

Accuracy in Irish newspapers

Report for the Press Council of Ireland
and the Office of the Press Ombudsman

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June 2009

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Section I: Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study on accuracy in news reports in Irish newspapers. The study was commissioned by the Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman in reference to Principle 1 of the Code of Practice for Newspapers and Periodicals; this states (1.1)

In reporting news and information, newspapers and periodicals shall strive at all times for truth and accuracy.

Formal studies of accuracy of news stories have a long history, often traced back to Charnley (1936), who is still a reference for research procedures in this field. Such studies have been published less frequently in recent years, and all of those we could find were from the United States (see Section 4). This analysis has drawn on several of these published studies in its design and implementation; the principal method applied was to have sources assess articles in which they were named by various criteria of accuracy. The results of the present study are strikingly similar in several respects to a number of American studies.

We are not aware of any previous study of accuracy in news reports in Irish media, nor of any recent such study relating to British media, with which many Irish-based media have connections of ownership, common professional organisation, competition in the Irish market, and similar ethos.

The present study, notwithstanding its modest scale, may assist the Press Council and the Office of the Press Ombudsman and their supporting organisations and companies in promoting compliance with the Code of Practice. It also fills a gap in the research literature on Irish journalism, and provides some pointers for journalism education and professional development.

The material for this study was collected from newspapers published in October 2008. Questionnaires for accuracy checks by named sources of the selected news reports were sent out in November 2008, and the responses received and analysed in the period November 2008-January 2009.

Referring to this short time frame, the approved proposal from the Centre for Society, Information and Media (SIM) at Dublin City University defined the project as a pilot study. In presenting this report, the authors again state, as was contained in the proposal, that the study may “offer indicative results”. However, we have no reason to conclude that the limits of the study have skewed the results in any way. The authors believe that this report represents a fair account of Irish newspapers’ performance to standards of accuracy in reporting news and information.

Section 2: Summary report

This study of accuracy in Irish newspapers' news reporting was based on a sample of over 500 news reports from 62 editions of 14 different newspaper titles spread over the period 10–31 October 2008. Nearly 700 named in these reports as sources were sent a questionnaire, posing a series of questions in respect of an article in which they were named. These questions referred both to errors of fact and errors of emphasis or context. Only 24 of these sources (3.4%) reported that they found serious or very serious errors. At a time when, worldwide, journalists' reputations for honesty and integrity are falling, that may be seen – by the industry particularly – as welcome news.

Of the 143 questionnaires returned, 65 (46%) found that the news reports were free of error. Of the remaining 78 questionnaires, 32 (22% of all completed questionnaires) identified one error and 46 (32%) reported more than one error. Of these errors, 136 (72%) were categorised as not serious, 40 (21%) as serious and 13 (7%) as very serious. Of the 78 questionnaires reporting some error, 36 (46%) reported no error of fact.

In a separate fact-check of 54 newspaper items, it was found that 25 items (46%) contained no error. As it happens, this was precisely the same percentage of source-responses that rated the articles reviewed as containing no error. This left 29 items (54%) in which the researchers found some error.

The response rate of sources was 21%, a little better than one in five. The researchers followed up with non-responders as far as practicable, but the response rate is considered acceptable by large-scale survey standards, particularly when the responder actually has to do something.

It is impossible, of course, to say much about any individual non-response, but, in aggregate, some reasonable inferences may be drawn. In essence, our queries were asking people who appeared in news stories, “Is there anything wrong about the story that you would like to complain about, even anonymously?” It seems much more likely that the responses would over-represent than under-represent those who did have something to complain about.

There may be many reasons that people chose not to respond to our survey or to play down errors they found. The stories were certainly not error-free, even if subjects in the stories were not generally outraged at the severity of the mistakes. More than half of the returned questionnaires (54%) found errors, and nearly a third of those (32%) found more than one. However, *any* error, no matter how modest, can affect public confidence in the media.

Journalism training and professional standards tend to emphasize, in the words of Joseph Pulitzer, these three qualities: “accuracy, accuracy and accuracy” – by which Pulitzer meant factual, demonstrable, empirical data – names, dates, ages, etc. It is harder to train for, and harder to check for, softer information dealing with emphasis and context, all those things journalists put together under the category of “news judgement.”

We followed long-established precedent in such studies (see Section 4) by surveying for different types of error, that have been broadly classified as objective (fact) or subjective (emphasis or context). Readers in this survey mentioned “subjective” errors far more often than they quibbled with hard data. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of the respondents who found error found this sort of subjective error. Barely a quarter (28%) found factual (or “objective”) error. Some of these subjective errors would not be “corrected” even if the reporter had time and inclination because of journalistic judgement. It is also the case that even the perfectly balanced story will satisfy none of the players in the story entirely, because each would want more from it than strict balance or fairness dictates.

Especially problematic is the category of “essential information missing,” which is often another term for “poor context.” Several respondents indicated they had spoken about several things, and the reporter highlighted, or even mentioned at all, only one. By many professional standards, the reporter might respond by saying that it is her job to sort the important from the not-so-important or the trivial. For the source, however, the missing bits may give meaning to the piece the journalist has retained; their omission makes the report inaccurate by this standard.

Missing information accounted for 15% of reported errors, just one percentage point less than the largest single category of error (16%), “sensationalism”. Since a large part of news is bad news, it is hardly surprising that some people would prefer not to be in the story at all or would be inclined to dismiss the story as sensationalist. Add two other common subjective errors, bias (9%), and fact and opinion not clearly separated (7%), and nearly half of all the reported errors (47% of the total) are accounted for. All of these involve shadings and interpretations that the reporter involved – and, indeed, others at the newspaper – might stand over.

Overall, our findings support those of other studies in what appears, at least at first sight, to be counter-intuitive: the more the reporter tries to add to a story, the more likely quoted sources will be unhappy with the results; the less the reporter tries to analyze and contextualize, the more likely the sources will approve of the printed story. In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, newspaper journalists tend to see their role as increasingly one of analysis and less one of recording and conveying raw data. The results of this study and of others indicate that sources (who are also readers) perceive that errors arise exactly in the aspect of journalists’ work that is supposedly adding value to information.

Section 3: Methods

The sample of Irish newspapers from which the news reports were selected for assessment was compiled from eight daily newspapers and six Sunday newspapers published in Ireland.

On 22 successive days in October 2008, two, three or four of these newspapers were purchased in a schedule that ensured each daily newspaper was represented by six separate editions, one each for the days from Monday to Saturday (or a 'constructed week'), and each Sunday newspaper was represented by two separate editions. The newspaper sample represented a total of 62 separate editions of 14 Irish-published newspapers.

From each newspaper edition, up to 10 news items were drawn, sampling from page 1 to the end of the home news section, and ensuring a mix of more prominent and less prominent items. The following exclusions were applied: reports of Budget details; reports of proceedings from courts, Oireachtas, local councils and tribunals; opinion, analysis and feature stories; celebrity and entertainment news; items of less than three paragraphs or 100 words; items with no identifiable source.

In the cases of all newspapers except two, it proved possible to select 6-10 items by these criteria (for the two exceptions, the number retrieved was lower). All of these articles were copied and scanned in preparation for distribution to the named sources. Each of the daily newspapers was represented in the sample of articles by 40-60 articles (average 50) each; the Sunday newspapers were represented by 9-18 (average 15) articles each.

All of the articles sampled were assigned a unique article code (e.g. DN62510P6B, where DN6 refers to a daily newspaper, and the further numbers and characters to the date of the edition, the page on which the item occurred, and B indicates that the item was one of two or more selected from that page). A log of all the sampled articles was compiled, recording this code, author, story topic, sources named and contact details. Aside from the time devoted to accessing the contact details, completion of the log was, in itself, a time-consuming process but a critical element in the efficient execution of the survey.

Of the 511 articles initially selected, 435 were used for the study. A variety of factors rendered 76 articles not usable; one was the difficulty in finding source contact details, particularly in the case of private citizens. Some companies did not have email addresses on their websites and proved impossible to contact by other means and, in some cases, emails sent to addresses sourced by phone or from websites failed to elicit a response.

Another issue was that crime featured significantly in the selected articles and frequently the only source quoted in these articles was an unnamed Garda. In the early stages of the survey the Garda Press Office was contacted in relation to some of these. They then contacted us to explain that, for security reasons, they would not be in a position to comment on articles relating to ongoing cases. They were,

however, in a position to assist us with some of the articles and were very helpful in those instances where they could be.

A coding sheet was devised for use by the sources. The first eight questions asked sources to say if they found errors of fact in the headline, titles given to people, spelling of names, age given to the respondent, addresses, date or time, location, and numbers. The following nine questions concerned missing information, misquoting, quoting out of context, quoting that misrepresented the respondent, quoting of something said off-the-record, inappropriate illustration or presentation, bias on the newspaper's part, sensationalist treatment of the story, failure to distinguish fact and opinion.

In relation to each of these, respondents were asked to indicate: No error or not applicable; Not a serious error; Serious error; Very serious error. (The questionnaire used is the basis of Table 2 in Section 5: Findings)

The questionnaires were generally sent as an email attachment with a cover letter in the body of the email. Where sources did not have an email address the questionnaire and the article were posted out in hard copy. In many cases sources had to be phoned and tracked down before an email or postal address was provided. This also proved to be a very time-consuming task; each email had to be sent individually as the questionnaire and a scanned copy of the original article were attached.

The researchers followed up with phone calls and emails with the aim of achieving the highest possible response in the available time. Despite the considerable efforts made in this regard, the response rate was 21%, considerably lower than the target set in the original proposal, but nonetheless high enough to allow some qualified generalisations to be made. One qualification worth noting at this stage is that named sources with a complaint to make might be considered more likely than those without complaint to complete a questionnaire. Thus, the balance of errors or no-errors that we report may be tilted somewhat in favour of findings of error.

Many respondents expressed concern that their responses might be shown to journalists or editors or that they might be otherwise identified. To boost the response rate, it was decided to reassure respondents that their completed questionnaires and comments would not be given over to journalists or editors. (The original project proposal included, as one subsidiary part of the study, a proposal that a sub-sample of items assessed by sources would be sent to the named authors, together with those assessments, for their comment.)

143 questionnaires were returned and analysed. In a very small number of cases respondents filled out the question in a confused manner, writing such comments as 'yes' and 'slightly' into the no error box. Where this happened the researchers used their best judgement to extrapolate the intended meaning of the comment, as, for example, when an error was clearly being reported but the respondent recorded this in the no-error category; in such a case, the error was coded as not-serious.

69 randomly selected newspaper items for which no source surveys were returned were independently fact-checked by team members who had not taken part in the administration of the source questionnaires. This independent check was undertaken for purposes of comparison with the patterns of error and no-error reporting by sources. In examining each item the fact-checkers

- tested for internal consistency of names, numbers and similar detail
- checked organisation names, personal names and place-names against reliable sources
- searched online for media statements and other supplied material from the named organisations or individuals relevant to the item

The fact-checkers did not seek to contact the named sources directly, as this had been attempted already and no contact was made or no questionnaire was returned. The results of this independent fact-check were recorded for each article in a slightly modified version of the source questionnaire.

Section 4: Previous studies

As indicated earlier, the design and implementation of this study were influenced by those of previously published studies. As also indicated, such studies are predominantly American in origin. This may be associated, perhaps both as cause and effect, with the professional practice in American news media of 'fact-checking'. One American scholar (Maier 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005, 2007), accounts for a significant proportion of the relevant research published in the major English-language journalism studies journals in the past decade.

It may be observed that the apparent paucity of such studies, and their almost complete absence outside of North America, relates paradoxically with the more active concern with issues of public trust in the media: it can reasonably be argued that levels of trust or credibility and perceptions of in/accuracy are in direct relationship with one another. A study for the American Society of News Editors found that perceived accuracy was one of the best predictors of newspaper credibility (ASNE 1984, cited in Maier 2005).

A common feature of many accuracy studies is the procedure of asking sources named in news reports to assess those reports. Some published research (e.g. Maier 2002b, 2003, 2005) draws mainly or exclusively on data compiled from such procedures. However, any two parties to the same set of events, or 'story', may have different views of what represents an accurate account of that story. Maier (2005) used only those named first in the reports as accuracy assessors; he followed in a tradition that tended to produce a single 'score' per news item and, from aggregation of such scores, an overall rating of individual news media or of sets of media.

A further qualification on such studies is that a journalist writing a report may be fully and justifiably satisfied as to its accuracy (everything reported is documented to have been said, or to have taken place), while a protagonist in the story insists that the report is inaccurate (e.g. not everything that could or should have been reported is included). Maier (2005) explicitly acknowledged this factor but did not take account of it in his study.

Tillinghast (1982) had highlighted this issue, studying the rejection by journalists of sources' error claims. However, Mensing and Oliver (2005) found that 80 percent of smaller-circulation newspaper editors they surveyed thought that accuracy was a very serious or somewhat serious problem for newspapers in general.

Among earlier studies, Berry (1965) considered that where accuracy was the point of concern, the difference between breaking news and developed stories was his most important finding. He attributed the correlations of objective and subjective errors to time available, arguing that objective errors decrease as journalists have more time to write their stories but subjective errors actually increase with time devoted to reporting and writing the story. The overall accuracy rate found was 46.3%, staying within the 40-60% level predicted by most studies.

Berry also noted that claims of over- and under-emphasis were equally likely at 10.2% each, suggesting that often the judgement of an involved source is the real issue rather than an actual error. Omissions were the most commonly reported error at 16%, followed by misquotations (13.1%) and typographical errors and inaccurate headlines (12.9%). Perhaps surprisingly, Berry found that inaccuracy increased as more people handled the story.

Also in the 1960s, Lawrence and Grey (1969) developed further the concept of subjective errors, those differences between a reporter's perception of reality and that of a news source. Subjective errors, for the purpose of their study, were listed as: errors of meaning, omission, over- and under-emphasis. Their method was to conduct in-depth interviews with both news sources and reporters for stories where errors were claimed. The researchers strove to ask both parties identical questions. This method meant a very small sample size – 19 interviews with sources and 18 with reporters.

Interestingly, sources linked sensationalism to a lack of personal contact between reporter and source, suggesting that, from the news source perspective, face-to-face interviews were more likely to produce satisfactory results than telephone interviews. Reporters did not think this was a factor, but, at the same time, said having more time to work on stories would lead to greater accuracy.

Blankenburg (1970) reviewed some of the previously mentioned studies and added his own analysis of source responses to accuracy questionnaires relating to stories in two local US newspapers. His finding of 40% of stories rated as accurate was in the region (40%-60%) as previous comparable studies. As before, the largest categories of (non-typographical) errors were omission, misquotation, headlines and emphasis.

Scanlon (1972) proposed “a new approach” to the study of newspaper accuracy. He found that specialist reporting and specialist reporters were likely to be more accurate than stories produced by general assignment reporters. City hall stories were found to be more accurate than general news.

Scanlon stressed what he perceived to be a new dichotomy in reporters, between what he called active and passive reporting. Passive reporting involves the reporter either working off a press release or from first-hand coverage of an event. Active reporting involves asking questions and writing down answers. Scanlon found that “passive” reporting tended to be more accurate. His conclusion, that “the fastest route to an error is to allow a reporter to get involved – by an interview or dialogue of any sort” surely does not suggest that journalism needs less reporting, not more.

Philip Meyer, a leading authority on journalism standards, identified (1989) a potential problem with having reporters analyse questionnaires returned by sources: significant data may be lost if sources are aware that their responses will be given to newspapers and reporters with whom they may have to deal again. Meyer raised an important point in arguing that employing check-sheet surveys may really be measuring source satisfaction rather than accuracy.

Meyer made a case for the primacy of a journalist definition of error over a source definition as the latter may consider themselves, rather than the general public, to be

the clients of the reporter. It is certainly a possibility that, as he says, any such study may be considered to be a “consumer satisfaction study” and should always carry a health warning.

Meyer also devised a mechanism for determining whether the reporter or the source was correct after the reporter was given a “reporter reply” questionnaire. This is a complex and time-consuming procedure, involving senior newsroom management personnel and second coders from the marketing department. As with several other expensive and cumbersome methods researchers have devised over the years, Meyer’s are even less likely to be adopted in the current climate.

Scott Maier of the University of Oregon’s School of Journalism has made this area of study almost his own in recent years. In a study (Maier 2002b) linking accuracy and credibility, he had sources rate the seriousness of errors on a seven-point scale and found that they gave subjective errors a higher average severity score. Of these subjective errors, 25% were omissions. The relationship between errors and credibility was demonstrated statistically, but weakly.

It will be noted that the findings of the present study, in the following section, contain several that are close – in some cases, remarkably close – to several of those presented briefly here from earlier studies. For example, the proportion of subjective errors represented by omission in Maier’s last-named study (Maier 2002b) is within a few percentage points of that found in the present survey.

Section 5: Findings

Based on the procedures described above, 686 questionnaires were issued to sources named in the sampled articles. Of these, 143 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 21%. The distribution of the questionnaires received, in relation to the newspapers sampled, and articles selected, is presented in Annexe I (page 26).

Of the 143 questionnaires returned, 65 (46%) reported no error. Of the remaining 78 questionnaires 32 (22%) identified one error and 46 (32%) reported more than one error. Of these 78 questionnaires, 36 (46%) reported no error of fact but subjective errors only, while 17 (22%) recorded no subjective error but objective errors only. Thus, the majority of questionnaires presenting claims of error included both objective and subjective errors.

We can summarise these findings by saying that 54% (78), or just over half, of all articles contained at least one error, according to one of the sources. When the overall number of errors is divided by the number of returned questionnaires an average of 1.32 errors per response is found. Of the 143 responses, 65 (45%) reported no error, 32 (22%) reported one error and 46 (32%) reported more than one error.

The completed questionnaires reported a total of 189 errors. Of these, 136 (72%) were categorised as not serious, 40 (21%) as serious and 13 (7%) as very serious.

Summary of errors reported

	No error or Not Applicable	Not a serious error	Serious error	Very serious error	Total errors
Total	2242	136	40	13	189

Error Categories and Frequency

Errors have historically been broken into objective and subjective categories. For the purposes of this study we characterised the following error types as objective, or 'errors of fact': headline, titles, spelling of names, ages, addresses, dates/times, locations and numbers. We listed the following as subjective errors, or 'errors of meaning': information missing, misquotes, quotes out of context, misrepresentative quotes, quoted on something said off-the-record, inappropriate illustration or presentation, bias, sensationalism, non-distinction between fact and opinion.

The numbers of errors reported in relation to each category are presented in Table I (page 16), which also shows the form and order in which the questions were posed to respondents. The first group of questions, relating to errors of fact, are classified as objective, the others as subjective. Where exactly the line is drawn

between these categories is a matter of judgement. For example, misquoting might be regarded as error of fact but in this study, where sources were asked if they found that they were misquoted, this was classified as subjective error. In some previous studies, headline errors were classified as subjective. But in our questionnaire respondents were specifically asked if they could identify errors of fact in the relevant headline and we classified headline errors, therefore, as objective. In the following presentation of findings, we refer to the objective / subjective distinction based on the grouping of questions seen in Table 1.

Analysing the reported errors by these categories, we found that sensationalism (16%) was the most common error indicated, followed by essential information missing (15%) and erroneous headlines (11%). In the following listing, the reported errors are classified as objective (O) or subjective (S).

S: Sensationalist (31)	16%
S: Essential information missing (29)	15%
O: Headline (21)	11%
S: Misquoted (18)	10%
O: Title (17)	9%
S: Bias (17)	9%
S: Fact/Opinion not distinguished (14)	7%
O: Numbers (9)	5%
S: Quoted out of context (9)	5%
S: Quote misrepresented source (8)	4%
S: Illustration/presentation inappropriate (6)	3%
O: Spelling of names (4)	2%
S: Quoted, although off the record (3)	2%
O: Date/Time (1)	0.5%
O: Location (1)	0.5%

Subjective errors were far more commonly reported, accounting for 135 (71%) of the total; they accounted for 94 (69%) of the not-serious errors, 29 (73%) of the serious errors and 12 (92%) of the very serious errors. Some examples of various categories and types of error, as reported by sources surveyed, will serve to illustrate what concerned those sources, but also how they rated the severity of errors:

- **Essential information missing – Not serious error**
The source said that there were many other important issues mentioned by him during the interview and raised at a conference that the article had not mentioned.
- **Headline – Not serious**
The source said that exaggerated numbers had been used in the headline.
- **Quoted out of context – Not serious**
The source had recommended a number of measures but only one was referred to in the article.
- **Quoted off-the-record – Not serious**

The source said he was surprised to be named, as opposed to being described as a spokesperson.

- **Misrepresented – Not serious**
One source was concerned that a story about a study of bird life was presented in such a way as to suggest that one particular species was the primary concern of the study; the source did not place the focus on that species and only mentioned it in response to a direct question.
- **Location – Not serious**
A student union campaign was described as “country-wide” although the campaign was actually run only in one college.
- **Misquoted– Not serious**
A spokesperson for a community group campaigning to retain hospital services said that a strong word attributed to him was not a word he uses.
- **Various errors – Not serious**
A source who identified seven subjective errors as ‘not serious’ had not had any contact with the journalist and suggested that the journalist had “either heard him on the radio or picked up the story from another article”
- **Essential information missing – Serious error**
The source spoke directly to the journalist who included only a small part of what he had been told. The journalist’s selective use of information portrayed the organisation as having a view on the matter which was the complete opposite of their true position, which had been conveyed to the journalist.
- **Sensationalist – Serious**
A percentage increase figure quoted in the article was very much out of context and the source of the increase was not explained. This sensationalised the issue and the potential threat posed by it.
- **Misquoted – Serious**
In an article about an Irish person missing abroad, a source was quoted as saying the fire brigade was part of the rescue effort; the source, in his response to the questionnaire, said he never mentioned the fire brigade.
- **Headline – Serious**
In a story about a hospital’s purchase of software that did not work, the respondent said that the headline overstated the figure by a factor of two.
- **Title – Serious**
A source who was interviewed in one capacity was identified in the article as the holder of another role which he had not disclosed; the capacity in which he had been speaking to the journalist was not clarified.
- **Headline – Serious**
The headline of an article relating to a public disturbance instigated by one individual used the plural to describe the perpetrator, giving the impression that the behaviour was more widespread than it actually was.
- **Misquoted and Quoted out of context – Very serious**
The journalist did not contact the source in 2008 and a statement attributed to the source was taken from an article written two years earlier.
- **Fact/Opinion not distinguished – Very serious**
The source, representing one of the parties named in the article, commented that opinions given by unnamed management and sources in a different named company were at variance with the facts.

TABLE 1: Overview of Errors reported

	No error or Not Applicable	Not a serious error	Serious error	Very serious error	Total of error type
Did you find errors of fact in the					
... headline?	122	15	5	1	21
...the title given to you or other people (e.g. Ms)?	126	15	2		17
... spelling of names?	139	2	2		4
... age given to you?	143				0
... address or addresses?	142	1			1
... date or time?	142	1			1
... location?	142	1			1
... numbers?	134	7	2		9
Total errors of fact					54
Did you find that					
... essential information was missing?	114	20	8	1	29
... you were misquoted?	125	12	4	2	18
...you were quoted out of context?	134	7	1	1	9
... your quote misrepresented you?	135	7	1		8
... you were quoted on something that you said off-the-record?	140	1	1	1	3
... the illustration or presentation was inappropriate?	137	5	1		6
... the report showed bias on the newspaper's part?	126	12	2	3	17
... the treatment of the story was sensationalist?	112	21	9	1	31
... the report did not distinguish fact and opinion?	129	9	2	3	14
Total 'subjective' errors					135
Total errors	2242	136	40	13	189

The very-serious category is almost entirely composed of subjective errors. The single exception is in the category of headlines.

	Not a serious error	Serious error	Very serious error	Total errors
Objective	42	11	1	54
Subjective	94	29	12	135

Of the serious errors the following were the most commonly reported:

Sensationalist (9)	23%
Essential information missing (8)	20%
Headline (5)	13%
Misquoted (4)	10%

Of the very serious errors the following were the most commonly reported:

Bias (3)	23%
Fact/Opinion not distinguished (3)	23%
Misquoted (2)	15%

Aside from the headline category, subjective errors dominate. Respondents reporting errors were twice as likely to find subjective errors as errors of fact. When they rated errors as very serious these almost all fell into subjective categories. A clear pattern of greater concern with subjective errors has emerged.

Clustering of Errors

We found that serious errors tended to cluster. Of all returned questionnaires with at least one reported error, 32 (42%) had just one error, leaving 46 (58%) with two or more. Of the questionnaires reporting only one error, 88% (28) were in the not-serious column. Thus, overall, nearly two-thirds (65%) of responses reported no error or a single not-serious error.

	Questionnaires	Not a serious error	Serious error	Very serious error	Total errors
One error	32	28	3	1	32
More than one error	46	108	37	12	157

Serious and very serious errors accounted for 53 (28%) of all errors. However, serious and very serious errors accounted for only four (12.5%) of the errors reported in questionnaires where only one error was identified. By contrast, serious or very serious errors were found in 21 (45.7%) of the questionnaires where more than one error was recorded and accounted for 49 (31.2%) of all errors in this category of response.

This indicates that where there is more than one error present, serious or very serious errors are more likely to occur. There are a number of possible explanations, all meriting further research. It may be that sources are more likely to judge errors harshly if there are several clustered in one article. It may also be explained by deadline pressure and other organisational factors compounding each other in the production of errors. What is certain is that these articles with multiple and more serious errors are the most likely to have a detrimental impact on the credibility of Irish newspapers with the newspaper-reading public. They are also likely to loom disproportionately large in the public image of the newspapers.

Multiple Responses

In order to increase the response rate, and reflecting the prevalence of reports with more than one source, we sought up to three responses per article selected. (A maximum was set in order to avoid any bias from having a large number of responses referring to a small number of newspaper items.) Among the very few multiple responses one suggested that there may be issues with differences of perspective: one respondent identified five errors, three of them serious and two of them not serious, while another respondent reported only one not-serious error for the same article. The two respondents may have been focused on different aspects of the article, as it pertained directly to each of them.

This underlines the limitation of accuracy studies based on a single source's assessment. As the overview table in Annexe I makes clear, in all but a very small number of the articles sampled an average of more than one source was named and could be contacted (average 1.6 per article). Adding the number of sources named and not contacted could raise the average number of sources per article to two or more.

Contact with Journalist

After distributing the first 45 questionnaires, we included an additional question, seeking to find out if the source had been directly contacted by the journalist. Of those responses that included this question, 52 (53%) indicated they were contacted by the journalist, 29 (30%) were not and 17 (17%) did not answer the question.

Errors by Category of Story

Articles were classified by categories of topic in order to determine whether certain types of stories were more or less likely to contain errors and if certain types of respondents were more likely to report errors. What the following summary also shows is that the study covered a considerable diversity of story-types.

Category of Story	Number of errors in category	Number of questionnaires in category	Errors per response
Crime and Policing	38	18	2.1
Health	34	20	1.7
Education	20	15	1.3
Consumer and Social Affairs	19	29	0.6
Environment and Energy	18	10	1.8
Business, Industrial Relations and Finance	18	16	1.1
Housing, Planning and Development	16	8	2.0
Politics	13	7	1.8
Other	5	6	0.8
Science and Agriculture	4	5	0.8
Transport	4	9	0.4
Total	189	143	

Articles on Crime and Policing were reported as having the greatest number of errors, representing 20% of the total. Responses on Crime and Policing stories also had the highest number of errors on average – it should be noted that the average takes account of the responses in which no error was reported.

The Crime and Policing category was closely followed by Health articles at 18%. The total number of errors in Education, Consumer and Social Affairs, Environment and Energy, Business and Finance and Housing, Planning and Development articles was broadly similar, through the averages per questionnaire returned varied considerably; these five categories combined accounted for a further 48% of errors. Political stories accounted for 7% of the total errors identified and 5% of the completed questionnaires.

Respondents were also classified by area of public life, as can be seen in the following table.

Responses by Category of Respondent

(Total = 143; percentages rounded to nearest whole number)

State Sector (27)	19%
Politics (21)	15%
Business & Finance (18)	13%
NGO (18)	13%
Lobby & Representative Groups (14)	10%
Health Sector (7)	5%
Other (7)	5%
Government (6)	4%
Local Government (6)	4%
Education (6)	4%
Security Forces (6)	4%
Sport (4)	3%
Semi-State Sector (3)	2%

Independent fact-checks

In a secondary accuracy assessment, a random sample of 69 newspaper items for which no source surveys were returned were independently fact-checked by team members who had not taken part in the administration of the source questionnaires. This independent check was undertaken for purposes of comparison with the patterns of error and no-error reporting by sources. In examining each item the fact-checkers

- tested for internal consistency of names, numbers and similar detail
- checked organisation names, personal names and place-names against reliable online sources
- sought media statements and other supplied material from the named organisations or individuals relevant to the item online

The fact-checkers did not seek to contact the named sources directly, as this had been attempted already, and no contact was made or no questionnaire was returned.

Of 69 items sampled, 15 were deemed uncheckable on the basis that there was no available supplied material and/or the items were based entirely on direct interviews with individual sources. A further 25 items were found to contain no error. This left 29 items (42 per cent) in which some error was found. The total number of recorded errors over these 29 items was 51. The most common types of error were

- missing essential information (11 not serious, 5 serious)
- incorrect information (7 not serious, 2 serious)
- in the headline (5 not serious, 3 serious)

Errors in various other categories, including in personal names, in names of organisations, in numbers, and in not distinguishing fact and opinion were found two or three times each, and always coded as 'not serious'. Errors in these categories tended to be found alongside others.

Because this aspect of the study was undertaken directly by the research team, it is possible to comment rather more on the nature of the errors than is the case for the source responses. So, we note that headline errors were, in equal measure, a slight deviation from the precise detail of the story or a faithful representation of an error in the story. In one case of a discrepancy between headline and report, the headline claimed that a health issue had closed a school, while the report made it clear that pupils in a particular class had been asked to stay away, but the school stayed open.

Incidents of 'incorrect information' generally represented a lapse of concentration or failure of sub-editing (e.g. county council for city council), or an assumption made, rather than wholesale invention. It was noted that a large proportion of items was based directly on supplied material that the researchers were also able to access independently, but this did not represent full protection against factual error. An item on a survey of security in student accommodation reported that one in three students had been burgled, whereas the survey stated that one in three students said

they or someone they knew (our emphasis) had been burgled. Another item on a survey of sexual activity reported that one quarter of 18-to-25-year-olds did not use a contraceptive once in the last year, whereas the survey report stated that one quarter of this age cohort said they *did not use contraception consistently*.

In the largest category, Essential information missing, the omissions were deemed by the researchers to be of significant contextual information. Examples included:

- a news item on a study of Dublin city noise levels failed to note that the exposure levels reported were ‘hypothesised’ on the basis of computer models, rather than measured directly in all instances, as the article implied;
- a report on an individual businessperson’s complaint about a planning issue failed to report that the issue had been discussed at minuted meetings in recent days between the developer and other business interests;
- a news item highlighting that no cost price was given with a published plan for a new Luas line failed to note that the responsible agency explained that, at this stage in the process, they never gave an estimated cost for commercial and other reasons;
- a news item failed to report that the information at issue was taken from a blog posting of four weeks earlier;
- a report claiming that a drugs survey showed no impact of model Katy French’s death on cocaine use failed to note that the survey research was done before her death.

It appeared in several of these cases that the omissions represented an effort to make stories appear more completely new than they, in fact, were. In one case, a study referred to as ‘new’ was completed in 2004.

Section 6: Discussion and recommendations

The headline finding for this study is that about half of all newspaper news articles assessed for accuracy by named sources or by independent fact-checking were found to contain an error - equally, that about half contained no error. This finding is broadly in line with the pattern of findings from accuracy studies conducted in the United States over several decades.

Precisely because of the proportions in question, this finding invites the observation that the glass is half-full or half-empty. From the readers' point of view, we can reasonably assume, it is half-empty. Each error that they spot – and they do spot them, as our survey of reader-sources indicates – is likely to strengthen any doubts they may have about the accuracy of other reports in relation to which they have no direct knowledge. Their view of newspaper accuracy as a whole may well be based on the knowledge they bring to particular stories in which they are personally implicated.

From reporters' and editors' points of view, this headline finding may be seen differently – and the perspectives may differ between the two groups, between different publications or publication-types, in relation to different types of story. The finding could be taken, for example, as indicating satisfactory performance in circumstances where newsroom staffs are reducing,, or as indicating a worrying lack of attention to detail by individual journalists, or as indicating a failure of the editorial systems for eliminating errors.

We have no systematically assembled knowledge of the perceptions of newspaper readers, reporters or editors of the importance or the incidence of accuracy and inaccuracy in newspaper reporting. However, the fact that the reference to “truth and accuracy” is found in Principle I of the Code of Practice for Periodicals and Newspapers, which was the subject of intensive consideration by industry representatives, suggests that accuracy is considered highly important by editors and publishers. Thus, any significant deviation from 100 per cent accuracy – and this study presents evidence of such deviation – would be considered a cause for concern and action.

For journalism educators, the headline finding should prompt reflection on the rigour with which prospective journalists are prepared in the classroom for the responsibilities of their profession. Although this has not formed a direct part of this study, it was evident from the two phases of the accuracy checks that a significant proportion of news reports was based on supplied material; this is generally received by newspapers in the form of press releases, and sometimes also (or instead) a survey report or similar document. Alongside the news articles that were substantially (and accurately) based on such supplied material were others that introduced errors in the transcription and understanding of information from this material. The rush-to-print must be a factor in such failure, but so too are the acquired competence and the organisational encouragement to check and re-check.

Another finding of greater detail also raises difficulties of interpretation: the most common type of error in independent fact-checking and second most common, as reported by sources, was that of omission (“essential information missing”). While this may be deemed a subjective error, and thus less amenable than an error of fact to simple correction, it is not as strongly subjective as, say, a finding of sensationalism. It should cause some reflection and discussion on how and whether the necessary selection of detail from all that is available may contribute to a reduction or reorientation of a story that is tantamount to misrepresentation.

The limits of this study were mentioned at the start. Despite these, we remain confident that the study has represented fairly the performance of Irish-published newspapers to the accuracy standard set in Principle I of the Code of Practice of Periodicals and Newspapers. However, Principle I also refers to “prompt correction” of errors found. We were not in a position to check whether and how any errors reported by sources or found independently were the subject of published corrections, but our impression is that very few were.

We recommend that a further analysis of this or another newspaper sample be undertaken to assess the policy and practice of Irish-published newspapers in respect of corrections and retractions.

We recommend that further research be undertaken to see whether patterns of errors are correlated with the topic areas of stories and with the professional categories of sources surveyed; in other words, are errors more likely to occur in, say, political stories than social affairs stories, and are politicians less or more likely than others to report such errors?

We recommend that newspaper publishers and editors review what direction or discretion is given to reporters in selecting the ‘angle’ of their news reports, and what risks this selection presents that crucial elements will be overlooked or downplayed.

We recommend that newspaper publishers and editors review what direction or discretion is given to sub-editors to check reports for factual accuracy by their own means.

We recommend that newspaper publishers and editors review what level of care is taken, and is required, in ensuring that more complex stories, e.g. with technical information, multiple conflicting sources, or involving many numbers and percentages, are appropriately assigned.

We recommend that newspapers perform their own internal accuracy checks – after publication – on a random but regular basis and make journalists and editors aware of the findings.

We recommend that research be undertaken to ascertain whether and how the requirement on journalists to produce material across different formats affects the time and effort they devote to verifying information for reports.

We recommend that research be undertaken into levels of accuracy in reports on newspaper websites: are the same standards of fact-checking and sub-editing applied to online reports as to those that appear in print?

We recommend that journalism educators and trainers review what importance is attached, in preparing students and trainees, to attaining accuracy and precision and to procedures and techniques for attaining these values.

We recommend that journalism educators review what guidance or support is given to students and trainees, and what level is required, in preparing them to handle more challenging stories, including those with complex numbers or percentages.

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Annexe I: Overview of samples and survey responses

Newspaper	Articles Selected	Articles Used	Sources Contacted ¹	Completed Questionnaires
DN31010	9	7	9	0
DN61010	10	10	18	4
DN11110	8	7	14	5
DN51110	10	7	13	4
DN81110	8	2	2	1
SN21210	8	8	19	8
SN31210	8	8	17	3
SN51210	8	8	14	0
SN41210	7	6	15	1
DN31310	10	7	7	4
DN61310	9	9	17	3
DN21410	8	6	8	2
DN41410	9	6	10	3
DN71410	8	8	11	2
DN31510	8	6	7	0
DN61510	10	9	14	5
DN71610	9	7	9	2
DN21610	9	7	12	1
DN41610	8	8	11	2
DN11710	8	7	17	4
DN81710	6	5	8	2
DN51710	10	10	15	5
DN21810	7	7	12	3
DN41810	1	0	0	0
DN71810	7	5	6	1
SN11910	6	6	7	2
SN21910	10	10	16	1
SN41910	9	8	14	1
SN61910	8	8	10	1
DN12010	10	10	17	2
DN52010	9	9	13	4
DN82010	7	6	7	0
DN32110	8	6	8	0
DN62110	10	9	14	3
DN12210	8	8	15	5
DN52210	10	6	9	1
DN82210	9	6	7	1
DN32310	8	6	10	2
DN62310	8	8	13	3
DN22410	9	7	15	2
DN42410	8	7	10	2
DN72410	9	7	11	2
DN32510	6	2	2	1
DN62510	9	9	18	5

¹ This does not include press releases, reports or sources who were rung but did not answer, to whom email sending failed, who responded but declined to complete the questionnaire, or who forgot to attach the completed questionnaire to their email reply.

SN52610	8	7	7	4
SN32610	8	8	11	2
SN62610	8	7	11	3
SN12610	3	3	3	0
DN22710	9	6	9	3
DN42710	8	7	9	2
DN72710	10	8	10	1
DN12810	10	10	19	3
DN52810	10	8	14	1
DN82810	7	4	4	1
DN72910	8	8	14	3
DN42910	6	6	7	3
DN22910	7	6	11	2
DN13010	8	7	10	3
DN53010	10	10	13	2
DN83010	10	9	10	1
DN33110	7	4	6	0
DN63110	10	9	17	5
Total 62	511	435	686	142²

² One completed questionnaire is not included in total as there is no indication of article or source. Response is included in results so total number of usable responses is 143.

Annexe 2: Breakdown of errors reported, by individual response

Questionnaire Code	Error Type	Not a serious error	Serious error	Very serious error	Number of errors per questionnaire
DN61010P7	Spelling of names		x		1
DN61010P9B	Headline		x		4
	Title		x		
	Essential information missing	X			
	Quote misrepresented you	X			
DN1110P1	Numbers	X			1
DN1110P8	Title	X			1
DN1110P10A	Headline	X			3
	Numbers	X			
	Essential information missing	X			
DN51110P1	Essential information missing	X			2
	Sensationalist		x		
DN51110P5A	Headline	X			3
	Essential information missing	X			
	Illustration or presentation inappropriate	X			
SN21210P1	Essential information missing		x		2
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished			x	
SN21210P2	Misquoted	x			3
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
SN21210P12	Spelling of names	x			1
SN21210P15B	Headline	x			1
SN31210P1	Essential information missing	x			3
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist		x		
SN31210P5	Numbers	x			5
	Quoted out of context	x			
	Quoted 'off-the-record'	x			
	Bias	x			

	Sensationalist	x			
DN41210P19A	Essential information missing		x		2
	Quote misrepresented you		x		
DN31310P4	Essential information missing	x			3
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
DN31310P7A	Headline	x			4
	Essential information missing			x	
	Sensationalist	x			
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
DN31310P12	Sensationalist	x			1
DN31310P15	Essential information missing	x			3
	Misquoted		x		
	Quoted out of context		x		
DN61310P2A	Names	x			1
DN61310P7	Essential information missing	x			1
DN21410P17	Numbers	x			1
DN41410P16	Sensationalist	x			1
DN41410P20A.1	Headline		x		5
	Numbers		x		
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished		x		
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
DN41410P20A.2	Sensationalist	x			1
DN71410P4	Title	x			1
DN61510P3A	Headline	x			2
	Title	x			
DN61510P7B	Misquoted	x			3
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
DN21610P22	Headline	x			4
	Illustration or presentation inappropriate	x			
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
DN41610P4	Essential information missing	x			7
	Misquoted	x			

	Quoted out of context	x			
	Illustration or presentation inappropriate	x			
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
DN71610P8	Title	x			4
	Essential information missing		x		
	Misquoted	x			
	Sensationalist		x		
DN71610P12	Headline	x			3
	Title	x			
	Misquoted	x			
DN51710P12	Headline	x			2
	Essential information missing		x		
DN51710P13	Essential information missing	x			2
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
DN81710P18.1	Headline		x		2
	Sensationalist		x		
DN81710P18.2	Headline	x			2
	Sensationalist	x			
DN21810P2	Sensationalist	x			2
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
DN21810P7	Headline		x		3
	Numbers	x			
	Essential information missing	x			
DN71810P8	Headline	x			2
	Bias	x			
DN21810P10	Title	x			1
SN11910P14	Headline			x	6
	Essential information missing		x		
	Misquoted			x	
	Bias			x	
	Sensationalist			x	
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished			x	
SN21910P4A	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			1

SN41910P5	Headline	x			1
DN12010P11	Quoted 'off-the-record'			x	1
DN52010P1B	Title	x			1
DN62110P3	Numbers	x			1
DN62110P3A	Essential information missing	x			1
DN12210P6	Sensationalist	x			1
DN12210P7	Sensationalist	x			1
DN12210P13A	Essential information missing	x			1
DN52210P5	Misquoted	x			2
	Sensationalist	x			
DN82210P4	Title	x			2
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
DN32310P8/9	Headline	x			9
	Title	x			
	Numbers	x			
	Essential information missing		x		
	Quoted out of context	x			
	Quote misrepresented you	x			
	Illustration or presentation inappropriate		x		
	Bias		x		
	Sensationalist		x		
DN62310P2	Misquoted	x			2
	Quoted out of context	x			
DN62310P11A	Date or Time	x			3
	Misquoted	x			
	Quoted out of context	x			
DN22410P26	Headline	x			4
	Essential information missing	x			
	Misquoted	x			
	Quote misrepresented you	x			
DN72410P8	Headline		x		5
	Numbers		x		
	Essential information missing		x		
	Misquoted		x		
	Sensationalist		x		
DN62510P3	Misquoted			x	2

	Quoted out of context			x	
DN62510P7	Essential information missing	x			1
SN32610P7	Quoted out of context	x			2
	Quote misrepresented you	x			
SN52610P2	Title	x			9
	Essential information missing	x			
	Misquoted	x			
	Quoted out of context	x			
	Quote misrepresented you	x			
	Illustration or presentation inappropriate	x			
	Bias	x			
	Sensationalist	x			
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
SN52610P4A	Headline	x			5
	Title		x		
	Essential information missing		x		
	Bias			x	
	Sensationalist	x			
SN52610P5	Essential information missing	x			5
	Misquoted	x			
	Quoted 'off-the-record'		x		
	Sensationalist		x		
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
SN52610P8	Bias	x			2
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished	x			
SN62610P6A	Title	x			1
SN62610P9	Misquoted	x			1
DN22710P10	Title	x			1
DN52810P7B	Essential information missing	x			5
	Illustration or presentation inappropriate	x			
	Bias		x		
	Sensationalist		x		
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished		x		

	distinguished				
DN82810P6B	Sensationalist	x			1
DN22910P7	Title	x			4
	Bias			x	
	Sensationalist		x		
	Fact/Opinion not distinguished			x	
DN42910P24	Title	x			3
	Spelling of names		x		
	Address	x			
DN72910P24	Headline	x			1
DN13010P12A	Location	x			2
	Sensationalist	x			
DN53010P8A	Misquoted		x		1
DN63110P2	Quote misrepresented you	x			1
DN63110P6A	Title	x			3
	Essential information missing	x			
	Quote misrepresented you	x			
DN63110P6C	Essential information missing	x			1
DN63110P9A	Bias	x			2
	Sensationalist	x			
No ID	Misquoted		x		1
Total 78		136	40	13	189