

The Line of Verification: a guide to social media & objectivity

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/01/21/the-line-of-validation-a-guide-to-social-media-objectivity/

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[Update 8.2.2012: Sky News has announced [new guidelines on the use of Twitter](#) that is causing an interesting debate – my take on that is [here](#)]

We all know that the Internet means that there is a superfluity of information out there, much of it partial, inaccurate and even false. There are so many perspectives and complexities around any issue or event that it is nearly impossible to claim an impartial, single ‘correct’ version of reality. So if objectivity is a relative concept, then how does a journalist work out where they stand?

I would like to introduce you to a new phrase that I think helps us understand and practice the art of negotiable, provisional ‘truth-telling’. (Cue drum-roll please) Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you:

| *“The Line Of Verification”*

I wish this were my idea, but like all good hacks, I nicked it from a better journalist, Matthew Eltringham, (@mattsays) Assistant Editor, Interactivity, BBC News. [Now [editor of the BBC Academy](#)]

For a long time now Matthew has been working to combine the BBC’s reputation for objective, impartial, fact-based news reporting with the flood of user generated content and social media communication that often threatens to swamp newsgathering during big stories.

He set up the BBC’s UGC operation and has been evolving ways of assessing and processing information from ‘non-journalistic’ sources such as emails, texts, tweets, blogs, Facebook and the rest. The BBC wants to use all that information to make the news. But how far do you go?

This is especially a problem for the BBC because of its legal duty to strive for balance and its reputation for aiming at ‘objectivity’. But I think that all mainstream news media, regardless of their particular editorial culture, ultimately have to address similar questions in the Internet Age:

- Should you use citizen-generated material that you can’t 100% verify?
- How do you source social media?
- How do you curate or partake of social media ‘conversations’ without diluting your value as a journalist?

Matthew’s Line of Verification concept is a neat way to approach this problem – though it doesn’t pretend to solve it.

Put simply, there is stuff that the BBC will broadcast that is on what I shall call the ‘Light’ side of the Line of Verification. It will carry the full authority of something that the BBC has decided is ‘true’. I know there are all sorts of caveats in theory and in practice about both the BBC and the idea of ‘truth’, but you know what I mean.

Then there is stuff on what I will call the ‘Dark Side’ of the Line of Verification that is not confirmed. Previously, the BBC would have simply not told you about it. It hadn’t been confirmed by two independent sources so it wasn’t reportable and, in effect, hadn’t happened. However, social media and the Internet change things.



You, the public or the audience already know about the stuff on the dark side of the line of Verification because it exists all over the places online that you spend so much time: Twitter, Facebook, Mumsnet etc. That's often where you will get or connect to your news. It is valid to report – or at the very least engage with – this non-validated stuff because it is already a part of the communications around a story. It is more than just a rumour. It is informal narrative of the story: online images and conversations produced by the public.

But you have to be clear in your journalism that it is not verified. So you must put it in context. Secondly, you must make it clear when you communicate it, that it's unverified. Here's an example from Matthew.



During the Tunisia uprising NPR's Andy Carvin was curating the breaking story on Twitter picking up and pointing out what he saw were key elements of the story. He tweeted a question asking for more information about a rumour circulating on the web that employees had taken over a TV station and were broadcasting an anti government line. So he was clearly operating on the dark side of the Line of Verification.

Matthew saw the tweet and asked the BBC's authoritative BBC Monitoring team, who were watching broadcasts from Tunisia whether it was true or not. They were able to confirm that apart from a brief interlude the station was continuing to broadcast the government line. He tweeted Andy Carvin to correct the rumour, a tweet that Andy himself retweeted widely. So the narrative moved to the Light side of the Line of Verification. Social media and conventional media working in harness.

Of course, the line is not always so clear. In practice, it's probably a Fuzzy Grey Zone of Verification, or perhaps a Wobbly Line of Verification that moves back and forth. But I like metaphors and I think this can help us think through the idea and practice of objectivity as a process rather than a final state.

But this is more than just a handy editorial guide for journalists who occasionally bump up against a tweet or a blog post. The whole point is that journalists must now engage with social media as part of the news process all the time. It is at the centre, not the margins of good [networked journalism](#). As Matthew puts it:

"We need to change our reporting activity to engage with 'stuff' on the dark side of the line as part and parcel of our daily journalism. Social media unleashes the capacity of people to publish and share rumour, lies, facts and factoids. We – as a trusted broadcaster (along with other journalists of course) become increasingly significant as a reference or clearing house, filtering fact from fiction."

[And click [here](#) for an article on how CNN verifies its UGC]

[More articles on BBC social media approaches [here](#)]

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