

## CASE STUDY

# A MAMMOTH MYSTERY

Good journalists rarely think they know exactly what a story is about when they begin to report on it. They try to keep an open mind. This means you interview people and collect information even if you disagree with what is said or think the ideas are far-fetched. You evaluate information based in part on your source's credibility, not on whether the information agrees with your view of the situation. You seek a second or even a third source to collaborate information that seems unlikely. Remember, sources can be reliable or unreliable, but information is true, partially true or false.

This is much harder than it sounds!

When you report breaking news, you probably will not have the luxury of satellite imagery or drone photography or the lab reports that will be available later in the month. You may not have the bigger picture yourself and should resist thinking you do. You, like your audience, may be trying to piece together a bigger picture from the information you are gathering bit by bit.

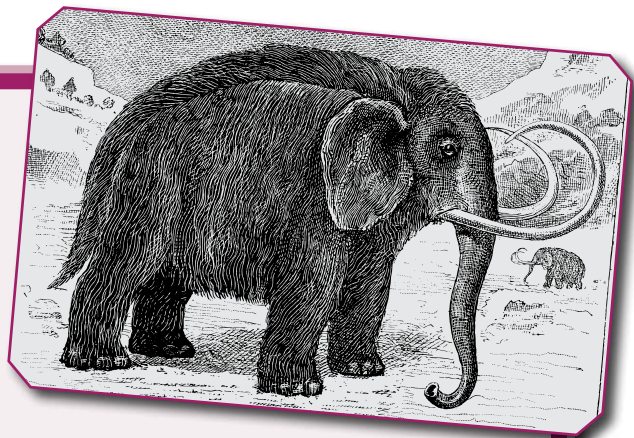
Deciding what to publish and what to withhold pending verification is not easy. It is a matter of news sense. But when a reporter and an editor work together, their news sense is much stronger than when someone is working alone.

Imagine you are reporting a story about a problem in the PE building. The police have the area taped off, but students who have been in the equipment room are available to tell what they saw.

Before the week is over, you will learn that a woolly mammoth was found on the Monday after spring break, standing in a dark PE equipment-issue room—all of the lighting broken. He stood over nine feet tall, had meter-long reddish-blond hair, two curved tusks, small eyes and ears (at least for his size) and two finger-like projections on the end of his trunk.

No one, including you, suspects the equipment room has been taken over by a woolly mammoth, since the last one died out in about 1650 BCE.

A week from now you will know what it is from DNA analysis of a hair sample. You may



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also have learned that an Advanced Placement Biology student incubated genetic material in a Petri dish on the dryer in the equipment room and then forgot about it.

But right now, you just know something is going on in the PE building and the police are there.

## PRIMARY SOURCES—WITNESSES

You heard about the mystery on social media shortly after 7 a.m. and rushed to the PE building, but police tape keeps you 50 yards away, so you are not likely to become an eyewitness. You locate and interview a dozen people, primary sources, who say they have been inside, one with a flashlight. The others relied on light from the open door or the light that came into the room as the sun rose through the frosted and dirty windows near the ceiling.

Each witness gives you his or her full name and year in school, as well as contact information for follow-up questions. Each one relates a different experience.

- Witness 1, a seven-foot basketball player with an LED light on his keychain reports a small eye floating more than a foot above his head.
- Witness 2, a five-foot freshman, tells about a ginger-colored curtain hanging in front of her. She shows you a long, reddish strand, possibly hair, which she says got caught on her fingers as she pushed the curtain away from her face before she ran. You take a picture of the strand.
- Witness 3 reports a shiny, yellow-white tube curving up like some sort of musical instrument.

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## CASE STUDY

# A MAMMOTH MYSTERY (CONTINUED)

- Witness 4 says he saw something like the slope of a grass-covered roof high above his head, just in front of him.
- Witness 5 reports a thick whip speeding past him at eye level.
- Witness 6 says a two-headed snake groped toward her.
- Witness 7 says he ran into a tree trunk, thicker than a pine and covered with moss.
- Witness 8 reports a giant autumn leaf about the size of a sheet of notebook paper high above his head, probably eight feet up, moving “like it was in the wind but still hanging on the tree.”
- Witness 9 reports he saw the same thing but thought it looked like the ear of giant dog. “Clifford is definitely a different color of red, though he is about the same size.”
- Witness 10 says it smelled “like someone really, really needed to wash his hair.”
- Witness 11 reports the sound of something huge bumping into the ceiling, “like a whale coming up for air.”
- Witness 12 reports a metallic, whirring sound and something jumping on her shoulders and grabbing her around the neck

## HANDLING PRIMARY SOURCES

So you now have witnesses reporting two-headed snakes, whips, musical instruments, floating eyes, reddish leaves, hanging moss, breaching whales, junior-high hair, Clifford the Big Red Dog, a sloping roof and mechanical, strangling monkeys. Are all, or some, of these people lying? Which ones? What do you report?

The media you are using and your deadlines influence how you handle their divergent accounts. If you are posting to electronic media such as Reddit, or the breaking news section of your publication or broadcast’s website, you should report most of what you learn as the story unfolds, each time saying or writing who your source is,

7:17 a.m. Happyville police scanner **reports** eight squad cars are on the scene.

7:17 a.m. SillyRabbit **posts** on Facebook “A bunch of girls are crying and hugging each other. Lunch ladies are beside two who are leaning against the wall. (A warm cinnamon roll would calm my nerves right now.)”

7:28 a.m. Junior Adam Lybbert **says** he went into the locker room but could not turn on the lights. He used an LED light on his key chain to “see what was going on with the lights. I saw a small, red-brown eye floating more than a foot above his head.” Lybbert is the seven-foot center for the basketball team.

7:36 a.m. Senior Abby Lyon **tells** “La Voz” that she went in from the girls’ side. “I heard a metallic, whirring sound and something jumped on my shoulders and grabbed me around the neck.”

7:40 a.m.: Freshman Kurzi Short **says**, “All I saw was a reddish brown curtain hanging in front of me. I was almost into the curtain—I felt it on my face and shoulders. Then I backed out, as fast as I could.”

By eight o’clock, you have heard from Abby’s sister that Abby arrived on campus at 7:35 after the police arrived, according to your notes. She may have lost her reliability (our ability to trust her) and you have already posted her comment. What do you do?

You can choose to take her comment down, strike through it or leave it up. But don’t do any of the above until you have alerted your editor, even if you are posting directly to the web. Then attempt to collaborate or refute her report. If you find a second source who can verify that Abby had just come on campus when you interviewed her or if you can ask Abby, “Is there any chance you were just making up stuff for fun?” If she grins and admits it, you are probably safe modifying your report. Ethically, you should strike through the 7:36 posting rather than removing it when you make your correction. You may also

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## CASE STUDY A MAMMOTH MYSTERY (CONTINUED)

write (error) after the post. Such corrections may increase your credibility as a journalist.

If you post information on your publication or broadcast's webpage, a 20-second long conversation with your editor before she posts your work can be collaboration. A second set of eyes and two people's news instinct may keep your publication from publishing something that embarrasses the whole staff.

The Web editor may decide to withhold some of your reporting from publication until you find second or even third sources for similar information. Or the Web editor may notice that all the other sources report something organic and not aggressive while Abby's report was rather different. The editor may have other reasons to doubt Abby's reliability as a source.

For instance, in addition to withholding Abby's report of metallic, whirring sounds, you may decide not to publish the comments from Witness 9 because he is "always joking around," from Witness 6, because she spends "hours and hours in World of Warcraft and may be reality-impaired" and from Witness 4 because "he's always bragging about how much he can drink and still go to school." Witness 12's story seems a little "off" to you or your editor.

If you do not publish the comments about Clifford the Big Red Dog, a two-headed snake, and a grass-covered slope, you risk being scooped, that is, another news source may get that part of the story out before you. But if the other news sources report lies and hoaxes as eyewitness testimony and you do not, you have advanced your credibility as a source of reliable news.

If you are preparing copy for a daily broadcast, for print or for later online news stories, you have the luxury of time to process all the information you receive. You should, for instance, contact SillyRabbit who posted on Facebook and verify her identity. Interview her.

### PRIMARY SOURCES—AN EXPERT

In addition to checking eyewitness sources, you can gather more information. You learn the

strand taken from Witness 2 will be analyzed for composition and possibly for DNA at the state wildlife commission's lab. You contact an expert in DNA, another primary source. In this case, the primary source is the professor of zoology from a nearby university.

He tells you, "It will take several weeks to complete DNA analysis of the strand, but they should be able to tell right away if the strand is organic—really hair or just a man-made fiber.

"If it's a hair, they should be able to tell if it is human or from another mammal by examining it. Animal hair is coated with substances that provide waterproofing and insulation. Human hair just does not have that—we don't get any real protection from cold and wet from our hair.

"The photo I saw online suggests it is too long to have come from any breed of dog I know. It appears to be too thin to be from a horse's hair or tail. It will be interesting to see what the lab finds."

His professional expertise and university connection make him a *credible* source, that is, a source who will be doing his best to provide intelligent, fair and educated information. Though he may make errors, as does any other primary source, his professional reputation will make him as careful and accurate as possible.

After you finish the interview, you realize the photo he saw online could be the one you took when you interviewed Kurzi Short. You call the expert back and ask him what photo he saw. You learn his primary source was your photo. Your photo, a primary source, is the basis of his opinions as an expert source.

### SECONDARY SOURCES— INTERPRETING THE NEWS

By 8:30 a.m. the police department has started giving interviews, and by 9:30 a.m. the school district has released a statement to the press. These are all secondary sources. They are aware of eyewitness and first-person accounts and may have transmitted their interpretation of them. They report the information they wish the public to know. Though they give information, they may also withhold information.

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## CASE STUDY A MAMMOTH MYSTERY (CONTINUED)

The police report is matter-of-fact and centers around what they know for sure, what *they* are doing.

*"We received a call from the school at 7:06 and responded by 7:09. Approximately 40 officers and a SWAT team are standing by on the campus. There has been no use of weapons.*

*"A paramedic unit is standing by.*

*"We have no reports of injuries to bystanders or officers.*

*"Evidence from the scene has been sent to appropriate labs and witnesses have been interviewed.*

*"We have cordoned off the gymnasium and nearby buildings. At this point, until we get officers inside and know more, we are treating this as an unknown threat.*

*"Animal control personnel are on their way. We are considering the possibility that an animal has been lead into the locker room or that a wild animal has been released there."*

The school district sends out a press release:

*"Currently Happyville High School is on lockdown as a precaution because of an incident in the area of the PE buildings. There is no immediate threat to the students or staff. The district is acting out of an abundance of caution until we know the exact nature of the problem. No students have been injured and there have been no reports of violence. The police are on the scene and have the situation under control.*

*"We request that parents and guardians stay away from the campus for the safety of the students.*

*"At this time, we expect that students will be released from school at their regular time.*

*"The Happyville Unified School District always considers the safety and welfare of students as its highest priority."*

Both the police and the school district have experience dealing with the press and wish to be fair, maintain good relations with the press and also protect their own interests. (Almost all people do.) They both tell what they want the public to know and withhold what they do not want them to know. The police do not report the conflicting reports from students and the fear they displayed. The school district does not report that they do not know what is going on, that paramedics are standing by or what the students report seeing, feeling and smelling. They do not mention students are being confined to their first period classrooms. Their report contains no speculation. Their purpose is to reassure parents and prevent chaos on campus.

The professional media soon become another source, officially still secondary sources if they are not eyewitnesses. Their reports should build on primary sources like links in a chain, but they are secondary because they add interpretation of the events.

Before noon local radio and TV stations send reporters and crews, as does the nearest daily paper. A news helicopter or a drone flies overhead, videotaping the gym and the police cordon. They do not come on campus because the principal has requested that they stay off school grounds, which is a request journalists usually honor.

The professional media's reports are gleaned from police reports, the district's spokesperson, other media reports, including yours, as well as their aerial footage. They may quote tweets and Facebook postings. They are several steps away from the events, though the helicopter footage makes them an eyewitness, at least of the police cordon.

They will evaluate and synthesize multiple sources—witnesses, experts, official statements—and provide context to help the audience make sense of the chaotic situation. A noon newscast could, for instance, research similar police actions on other campuses. Or they could review the history of high school pranks in your area. Their assumptions about the story may control the angle they take on the story, what they see and what they dismiss and what the tone of the story is.

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## CASE STUDY A MAMMOTH MYSTERY (CONTINUED)

### HEARSAY

After school, reporters are waiting across the street from the school. As students come out, they ask them for their account of what happened today. The students are first-person reporters if they tell the reporter what they experienced, “We had to stay in first period class all day. I had English. Boy, was that boring!”

The same students are repeating rumors, hearsay evidence, if they tell the reporter, “A girl was so hysterical the paramedics had to take her away.” Or “I heard it’s an old bull someone led into the locker room. Grumpyville High School put it in the locker room last night as a prank. Their mascot is a Toreador.” If reporters broadcast or publish either of these reports, they are guilty of using unsourced information and reporting hearsay. But if hearsay corroborates what they already think the story is about, it can be very tempting.

1. Which of the 12 eyewitness reports would you be willing to publish without collaboration? (Remember, you do not yet know it is a woolly mammoth.)
2. Which of the 12 eyewitness reports would you withhold from publication because they seem impossible to you?
3. Which of the 12 eyewitness reports tend to corroborate the information in other eyewitness reports?
4. Stories with political, racial or class components may lead reporters to think they already know the story before they report it. Brainstorm with your group at least five stories a high school reporter might cover where reporters could be tempted to think they know what the story is about before they report it.
5. How might an editor help a reporter working on one of the stories in number four evaluate the reliability of the sources?
6. Knowing that editors can also be guilty of having previously decided what a story is about before it is reported, what conflicts between the reporter and the editor do you predict may develop in covering a story in number 4 above?