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Guardrails for News Headlining: Principles and Workflow

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Headlining news stories poses unique challenges for newsroom teams in creativity, collaboration, and policy transparency. This applied ethics module will explicitly bring a set of three principles and related norms to the surface. This is to both offer clarity and use them to propose a checklist (guardrails) for everyday news headlining. It is primarily targeted at all headline writers in newsrooms—news editors, SEO specialists, social media editors, etc. It will also help reporters since it's their own stories that are being headlined and they are a key newsroom stakeholder affected when a story's impact is diminished by a headline that misleads, misinforms, or misrepresents the story.

Before we go into the principles and guardrails checklist, here's a small list of challenges associated with headlining news stories. You can, no doubt, add to these.

1. **Framing:** Any act of brevity, like headlining, requires deciding what gets saliency in the headline. Headlines then are frames, which means they carry the bias of the framers. Headlines may end up undermining a complicated narrative in the story itself, or may suggest cause and effect when the story does not.
2. **Reach to disinformation:** Lies and confusion operate in a feedback loop. Planting lies sows confusion and confusion makes it easier for lies to take off. Elevating lies inside quotes in headlines amplifies the manipulative impact of the lies when social media and news apps distribute stories at scale.
3. **Accuracy:** Representing the story accurately in a line or two has much riding on the headliners' interest and time available. Rushing headlines can result in contradicting the story.
4. **Workflow:** The story writer or producer may not often be the editor who decides the headline. The latter's incentives are different from the former.
5. **Uptake:** Editors and analytics professionals worry that people will not open a story simply because the headline did not land. Engagement metrics are a real thing. This is usually where SEO and keywording comes in, especially if the topic has currency and people are searching online for more.
6. **Reader attention vs. expectation:** We all skim headlines. Attention is scarce. Headlines are expectation setters. When the actual story belies expectations, it has costs. (Upset readers, confusion, miscomprehension, etc.)
7. **Headlining transparency:** Most ethics codes listed on newsroom websites do not include a separate section for headlining ethics. That indicates the deeply ingrained and cultural nature of the work.

It is easy to criticize headlines, but in reality these challenges make defining “success” in news headlining around any one organizational metric or value a near impossible task.

Diverse incentives may bring conflicting pressures from different stakeholders: advertising sales (revenues), reporting (accuracy), editors (posturing, neutrality, tone), time pressure (prioritization, workflow), and more. These challenges are exacerbated by how our attention spans, news headlining, and online news discovery/distribution all influence each other.

This module will explicitly bring a set of three principles and related norms to the surface to both offer clarity and use them to propose a checklist (guardrails) for everyday action.

1. Representing the Story with Integrity
2. Centering Valid and Authentic Claims
3. Seeing Headlines Through Eyes of Stakeholders

Following the principles section is a rough checklist for your headline process that shows how you might apply the principles in your newsroom workflow.

Checklist A: Organization level, for policy

Checklist B: Story level, for everyday workflows

Note, this module will not fix all of our headlining problems. (See the resources section for a more comprehensive set of possibilities.) But it will help address the most egregious errors by mitigating harms. We're interested in receiving your feedback from your own ethics-related experimentation. Feel free to send us your input [via our headlining news stories survey](#).

Principles for Headlining and how to Apply Them

Principles, when applied, may help you identify or weed out poor candidate headlines and then decide from the rest. Say you have three to five possible headlines for a story. One or two or three of those might conflict with one or more principles and you can modify or drop them. These principles connect to the mission of ethical storytelling and news production.

1. Representing the Story With Integrity:

Does the headline's claim or assertion sit at odds with the actual findings in a story? Is the headline *truthful* about the story or is it setting up false expectations? Does the headline imply cause and effect, even when the story does not? Is the story's thrust suggesting one reality at play, and the headline is elevating or exaggerating or overstating something else? These problems are more common than we think. They violate the *norm of truthfulness*. The fact-checking organization FullFact calls such headlines *edlines* and compiled a list of [examples here](#).

Risks/Costs: There are real costs to this principle being violated.

1. In their [research on headlines](#) and their influence on learning, Nick Carcioppolo, Di Lun, and Soroya Julian McFarlane found that “reading the full article with an accurate headline resulted in the highest recognition and comprehension.” On the other hand, they found that reading correcting information within an article is likely not enough “to overcome the deleterious impact of a clickbait headline.” In other words, poor headlines damage the epistemic journey even for committed readers, who have taken the trouble to read the full story.
2. In another effort, researchers Jennifer Allen, Duncan Watts, and David Rand [quantified the impact](#) of misinformation on Facebook. The *Chicago Tribune* article titled, “A healthy doctor died two weeks after getting a COVID vaccine; CDC is investigating why,” falls in the category of implying cause and effect when the story did not. This story had massive reach; it was the most-viewed URL across 13,206 URLs during the research time period. It was seen by 54.9 million people on Facebook (>20% of Facebook's U.S. user base). The story itself indicated uncertainty surrounding the true cause of death, but the researchers pointed out that the headline's implication was that the vaccine may have been harmful to health. There are consequences:

“We found that the only content dimension that consistently predicted a headline's effect on vaccination intentions was the extent to which the headline suggested that the vaccine was harmful to a person's health.” - Allen et al.

Mitigation: Usually well-reported stories already have the truth of the details in the story. Have a collaborative workflow. Let the story's producers or reporters view the headline options and weed out the bad ones or veto them. Pick from the rest.

Example of what not to do, a hypothetical bad headline:

CJR's Feven Merid [interviewed elections expert Tina Barton](#) on responsible coverage in 2024, where headlining came up. Barton said:

For example, if a headline reads, "Michigan's second-largest city lost an entire tray of mail ballots," it implies that the election clerk was careless when, in reality, the tray was unaccounted for by the United States Postal Service, not the clerk."

"Such sensationalized reporting can lead to public outrage and erode trust in election officials, making it critical for journalists to be precise in their wording and ensure that all aspects of a story are accurately represented. This means not only getting the facts right but also considering how headlines and stories can influence public perception and behavior."

See more here: [Q&A: Elections expert Tina Barton on how the media can cover voting responsibly--Columbia Journalism Review](#)

A guardrail example: For stories that appear on NPR's website, their general assignment desk directly allows reporters to weigh in. Reporters draft the initial headline, which the editor reviews, and discusses options with the reporter soliciting further input. "And between them, they will settle on what they think is the perfect headline for that story." Another NPR reporter and podcaster captures this well: "Headlines seem to work best when they are written by journalists who understand the complete story and enjoy writing them."

2. Centering Valid and Authentic Claims

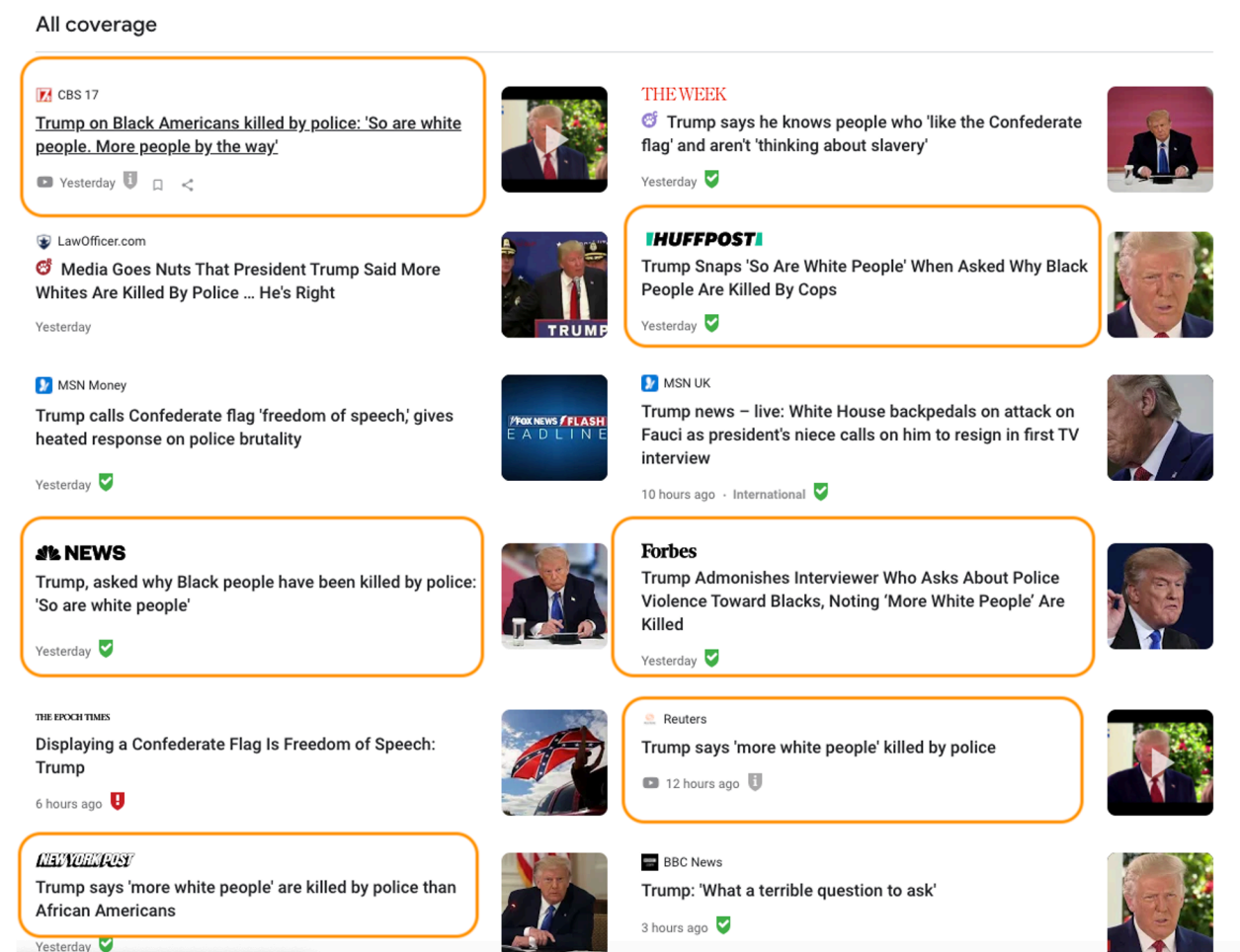
Official authorities—federal, regional, and local leaders and appointees are leading stakeholders in policy making by virtue of the positions they hold. They have an interest in not just being quoted in stories, but in their claims being headlined.

Risks: Centering official actors in headlines (as opposed to including their claims in stories) allows their claims to gain legitimacy through circulation. For officials who have already caused harm or have taken evidently harmful positions in the past, headlining their views on the same causes harm to discourse. Their claims may fail one or more tests of validity and authenticity (discourse ethics): a) plain misleading by exaggeration

b) taking numbers out of context c) not coming from a standpoint of lived experience or empirical knowledge.

Examples of such headlines: In 2020, when asked by a journalist why African Americans are still dying at the hands of police, Trump said, “And so are white people. So are white people. What a terrible question to ask.” He then added “[More white people, by the way. More white people.](#)” Only a handful were careful not to elevate the claim as is. When the most powerful official in the land makes a claim like this, the pull of conventional/legacy newsworthiness determination is to elevate it to the headline. Headlining the story with this claim amplified the misleading framing, legitimized a false equivalence in proportionality of police killings, and added insult to injury to Black Americans. Yet, scores of newsrooms did just that.

All coverage



The screenshot displays a grid of news results from Google News. The top section is titled 'All coverage'. The results are organized into three columns. The first column contains articles from CBS 17, LawOfficer.com, MSN Money, NEWS, THE EPOCH TIMES, and NEW YORK POST. The second column features articles from THE WEEK, HUFFPOST, MSN UK, Forbes, Reuters, and BBC News. The third column shows a series of small video thumbnails. Several articles are highlighted with orange borders, including the CBS 17 article, the HUFFPOST article, the NEWS article, the Forbes article, the Reuters article, and the NEW YORK POST article. Each article entry includes the outlet's logo, a headline, a sub-headline, and a timestamp. Some entries also include a small thumbnail image or video player.

CBS 17
Trump on Black Americans killed by police: 'So are white people. More people by the way.'
Yesterday

THE WEEK
Trump says he knows people who 'like the Confederate flag' and aren't 'thinking about slavery'
Yesterday

LawOfficer.com
Media Goes Nuts That President Trump Said More Whites Are Killed By Police ... He's Right
Yesterday

HUFFPOST
Trump Snaps 'So Are White People' When Asked Why Black People Are Killed By Cops
Yesterday

MSN Money
Trump calls Confederate flag 'freedom of speech,' gives heated response on police brutality
Yesterday

MSN UK
Trump news – live: White House backpedals on attack on Fauci as president's niece calls on him to resign in first TV interview
10 hours ago · International

NEWS
Trump, asked why Black people have been killed by police: 'So are white people'
Yesterday

Forbes
Trump Admonishes Interviewer Who Asks About Police Violence Toward Blacks, Noting 'More White People' Are Killed
Yesterday

THE EPOCH TIMES
Displaying a Confederate Flag Is Freedom of Speech: Trump
6 hours ago

Reuters
Trump says 'more white people' killed by police
12 hours ago

NEW YORK POST
Trump says 'more white people' are killed by police than African Americans
Yesterday

BBC News
Trump: 'What a terrible question to ask'
3 hours ago

Screenshot from Google News showing media outlets and headlines. Photo by Subbu Vincent.

More on Risks and Costs

The philosopher Jennifer Saul developed a concept called “figleaf” to contrast with dogwhistles in her latest book, [*Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*](#) (2024). Saul offers this definition for what a falsehood figleaf is:

“A falsehood figleaf is a bit of speech that blocks the inference (from something a person has said to the claim) that the person or utterance has violated our norm against untruthfulness.”

- Jennifer Saul

This particular case of newsrooms reporting what Trump said on police killings verbatim is a case of editors giving a figleaf to Trump's falsehood. She explains the problem of figleaves for misleading claims and falsehoods further in her section on, “Reported Speech,” in the book.

“People may feel very comfortable sharing reports of what others have said online, knowing that doing so is not an explicit endorsement. News organizations may find it appealing to report on ridiculous things that people have said—these can be a kind of clickbait—but doing so gives these claims greater prominence and keeps them in circulation. If news organizations can be induced to report on the ridiculous things that people have said, they may unwittingly become the accomplices of those who want to propel those ridiculous claims into mainstream discussions.”

- Jennifer Saul in *Dogwhistles and Figleaves*.

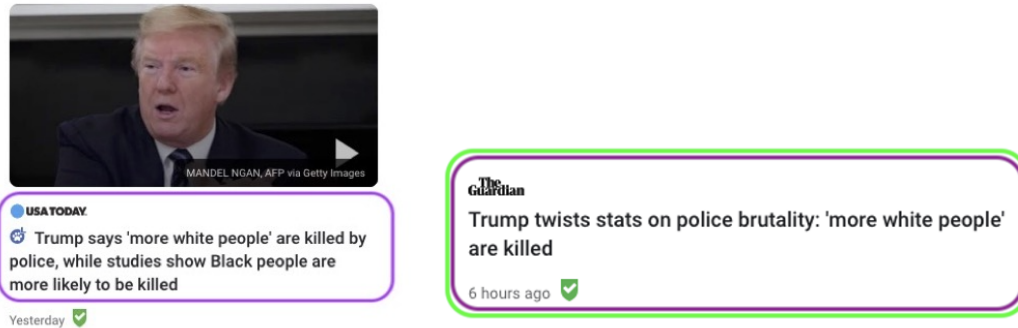
In a conversation with me via email, Saul says that the claim, “More white people are killed by police than Black people,” by itself would be recognised as misleading. But when the news headlines add, “*Trump says*, ‘More white people are killed by police than Black people,’” it starts sounding acceptable because now the overall sentence is reporting what Trump said, i.e, he did say that. “The figleaf is the fact that they are just reporting what Trump said,” says Saul.

“The repetition of this helps to spread belief in the misleading claim that more white people are killed by police than Black people,” she adds.

Mitigation: When covering such claims, diligent reporters would have talked to both domain experts and the impacted communities whose viewpoints, may offer greater

authenticity, and validity. Those views may pass the test for both responsible elevation of headlines and meeting newsworthiness.

Examples of better headlining: For the same issue above, a few publications were more careful and mitigated the epistemic harm that emerges from such a claim (in being run as is), by adding context from reality into it. Two examples below are from *USA Today* and *The Guardian*.



Screenshot from Google News showing media outlets and headlines. Photo by Subbu Vincent.

Idea for a best practice: Look at the discourse the reporters have documented in the exchange of views, facts, and statistics in the story itself. Consider the views of people and communities who have less power than official actors. There will likely be newsworthy views, accurate readings of statistics, glimpses of democratic agency, and solution-seeking grounded in reality that meet the tests of validity and authenticity. Those might become candidates for elevation or synthesis into a headline.

3. Seeing Headlines Through Eyes of Stakeholders

Does the headline simply restate a he-said-she-said spat between policy and partisan elites? Such headlines, especially on complex issues, are not expanding the power of vulnerable and solution-seeking communities to impact discourse.

Risks: “Politics as usual” headlines are easy to frame because they run on ongoing controversies and ongoing *controversialization* of non-controversies. By non-controversies we mean undisputed facts, due process of law, etc. With “he-said-she-said” type spats in the headline, unimpacted or relatively insulated partisans may feel affirmed, but the opportunity to center and highlight democratic agency through the voices of groups seeking fair, proportionate and just remedies gets missed. Those voices are often downstream of elite political power. Comprehension (through discourse) and possibilities for solidarity building suffer.

Mitigation: Serious issues being reported almost always have diverse stakeholders who occupy a range of vantage points from where action and speech are launched: Government decision makers, law enforcement personnel, regulators, impacted communities on the ground, non-profit organizations, retired officials, technical experts studying the issue, official record keepers or statisticians, conveners, trainers, and so forth.

Take any complicated issue of our time: immigration, wages and jobs, housing, zoning, prices, poverty, public safety, disaster relief, taxation policy, health care, water quality, food safety, public health, environmental health, veterans affairs, etc. Accurate stories and narratives emerge regularly when reporters source diverse voices by identifying a broad range of stakeholders, identifying which groups and people have had the least amount of power in getting their voices heard and plan that into the reporting. These stories actually make it easier to decide on a headline.

Reporters could ask the editor to center on the views or claims of the impacted groups who have explained what is going wrong or right, why and how the situation might be remedied or solutions expanded. Scanning voices, twists and turns in the story along an imaginary power line (official authorities and top C-suite execs are on one side and everyday people on the other), headline framers will be able to elevate voices of sourced-in stakeholders, already in the story, that are least powerful but most impacted.

Examples

1. **A great headline on stakeholders:** In a story about DOGE firings at the National Park Service, *North Dakota Monitor's* editors framed the headline around what knowledgeable people and stakeholders (retired park officers with years of service) were explaining: the likely real impact and costs of the firings: "that staff reductions and seasonal hiring chaos could affect visitors and imperil natural resources."
[Former Yellowstone, Rushmore, Badlands superintendents say DOGE wiped out a generation of leaders](#)
2. See this story: [Elon Musk wants to 'delete' a federal agency designed to prevent another financial crisis and protect people from scams.](#)

Here the central actor's intention posted on X, is being reported on in the story, but *Business Insider's* reporters also explained what the stakes are here for the CFPB, and who has benefited from the watchdog. That reporting allows the headline to both show what Musk wants to do, *and* how the agency benefits vulnerable people.

3. **Caveat:** On the other hand, this principle will simply fail to catalyze your creativity for headlining if the story itself is a he-said-she-said spat, and does not include voices of the impacted or stakeholders. In this example—[Australia rejects Elon Musk's claim that it plans to control access to the internet](#)—Elon Musk makes a grand claim that Australia plans to control access to the Internet for its citizens, and three Australian officials countered that with their own accusations of Musk. But the real stakeholders were children and their access to social media, and parents. Because the story didn't complicate the narrative with their voices, the claim-counter-claim headline ends up “representing” the story.

Implementation: A Checklist for Ethical Leverage to Your News Headlining

Headlining is a culturally complicated and normatively demanding task where teams get better with a system to practice with over time. Starting with a checklist will give you a sense of where to go from there.

Checklist A: Organization level, for policy

1. Listen to your audiences' headline complaints: Not every newsroom has or can afford to have a public editor like NPR or PBS to pay attention to what your public stakeholders are saying. With fairly sophisticated LLM tools today, your engagement leads can collect all the feedback emails and reader comments into one bucket and prompt an LLM to find the headline complaints only in them, and categorize them with citations going to actual complaints. As a quick dipstick exercise, this will help show what your own audience has said and is saying to you. Remember that readers may not use formally normative language such as “representative integrity” or “Seeing through stakeholders' eyes,” etc. Examine which of the principles above align best with what the readers are complaining about, and use them to revise the headline review process in your teams.

2. Transparency: Review your current headlining approach and draft into an explanatory page on, “How we headline the stories you read,” and post it on your policy/about-us pages, with an embedded form for feedback/complaints on your headlines.

3. Close the loop: Once you put a form on a page that explains your approach to headlining, monitor your audience's feedback for submissions, weekly or biweekly.

Checklist B: Story level, for everyday workflows

You are an editor and have final responsibility for the headline that goes out. You have a completed story draft on your screen, with a proposed headline. You are tempted to tweak it. Here's a checklist:

1. Does the headline contradict or set up false expectations for the broad findings in the story?

- ⇒ Yes, drop it.
- ⇒ No, keep it on your shortlist.

2. When the proposed headline has a quote or claim from a source:

- a. Is the content a false claim that has already been debunked before or has been debunked in the reporters' story draft itself?
 - ⇒ If yes, drop the headline.
- b. Is there an utterance along with, or in the claim, that appears to be a figleaf?
 - ⇒ If yes, review it carefully against the guidance in section 2 of this guide.
 - ⇒ If it is a figleaf, drop the headline.

Remember some false claims are *lies*, referring to intent to spread. The same standard applies. Lies are intentional because the false claim has been debunked already and the speaker has a track record of uttering it again and again and knows they are lies.

In all these cases, nothing prevents the author from reporting on the false or misleading claims or lies using a truth-sandwich in the story itself. This is different from elevating it to the headline.

3. Does the headline center the most powerful actors in the story, or the least?

See how the reporter has accounted for coverage of downstream impacts and stakeholder diversity. There are often signals of sourcing stakeholdership in the reporting.

⇒ You can use their viewpoints or claims (when found to be valid and authentic) to draft your headline.

4. Reporters' buy in.

⇒ Send your draft headlines to the reporter(s). Get their inputs. The goal needs to be to trim down your list of headline choices from, say, three or four or five to just a few, but ethically valid ones.

5. Get inputs from distribution specialists:

As noted earlier, editors and analytics professionals worry that people will not open or click on a story simply because the headline did not land.

⇒ Send your final headlines shortlist to your SEO folks (could be web-producers), newsletter writers, and social media editors. This is where trending keywords, hashtags, etc. come in. Each of these distribution stakeholders are trying to get the story to a wider audience, and are going to want to bring their own agency into headlining too.

SEO, for instance, is important because for an ongoing news cycle, it does drive traffic. Real people in your audience are searching using keywords and framings. That does not mean, however, the principles have to be necessarily compromised. Understanding the story's diversity of stakeholder voices and narrative will help find intersections between inputs from distribution-side people and the ethics principles outlined above.

Additional Resources

These additional articles and guides get into the broader universe of examples that offer opportunities for better headlining.

1. *Resolve Philly's* YouTube video: [Crafting sharp & responsible headlines for your political stories](#) in the context of Election 2024 for additional tips.
2. *Full Fact*: [The media must stop using misleading headlines](#).

Feedback

[Use this form to send us your feedback about the Ethical News Headlining checklist.](#)

Acknowledgments

The examples and ideas in this module were originally discussed at the Markkula Center's [Journalism and Media Ethics Council](#).