

“Verifying the Story” Video Transcript

Pat Gauen

Editor, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

From my perspective, the hardest thing to verify especially early on, was some narrative from the police side of what happened in Ferguson. The police said so little early on that when we were trying to balance the story, critics said they saw a police officer chase him down a street, they saw him stand over Michael Brown, they saw him shoot Brown while he was pleading for his life. We didn't have anything to counter that; the police weren't saying anything.

Gilbert Bailon

Editor, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

The people who were protesting use the “hands up” as their slogan, as their cause, and it became very well known throughout the world and in the nation eventually. Later in the investigation, what the official investigation was—he did not have his hands up when he was shot. But we reported what witnesses said he did, so there's conflicting information.

Pat Gauen

Editor, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

I think it gave us a lopsided story for rather a while and that was very frustrating and we had well-sourced reporters doing what they could to bear down and get more of the police side and finally did and within about six days, when we learned more about the Michael Brown strong-arm robbery that had preceded the encounter with Darren Wilson, we sort of got at least an emergence of the picture from the law enforcement side and one that would later be pretty much verified by the Grand Jury investigation and the Department of Justice investigation, but that story was really late to the coming.

And by that time, people had formed their opinions. It was very easy to dismiss a police account six days later: “Well, you finally get your story in order, cops, and why should we believe you now if you knew this back on Saturday or Sunday, why didn't you say this on Saturday or Sunday?”

Alice Speri

Correspondent, *Vice News*

Some of the things I read about Ferguson before I got there were like, you know, “This vigil for this slain teenager turned into a mob.” I'm like what does *mob* mean really, you know. So I was very mindful not to kind of use of language.

A lot of people showed the images of the people looting. Somebody had broken into this liquor store and we started talking to the kids at the door, and if you looked at it from a distance and just filmed it, it would have looked like they just broke in and they're watching for their friends that are inside. And if you talked to them, it's kids from the neighborhood were trying to get the looters out. There's no way you would have known that if you didn't question the scene.

So I think we all make assumptions all the time, and especially in a situation like that, it's very easy to go for what you think you know, and so being mindful that that's an issue and trying to always ask is a good step to kind of undo the bias in a way.

Even a witness—and I mean I talked to a lot of people that were on the scene of the murder right after and then one guy who was actually live-tweeting Mike Brown's murder and he doesn't fully know what happened. He took pictures of it, he saw it, and he'll tell you, "This is what I saw, this is what I didn't see." And so there is not one source that has it all that you need to get and that's it, that's your truth, that's your story. You want to put your puzzle together with all these different stories.

Wesley Lowery

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

Many times, verifying information in Ferguson was extremely difficult. This was a very fast-moving story with intense national interest happening not even in a major city, but in a suburb of a major city. So there wasn't a lot of information channels. This wasn't a place we were particularly well sourced initially.

Well-Sourced: Having several reliable sources close to a story who can provide credible information about what happened.

And on top of that, it was just so hectic and so chaotic. You had multiple police departments involved, city officials, state officials, potentially federal officials. You had information leaking from all sorts of corners.

DeNeen Brown

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

The challenges that I had in Ferguson was I was on the street reporting so I was in the midst of the protest and events were happening pretty quickly. And as you know, it's a really competitive news cycle, so I needed to get information to the desk as soon as possible. Much of my reporting was raw. I was there on the ground; I was an eyewitness to some of the events that happened. The events that happened where I was eyewitness to them were not particularly challenging to check out because I was there, which I think is the best form of journalism.

But for information that I was gathering by phone or from sources—I would send that information to the desk and they had reporters here by the phones. They were able to check out the facts before they were printed.

Kevin Merida

Managing Editor, *The Washington Post* (2013–2015)

When we're doing breaking news, usually some of the best and quickest information you can get is you're having some of our great researchers find—they're looking for leads everywhere, in databases. They're trying to find phone numbers. They're trying to find records. They're trying to find clues, decrees, orders. They're trying to find—and then people here pursue those tips.

Krissah Thompson

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

We had trained reporters who were there on the scene. You know, we had others who were at the police station, who had gone out to talk to and find the person who did the local autopsy. You know, those are the kinds of things you're not just going to see flowing across your Twitter feed. But when you come to *The Post*, it's all stitched together for you and it'll give you a broader picture of what's happening.

Alice Speri

Correspondent, *Vice News*

Verification is basically asking as many questions as possible to as many people as possible that have a relevant take on what happened, that have witnessed it directly, that have a direct experience with it or an expertise that's relevant. And then kind of putting all of that information together and clearly telling, "This is what I know, this is what I don't know, this is how I know it, this is where it comes from."

Verification is a complex process. So it's a puzzle you put together from the different pieces. Everything you see is not necessarily all there is to be seen or you're not necessarily interpreting it correctly. At the same time, when you talk to somebody and they tell you what they saw, that's also not the full picture and you never have the full picture. The idea of our job is you never know what the full story is and nobody ever knows what the full story is.

Gilbert Bailon

Editor, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Sometimes it's up to a reader to look at this information and say, "Who's telling the truth? Do I believe this person? Do I believe this information?" It's up to the individuals to make those conclusions.

DeNeen Brown

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

I think readers, people who consume social media, should try to verify what they see on tweets or on Facebook. I often go to main news sites to see whether they're reporting the same information that I'm seeing on Twitter or Facebook. So I think that that would be a good lesson for the public if you see something on Twitter that appears questionable, go to WashingtonPost.com or *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* to see if they're also reporting that information, because reporters for those newspapers are required to verify that information as much as possible before publishing it.

Gabriela Akrap

Student, *Kirkwood High School*

So if CNN's saying one thing, I kind of go check out what the other news sources are saying to make sure it's all kind of in the same spectrum and not something super crazy, because then it was probably a not very credible thing that they said.

Gilbert Bailon

Editor, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

What we can't always say is, "This is the one truth," because that's not what we do. We don't tell one truth, we try to tell as much and as many things that are truthful.

Krissah Thompson

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

Our approach for this story and any major moving story is that you just continue to report the story and it evolves over time and the truth becomes clearer.

One of the things that the public often does, and that any reporter who is on a story for a long time can relate to, is that you want to drop out of the story and move on. You feel like you know what happened and you've made your opinion and it's over and it does keep evolving and layers keep pulling back.

I would encourage people to stay involved and engaged in stories. If they've invested in it in the beginning enough to form an opinion, then be open to changing dynamics on the ground and for new information being revealed to influence what they think.

Student Notes