claims of misquotes were more of a judgmental than a factual nature. See also, William A. Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Source Perception, Reporter Response and Some Causes," *ANPA News Research Reports*, (forthcoming.)

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