



# The Sift<sup>®</sup> News Goggles

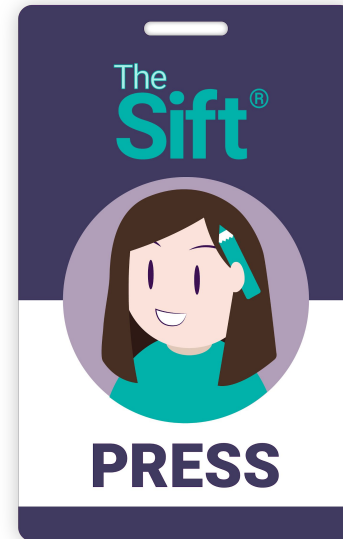
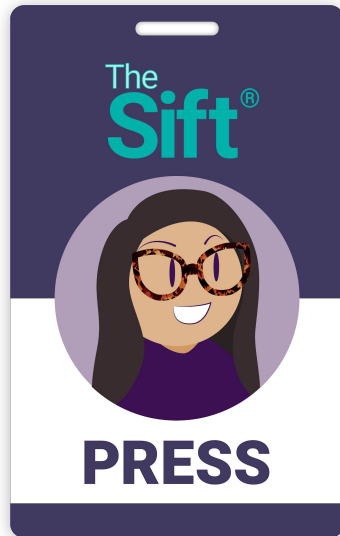
'Could not be reached for comment': Fairness and balance in the Missouri Independent

Dec. 7, 2020

# First things first

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- 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 report through journalists' eyes.



The Missouri Independent published a Dec. 3 [news report](#) about a local jail closure following a COVID-19 outbreak. It provides opportunities to take a closer look at the concepts of fairness and balance, as main sources “could not be reached for comment.” How do journalists report stories when a key source is unavailable or unwilling to share their perspective publicly? Grab your news goggles! Let’s find out!

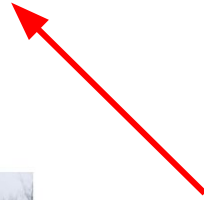


# MISSOURI **I**NDEPENDENT

## Howard County Jail closed as COVID outbreak hits sheriff, inmates

*The 15 detainees who were held in the jail have been sent to Cooper County*

By **Rudi Keller** | **Rebecca Rivas** - December 3, 2020



Here's the story!

Click [here](#) to read the full report.



# MISSOURI **I**NDEPENDENT

An entire jail in central Missouri is empty today due to a COVID-19 outbreak among inmates and staff.

The Howard County Sheriff's Department closed Saturday and sent the 15 detainees to Cooper County, Sheriff Mike Neal, at least one deputy and most of the jail staff are infected with the coronavirus.

The department posted a notice it was closed Saturday on its Facebook page. The post did not state what residents of the county who live outside cities and towns should do to obtain law enforcement.

Note: Sheriff Mike Neal is mentioned toward the top of the story, which indicates that Neal is an important source. Let's see if the journalists try to reach the sheriff for his perspective.

Let's read the first few paragraphs (or "grafs," in journalist speak). Each article begins with a "lede." A good lede (pronounced "lead") should provide the most important and newsworthy information from the get-go.

Neal could not be reached for comment Thursday.

No one else was available from the department either. **a dispatcher** told the Missouri Independent on Wednesday afternoon.

"They are all out for quarantine," the dispatcher, **who did not give her name,** said.



Look, they did try to contact the sheriff, Neal. This line shows transparency and lets readers know that the journalists made an attempt to reach a key source of the story. Readers could be wondering about his perspective, and it would be unfair if the journalists did not try to contact him. Since the story involved Neal's department, it's important to give him a chance to weigh in on the news event.



The next graf shows that they also tried to contact other officials in the department since Neal could not be reached. It looks like they connected with a dispatcher. Dispatchers who answer emergency calls are often a good source for information but may be hesitant to have information attributed to them by name. Many prefer information to come from people who are designated to speak to reporters, such as a public information officer — PIO, for short.

Presiding Judge Scott Hayes was not available immediately Thursday morning for comment on conditions in Howard County of if he was aware that hearings with infected people, including Turner and Neal on Nov. 24, had occurred.




Here's another example that shows that the journalists tried to reach another source for comment, but were unsuccessful. I used similar language in my news reports; my go-to phrase usually was, "could not immediately be reached for comment." This kind of wording, particularly the word "immediately," indicates that the journalists were working on deadline and they had not heard back from the source by deadline.




The journalists also provide details here on specific information they were hoping to obtain from an interview with the judge. Also, this graf shows balance in the reporting process. Since the journalists interviewed Turner, an inmate in the jail who shared his experiences, they also tried to reach an authoritative source who could have another relevant perspective or offer different details on this subject. Part of a reporter's job is to seek comment from people in power, including public officials like a sheriff or judge.

The Howard County Health Department administrator could not be reached Thursday morning for comment on steps being taken to control infection in the jail, sheriff's department and courthouse, which also houses county administrative offices.

County Clerk Shelly Howell referred questions about courthouse operations to the Howard County Commission. The commission did not respond Thursday to a voice message.



Here's another "could not be reached," but this time more details are provided, including "Thursday morning" (when they attempted to contact the source) and again, what they wanted to ask the source ("steps being taken to control infection"). With details like this, it's like we're getting a peek into a reporter's notebook.



This second graf is an example of journalists showing their work. Even when the reporters were successful in reaching an official — in this case, the county clerk — this person then referred them to someone else. But unlike previous instances, here we also see the specific way that journalists tried to reach a source (they left a "voice message"). My editors often encouraged me to let readers know how I tried to contact sources (by phone, email, etc.) if they did not respond by deadline.



"I felt like my well being was not important to anyone," Turner said. "Once I was in the orange and behind bars they viewed me as something other than a human being."

*Check back later for updates to this developing story.*



The report ends with an important line: "Check back later for updates to this developing story." When I worked as a breaking news reporter, we often put wording like this on stories that we were still actively reporting. In this case, if sources who could not be reached immediately later respond, I would expect the story to be updated to include their comments.



# News Goggles: Next steps

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**Discuss:** Is this article fair in its reporting? What steps should reporters take to try and reach a source on deadline? How should a journalist handle unsuccessful efforts to contact a source in a story? If journalists had been able to reach local sheriff's officials, what questions should they have asked? Is this report balanced? Are any relevant perspectives or voices missing? If a key source responds to a reporter *after* a story is published, what could the journalists do in response?

**Related:** ["Opinion: RNC blasts Politico over Michigan election story"](#) (Erik Wemple, The Washington Post).

**Resources:** ["Practicing Quality Journalism"](#) (NLP's Checkology® virtual classroom).



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This exercise originated in the Dec. 7, 2020, issue of The Sift® newsletter from the News Literacy Project. You can read archives of the newsletter and subscribe [here](#).



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