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‘Caliphate’ and the Problem of Testimony

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In 2004, the *New York Times* [apologised](#) for its misleading reporting on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. After an internal review, the *Times* acknowledged the swamp of mistakes that resulted in the spread of misinformation: journalists did not confirm the “veracity of sources”, editors were “too intent on rushing scoops into the paper”, articles “based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display”, and “follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried [and sometimes] there was no follow-up at all”.

The consequences were significant. Given the global reach of the newspaper, the *Times* not only instilled false beliefs in the American public, but across the world. Worse still, the misinformation may have impacted policy-making at the highest levels: [Bush administration](#) officials cited false and misleading claims printed in the *Times* as evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

It is against this backdrop that we should assess Rukmini Callimachi’s 2018 podcast ‘[Caliphate](#)’, which aired interviews with Shehroze Chaudhry, a Canadian man who falsely claimed to have been an ISIS fighter. On December 18, the [Times recognised](#) that the podcast series fell short of journalistic standards and pointed to “institutional failures” as the root cause. But the damage was done: As with the weapons of mass destruction reporting, ‘[Caliphate](#)’, believed to be true, [informed policy debates](#).

While the weapons of mass destruction and ‘[Caliphate](#)’ reporting failures are different, the *Times*’ two misadventures share an important thread: each relied on faulty testimony. And we, the consumers of the news, trusted the testimony of the reporters because of the *Times*’ institutional credibility. In a field in which obtaining truth often depends on testimony, we need to understand how truth gets hooked onto the news to see where things went wrong for the *Times* and for us.

Knowledge, Testimony, and Trust

Much of what we know comes from testimony. In plain terms, knowledge transmission through testimony roughly translates to ‘I get knowledge from you when you tell me something true’. Testimony in this broader sense is different to what testimony means in a legal context—it need not happen under oath.

As philosopher John Greco explains in his [new book](#), *The Transmission of Knowledge*, not all examples of knowledge transmission through testimony require good inductive reasons. Compare the two cases that Greco introduces:

Case A. A mother tells her small child that there is milk in the refrigerator.

Case B. A job applicant tells you that he has relevant previous employment.

In case A, the hearer (the child) can believe straight away what she is told. Even if the mother ends up being mistaken (perhaps, unbeknownst to her, someone in the house finished the milk), we wouldn't suggest that the child should verify the mother's claims before accepting her testimony. Greco suggests that in case A, "something epistemically special is going on ... testimonial knowledge depends on a relationship between speaker and hearer that is present [in this case] but not in [the other]". In other words, there is something about the relationship between the speaker (the mother) and the hearer (the child) that renders it appropriate for the child to accept the mother's testimony on this issue at face value.

But in case B, it would be a mistake for the interviewer to believe the job applicant in the absence of good inductive reasons. If, for example, an interviewer never checked that the interviewee had a job they claimed they'd had, we would fault the interviewer for not doing their due diligence. There is no special relationship between the speaker (the interviewee) and the hearer (the interviewer) that renders it appropriate for the interviewer to accept the interviewee's claims on this issue at face value.

Problems arise when hearers mistake B cases for A cases; that is, hearers mistakenly believe solely on the basis of what the speaker said and don't ask for good inductive reasons even though they should.

'Journalists learning from sources' doesn't fit neatly into either A or B cases. On the one hand, journalists may come to rely on the testimony of sources when trust has been established. There are a variety of ways in which a source can be deemed credible, but it's not easy to cross every 't' and dot every 'i'. The journalist's trust in a source may play a critical role in getting a story off the ground.

But on the other hand, journalists who assume that they are hearing the truth solely on the basis of testimony are acting gullibility—an epistemic (and journalistic) vice. Journalists are allowed to ignore the rules of respectful deference to experts, to be abrasive, and to dig deeper. This isn't always an easy or popular move, but journalists who believe something simply because they're told haven't acted with the kind of rigour we expect.

While the Times and other media organisations have established clear and robust standards for reporting, not all of them are possible to meet consistently when the subject matter is opaque.

Verifying sources isn't so simple. Consider these two cases:

Case C. A testifies to B that it is 10:35am. B believes A because A has no reason to lie, but B double-checks the time on their phone just to be sure.

Case D. A testifies to B that something B has heard in the corridor is actually a Tagalog word meaning "p". B believes A because A is a native

speaker of Tagalog, and doesn't have a good way to double-check that A is right.

One significant difference between the two cases: the hearer's access to a particular domain of knowledge. In case C, checking that A's testimony was correct is easier than in case D (sure, you can pull up your first and go on google translate, but let's imagine that "p" is a word with a non-obvious tertiary meaning that doesn't show up in something like Google translate).

How do you check testimony when you don't have access to the relevant domain? Not easily. This issue is hard for journalists to deal with, especially when they are reporting from a war zone. In this context, there is a more prominent asymmetry because the speaker and hearer with respect to their access to the domain of knowledge at hand. It is no accident that both the weapons of mass destruction and 'Caliphate' failures come from foreign policy reporting.

Trusting people's testimony is a complex and fraught act, and sometimes journalists make mistakes. But when the mistakes are structural, not isolated examples, the consumers of the news have good reason to doubt the testimony of journalists.

The Fiduciary Basis of Knowledge

Just as journalists depend on the testimony of their sources to obtain information, we, the consumers of the news, depend on the testimony of journalists.

We trust journalists, editors, and newsroom leaders to get it right. When they don't, the well of public knowledge, from which we obtain our facts and 'commonsense', is depleted or dirtied. We feel misled, deceived, and angry, even if no one intended to do wrong by us. Our response is understandable because the stakes are high. As Muirhead and Rosenblum [explain](#), "the fiduciary basis of knowledge makes us vulnerable; if the community in which we place our trust gets it wrong or is corrupt, then what we take to be knowledge may be unjustified and erroneous". When journalists get it wrong, we—the people who believed the reporting—get it wrong.

While consumers of the news have some epistemic obligations—to distinguish between an opinion piece and a news article, for example—we are largely dependent on journalists for our knowledge of various domains, especially what's happening in places we, the average reader, will never be able to go to. It is therefore imperative that journalists make salient how certain they are that the information being conveyed is true.

Rukmini Callimachi and the *Times* failed to do this: the 'Caliphate' mistake represents the epistemic fracture in news production and dissemination. The 'Caliphate' episodes occasionally offer a skeptical assessment of the story being spun, but not in a manner that made it possible for the consumer of the news to get a grip on what was fact and what was fiction. We place too high a burden on the individual if we expect them to do the work of

differentiating verified facts and unsubstantiated claims when both are communicated in the same breath and tone.

The problem goes beyond misinformation but is still intimately connected to deception. The transition to a new form (podcasts) and the emergence of narrative reporting corroded the rituals that underpin how truth is hooked onto the news. As Ben Smith [explains](#), Ms. Callimachi's reporting came right when the paper was "in the midst of an evolution from the stodgy paper of record into a juicy collection of great narratives, on the web and streaming services." 'Caliphate' is part of a broader media phenomenon in which journalists blur news with commentary, analysis, and opinion, making the news sexier and more entertaining. The contours of the contemporary news environment are not only unknown and unfamiliar to many consumers of the news, but rapidly shifting and transforming. It is the responsibility of the *Times* to clearly, explicitly, and consistently delineate the news it knows to be true from that over which it is still in question in all mediums.

In the weapons of mass destruction reporting failure, the *Times* valued being first over being right. Today, the *Times* has shown that it prized entertainment over the integrity of its reporting and, in so doing, misled those of us who believed in the testimony of the *Times*' journalists. The *Times* will need to rethink its approach to ensure that a few years from now, we won't have to repeat this conversation once again. It will also need to reestablish trust. Until that happens, the next time the *Times* tells me there's milk in the fridge, I'll either check for myself or suspend belief.