REALITY CHECK: REPORTERS

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In an era when it can be difficult to distinguish real news from fake news, Americans may be wondering if what they are reading or listening to is fair and balanced.

With the advent of internet, one phony story on social media has the ability to spread like cancer. This, combined with political backlash against news organizations, can make public trust difficult in the field of journalism.

"We are not going to give you something that is not true," Steve Wallick, editor-in-chief, and 43-year employee of The Bismarck Tribune said. "We often get criticism – that’s not unusual – and have been accused by both sides of being biased and unfair.

We try to be fair. We try to tell both sides of the story."

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- Amy Sisk

J.R. Havens, KFYR-TV news director, said it’s important to stick to the company’s roots, which has established a reputation for good, factual and truthful news.

"What it comes down to is the basics," Havens said. "In order to get the real news ... the basics are: who, what, why, where, when and how."

Havens said in order to be fair and balanced, journalists must show both sides of the story. This can be challenging if they are restricted to shorter air segments or article lengths.

The Bismarck Tribune tells its reporters to get more than one voice for a story. Wallick said the number of sources can set a strongly written story apart from a poorly written one.

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- Amy Sisk, reporter for Inside Energy and Prairie Public Radio and TV said, "That is what I strive for in every story."

Sisk said in some stories there are more than two perspectives. She added that it is not uncommon to have up to three or four sources.

One source can be synonymous with a single point of view. Wallick explained at times when a reporter is chasing breaking news, a single source is used because it may be the only source available.

"For most of your stories you want as many sources as possible, and you want to be able to quiz them," Wallick said. "If the numbers don’t jive then you can go back to the person and say, “What about this?”"
Monica Hannan, KFYR-TV managing editor and anchor, has been with Channel 5 for 28 years. Hannan explained that television reporters share the same responsibilities as print reporters.

"Using more than one source doesn’t necessarily apply to just news print," Hannan said. "Journalists on television have the same responsibilities."

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Hannan said part of their training is to go with multiple sources, versus just one. It entails asking a lot of questions to get to the heart of the matter.

"We don’t use unnamed sources here," Hannan said. "You make sure you get both sides and then you report them. You don’t put your opinion in it. You just give the facts. You make sure everybody is represented, and in order to be careful to avoid giving the appearance of being biased you quote people."

Hannan said the fundamentals of journalism are often taught at a young age. She also said the core principles of journalism never really change – like identifying a good source.

"I remember back when I was in school, we would learn how to identify a good source," Slisk said. "It is something that kids should be aware of in school. It is something that teachers should be talking about in school – how to identify those things."

Just as journalists should have multiple sources in their news story, individuals should have multiple sources before establishing an opinion. Wallick, Slisk, Hannan and Havens all agreed that people should exercise caution in what they decide to share on social media.

"People who use social media have to be smart about it," Wallick said. "They have to realize there are a lot of things that are posted that are unverified."

Some people tend to believe what they want to believe, especially if it might fit their beliefs. They may be a little more accepting of it than they should be."

Hannan said viewers should read more than one source, including the opposing view.

"Try to find something in the middle," Hannan said. "Eventually, you are going to find consensus if you really are looking. People tend to look for their own opinion, but if you can fight that and look for all opinions, eventually the truth will come out. You are going to see a trend toward the truth."

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