The Sift® News Goggles

Corrections and clarifications: Accuracy and correcting the record

Dec. 14, 2020
First things first

- Be sure to view these slides in presentation mode.
- Suzannah and Hannah, former reporters who work at NLP, are going to help you examine this topic through journalists’ eyes.
Quality news organizations take factual inaccuracies very seriously when they occasionally occur. Being transparent about mistakes — and accountable for them — is a key characteristic that separates credible news organizations from other sources of information. Let’s take a look at several recent news reports that contained errors and examine how the different news organizations involved handled the corrections. Grab your news goggles. Let’s go!
Example 1:
CNN
Controversial Princess Diana interview from 1995 is under investigation again

By Alexis Baranisto, CNN Business
Updated 5:49 PM ET, Sun December 6, 2020

Click here to read the full report.
Bashir has not defended himself publicly, and he did not respond to CNN's request for comment. He is currently on leave, recovering from heart surgery and complications from Covid-19, according to a statement from BBC.

-- CNN's Max Foster contributed to this report.

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated the year of the BBC interview. It was conducted in 1995.

I would describe this as a typical correction. I don’t know about you, Hannah, but years and dates are the kinds of facts that I would check several times during the editing process before publication. Even though an editor also checked facts, I would usually print out a copy of a draft of my stories, highlight information that needed to be fact-checked and then put a check mark after I verified it. After all, it was my name on the story. When I wanted to double-check my fact-check, I would refer to this highlighted printout with my check marks until publication.
Bashir has not defended himself publicly, and he did not respond to CNN's request for comment. He is currently on leave, recovering from heart surgery and complications from Covid-19, according to a statement from BBC.

-- CNN's Max Foster contributed to this report.

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated the year of the BBC interview. It was conducted in 1995.

Agreed! I did the same. I would obsessively check and recheck that printed hard copy of my story right up to the moment it was published. (And even wake up in the middle of the night to double-check things!) These are the kinds of errors that fact-checking and careful copy editing often catch. And while errors do occasionally slip through, it’s important to note that out of all the news reports published by a standards-based news organization, only a small percentage require corrections.
Example 2: The New York Times
Here’s the story! It’s an obituary. At the bottom, here’s what we see...

Click here to read the full obituary.
Michael Levenson contributed reporting.

Correction: Dec. 4, 2020
An earlier version of this obituary misspelled the surname of a journalist in whose name a journalism scholarship program for women was established. (Ms. Wade was a member of its board.) She was Anne O’Hare McCormick, not McCormack.

Correction: Dec. 8, 2020
An earlier version of this obituary misidentified one of the journalism schools for which scholarships for women are endowed by the Anne O’Hare McCormick Memorial Fund, of which Ms. Wade was a board member. It is the City University of New York journalism school, not City College of New York.

Robert D. McFadden is a senior writer on the Obituaries desk and the winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting. He joined The Times in May 1961 and is also the co-author of two books.

Ouch! A double. I’ve had to do a double correction before, and it is an extra-painful correction experience! It still hurts to think about it.

Same. Name spelling mistakes were especially upsetting. I’m not sure if people realize how seriously journalists take corrections. Any inaccuracy hurts, and I still get anxious thinking about mistakes from years ago! Also, look: This journalist is a Pulitzer Prize winner with decades of experience. Mistakes happen even to veteran journalists. What matters is that errors get corrected.
Note that the two corrections ran on different days. While the story was published on Dec. 3, the first correction was published the next day, and the second correction, on Dec. 8. Sometimes a news organization does not become aware of an error for days or longer. But when an error is discovered, journalists don’t sit on the correction — they run it right away for transparency’s sake and to correct the record.
Example 3: Reuters
CORRECTED-Four lions at Spanish zoo test positive for COVID-19

Four lions at Barcelona Zoo have tested positive for COVID-19, veterinary authorities said on Tuesday, in one of just a handful of documented cases globally in which large felines have contracted coronavirus. (45 kB)

Click [here](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N2IO198) to read the full report.

This is interesting! This correction is clearly identified in the story preview, which means it appears on search results. When we click on this report, here’s what we see...
Four lions at Spanish zoo test positive for COVID-19

By Reuters Staff

BARCELONA (Reuters) - Four lions at Barcelona Zoo have tested positive for COVID-19, veterinary authorities said on Tuesday, in one of just a handful of documented cases globally in which large felines have contracted coronavirus.

(Corrects paragraphs 1, 6 and 7 in Dec. 8 story to remove reference to this being the second case, adds Zoo Knoxville case.)

Former Reuters reporter who has had to run corrections here! Reuters is a global news wire service and very transparent in its corrections. Not only is the word “CORRECTED” added as a headline tag to the corrected report published on the wire (as seen in the last slide), but the correction text appears near the top and above the story text in parentheses, explains what is being corrected and exactly where the error occurred in the story.

Unlike CNN and the New York Times, these corrections appear at the beginning of the story, rather than the end. Which placement do you think is best? Why?
This is another Reuters report published on the same day that also required a correction. But this one is different: It’s called an “official correction.” This official correction reflects that an error was made as a result of inaccurate information provided to Reuters by a source. Journalists work with the best information that they have at the time of publication.

Official or not, corrections must run and are signs of a news organization’s credibility — they show transparency, accountability and a commitment to accuracy. Quality news organizations don’t just make changes without noting the correction, or delete stories altogether as though they never existed.

Corrections are also important for future coverage on the topic. Reporters often refer to, rely on and use previous coverage by their news organization. Not running a correction could cause the error to be repeated.

Click here to read the full report.
Example 4: Arizona Republic
Some news organizations have an entire page on their websites dedicated to corrections. Here’s what I found for the Arizona Republic. Notice that this page explains how to contact the newsroom to report any errors. On the next slide, let’s look at a recent correction listed here.

To report Corrections & Clarifications, contact:

**Phone:** 602-444-6397

**Email:** accuracy@arizonarepublic.com

Please indicate whether you’re responding to content online or in the newspaper.

The following Corrections & Clarifications have been published on stories produced by The Arizona Republic/azcentral.com's newsroom:

Click [here](#) to see this page.
Yuma doctor says Arizona has shortage of ICU beds, staff as COVID-19 cases surge

Madeline Ackley Arizona Republic

Dr. Cleavon Gilman works at Yuma Regional Medical Center and said he was told on Nov. 22 no hospital in the state was accepting transfer ICU patients. Courtesy Dr. Cleavon Gilman

Corrections & Clarifications: A previous version of this article incorrectly characterized Gov. Doug Ducey’s executive order about allowing events with more than 50 people. Individual municipalities also must approve them.

Dr. Cleavon Gilman was shocked when he came into work at Yuma Regional Medical Center on Nov. 22 and learned no hospital in the state was accepting transfer ICU patients. It’s a situation that has been proudly reversed in recent days.

Some newsrooms distinguish between corrections and clarifications. Clarifications occur when information may be factually correct but perhaps is missing important details or context. Here, it looks like the report “incorrectly characterized” an executive order described in the story. Journalists take both types of mistakes seriously.
Example 5: Chicago Tribune
Similar to the Arizona Republic, the Chicago Tribune also has a page on its website for corrections and clarifications. Here we find recent mistakes listed. And take a look at this line: “The Tribune regrets the errors.” Journalists know their credibility depends on accuracy. As a reporter, I wanted nothing more than to get the story right. I actually appreciated when readers, sources or others pointed out mistakes so that I could fix them.

Click here to see this page.
Between the two — corrections and clarifications — a clarification is considered by journalists to be a lesser offense, but neither feels great.

Here the Tribune explains that accuracy is part of its “news responsibility” and “a value.”

The news organization also points to the standards, principles and conduct that its journalists are expected to abide by. And there’s a link to those guidelines so readers can view them. Every legitimate newsroom has a similar set of standards and ethics that is publicly available.
Note: New research reveals that Johns Hopkins, founder of the university and hospital that bear his name and long considered a “staunch abolitionist,” actually owned slaves, according to a Baltimore Sun news report. The reporting helps underscore the importance of correcting the historical record when new information comes to light — even decades later.
News Goggles: Next steps

**Discuss:** Why is it important for news organizations to correct inaccuracies? How does correcting mistakes make a news source more trustworthy? How often do standards-based sources of news make errors of fact? What types of errors are the most common?

**Idea:** Ask students to research corrections policies and standards posted online for a few local news organizations. How do these policies compare? Do the policies outline how to contact the newsrooms about mistakes? Connect your students with one of NLP’s journalist volunteers using the [Checkology journalist directory](#) and have a conversation about errors and corrections. Discuss the steps the journalist takes to prevent corrections and how they correct factual inaccuracies when they occur.
News Goggles: Next steps

Another idea: Select one of the news reports included in this week’s slides. To demonstrate the number of facts that journalists are verifying in a typical news report, ask students to tally the facts in the selected article. Be sure the students look for name spellings, job titles, organization names, dates, locations, quotes, etc. How would students go about fact-checking this report?

Resources: “Practicing Quality Journalism” (NLP’s Checkology® virtual classroom) and Newsroom to Classroom (NLP’s Checkology® directory of journalist volunteers).
This exercise originated in the Dec. 14, 2020, issue of The Sift® newsletter from the News Literacy Project. You can read archives of the newsletter and subscribe [here](#).
Thank you!