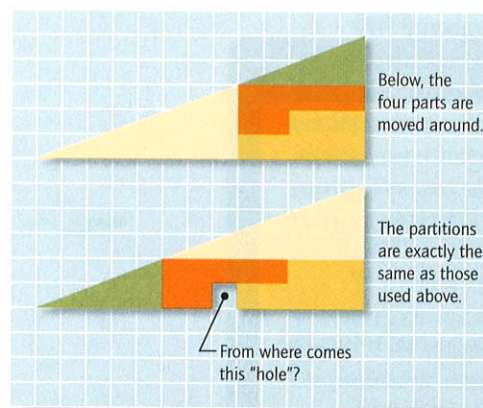




■ This optical illusion has made the rounds on the web. It takes a very close look to identify how the illusion works, although it's *certain* that *something* sneaky is going on here. The problem is solved back in the Answer Section.

"middle of winter" cannot command much initial plausibility because of the obvious way it conflicts with our background information about eighty-seven-year-old people, about Lake Michigan, about swimming in cold water, and so on. In fact, short of observing the swim ourselves, it isn't clear just what *could* persuade us to accept such a claim. And even then, we should consider the likelihood that we're being tricked or fooled by an illusion.

Obviously, not every oddball claim is as outrageous as the one about Charlie's grandmother. Recently, we read a report about a house being stolen in Lindale, Texas—a brick house. This certainly is implausible—how could anyone steal a home? Yet there is credible documentation that it happened,* and even stranger things occasionally turn out to be true. That, of course, means that it can be worthwhile to check out implausible claims if their being true might be of benefit to you.

Unfortunately, there are no neat formulas that can resolve conflicts between what you already believe and new information. Your job as a critical thinker is to trust your background information when considering claims that conflict with that information—that is, claims with low initial plausibility—

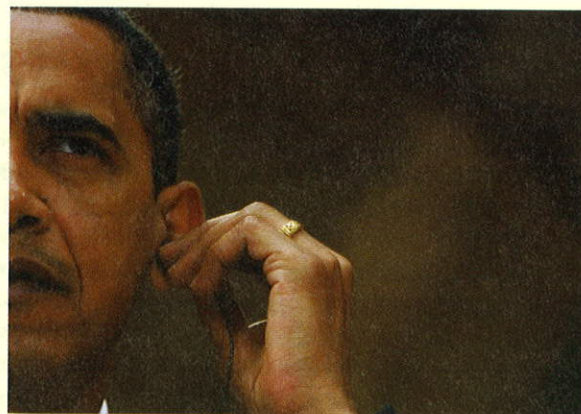
Real Life

Do Your Ears Stick Straight Out?

According to Bill Cordingley, an expert in psychographicology—that's face-reading, in case you didn't know (and we certainly didn't)—a person's facial features reveal "the whole rainbow collection" of a person's needs and abilities. Mr. Cordingley (*In Your Face: What Facial Features Reveal About People You Know and Love*) doesn't mean merely that you can infer moods from smiles and frowns. No, he means that your basic personality traits are readable from facial structures you were born with.

Do your ears stick out? That means you have a need to perform in public. The more they stick out, the greater the need. Other features are said to reliably predict features of your personality. It appears that President Obama is fortunate in that he (and his ears) have lots of opportunities to appear in public.

Is there any reason to believe facial features can tell us such things about people? We think not. The fact that Cordingley was once mayor of San Anselmo, California, adds no credibility to the claim.



*Associated Press report, March 25, 2005.

Real Life

Fib Wizards

In *The Sleeping Doll*, novelist Jeffery Deaver invents a character who is incredibly adept at reading what people are thinking from watching and listening to them. This is fiction, but there seems to be at least a bit of substance to the claim that such talents exist.

After testing 13,000 people for their ability to detect deception, Professor Maureen O'Sullivan of the University of San Francisco identified 31 who have an unusual ability to tell when someone is lying to them. These "wizards," as she calls them, are especially sensitive to body language, facial expressions, hesitations in speech, slips of the tongue, and similar clues that a person may not be telling the truth. The wizards are much better than the average person at noticing these clues and inferring the presence of a fib from them.

Professor O'Sullivan presented her findings to the American Medical Association's 23rd Annual Science Reporters Conference.

Maybe a few people can reliably tell when someone is lying. But we'd bet there are many more who merely *think* they can do this—these are the ones we want to play poker with.

From an Associated Press report.

but at the same time to keep an open mind and realize that further information may cause you to give up a claim you had thought was true. It's a difficult balance, but it's worth getting right. For example, let's say you've been suffering from headaches and have tried all the usual methods of relief: aspirin, antihistamines, whatever your physician has recommended, and so on. Finally, a friend tells you that she had headaches that were very similar to yours, and nothing worked for her, either, until she had an aromatherapy treatment. Then, just a few minutes into her aromatherapy session, her headaches went away. Now, we (Moore and Parker) are not much inclined to believe that smelling oils will make your headache disappear, but we think there is little to lose and at least a small possibility of something substantial to be gained by giving the treatment a try. It may be, for example, that the treatment relaxes a person and relieves tension, which can cause headaches. We wouldn't go into it with great expectations, however.

The point is that there is a scale of initial plausibility ranging from quite plausible to only slightly so. Our aromatherapy example would fall somewhere between the plausible (and in fact true) claim that Parker went to high school with Bill Clinton and the rather implausible claim that Paris Hilton has a Ph.D. in physics.

As mentioned, background information is essential to adequately assess a claim. It is pretty difficult to evaluate a report if you have no background information relating to the topic. This means the broader your background information, the more likely you are to be able to evaluate any given report effectively. You'd have to know a little economics to evaluate assertions about the dangers of a large federal deficit, and knowing how Social Security works can help you know what's misleading about calling it a savings account. Read widely, converse freely, and develop an inquiring attitude; there's no substitute for broad, general knowledge.

Exercise 4-1

1. The text points out that physical conditions around us can affect our observations. List at least four such conditions.
2. Our own mental state can affect our observations as well. Describe at least three of the ways this can happen, as mentioned in the text.
3. According to the text, there are two ways credibility should enter into our evaluation of a claim. What are they?
4. A claim lacks inherent credibility, according to the text, when it conflicts with what?
5. Our most reliable source of information about the world is _____.
6. The reliability of our observations is not better than the reliability of _____.

Exercise 4-2

▲ In your judgment, are any of these claims less credible than others? Discuss your opinions with others in the class to see if any interesting differences in background information emerge.

1. They've taught crows how to play poker.
2. The center of Earth consists of water.
3. Ray Charles was just faking his blindness.
4. The car manufacturers already can build cars that get more than 100 miles per gallon; they just won't do it because they're in cahoots with the oil industry.
5. If you force yourself to go for five days and nights without any sleep, you'll be able to get by on less than five hours of sleep a night for the rest of your life.
6. It is possible to read other people's minds through mental telepathy.
7. A diet of mushrooms and pecans supplies all necessary nutrients and will help you lose weight. Scientists don't understand why.
8. Somewhere on the planet is a person who looks exactly like you.
9. The combined wealth of the world's 225 richest people equals the total annual income of the poorest 2.5 billion people, which is nearly half the world's total population.
10. George W. Bush arranged to have the World Trade Center attacked so he could invade Afghanistan. He wanted to build an oil pipeline across Afghanistan.
11. Daddy longlegs are the world's most poisonous spider, but their mouths are too small to bite.
12. Static electricity from your body can cause your gas tank to explode if you slide across your seat while fueling and then touch the gas nozzle.
13. Japanese scientists have created a device that measures the tone of a dog's bark to determine what the dog's mood is.
14. Barack Obama (a) is a socialist, (b) is a Muslim, (c) was not born in the United States.

THE CREDIBILITY OF SOURCES

We turn now from the credibility of claims themselves to the credibility of the sources from which we get them. We are automatically suspicious of certain sources of information. (If you were getting a divorce, you wouldn't ordinarily turn to your spouse's attorney for advice.) We'll look at several factors that should influence how much credence we give to a source.

Interested Parties

We'll begin with a very important general rule for deciding whom to trust. Our rule makes use of two correlative concepts, interested parties and disinterested parties:

A person who stands to gain from our belief in a claim is known as an **interested party**, and interested parties must be viewed with much more suspicion than **disinterested parties**, who have no stake in our belief one way or another.

Real Life

Not All That Glitters



Since the U.S. dollar began to decline seriously in about 2004, quite a few financial "experts" have claimed that gold is one of the few ways to protect one's wealth and provide a hedge against inflation. Some of the arguments they make contain some good sense, but it's worth pointing out that many of the people advocating the purchase of gold turn out to be brokers of precious metals themselves, or are hired by such brokers to sell their product. As we emphasize in the text: Always beware of interested parties!

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this rule—in fact, if you were to learn only one thing from this book, this might be the best candidate. Of course, not all interested parties are out to hoodwink us, and certainly not all disinterested parties have good information. But, all things considered, the rule of trusting the latter before the former is a crucially important weapon in the critical thinking armory.

We'll return to this topic later, both in the text and in some exercises.

Physical and Other Characteristics

The feature of being an interested or disinterested party is highly relevant to whether he, she, it, or they should be trusted. Unfortunately, we often base our judgments on irrelevant considerations. Physical characteristics, for example, tell us little about a person's credibility or its lack. Does a person look you in the eye? Does he perspire a lot? Does he have a nervous laugh? Despite being generally worthless in this regard, such characteristics are widely used in siz-

Real Life

Whom Do You Trust?



As mentioned in the text, we often make too much of outward appearances when it comes to believing what someone tells us. Would you be more inclined to believe one of these individuals than the other? As a matter of fact, we can think of at least as many reasons for the man on the left telling us something that isn't true as for the man on the right.

ing up a person's credibility. Simply being taller, louder, and more assertive can enhance a person's credibility, according to a recent study.* A practiced con artist can imitate a confident teller of the truth, just as an experienced hacker can cobble up a genuine-looking website. ("Con," after all, is short for "confidence.")

Other irrelevant features we sometimes use to judge a person's credibility include gender, age, ethnicity, accent, and mannerisms. People also make credibility judgments on the basis of the clothes a person wears. A friend told me that one's sunglasses "make a statement"; maybe so, but that statement doesn't say much about credibility. A person's occupation certainly bears a relationship to his or her knowledge or abilities, but as a guide to moral character or truthfulness, it is less reliable.

Which considerations are relevant to judging someone's credibility? We shall get to these in a moment, but appearance isn't one of them. You may have the idea that you can size up a person just by looking into his or her eyes. This is a mistake. Just by looking at someone, we cannot ascertain that person's truthfulness, knowledge, or character. (Although this is generally true, there are exceptions. See the "Fib Wizards" box on page 113.)

Of course, we sometimes get in trouble even when we accept credible claims from credible sources. Many of us rely, for example, on credible advice from qualified and honest professionals in preparing our tax returns. But qualified and honest professionals can make honest mistakes, and we can suffer the consequences. In general, however, trouble is much more likely if we accept either doubtful claims from credible sources or credible claims from doubtful sources (not to mention doubtful claims from doubtful sources). If a mechanic says we need a new transmission, the claim itself may not be suspicious—maybe the car we drive has many miles on it; maybe we neglected routine maintenance; maybe it isn't shifting smoothly. But remember that the mechanic is an interested party; if there's any reason to suspect he would exaggerate the problem to get work for himself, we'd get a second opinion about our transmission.

One of your authors currently has an automobile that the local dealership once diagnosed as having an oil leak. Because of the complexity of the repair, the cost was almost a thousand dollars. Because he'd not seen any oil on his garage floor, your cautious author decided to wait and see how serious the problem was. Well, a year after the "problem" was diagnosed, there was still no oil on the garage floor, and the car used less than half a quart of oil, about what one would have expected to add during the course of a year. What to conclude? The service department at the dealership is an interested party. If they convince your author that the oil leak is serious, they make almost a thousand dollars. This makes it worth a second opinion, or, in this case, one's own investigation. We now believe his car will never need this thousand-dollar repair.

Remember: Interested parties are less credible than other sources of claims.

*The study, conducted by Professor Lara Tiedens of the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, was reported in *USA Today*, July 18, 2007.

I looked the man in the eye.
I found him to be very straight-
forward and trustworthy.
We had a very good dialogue.
I was able to sense his soul.

—GEORGE W. BUSH, commenting
on his first meeting with Rus-
sian president Vladimir Putin

By the end of 2007, Bush
had changed his mind about
Putin, seeing him as a threat
to democracy. So much for
the "blink" method of judging
credibility.

Expertise

Much of our information comes from people about whom we have no reason to suspect prejudice, bias, or any of the other features that make interested parties such bad sources. However, we might still doubt a source's actual knowledge of an issue in question. The state of a person's knowledge depends on a number of factors, especially that person's level of expertise and experience, either direct (through personal observation) or indirect (through study), with the subject at hand.

Just as you generally cannot tell merely by looking at someone whether he or she is speaking truthfully, objectively, and accurately, you can't judge his or her knowledge or expertise by looking at surface features. A British-sounding scientist may appear more knowledgeable than a scientist who speaks, say, with a Texas drawl, but his or her accent, height, gender, ethnicity, or clothing doesn't have much to do with a person's knowledge. In the municipal park in our town, it can be difficult to distinguish the people who teach at the university from the people who live in the park, based on physical appearance.

So, then, how do you judge a person's **expertise**? Education and experience are often the most important factors, followed by accomplishments, reputation, and position, in no particular order. It is not always easy to evaluate the credentials of an expert, and credentials vary considerably from one field to another. Still, there are some useful guidelines worth mentioning.

Education includes, but is not strictly limited to, formal education—the possession of degrees from established institutions of learning. (Some “doctors” of this and that received their diplomas from mail-order houses that advertise on matchbook covers. The title “doctor” is not automatically a qualification.)

Experience—both the kind and the amount—is an important factor in expertise. Experience is important if it is relevant to the issue at hand, but the mere fact that someone has been on the job for a long time does not automatically make him or her good at it.

Real Life

War-Making Policies and Interested Parties

In the 1960s, the secretary of defense supplied carefully selected information to President Lyndon Johnson and to the Congress. Would the Congress have passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized the beginning of the Vietnam War, if its members had known that the secretary of defense was determined to begin hostilities there? We don't know, but certainly they and the president should have been more suspicious if they had known this fact. Would President Bush and his administration have been so anxious to make war on Iraq if they had known that Ahmad Chalabi, one of their main sources of information about that country and its ruler, Saddam Hussein, was a very interested party? (He hoped to be the next ruler of Iraq if Hussein were overthrown, and much of his information turned out to be false or exaggerated.) We don't know that either, of course. But it's possible that more suspicion of interested parties may have slowed our commencement of two costly wars.

Accomplishments are an important indicator of someone's expertise but, once again, only when those accomplishments are directly related to the question at hand. A Nobel Prize winner in physics is not necessarily qualified to speak publicly about toy safety, public school education (even in science), or nuclear proliferation. The last issue may involve physics, it's true, but the political issues are the crucial ones, and they are not taught in physics labs.

A person's reputation is obviously very important as a criterion of his or her expertise. But reputations must be seen in a context; how much importance we should attach to somebody's reputation depends on the people among whom the person has that reputation. You may have a strong reputation as a pool player among the denizens of your local pool hall, but that doesn't necessarily put you in the same league with Allison Fisher. Among a group of people who know nothing about investments, someone who knows the difference between a 401(k) plan and a Roth IRA may seem like quite an expert. But you certainly wouldn't want to take investment advice from somebody simply on that basis.

Most of us have met people who were recommended as experts in some field but who turned out to know little more about that field than we ourselves knew. (Presumably, in such cases those doing the recommending knew even less about the subject, or they would not have been so quickly impressed.) By and large, the kind of reputation that counts most is the one a person has among other experts in his or her field of endeavor.

The positions people hold provide an indication of how well *somebody* thinks of them. The director of an important scientific laboratory, the head of an academic department at Harvard, the author of a work consulted by other experts—in each case the position itself is substantial evidence that the individual's opinion on a relevant subject warrants serious attention.

But expertise can be bought. Our earlier discussion of interested parties applies to people who possess real expertise on a topic as well as to the rest of us. Sometimes a person's position is an indication of what his or her opinion, expert or not, is likely to be. The opinion of a lawyer retained by the National Rifle Association, offered at a hearing on firearms and urban violence, should be scrutinized much more carefully (or at least viewed with more skepticism) than that of a witness from an independent firm or agency that has no stake in the outcome of the hearings. The former can be assumed to be an interested party, the latter not. It is too easy to lose objectivity where one's interests and concerns are at stake, even if one is *trying* to be objective.

Experts sometimes disagree, especially when the issue is complicated and many different interests are at stake. In these cases, a critical thinker is obliged to suspend judgment about which expert to endorse, unless one expert clearly represents a majority viewpoint among experts in the field or unless one expert can be established as more authoritative or less biased than the others.

Of course, majority opinions sometimes turn out to be incorrect, and even the most authoritative experts occasionally make mistakes. For example, various economics experts predicted good times ahead just before the Great Depression. The same was true for many advisors right up until the 2008 financial meltdown. Jim Denny, the manager of the Grand Ole Opry, fired Elvis Presley after one performance, stating that Presley wasn't going anywhere and ought to go back to driving a truck. A claim you accept because it represents the majority viewpoint or comes from the most authoritative expert may turn out to be thoroughly wrong. Nevertheless, take heart: At the time, you were

Real Life

Smoking and Not Paying Attention Can Be Deadly



David Pawlik called the fire department in Cleburne, Texas, in July to ask if the "blue flames" he and his wife were seeing every time she lit a cigarette were dangerous, and an inspector said he would be right over and for Mrs. Pawlik not to light another cigarette. However, anxious about the imminent inspection, she lit up and was killed in the subsequent explosion. (The home was all electric, but there had been a natural gas leak underneath the yard.)

—Fort Worth Star Telegram, July 11, 2007

News of the Weird <<http://groups.google.com/group/NewsOfTheWeird/>>

Sometimes it is *crucial* that you take the word of an expert.

rationality justified in accepting the majority viewpoint as the most authoritative claim. The reasonable position is the one that agrees with the most authoritative opinion but allows for enough open-mindedness to change if the evidence changes.

Finally, we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that whatever qualifies someone as an expert in one field automatically qualifies that person in other areas. Being a top-notch programmer, for example, surely would not be an indication of top-notch management skills. Indeed, many programmers get good at what they do by shying away from dealing with other people—or so

the stereotype runs. Being a good campaigner does not always translate into being a good office-holder, as anyone who observes politics knows. Even if the intelligence and skill required to become an expert in one field could enable someone to become an expert in any field—which is doubtful—having the ability to become an expert is not the same as actually being an expert. Claims put forth by experts about subjects outside their fields are not automatically more acceptable than claims put forth by nonexperts.

List as many irrelevant factors as you can think of that people often mistake for signs of a person's truthfulness (for example, the firmness of a handshake).

Exercise 4-3

List as many irrelevant factors as you can think of that people often mistake for signs of expertise on the part of an individual (for example, appearing self-confident).

Exercise 4-4

Expertise doesn't transfer automatically from one field to another: Being an expert in one area does not automatically qualify a person as an expert (or even as competent) in other areas. Is it the same with dishonesty? Many people think dishonesty does transfer, that being dishonest in one area automatically discredits that person in all areas. For example, when Bill Clinton lied about having sexual encounters with his intern, some said he couldn't be trusted about anything.

Exercise 4-5

If someone is known to have been dishonest about one thing, should we automatically be suspicious of his or her honesty regarding other things? Discuss.

1. In a sentence, describe the crucial difference between an interested party and a disinterested party.
2. Which of the two parties mentioned in item 1 should generally be considered more trustworthy? Why?

Exercise 4-6

- ▲ Suppose you're in the market for a new television set, and you're looking for advice as to what to buy. Identify which of the following persons/subjects is likely to be an interested party and which is not.

Exercise 4-7

1. a flyer from a local store that sells televisions
2. the *Consumer Reports* website
3. a salesman at a local electronics store
4. the Sony website
5. an article in a major newspaper about television sets, including some rankings of brands

Now let's say you've narrowed your search to two brands: LG and Panasonic. Which of the following are more likely interested parties?

6. a friend who owns an LG set

7. a friend who used to own a Panasonic and now owns an LG
8. a salesperson at a store that sells both Panasonic and LG

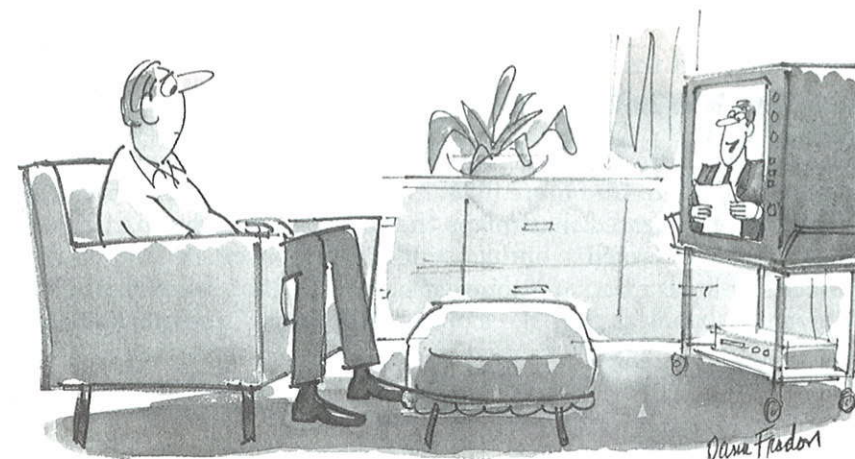
CREDIBILITY AND THE NEWS MEDIA

You may have heard that newspapers and the print media in general have fallen on hard times in recent years. It's true: many newspapers are in bankruptcy, with advertising revenue falling 23 percent between 2006 and 2009 and one out of five newspaper journalists losing their jobs between 2001 and 2009.* Much of the losses in both the print media and in broadcast television have been the result of more and more people turning to the Internet for their news and information. During 2008, consumption of news on the Internet increased by some 19 percent, and it has no doubt expanded hugely since. Strangely enough, though, as more and more people turn to the web for news, they give it very low marks for credibility. On the other hand, according to the Pew Project report for 2009, leading newspapers and television news operations had stable credibility ratings during the past presidential election year. However, the ratings held stable at a level that was already pretty low. When evaluating seven print media sources, an average of only 19 percent of those polled said they "believe all or most" of what they read. CNN, which topped the list in believability among television sources, came in at only 30 percent. Why is the level of confidence in our media so low? Let's look at some likely factors.

Consolidation of Media Ownership

Although it is not well known to most citizens, one reason the quality of news available has decreased is that the media have become controlled by fewer and fewer corporations, the result of many mergers and buyouts over the past three or so decades. Since 2001, when the Federal Communications Commission loosened the regulations regarding ownership of newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, the concentration of media in fewer and fewer hands has been accelerating. From thousands of independent media outlets in the mid-twentieth century, media ownership dropped to only fifty companies by 1983. By late 2004, approximately 90 percent of all media companies in the United States were controlled by just five companies: Time Warner (Warner Bros., Time, Inc., HBO, CNN, etc.), Disney (ABC, ESPN, Miramax Films, etc.), News Corp. (Fox Television, Wall Street Journal, New York Post, etc.), General Electric (NBC, Universal Studios, A & E Television, etc.), and Viacom (Paramount Pictures, MTV, Comedy Central, etc.). The subsidiaries listed in parentheses are only a tiny portion of these companies' holdings. No matter what you see on television, the great likelihood is that one or more of these companies had a hand in producing it or getting it onto your screen. The fewer hands that control the media, the easier it is for the news we get to be "managed"—either by the owners themselves or by their commercial advertisers or even, as we'll next see, by the government.

**The State of the News Media*, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, a biennial report, from which we draw heavily in this section.



"Those are the headlines, and we'll be back in a moment to blow them out of proportion."

© The New Yorker Collection 1991 Dana Fradon from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

Government Management of the News

For a while there, our only known source of *fake* news was Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*. But the federal government got into the fake news business as well. In recent years, a number of fake news reports, paid for by the government, have appeared on television touting the virtues of government schemes from the prescription drug program to airport safety to education programs. No criticism of the programs was included, and no mention was made that these were not legitimate independent news reports but rather were produced by the very same governmental departments that produced the policies in question.

These practices provide material for stations that cannot afford to produce a full plate of news themselves, which includes many, many stations across the country. Unfortunately, many viewers accept as news what is essentially official propaganda.

Leaving aside news reporting, problems also crop up on the op-ed page. Opinion and editorial pages and television commentaries are usually presumed to present the opinions of the writers or speakers who write or speak in them. But, as it turned out, some of those are bought and paid for as well. Our favorite example turned up in 2005: Syndicated columnist Michael McManus was paid \$10,000 by the Department of Health and Human Services for writing positively about one of its programs. Ironically enough, his column is entitled "Ethics and Religion."

The military has its own methods for managing the media, from not allowing photographs to be taken of the coffins of slain American soldiers when they are sent home from Iraq to the more elaborately produced example seen in the box on p. 125, "Saving Private Lynch." Sometimes management takes the form of simple suppression of news, as when it took a whistle-blower to finally make public the video of a 2007 helicopter attack that killed a news photographer, his driver, and several others.

Bias Within the Media

It is commonly said that the media is biased politically. Conservatives are convinced that it has a liberal bias and liberals are convinced the bias favors conservatives.

The usual basis for the conservative assessment is that, generally speaking, reporters and editors are more liberal than the general population. Indeed, several polls have indicated that this is the case. On the other hand, the publishers and owners of media outlets tend to be conservative—not surprisingly, since they have an orientation that places a higher value on the bottom line: They are in business to make a profit. A book by Eric Alterman* argues

In the Media

Jumping to Conclusions in the News



On March 29, 2010, Fox Nation, the Fox News website, put up a story about a tragedy in Antarctica:

Famed global warming activist James Schneider and a journalist friend were both found frozen to death on Saturday, about 90 miles from the South Pole Station, by the pilot of a ski plane practicing emergency evacuation procedures.

Well, Fox Nation was a bit too quick to jump on a story that fairly dripped with irony—a frozen global warming activist, indeed. However, the joke turned out to be on Fox: they had gotten the story from *ecoEnquirer.com*, a satirical website featuring spoof articles—James Schneider was a made-up name, not a real person. (Other headlines at the site: “Court Orders Fisherman to Apologize to Eagle,” “Penguins Fed Up with Media Attention.”)

* *What Liberal Bias?* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

In the Media

Saving Private Lynch

Just after midnight on April 2, 2003, a battle group of Marine Rangers and Navy SEALs descended in helicopters on the Iraqi town of Nasiriyah. With shouts of “Go, go, go!” and rifle fire, they charged the hospital where Private Jessica Lynch was being held. The 19-year-old supply clerk was put on a stretcher and carried from the hospital to the choppers, and the unit was up and away as quickly as it had come. The entire scene was captured by military cameramen using night-vision cameras.

Eight days earlier, when Private Lynch's unit had taken a wrong turn and become separated from its convoy, it was apparently attacked by Iraqi fighters. According to the story in the *Washington Post*, Lynch put up a defiant stand against the attackers and “sustained multiple gunshot wounds” and was stabbed while she “fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers . . . firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition.” The paper cited a U.S. military official as saying “she was fighting to the death.” This story was picked up by news outlets all over the world.

The ambush and the rescue sound like something out of *Black Hawk Down* or maybe a Bruce Willis movie. It also came at a time when the military was looking for some good press out of the Iraq invasion. Like many stories that seem too good to be true, this one was too good to be true.

At the hospital in Germany to which Private Lynch was flown, a doctor said her injuries included a head wound, a spinal injury, fractures in both legs and one arm, and an ankle injury. Apparently, none of her injuries were caused by bullets or shrapnel, according to the medical reports. A doctor at the Nasiriyah hospital where she was initially treated said Lynch suffered injuries consistent with an automobile wreck.

The rescue itself may have been rather seriously overdone. Quoted in the BBC News World Edition, Dr. Anmar Uday, who worked at the hospital, said, “We were surprised. Why do this? There was no military, there were no soldiers in the hospital. It was like a Hollywood film. They made a show for the American attack on the hospital—action movies like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan.”

The BBC referred to the “Saving Private Lynch” story as “one of the most stunning pieces of news management ever conceived.” We shall probably never know the truth of the details, but it seems clear that the episode was stage-managed to some extent: It isn't likely an accident that the Special Forces just “happened to have” an American flag to drape over Ms. Lynch as she was carried to the helicopter on her stretcher.

that the “liberal media” has always been a myth and that, at least in private, well-known conservatives like Patrick Buchanan and William Kristol are willing to admit it. On the other hand, Bernard Goldberg, formerly of CBS, argues that the liberal bias of the press is a fact.*

Making an assessment on this score is several miles beyond our scope here. But it is important to be aware that a reporter or a columnist or a broadcaster who draws conclusions without presenting sufficient evidence

* *Bias*, (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2001).

Bias in the universities?
According to CNN news anchor Lou Dobbs, citing a *Washington Post* survey, 72 percent of collegiate faculty across the country say they are liberal; 15 percent say they are conservative. At elite universities, 87 percent say they are liberal, and 3 percent say they are conservative.

is no more to be believed than some guy from down the street, even if the conclusions happen to correspond nicely to your own bias—indeed, *especially* if they correspond to your own bias!

What is important to remember is that there are many forces at work in the preparation of news besides a desire to publish or broadcast the whole truth. That said, our view is that the major network news organizations are generally credible, exceptions like those noted above notwithstanding. ABC, CBS, and NBC do a generally credible job, as does CNN, and the Public Broadcasting System and National Public Radio are generally excellent. Also in our view, the printed media, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other major newspapers are generally credible, even though mistakes are sometimes made here as well. News magazines fall in the same category: usually credible but with occasional flaws.

The rise of the cable news networks has been an influence on what gets broadcast as news. CNN (which stands, unsurprisingly, for “Cable News Network”) began the trend in 1980 as the first twenty-four-hours-a-day news broadcaster. Fox News and MSNBC now also compete for viewers’ attention both day and night. While spreading across the hours of the day, these networks have also spread across the political spectrum. You can now find “news” that satisfies nearly any political bias. What’s more, with the need to fill screens for so many hours, the notion of what actually counts as news has had to be expanded. The result has affected not just the cable networks but traditional news programs as well: “Feature stories” from prison life to restaurant kitchen tours take up more and more space that used to be devoted to so-called hard news. One of our northern California newspapers, the *Sacramento Bee*, recently did a story on how “silly news” was taking up more and more space in local news programs. Ben Bagdikian, author and former dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, has pointed out that a commercial for Pepsi Cola seems to connect better after a fluff piece or a sitcom than after a serious piece on, say, massacres in Rwanda or an ambush in Afghanistan.

It would be difficult to boil down our advice regarding accepting claims from the news media, but it would certainly include keeping the following points in mind:

1. Like the rest of us, people in the news media sometimes make mistakes; they sometimes accept claims with insufficient evidence or without confirming the credibility of a source.
2. The media are subject to pressure and sometimes to manipulation from government and other news sources.
3. The media, with few exceptions, are driven in part by the necessity to make a profit, and this can bring pressure from advertisers, owners, and managers.

Finally, we might remember that the news media are to a great extent a reflection of the society at large. If we the public are willing to get by with superficial, sensationalist, or manipulated news, then we can rest assured that, eventually, that’s all the news we’ll get.

Talk Radio

On the surface, talk radio seems to offer a wealth of information not available in news reports from conventional sources. And many talk radio hosts scour traditional legitimate news sources for information relevant to their political agenda, and to the extent that they document the source, which they often do, they provide listeners with many interesting and important facts. But radio hosts from all sides are given to distortion, misplaced emphasis, and bias with regard to selection of which facts to report. And, really, the shouting gives us a headache.

Advocacy Television

We mentioned earlier that some cable networks have moved left while others have moved right on the political spectrum, so the news you can expect from them comes with a predictable slant. This is good insofar as it exposes people to opinions different from their own; it is not so good insofar as it simply reinforces what the viewer already believes, especially if there is no evidence offered in support of the opinions.

The Comedy Central channel features *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, which generally approaches the news from a leftish (and completely zany) viewpoint, and *The Colbert Report*, in which Steve Colbert, in reality a liberal, plays the part of a right-wing host. (Before the show, Colbert reminds his guests that “My on-air character is an idiot.”) It is ironic, because he appears on the Comedy Central channel, but when Jon Stewart isn’t going for the laughs, we think he may be the best, and the toughest, interviewer currently on television. He’s doubtless tougher on guests from the right than the left, but he takes no guff from either.

MSNBC offers *The Ed Show*, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, and *The Rachel Maddow Show*, all of which offer a liberal perspective on the news of the day, and all of which editorialize from that perspective.

Fox News features Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck, who represent various conservative constituencies and do something similar from the other side.

We could write an entire chapter on this subject, and maybe, given the influence the media have on American public opinion these days, we should. We could discuss other channels and other organizations (e.g., Accuracy in Media on the right and MoveOn.org on the left, to name just two of a thousand), but we think you get the idea: We remind you to always listen with a skeptical ear (and maybe a jaundiced eye) to political news and commentary. We know it’s difficult, but it’s important to be especially careful about accepting claims (without good evidence), and in particular, those with which you sympathize.

The Internet, Generally

It is getting to be difficult to overestimate the importance of the Internet—that amalgamation of electronic lines and connections that allows nearly anyone with a computer and a modem to link up with nearly any other similarly equipped person on the planet. Although the Internet offers great benefits,

In the Media

Evaluating Website Credibility: A Tip from the Professionals

In a study done a few years ago,* it was determined that when it comes to evaluating the credibility of a website, experts in a field go about it much differently than do ordinary consumers. Since, as we've indicated, credibility varies hugely on the web, we must do the best job we can in assessing this feature of any website we consider important. Unfortunately, as was shown in the study just mentioned, most ordinary visitors do a much less effective job of evaluating credibility than do people knowledgeable about the field. In particular, while professionals attend most carefully to the information given at a website, most of the rest of us pay more attention to its visual appeal. Layout, typography, color schemes, and animation affect the general public's estimate of a site's credibility—54 percent of comments are about these features—whereas the professionals' interest is more in the quality of the site's references, the credentials of individuals mentioned, and so on. Only 16 percent of professional evaluators' comments had to do with a website's visual design.

What should we take from this? A general rule: Don't be taken in by how visually attractive a website might be. A flashy design with attractive colors and design features is no substitute for information that is backed up by references and put forward by people with appropriate credentials.

* Experts vs. Online Consumers, a Consumer Reports WebWatch research report, October, 2009. (www.consumerwebwatch.org).

the information it provides must be evaluated with even *more* caution than information from the print media, radio, or television. We presented two stories at the beginning of the chapter that show just how wrong things can go.

There are basically two kinds of information sources on the Internet. The first consists of commercial and institutional sources; the second, of individual and group sites on the World Wide Web. In the first category, we include sources like the Lexis-Nexis facility, as well as the online services provided by newsmagazines, large electronic news organizations, and government institutions. The second category includes everything else you'll find on the web—an amazing assortment of good information, entertainment of widely varying quality, hot tips, advertisements, come-ons, fraudulent offers, and outright lies.

Just as the fact that a claim appears in print or on television doesn't make it true, so it is for claims you run across online. Keep in mind that the information you get from a source is only as good as that source. The Lexis-Nexis information collection is an excellent asset for medium-depth investigation of a topic; it includes information gathered from a wide range of print sources, especially newspapers and magazines, with special collections in areas like the law. But the editorials you turn up there are no more likely to be accurate, fair-minded, or objective than the ones you read in the newspapers—which is where they first appeared anyhow.

Wikipedia

Possibly the fastest-growing source of information in terms of both its size and its influence is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. "Wiki" refers to a collaborative voluntary association (although the word seems to have been coined by a programmer named Ward Cunningham from the Hawaiian term "wiki-wiki"—"quick-quick"). Begun in 2001 by Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales, the encyclopedia's content and structure are determined by its users. This accounts for its major strengths as well as its major weaknesses. Because there are many thousands of contributors, the coverage is immense. There are well over three million articles in English alone, and more than two hundred other languages and dialects are also employed. Because access is available to virtually everybody who has a computer and modem, coverage is often very fast; articles often appear within hours of breaking events.

But also because of this wide access, the quality of the articles varies tremendously. You should be especially wary of recent articles; they are more likely to contain uncorrected errors that will eventually disappear as knowledgeable people visit the page and put right whatever mistakes are present. Not just factual errors, but bias and omission can affect the quality of material found on Wikipedia's pages. Occasionally, a writer will do a thorough job of reporting the side of an issue that he favors (or knows more about, or both), and the other side will go underreported or even unmentioned. Over time, these types of errors tend to get corrected after visits by individuals who favor the other side of the issue. But at any given moment, in any given Wikipedia entry, there is the possibility of mistakes, omissions, citation errors, and plain old vandalism.

Our advice: We think Wikipedia is an excellent starting point in a search for knowledge about a topic. We use it frequently. But you should always check the sources provided in what you find there; it should never be your sole source of information if the topic is important to you or is to become part of an assignment to be turned in for a class. That said, we add that articles dealing with technical or scientific subjects tend to be more reliable (although errors are often more difficult to spot), with an error rate about the same as that found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.^{*} Such articles and, as mentioned, articles that have been around for a while can be extremely helpful in whatever project you are engaged in.

Now we come to blogs. Blogs are simply journals, the vast majority of them put up by individuals, that are left open to the public on an Internet site. Originally more like public diaries dealing with personal matters, they now encompass specialties of almost every imaginable sort. Up to three million blogs were believed to be up and running by the end of 2004, with a new one added every 5.8 seconds (ClickZ.com, "The Blogosphere by the Numbers"). Nobody knows how many there are now.

You can find blogs that specialize in satire, parody, and outright fabrication. They represent all sides of the political spectrum, including some sides that we wouldn't have thought existed at all. The Drudge Report is a standard on the right; the Huffington Post is equally well known on the left. On a blog site, like any other website that isn't run by a responsible organization such as

Blogs

*"Internet Encyclopedias Go Head to Head," by Jim Giles, *Nature*, December 12, 2005.