

<b>Peter O'Connor</b>	<b>Introduction to Journalism</b>
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>Getting your facts straight</b>
<p><b>1.</b> “If I said yes, that would then suggest that that might be the only place where it might be done which would not be accurate, necessarily accurate. It might also not be inaccurate, but I'm disinclined to mislead anyone. There's another way to phrase that and that is that the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. It is basically saying the same thing in a different way. Simply because you do not have evidence that something does exist does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist.” ~ Donald Rumsfeld on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.</p> <p>Donald Rumsfeld was the 13th Secretary of Defense under Gerald Ford, 1975–1977; and 21st Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush, 2001–2006. In the ‘fog of war’, journalists depend on official briefings. If the above is an acceptable standard of truth for a government official of high standing, it's not surprising that it has taken some time to get the facts about the invasion of Iraq into news reports. But journalism is the responsibility of journalists and most try to get the facts right, though some just make it up. Some journalists are better described as ‘newshounds’: they can sniff out all the facts but they simply can't write. And there are editors who run stories which are short on facts but long on implication: are they taking orders from elsewhere or are they just pandering to prejudice and fear?</p>	



## **2. MAKE IT FAST, MAKE IT FIRST AND MAKE IT ACCURATE (*make it up*)**

**YOU'LL STILL SEE** this little motto pasted up on the wall in newsrooms and editing suites and behind the editor's desk. The editor wants the journalists to meet deadlines, they want the news you have uncovered to be an exclusive – a scoop – and they want it to be accurate. What you will also see scribbled in hand after these stern injunctions is the half-joke ‘make it up’. Very few journalists make it up, but quite a few will use language that gets their story out of the area of libel or, put more simply, telling lies about someone and injuring their reputation in the process – this can be very costly in some courts, especially in Britain and France. Here are some common ‘get-out clauses’:

-‘**SET TO**’ – as in ‘Government set to cut taxes’. (It may never happen, but if it does, you saw it here first).

-‘**IT WAS CLAIMED LAST NIGHT**’ puts the facts that came before in an unattributable perspective. You don't say who made the claim: it could have been your mother-in-law. After all, it's only a claim: it's not a promise or an assurance that can go ‘on the record’.

-‘**PLANS**’, e.g. ‘Council plans to deny housing benefits to asylum seekers’. When challenged, the journalist can say that the Council did plan to deny benefits but then changed its mind. So ‘It was true when I wrote it.’

-‘**UP TO**’. ‘Up to 4 million attended the march against war held yesterday in central London’. Nobody knows the exact figures when there's a mass demonstration. The police estimates are always lower than the media estimates: the media want to imply great numbers while at the same time referring to fewer, just in case actual figures exist.

**3. ‘ COMMENT IS FREE BUT FACTS ARE SACRED’~ C.P. SCOTT, 1921.** Scott edited *The Manchester Guardian* for 57 years. What this means is you can say what you like in commentary articles – leaders, features, op-eds (bylined columns) – but that you have to stick to the facts when you write the news. The journalist Kim Fletcher recalls his early years as a cub reporter in the provinces when he’d be sent to interview an elderly local couple who were celebrating their Golden Wedding: the fact that they’d been married for fifty years. The usual headline would be something like, ‘Tom and Dolly celebrate fifty golden years’. Entirely predictable – and it didn’t have to be accurate, because although those fifty years of marriage may not have been so very ‘golden’, ‘golden’ was a vague enough term to lie within the area of comment, not news – and ‘Tom and Dolly’ would have been the last to object (Fletcher 2005: 75).

**BUT THE NEWS IS DIFFERENT** Carter-Ruck & Co. are ‘the pre-eminent media lawyers in the UK’, that is, the leading libel law firm. If you think your reputation has been falsely damaged, make an appointment with them. Their charges are some of the highest in the UK, but they often win. Any news organisation that injures the good name and reputation of a Carter-Ruck client – such as, for example, Jade Goody of *Big Brother* fame – has had to pay ‘substantial’ sums of money or ‘damages’. Here’s the Carter-Ruck website: <http://www.carter-ruck.com/index.html>

**4. ACCURACY IS RELATIVE:** In between total accuracy and total inaccuracy the degree of objective fact varies enormously. The truth is not an absolute in journalism, any more than it is in history. You may have a totally reliable inside source, someone inside the palace or inside the cabinet with documentary evidence. You may have a statement on film or on tape. But the source may still be inaccurate and the documentation may just be a discussion paper or it may be an early draft, since revised or updated.

**IN 2003 LORD HUTTON** chaired an enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of the Government scientific adviser, Dr. David Kelly, who committed suicide after learning that that he was to be revealed as the source of BBC stories about the Blair cabinet ‘sexing up’ British intelligence reports regarding Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. The stories written and broadcast about the government had been extremely critical. Andrew Gilligan, a BBC journalist, had openly accused the Blair cabinet of coercing the intelligence community into making statements in the ‘Iraq Dossier’ that exaggerated the military danger posed by Iraq, in particular the ‘45 minute attack’ claim, which Tony Blair made in the House of Commons. In the end Hutton absolved the government of any wrongdoing, and both Gilligan and the Director of the BBC, Greg Dyke, resigned. For the BBC, the real problem was that Andrew Gilligan depended too heavily on one source, Dr. Kelly, and Dr. Kelly killed himself. Here’s some of the background, with speculation as to the cause of Kelly’s death: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkuEtYQOFpY>

**THE WATERGATE CONSPIRACY** made heroes of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, but they would never have had a story without the help of their main source, ‘Deep Throat’. ‘Deep Throat’, later revealed as an FBI agent, did not expose the wrongdoing and corruption at the heart of Nixon administration on moral grounds but because his

organisation had been slighted by Nixon's team and because of inter-agency rivalries. So Watergate wasn't quite the moral crusade we enjoy in the film *All the President's Men*. Woodward and Bernstein's other source was Martha 'the Mouth' Mitchell. Martha was so bored with her husband John, Nixon's Attorney-general, that she started telling reporters everything she knew about Watergate (and a lot that she didn't know) in secret calls from her bathroom telephone. The moral of the story is: if you're looking for leads, don't look to the conscience-stricken, look for someone who bears a grudge.

**5. WHAT'S THE REAL STORY?** See handout: *The Japan Times* [JT] on the North Korean nuclear test crisis:

**Page 1:**

- A.** Oct 4: N. Korea plans nuclear test.
- B.** Oct 4: New UN Secretary-General likely to be South Korean FM
- C.** Oct 11: Japan's nuclear potential
- D.** Oct 11: International condemnation of N. Korea's nuclear test

**Page 2:**

- E.** Oct 18: N. Korea says UN sanctions constitute declaration of war
- E2:** Oct 18: *JT* runs Oct. 15 *Washington Post* leading article on tests
- F.** Oct 18: China urges restraint
- G.** October 25: Koreans arrested for uranium trade in Nov. 2004
- H.** Oct. 25: NHK radio gets abduction prod from Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry [Can this be related to G and E2? For JT history, see masthead p2 top right]

**6. Handout PAGE 2: JAPAN TIMES: OCT. 25 FRONT PAGE LEAD: G**

**Koreans arrested for uranium trade (AFP-Jiji). Numbered paragraphs:**

1. **ETHNIC KOREANS ATTEMPTING TO SELL ENRICHED URANIUM**
2. On SEPT 11: Korea's leading daily the *Chosun Ilbo* reports the September 11 arrest in Beijing of **CHANG AND CHUNG** and JT repeats this report as front page lead but provides little in the way of supplementary information or independent confirmation
3. Even the Chinese Foreign Ministry has no information
5. Apparently Zhang Xueliang and Chung were caught trying to sell **970 GRAMS OF ENRICHED URANIUM** which they had bought from an **UNIDENTIFIED SELLER** from a **REMOTE AREA** nearly two years earlier in NOVEMBER 2004
6. JT quotes *Chosun Ilbo* quoting Beijing police source that the **ENRICHED URANIUM** these **ETHNIC KOREANS** were trying to sell was **PRESUMED TO BE RUSSIAN-MADE**
7. However the **URANIUM COULD HAVE COME FROM N. KOREA**. WHY? BECAUSE **MANY ETHNIC KOREANS IN CHINA ENGAGE IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITY WITH NORTH KOREANS**
8. Anecdotal evidence by *Chosun Ilbo*: an **UNNAMED SOURCE** tells *Chosun Ilbo* that he was approached by **SOMEONE** in an **UNNAMED** Chinese border town who said, "**HAVE ENRICHED URANIUM SMUGGLED FROM NORTH KOREA**"
9. Some clarification: It was **NOT KNOWN HOW ENRICHED THE URANIUM WAS** despite statements in paragraphs 1, 5 and 6. in this para (9) JT quotes *Chosun Ilbo* that 15-17 kg. of enriched

or highly enriched uranium would be needed for a bomb. But para 5 says Zhang Xueliang and Chung were trying to sell **970 GRAMS OF ENRICHED URANIUM**

**10. In 2002 US ACCUSED N KOREA OF RUNNING A CLANDESTINE NUCLEAR PROGRAMME**

**11-12. HONG KONG DETAINS RUSTING, EMPTY N. KOREAN VESSEL ON SUSPICION OF BREACHING 25 REGULATIONS**

**13. BUT HONG KONG CUSTOMS CANNOT CONFIRM DETENTION OF SHIP**

**THIS STORY** is based on second-hand, outdated reports, themselves based on flimsy, unsourced evidence. It certainly doesn't appear to merit a front page lead. On the day it ran the story, the Japan Times also reported an announcement by a Japanese government official that he intended to **order NHK to focus more on the Japanese kidnapped to North Korea**. Under the circumstances, this story may have been the best the JT could come up with.

**THE REAL STORY** may have had less to do with Koreans selling uranium in unnamed border towns to unnamed persons than with China demonstrating a new determination to uncouple its foreign policy from North Korea and Kim Jong Il, the loose cannon running the house next door. Since then, the Chinese premier has addressed the Japanese Diet and shown a willingness to move towards positive partnership with Japan in East Asia. With South Korea's ex-Foreign Minister as the new UN Secretary-General, we may be witnessing the beginnings of an informal East Asian power bloc, not only at the United Nation but in the world at large.

## **7. Tales of the unexpected: no sources, total accuracy~**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7djZzC6FKhw>

Jambo, Jersey Zoo's world famous and much loved silverback gorilla had a truly remarkable life. He was born in Basle Zoo in Switzerland in 1961. He arrived at Jersey Zoo on the 27th April 1972.

On a busy Sunday afternoon in August 1986, an incredulous public witnessed Levan Merritt, a small boy from Luton, UK, fall into the gorilla enclosure at Jersey Zoo. Levan was with his father. At the one moment when his father wasn't watching him, Levan leaned over for a closer look at the gorillas and fell 25 feet onto the concrete at the edge of their enclosure.

Led by Jambo, the gorillas went to investigate the new arrival. As spectators yelled "Oh my God" and "Get away, you brute!" Jambo descended the grassy slope toward Levan's unconscious figure, reached down and gently touched the boy's pale skin. Then he brought his hand back and sniffed his fingers for scent. When another gorilla, Rafiki, began bounding close to the child, Jambo took up a protective position near the still prone Levan. But when Levan regained consciousness and started crying, Jambo suddenly raised himself on all fours, looked up at the shouting crowd and retreated to the gorilla house.

As the doors closed on Jambo, Hobbit, an unrelated seven year old male, escaped from the gorilla house and began rushing towards Levan and one of the zoo keepers who entered the enclosure and held Hobbit at bay until a rescuer finally winched Levan to safety.

