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Article

Methodology of Working with Facts in the Modern Information Space and Its Role in Shaping a Journalist's Professional Competence

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Abstract: This article examines the theoretical and practical significance of facts in journalistic practice, highlights their primary functions, and underscores the vital importance of fact-based journalism for contemporary society. As part of the empirical research, an open-ended survey comprising 20 specialized questions on "The Role of Facts in Journalistic Activity and Skills in Their Application" was conducted to analyze the perspectives and practical insights of media professionals.

Keywords: journalism, fact verification, fake news, fact-checking, pandemic, infodemic, media literacy.

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized and information-saturated world, the role of journalism in society is invaluable. In the context of unlimited information flows, the rapid development of social networks, and the widespread dissemination of fake news, the importance of fact-based journalism is growing even more. The main task of journalism is to provide society with reliable, objective, and truthful information. Facts play a central role in effectively fulfilling this task. Classic accounts of journalism name verification as its essence [1]. The spread of false information online has been described as an information disorder [2]. Researchers also call for a science of fake news [3].

Therefore, journalists should pay attention to the significance of facts in the creative process.

2. Materials and Methods

For this reason, within the framework of the study, a special open survey was conducted on "The Role of Facts in Journalistic Work and the Skill of Using Facts," consisting of 20 questions, to study the opinions of media professionals on this issue. More than 200 respondents participated in this survey, including editors of republican, local, and industry newspapers, journalists from local television and radio channels, skilled publicists, and young journalists from the Republic of Karakalpakstan. During the research, the creative processes of experienced journalists were studied, direct interviews about their activities were conducted, a series of journalistic materials published in the media was collected, and the skills of using facts were analyzed and applied in the practical

part of the work. Studies of how journalists ensure accuracy are likewise based on interviews with practitioners [4].

3. Results

Below, we present an analysis of the survey results. In particular, to the question "What is a fact? What is the role and significance of facts in a journalist's work?" almost all participants confirmed the opinions of theorists. Among them are original ideas integrated with practice. We will cite some of them. (The following and subsequent sections reflect the participants' responses to the questions).

"Facts play a crucial role in a journalist's work. If the facts are weak, the resulting material will also be weak."

"Facts are the primary source that brings to life any work written in a journalistic genre."

"Facts are a means of substantiating opinions. Stated opinions and conclusions are supported by facts. Facts make a journalist's work easier."

"Facts form the foundation of an article. If the facts cited in an article are unclear, its value diminishes. In this context, facts serve as the main criterion," and so on. Now, let's analyze the answers to the question, "What should a journalist focus on more when gathering facts? Is there a specific methodology for obtaining facts?" "Refer to Table 1":

Table 1. Journalists' views on whether a methodology for obtaining facts exists

Existence of methodology	Lack of methodology
Methodology is finding the core of a fact. For example, one should accept a fact that carries the same meaning in three out of five sources;	There is no set methodology. Depending on the topic of the article you're writing, you collect facts. Whether through observations or interviews, ultimately - this is where skill comes into play;
There are various methodologies. This depends on the journalist's skill. To obtain facts, a person must be knowledgeable, activate their knowledge, and act as a psychologist during conversations.	"When gathering facts, you focus on the direction of the article you're writing. There's no fixed methodology for obtaining facts.

As can be seen, 50% of journalists say there is a methodology for obtaining facts in response to this question, while the other half emphasize that there is no precise measure and that it depends on the journalist's skill. In our opinion, such a methodology is necessary. This methodology stems from the journalist's scientific approach to and analysis of the event.

Interestingly, 65% of respondents answered "not necessary" to the question "Does a journalist have to confirm every opinion with facts?" "See Figure 1":

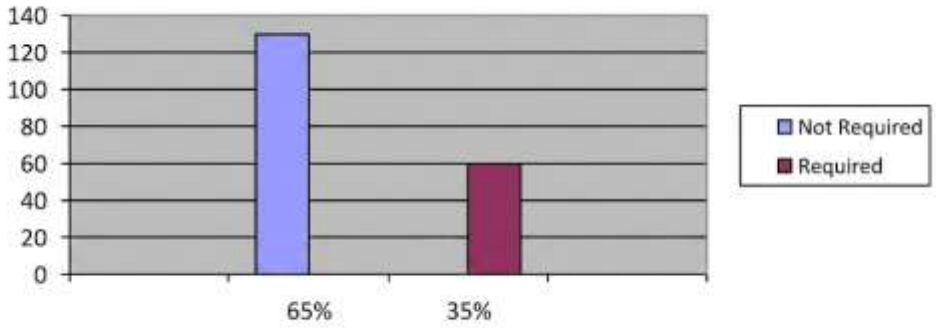

Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the question "Does a journalist have to confirm every opinion with facts?"

We will present some of their responses. We won't dwell on the "Necessary" answer. Respondents explain why it is not necessarily required: For example, "It's not necessary. It depends on the writer's reflection. They can confirm or cancel it." Another states, "It depends on the situation at that time. Some things do need confirmation. If an opinion might mislead people, then it must be verified. Because there are various axioms." Additionally, "It's a mistake to think that an article based solely on facts will be strong. It depends on the topic. If it's a chronicle-based theme, then facts are needed. In such cases, hearsay is inappropriate. Facts support your opinions." Another journalist approached the use of facts from a creative standpoint: "It's not necessary to confirm everything. It's appropriate to use facts in the main idea you want to express. Facts can be presented more beautifully with artistic touches. If only facts are used throughout, the reader will get bored." Thus, from the creators' opinions, it can be understood that their "not necessary" doesn't mean facts are unnecessary, but rather implies that facts should be used where appropriate.

Accuracy plays a central role in determining the media's influence in society. If listeners and viewers don't trust the media as a means of accurately conveying facts, it indicates that journalists have failed even in their most basic task. Because "the primary requirement for a journalist is to guarantee that people receive accurate and truthful information by reflecting objective reality." Accuracy in facts means not only the correctness of verifiable facts (names, place names, birth dates, quotes) but also the need for an impartial, fair approach to the viewpoints presented in the article. In this regard, in a survey conducted as part of the research, the renowned publicist Urazboy Abdirakhmonov noted: "a fact cannot be creative material in itself. The writer's attitude towards the fact and the process is important."

Analysis shows that recently, the majority of materials published in newspapers belong to the news or reportage genre. Articles on the same topic often resemble twins, being very similar to each other. This is due to the inability to distinguish the unique aspects of the presented facts. For example, the newspaper "Qaraqalpaqstan jaslari" published a report under the heading "Weddings are linking to weddings" about wedding and circumcision ceremonies held for children from socially vulnerable, low-income families as part of charity events in Qonliko'l, Amudaryo, and Qorao'zak districts. In all three materials, the facts, their arrangement, and interpretation are practically identical in both content and form. In this case, a journalistic approach and research are not evident.

Distinguishing between documentary information and facts obtained from reliable sources, and applying such information in one's own material requires special research,

knowledge, and critical thinking from the creator. It is known that sources of facts are divided into several types: witnesses (those who saw the event with their own eyes), documents, real processes (observation), and others.

In the conducted survey, let's consider the respondents' answers to the question "In your opinion, which sources provide more reliable facts? Which sources do you rely on more when writing an article?" "See Figure 2."

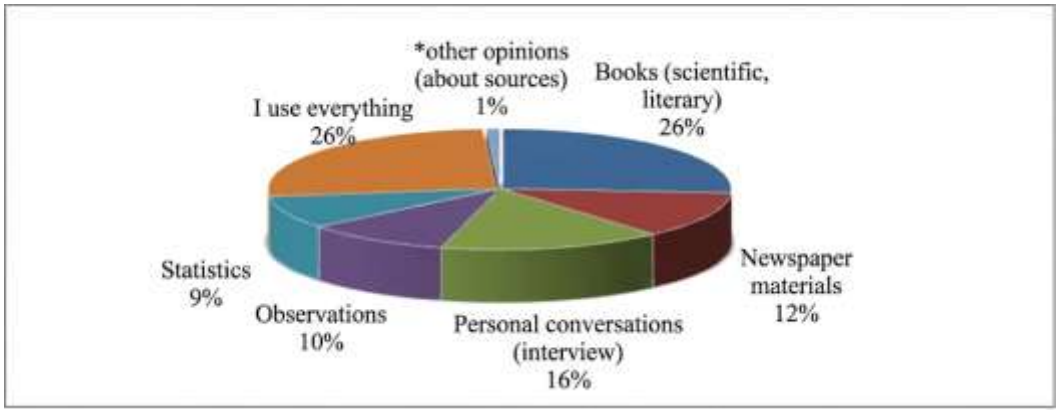

Figure 2. Sources of facts that respondents consider the most reliable and rely on when writing an article

*Note. One of the participants stated that none of the sources we cited were reliable.

"In journalism, a fact is characterized by truth and its expression. In turn, the concept of a journalist's 'objectivity' is closely linked to the notion of 'documentariness.' This serves as a guarantee of the journalist's independence and objectivity. When covering any story, a journalist should rely on documented facts; that is, the subject matter should be confirmed either directly or through additional evidence" [5]. The essence of working with documents lies entirely in verifying their reliability and authenticity. If the authenticity of a document is questionable, the original text should be obtained from the author and subjected to special analysis. This analysis enables the determination of the document's structural aspects, authenticity, or other characteristics. Sometimes, even with these methods, it can be very difficult to ascertain the authenticity of the source; in such cases, it is advisable to consult experienced specialists with a deep understanding of the field. Additionally, participants provided various answers to the question, "Is it necessary to confirm the obtained information with other sources? If so, what approach would you take?" We will discuss some of these responses below (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Respondents' views on whether obtained information must be confirmed with other sources

Must be verified by another source	**No need to verify with other sources**
Of course, verification is necessary. Some people may provide false information. Facts need to be checked. This is because people read newspapers today. For example, if we claim that 15 kindergartens have been built in the district and their construction has been completed, residents of that area will know that two of them are not yet fully finished. Therefore, it's essential	This will be revealed during the analysis process. It's advisable to compare the suspected information.

to verify the accuracy before writing;	
The obtained fact must be verified by its manifestation in real life and its final outcome. If necessary, it should be cross-checked and compared with other sources.	Verified facts may not always be truthful. The power of the pen lies in the art of persuasion;
A journalist must exercise extreme caution when using any fact. It is beneficial to thoroughly examine it and corroborate it with other sources.	A newspaper journalist doesn't have time to compare a obtained fact with information from another source. In some cases, when I encounter such a need for comparison, I often turn to a specialist in the relevant field;

In particular, one of the survey participants emphasizes that "if a fact is not precise, confirmed, and verified, using it in an article discredits the author and causes doubt in the audience." This observation is correct in every aspect.

Presenting information to the audience based on at least two reliable sources eliminates potential problems that may arise later. Sometimes, for legal reasons, issues of confidentiality, or similar concerns, it is not recommended to specify the sources. In such cases, it is necessary to ensure that the source is reliable. This is because, first and foremost, "the reader or listener is interested in the source of the information."

If a journalist does not cite the source of information, it creates the impression that the information belongs solely to the journalist. The audience evaluates the value of information based on the reliability and credibility of the message source" [6]. To ensure authenticity, journalists must first determine the sources of facts, understand the informant's intentions, and distinguish between scientific and everyday facts.

Scientific fact-based materials are regularly published in the press. Scientific facts are always based on numerous empirical observations, experiments, and trials. When preparing analytical materials, journalists primarily rely on scientific facts. Using scientific facts is very convenient, as the main characteristic of all scientific evidence is its accuracy and reliability. Therefore, journalists frequently refer to this in their materials. For example, the article "Suw-tirishilik deregi" (Water is the Source of Life) [7] by Professor Sarigul Bahadirova, a member of the Creative Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan, uses facts, opinions, and conclusions that are scientific, socio-politically and economically justified, and most importantly, reflect our national values, which encourages reading the material with interest. The facts are clearly stated in simple, accessible language. Below is an excerpt from the article: "The Aral Sea is a sea formed in the middle of the Kyzylkum Desert. It is a sea that has existed for many centuries, created by God's power in the middle of a desert that amazes mankind..."

Along with scientific facts, journalists effectively utilize various types of everyday facts from our surroundings in their materials. Such facts provide an opportunity to discuss people's direct experiences, their approaches to ongoing events, and other related aspects. Additionally, journalists employ the traditional method of presenting materials through statistical data during their work. Numbers are an optimal way to reveal the essence of a problem by describing a specific phenomenon, showing the dynamics of an event's development, and ultimately drawing conclusions based on them.

4. Discussion

The unprecedented integration of the internet into our lives has led to a sharp increase in the number of sources disseminating social information. This, in turn, is contributing to a reduction in the reliability of information or an increase in its uncertainty. Researchers note that alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, another pseudo-pandemic has emerged worldwide. It has been termed "infodemia" [8]. In 2020 the World Health Organization warned that the world was fighting an infodemic as well as an epidemic [9]. Uzbek-language media have likewise warned that the infodemic can be deadly [10]. Currently, fake content is observed not only in breaking news and social networks but sometimes also in serious official media. We can see this in the example of fake news. Such messages closely resemble reality, and there are various methods for their dissemination. One of the most dangerous global problems is precisely false news and the resulting damages. In this regard, the most effective solution to the problem, that is, in combating fake news, is fact-checking. It is no secret that the increasing demand for information from the audience has led to the development of practices for verifying the reliability of disseminated information and refuting it if its objectivity is not confirmed. In other words, it has accelerated the process of fact verification.

"In the 21st century, several innovations have been introduced to the field of journalism. In particular, fact-checking - the process of verifying information - has begun in the scientific sphere. In the first decade of this period, separate departments were established in non-governmental non-profit organizations or quality media editorial offices that professionally verify facts. Their emergence is associated with a number of complex reasons" [11]. In the United States, fact-checking grew into a recognized form of journalism [12].

Maxim Kornev, Associate Professor of the Russian State University for the Humanities and Director of the "Journalist" portal, lists the following 5 methods for verifying information:

1) provide information from several independent sources or

provide confirmation;

2) ask opposing parties;

3) learn to recognize fake content;

4) the accuracy of evidence is more important than sensationalism;

5) use social networks with caution.

"The Washington Post" [13] operates in this regard. Unfortunately, they are primarily targeted at English-speaking audiences.

"Previously, the media was the foundation of information production and journalism. Now everything is different: technological, economic, and political transformations have changed the media... The demand for verified reports has increased, and this has begun to require high skill from journalists. In particular, with the growing phenomenon of "fake news" in journalism, the demand for specialized journalists has increased due to the prevalence of inaccurate information not based on concrete facts. In the modern political climate, the main focus is on various events, specific individuals, and economic debates. In the fight against fake news, a journalist's ethics plays a special role" [14]. UNESCO's handbook for journalism education offers guidance for journalists who face disinformation [15].

As is known, the entire world is currently battling the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. In such a dangerous situation, it has become very easy to influence people's minds and persuade them. This has led to an increase in fake news. Naturally, in these circumstances, the media and journalists have been entrusted with an even more important and responsible task than ever before: urging people not only to avoid becoming victims of the virus but also to remain vigilant against misinformation. The reason for this

is that "the crisis in journalism is currently intensifying due to disruptions in the media space caused by incidents of propaganda, fake information, pranking, digital aggression, trolling, etc. 'Information overload' is leading to 'information ambiguity.' Manipulation of consciousness through these means is resulting in the increased 'swallowing' of any information worldwide, due to the audience's lack of 'critical autonomy'" [16].

According to a study commissioned by Internews, the results of a social survey conducted for the first time by the Public Opinion Research Institute in July 2019 [17] showed that at that time, most respondents were unaware of the concept of "fake news." However, at the next stage of the study, the result was different, indicating that the flood of information caused by the coronavirus had taught the majority of the population what to believe.

Having examined the complex nature of facts and their purpose in journalistic work, it is important to acknowledge that achieving objectivity in covering events is difficult if a journalist does not use only carefully verified, reliable information. This can be understood from the opinions of survey participants and their work experience.

The prevalence of fake news depends, on the one hand, on the professionalism of journalists, and on the other hand, on the media literacy of information consumers. It is noteworthy that in the context of the pandemic, the sharp increase in fake news is developing readers' skills in properly handling information. This includes determining which sources are reliable and fact-based, or which news is true. As a result, the number of people with a high level of media literacy is currently growing worldwide. This, of course, represents an important change and growth in all respects.

5. Conclusion

In today's fast-paced information age, a journalist's primary tool and responsibility is adherence to facts. At a time when disinformation and fake news are widespread, journalists must rely on verified and reliable information in every piece of their work. This not only strengthens the journalist's reputation but also ensures that society has a conscious understanding of reality. Fact-based journalism helps citizens make informed decisions and enhances the transparency of democratic processes. Thus, facts are not only an integral part of a journalist's work but also a key indicator of their service to society.

As emphasized in the article, facts are not merely information for a journalist, but the foundation and ethical criterion of their professional activity.

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