



Follow, Follow, Follow, Follow

By

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One of the aspects of being a news manager that I enjoyed was 'training' other journalists. I'm glad to still have the opportunity to do that through this newsletter and hope you find it helpful. If you do, please feel free to share it with other journalists.

The last part of this training series was about the 'principles' of journalism —

- Curiosity
- Skepticism
- Accuracy
- Objectivity

I'd like to focus next on how we 'gather' the facts that we're going to report to our audience. I call it '**The 4 F's of Journalism.**'

Follow the Facts

Journalists are bombarded with facts. We fill up notebooks (paper or electronic) with information that may or may not be factual. Once we gather the information, we begin the process of confirming the information. Once confirmed, we know that we're staring at 'facts. What's next in the journalistic process? 'Follow' those facts.

Following facts is the process of asking questions about each fact we've confirmed. The answers to our questions usually lead to more information. Once we confirm that information, we have more facts to report.

How many 'facts' journalists need for a story depends to some degree on the length of the story. Radio news stories are often shorter than television news stories. Television news stories are often shorter than newspaper stories. Online stories are often about the same length as a television news story, though some are closer to newspaper length. Your producer or editor will tell you what length fits with their plan.

That's when you go to work with your 'facts.' More on that in a minute.

Morning and afternoon news meetings are often where reporters get a feel for what their producers, editors, or managers are thinking about your assignments. Having been involved in thousands of those meetings through the years I understand the need for them. Those meetings give producers and editors the information they need to determine the 'word' or 'time' length for your story. However, both as a reporter and a manager, I believed reporters should present their case for more words (which equals more time or space depending on the medium) 'if' their facts justified it.

If a journalist has done a good job 'following the facts,' they may deserve more words. Yes, that might mean producers and editors will shorten or even drop other stories, but an impactful story with a strong 'fact-finding' process often beats out less interesting, less important stories.

Unfortunately, as I've mentioned before, most of the news stories I see, read, or hear are often not very interesting with little real impact on the audience. Whose fault is that? The reporter? The producer? The editor? The manager?

News gathering is a cooperative process. If each person does their job well in the newsroom and in the field, newscasts become more interesting, more important, more insightful, and more impactful. Isn't that what journalists should want? They should, and the reason why is simple — that's what your audience wants — and isn't your audience the reason you are a journalist? The 'free press' exists to report what's true about those events and issues that make up the life of a community and of a nation.

Follow the Money

Next, we move to finding the ‘facts’ that make a difference in people’s lives. Let’s start with money. Money is a ‘driver’ in news coverage — and I don’t mean ‘advertiser money.’ I mean the money that makes the world go round. That’s the money consumers use to purchase goods — the money that governments use to, hopefully, improve the lives of the people who live within the government’s control — the money that fuels business and employs people.

It’s fairly easy to ‘follow money’ in an open society. Journalists have access to so much financial information these days — information at your fingertips. Governments put financial data online and in print for the purpose of keeping citizens informed about how their taxes are being spent. Follow up on the information you find in person and online. Include the most important financial aspects in your story. Use graphics, standup, interviews, etc., so your audience understands what the numbers mean.

It's not as easy to 'follow money,' even in an open society, when governments or businesses don't want you to find the information. You can still get the information you want (at least some of it) by digging deeper, developing sources, looking beyond the 'handouts' that government agencies love to give journalists. Those handouts are one of the reasons that so many newscasts sound the same. Reporters and anchors are reading off the same pages — the ones people in power want you to read. What governments and businesses don't want you to do is 'discover' what they are hiding from their citizens. That's why journalists have to be smart, agile, skeptical, and creative. By creative I don't mean doing anything that's dishonest or illegal. That's where 'sources' inside a government agency or business organization can help you find the information that will 'break open' a story for you.

A quick word about 'sources.' If your sources get information to you, always confirm the information as best as you can. I often included 'sourced' information in private interviews and public meetings. Yes, I upset some people who wanted the information to remain hidden. So what? If people in power are hiding financial or other information that rightly belongs to people who have very little power (if any), we're doing the job of *real journalism*. We're serving in the public's interest.

Follow the People

Speaking of people — follow them as well. Who are the people in your stories? Not just who they say they are, but who are they — really? It's amazing to me that many journalists don't look into the backgrounds of the people they cover. If they did, they would often find some really good stories to tell.

Much of the information about people's backgrounds, where they went to school, what jobs they held before the one they have now, their friends, family, hobbies, interests, whether they have prior criminal convictions, etc., are often easily available by simply asking a few questions and/or looking up the people online. The amount and types of material that people reveal about themselves on social media is amazing

What you discover about people is often eye-opening, and your audience has a right to know — especially if the people are ‘public officials’ or ‘public figures.’ Make sure you know the difference between those categories and someone who is a ‘private figure.’ The legal implications about the information you can report are important to both you and the company that employs you. If you are an independent journalist and have no employer, you can still be sued for defamation. So, be sure you know the differences —

- **Public official** — The term “public official” means any elected official, appointed official, or employee of— (A) a Federal, State, or local unit of government in the United States other than— (i) a college or university; (ii) a government-sponsored enterprise (as defined in section 622(8) of this title); (iii) a public utility that provides gas, electricity, water, or communications; (iv) a guaranty agency (as defined in section 1085(j) of title 20), including any affiliate of such an agency; or (v) an agency of any State functioning as a student loan secondary market pursuant to section 1085(d)(1)(F) of title 20 ; (B) a Government corporation (as defined in

section 9101 of title 31); (C) an organization of State or local elected or appointed officials other than officials of an entity described in clause (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), or (v) of subparagraph (A); (D) an Indian tribe (as defined in section 5304(e) of title 25 ; (E) a national or State political party or any organizational unit thereof; or (F) a national, regional, or local unit of any foreign government, or a group of governments acting together as an international organization. Cornell Law (**Source** 2 USC § 1602(15))

- **Public figure** — In the context of defamation, a **public figure** is generally defined as an individual who has assumed a role of prominence in society or voluntarily or involuntarily thrust themselves into the public spotlight, like a government official, a celebrity, or even a person at the heart of a controversy. Minc Law
- **Private figure** — A **private figure**, on the other hand, is generally defined as anyone who does not qualify as a public figure and is not in the public spotlight. If you are classified as a private figure rather than a public figure, you only need to show the defendant in your defamation claim was negligent or careless in determining whether

or not the false statement was true. If the defendant did not follow basic journalistic best practices or otherwise did not exercise a reasonable degree of care, this element of your defamation claim is satisfied. Forbes Advisor

Once you've gathered the information you need about a person, confirmed the information and the legality of reporting on it, you are ready to do the story. Once you break the story, get ready for phone calls from those people if they didn't like the information you reported about them. Also, be ready to keep following that person and anyone connected to them.

People love talking about themselves. You can find a lot of information that people have already revealed about themselves through online searches, social media accounts, etc. You can always contact the person to verify information as well. Those calls often give you an opportunity to ask more questions, which can lead to more facts for your story.

Follow the Science

Our final 'follow' is 'science.' The old definition of science was 'knowledge.' It's a bit more nuanced today.

Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence. The Science Council

When I tell journalists to 'follow the science,' I mean they should look at every aspect of any scientific 'claim.' I've lived long enough to have reported on many claims made by scientists who contradicted earlier claims because of changes in 'science.' If I reported what was 'accepted science' on a variety of subjects from the 1960s, you would rightfully wonder where I'd been hiding the past 55 years.

As I mentioned, science ‘changes’ over time. By ‘changes’ I mean that scientists use the ‘scientific method’ to continually observe, measure, test evidence, experiment, repeat experiments, analyze their findings, verify their findings, have their findings assessed and peer reviewed, and then continue the process through their careers.

The ‘scientific method’ is a little different than the ‘investigative method’ journalists use, but the similarities should help us understand how to ‘follow the science.’ What’s reported as ‘settled science’ today may change next week or next month or next year. Don’t stop following scientific information just because a ‘scientist’ says the science is ‘settled.’ **Science doesn’t say anything - scientists do.** Keep that in mind as you cover scientific subjects. The people who do the research, make the findings, interpret those findings, and publish their interpretations in various scientific publications are ‘scientists.’ We’re following the people who make claims that other people believe about ‘science.’ I’m not demeaning what scientists do. I’m just saying that your job as a journalist is to ‘follow the science.’ That means ‘follow the scientists.’

'Following the science' can also meld with 'follow the people' and 'follow the money.' Who are the scientists involved in your story. What do you know about their expertise, their training, previous discoveries, problems with previous publications, etc? Asking some questions about them might lead to interesting and important information. Also, how much is the scientific research costing and who's paying for it? Who pays the scientists' salaries? Where do they get their funding for scientific research? Is it private money? Public money? Money from a company or government agency that would benefit if their research were to support particular positions? You can and should use all the 'follows' in your stories whenever possible.

Scientists are making discoveries every day in the 'world of science.' If those discoveries affect people, report on it. Your audience needs to know what's going on behind the science 'curtain.' Your story may be about a recall of eye drops, or about nutrition, or about a changing climate, or about the discovery of a new drug for treating disease, or one of hundreds of other stories that include scientific claims.

Another reason to 'follow the science' is that many scientists don't agree with each other even though they may be using the same 'data.' If you tell only one side of a science story or skew your story to support the side you want to be true, that's not journalism. Give all sides of science stories the opportunity to present their best information for why they believe what they believe. Even if you are a journalist who happens to have an advanced degree in the particular science you're reporting about, be a real journalist and tell everybody's side accurately and objectively. Journalists who specialize because of advanced degrees in certain areas will often have a better understanding of a topic that another journalist may not. What that means is you should be able to ask more informed and insightful questions, but your reporting should still meet all the criteria for best practices for being a journalist.



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