Journalism

Figures current as of October 2026

How the news is chosen, reported, verified, written, edited, and defended in court — what journalism is and its numbers in 2026, how its rules were made, news judgment and the bias question, reporting from people and from records, verification and the fakes, writing and the edit, ethics, the law of the press, investigative reporting, the beats, the press around the world, artificial intelligence in the newsroom, and what to watch.

MODULE 1 — Foundations

Goal: Set the definition, the numbers, and the vocabulary.

What separates journalism from commentary, public relations, and content; the 2026 numbers on reporters, newsrooms, local news, audiences, and trust; who pays for reporting; and the working vocabulary — one event in four treatments, worked.

MODULE 2 — How the Rules Were Made

Goal: Trace each of today's rules to the case that made it.

Truth as a defense in the Zenger trial; the penny press, the wire, the interview, and the inverted pyramid; the muckrakers and Ida B. Wells's counts; objectivity as a method; the Pentagon Papers and Watergate; and the scandals that wrote today's standards — one failure taken apart, worked.

MODULE 3 — News Judgment, and the Bias Question

Goal: Understand how stories are chosen, and weigh the bias question.

The news values and the research on gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and framing; the distortions they produce — negativity, the horse race, false balance, whose stories get told; metrics as the new editor; and whether the press is politically biased, each side's case and the evidence — a metro desk's day, worked.

MODULE 4 — Reporting: People

Goal: Learn how reporters find, question, and protect sources.

Kinds of sources and how to weigh them; on the record, on background, and off the record; when to grant anonymity; the interview from preparation to follow-up; recording-consent laws; access against accountability; and protecting sources when phones can be searched — an accountability interview, worked.

MODULE 5 — Reporting: Records and Numbers

Goal: Learn where the records are and how to read the numbers.

Why documents outrank memories; the federal Freedom of Information Act and its nine exemptions; state records laws; the paper trails of courts, property, campaigns, companies, and charities; and the arithmetic reporters most often get wrong — a records request and a misleading number, worked.

MODULE 6 — Verification

Goal: Learn how claims, images, and videos are checked.

The discipline of verification and how it differs from fact-checking; the fact-checkers and the platforms' retreat from them; open-source methods from geolocation to shadows; synthetic media and the limits of detection; and the failures that taught the rules — a viral war video verified step by step, worked.

MODULE 7 — Writing and Editing the News

Goal: Learn the forms of news writing and what the edit checks.

The inverted pyramid, the lede, and the nut graf; attribution and quotations; style, headlines, and the forms of news from the brief to the live blog; writing for audio and video; the walls between news, opinion, and business; and the edit — council-meeting notes to a finished story, worked.

MODULE 8 — Ethics

Goal: Learn the codes and practice applying them.

The codes and their October 2026 revision; minimizing harm, from naming victims to removing old stories; independence and conflicts of interest; paying sources; deception and undercover reporting; and objectivity against moral clarity, each side's case and the evidence — five dilemmas decided under the codes, worked.

MODULE 9 — The Law of the Press

Goal: Learn the law that governs publishing and newsgathering.

Prior restraint and the right to publish what was lawfully obtained; broadcasting's exception; libel from *Sullivan* to President Trump's suits, and the argument over revisiting it; privacy and newsgathering; the reporter's privilege after the 2025 reversal and the January 2026 search; the Espionage Act; the fights over access; and copyright and artificial intelligence — a libel claim tested element by element, worked.

MODULE 10 — Investigative Journalism

Goal: Learn how investigations are built, what they cost, and what they change.

What makes an investigation, from the hypothesis to the confrontation letter; the classic investigations and what they changed; the collaborative model behind the Panama Papers; who pays for accountability reporting and why markets underproduce it; and the 2026 Pulitzer winners — one investigation from tip to impact, worked.

MODULE 11 — The Beats

Goal: Learn to read beat coverage critically.

Government and politics, from city hall to the statehouse; police and courts; business and economics; and science and health — each beat's sources, documents, and classic errors — one story from each beat, read critically, worked.

MODULE 12 — Journalism Around the World

Goal: Compare press systems and the dangers reporters face.

Press freedom in numbers; the systems — public service, state-directed, and captured; the tools of pressure, from foreign-agent laws and prison to spyware and closed borders; the war correspondent and the fixer; and journalism in exile — one event as three systems would cover it, worked.

MODULE 13 — The Machine in the Newsroom

Goal: Understand what artificial intelligence changes in the craft.

Artificial intelligence as a reporting tool, from transcription to satellite analysis; as an author, and the failures that followed; as a distributor that answers instead of linking; as a customer and a defendant in the fight over licensing; and what does not change — a machine-assisted investigation and a machine fabrication side by side, worked.

MODULE 14 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

Goal: Weigh the evidence and name the dates.

The argument in one page; what research finds when local reporting disappears; the contradictions of 2026; two contested questions — who counts as a journalist, and whether the public should pay for reporting — each side's case and the evidence; the dated watch list; and the last word.

A note on the ground. Journalism is the one subject in which the sources are also the subject, and many of them are parties to the fights this course describes. Figures come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Pew Research Center, Northwestern University's Medill School, Gallup, the Reuters Institute, Reporters Without Borders, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the legal record from court filings and rulings. Contested questions are argued as their advocates argue them, weighed against the evidence, and given the course's own reading once. Lawsuits and appeals are described as they stood on October 8, 2026, and the course says where a case was still pending.

Module 1 — Foundations

What Journalism Is, in Numbers and Words

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism* (4th edition, 2021) — the standard account of what journalism is for and the discipline it requires

Reference: The Bureau of Labor Statistics' occupational employment survey (each spring), Northwestern University's Medill *State of Local News* report (each fall), and the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* (each June), the sources for the figures throughout

1a. What Journalism Is

Journalism is the work of finding out what is true about matters the public needs to know, and reporting it in a form the public can check. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, whose book is the field's standard statement of first principles, put the core in one line: "the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification." Everything else in the craft — the sourcing rules, the attribution, the editing, the corrections — exists to make that discipline reliable.

The definition rules things out as well as in. Commentary argues from facts that others gathered; it can be valuable, but it is not reporting. Public relations communicates for a client, and its loyalty runs to the client rather than to the reader. Propaganda serves a state or a cause whether or not its claims are true. Content, the broad category of material made to hold attention, may contain facts, but nobody stands behind them. What separates journalism from all four is method and loyalty, not medium: a newsletter can be journalism, and a newspaper column often is not.

Kovach and Rosenstiel list ten elements: nine in their first edition of 2001 and a tenth, on the public's own part, added in 2007. They read less like rules than like obligations, and much of this course is an account of how each one is met in practice.

Element	What it asks of a newsroom
Its first obligation is to the truth	Accuracy first: a working truth that improves as reporting continues and is corrected when it is wrong
Its first loyalty is to citizens	Serve readers, not advertisers, owners, or the people in the story
Its essence is a discipline of verification	Check before publishing, and show readers how you know
Independence from those it covers	No favors, stakes, or side arrangements with the people being reported on
An independent monitor of power	Watch those who hold power, public and private, on the public's behalf
A forum for public criticism and compromise	Carry the community's argument, not only the officials' version of it
Make the significant interesting and relevant	Engage readers without trading substance for spectacle
Keep the news comprehensive and proportional	Cover what matters in proportion to how much it matters
Practitioners must exercise their conscience	Reporters must be free to object inside their own newsroom
Citizens have rights and responsibilities too	What the public reads, pays for, and shares shapes what journalism gets made

Paraphrased from Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*; the tenth element was added in the 2007 edition.

1b. The Numbers in 2026

Journalism is a small occupation inside a large information economy. The Bureau of Labor Statistics counted 39,250 people employed as news analysts, reporters, and journalists in May 2025, with a median annual wage of $62,200. It counted 283,380 public relations specialists, at a median of $74,750, or about seven for every reporter. The survey leaves out freelancers and the self-employed, so it understates how many people do journalism, but the direction is not in doubt: the Bureau projects reporting jobs, counting the self-employed, to fall 6% between 2025 and 2035.

Measure	Figure	Source and date
Reporters and journalists employed	39,250; median pay $62,200	Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2025 (excludes the self-employed)
Public relations specialists	283,380; median pay $74,750 — about seven per reporter	Same survey
Newsroom employment, all media	About 114,000 in 2008; about 85,000 in 2020 (−26%)	Pew Research Center, from federal data
Newspaper newsroom employment	71,070 in 2008; 30,820 in 2020 (−57%)	Pew Research Center
Newspapers lost since 2005	Close to 3,500; 136 closed in the year to October 2025	Medill, *State of Local News* 2025
Counties with no local news source	213; another 1,524 have only one; about 50 million people have limited or no access	Medill, October 2025
Statehouse reporters	1,724 in 2022, but only 850 full time, down from 904 in 2014	Pew Research Center, 2022 (as corrected in 2023)
Trust in the mass media	33% a great deal or a fair amount, up from a record-low 28% in 2025; Democrats 50%, Republicans 22%	Gallup, September 2026
Where news reaches people	Social and video platforms now outrank television and news sites across 48 markets; 27% get news from news creators; 10% use artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots for news weekly	Reuters Institute, *Digital News Report* 2026
Trust in news, by country	37% across 48 markets; 25% in the United States, down 5 points	Reuters Institute, 2026
Paying for online news	17% across 20 richer countries; 16% in the United States	Reuters Institute, 2026

Pew first reported 1,761 statehouse reporters; a 2023 correction lowered the total to 1,724.

Two trends run through the table. Reporting capacity has shrunk fastest where it is hardest to replace. Local newspapers employed 71% of American journalists in 2005 and 29% in 2024, and in 2022 fewer than half of statehouse reporters worked the beat full time. Attention, meanwhile, has moved to platforms that distribute news without producing it: social video, news creators, and now chatbots that summarize reporting without sending readers to it. Gallup's measure of trust rose from its record low in 2026, though the Reuters Institute's measure of trust in news fell in the United States, and two-thirds of Americans still have little or no confidence in the mass media.

1c. Who Pays for Reporting

Reporting is expensive because verification is labor. Once editing, legal review, travel, records fees, and the stories that never run are counted, a reporter's salary is the smallest part of what a story costs. For most of the twentieth century advertising paid for that labor, and a local newspaper's near-monopoly on classified and display ads let it carry a newsroom of hundreds. After 2000 those ads moved to search engines, social platforms, and listings sites, and newsrooms shrank with them.

What pays now is a mix. Subscriptions carry the national papers that built large digital audiences. Philanthropy funds a growing nonprofit sector; Press Forward, a coalition of foundations, pledged more than half a billion dollars over five years in 2023. Public money is contested: Congress rescinded $1.1 billion from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in July 2025, and the corporation wound down within months. Technology companies now pay some publishers to license their archives for AI systems. The craft's methods are the same whoever pays, but who pays decides how many people can practice them, and in many towns the answer is no one.

1d. The Vocabulary

Term	Meaning	Where the course returns to it
Beat	A reporter's assigned subject or institution: city hall, the courts, health	Module 11
Desk	An editing group, such as the metro desk, the national desk, or the copy desk	Module 7
Budget	The day's list of planned stories, with lengths and placement	Module 3
Lede	A story's opening sentence or paragraph	Module 7
Nut graf	The paragraph that says why the story matters now	Module 7
Inverted pyramid	The most important information first, the rest in descending order	Modules 2 and 7
Attribution	Telling the reader who said or documented each claim	Modules 4 and 7
On the record, on background, off the record	Terms that set how a source may be quoted or identified	Module 4
Wire service	An agency, such as the Associated Press (AP) or Reuters, that sells stories to many outlets	Module 2
Embargo	An agreement to hold information until a set time	Module 11
Stringer	A freelancer paid by the story, often in a distant place	Module 12
Correction and editor's note	A published fix for an error; a longer note when the problem goes beyond a single fact	Module 6
Op-ed	An opinion article by an outside writer, run opposite the newspaper's own editorials	Module 7

Worked example — one event, four treatments

A city council votes 5-2 to put $40 million of public money toward a $300 million stadium for a professional soccer team. That evening four accounts of the vote reach a resident's phone. Each contains facts. Only one is built so that a reader can check them.

Treatment	What it says	How it handles the facts	Whose interest it serves
The team's press release	"A historic investment that will create 2,000 jobs and $500 million in economic activity."	The jobs and spending figures come from a study the team paid for; no cost to taxpayers is stated; no dissent appears.	The team's
A partisan commentary video	"The council just handed your money to billionaires."	Accurate about the subsidy; leaves out the team's own $260 million and the projected tax revenue; no one is asked to respond.	The commentator's argument and audience
A viral post	A photo of the council chamber captioned "They all got season tickets for this."	The claim has no source, and the photo is from a different meeting; it spreads because it angers.	Whoever gains from the attention

Treatment	What it says	How it handles the facts	Whose interest it serves
The news story	"The council voted 5-2 Tuesday to contribute $40 million toward a $300 million stadium…"	Every figure attributed; the jobs claim tested against independent research; both dissenting members quoted; the team asked who paid for its study.	The reader's

The news story is not neutral in the sense of having no point. It reports that the economists who have studied stadium subsidies find they rarely produce the growth promised, which the team will not like. Its difference is that every statement in it can be traced to a person or a document, and the people with the most at stake had a chance to answer. That is what this course means by journalism, and it is the standard against which every later module measures the craft.

Module 1 Key Points

Foundations

• Journalism's defining discipline is verification: checking what is true before publishing, independently of the people being covered.

• About 39,000 reporters work in the United States against 283,000 public relations specialists — roughly seven to one.

• Close to 3,500 newspapers have closed since 2005, and 213 counties now have no local news source at all.

• Trust in the mass media rose to 33% in Gallup's 2026 reading, from a record low of 28% in 2025.

• Social and video platforms now outrank television and news sites as a source of news, and 10% use chatbots weekly.

Module 1 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What do Kovach and Rosenstiel call the essence of journalism?

A) Objectivity
B) Independence from owners
C) A discipline of verification
D) Balance between the two sides of every dispute

2. How many public relations specialists were there for every reporter in the federal count of May 2025?

A) About seven — 283,380 against 39,250 reporters
B) About two
C) Roughly one for one
D) About three — 120,000 against 39,250

3. How many American counties had no local news source in Medill's 2025 count?

A) 1,524
B) About 60
C) More than 900
D) 213

4. What share of Americans had a great deal or fair amount of trust in the mass media in Gallup's 2026 reading?

A) About 50%
B) 33%
C) Just under 45%
D) 28%, a new record low

5. In the worked example, what sets the news story apart from the other three accounts of the stadium vote?

A) It takes no position on the subsidy
B) Every claim traces to a person or document, and those most affected could answer
C) It gave equal space to the team, the commentator, and the objectors
D) It was published first

Module 2 — How the Rules Were Made

The Craft's History, Rule by Rule

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978) — how objectivity and the modern reporter came to be

Reference: The Pulitzer Prizes' archive of winners and citations since 1917, and the editors' notes and reports in which newsrooms explained their own failures

2a. The Partisan Press and the Truth Defense

The first American newspapers were not neutral and did not pretend to be. Colonial printers depended on government printing contracts, and after independence most papers were openly allied with a party, which often paid for them. Reporting in the modern sense barely existed. Editors filled their pages with letters, speeches, and items copied from other papers.

The craft's oldest legal principle came out of that world. In 1734 New York's royal governor had the printer John Peter Zenger arrested for seditious libel, the crime of criticizing the government, over articles attacking him. At the trial in August 1735, Zenger's lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, conceded that Zenger had printed the articles but argued that true statements could not be libel. The judge ruled that truth was no defense, so Hamilton appealed over his head to the jury, which acquitted. The verdict set no binding precedent, but the idea that truth protects a publisher entered American law and, in time, its constitutions.

2b. The Penny Press, the Wire, and the Interview

The modern reporter was born in the 1830s, when penny papers such as the *New York Sun* (1833) and James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* (1835) sold news to a mass urban audience and let advertisers pay most of the cost. They needed a steady supply of fresh events, so they hired people to go out and find them: police reporters, court reporters, and correspondents. News became something gathered rather than copied.

Two inventions of the period still shape the craft. The first was the interview. Bennett is sometimes credited with the first, in an 1836 murder case, though historians dispute whether the conversation ever took place. Horace Greeley's question-and-answer session with Brigham Young, printed in his *New York Tribune* in August 1859, is often called the first published interview of its kind. The second was the wire service. In 1846 a group of New York papers formed the cooperative that became the Associated Press, to share the cost of gathering news by telegraph. A story sold to papers of every political stripe had to be usable by all of them, so fact-first, opinion-free writing began as a commercial necessity.

The inverted pyramid, which puts the most important facts first and the rest in descending order, has a romantic origin story. Civil War correspondents, the story goes, put the essentials at the top because they could not trust the telegraph line to hold. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's dispatch on Lincoln's shooting, sent at 1:30 a.m. on April 15, 1865, is often cited as an early example. But Horst Pöttker's study of the *New York Herald* and the *New York Times* found the form became common only two decades later, in the 1880s, as editors worked to make news easier to read. The pyramid spread because it served readers, not because the telegraph forced it.

2c. The Muckrakers and the Data

At the turn of the twentieth century a generation of reporters turned the craft toward accountability. Ida B. Wells, a Memphis editor, began documenting lynchings in 1892; after her editorial that May, a white mob destroyed her newspaper's office while she was out of town. Her pamphlets *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895) built their case on the *Chicago Tribune*'s annual tallies of lynchings. She chose figures compiled by a white-owned paper so that no one could accuse her of exaggerating, and using the adversary's own data remains one of the strongest moves in the craft.

Ida Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil Company* ran in nineteen installments in *McClure's Magazine* from November 1902 to October 1904. It was built from court records, testimony, and company documents, not interviews alone, and it showed in detail how John D. Rockefeller's company had crushed its competitors. In 1911 the Supreme Court upheld the government's breakup of Standard Oil. Theodore Roosevelt gave the reporters of the era their name in 1906, comparing them to a character in *The Pilgrim's Progress* who rakes muck; he meant it partly as a rebuke, and they took it as a badge.

Undercover reporting began in the same era. In 1887 Nellie Bly feigned insanity to have herself committed to the women's asylum on New York's Blackwell's Island. Her account, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, helped bring a grand jury inquiry and more money for the city's asylums. Deception has been debated ever since, and Module 8 sets out when the codes allow it.

2d. Objectivity as a Method

By 1920 the press had a credibility problem much like the modern one. In "A Test of the News," a 42-page supplement to the *New Republic*, Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz examined three years of the *New York Times*' coverage of the Russian Revolution. The paper had reported the imminent fall of the Bolshevik government at least 91 times. The coverage, they concluded, reflected what its editors hoped to see rather than what was happening.

Lippmann's remedy, set out that year in *Liberty and the News* and two years later in *Public Opinion*, was not that reporters should have no views. It was that they should adopt something like the scientific method: test claims against evidence in a way that did not depend on who was doing the testing. Objectivity, in this original sense, was a property of the method, not of the journalist. Much of the modern argument over objectivity, which Module 8 takes up, turns on what the word was meant to describe.

The profession organized itself in the same decades. The University of Missouri opened the first journalism school in 1908, and Columbia followed in 1912. The first Pulitzer Prizes were awarded in 1917. The American Society of Newspaper Editors adopted its Canons of Journalism in the early 1920s, and in 1926 the organization that later became the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) took them as its own code.

2e. Broadcast, Secrets, and Sources

Television brought accountability reporting its first mass audience. On March 9, 1954, Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* devoted a broadcast to Senator Joseph McCarthy built almost entirely from McCarthy's own words and film. Letting the record make the case is a technique documentary reporting still uses.

The Pentagon Papers set the modern law of publishing secrets. The *New York Times* began publishing the government's classified history of the Vietnam War on June 13, 1971, and the Nixon administration won a temporary court order stopping it. On June 30 the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that the government had not met

the heavy burden needed to justify such a prior restraint, and the *Times* and the *Washington Post* resumed publication.

Watergate made the confidential source central to the craft. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Post* followed the June 17, 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee's offices to the White House over two years, relying on sources they could not name, and Richard Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974. Their editors required that sensitive claims be confirmed by more than one source, a practice that hardened into the newsroom's two-source rule. Their most important source, known as Deep Throat, was revealed in 2005 to be W. Mark Felt, who had been the second-ranking official of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The same years produced two other strands. The New Journalism of Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and Truman Capote used scene, dialogue, and interior point of view, which demanded more reporting to support them, not less. Precision journalism, named in Philip Meyer's 1973 book, brought survey methods into the newsroom. The *Detroit Free Press* survey after the 1967 riot, which Meyer led, found that college-educated residents had been about as likely to riot as high-school dropouts, and the paper's riot coverage won a Pulitzer. Today's data journalism descends from it.

2f. The Scandals That Wrote the Standards

Most of the profession's written standards were adopted after something went wrong. The pattern is consistent: a failure becomes public, the newsroom investigates itself and publishes what it found, and a rule follows.

Case	What happened	The rule it produced
Janet Cooke, *Washington Post* (1980-81)	"Jimmy's World," about an eight-year-old heroin addict, won the Pulitzer for feature writing in April 1981. The boy did not exist, and the prize was returned two days later.	An editor must know the identity of every anonymous source and be able to confirm the person exists.
Stephen Glass, *The New Republic* (1998)	At least 27 of his 41 articles contained invented material, backed by fake notes and, in one case, a fake website built to fool the magazine's checkers.	Checkers verify against independent sources, not against the reporter's own notes.
Jayson Blair, *New York Times* (2003)	The paper's 7,239-word self-investigation found fabrication and plagiarism across dozens of his stories; its two top editors resigned.	A standards editor, and a public editor to hear readers' complaints (a post that lasted from 2003 to 2017).
Prewar Iraq coverage, *New York Times* (2002-04)	A May 26, 2004 editors' note found the paper had relied too heavily on Iraqi exiles and let claims about weapons go unchallenged.	Tighter rules on anonymous sources and on single-source intelligence claims.
"A Rape on Campus," *Rolling Stone* (2014-15)	The magazine relied on one account and did not give the men it accused a chance to respond; it retracted the story on April 5, 2015.	Contact everyone accused, and verify the central account independently.

From the newsrooms' own published reports and editors' notes, and the Pulitzer Prize archive.

2g. The Digital Turn

The internet changed the speed of the craft more than its rules. Live blogs and social feeds replaced the edition, so stories now change after publication, and updating and correcting have become constant work. The rules of verification stayed the same, but the pressure to publish before verifying grew, and with it the number of errors that spread before they could be fixed. The newest pressures — news creators, platforms that rank stories by engagement, and machines that write — are the subject of the second half of this course.

Worked example — anatomy of a failure: Rolling Stone, 2014

Rolling Stone published "A Rape on Campus" online on November 19, 2014. It described a gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity, told through a student it called Jackie. Within weeks, reporting by the *Washington Post* and others found that the account could not be corroborated. The magazine asked Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism to investigate, and its report, published on April 5, 2015, the day the magazine retracted the story, called the failure avoidable. The table maps each step the magazine skipped to the check that would have caught the problem.

Step skipped	What the magazine did	The check that would have caught it
Contacting the accused	Never gave the fraternity enough detail to respond, and never reached the man Jackie described	A request for comment with specifics, which the fraternity could have answered with its records of that night
Identifying the central figure	Accepted that the reporter could not learn the alleged ringleader's name	Refuse to publish an accusation against a person the newsroom cannot confirm exists
Interviewing the friends	Described three friends Jackie said she met that night, without interviewing them	Interview them; they later told the *Post* that her account that night differed from the published one
Editing	Accepted pseudonyms and gaps rather than asking how the reporter knew	The editor's basic question: how do we know this?
Fact-checking	Did not follow the checker's questions through to answers	A checker with the authority to stop publication

None of these checks required unusual resources. Each was skipped for the same reason: the reporter and editors believed the account and feared that pressing would retraumatize the source. The Columbia report's lesson was that sympathy for a source does not excuse a newsroom from verifying what it publishes, and that the people accused are owed the chance to answer. A jury later awarded a university administrator $3 million against the magazine and its reporter, and the story damaged the credibility of real survivors' accounts.

Module 2 Key Points

How the Rules Were Made

• Truth as a defense entered American law through a 1735 jury verdict acquitting the printer John Peter Zenger.

• Objectivity began as Lippmann's call for a method of testing claims, not a claim that reporters have no views.

• Ida B. Wells built her lynching case on a white-owned paper's own counts, so no one could call it exaggerated.

• The Pentagon Papers ruling, 6-3 in 1971, made a prior restraint on publication nearly impossible to justify.

• Most written standards followed failures: Cooke, Glass, Blair, the Iraq coverage, and *Rolling Stone* each produced a rule.

Module 2 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What did Andrew Hamilton argue at John Peter Zenger's 1735 trial?

A) That the jury lacked jurisdiction
B) That the governor was a public figure
C) That true statements could not be libel
D) That a printer is not responsible for what he prints

2. How many times did the *New York Times* report the imminent fall of the Bolsheviks, by Lippmann and Merz's count?

A) About a dozen
B) At least 91
C) Twice, in 1917
D) More than 300

3. Why did fact-first, opinion-free writing take hold at the Associated Press?

A) Congress required it of wire services
B) A federal court ruled that wire stories could not carry opinions
C) Its stories had to suit papers of every politics
D) Its founders were former judges who prized neutrality

4. What rule did the Janet Cooke case produce?

A) Prize juries must interview every winning reporter before announcing
B) Feature stories must carry a label saying they are features
C) Reporters may not write about drug use by children without a parent's consent
D) Editors must know every anonymous source

5. Which check did the Columbia report find *Rolling Stone* had skipped?

A) Giving the people it accused specifics and a chance to respond before publication
B) Hiring an outside fact-checking firm
C) Sending the story to the university's lawyers and the police first
D) Running the story past a sensitivity reader

Module 3 — News Judgment, and the Bias Question

What Becomes News, and Who Decides

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (1979; 25th anniversary edition, 2004) — the classic study of how editors choose

Reference: Indiana University's *American Journalist* survey (2022) and the Pew Research Center's surveys of trust and perceived bias

3a. The News Values

Every day an editor faces far more possible stories than there is space, airtime, or staff to cover them. The criteria editors use to choose are called news values, and researchers have been listing them for sixty years. Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge's 1965 study of foreign news in four Norwegian newspapers named twelve factors. Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill's 2017 update, drawn from British papers and social media, named fifteen. The lists overlap more than they differ, and each value carries a built-in distortion.

News value	What it means	The distortion it invites
Magnitude and impact	How many people are affected, and how seriously	Big numbers crowd out slow harms that touch many people a little
Timeliness	It happened today, or it is new	Events beat conditions; a decades-long problem has no "today"
Proximity and relevance	It is near, or it touches the audience's lives	Distant suffering is undercovered, and people like the audience are overcovered
Prominence	It involves the powerful or the famous	Officials' statements become news because officials made them
Conflict	Someone opposes someone	Agreement and compromise go unreported
Bad news	Something went wrong	The world looks worse than its trends
Surprise	It is unexpected	Rare risks are covered more than common ones
Follow-up	It continues a story already running	Coverage persists after the news fades, then stops abruptly
Exclusivity	No one else has it	Scoops can matter more to newsrooms than to readers
Pictures and shareability	It comes with strong images or spreads easily	What can be filmed or shared gets covered

Adapted from Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill (2017); the third column is the course's.

3b. Gatekeeping, Agenda-Setting, and Framing

Three findings from communication research describe what news judgment does. The first is gatekeeping. For a study published in 1950, the sociologist David Manning White asked the wire editor of a small Midwestern morning paper, whom he called Mr. Gates, to keep every wire story he rejected for a week and note why. About nine-tenths of the copy was rejected, mostly for lack of space, but many reasons were

personal judgments, such as "too Red" and "don't care for suicides." White showed that the news is, in the end, what someone decided it was.

The second is agenda-setting. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw surveyed undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the 1968 presidential campaign and compared the issues they called most important with the issues the news media emphasized. The correlation for major items was +.967, nearly perfect. As the political scientist Bernard Cohen had put it in 1963, the press may rarely tell people what to think, but it is very effective at telling them what to think about.

The third is framing. Robert Entman defined framing in 1993 as selecting some aspects of reality and making them more prominent, in a way that promotes a particular definition of the problem, a cause, a moral judgment, or a remedy. Shanto Iyengar found that television news framed issues episodically, as individual cases, far more often than thematically, as trends with causes. Viewers of episodic stories tended to blame individuals for problems such as poverty, while viewers of thematic stories blamed society and government. Choosing a frame is choosing who is responsible.

3c. The Distortions News Values Produce

News values pull coverage toward the negative, the conflictual, and the novel, and audiences reward the pull. A 2023 study of 12,448 randomized headline tests on the Upworthy site found that each additional negative word in an average-length headline raised the click-through rate by about 2.3%. Stuart Soroka and his colleagues measured physiological responses to news in seventeen countries and found that people react more strongly to negative stories, though individuals vary widely. A newsroom that follows its clicks will drift toward bad news whether or not the world is getting worse.

Election coverage shows the same pull. Thomas Patterson's analysis of the 2016 general election for Harvard's Shorenstein Center found that policy issues took 10% of the coverage, less than a quarter of the space given to the horse race: who was ahead, who was behind, and why. A new poll is news every day; a candidate's tax plan is news once.

Balance, the newsroom's guard against bias, can itself distort. Maxwell and Jules Boykoff studied climate coverage in four leading American newspapers from 1988 to 2002 and found that 53% of the articles gave roughly equal weight to the scientific consensus that humans were warming the climate and to a small number of skeptics. Giving two sides equal space is fair when the evidence is divided. When it is not, balance misinforms.

News values also decide whose misfortunes count. Zach Sommers compared 2013 coverage of missing people on four news sites with the FBI's national missing-persons file. Black Americans were about 35% of the missing but the subjects of about 13% of the articles, while white women were about half of all article subjects. The pattern, often called missing white woman syndrome, reflects assumptions about which victims readers will care about.

Audience data is now an editor in its own right. By 2015 the real-time dashboards of the analytics firm Chartbeat were used by 80% of the highest-traffic publishers in the United States. The sociologist Caitlin Petre's study of newsrooms, *All the News That's Fit to Click* (2021), found that metrics shaped which stories were assigned, how they were promoted, and even who was hired and fired. Metrics measure what readers click, which is not always what they need to know.

3d. The Bias Question

No question about journalism is argued more often than whether the press is politically biased. It is contested ground, so the course sets out each side's case as its advocates make it, then the evidence, then its own reading.

The case that the press leans left. Its advocates begin with who journalists are. Indiana University's *American Journalist* survey found that Republicans made up 25.7% of American journalists in 1971 and 3.4% in 2022, against 36.4% Democrats and a majority calling themselves independents. National newsrooms are concentrated in a few large coastal cities and recruit from similar universities. Advocates argue that these facts shape what editors find newsworthy and whom reporters find credible.

They point to stories they say were dismissed for political reasons. One is the *New York Post*'s October 2020 report on Hunter Biden's laptop, parts of which the *Times* and the *Washington Post* later authenticated. Another is the 2020 treatment of the hypothesis that the coronavirus pandemic began with a laboratory accident as a conspiracy theory, though three American intelligence agencies later leaned toward it, with low to moderate confidence. A 2005 study by Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, which compared outlets' citations of think tanks with those of members of Congress, placed almost every major outlet to the left of the average member. In an April 2025 Pew survey, 58% of Americans said most journalists are biased, including 74% of Republicans.

The case that the press's biases are structural, not partisan. Its advocates, many of them scholars and critics on the left, argue that the press leans toward power rather than party. Coverage tends to track the range of debate among officials, a pattern W. Lance Bennett called indexing, so views outside that range go unreported whichever party holds them. Commercial pressure, they argue, pushes toward conflict, novelty, and bad news, and they cite the research in section 3c.

Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro's study of 433 daily newspapers found that a paper's slant tracked the politics of its readers, which explained about a fifth of the variation, while the identity of its owner explained far less. Bias, in their account, is supplied because readers demand it. Advocates add that the right has a large media ecosystem of its own, from talk radio and Fox News to podcasts, and that complaints of liberal bias are partly a strategy for moving coverage.

The evidence. Several findings bear on both cases. Journalists' personal politics do lean left of the public, and the Republican share has collapsed. Some episodes the first side cites hold up: Module 11 describes how early coverage treated the laboratory-leak question as settled when it was not. But a 2020 field experiment by Hans Hassell, John Holbein, and Matthew Miles, which sent thousands of political journalists the same story pitch about a candidate whose party was varied at random, found no partisan bias in which journalists chose to pursue the story. Measurements of slant in published content depend heavily on method, and studies using different methods disagree. And the hostile media effect, first shown by Robert Vallone, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper in 1985, makes perception an unreliable guide: pro-Israeli and pro-Arab students who watched the same coverage of the 1982 Beirut massacre each judged it biased against their own side. Trust now divides sharply by party, at 50% among Democrats and 22% among Republicans in Gallup's 2026 reading.

The course's reading. The newsroom's political lopsidedness is real, and the documented errors show how a shared outlook can harden into a premature consensus on a contested question. The structural pulls toward conflict, negativity, and official sources are documented too, and they shape coverage of both parties. The evidence does not settle which weighs more, and the experimental evidence cuts against the common claim that bias shows mainly in which stories get covered. The remedy for both is the same: method, meaning verification, sourcing that crosses the newsroom's own assumptions, and transparency

about how a story was reported. A reader's best test of any story is whether its claims are attributed and could be checked.

Worked example — a metro desk's day

At 10 a.m. the metro editor of a mid-sized daily has eleven reporters, a website, a morning newsletter, and a print edition with room for eight local stories. The day's budget lists thirty possible stories. The table shows twelve of them, the news values each carries, and what the editor decided.

Candidate story	News values	Decision and reasoning
Two killed in a crash on the interstate	Bad news, timeliness, proximity	Runs: online first, a short print story from a police statement and a call to the coroner
Council votes tonight on a 9.5% water-rate increase	Impact, timeliness, proximity	Runs: a preview now and the vote tonight; tomorrow's lead story
Celebrity chef opens a restaurant downtown	Prominence, entertainment	Runs online, where it will be the day's most-read story
State audit finds the school district misreported graduation rates	Impact, exclusivity, conflict	Runs if confirmed: the education reporter gets the day, and the lawyer reads it
Burglaries fall for a third straight month	Good news, modest magnitude	A brief; the editor notes that a 10% rise would have led the page
Zoning board approves an apartment-complex variance	Long-term impact, little conflict	A brief; no reporter attends the hearing
Councilwoman's angry social media post about the mayor	Conflict, prominence, shareability	Two paragraphs inside the water-rate story, not a story of its own
Nursing-home inspection reports released	Impact; follow-up to last year's series	Held: the data needs a week of analysis
Missing teenager found safe	Follow-up, human interest	A short update, at the family's request
National jobs report	Timeliness, magnitude	Wire copy, with the local unemployment figure added
Bridge closed for repairs through spring	Impact, proximity	A service story with a map, online and in the newsletter
Statehouse hearing on the property-tax cap	Impact, but distant and procedural	Not covered: the paper's statehouse reporter left last year

Three things stand out. The decisions are defensible one by one, yet together they tilt the paper toward the immediate and the dramatic: the crash and the chef get more space than the zoning variance, which will shape the city for decades. The audit and the inspection reports, the stories most likely to change something, are the ones that need time, the newsroom's scarcest resource. And the statehouse hearing, which will help decide the city's budget, goes uncovered because the job that would cover it no longer exists. News judgment is made under constraints, and the constraints are themselves a kind of judgment.

Module 3 Key Points

News Judgment, and the Bias Question

• News values — impact, timeliness, proximity, prominence, conflict, novelty — decide what becomes news, and each carries a built-in distortion.

• In the Chapel Hill study, the media's issue emphasis and voters' priorities correlated at +.967, the founding evidence for agenda-setting.

• In 2016, policy took 10% of general-election coverage, less than a quarter of the space given to the horse race.

• Republicans fell from 25.7% of American journalists in 1971 to 3.4% in 2022, when independents were the majority.

• Partisans on both sides see the same coverage as biased against them — the hostile media effect.

Module 3 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What did McCombs and Shaw's Chapel Hill study find?

A) Voters ranked issues almost exactly as the news media had emphasized them
B) Voters ignored the news and followed their parties
C) Television mattered more than newspapers
D) Editorials changed how undecided voters cast their ballots

2. What did Iyengar find about episodic framing?

A) Viewers remembered the story longer
B) Viewers blamed individuals rather than society
C) Viewers demanded government action more often than after thematic stories
D) It made viewers trust the network less than thematic coverage did

3. In Boykoff and Boykoff's study of climate coverage from 1988 to 2002, what share of articles gave "balanced" accounts?

A) About 53%
B) About 6%
C) Roughly 90%
D) About 25%, mostly in 1988

4. What share of American journalists identified as Republicans in the 2022 *American Journalist* survey?

A) About 18%
B) About a third, as in 1971
C) 3.4%, down from 25.7% in 1971
D) Roughly equal to the share identifying as Democrats

5. What is the hostile media effect?

A) Partisans see neutral coverage as biased against them
B) Reporters' hostility toward officials who deny them access, shown in their coverage
C) The tendency of audiences to trust outlets that confirm what they already believe
D) Hostility in coverage toward whichever party currently holds the White House

Module 4 — Reporting: People

Sources, Interviews, and Protecting Them

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Ken Metzler, *Creative Interviewing* (3rd edition, 1997) — the standard guide to preparing and conducting interviews

Reference: The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press's *Reporter's Recording Guide*, which sets out each state's consent rules

4a. Kinds of Sources, and How to Weigh Them

A source is anyone or anything that tells a reporter something: an official, a participant, a witness, an expert, a document, a dataset. Reporters learn early to ask four questions of every one. How does this source know? What does the source want? Can what the source says be checked? And how reliable has the source been before?

The answers sort sources into rough tiers. A participant who saw something firsthand outranks someone who heard about it. A document produced for another purpose, such as a payroll record or an inspection report, outranks a statement prepared for the press. An official speaking for an agency is authoritative about the agency's position, not about whether the position is true. Experts are useful for context and dangerous when quoted outside their field. A press release is a source like any other: a claim to be tested, not a story to be rewritten.

Reporters also map sources before they need them, and the question that drives the map is who would know. The clerk who processes the permits, the former employee, the competitor, and the auditor all know things officials will not say. Beat reporters spend much of their time building these relationships, because the source who trusts a reporter on an ordinary Tuesday is the one who calls when something goes wrong.

4b. The Attribution Ladder

Before a source says anything sensitive, reporter and source should agree on how it can be used. The terms form a ladder, and their meanings vary by newsroom and by source, which is why the agreement must come first. A source who says "that was off the record" after speaking has not, under most newsrooms' rules, made it so, though a reporter who wants to keep the source will often negotiate.

Term	What the reader sees	The cost
On the record	The source's name, title, and words	None; this is the default unless both sides agree otherwise
On background	A description, such as "a senior official familiar with the talks"	Readers cannot judge the source's interest, and descriptions can mislead
On deep background	The information, with no attribution at all	Readers cannot tell that the claim came from an interested party
Off the record	Nothing: the information cannot be published, though the reporter may seek it elsewhere	The reporter now knows something that cannot be used

Definitions vary by newsroom. Agree on the terms before the information is given, and record the agreement in your notes.

4c. Anonymous Sources

Anonymity protects people who would lose their jobs, their freedom, or their safety for telling the truth, and some of the most important stories in the craft's history depended on it. It also lets sources settle scores, float claims without accountability, and dress up an agency's position as a leak. The prewar coverage of Iraq, which rested heavily on unnamed officials and exiles, showed how much damage unattributed claims can do.

Most newsrooms now grant anonymity only under conditions, and the AP's are typical. The material must be information, not opinion or speculation, and vital to the story. It must be unavailable except on condition of anonymity. And the source must be reliable and in a position to know. The story should tell readers why anonymity was granted and describe the source's vantage point as precisely as safety allows, and since the Janet Cooke case at least one editor must know who each anonymous source is.

4d. The Interview

Preparation is most of an interview. A reporter who has read the documents, knows the timeline, and has talked to others first can ask the questions that matter and recognize an evasion when it comes. The question list is a plan, not a script. Start with what is easy and factual, move toward what is contested, and save the hardest question for late in the interview, but not so late that the subject can end it before answering.

Open questions, such as "walk me through what happened," produce narrative and detail; closed questions, such as "did you sign the contract?", pin down facts. The most useful follow-ups are the simplest. How do you know that? Can you give me an example? Who else would know? Silence is a tool too, because people fill it. A good interviewer listens more than talks, writes down exact words when they matter, and asks the same question again, differently, when the first answer dodged it.

Quotations must be the speaker's words. Reporters may trim a quote with ellipses if the meaning survives, but they do not invent, combine, or improve quotes. Most newsrooms refuse to let subjects approve their quotations before publication, because approval lets the subject edit the record of what was said; the *New York Times* banned the practice in 2012. If a subject's words are garbled, paraphrase them. And anyone who will be criticized deserves to hear the specifics before publication and to have a fair chance to respond, a rule Module 7 takes up.

4e. Recording and Consent

Recording protects both reporter and subject, but the law sets conditions. Federal law and most states require the consent of only one party to a conversation, and that party can be the reporter. About a dozen states, including California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Washington, require the consent of every party to a private conversation, and recording without it can be a crime. For calls across state lines, the safe practice is to follow the stricter state's rule. In public places, where no one expects privacy, the rules are looser everywhere.

4f. Access, Accountability, and Protection

Access is a currency, and officials know it. A reporter who covers a powerful institution every day needs its people to return calls, and they know that tough coverage can be punished with silence. The trade can produce access journalism, in which favorable treatment buys exclusives, and the only defense is a newsroom willing to lose access when the story requires it. In Washington the fight has moved into the open: the White House took control of the presidential press pool from the correspondents' association in February 2025 and in September 2026 revoked the credentials of three news organizations, actions whose legal side Module 9 covers.

Protecting a confidential source begins before the first conversation. Phone records, emails, and location data can identify a source even if the reporter never does, so reporters handling sensitive material use encrypted messaging such as Signal, secure systems for receiving documents, and meetings without phones. The precautions became more urgent after April 2025, when the Justice Department rescinded its limits on subpoenas and search warrants for reporters' records in leak investigations. In January 2026 FBI agents searched the home of a *Washington Post* reporter and seized her phone and laptops. A promise of confidentiality is one the reporter must be able to keep, including in front of a judge.

Worked example — an accountability interview, planned and run

A county reporter has obtained payroll records showing that the sheriff's office paid $2.1 million in overtime last year against a budget of $900,000, and that four deputies each earned more in overtime than in base salary. The sheriff has agreed to a thirty-minute interview. The plan, the questions, and the reasoning behind their order follow.

Stage	The questions	Why in this order
Opening (minutes 1-5)	How is overtime assigned? Who approves it?	Easy, factual, and on the sheriff's own ground; the answers establish what the policy is supposed to be
The facts (5-12)	The budget was $900,000 and spending was $2.1 million. Is that right?	Gets the sheriff to confirm the records before the hard questions
The pattern (12-20)	Four deputies earned more in overtime than in salary. Who approved their hours?	Moves from the total to named decisions
The hard question (20-25)	One of the four is your campaign treasurer. Did that affect his assignments?	Late enough that the facts are confirmed, early enough to get an answer
The close (25-30)	Is there anything I haven't asked that I should? Who else should I talk to?	Invites context the reporter missed, and a lead to the next source

The sheriff confirmed the totals, blamed a staffing shortage, and said the treasurer's assignments followed seniority. The reporter did not argue. She asked for the seniority list, which the office released a week later; it showed nine deputies senior to the treasurer who had all received less overtime than he had. The story quoted the sheriff's explanation, then the document that contradicted it, and the office received the specifics in writing before publication. The interview's value was not a confession. It was an on-the-record explanation that documents could test.

Module 4 Key Points

Reporting: People

• Agree on attribution terms before information is shared; "background" and "off the record" mean different things to different people.

• Grant anonymity only for vital information unavailable otherwise, from a source in a position to know, and tell readers why.

• About a dozen states require every party's consent to record a private conversation; federal law and most states require one.

• Since 2025 prosecutors may again seek reporters' records in leak cases, so source protection starts with the reporter's own devices.

• An interview's value is often an on-the-record explanation that documents can then test.

Module 4 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What can a reporter publish from information given on deep background?

A) Quotes, attributed to "a senior official"
B) A paraphrase with the source's agency named
C) Only what another source confirms on the record
D) The information itself, with no attribution to any source

2. Under the AP's standard, which condition must be met before granting anonymity?

A) The source asks for it
B) The story is about national security
C) The information is vital and unavailable any other way
D) The source is a senior official who has spoken on background before without error

3. In an all-party-consent state, what does a reporter need to record a private phone conversation lawfully?

A) A press credential issued by the state
B) Everyone's consent
C) Only the reporter's own consent
D) A court order, unless the call crosses state lines

4. Why do most newsrooms refuse to let subjects approve their quotations before publication?

A) Libel law forbids it
B) It would take too long on deadline
C) It lets the subject edit the record of what was said
D) Subjects would demand payment for approved quotes in return

5. In the worked example, why did the reporter confirm the overtime totals before asking about the campaign treasurer?

A) Because the sheriff had set the order of topics
B) Because overtime was the story and the treasurer link only a side issue
C) To get the facts confirmed before the hard question
D) To give the sheriff time to call his lawyer before the difficult part of the interview

Module 5 — Reporting: Records and Numbers

The Paper Trail and the Arithmetic

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Brant Houston and Investigative Reporters and Editors, *The Investigative Reporter's Handbook* (5th edition, 2009) — the standard guide to documents and records

Reference: The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press's *Open Government Guide* to each state's records law, and the Justice Department's annual summaries of federal freedom-of-information requests

5a. Why Documents

Documents do not misremember, rarely spin, and can be checked by readers. A record produced for another purpose, such as a contract, an inspection, or a payroll, was not written for the press, which makes it more reliable than almost any statement made to it. Investigative reporters often say they build the paper trail first and interview people second, so that they know what is true before anyone tells them a story. A source's claim that a document exists is the beginning of the reporting, not the end; the document is the story.

5b. The Freedom of Information Act and the Records Laws

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), signed in 1966 and strengthened after Watergate in 1974, gives anyone the right to request records from federal executive agencies. It does not cover Congress, the federal courts, or the president's immediate office. Agencies must decide on a request within twenty working days, a deadline they routinely miss. Requesters can appeal denials and sue, and courts can order records released. Nine exemptions allow agencies to withhold records, and most fights over FOIA are fights over the exemptions.

Exemption	What it covers	Where it matters
1. National security	Properly classified information	Defense and intelligence requests
2. Internal personnel rules	Purely internal agency practices	Rarely contested
3. Other statutes	Records another law requires to be kept secret, such as tax returns	Common; depends on the statute
4. Trade secrets	Confidential commercial and financial information supplied by businesses	Contracting and regulatory requests
5. Deliberative process	Internal drafts, advice, and legal memos	The most contested of the nine
6. Personal privacy	Personnel, medical, and similar files	Common; weighed against the public interest
7. Law enforcement	Records whose release could harm investigations, trials, privacy, or safety	Police, immigration, and prison requests
8. Financial institutions	Bank examination reports	Narrow
9. Wells	Geological data on oil and gas wells	Rare

The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires agencies to show foreseeable harm before withholding, and ends the deliberative-process exemption for records 25 or more years old.

The system is under strain. Federal agencies received a record 1,707,197 requests in fiscal year 2025, up from about 1.5 million the year before, while the number of full-time FOIA staff fell from 5,628 to 4,823, about 14%. The backlog of unanswered requests rose 27%, to 339,671. Every state also has a public-records law of its own, and the laws vary widely in what they cover, how fast agencies must respond, and what they may charge. A reporter's first step on any local story is to know the state's law better than the clerk does.

5c. The Paper Trail

Beyond requests, a great deal is public by default. The table lists the records reporters use most and where to find them.

Subject	The records	Where
Courts	Dockets, complaints, motions, transcripts, judgments	Federal courts: the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system; state courts: online portals and clerks' offices
Property	Deeds, mortgages, liens, assessments	County recorders and assessors
Campaigns	Contributions and spending	The Federal Election Commission (FEC) for federal races; state election boards
Lobbying	Registrations, clients, and fees; foreign agents' filings	Congress's lobbying-disclosure databases; the Justice Department's foreign-agent registrations
Companies	Annual and quarterly reports, executive pay, material events	The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for public companies; state business registries for private ones
Nonprofits	Revenue, executive pay, and grants	Form 990 tax returns filed with the Internal Revenue Service, searchable in ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer
Government money	Contracts, grants, budgets, and audits	USAspending.gov for federal money; local budgets and audit reports
Inspections and licenses	Restaurants, nursing homes, day cares, contractors	State and local regulators
Police	Arrest logs, incident reports, use-of-force reports, body-camera video	Varies sharply by state

5d. Numbers Reporters Must Get Right

Most numerical errors in the news are not about advanced statistics. They come from a short list of mistakes, and almost every one can be caught by asking what the number is being compared with.

The mistake	An example	The fix
Counts without rates	"Crime rose in the city's fastest-growing district"	Divide by population and report rates, such as crimes per 1,000 residents
Mean for median	Average household income pulled up by a few very high earners	Report the median when the data are skewed
Dollars across years	"Spending hit a record"	Adjust for inflation before comparing years
Percent and percentage points	Unemployment rising from 4% to 5%	That is a rise of 1 point, or 25%; say which you mean
Relative risk alone	"Doubles the risk"	Give the absolute risk too: from 1 in 7,000 to 2 in 7,000
Correlation as cause	"Coffee drinkers live longer"	Ask what else differs between the groups

The mistake	An example	The fix
Small numbers	"Burglaries up 50%," from four to six	Report the counts and the usual year-to-year swing
One poll	"Candidate surges"	Report the polling average and the margin of error

The cost of the relative-risk mistake can be measured. In October 1995 British regulators warned that newer contraceptive pills doubled the risk of a dangerous blood clot. In absolute terms, the 100% increase meant roughly one extra case for every 7,000 women. The warning was widely reported as a doubling, many women stopped taking the pill, and an estimated 13,000 additional abortions followed in England and Wales.

Polls deserve particular care. The margin of error reported with a poll covers only sampling error, the chance that a random sample differs from the population; it says nothing about badly worded questions, unrepresentative samples, or people who refuse to answer. It applies to each candidate's share, so the margin on the gap between two candidates is roughly twice as large. The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) found that national polls in 2020 were off by an average of 4.5 points, the largest error in 40 years, and by 2.6 points in 2024. An average of many polls is more reliable than any one.

Data journalism, the descendant of Meyer's precision journalism, applies the same discipline to larger datasets. Reporters obtain records in electronic form, clean them, analyze them, and check the results against known totals before writing a word. An analysis is itself a source and must be verified like one, by documenting every step and having a second person reproduce it.

Worked example — a records request, and a misleading number

The request. A reporter wants to know why the city's police overtime has tripled in three years. Under the state's public-records law, she sends a written request to the police department's records custodian. The table follows the request from letter to story.

Step	What she did	What came back
The request	Cited the statute; asked for overtime records by officer, date, and assignment for three years, in electronic form; asked for a fee estimate and release in batches	An acknowledgment within the law's five-day limit
The response	Received the department's answer in the third week	Totals released; officer-level records withheld as private personnel files, in a written partial denial citing the exemption
The appeal	Argued that public employees' pay is public under the state's law and court rulings; offered to accept records without home addresses	Officer-level records released six weeks later
The analysis	Loaded the data into a spreadsheet; totaled it by officer and assignment; checked the totals against the city budget	Twelve officers drew 40% of all overtime, mostly on special-event details paid for by private promoters
The verification	Matched a sample of entries to the department's scheduling records; asked the department to explain the special-event details	The department confirmed the pattern and said promoters reimbursed part of the cost

The misleading number. The same week, a council candidate's press release says violent crime on the city's Eastside rose 50% this year. The reporter checks the police data. The Eastside, with 8,000 residents, had six violent crimes last year and nine this year, so the 50% is accurate and close to meaningless. The rate rose from 0.75 to 1.1 per 1,000 residents, still far below the citywide rate of 4.2, and the neighborhood's yearly count had swung between five and eleven over the previous decade. The story reported the counts, the rate, and the decade's range, and quoted the candidate's claim only after them.

Module 5 Key Points

Reporting: Records and Numbers

• Documents outrank memories: build the paper trail first, then interview, and quote the record over the claim.

• Federal agencies received a record 1.7 million FOIA requests in fiscal 2025 while their FOIA staff shrank about 14%.

• Most fights over federal records are fights over FOIA's nine exemptions, above all deliberative process and personal privacy.

• A 100% increase in risk can mean one more case in 7,000; report the absolute numbers alongside the relative.

• A poll's margin of error covers only sampling, and roughly doubles for the gap between two candidates.

Module 5 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. Which of these does the federal FOIA cover?

A) The federal courts and their judges
B) Congress and its committees
C) The president's immediate office
D) Executive agencies

2. What did the 2016 amendments change about the deliberative-process exemption?

A) It was repealed for all agencies
B) Agencies must show foreseeable harm, and the exemption ends after 25 years
C) It now covers emails as well as memos
D) It applies only to the Defense Department

3. In October 1995 British regulators said newer pills doubled the risk of a blood clot. What was the absolute change?

A) One extra case in 70
B) Half of users would be affected
C) Roughly one extra case for every 7,000 women
D) One extra case in every 100 women

4. A poll shows a candidate ahead 47% to 44% with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 points. What is the best reading?

A) The candidate leads beyond doubt
B) The lead is real because it exceeds the margin
C) Jones is really ahead once the margin is applied to both candidates' shares
D) The lead is within the poll's error and is not a clear lead

5. In the worked example, how did the reporter get the officer-level overtime records?

A) A source leaked them
B) She appealed, arguing public pay is public
C) She sued in federal court
D) The department posted them online after the totals were challenged by the council

Module 6 — Verification

The Discipline, the Tools, and the Fakes

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload* (2010) — the skeptical way of knowing, for reporters and readers

Reference: *The Verification Handbook*, edited by Craig Silverman for the European Journalism Centre (free online), and Duke University's Reporters' Lab census of fact-checkers (each June)

6a. The Discipline

Verification is the part of journalism that cannot be skipped and cannot be seen. It means testing a claim before publishing it: asking who says so, how they know, what the evidence is, where it first came from, and what would show it to be wrong. A verified story is one in which the newsroom can show its work for every fact, even if no reader ever asks.

Two practices are often confused. Verification is checking one's own reporting before publication. Fact-checking, in its common modern sense, means testing claims that others, usually politicians, have already made in public. Magazines add a third practice, the pre-publication fact-check, in which a separate checker re-reports every name, number, quotation, and characterization before the story runs. Most newspapers have no separate checkers: the reporter is responsible, and the editor's questions are the check.

Corrections are part of the discipline, not a failure of it. Standard practice is to correct errors promptly, say what was wrong, and place the correction where readers of the error will see it. When a problem goes beyond a single fact, as when a story's central claim does not hold up, newsrooms publish an editor's note explaining what happened. A newsroom that rarely publishes corrections is not one that rarely errs.

6b. The Fact-Checkers and the Platforms

Political fact-checking grew into an industry in the 2000s, led by FactCheck.org (2003), PolitiFact (2007), and the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker (2007). Duke University's Reporters' Lab, which counts fact-checking projects worldwide, now finds the field shrinking. It counted 437 active projects in June 2026, down from a peak of 464 in 2024, after more than thirty projects closed and ten opened in 2025.

Much of the field's money and reach came from the platforms, and the platforms have pulled back. Meta ended its third-party fact-checking program in the United States on April 7, 2025, replacing it with Community Notes, in which users write and rate notes and a note is shown only when raters who usually disagree both find it helpful. Meta says more than 200 million American users saw a note in July 2026. Outside the United States it still pays fact-checkers, though it began testing notes in Latin America in September 2026. Google told the European Commission in January 2025 that it would not build fact-checks into its services, and in June 2025 it began removing the fact-check labels that had appeared in its search results.

The evidence on crowd-written notes is mixed. Their supporters point to scale and to trust, since notes written and rated across partisan lines are harder to dismiss as one side's verdict. Their critics point to coverage and speed. Studies cited by Meta's Oversight Board found that about 8% of the notes proposed on

X were published, after an average delay of 26 hours. Meta said in September 2025 that about 6% of its own proposed notes were being published. A September 2026 analysis by the newsletter Indicator found notes on 3% of the Instagram posts that Agence France-Presse (AFP) had debunked in the United States, against 20.5% on X.

6c. Open-Source Methods

A large share of modern verification uses evidence anyone can reach: satellite imagery, street-level photographs, flight and ship trackers, social media archives, and the image itself. The methods, developed by groups such as Bellingcat and adopted by the *New York Times*' Visual Investigations team, the verification unit of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and the wire services, follow a sequence.

Step	The question	The tools
Find the original	Who posted it first, and when?	Searches by keyword and time; reverse image search of key frames
Geolocate	Where was it filmed?	Matching landmarks, signs, and terrain to satellite and street-level imagery
Chronolocate	When was it filmed?	Shadows and the sun's angle, weather records, seasonal vegetation, visible events
Check the content	Is it what it claims to be?	Signs of editing, wrong uniforms, mismatched audio, footage reused from elsewhere
Contact the source	Can the person who filmed it confirm?	A direct message; a request for the original file and any other footage
Corroborate	Does other evidence agree?	Other videos, witnesses, official statements, satellite images taken afterward

The methods catch fakes that reach official channels. On June 23, 2025, during Israel's war with Iran, Israel's foreign minister shared a video said to show a missile striking the gate of Tehran's Evin Prison, and broadcasters around the world aired it. Belgium's Flemish public broadcaster (VRT) matched the video's first frame to a photograph taken in January 2023, in which the bushes by the gate were bare as in winter; in June they are in full leaf. Other verifiers found lines on the gate warping from frame to frame. The prison really had been struck that day, which made the doctored video harder to spot: a fake of a real event.

The war that began on February 28, 2026, when the United States and Israel struck Iran, produced a newer kind of fake: synthetic satellite imagery. In March 2026 the state-affiliated *Tehran Times* posted an image said to show a destroyed American radar installation in Qatar. Researchers matched it to a 2025 Google Earth image of an American base in Bahrain, from which it appeared to have been generated, with parked cars in identical positions. Fact-checkers also found, in other fakes from the war, the invisible watermark Google embeds in images made by its own AI tools.

6d. Synthetic Media and the Limits of Detection

Generative tools now produce photographs, video, and audio that people cannot reliably tell from real ones, and software does little better. In a 2025 study, Australia's national science agency and a South Korean university tested sixteen leading deepfake detectors and found that none reliably identified real-world deepfakes. Detectors trained on one generation of fakes tend to fail on the next.

The more promising defense is provenance: proving where an authentic image came from, rather than proving that a fake is fake. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA) has built a

standard, known as Content Credentials, that records a signed history of a file from the camera onward. Leica built it into a camera in 2023, Sony offered verification to news organizations in 2025, and Google's Pixel 10 phones attach credentials to every photo they take. The system can fail: Nikon suspended its service in September 2025 after a flaw let an AI-generated image be signed as authentic. And adoption is thin, with fewer than 1% of news images and videos carrying the metadata in a 2026 estimate.

Synthetic media also creates what the legal scholars Bobby Chesney and Danielle Citron called the liar's dividend: once fakes are common, anyone caught on genuine video can claim it is fake. Verification now has to establish that real evidence is real, as well as that fake evidence is fake.

6e. When Verification Fails

The most common failure is not a fake. It is a claim reported as fact because it came from someone in authority or arrived first. On October 17, 2023, an explosion at the al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza killed scores of people, and within an hour many outlets reported, citing the Hamas-run health ministry, that an Israeli strike had killed hundreds. Several Western intelligence services and independent analysts later concluded that a misfired Palestinian rocket was the likeliest cause, which Hamas disputes. On October 23 the *New York Times* published an editors' note saying its early coverage had relied too heavily on Hamas's claims. The rule the episode reinforced is old: a claim from a party to a war is a claim, and the headline should say who is making it.

The next most common failure is the first clip mistaken for the event. In January 2019 a short video of a Kentucky high-school student facing a Native American elder at a Washington rally spread widely as evidence that the students had harassed the man. Longer video showed a more complicated encounter, and outlets corrected and updated their stories. The student, Nicholas Sandmann, later settled defamation suits with the Cable News Network (CNN) and the *Washington Post* for undisclosed sums. The first video to spread is rarely the whole of what happened.

Worked example — a viral war video, verified step by step

Forty minutes after reports of night explosions in a port city, a 30-second video of a fireball over waterfront cranes, captioned as the missile strike, gathers a million views. A verification desk checks it.

Step	What the desk did	What it found
Find the original	Searched the past day's posts by keyword; ran key frames through reverse image search	An identical clip uploaded 14 months earlier by a local account
Geolocate	Matched the cranes, a domed building, and the shoreline to satellite imagery	The video does show the city's port; the place is right
Chronolocate	Measured the cranes' shadows; checked the weather on both dates	Long eastward shadows mean late afternoon, not night; clear skies, as on the earlier date
Check the content	Compared the two copies frame by frame	Identical, apart from a cropped watermark
Corroborate	Searched local news from the earlier date	A port fuel-depot fire, with no injuries
Contact the source	Messaged the account that posted the new copy	No reply; the account was a week old

The desk published a short debunk that showed its method: the side-by-side frames, the shadow measurement, and the earlier news report. It did not say that no strike happened, since other footage from that night was still being checked. Every step used free tools; the discipline lay in doing all of them and reporting only what they showed.

Module 6 Key Points

Verification

• Verification checks your own reporting before publication; fact-checking tests others' public claims after they are made.

• Fact-checking projects worldwide fell to 437 in June 2026 from a 2024 peak of 464, as platforms withdrew support.

• Meta ended American fact-checking in April 2025; on X and on Meta, most proposed community notes never appear.

• Detection tools cannot reliably spot deepfakes; provenance — proving where an image came from — is the stronger test.

• A claim from a party to a war is a claim: say who is making it, in the headline.

Module 6 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. As the course uses the terms, how does verification differ from fact-checking?

A) They are two words for the same thing

B) Fact-checking is a newsroom's own check before publishing; verification tests politicians

C) Verification checks your own reporting before publishing; fact-checking tests others' public claims afterward

D) Verification applies only to photographs and video

2. What replaced Meta's third-party fact-checking program in the United States in April 2025?

A) Fact-checks by Meta's own staff

B) A partnership with the Associated Press

C) An artificial-intelligence labeling system

D) Community Notes

3. How did the Belgian broadcaster VRT show that the Evin Prison strike video was doctored?

A) It matched the first frame to a 2023 photo whose bushes were bare, as in winter

B) It found the file's metadata named an editing program

C) It found the explosion's sound copied from footage of a 2020 blast in Beirut

D) The prison's gate was a different color in June

4. Why does the course call provenance a stronger test than detection for AI-generated images?

A) Detection is too slow for breaking news

B) Provenance is required by law in the United States

C) Every news photograph now carries Content Credentials from the camera

D) Detectors are unreliable; origin can be traced

5. In the worked example, what showed that the viral video was not the night's missile strike?

A) The uploader admitted it was fake

B) Satellites showed no damage anywhere in the city

C) Shadows put it in daylight, and an identical copy was posted 14 months earlier

D) The cranes in the video had been removed from the port years earlier

Module 7 — Writing and Editing the News

From Notes to Published Story

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (30th anniversary edition, 2006) — the classic guide to clear nonfiction

Reference: *The Associated Press Stylebook*, updated each year and used by most American newsrooms

7a. The Inverted Pyramid and the Lede

News writing puts the reader's question first: what happened, and why does it matter to me? The inverted pyramid answers it by putting the most important information at the top and the rest in descending order, so that a reader who stops after any paragraph has the most important part. The form survived the move to phones because readers skim, and because a story can be cut from the bottom without losing its point.

The lede is the first sentence or paragraph. A summary lede gives the news directly, in about 25 to 35 words, answering the most important of who, what, when, where, why, and how; trying to answer all six produces an unreadable sentence. A delayed lede opens with a scene, a person, or an anecdote and reaches the news a few paragraphs later. It suits features and trend stories, not breaking news. Whatever the opening, readers should know within a few paragraphs why the story exists.

That is the job of the nut graf, the paragraph that explains why the story matters now. The structure usually credited to the *Wall Street Journal* moves from an anecdote to the nut graf, then to the evidence, and ends with a kicker, a closing quotation or scene that returns to the opening. Each part has a function, and a paragraph that serves none of them can be cut.

7b. Attribution and Quotations

Attribution tells readers who is responsible for each claim. The neutral verb is "said." Verbs such as "claimed," "admitted," and "conceded" carry a judgment, that the claim is doubtful or that something was confessed, and a reporter who uses them must be able to support the judgment. Facts the reporter has established need no attribution; contested claims always do. Documents are attributed with "according to," and every figure should name its source.

Quotations are for what only the speaker can supply: emotion, voice, a contested claim in the person's own words, a memorable phrase. Information is usually better paraphrased, which is shorter and clearer. A quotation must be exact, and partial quotations should be used sparingly, because a few words cut from a sentence can change what it meant.

7c. Style, Headlines, and Forms

Style is the newsroom's system for consistency. The *Associated Press Stylebook*, updated every year, settles questions from abbreviations to sensitive terms, and its choices can become news. In January 2025 the AP said it would keep using "Gulf of Mexico," a name more than 400 years old, while noting President

Trump's order renaming it, because its audience is global. In February the White House barred AP reporters from many presidential events, a fight Module 9 follows into court.

Headlines are the most-read and least-checked words in journalism. A print headline must fit its space and carry a verb; a search headline needs the words people will type; a social headline competes for attention in a feed. The pressure on all three is to claim more than the story shows. The rule is that the story must support its headline: a story saying a policy may raise costs cannot run under a headline saying it will.

The forms of news vary with their purpose. The brief gives the bare facts, and the news story adds context and response. The feature tells a story through people and scenes, and the profile through one person. The explainer answers the questions a reader needs answered to follow a subject. The analysis, labeled as such, interprets events within the reporter's expertise, and the live blog follows breaking news in timestamped entries. Writing for audio follows its own rules: one idea per sentence, attribution before the claim, and round numbers the ear can hold. Writing for video starts with the pictures and adds what they cannot show.

7d. The Walls

News organizations keep two walls. The first separates news from opinion. The editorial page states the organization's views, columnists and outside op-ed writers state their own, and the news pages are supposed to state neither. Labels such as "opinion" and "analysis" tell readers which side of the wall they are on.

The wall is tested when opinion decisions become news. In June 2020 the *New York Times* published an op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton calling for troops to quell unrest. After protests from its own staff, the paper said the piece did not meet its standards, and the editor of its editorial page resigned. In February 2025 the *Washington Post*'s owner, Jeff Bezos, narrowed its opinion section to defending personal liberties and free markets, and its opinion editor left.

The second wall separates news from business. Advertisers get no say in coverage, and paid content, the sponsored articles known as native advertising, must be labeled so that readers can tell it from journalism. Owners are a harder case, since the power to hire editors is the power to shape coverage. Newsrooms protect themselves by disclosing an owner's interests whenever they report on them.

7e. The Edit

Editing is where the discipline of verification is enforced. A good editor reads a draft as a skeptical reader would and asks a short list of questions. What is the news? How do we know each fact? Who else would know? What is the other side? What is missing? Does the headline say more than the story shows? Line editing then makes the prose clear and short, and the copy desk, much reduced in most newsrooms, checks names, numbers, style, and grammar.

Stories with legal risk get a lawyer's read before publication, in which a media lawyer flags statements that could be defamatory or invade privacy and asks what supports them. And every story that criticizes a person or organization carries a request for comment. The standard is sometimes called "no surprises." The subject is told specifically what the story will say and given a reasonable time to respond, hours for breaking news and days for an investigation, and the response, or the refusal, appears in the story.

Worked example — from council-meeting notes to a finished story

The notes

- 7:04 p.m. Council takes up water rates. Staff report: 140 miles of mains more than 100 years old; 212 main breaks last year.
- Proposal: a 9.5% rate increase from January 1, the third increase in five years. The average household bill rises $6.80 a month, to $78.40. The increase brings in $9.6 million a year.
- Mayor Diaz: "We can pay to fix the pipes now, or pay more to fix the streets after they burst."
- Councilman Okafor, voting no: "Seniors on fixed incomes can't absorb another increase."
- Public comment: 11 speakers, 9 opposed. Resident Ana Ruiz says her bill has doubled since 2019.
- 8:31 p.m. Vote: 5-2. Okafor and Lee against.
- The utility's ten-year plan: replacing old mains costs about $1.2 million a mile.

The first draft's lede

"The Riverside City Council met Tuesday night and took up a number of items, including a proposal from the water utility to raise rates."

The edited lede and nut graf

"Water bills in Riverside will rise about $6.80 a month in January after the City Council voted 5-2 Tuesday to raise rates 9.5% to pay for replacing aging pipes."

"The increase, the third in five years, will help replace the city's 140 miles of water mains that are more than a century old. The pipes broke 212 times last year."

What the editor asked

Question	The answer	The change
What is the news?	The vote, and what it costs residents	The lede was rewritten around the bill, not the meeting
How do we know the $6.80?	The staff report's table	Attributed to the city's figures
What is the other side?	Two members voted no; 9 of 11 speakers opposed	Okafor quoted in the fourth paragraph; the speakers summarized, with Ruiz quoted
What is missing?	How far the money goes	Added: $9.6 million a year at $1.2 million a mile replaces about 8 miles a year, so the 140 miles would take more than 17 years
Does the headline overreach?	A draft said "Council hikes water rates to fix crumbling pipes"	Changed to "Water bills to rise $6.80 a month after council vote," which the story supports

The utility was asked the next morning how it chooses which mains to replace first, and its answer went into a follow-up story. The finished story ran 600 words: the news in the first sentence, the stakes in the second paragraph, both sides by the fourth, and the arithmetic by the sixth. That last addition, 8 miles a year against 140, turned a story about a rate increase into a story about how long the pipes will take to fix.

Module 7 Key Points

Writing and Editing the News

• The news lede puts the most important fact first, usually in under 35 words; the nut graf says why it matters now.

• "Said" is the neutral attribution verb; "claimed" and "admitted" carry a judgment the reporter must be able to support.

• The headline is the most-read and least-checked line in a story, and it must not claim more than the story shows.

• A fair story gives its subject the specifics and reasonable time to respond before publication — the "no surprises" rule.

• News and opinion are separate departments; labels such as "analysis" and "opinion" tell readers which one they are reading.

Module 7 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What is a nut graf?

A) The final paragraph, which returns to the scene that opened the story
B) A paragraph summarizing every source the reporter interviewed
C) The opening sentence that gives the news in about 30 words
D) The paragraph on why the story matters now

2. Why is "said" preferred to "claimed" in attribution?

A) "Said" is shorter
B) "Claimed" signals doubt the reporter must be able to support
C) Style rules ban "claimed" in all news stories
D) "Claimed" is legally riskier than any other verb a reporter could choose, under libel law

3. Why did the AP keep using "Gulf of Mexico" in 2025?

A) Federal law requires it
B) Its editors opposed the president's policies
C) The name is centuries old and its audience is global
D) Its member newspapers voted to reject the new name at their annual meeting

4. What does the "no surprises" standard require?

A) Warning readers before publishing anything distressing or graphic
B) Telling the subject what the story will say
C) Letting subjects read the full story and approve it before it runs
D) Publishing only what the reporter's editor already knew about in advance

5. In the worked example, what did the editor add when asking what was missing?

A) A second quotation from the mayor about the pipes
B) A list of every speaker at the public comment period
C) The council's vote on an unrelated zoning matter that same night
D) How far the money would go

Module 8 — Ethics

Truth, Harm, Independence, and Accountability

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990) — the classic study of the reporter's relationship with a subject

Reference: The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (revised October 2026) and the Associated Press's statement of news values and principles

8a. The Codes

American journalism has no license and no regulator, so its ethics live in voluntary codes enforced by employers and peers. The most widely used is the SPJ's, built on four principles: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent. The society adopted the editors' canons in 1926, wrote its own code in 1973, and revised it in 1984, 1987, 1996, and 2014.

On October 4, 2026, 93% of the society's members voting at its convention in Columbus, Ohio, approved another revision. The four principles are unchanged. The new text adds guidance on artificial intelligence and machine-generated content, verification, misinformation, transparency about sources, fairness in reporting allegations, the handling of hateful material, and how journalists' own experiences can shape their work. News organizations add codes of their own, from the AP's statement of principles to the *New York Times*' ethics handbook, and broadcasters follow the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA).

Other democracies make different choices. In Britain most newspapers belong to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), which enforces a code and can require corrections. In the United States the First Amendment rules out a government press regulator, and newsrooms answer to readers, courts, and their own standards.

8b. Minimizing Harm

Journalism hurts people even when it is true, and the codes ask reporters to weigh the harm against the public's need to know. Most newsrooms do not name victims of sexual assault without their consent, and they rarely name juveniles accused of crimes. Graphic images are published when they carry meaning no description can, as with the photographs of Emmett Till's body in 1955 or of the drowned Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi in 2015, and withheld when they would only shock.

The internet made old stories permanent, and newsrooms have begun to address the cost. A brief item about a minor arrest, once forgotten with the newspaper, now follows a person through every job search. In 2018 cleveland.com began removing names from stories about minor crimes on request. In 2021 the *Boston Globe* started its Fresh Start program for reviewing such requests, and the AP said it would stop naming suspects in minor crimes it was unlikely to follow up. Many newsrooms have also ended the mug-shot galleries that drew traffic by displaying people who had only been arrested.

8c. Independence and Conflicts

Independence means having no stake in what one covers. Reporters do not accept gifts or free travel from the people they cover, do not invest in companies on their beats, and, at most major newsrooms, do not give to campaigns, march in demonstrations, or display political signs. The rules apply to appearances as well as to facts, because a reader who suspects a conflict cannot trust the story.

Mainstream newsrooms also refuse to pay sources. Payment gives a source a motive to embellish, and it turns the source's account into a purchased product. Tabloids and some television programs have paid for interviews, a practice called checkbook journalism, and their stories are discounted accordingly. Where an organization's owner or business partners appear in the news, the story discloses the connection.

8d. Deception and Undercover Reporting

Deception has produced some of journalism's most important stories and some of its worst. Nellie Bly's asylum exposé in 1887 depended on it. In 1977 the *Chicago Sun-Times* bought a tavern, which it named the Mirage, to document city inspectors demanding bribes; the series was celebrated, but the Pulitzer board declined to give it a prize because of the deception.

The legal risks are real. In 1992 the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) program *PrimeTime Live* sent producers with hidden cameras to work at Food Lion grocery stores, and their report described unsanitary food handling. Food Lion sued not for libel but over how the material was gathered. A jury awarded $5.5 million in punitive damages, which the trial judge cut to $315,000, and in 1999 an appeals court left only $2 in nominal damages, for trespass and breach of the duty of loyalty, since the producers had taken jobs only to work against their employer. The codes now treat deception as a last resort: justified only for information of vital public importance that cannot be obtained any other way, and disclosed to readers when the story runs.

8e. Objectivity or Moral Clarity

The sharpest ethical argument in journalism since 2020 has been over objectivity. It is contested ground, so the course sets out each side's case as its advocates make it, then the evidence, then its own reading.

The case for objectivity. A. G. Sulzberger, publisher of the *New York Times*, made the case in a 2023 essay in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, calling the principle independence: following the facts wherever they lead, even against a reporter's own views. Its advocates argue that separating fact from opinion is what lets a news organization serve readers across a divided public. Reporters' personal views are irrelevant to the facts, and displaying them invites readers to discount the reporting. They note that trust is already lowest among the readers the press most needs to reach, and that abandoning neutrality would confirm those readers' suspicions. And they argue that neutrality protects journalists themselves: a reporter known for opinions becomes a combatant, and sources and readers treat them as one.

The case for moral clarity. Its advocates argue that objectivity, as practiced, has often meant the views of the people who ran newsrooms, who were mostly white and male, presented as no view at all. Wesley Lowery made the case in a widely read *New York Times* op-ed in June 2020, arguing that newsrooms should aim for moral clarity in place of a performed neutrality. The press critic Jay Rosen has long called that neutrality "the view from nowhere." Advocates add that false balance gives lies equal time, as the climate coverage in Module 3 showed. A 2023 report by Leonard Downie Jr. and Andrew Heyward, based on

interviews with newsroom leaders, found that many considered objectivity an outdated goal and preferred to speak of trustworthiness and transparency.

The evidence. The two sides agree on more than their arguments suggest: both demand verification, and neither defends publishing falsehoods. Their disagreement is about framing, about tone, and about when a dispute has two sides worth presenting. The history in Module 2 matters here, because Lippmann proposed objectivity as a method of testing claims, not as a pose of having no views. The audience evidence cuts both ways. Trust divides sharply by party, which warns against signaling allegiance, but experiments such as Derek Koehler's in 2016 found that balanced presentations of settled science leave readers believing experts are more divided than they are.

The course's reading. The useful core of objectivity is Lippmann's: a method that tests every claim the same way, whoever makes it. That method requires neither false balance nor a pretense that reporters have no views. Where the evidence is settled, report it as settled; where values divide people, report the division fairly; and keep the reporter's own allegiances out of both.

Worked example — five dilemmas, decided under the codes

Each case tests one or more of the SPJ's principles. The right column gives the resolution most newsrooms would reach, and the reasoning.

The dilemma	The principles in tension	The usual resolution
A city councilman's 17-year-old son is arrested for drunken driving; no one was hurt. Name him?	Seek truth; minimize harm	Do not name him: he is a minor, the crime is minor, and his father's office does not make him newsworthy
A bystander's video shows the moment a man dies in a police shooting. Publish it?	Seek truth; minimize harm	Publish an edited version with a warning, because the video is central to a matter of public concern; tell the family first if possible
A source offers documents proving fraud at a charity, for $5,000.	Seek truth; act independently	Decline to pay; ask whether the documents can be obtained another way, and verify them independently if they arrive
A reporter who covers immigration wants to march in a rally about immigration policy.	Act independently	Most newsrooms would say no: participation becomes a visible conflict on her own beat
A man asks the paper to remove a 2014 story about his arrest; the charge was later dismissed.	Be accountable; minimize harm	Update the story to report the dismissal, and consider removing his name under a fresh-start policy

None of the resolutions is automatic. Each depends on facts that could change it: if the councilman had used his office to help his son, the son's case would become news; if the shooting video could be described fully in words, publishing it would add harm without information. The codes give journalists questions to ask, not answers to apply mechanically, which is why newsrooms decide hard cases in conversation with editors rather than alone.

Module 8 Key Points

Ethics

• The SPJ code was revised in October 2026 to address AI; its four principles, from seeking truth to minimizing harm, stand.

• Mainstream newsrooms do not pay sources, because payment gives a source a motive to embellish.

• Deception is a last resort: justified only for vital information unobtainable otherwise, and disclosed to readers.

• Many newsrooms now stop naming people in minor crimes and remove old stories that follow them for years.

• In the course's reading, objectivity's useful core is a method that tests every claim the same way, not a pretense of having no views.

Module 8 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What did the SPJ's members approve on October 4, 2026?

A) A licensing exam for reporters
B) A revised ethics code that addresses AI
C) A merger with the Radio Television Digital News Association
D) A rule letting members be disciplined by their employers for breaking the code

2. Why do mainstream newsrooms refuse to pay sources?

A) Sources rarely ask
B) It is illegal under federal law
C) Only tabloids can afford it, given the cost of the largest exclusive interviews
D) Payment gives a source a motive to embellish

3. In the Food Lion case against ABC, what remained of the jury's award after the 1999 appeal?

A) $5.5 million
B) Two dollars for trespass and breach of loyalty
C) $315,000, as the trial judge set it
D) A new trial, ordered because the judge had misinstructed the jury

4. What does the course take as the useful core of objectivity?

A) A method that tests every claim the same way
B) Reporters having no political views
C) Refusing to say that either side of a dispute is wrong
D) Publishing every side of a dispute at equal length, whatever the evidence

5. In the worked example, how would most newsrooms handle a request to remove a 2014 story about a later-dismissed arrest?

A) Update it, and consider removing the name
B) Delete it on request
C) Refuse, since the archive is a record
D) Remove it only if a court orders the newspaper to, under privacy law

Module 9 — The Law of the Press

What Reporters Can Publish, Gather, and Protect

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Anthony Lewis, *Make No Law: The Sullivan Case and the First Amendment* (1991) — the story of the case that made modern press law

Reference: The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press's state-by-state legal guides to libel, the reporter's privilege, recording, and the laws against suits meant to silence speech

9a. Publishing: Prior Restraint and Lawfully Obtained Information

The First Amendment says Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press. Its strongest protection is against prior restraint, government action that stops publication before it happens. In *Near v. Minnesota* (1931) the Supreme Court struck down a state law that let officials shut down a newspaper as a public nuisance. In the Pentagon Papers case (1971) it held that the government must meet a heavy burden to justify stopping publication, even of classified material.

The Court has also protected the publication of truthful information lawfully obtained. In *Bartnicki v. Vopper* (2001) it held that a radio host could not be punished for broadcasting an illegally intercepted phone call on a matter of public concern, because he had taken no part in the interception. The principle lets reporters publish leaked material they did not steal. It does not protect the leaker, and it does not protect a reporter who breaks the law to get the material.

Broadcasting is the exception. Because the airwaves are licensed, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates broadcasters in ways that would be unconstitutional for newspapers, and its leverage has become a press-freedom issue. In September 2025, after the commission's chairman, Brendan Carr, publicly criticized remarks by the late-night host Jimmy Kimmel, ABC suspended his show for six days. In March 2026 Carr said broadcast licenses are not a property right, and in April the commission ordered ABC's own stations to file early for license renewal.

9b. Libel

Libel is a published false statement of fact that damages someone's reputation. A plaintiff generally must show that the statement was false, that it was about them, that it was published to others, that it was defamatory, and that the publisher was at fault. Opinion that cannot be proved true or false is protected. But in *Milkovich v. Lorain Journal* (1990) the Court held that there is no blanket exemption for anything labeled opinion: a statement that implies a provable fact can be libelous.

The fault a plaintiff must prove depends on who is suing. In *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964), an Alabama official had won $500,000 from the *Times* over an advertisement for the civil-rights movement that contained minor errors. The Supreme Court reversed. It held that a public official must prove actual malice, meaning the publisher knew the statement was false or acted with reckless disregard for whether it was true, and must prove it with clear and convincing evidence. Later cases extended the rule to public figures and let states apply a lower standard, usually negligence, to private people.

Actual malice is hard to prove, but not impossible. Dominion Voting Systems settled its suit against Fox News for $787.5 million in April 2023, after pretrial discovery showed the network's hosts and executives

privately doubting claims of election fraud that it aired. Newsmax disclosed a $67 million settlement with Dominion in August 2025, and Smartmatic's $2.7 billion suit against Fox was still moving toward trial in 2026.

Defendants have a second line of protection. A strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) is a suit filed to punish or silence speech rather than to win it. As of March 2026, forty states and the District of Columbia had anti-SLAPP laws, which let a defendant ask a judge to dismiss a suit early unless the plaintiff shows it is likely to succeed. Most make a losing plaintiff pay the defendant's legal fees. Seventeen states have adopted the Uniform Public Expression Protection Act, a model law drafted by the Uniform Law Commission, Missouri most recently, in July 2026.

Since 2024 Donald Trump has sued six news organizations, three of them after taking office in January 2025. The table gives their status on October 8, 2026.

Defendant	The claim	Filed	Status, October 8, 2026
ABC News	Defamation, over an anchor's on-air statement	2024	Settled in December 2024: $15 million to the president's library, plus $1 million in fees
Paramount, owner of *60 Minutes*	Deceptive editing of a *60 Minutes* interview	2024	Settled in July 2025 for $16 million
Des Moines Register and the pollster Ann Selzer	Consumer fraud, over a pre-election poll	December 2024	Dismissed by an Iowa judge on September 23, 2026; the president plans to appeal
The *Wall Street Journal*, its publisher, and Rupert Murdoch	Defamation, $10 billion, over a report on a letter to Jeffrey Epstein	July 18, 2025	Dismissed April 13, 2026 for failing to plead actual malice; an amended complaint filed May 27 is pending
The *New York Times*, three reporters, and Penguin Random House	Defamation, $15 billion	September 15, 2025	The first complaint was struck for its length; a second amended complaint filed August 27, 2026 is pending
The BBC	Defamation, $10 billion, over a *Panorama* edit of a 2021 speech	December 15, 2025	A motion to dismiss is pending; a two-week jury trial is provisionally set for the period beginning February 15, 2027, in Miami

From the court records and the parties' statements as reported. A settlement is not a finding that a story was false.

The Sullivan question

Justice Clarence Thomas, and since 2021 Justice Neil Gorsuch, have called for reconsidering the actual-malice rule. On June 29, 2026, both dissented when the Court declined to hear Alan Dershowitz's challenge to it, in his suit against CNN. The Court had turned away a similar petition from the casino owner Steve Wynn in March 2025. Whether the rule should stand is contested ground, so the course gives each side's case, then the evidence, then its own reading.

The case for revisiting it. Its advocates argue that the rule has no basis in the First Amendment's original meaning, since the common law of libel the founders knew imposed no such burden. They argue it now protects too much. In a world where anyone can publish to millions, ordinary people swept into a public controversy become public figures who can almost never win, even against careless falsehoods. They point to Sarah Palin's suit over a 2017 *New York Times* editorial that wrongly linked her to a mass shooting: the paper corrected the error, but juries in 2022 and 2025 found she had not proved actual malice. And they argue that the rule lets well-funded outlets spread damaging claims at little risk.

The case for keeping it. Its defenders argue that the rule was made for exactly the danger it still guards against. *Sullivan* arose because Southern officials were using libel suits to drive the national press away from the civil-rights story. Without the rule, they argue, powerful plaintiffs could use the cost of litigation to

silence critics, as recent suits show they are willing to try. And they add that the rule protects error, not lies: plaintiffs with evidence of knowing falsity can still win, at trial or through settlements like Dominion's.

The evidence. The record supports parts of both cases. Plaintiffs have built strong actual-malice cases when pretrial discovery uncovers what a publisher privately believed, as Dominion did before Fox settled, and juries have found actual malice, as in the 2016 *Rolling Stone* verdict. But the public-figure category has grown to reach people who never sought attention, and courts have struggled to define its edges. On original meaning, the first side is right that the founders' law imposed no actual-malice rule; the Court grounded the rule in the First Amendment's purpose, and whether that is legitimate is a question of constitutional method that evidence cannot settle.

The course's reading. The actual-malice rule does what it was meant to do: it protects honest error in reporting on public matters while leaving deliberate falsehood exposed, as the *Rolling Stone* verdict and the Dominion settlement show. The strongest case for change is narrower than overturning it, and concerns who counts as a public figure.

9c. Privacy and Newsgathering

True reporting can still invade privacy. Most states recognize four privacy claims: intrusion into a private place or affair, publication of private facts that are not newsworthy, false light, and use of a name or likeness for commercial gain. Newsworthiness is the main defense to the second, and courts give the press wide latitude to decide what is news. Newsgathering has no special protection. Reporters are bound by trespass, wiretapping, and recording laws like anyone else, as the undercover cases in Module 8 showed.

9d. The Reporter's Privilege

Reporters promise sources confidentiality, but the law does not always honor the promise. In *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972) the Supreme Court held 5-4 that the First Amendment gives reporters no privilege to refuse a grand jury subpoena, though Justice Lewis Powell's concurrence led many lower courts to recognize a qualified one. Forty states and the District of Columbia have shield laws, courts in most of the rest recognize some protection, and Hawaii and Wyoming offer none.

There is no federal shield law. The Protect Reporters from Exploitative State Spying (PRESS) Act passed the House without objection in January 2024, but a single senator blocked it that December, and it has not passed since. The executive branch's own limits have swung with administrations. In 2021 and 2022 Attorney General Merrick Garland barred subpoenas and warrants for reporters' records in most leak investigations. On April 25, 2025, Attorney General Pam Bondi rescinded that policy, allowing them with the attorney general's approval while saying the news media are presumptively entitled to advance notice. Bondi left office in April 2026, and the Senate confirmed Todd Blanche as attorney general on August 8.

The new policy's sharpest use came on January 14, 2026, when FBI agents searched the Virginia home of Hannah Natanson, a *Washington Post* reporter, and seized her phone, two laptops, a watch, an audio recorder, and an external drive. The search was part of the case against a systems administrator working for a Pentagon contractor, charged with taking home and passing on classified reports. The warrant application did not mention the Privacy Protection Act of 1980, which generally requires subpoenas rather than search warrants for journalists' work, and the magistrate judge called the omission a matter of significant concern. In February the court stopped the government from reviewing the seized data itself and took over the review. In June the Justice Department withdrew grand jury subpoenas it had issued to a *Post* reporter and three *Wall Street Journal* reporters.

9e. Leaks and the Espionage Act

The Espionage Act of 1917 makes it a crime to keep or pass on national defense information without authorization. It has been used against leakers, beginning with the Pentagon Papers' Daniel Ellsberg, whose case was dismissed for government misconduct. For more than a century it produced no conviction for obtaining and publishing secrets. That changed on June 26, 2024, when the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange pleaded guilty in a federal court in Saipan to one count of conspiring to obtain and disclose national defense information. He was sentenced to the five years he had already served. A plea sets no binding precedent, but it showed that the act can reach the gathering and publishing of secrets, which journalists also do.

9f. Access

There is no general constitutional right of access to government information or places. But courts have held that once the government opens a space to the press, it cannot exclude reporters because of what they publish. In *Sherrill v. Knight* (1977) an appeals court required the White House to give reasons and a chance to respond before denying a reporter a press pass. Three fights tested the principle in 2025 and 2026.

The fight	What happened	In court, as of October 8, 2026
The AP and the White House	Barred from the Oval Office and Air Force One in February 2025 over its "Gulf of Mexico" style; the White House said access to the president's spaces is a privilege it may allocate, and took over the press pool	A judge ordered access restored in April 2025; the appeals court paused the order, 2-1, in June and heard the merits in November 2025; no final ruling had been reported by October 8
The *New York Times* and the Pentagon	A credential policy the Pentagon said would protect sensitive information and reporters said would bar ordinary newsgathering; on October 15, 2025, most of the press corps turned in its badges rather than accept it	Judge Paul Friedman ruled for the *Times* on March 20, 2026, finding viewpoint discrimination, and restored seven *Times* journalists' credentials; the Pentagon closed its press offices and required escorts, which the appeals court allowed pending appeal
CNN, MS NOW (My Source for News, Opinion and the World, formerly MSNBC), and Politico	Credentials revoked by the White House on September 18, 2026, over coverage it called misleading	A judge restored access on September 24 on due-process grounds; a hearing on a longer injunction was set for October 8

9g. Copyright and Artificial Intelligence

The newest legal front pits publishers against the companies that trained AI systems on their work. Copyright protects expression, not facts, and the fair-use doctrine permits some copying for new purposes; whether training a model is fair use is the central question. The *New York Times* sued OpenAI and Microsoft in December 2023, and its core claims survived a motion to dismiss in March 2025. The case was in discovery in 2026, with no trial date.

Rulings elsewhere have split. A federal judge found in February 2025 that a legal-research start-up's use of Thomson Reuters' case summaries was not fair use, while two judges in June 2025 found that training on books could be. Anthropic agreed to pay $1.5 billion to settle authors' claims over books it had downloaded from pirate sites. Many publishers have chosen licensing over litigation, a market Module 13 describes.

Worked example — a libel claim, element by element

A local news site reports that a paving contractor "bribed" a county commissioner to win a $4 million road contract. The story rests on two unnamed sources and a bank record showing a $10,000 payment from the contractor to the commissioner. The reporter did not call the contractor before publishing. The bank record's memo line reads "loan repayment," and the contractor later produces a signed loan agreement from two years earlier. He sues for libel in a state with an anti-SLAPP law.

Element	Analysis	Likely finding
A false statement of fact	"Bribed" asserts a crime, which can be proved true or false, and the loan documents show it false	Met
About the plaintiff	The contractor was named	Met
Published to others	It ran on the site and was shared	Met
Defamatory	An accusation of a crime damages reputation on its face	Met
Is he a public figure?	A private businessman who bids for public contracts may be a limited public figure on the subject of those contracts; courts differ	Uncertain, and the case may turn on it
If public: actual malice	Ignoring the memo line and not calling the subject can be evidence of purposeful avoidance of the truth, which courts treat as reckless disregard	A real risk for the site
If private: negligence	A reasonable reporter would have asked about the memo line and called the subject	Likely met
Defenses	Truth fails; the fair-report privilege, which protects accurate reports of official proceedings and records, does not apply because none was reported; "bribed" is not opinion	None strong
Anti-SLAPP motion	The site can move to dismiss early; the contractor must show he is likely to win	Probably denied on these facts, though the motion raises his costs

The analysis shows why the rules of the earlier modules matter in court. A single call to the contractor, or one question about the memo line, would have stopped the story or turned it into a defensible one: "paid the commissioner $10,000; both men say it repaid a loan." Actual malice protects reporters who make honest mistakes after doing the work. It does not protect a newsroom that avoids learning the truth.

Module 9 Key Points

The Law of the Press

• Prior restraint is nearly impossible to justify, and the press may publish truthful information it obtained lawfully.

• Public figures must prove actual malice; on June 29, 2026, the Court again declined to revisit the rule.

• Forty states and the District of Columbia have anti-SLAPP laws that end meritless suits early and shift legal fees.

• There is no federal shield law, and since April 2025 prosecutors may again seek reporters' records in leak cases.

• Courts have held that once government opens a space to the press, it may not exclude reporters for their viewpoint.

Module 9 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. Under *New York Times v. Sullivan*, what standard of fault must a public figure prove to win a libel suit?

A) Knowing falsity or reckless disregard for the truth
B) Simple carelessness
C) A failure to follow the newsroom's own written standards
D) Negligence, meaning the care a reasonable reporter would take

2. What did the Supreme Court do on June 29, 2026, in Dershowitz's case against CNN?

A) Overruled *Sullivan*
B) Upheld a jury verdict
C) Declined to hear it, over two dissents
D) Narrowed the definition of a public figure to people who sought attention

3. What did the Justice Department's April 2025 memo allow?

A) A federal shield law
B) Prosecution of reporters for publishing leaks
C) Arrests of reporters who refuse to name sources to a grand jury, without a judge
D) Subpoenas and warrants for reporters' records in leak cases

4. What did Judge Paul Friedman rule in the *Times*' suit against the Pentagon?

A) The Pentagon may set any rules it likes
B) The suit was filed too late
C) The credential policy discriminated by viewpoint, and he restored seven reporters' credentials
D) Reporters must accept escorts but may keep their offices

5. In the worked example, what single step would most likely have prevented the libel suit?

A) Calling the contractor and asking about the memo line
B) Labeling the story as opinion
C) Using three sources instead of two
D) Waiting for the commissioner to be charged with a crime before publishing anything

Module 10 — Investigative Journalism

Method, Money, and What It Changes

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said* (2019) — the Weinstein investigation from the inside, method included

Reference: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists' published methods and its Offshore Leaks database (offshoreleaks.icij.org)

10a. What Makes an Investigation

Investigative reporting is original reporting about something that someone powerful wants kept hidden. It is built mostly from documents and data, and it usually takes months. Its subject is often not a single wrong act but a system: how a probation office loses track of offenders, how a hospital chain bills its patients, how a court system treats people who cannot pay.

The method most investigative reporters describe begins with a hypothesis, a testable statement of what the reporter suspects, and then tries to prove it wrong. Mark Lee Hunter's widely used manual for the United Nations' education agency calls the approach story-based inquiry. The hypothesis tells the reporter which documents to seek and whom to ask, and it changes as the evidence comes in. Reporters keep a master file, a chronology, and a list of every fact with its source, which becomes the fact-check memo before publication.

The last stage is the confrontation. Before publication the subjects receive a letter listing every significant finding the story will report, with a deadline to respond that is often a week or more. Their answers can change the story or kill it, which is the point: an investigation that cannot survive its subjects' best reply should not run. The lawyer's read follows, and the response, or the refusal, appears in the story.

10b. The Classics, and What They Changed

Investigation	What it showed	What followed
Ida Tarbell, *McClure's* (1902-04)	Standard Oil's methods of crushing competitors, from court records and testimony	The Supreme Court upheld the company's breakup in 1911
Washington Post, Watergate (1972-74)	A White House campaign of political espionage and its cover-up	President Nixon resigned in August 1974
Boston Globe, Spotlight (2002)	The Catholic archdiocese had moved abusive priests from parish to parish for decades	Cardinal Bernard Law resigned that December, and inquiries followed around the world
International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and partners, the Panama Papers (2016)	11.5 million leaked records of a Panamanian law firm, exposing offshore companies of officials and the wealthy	Iceland's prime minister stepped aside within two days; Pakistan's was disqualified in 2017; governments recovered about $1.3 billion
New York Times and *New Yorker*, Harvey Weinstein (2017)	Decades of sexual-harassment and assault allegations against the producer, and the settlements that hid them	A worldwide reckoning known as #MeToo; Weinstein was later convicted in California
Miami Herald, "Perversion of Justice" (2018)	The secret, lenient plea deal federal prosecutors gave Jeffrey Epstein in 2008	Epstein was arrested on federal sex-trafficking charges in July 2019

Investigation	What it showed	What followed
ProPublica, Clarence Thomas (2023)	Luxury travel and gifts from a billionaire that the justice had not disclosed	The Supreme Court adopted its first code of conduct seven months later

10c. The Collaborative Model

Some stories are too big for one newsroom. The ICIJ, founded in 1997 and independent since 2017, pioneered a model in which hundreds of reporters share a leaked dataset, report it in their own countries, and publish on the same day. The Panama Papers brought together more than 370 journalists in 76 countries working through 2.6 terabytes of records. The Pandora Papers in 2021 involved more than 600 journalists in 117 countries and 11.9 million records naming 35 current and former world leaders.

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) works the same way on smaller leaks and public records. Collaboration buys scale, local knowledge, and safety, because a story published by 150 outlets at once is hard to suppress or to sue out of existence. Its costs are coordination and discipline: one partner who breaks the shared publication date can expose every other partner's sources.

10d. Who Pays for It

Investigations are the most expensive journalism and the least likely to pay for themselves. A team may spend a year on one story, with records fees, data work, travel, and legal review, and the result may sell no more subscriptions than a weather forecast. The economist James T. Hamilton's study of the field, *Democracy's Detectives* (2016), found that the public benefits of investigations that change policy can exceed their costs many times over, but almost none of that value returns to the newsroom that paid. In economic terms, accountability reporting is a public good, whose benefits reach everyone whether or not they pay, and markets underproduce public goods.

As newspaper revenue fell, nonprofits took up part of the work: the Center for Investigative Reporting (founded in 1977), ProPublica (2008), the Marshall Project on criminal justice (2014), and statewide newsrooms such as the *Texas Tribune* (2009) and CalMatters. Their money comes from foundations, wealthy donors, and members, and their independence depends on keeping funders out of editorial decisions. Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), the profession's training organization since 1975, had about 4,900 members in 2024.

10e. The 2026 Pulitzers

The 2026 Pulitzer Prizes, announced in May, showed where the work stands. The *Washington Post* won the prize for public service for what the board called piercing the secrecy around the administration's overhaul of federal agencies and documenting its human toll, three months after cutting about a third of its staff. The *New York Times* won for investigative reporting that, in the board's citation, showed how the president weakened conflict-of-interest safeguards and profited from his office.

Reuters won for national reporting that the board said documented the president's use of federal power against his critics. The AP won for international reporting on surveillance tools developed in Silicon Valley, refined in China, and later adopted by the United States Border Patrol. The *San Francisco Chronicle* won for explaining how insurers' algorithms undervalued homes destroyed by wildfires. The two local awards went to the *Chicago Tribune*, for its coverage of a federal immigration sweep, and to the *Connecticut Mirror* and

ProPublica, whose reporting on towing laws led to new consumer protections. Most of the winning work rested on documents and data, and several entries were collaborations.

Worked example — one investigation, from tip to impact

This composite, drawn from the pattern of many published investigations, follows a regional newspaper's six-month inquiry into a nursing-home chain. The right-hand column names the failure each stage exists to prevent.

Stage	Weeks	What the team did	What could have gone wrong
The tip	1	A nurse writes that residents at three of the chain's homes are falling at night because night shifts are understaffed	Acting on one source's account without testing it
The hypothesis	1-2	"The chain staffs nights below the state minimum, and falls rise when it does"	A hypothesis too vague to disprove
The records	2-10	Federal staffing data reported by the homes themselves, state inspection reports, lawsuits, and the chain's ownership filings	Missing the records that cut against the hypothesis
The data	6-12	Staff hours per resident, night by night, matched to reported falls across 40 homes; a statistician reviews the method	Reporting a correlation as proof of cause
The people	8-18	Thirty interviews: families, former staff on the record, two administrators, and an expert on elder care	Relying on anonymous former employees with grievances
The confrontation	19-21	A 14-page letter to the chain setting out 23 findings, and a meeting with its lawyers	Too little time to respond, which invites a fair-process complaint
Publication and impact	22-26	A four-part series; the chain disputes two findings, and the paper reports its objections; the state orders inspections of all 40 homes, and the legislature takes up a staffing bill	Treating the series as finished once officials respond

The investigation's strength came from the order of its work. The documents came first, the data tested the tip, the people explained what the numbers showed, and the subjects answered every finding before publication. Each stage could have failed in a known way, and the rules of the craft exist to prevent exactly those failures.

Module 10 Key Points

Investigative Journalism

• Investigations test a hypothesis against documents and sources, and end with a letter giving subjects every finding to answer.

• The Panama Papers' 11.5 million records were shared among 370-plus journalists in 76 countries; governments recovered about $1.3 billion.

• ProPublica's 2023 reporting on Clarence Thomas was followed seven months later by the Supreme Court's first code of conduct.

• Investigations' public benefits can far exceed their cost, but the newsroom captures little — so markets underproduce them.

• The *Washington Post* won the 2026 Pulitzer for public service three months after cutting about a third of its staff.

Module 10 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the purpose of the confrontation letter at the end of an investigation?

A) To warn the subjects that legal action against them is likely to follow
B) To ask the subjects to suggest other people the reporters should interview
C) To give the subjects' lawyers a draft of the full story to approve
D) To let subjects answer every finding

2. Which investigation was followed by the Supreme Court's first code of conduct?

A) The *Boston Globe*'s Spotlight series
B) The *Miami Herald*'s Epstein series
C) ProPublica's on Clarence Thomas
D) The Panama Papers, published by more than 370 journalists

3. Why, in Hamilton's economics, do markets underproduce investigative reporting?

A) Readers dislike long stories
B) Its benefits go mostly to the public, not to the newsroom that pays for it
C) Its costs are too unpredictable for newsrooms to budget a year ahead
D) Advertisers refuse to appear next to it

4. What does the ICIJ's model rely on?

A) Many newsrooms sharing a leak and publishing together
B) A single newsroom's staff
C) Paying sources for leaked documents through a fund the consortium controls
D) A single foundation that funds the reporting and decides what is published

5. In the worked example, what order of work gave the investigation its strength?

A) Documents first, then data to test the tip, then people, then the subjects' answers
B) Families' accounts first, then records to confirm them, then the chain's reply
C) The chain's own staffing reports, confirmed by its executives in an interview
D) A statistician's analysis first, with interviews left until after publication

Module 11 — The Beats

How Each Beat Works, and Where It Goes Wrong

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat* (2006) — how covering one subject changed the press and the country

Reference: Journalist's Resource, the Harvard Shorenstein Center's guides to reporting on research (journalistsresource.org), and the Pew Research Center's 2022 count of statehouse reporters

11a. Government and Politics

Government is the oldest beat and the one with the most at stake. At city hall and the statehouse, the raw material is the budget, the agenda, the contract, and the vote, and the reporter's job is to explain who wins and who pays before a decision is made, not after. Pew's 2022 count found 1,724 reporters assigned to statehouses, but only 850 of them on the beat full time, down from 904 in 2014. Nonprofit newsrooms employed 353 of the 1,724, a fifth of the total, against 92 in 2014, as newspapers' share fell.

Where no one covers a legislature, bills pass unread and lobbyists' claims go untested, and Module 14 sets out what research finds when coverage disappears. The beat's sources are documents first: bill texts, the fiscal notes that estimate a bill's cost, lobbying disclosures, and campaign finance reports. Then come the clerks, staff members, and lobbyists who know how the process works. Officials are sources for their own positions.

Political coverage has traps of its own. The horse race crowds out policy, as Module 3 showed, and polls are reported with more confidence than they deserve, as Module 5 showed. A subtler trap is false symmetry: when one side's factual claim is contradicted by the evidence, presenting it opposite the other side's accurate claim as a disagreement misleads readers. The White House beat adds a trap of access: since February 2025 the White House itself has chosen which outlets travel in the presidential press pool.

11b. Police and Courts

Crime stories are among the most read and the most often wrong in emphasis. The police are usually the first source and sometimes the only one, and an arrest report is the police's account of what happened, not a finding of fact. Newsrooms have learned to attribute police accounts explicitly, to seek the accused person's side and witnesses, and to avoid passive phrasing such as "officer-involved shooting" that hides who did what. They also report what happens after an arrest. Dropped charges and acquittals are news, and a newsroom that reports arrests but not outcomes leaves a false record.

Access is narrowing on this beat too. Since 2020 many police departments have encrypted their radio traffic, cutting off the scanners reporters used to hear incidents as they happened. California's justice department directed agencies in 2020 to protect personal information on the air, and many chose full encryption. Colorado responded in 2021 with a law requiring agencies that encrypt to adopt policies for giving the news media access.

Crime coverage also shapes what people believe. In most years since 1993, majorities in Gallup's polls have said crime in the country was rising, including many years when it was falling. Stories about individual

crimes are episodic, in Iyengar's terms. Readers need trend data — rates over years — to judge whether a place is getting safer or more dangerous.

Court reporting rests on the docket. Complaints, motions, and indictments are allegations, and the language must say so: "charged with," "accused of," "the lawsuit says." Accurate reports of court filings are protected from libel claims by the fair-report privilege, but the privilege covers what a document says, not whether it is true. Verdicts, sentences, and appeals are where the record is made.

11c. Business and Economics

Business reporting runs on disclosure. Public companies file annual reports, quarterly reports, and reports of major events with the SEC, and their earnings calls and proxy statements on executive pay are public. The beat's skill is reading those documents: separating revenue from profit, one-time gains from recurring ones, and a company's preferred adjusted figures from the ones accounting rules require.

Speed matters on this beat as it does nowhere else, because news moves prices. Government statistics such as the monthly jobs report are released at fixed times, and reporters who see them early do so in locked rooms, known as lockups, under embargo until the moment of release. Wire services sell headlines to traders in fractions of a second. The stakes became clear in 2013, when it emerged that Thomson Reuters had been sending the University of Michigan's consumer-sentiment index to high-speed trading clients two seconds before everyone else. Trading spiked within milliseconds, and the practice ended under an agreement with New York's attorney general.

Business reporters face their own conflicts. A reporter who trades on what he is about to publish commits a crime: the *Wall Street Journal* columnist R. Foster Winans was convicted in 1985 for leaking the contents of his columns to traders before they ran. Most newsrooms bar reporters from owning shares in the industries they cover. Economic figures need context of their own: seasonal adjustment, revisions (the jobs report is revised twice in the following months), and the difference between nominal and inflation-adjusted numbers. A single month is a noisy estimate; the trend over several months is the news.

11d. Science and Health

Science reporting has a pipeline problem. A finding moves from a study, sometimes first posted as an unreviewed preprint, to a journal, to a university press release, to a news story, and each step can add exaggeration. A 2014 study in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) of 462 press releases from twenty British universities found that 40% exaggerated health advice, 33% turned correlations into causes, and 36% claimed human effects from animal research. When the release exaggerated, the coverage usually did too. In the study, 86% of news stories inferred human effects when the release had done so, against 10% when it had not.

The beat's rules follow. One study is not a finding; the weight of evidence is. Observational studies show associations, not causes. Mouse studies are not human studies. Relative risks need absolute risks beside them. Researchers' funding and conflicts of interest belong in the story. And a press release is a claim by an institution with an interest in attention.

The pandemic tested the beat hardest on premature certainty. In 2020 many outlets described the hypothesis that the coronavirus escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan as a debunked conspiracy theory. By 2023 the FBI and the Energy Department had judged a laboratory origin likely, with moderate and low confidence respectively, and in January 2025 the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) shifted to the same view

with low confidence, while other agencies leaned toward a natural spillover. The question remains open. The error was to report an unsettled question as settled, which would have been just as wrong in the other direction.

11e. Each Beat's Traps

Beat	First sources	Key documents	The classic error	The check
Government	Clerks, staff, lobbyists	Budgets, bills, fiscal notes, contracts, disclosures	Covering the vote, not the decision before it	Report who wins and who pays while it can still change
Politics	Campaigns, voters, analysts	Finance reports, voting records, polls	The horse race	Ask what a candidate would do, and test it
Police and courts	Police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, witnesses	Arrest reports, dockets, filings	The police-only story	Attribute, seek the other side, report the outcome
Business	Companies, analysts, employees, regulators	Securities filings, earnings calls	The one-day stock move	Read the filing and separate one-time items
Science and health	Researchers and independent experts	The study itself, not the release	The single study	Weight of evidence, absolute risk, and who paid

Worked example — one story from each beat, read critically

Four headlines of a kind that appear every day, with what each leaves out and the question that would test it.

The headline	What it leaves out	The question to ask
"Poll: Smith surges, leads Jones 47-44"	A margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 points, which makes the lead uncertain; it is one poll; the polling average has barely moved	What does the average show, and is the lead larger than twice the margin?
"Man dies in officer-involved shooting after struggle"	Who fired; the only source is a police statement, with no witness, video, or family account	Who shot whom, and what do body-camera video and witnesses show?
"Acme stock soars 40% on blockbuster earnings"	The stock fell 60% last year; the profit came from selling a division; revenue fell	What do the recurring numbers in the quarterly filing show?
"Coffee cuts cancer risk in half, study finds"	An observational study of 2,000 people, paid for by a coffee trade group; the absolute risk fell from 2 in 1,000 to 1 in 1,000	What kind of study, who paid, and what is the absolute risk?

Each headline is accurate in a narrow sense. Each would mislead a reader who stopped there, and each fails in the way its beat characteristically fails. A reader who carries the four questions can read most of a day's news more accurately than its headlines do.

Module 11 Key Points

The Beats

• In 2022 only 850 statehouse reporters worked the beat full time, and nonprofits employed a fifth of all 1,724.

• An arrest report is the police's account; a crime story built only on it reports one side.

• When a press release exaggerated a study, news stories usually did too — 86% for animal-to-human claims, against 10% otherwise.

• Market-moving news is a race measured in milliseconds, which is why government data are released under lockup rules.

• Each beat has a classic error: the horse race, the police-only story, the one-day stock move, and the single study.

Module 11 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What did Pew's 2022 count find about statehouse reporters?

A) Their numbers had doubled since 2014
B) Fewer than half worked the beat full time, and nonprofits employed a fifth of the total
C) Most were employed by television stations
D) Most worked full time, and newspapers employed a larger share than in 2014

2. What does the course say an arrest report is?

A) A court record of the charges
B) A sworn finding of probable cause
C) The police's account, not a finding of fact
D) A confidential document that newsrooms may not quote until charges are filed

3. In the 2014 study of university press releases, what happened when a release exaggerated?

A) Journalists usually corrected the exaggeration by reading the study
B) Most outlets declined to cover the study at all
C) The universities withdrew the release within a week
D) News stories usually did too

4. What happened in 2013 with the University of Michigan's consumer-sentiment index?

A) A reporter traded on it before release and was convicted of insider trading
B) The university stopped publishing it after a hacker leaked it a day early
C) Its release moved to the evening, after the stock markets had closed
D) Thomson Reuters sent it to high-speed traders two seconds early, and the practice was ended

5. In the worked example, what question tests the coffee headline?

A) Did the reporter reach the study's authors to confirm what it found?
B) What kind of study, who paid, and what is the absolute risk?
C) Was the study published in a prestigious journal with a long publication record?
D) Did the newspaper run a second story with the industry's response to the findings?

Module 12 — Journalism Around the World

Press Freedom, State Media, and the Dangerous Places

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Joel Simon, *The New Censorship: Inside the Global Battle for Media Freedom* (2015) — how governments control information without classic censorship

Reference: Reporters Without Borders' *World Press Freedom Index* (each spring) and the Committee to Protect Journalists' databases of journalists killed and imprisoned

12a. Press Freedom in Numbers

Two organizations keep the world's press-freedom record. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks 180 countries each year on the political, economic, legal, social, and security conditions for journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) counts journalists killed and imprisoned. RSF's 2026 index and CPJ's count for 2025 both set records.

RSF's 2026 index, published on April 30, found the global average score at its lowest in the index's 25 years, and for the first time more than half the world's countries rated "difficult" or "very serious." The legal indicator fell furthest, worsening in 110 of the 180 countries as governments turned national-security and other laws against journalists. Norway ranked first for the tenth year in a row. The United States fell seven places, to 64th.

Country	Rank, 2026	Note
Norway	1	First for the tenth year
Netherlands	2	
Estonia	3	
United Kingdom	18	
United States	64	Down seven places from 2025
Hungary	74	
Israel	116	Down from 112
India	157	Down from 151
Türkiye	163	Down from 159
Russia	172	
Iran	177	
China	178	
North Korea	179	
Eritrea	180	Last for the third year

Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index* 2026.

CPJ counted 129 journalists and media workers killed in 2025, the most since it began keeping records in 1992; after a review completed in September 2026 it put the figure at 127, still a record. Israel was responsible for about two-thirds of the deaths, most of them in Gaza, along with 31 in Yemen and 3 in Iran. Sudan, Mexico, Ukraine, and the Philippines followed. Forty-seven of the deaths were murders, deliberate killings for the victims' work, and in none of them had anyone been held accountable. Drones killed 39, up

from 2 in 2023. As of December 1, 2025, CPJ counted 330 journalists in prison, with China holding 50, followed by Myanmar, Israel, Russia, and Belarus.

12b. The Systems

Press systems fall into rough types. In free-press systems, private and public outlets report without state control, under law. Within them, public-service broadcasters such as the BBC and the national broadcasters of Japan and Germany are funded by the public but run at arm's length from government. The arrangement is only as independent as its rules. The BBC is funded by a licence fee the government sets, £180 a year from April 2026, under a royal charter the government renews; the current charter expires at the end of 2027, and the review of its successor began with a consultation paper, known as a green paper, in December 2025.

The BBC's 2025 crisis showed the pressure such systems face. In November 2025 it emerged that a 2024 episode of *Panorama* had joined two passages of President Trump's speech of January 6, 2021, delivered nearly an hour apart, in a way the BBC's chairman later acknowledged gave the impression of a direct call for violent action. The director-general, Tim Davie, and the head of news, Deborah Turness, resigned on November 9, the chairman apologized, and the president sued. In 2026 the corporation named a former Google executive, Matt Brittin, as director-general and announced 1,800 to 2,000 job cuts to save £500 million.

In state-directed systems the news media serve the government. China's Xinhua agency had 181 bureaus worldwide in 2021, China Global Television Network (CGTN) broadcasts abroad, and analysts have estimated China's spending on external propaganda at around $10 billion a year. Russia's state broadcaster, Russia Today (RT), has been suspended across the European Union since March 2022. Qatar's state-funded Al Jazeera occupies a middle ground: it reports aggressively on other governments and has been banned by Israel since 2024, and critics note how rarely it scrutinizes its funder.

A growing share of the world falls between the two. In captured-media systems, elections are held and independent outlets exist, but governments and their allies buy, starve, or intimidate the press until little independent coverage remains. In 2018 hundreds of outlets friendly to Hungary's government were consolidated into a single foundation, and in 2023 the government created a Sovereignty Protection Office that RSF calls a tool for smearing journalists. Türkiye jailed and expelled reporters during the protests of March 2025. India, ranked 157th, uses sedition, defamation, and anti-terror laws against reporters.

12c. The Tools of Pressure

The tool	How it works	An example
Foreign-agent laws	Label outlets with foreign funding as agents, burying them in paperwork and stigma	Russia labeled the exile outlet Meduza a foreign agent in 2021 and, under a separate law, an "undesirable organization" in 2023, making work with it a crime; Georgia's 2024 law was followed by a steep fall in its press-freedom ranking
National-security and sedition laws	Turn reporting into a crime against the state	Hong Kong's Jimmy Lai, founder of *Apple Daily*, was convicted in December 2025 of colluding with foreign forces and of sedition, and sentenced in February 2026 to 20 years, at 78
Hostage-taking	Arrest foreign reporters to trade them	The *Wall Street Journal*'s Evan Gershkovich, arrested in Russia in March 2023 and sentenced to 16 years for espionage, was freed in a prisoner exchange on August 1, 2024

The tool	How it works	An example
Spyware	Infect phones to read messages and identify sources	The 2021 Pegasus Project found at least 180 journalists among 50,000 numbers on a leaked target list; Paragon's Graphite was used against Italian journalists in 2025; an Athens court convicted four people, including the Predator spyware firm's founder, in February 2026
Denial of access	Keep reporters away from the story	Israel has barred foreign journalists from entering Gaza independently since October 2023, citing security; only reporters embedded with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) may go in
Killing with impunity	The most effective censorship of all	No one has been held accountable for any of the 47 murders of journalists CPJ recorded in 2025

12d. The War Correspondent and the Fixer

War reporting is the most dangerous work in journalism, and its burden falls unevenly. Foreign correspondents can embed with an army, which gives access and protection at the cost of seeing the war from one side, or work independently, which gives freedom at greater risk. Both depend on fixers: local journalists, translators, and drivers who arrange access and take the greatest risks for the least credit. Freelancers and stringers often work without the insurance and security support that staff correspondents receive.

Gaza has been the deadliest conflict for journalists that CPJ has recorded. By September 24, 2026, CPJ counted 247 journalists and media workers killed in the Israel-Gaza war and the fighting that spread from it, 241 of them by Israel. Most were Palestinians reporting from inside a territory foreign reporters could not enter on their own. CPJ revised the list in September 2026, after evidence that some of those named had been combatants, removing 22 names and reinstating 6. Because independent access is barred, much of the world's knowledge of the war has come from local journalists who were themselves under fire.

Elsewhere, Russian drones killed four journalists in Ukraine in 2025, and at least sixteen journalists were killed in Sudan's civil war between April 2023 and the end of 2025. The war that began when the United States and Israel struck Iran on February 28, 2026, killed nine journalists in its first six weeks, most of them in Lebanon, by CPJ's count. In Mexico, outside any war, RSF counted eight journalists killed in 2026 by the end of August.

12e. Journalism in Exile

When reporting at home becomes impossible, some newsrooms leave. Meduza, founded in Riga by Russian journalists in 2014, was declared an undesirable organization by Russia in 2023. Dozhd, Russia's last independent television channel (its name means "rain"), now broadcasts from Amsterdam, and Novaya Gazeta Europe publishes from Riga. Exile newsrooms report into their countries through sources inside, encrypted messaging, and readers who use tools to get around censorship. They depend on foreign donors and subscribers, and their sources and readers at home run real risks for contact with them.

Worked example — one event, three systems

A fire at a chemical warehouse in a provincial city kills 40 people. The table follows how the story would typically be covered under each type of press system.

Question	Free press	State-directed	Captured
Who reports first?	Local reporters, from the scene and the fire department	The state news agency, hours later, with an official casualty figure	Pro-government outlets repeat the official account; an independent site reports from the scene
How is the toll established?	Hospitals, the coroner, and families, reported as the count rises	The official figure only; independent counts are deleted from social media	Disputed: the officials' figure against the independent site's
Who is blamed?	Records show the warehouse failed two inspections; reporters name the officials who approved its permit	The warehouse's managers are arrested; officials are praised for the rescue	Pro-government outlets blame the owner, a rival businessman, and call the independent site's records foreign disinformation
What happens to reporters?	The warehouse owner sues and loses under the state's anti-SLAPP law	Foreign reporters are turned back at roadblocks; a local blogger is detained	The independent site faces a tax audit and a foreign-agent investigation
What does the public learn?	Why it happened, and who was responsible	That it happened, and that the state responded	Two incompatible accounts, and distrust of both

The pattern is drawn from documented cases. After the 2015 explosions at a chemical storage site in Tianjin, China's authorities restricted coverage and censored social media posts, and the official account emphasized the rescue while blame fell on company managers and local officials. The table's general point is that what a public knows about a disaster depends less on the disaster than on the system reporting it.

Module 12 Key Points

Journalism Around the World

• More than half the world's countries now rate "difficult" or "very serious" for press freedom — a first in RSF's 25-year index.

• CPJ counted a record 129 journalists killed in 2025, about two-thirds by Israel; a later review put it at 127.

• China, Myanmar, Israel, Russia, and Belarus jailed the most journalists at the end of 2025; China held 50 of 330.

• In captured-media systems elections are held, but independent outlets are bought, starved, or intimidated until little remains.

• Israel has barred foreign journalists from entering Gaza independently since October 2023, citing security; only military embeds may go in.

Module 12 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. Where did the United States rank in RSF's 2026 index?

A) 64th, down seven places
B) 18th
C) First among the democracies of the Americas
D) Below 150th, among the most restrictive countries in the world

2. Which indicator fell furthest in RSF's 2026 index?

A) The legal indicator
B) Security
C) The economic indicator, as advertising fell
D) The social indicator, measuring public attacks on journalists online

3. Which country jailed the most journalists as of December 1, 2025, by CPJ's count?

A) Russia
B) Myanmar
C) China
D) Türkiye

4. What happened to the BBC's director-general after the *Panorama* edit came to light in November 2025?

A) He was fired by Parliament
B) He resigned, along with the head of news, and a former Google executive later succeeded him
C) He was suspended pending a review by the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom
D) He stayed on after an inquiry, while the head of news and the editor resigned

5. In the worked example, what does the public learn under a captured-media system?

A) Only the official account
B) Only what the independent site publishes before it is shut down
C) Why it happened and who was responsible, a few days later than elsewhere
D) Two incompatible accounts, and distrust of both

Module 13 — The Machine in the Newsroom

AI as Tool, Author, Distributor, and Defendant

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Nicholas Diakopoulos, *Automating the News: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Media* (2019) — the standard account of computation in journalism

Reference: The Reuters Institute's *Journalism, Media and Technology Trends and Predictions* (each January) and *Digital News Report* (each June)

13a. AI as a Reporting Tool

Newsrooms used artificial intelligence long before chatbots. Since 2014 the AP has generated corporate earnings stories automatically from financial data, raising its output from about 300 stories a quarter written by hand to about 4,400. Transcription, translation, and searching large sets of documents are now routine uses, and they free reporters for the work machines cannot do.

The most valuable uses are in investigations, where a machine can search more material than any team could read. In 2023 the *New York Times* used an object-detection model to find more than 200 craters left by 2,000-pound bombs in satellite images of southern Gaza. City Bureau and the Invisible Institute used a machine-learning tool to sift Chicago police-misconduct files for their reporting on missing Black women and girls. Both won 2024 Pulitzer Prizes, and they were among five finalists that year who disclosed using AI. In both, reporters checked every machine finding by hand.

The AP's 2023 standards stated the principle that separates good use from bad: output from generative AI is to be treated as unvetted source material. The machine can suggest where to look. It cannot be the reason a fact is published.

13b. AI as Author, and the Failures

When newsrooms let machines write for publication without that check, the results have been consistent.

Case	What happened	What was skipped
The technology site CNET (January 2023)	41 of its 77 machine-written personal-finance articles needed corrections	Editing machine copy
Sports Illustrated (November 2023)	Product reviews ran under invented authors with machine-generated headshots, supplied by a contractor	Knowing who wrote the story
Apple Intelligence (December 2024 to January 2025)	Notification summaries attributed false headlines to the BBC, including that a murder suspect had shot himself; Apple paused summaries of news	Any human review at all
The "Heat Index" reading list (May 2025)	A syndicated summer supplement in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* recommended 15 books, 10 of which did not exist	Checking a freelancer's list
"Margaux Blanchard" (August 2025)	*Wired*, *Business Insider*, and others ran pieces by a freelancer who did not exist; one described a Colorado town that does not exist	Verifying the writer and the facts
Ars Technica (February 2026)	A story ran with quotations that a chatbot had paraphrased and the reporter had not checked against the source; it was pulled within two days and the reporter fired	Checking quotations against the original

Every case failed in the same place. None was a failure of the technology alone; each was an organization publishing machine output that no person had verified. The SPJ's October 2026 code revision and most newsroom policies now require disclosure of AI use and human responsibility for everything published, and the AP and many others refuse to use AI to create or alter news images.

13c. AI as Distributor

The larger change is in how readers reach the news. Search engines now answer many questions directly, with machine-written summaries above the links. In a Pew study of Google users' browsing in March 2025, users clicked a result link on 8% of visits that showed an AI summary, against 15% of visits without one, and clicked a link inside the summary only 1% of the time. Data from the analytics firm Chartbeat show Google search traffic to news sites falling 33% worldwide, and 38% in the United States, between November 2024 and November 2025. In a January 2026 survey by the Reuters Institute, news leaders expected search traffic to fall by another 43% within three years.

Chatbots are becoming a news source in their own right. The Reuters Institute's 2026 survey found 10% of people across 48 markets using AI chatbots for news each week, up from 7% a year earlier, and 16% of those under 35. Answer engines summarize reporting without sending readers to the outlets that paid for it, and their errors are attributed to the outlets they summarize, as the BBC learned.

Machines also generate imitation news at scale. NewsGuard, a company that rates news sites, counted 3,749 AI-generated sites posing as news outlets by June 2026, up from 3,006 in March and growing by hundreds a month. It had found in 2024 that partisan sites dressed as local newspapers, often called pink slime, outnumbered the country's daily newspapers, 1,265 to 1,213.

13d. AI as Customer and Defendant

Publishers have answered the AI companies in two ways: by suing them and by selling to them. The suits, set out in Module 9, turn on whether training on news archives is fair use. The deals license archives and current reporting for training and for answers. OpenAI has signed with the AP, Axel Springer, the *Financial Times*, News Corp, Condé Nast, Hearst, Vox Media, *The Atlantic*, and others, and News Corp's deal was reported at more than $250 million over five years. Amazon licensed the *New York Times*' content in 2025. Meta began paying publishers, including CNN, Fox News, and *USA Today*, for news in its AI assistant in December 2025. Microsoft opened a marketplace in February 2026 that pays publishers according to how much their content is used, and Perplexity shares subscription revenue with publishers.

The *Times* does both: it is suing OpenAI and Microsoft while licensing its work to Amazon. The strategy reflects the uncertainty. If courts rule that training is fair use, licensing fees may be all publishers ever get; if they rule it is not, the suits become leverage for larger deals.

13e. What Does Not Change

Machines can draft, summarize, translate, and search. They cannot knock on a door, persuade a frightened source, obtain a document someone wants hidden, or be held accountable for an error. As summaries of existing reporting become free and abundant, the scarce and valuable part of journalism is the part this course has described from the start: finding out what is not yet known, checking it, and standing behind it.

Worked example — an AI-assisted investigation and an AI fabrication, side by side

Two uses of machines, in 2023 and 2026, reached opposite ends of the craft. The difference was not the technology but what the newsroom did with its output.

Question	The crater analysis (*New York Times*, 2023)	The fabricated quotations (*Ars Technica*, 2026)
The task	Find craters from 2,000-pound bombs in satellite images of southern Gaza	Pull quotations from a source's blog post
What the machine did	Flagged candidate craters for review	Produced paraphrases that the reporter took for the source's own words
What people did	Reviewed every flagged crater, measured each one, and consulted weapons experts	Did not check the quotations against the post
What readers were told	The method, including the use of AI	Nothing, until the editor's note
The outcome	Part of a Pulitzer-winning body of work	A retraction within two days, and a reporter fired

The rule that separates the two columns is the AP's: machine output is unvetted source material. Used that way, AI extends what a newsroom can verify. Used as a shortcut around verification, it multiplies the errors verification exists to catch.

Module 13 Key Points

The Machine in the Newsroom

• AI output is unvetted source material: the 2024 Pulitzer winners that used it checked every machine finding by hand.

• Every notable AI failure in the news, from CNET to *Ars Technica*, came from publishing machine output nobody verified.

• With an AI summary on the page, Google users clicked a result 8% of the time, against 15% without.

• Google search traffic to American news sites fell 38% in the year to November 2025.

• NewsGuard counted 3,749 AI-generated sites posing as news outlets by June 2026, growing by hundreds a month.

Module 13 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. How did the AP's 2023 standards say newsrooms should treat output from generative AI?

A) As unvetted source material
B) As finished copy
C) As the work of the reporter who prompted it
D) As forbidden material that may never be used for any purpose in the newsroom

2. What did CNET's 2023 experiment with machine-written articles show?

A) Readers preferred them
B) 41 of 77 articles needed corrections
C) They drew more traffic than any other stories on the site that year
D) They were more accurate than staff-written stories in the same section

3. In Pew's study, how often did Google users click a result link when an AI summary appeared?

A) Roughly a third of the time
B) About 15% of visits, the same as without a summary
C) 8% of visits
D) More often than without one, because summaries spark curiosity

4. Which deal pays publishers according to how much their content is used?

A) Amazon's
B) OpenAI's with News Corp, reported at more than $250 million
C) Meta's arrangement with CNN, Fox News, and *USA Today* for its assistant
D) Microsoft's marketplace

5. In the worked example, what separated the crater analysis from the fabricated quotations?

A) The crater analysis used a more expensive and more accurate commercial model
B) People checked the machine's output
C) The *Times* put more reporters on the project than *Ars Technica* employs in total
D) Satellite images cannot be fabricated by AI systems, while quotations can

Module 14 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Argument, the Contradictions, and the Dates

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Margaret Sullivan, *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy* (2020) — the case for why local reporting matters

Reference: Northwestern University's Medill *State of Local News* report (each fall) and the court dockets of the cases in the watch list

14a. The Argument in One Page

Journalism's value is verification and accountability: finding out what is true, and holding the powerful to it. Both are expensive, and the institutions that paid for them have shrunk. There were 39,250 reporters on American payrolls in May 2025, 213 counties had no local news source at all, and in 2022 fewer than half of statehouse reporters worked the beat full time.

Yet the craft's methods have never been stronger. Open-source investigation, data analysis, cross-border collaboration, and machine-assisted searching let small teams find what large ones could not a generation ago, and the year's Pulitzer winners show it. The constraint is not method but capacity: how many people are paid to apply the method, and where they work.

Meanwhile attention has moved to platforms, creators, and now chatbots that answer questions without sending readers to the reporting. Gallup's measure of trust rose in 2026, to 33%, though it remains near its lowest and the Reuters Institute's measure fell. And the legal ground is being tested on several fronts at once, from libel suits by a sitting president to the search of a reporter's home and fights over access. The courts have mostly upheld the established doctrines: *Sullivan* stands, and trial judges ruled for the press in the Pentagon and credential cases, though appeals courts let the AP's exclusion and the Pentagon's escort rule stand while they decide. The cost of the fights has fallen on the outlets.

14b. What Happens When Local Reporting Disappears

Research on news deserts has moved from anecdote to evidence. Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee, and Dermot Murphy found that after a local newspaper closes, a county's borrowing costs rise by 5 to 11 basis points (hundredths of a percentage point), about $650,000 more per bond issue, and government wages and deficits rise. Without a watchdog, government costs more.

The effects reach elections too. Meghan Rubado and Jay Jennings found that sharp cuts in newsroom staff were followed by fewer candidates for mayor and more incumbents running unopposed. Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless found that as local coverage of House races shrank, voters knew less about their representatives and were less likely to vote. Joshua Darr, Matthew Hitt, and Johanna Dunaway found that split-ticket voting fell after newspapers closed, as voters fell back on national partisan cues. The pattern is consistent: when no one watches, government costs more and elections offer less choice.

14c. The Contradictions

- **The best work and the fewest workers.** The *Washington Post* won the Pulitzer for public service in the same year it cut about a third of its staff.
- **More sources, fewer reporters.** Americans can reach more outlets, creators, and feeds than ever, while the number of people paid to verify local news keeps falling.
- **Cheaper reporting, smaller audiences.** AI lowers the cost of searching records and transcribing interviews, and it also lowers the traffic that once paid for the reporting.
- **A sued press and a celebrated one.** The president was suing the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* while reporting on his administration won the year's top prizes.
- **Mixed signals on trust.** Gallup's measure of trust in the mass media rose from 28% to 33% in a year, while the Reuters Institute's measure of trust in news fell 5 points in the United States, to 25%, and the share of Americans paying for online news fell 4 points, to 16%.

14d. The Contested Questions

Two questions will shape the next decade of journalism, and both are contested. The course sets out each side's case as its advocates make it, then the evidence, then its own reading.

Who counts as a journalist?

The case for a functional definition. Its advocates argue that journalism is an activity, not an employer. A creator who gathers information, checks it, and publishes it to the public is doing journalism and deserves the same protections as a newspaper reporter. Pew found in 2024 that 21% of American adults regularly get news from news influencers, and that 77% of those influencers have never worked for a news organization. Several courts already apply functional tests for the reporter's privilege, asking whether a person intended, from the start of the reporting, to share it with the public.

The case for a professional definition. Its advocates argue that protections such as the reporter's privilege and press credentials need a boundary, or anyone — activists, partisans, people who publish leaks for a cause — can claim them. Institutions supply what individuals often lack: editors who ask how a reporter knows, lawyers who review claims before publication, and a published record of corrections. Most news influencers, they note, comment on the news rather than report it.

The evidence. The record is thin on both sides. Functional tests are not new: the federal appeals court in New York adopted one in 1987, asking whether a person intended from the start to publish news, and denied protection to a claimant who could not show it. Shield laws written around employment, for their part, can leave out freelancers doing serious work. Pew's data show that most influencers are commentators, but some do original reporting.

The course's reading. Define a journalist by function, meaning the gathering and verifying of information for the public, and let the method rather than the employer decide. Most creators will not meet that test, and some newspaper writers will not either.

Should the public pay for reporting?

The case for public support. Its advocates argue that accountability reporting is a public good that markets underproduce, as Hamilton's economics showed, and that the decline of local news has measurable costs in government spending and weaker elections. Countries with strong public broadcasters, such as Norway, rank at the top of press-freedom indexes. And support can be designed to protect independence, through payroll tax credits for each local reporter, as New York adopted in 2024, or arm's-length funds such as New Jersey's Civic Information Consortium, which distribute money through independent boards.

The case against. Its critics argue that the press cannot watch a government that pays it, and that public money, once given, can be withdrawn or conditioned. Advocates of the 2025 rescission argued that public broadcasting had tilted toward one side's views, which made its funding a political subsidy, and that taxpayers should not be made to pay for news many of them distrust. The BBC's funding, critics add, is set under a charter the government renews. They argue that public money crowds out private experiments, and that mandatory payments from platforms can backfire, as when Meta blocked news in Canada in 2023 rather than pay under the Online News Act.

The evidence. Both sets of effects are real. Public funding has supported some of the world's most trusted news organizations, and it can be withdrawn in political disputes, as the 2025 rescission showed. Canada's law produced payments from Google of about C$100 million a year, but also Meta's news block. The link between strong public broadcasters and high press-freedom rankings is a correlation, since wealthy, stable democracies tend to have both, and there is little rigorous evidence either way on crowding out. Arrangements built to protect independence typically share three features: multiyear funding, automatic formulas rather than discretionary grants, and independent boards between the money and the newsroom.

The course's reading. Public support for reporting works best when it is automatic, like a credit for every local reporter employed, and insulated from officials' discretion. It should pay for reporting capacity, not for any outlet's point of view.

14e. The Watch List

Date	What happens	Why it matters
October 8, 2026	A hearing on a longer injunction in the suit by CNN, MS NOW, and Politico over their revoked White House credentials	The latest test of whether the government may exclude reporters for their coverage
Fall 2026	Medill's 2026 *State of Local News* report (the 2025 edition appeared on October 20, 2025)	The year's count of news deserts, closures, and new local outlets
November 3, 2026	The midterm elections	The year's largest test of election coverage and of polling, whose national error in 2024 was 2.6 points
Pending, appeals court in Washington	The AP's case over its White House exclusion; the Pentagon's appeals in the *New York Times*' case	Rulings on whether government may exclude reporters for what they publish
Pending, federal court in Florida	The president's suits against the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*	Whether the amended complaints plead actual malice
Pending, New York	Smartmatic's $2.7 billion libel suit against Fox News	Whether a second election-technology company can prove actual malice against Fox
Pending, New York	The *New York Times*' copyright suit against OpenAI and Microsoft	Whether training AI on news is fair use
December 1, 2026	The date of CPJ's annual prison census, published early in 2027	The count of journalists jailed worldwide

Date	What happens	Why it matters
February 15, 2027	The start of the provisional two-week trial period in the BBC case, in Miami	The first jury in the president's current suits, if the case survives the motion to dismiss
Late April or May 2027	RSF's 2027 *World Press Freedom Index*	Whether the 25-year low deepens
May 2027	The Pulitzer Prizes	The year's best work, and who could still afford to do it
June 2027	The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report*	Chatbots' share of news use, trust, and payment
September 2027	Gallup's annual reading of trust in the mass media	Whether 2026's rise holds
December 31, 2027	The BBC's royal charter expires	The terms of the largest public-service broadcaster

Dates as known on October 8, 2026. Court schedules change; pending cases had no final rulings reported that day.

14f. The Last Word

Journalism is a method more than an institution. The institutions that carried it for a century are smaller, and some will not survive. The method — find out, check it, show your work, give the other side its say, correct what you get wrong — is portable. A newspaper can practice it, and so can a nonprofit, a wire service, or a single reporter with a newsletter. The question to ask of any of them is the one this course began with: can you check what they told you? Readers who ask it of every source will be better informed than any headline can make them, and journalism that answers it will earn back the trust the numbers say it has lost.

Module 14 Key Points

Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

• When a local paper closes, the county's borrowing costs rise 5 to 11 basis points — about $650,000 more per bond issue.

• The craft's methods have never been stronger; its constraint is capacity — 39,250 reporters, and 213 counties with no local news.

• Courts mostly upheld the press's doctrines in 2025-26, though appeals courts let two access restrictions stand while they decide.

• The course's reading: define a journalist by function, gathering and verifying information for the public, not by employer.

• The course's reading: public support for reporting works best when automatic, like a credit per local reporter, not discretionary.

Module 14 Quiz

Check Your Understanding

1. What did Gao, Lee, and Murphy find happens after a local newspaper closes?

A) Turnout rises
B) Property values fall by about a tenth within two years
C) Local taxes fall as officials face less scrutiny from voters and the press
D) Local borrowing costs rise

2. What is the course's reading on who counts as a journalist?

A) Anyone with a large audience
B) Whoever a state shield law names
C) Only people employed by news organizations, whose editors and lawyers supply the method
D) Anyone who gathers and verifies information for the public, judged by method, not employer

3. How did Meta respond to Canada's Online News Act of 2023?

A) It blocked news rather than pay
B) It paid the fee
C) It signed licensing deals with Canada's largest newspaper chains
D) It challenged the law in court and won an exemption for its platforms

4. What does the course say public support for reporting should pay for?

A) Public broadcasters only
B) Outlets that officials judge to be balanced
C) Reporting capacity, not any outlet's point of view
D) The outlets with the largest audiences, since they reach the most citizens

5. What is scheduled for February 15, 2027?

A) The start of the BBC case's provisional trial period
B) The Pulitzer Prizes
C) RSF's next press-freedom index
D) The expiry of the BBC's royal charter, set by the government in 2016

Answer Sheet

Answers to every module's Check Your Understanding quiz.

Module	Answers
Module 1 Quiz	1. C 2. A 3. D 4. B 5. B
Module 2 Quiz	1. C 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. A
Module 3 Quiz	1. A 2. B 3. A 4. C 5. A
Module 4 Quiz	1. D 2. C 3. B 4. C 5. C
Module 5 Quiz	1. D 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. B
Module 6 Quiz	1. C 2. D 3. A 4. D 5. C
Module 7 Quiz	1. D 2. B 3. C 4. B 5. D
Module 8 Quiz	1. B 2. D 3. B 4. A 5. A
Module 9 Quiz	1. A 2. C 3. D 4. C 5. A
Module 10 Quiz	1. D 2. C 3. B 4. A 5. A
Module 11 Quiz	1. B 2. C 3. D 4. D 5. B
Module 12 Quiz	1. A 2. A 3. C 4. B 5. D
Module 13 Quiz	1. A 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. B
Module 14 Quiz	1. D 2. D 3. A 4. C 5. A