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TO: Executive Addressed

FR: James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA

RE: The Truth Index: Assessing the Believability and Credibility of News Interviews, Stories, and Reporters

According to Janet Malcolm (*The Journalist and the Murderer*, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, pp. 3-4), "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse... On reading the article or book in question, (the source) has to face the fact that the journalist - who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things - never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own. The disparity between what seems to be the intention of an interview as it is taking place and what it actually turns out to have been in aid of always comes as a shock to the subject."

Journalism today is relentlessly competitive, amoral, aggressive, and negative. Survey after survey demonstrates the public's belief that reporters use deception and practice reckless reputation destruction. News subjects need the means to judge the validity and believability of their news interview experience, the resulting stories, and of the behavior of the reporters who question them.

TRUTH INDEX TEST QUESTIONS

The higher the score, the lower the believability and, the probable validity of the news story. Question reporters directly to test their believability and credibility and, therefore, the probability of the truthfulness of a story.

- | | |
|--|---|
| | Score |
| | <i>Yes</i> <i>No</i> |
| 1. Did the reporter personally witness what he or she is reporting about? | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| | <i>Yes</i> <i>No</i> |
| 2. Did the reporter have any specific knowledge about the topic prior to reporting about it? | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| | <i>Fair</i> <i>Unfair</i> |
| 3. Is the description and dialog of opposing views balanced, equal, and fair? | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| | <i>Fair</i> <i>Biased</i> <i>Unbalanced</i> |
| 4. Is the story clearly biased, unbalanced, or unfair? | 1 2 3 4 5 |

- | | |
|--|--|
| 5. How many emotionally charged, inflammatory, and negative words, phrases, or concepts are used? | <i>Many</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>Few</i> |
| 6. How does the story content direction and perception square with what the reporter told interviewees? | <i>Truthful</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>Deceptive</i> |
| 7. How much "surprise" material was used during the interviews? | <i>Some</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>Too Much</i> |
| 8. How do the observations of others present at the same news event compare with and support the reporter's version? | <i>Some</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>None</i> |
| 9. How many anonymous sources are used? | <i>Few</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>Many</i> |
| 10. Was the reporter insulting, overly suspicious, or disrespectful? | <i>Respectful</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>Disrespectful</i> |
| 11. Does the headline appropriately reflect the content of the story? | <i>Yes</i>
1 2 3 4 5
<i>No</i> |
| | <i>Yes</i>
<i>No</i> |

The lesson is: Truth can never result from deception, disrespect, or insulting, aggressive behavior.

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