In the age of post-truth, media studies find themselves trapped between the desire to restore journalism's authority as a veristic (truth-seeking) institution and the lack of a coherent, applicable and consensual theory of truth. In order to develop such a theory of truth, this study bases itself on a detailed picture of how a sample of mainstream Israeli journalists covered 20 cases of factual controversies, drawing on journalists’ own accounts of their work, an independent analysis of documents they relied on, as well as their published output. Findings show that during actual situations of coverage journalists’ operative conceptions of truth match, at a minimum, the theories of coherence, correspondence and pragmatism. I argue that a novel adaptationist theory of truth may not only provide an adequate description of journalists’ actual pursuit of truth, but also contribute to their reflexivity vis-à-vis the inevitable context-dependence of their own veristic criteria.

Keywords: Truth, Facts, Journalism, Philosophy, Evidence

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Introduction

The age of post-truth, post-factual politics, fake news and alternative facts is upon us (Ettema, 1987; Godler & Reich, 2017; Keyes, 2004). The possibilities for a deliberative public discourse have never looked bleaker, but the ethos of journalism as a “discipline of verification” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) continues to exist. When asked, journalists will still often declaratively commit themselves to one or another version of truth-based, or at the very least truth-driven, reporting. But they will stumble if asked to elaborate on what they mean by “truth.”

But why should we even care about journalists’ ability to answer questions regarding their understanding of such concepts as truth and facts? In situations when journalists are flooded with falsehoods and manipulations they often intuit that something in their fact-finding process is going awry. But because of the intensity
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of their work and its attendant time-constraints (Reich & Godler, 2014), journalists often cannot spare the time to reflect on the bases of their intuitions (Tuchman, 1972). And since journalists cannot find the time to reflect on the bases of their intuitions, interested parties leap on their hesitant responses (in response to public doubts and criticism vis-à-vis journalism), so as to claim that journalists are making unjustified inferences or are producing “fake news.”

It is almost redundant to mention U.S. President Donald Trump in this regard. He has repeatedly accused the most respected news outlets of falsifying and exaggerating stories which have a bearing on his public image (Rutenberg, 2018). However, Trump is not the only world leader voicing such accusations against the media. As it happens, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who is closely associated with Trump, has done the same with respect to the Israeli mainstream media, routinely accusing them of bias and falsification against himself and his policies (Heller, 2019).

Although, upon reflection, the charges are often spurious, they do enjoy a significant public resonance. For instance, according to a CBS News Poll, 91% of Trump supporters reported trusting the president to provide them with accurate information, whereas only 11% said the same about the mainstream media (Salvanto, De Pinto, Khanna & Backus, 2018). Arguably, the public may find it difficult to make sense of how journalists arrived at many of their factual conclusions.

The empirical aim of this article is to rip-open the black box of journalistic fact-finding, so as to articulate for both the journalists themselves and the wider public, what the journalistic practical conception of truth actually is. Beyond this analytical task, however, I consider how this previously unarticulated conception might help sustain journalism as a truth-seeking enterprise in the age of post-truth.

The article begins with the conceptions of truth which the media studies literature has attributed to the practice of journalism. It then proceeds to introduce a series of philosophical theories of truth, which parallel (and constitute expanded treatments of) the conceptions of truth offered in media studies. Then, the article moves on to present excerpts of qualitative data from an exploratory study of journalistic fact-finding in the context of factual controversies in Israeli journalism. Once an empirical basis for the discussion is established, the article applies the philosophical theories of truth to actual journalistic fact-finding in the hope of finding or constructing an applicable theory of truth for journalism. In conclusion, the article suggests that such a theory of truth is necessary if we are to get past the age of post-truth, and enter the age of post-post-truth—a hypothetical age in which all justified skepticism about truth in journalism has been incorporated into an expanded notion of truth for which such skepticism is not lethal.

Media scholarship and theories of truth

Media scholarship has long been averse to the concept of “truth.” Acknowledging this, Zelizer (2004) has dubbed truth a God-term. Nonetheless, the extant literature has combined an irony about truth and facts—terms which have mostly appeared in
scare quotes in the literature (e.g., Ericson, 1998; Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1972; for a critical view see Wright, 2011; for exceptions see Gauthier, 2005; Muñoz-Torres, 2012)—with the tendency to borrow select ideas from philosophical literature which was concerned with truth and knowledge. To give a few prominent examples, Maras (2013), Graves (2016) and Ettema and Glasser (1998), directly engaged with a number of philosophical theories, and the latter two even applied them to detailed empirical case studies of fact-finding practices (Graves vis-à-vis fact-checkers and Ettema and Glasser vis-à-vis investigative reporters).

A major scholarly prism through which media scholars have tackled, with varying levels of directness, the subject of truth, has been the discussion around the challenges of journalistic objectivity. Before moving on, it is important both to acknowledge this discussion and to explain why I do not pursue it further. Different authors have questioned the notions of objectivity which prevailed in journalism, whereas one prominent scholarly voice went so far as to argue that media research itself has diverted its own scholarly pike from important questions (including the question of truth) by excessively focusing on the notion objectivity (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Less typically, some defenses of non-traditional versions of objectivity have been mounted, such as the notion of objectivity as a transparency vis-à-vis one’s biases (Durham, 1998) and objectivity as a measure of how thoroughly news reports address themselves to readers’ possible doubts by providing evidential cues (Martine & De Maeyer, 2018). Interestingly, though, both the defenses and the critiques of the notion of journalistic objectivity tended to converge on understanding objectivity as essentially the separation of values from facts. While I do think this is a fair understanding of one element of objectivity, the implication that this separation is exhaustive of objectivity appears quite problematic. Indeed, a long-standing philosophical conception of objectivity posits that existing things cannot be wished away. This category of things encompasses both the extra-mental realm and deep mental structures (e.g., gravity in the realm of the extra-mental à la Bhaskar (2013), and the cognitive impossibility of imagining things out of space or outside of the passage of time, à la Kant’s (1998) commentary on the substructure of human cognition). Thus, I adopt here the position of Gauthier (1993), who argued long ago that objectivity is being criticized without being systematically defined, and I supplement it by contending that objectivity’s meaning must also be widely agreed upon across media scholarship, for any responsible discussion of this concept to be meaningful. In the absence of such agreement, the danger that readers will ascribe to this concept their own meanings threatens to undermine scholarly communication.

Despite important insights in the existing media studies literature dealing with truth, it is still rare to find scholarship on how philosophical theories of truth account for the broader category of straight news reporters’ practical conceptions of truth (cf. Godler & Reich, 2013). Still, one can elicit some apercus from extant work:

Agreed upon truth

One prominent view in the media studies literature—which has acquired a dominant position in the field—is that truth is merely a form of solid social consensus
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If society happens to agree that some belief is true—e.g., that the Soviet Union during most of the Cold War had expansionist foreign policy designs—then journalists can readily draw on this belief without the need for any additional proof or evidence.

Protean truth

Influenced by William James’s pragmatism, more on which below, some media scholars and ethicists have adopted the view that truth is not something that is obtained but rather a certain style of pursuing knowledge, which always takes all claims, concepts and conclusions to be tentative not only in principle, but also in practice, by seizing on every practical opportunity at revising the details and results of one’s investigative efforts (Ettema & Glasser, 1998; Graves 2016; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Maras 2013; Ward, 2009).

Hidden truth

The idea that because of the layered nature of reality, it is never possible to see truth in its pristine form (Bhaskar, 2013; Lau, 2004; Wright, 2011). Proponents of this idea argue that in journalism practice, in addition to the layered nature of reality, there is also the conditioning of organizational routines, which give preference to some story emphases over others (e.g., major cataclysms at the expense of slow processes; effects at the expense of causes; horse races and personalities at the expense of substance) (Allan, 2010; Bennett, 2016; Carey, 1986; Manning, 2000). Yet, on this view, the attempt to capture some layers of reality, no matter how selective, is nonetheless a reasonable way of approximating the truth.

Although the above views are not exhaustive of the media studies oeuvre, they are representative of media scholarship at least since the 1970s and onwards. Until that time, the only substantive view which the above paragraphs omit is the view that there is a truth to be captured which the news, for various reasons, had often failed at capturing (Lang & Lang, 1953; Lippmann, 1922, 2004; Park, 1940; White, 1950). This view was left virtually without proponents in the post-1970s intellectual climate and turned into a lightening-rod, almost never to be regarded again as a serious scholarly position within media studies. While described in capsule form, and suffering from a caricature-like appearance, I argue that the above conceptions of truth are supportable by a close reading of the scholarly literature in the field of media studies. However, outside of media studies there are somewhat more explicit conceptions of truth. To provide a more inclusive (albeit not exhaustive) picture of theories of truth, I now turn to philosophy.

Although the philosophical literature discusses various theories of truth, I will draw here only on philosophical theories of truth which, on the one hand, enjoy a rich philosophical pedigree, and on the other, can be empirically operationalized and discerned as part of actual fact-finding practices. But I will necessarily present stylized and possibly oversimplified descriptions of these theories. The idea is not so much to achieve philosophical precision, as it is to make available shorthand understandings which can be used by non-philosophers in the analysis of fact-finding practices in journalism.
Correspondence

According to this theory, a belief is true if, and only if, it corresponds to reality (Haack, 1987; Burgess & Burgess, 2011; Lemos, 2007; within media studies it was discussed, inter alia, by Maras, 2013). However, problems immediately arise when one tries to make sense of what it means for a belief to correspond to reality. The problem is partly ameliorated when reality is taken to mean the “extra-mental world.” But the matter of correspondence remains quite obscure. Indeed, it is not as if the human mind produces a miniature version of the goings-on outside of it, or as if physical threads are drawn between objects, on the one end, and human senses or the mind/brain on the other (although some Neo-Scholastic notions have come rather close to the latter view, for a discussion of such positions see Chomsky, 2013). But if it is granted that the mental world has some way of representing extra-mental reality, then a mental representation or a belief is true when it correctly represents what’s outside of the mind. Presumably, journalists harboring a “correspondence” conception of truth will treat some information as indicative of something existing extra-mentally, no matter how hard one tries to wish it away.

Pragmatism

A theory whose most simplistic formulation is that a belief is true if and only if it is useful in practice (Burgess & Burgess, 2011; James, 2005[1907]; Lemos, 2007; in media studies, Ward 2009 has, inter alia, discussed pragmatism in the context of journalism practice). This naturally has a counterintuitive ring to it, as there are apparently countless cases in which it may be useful to believe in a falsehood or in which a truth—or at least knowing it—happens to be more harmful than useful (e.g., consider the usefulness of finding out that with a high degree of medical certainty you have only two months to live). However, it is arguably the case that the intended meaning of the above formulation is that the context to which it is meant to apply is the context of individuals and groups authentically seeking to uncover reality (most prominently science, but also possibly history, journalism and the like). For the sake of brevity, I dub the context to which the above formulation is meant to apply as a truth-seeking context. In that context, concepts and methods will be deemed as leading to the truth if they open up fruitful avenues for further research or possible verification (James, 1907 2005), even if ultimately they may lead the truth-seekers astray. In James’s telling exposition of the pragmatist notion of truth: “so sure that verification is possible that we omit it, and are usually justified by all that happens” (James, 1907 2005, p. 29). As already noted, the above “protean truth” conception in media studies largely drew on pragmatist ideas, in particular those of William James. One surmises that journalists possessing a pragmatist conception of truth, would seek to identify promising avenues for verification (e.g., documents, data or detail-rich sources more generally), while avoiding verification in practice (e.g., avoiding the independent scrutiny of a detailed report).

Coherentism

This view posits that a belief is true if and only if it coheres with other beliefs (Lehrer, 1986,1988; Lehrer & Cohen, 1983; within media studies Ettema &
Glasser, 1998 have discussed the relevance of this theory. While apparently far-reaching, this view reiterates a long-standing—and not particularly controversial—philosophical recognition that nothing beyond one’s immediate experiences can be known with certainty or ever proven (acknowledged even at the realist end of the philosophical debate, see Boghossian, 2007; Russell, 2001; Sokal, 2008). Thus, according to some philosophers, the only solid criterion one has for gaining or losing confidence in newly formed beliefs, are preexisting beliefs which either jibe with inchoate beliefs (that is, with beliefs which are currently in the process of formation) or contradict them (Lehrer, 1986, 1988; Lehrer & Cohen, 1983). However, on this view, a belief can obtain the property of truth even if there is nothing outside of the mental world. Possibly, journalists holding a coherentist view would ascribe veracity to propositions which are consistent with their existing beliefs, thus viewing their own belief systems as self-contained and self-referential. Contrariwise, these journalists would regard as unreliable claims which are inconsistent with their existing beliefs.

Do any of these conceptions of and understandings about truth, either general philosophical or media-oriented, describe some facets or the whole of journalistic fact-finding? This question is explored empirically in what follows.

Methodology

As noted, the study aims to elicit journalists’ conceptions of truth, insofar as these reveal themselves in actual instances of reporters trying to settle factual questions, and factual controversies in particular. For this reason, the central method employed in this study was a semi-structured in-depth interview with news reporters from the major Israeli print media, centered around specific factual controversies ($n=20$), across political, economic, and science and health-related beats.

To understand the process of journalistic fact-finding in terms of the factual controversies they faced, I also examined publicly available documentation ($n=35$) which the reporters used in the process of adjudicating the factual controversy (e.g., data sheets, official reports and other documents), enabling, among other things, detection of errors, misunderstandings and misrepresentations. The insights from this juxtaposition are incorporated into the analysis of the findings.

The interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive sampling and availability sampling covering two established Israeli national dailies (Yedioth Ahronoth and Haaretz), with the aim of providing a picture which reflected, as much as possible, normal journalistic practices in the face of factual controversies, ranging from tabloid (Yedioth) to broadsheet (Haaretz). Haaretz was overrepresented (14 reporters, as compared to six from Yedioth Ahronoth), in the initial hope that its broadsheet format would yield more thoughtful instances of fact-finding and a greater incidence of knowledge-related concerns (as opposed to the tabloid commitment to titillating the audience) (Entman, 2005), although eventually such distinctions could not be conclusively established.
I purposively sampled reporters who were known to engage routinely in the adjudication of factual controversies. A period of roughly two months preceding each interview was devoted to monitoring reporters’ work, including a day-to-day reading of their most recent items.

Meanwhile, availability sampling involved the decision to approach those reporters who could be reached after several attempts and in a reasonable length of time, as well as those who were willing to be interviewed. When this was not the case, the non-responding reporter was replaced by another who had also dealt with factual controversies (in all, four of the reporters sought after could not be reached and were replaced in this manner). Most interviews with reporters were carried out face-to-face over approximately three years (2014–2016) in the vicinities of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, where most reporters live and work, excepting five which were carried out over the phone due to problems of scheduling (in two cases the initial interviews were followed up: one reporter recalled another case he had wanted to share and another was approached in order to expand on a controversy he or she had mentioned in passing). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours depending on the details of the factual controversies. As interviewees were promised anonymity, their identities have been obscured in recounting the findings, including by hiding some aspects of the topics covered in their articles and by using intentionally incorrect gender pronouns to refer to specific reporters’ work.

The research design was constructed in such a way as to allow interviewees to talk about at least three factual controversies entirely of their own choosing after satisfying the condition that at least one controversy would deal with a research document or a study. It should be clarified that, beyond the said condition, the author had no control over the interviewees’ choices. The condition that some news reports must rely on studies or data was set for one main reason: it enabled the occasional assessment of journalistic navigation within factual controversies involving an element of elevated expertise in specific subject matter, which would pose a challenge to journalists without formal training in this field (Albaek, 2011; Collins & Evans, 2007). Nonetheless, reporters’ selection of cases posed a threat of self-serving and unrepresentative cases.

In order to offset the potential self-serving bias, the details of the cases (as recounted by reporters) were tested for consistency between word (i.e., interview data) and deed (i.e., news items) (a familiar strategy within studies of journalism, see Mellado & van Dalen, 2014), and against the available source materials—i.e., the studies and research documents. This guarded against inaccuracies in reporters’ rendering of the studies’ contents. Moreover, the reporters’ entire reasoning process was critically assessed. As will be exemplified below, inferential shortcuts and what I believe to be conceptual errors were occasionally discerned. Meanwhile, in order to mitigate selection bias originating in the reporters’ choice, only one factual controversy per reporter was randomly sampled, in three cases resulting in duplication (i.e., different reporters working on the same controversy).

The decision to focus on print journalism is based on the absence of the inherent pressures and deadlines of broadcasting (Reich & Godler, 2014), as well as on its
greater selection of news beats. Both of these factors allow for more reflective coverage and for greater potential expertise (Reich, 2012), as compared to broadcast media. Indeed, as Reich (2009) pointed out in justifying his focus on the printed press rather than on broadcast media as part of reconstruction interviews: “[T]he printed press tends to be a more comprehensive and systematic news operation” (p.3).

In what follows I restrict myself to cases which are representative of the sample, and which allow me to illustrate journalists’ conceptions of truth. However, the interview data was systematically analyzed so as to determine what journalists knew or thought they knew about the factual controversies at the outset, what kind of verification strategy was employed, if any, and how source reliability was determined. Thus, the findings used as an illustration are representative of the sampled factual controversies.

Findings

The analysis of how reporters went about settling 20 factual controversies points to the repeated recourse to three of the above theories of truth: correspondence, coherentism and pragmatism. Virtually in all cases analyzed, these theories of truth account for reporters’ fact-finding.

A vacillation between correspondence and coherence

The journalists working on the sampled factual controversies did not ignore evidence simply because it contradicted their preexisting beliefs despite many such claims in the literature (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2004; Hallin, 1994; Patterson, 2013; Tuchman, 1972). However, they accorded evidence differential treatment as a function of their already existing beliefs. This should already indicate the coherentist logic behind reporters’ treatment of information—consistency or coherence of inchoate beliefs with prior beliefs seems to be determinative with respect to reporters’ reliability judgments toward incoming information. However, prior beliefs were not viewed merely as self-contained or self-referential systems. Thus, for instance, evidence which was consistent with prior beliefs led the reporters to judge it as indicative of the state of affairs it pointed to. In other words, when considering evidence which was found consistent with their pre-existing beliefs, reporters assumed the correspondence between the beliefs newly formed (on the basis of this evidence) and the world. In contrast, evidence which contradicted reporters’ prior beliefs, was regarded as evidence which must be reconciled with existing beliefs or explained away. Once again, then, an interaction of coherentist and correspondence logics shows up: reconciling new beliefs with older beliefs may be self-referential, but explaining away a belief calls for a rational process whereby one does not allow oneself to simply wish away information or evidence which raises suspicions or complicates the picture. This mental or cognitive tenacity of what reporters saw as even the most specious bits of information, effectively amounts to an assumption, on the reporters’ part, of the existence of a relatively stable extra-mental reality of which one can conceive in one’s thoughts. Hence, correspondence.

To demonstrate these claims in detail, I draw on the case of a reporter who covered a factual controversy regarding the number of Palestinians residing in the West
Bank. This reporter faced a factual claim by a right-wing group, to the effect that the population size in this area was smaller by one million (i.e., 1.6 million) than commonly believed (i.e., 2.6 million, at the time this news item was published). It was clear from the outset that this reporter believed that 2.6 million Palestinians (rather than 1.6 million) reside in the West Bank. In this, the reporter echoed the mainstream scholarly and official demographic data. Thus, when he initially learned about the factual claim that there were only 1.6 million Palestinians in the West Bank, and more importantly, when he read the study detailing the basis for this conclusion, he sought to find an explanation for the data, whether such an explanation would successfully explain away the surprising claim or make it reconcile with the mainstream figure. Thus, the reporter chose not to accept a belief on the grounds that it contradicted his existing beliefs, showcasing a coherentist conception of truth. Later, however, in the process of newsgathering, the reporter read through additional conventional studies on the topic, studies positing the 2.6 million figure. Having gone through these studies, the reporter “regained confidence” in what he believed to be the case and viewed the information as “indicative” of the demographic realities in the West Bank (Personal Communication, November 4, 2015), hence as straightforwardly corresponding to the demographic realities of the West Bank.

Just as the reporter covering the factual controversy surrounding the number of Palestinians in the West Bank had a prior belief that the consensus data were reliable, so the reporter covering a factual controversy surrounding the number of Palestinian casualties in Gaza during the military operation Protective Edge (in the summer of 2014) possessed a prior belief that Human Rights and UN casualty figures were unreliable. This reporter's preexisting belief served as the backdrop for his evaluation of incoming claims—forwarded by some Government Organized non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs)—to the effect that Human Rights and UN figures were unreliable, since recruitment age males were overrepresented among the casualties. If the fire visited on Gaza was indiscriminate (as the UN and human rights groups had at times claimed), the reporter reasoned that recruitment-age males' proportion among the casualties should not have exceeded their proportion in the overall Gaza population. The reporter expressed “a generally suspicious attitude” toward figures originating in UN officials and human rights organizations, and noted that “they are questionable, as has been demonstrated in previous rounds ( . . . )” (Personal Communication, September 16, 2014). For this reason, the reporter tended to accept claims made by GONGOs and foreign news outlets to the effect that UN and Human Rights figures were unreliable. Note, once again, that the reporter did not regard the GONGOs claims as something to be questioned after, but rather as a reliable reflection of the shady practices of those compiling UN and Human Rights casualty figures. Thus, it is clear that the reporter regarded the GONGOs claims, which he adopted as his own, as having a direct correspondence to an actual state of affairs.

As can be seen, two specific truth-conceptions, when taken together, seem to account rather well for journalists' actual choices in the process of settling factual questions: correspondence and coherence. Although formally irreconcilable, as the
former recognizes an extra-mental world and the latter remains non-committal about it, they appear to dialectically converge in practice.

A vacillation between correspondence and pragmatism

In the cases examined, conclusions were formed by reporters after the assessment of evidence, but these conclusions were regarded by reporters as tentative. At the same time, these tentative conclusions were not reviewed thoroughly by reporters after having arrived at them, even though they weren’t taken lightly either.

In this rushed assessment (or rather re-assessment), reporters look for additional information bearing on the factual controversy—beyond the evidence they have already assessed—but they do not pore over it. They do not spend time deciphering its minutiae. While it is clear that reporters seek to play their own devil’s advocates, they also try to avoid encountering the devil residing in the details. What they are concerned with, at this stage, is that the information which seems to run counter to their conclusion simply appear detailed. These considerations arguably showcase a mix of correspondence and pragmatist logic in the following sense: à la correspondence, the level of detail in the incoming information is seen by reporters as an irreducible fact about the world which they cannot wish away, while, à la pragmatism, being earnestly concerned with veracity and being so sure that the details provided by the information can lead to verification in principle, reporters forego the opportunity to actually verify. I dub reporters’ criterion for assessing such information as the criterion of internal specification. The more specified the information, the more likely it is to increase the reporters’ confidence in their conclusions.

I will illustrate this point by introducing a case which has not yet been analyzed. This case involved a reporter who covered a factual claim to the effect that the police harassed several political activists who organized a demonstration against what they perceived as the misallocation of public resources (in favor of international corporate interests).

Although this particular reporter did not dismiss the possibility of police harassment out of hand, he was more concerned with activists making frivolous accusations. He believed that “activists may sometimes exaggerate” (Personal Communication, April 6, 2015). Thus, the initial claim of police harassment was met with the reporter’s skepticism.

It turned out that testimonies collected from other activists corroborated the initial claim. As the reporter put it, “(...) what added to their credibility was the fact that they were independently collected” (Personal Communication, April 6, 2015). Specifically, the testimonies converged on one crucial point—that activists who were ‘absent from the demonstrations were [nonetheless] summoned to interrogations’ (Personal Communication, April 6, 2015). Thus, the reporter reached the tentative conclusion that the police had been overzealous in its application of various forms of intimidation and repressive measures. By implication, the reporter also hinted that the police collaborated with narrow corporate interests.

Still, the reporter thought that accusing the police of siding, in effect, with corporate interests was highly risky, and so, as protocol demands, the police spokesper-
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The police reaction, however, appeared to the reporter as “boilerplate” (Personal Communication, April 6, 2015) and rather “brief and automatic” (Personal Communication, April 6, 2015). It did not strike the reporter as a response which required a great deal of thought or sophistication. The reporter thought that the police reaction was merely an assertion which contested the statements of the witnesses, rather than a “well-argued” or “thoughtful” response (Personal Communication, April 6, 2015). Hence, the reporter viewed the police spokesperson’s claim as unreliable and incapable of undermining the corroborated testimonies. Note that in this case, the reporter had no control over the fact that the police provided him with a terse piece of information, lacking in any significant detail. In spite of the reporter’s inclination to suspect exaggeration on the part of activists, he felt nonetheless compelled to reject his tentative conclusion by the lack of detail in the police response. This lack of detail, as noted, was seen by the reporter as a tenacious fact about the world that he could not get rid of, despite his intuitions about activists’ alleged exaggeration. Thus, one can say that the reporter assumed that his conclusions (and consequently the story he produced) corresponded to the extra-mental reality he could not wish away, in this case, the terseness of the police response.

While in the case of suspected police harassment the reporter’s dismissal of a terse police reaction may seem reasonable, this does not make his heuristic of looking at the information’s level of detail universally sound. Recall the reporter covering the claim about the alleged overrepresentation of civilian casualties in the wake of the military operation in Gaza. This reporter was dissatisfied with the fact that UN and Human Rights Organizations data did not initially contain a breakdown according to gender and age group, which could attest to whether recruitment age males were overrepresented among the casualties. Thus, the data provided by these organizations at the end of his information gathering effort seemed to the reporter as “less sensitive to details (…) less informative” (Personal Communication, September 16, 2014) than data originating from GONGOs claiming overrepresentation of recruitment age males among the casualties. However, although the GONGOs claiming overrepresentation did provide such a breakdown, the non-random nature of much of the fire visited on Gaza rendered these data meaningless. In other words, having more recruitment age males among the casualties than their proportion within the overall Gaza population would arguably suggest that they may be overwhelmingly combatants only if the fire visited on Gaza was entirely indiscriminate. But since, crucially, the fire was not entirely indiscriminate, the data (albeit containing gender and age breakdowns) did not carry the implications that the reporter thought. Notwithstanding, it is clear that the reporter did not wish into existence the fact that the initial UN and Human Rights information about casualties was not detailed and that the GONGO data was. These were, once again, irreducible facts about the world at the time. And these were facts which the reporter sought to convey in his conclusions and story. Thus, the reporter was, at least in part, driven to his conclusion about the unreliability of UN and Human Rights casualty figures and the reliability of GONGO claim by solid facts he could not wish away. Simply put, the reporter’s beliefs about the world were, at least in his
mind, in a state of correspondence with the actual facts of the world. The fact that the reporter’s inference was faulty does not undermine the analytical insight that his conception of truth was one of correspondence. Nonetheless, this faulty inference simultaneously demonstrates that the reporter used as his sole criterion of reliability the level of detail in the information, and did not take even the most elementary steps to verify it directly, by, for instance, noticing that no one has claimed that all of the fire visited on Gaza was indiscriminate. In this latter sense, the reporter embodied the pragmatist notion that earnest truth-seekers can sometimes be so sure of verification that they omit it.

While the foregoing case contained instances of the same reporter reacting to both detailed and non-detailed information, other cases exemplify more neatly how reporters reacted solely to detailed information. In line with the above pattern, when reporters contacted sources who provided detailed data, these reporters tended to find the data reliable. For instance, a reporter encountered the surprising claim, by a deputy minister, that the Israeli education budget was larger than the defense budget. After cross-verifying the deputy minister’s claim against budgetary data and tentatively concluding that the claim was misleading, the reporter turned to another source of data—the Accountant General at the Ministry of Finance. Looking over the latter’s data sheets, the reporter noticed a wealth of data regarding various categories of pension recipients, including statistical data and annual breakdowns. Although some of this data was quoted in the news report, the reporter did not attempt to parse it or to engage with it critically, but focused on its bottom line. The bottom line was, once again, that the deputy minister’s claim was misleading: “this richness of data and their relatively high level of specification” enabled the reporter, as he put it, “to arrive at the judgment that these data were indeed authoritative enough to have a bearing on the issue” (Personal Communication, March 30, 2015). As can be expected by now, once the reporter was faced with the undeniable fact that the accountant general’s information was highly detailed, he merely looked at the bottom line without independently or critically engaging with the reasoning behind the data. Once again, this combination of cognitive and practical responses suggests the reporter acted on a correspondence conception of truth when determining that the information was detailed, and on a pragmatist conception of truth when, despite his concern for veracity, he omitted scrutinizing it himself.

Discussion
Whereas the above cases do not reveal an exclusive theory of truth to which journalists adhere, they lend themselves to the view that journalists are veristic opportunists, that is, maximizers of truth-seeking opportunities across several rather distinct understandings of truth. If they are unable to capture truth in one sense (e.g., by conclusively verifying information), they will not hesitate to capture truth in a somewhat different sense (e.g., by checking information’s compatibility with existing beliefs). In practice, if not in their ideals, journalists acknowledge that there is more
than one way of engaging in truth-seeking, although the spectrum of ways is also tightly circumscribed.

Thus, for example, journalists regard information which coheres with their beliefs as reality tout court, that is, as information which, once accepted as a belief, corresponds to a reality out there. Analogously, the journalists in the sample regard detailed information bearing on their conclusions as indicative of reality, even though they do not delve into its details or verify them exhaustively. In a sense, then, both the reliance on prior beliefs and on the information's level of specification, alongside the assumption of an existence of an external world, are the building blocks of the journalistic truth conception.

Although there is no reason to believe journalists are aware of their oscillating conceptions of truth, there is equally no reason to doubt that they have a conscious intention of getting to the truth, no matter the obstacles in their way. In this sense, they are purposive truth-seekers.

Journalists purposiveness as truth-seekers in the cases studied was apparent in that they did not pretend to have verified information when they actually haven't. Neither in the case of their strongly held preexisting beliefs, nor in the case of the specification criterion by which they revisit their conclusions. This suggests they know they haven't arrived at the highest possible level of confidence. Their experience taught them how to live in a world of incomplete factual determinations. In other words, reporters may be regarded as possessing an adaptationist theory of truth, which I define as a view according to which journalism has more than one veristic (or truth-driven) criterion. Journalists creatively maneuver between more and less rigorous ideas about what it means for beliefs, information and sources to be conducive to truth. But they never lose sight of the importance of truth, even when they are compelled by circumstances and the deficits of their own understanding and attention span to provide more precarious signs of truth.

I would like now to argue that although easily misused and mishandled, such an adaptationist theory of truth is not a reckless one. Rather, it is the dialectical product of authentic truth-seeking on the part of journalists and the practical, organizational and cognitive constraints they must take into account in their daily work. It is inconceivable that journalists will be able to produce the same volume of fact-based news items if they treat every document and every piece of information as a doctoral dissertation (Ericson, 1998; Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1972). Such a choice would arguably lead to journalists not being able to complete even a single news item, as it is hardly in doubt that even a single news item in today's world spans many areas of knowledge and expertise which cannot be realistically transferable in anything remotely approximating the degree required for exhaustive verification. However, it would be equally irresponsible if journalists did not develop some rigid and relatively systematic criteria for assessing reliability. Even if the assessment is far from perfect. This is where reliance on preexisting beliefs and on the criterion of specification come in.
The foregoing argument can be employed in the public debates taking shape in the context of the age of post-truth and post-factual politics. It is a unique merit of the journalistic approach to the truth—which I have named an adaptationist theory of truth—that it can easily translate into intuitions which the public shares in everyday life when signing contracts or visiting the doctor's office. In everyday life, news audiences also commonly rely on evidence which they themselves do not possess, but which is justifiably believed to be possessed by various sources of information, be it quality media known for their accuracy (Entman, 2005), doctors, scientists, colleagues (Collins & Evans, 2007; Hardwig, 1991), measuring instruments (Goldberg, 2012; Knorr-Cetina, 1999), or even passers-by consulted for directions (Keren, 2012). Members of the general public do not go out of their way to read all of the fine print when signing bank forms or to ascertain that their doctor is not an impostor. Rather, they assume that if these scenarios were likely, then some additional signs of their verisimilitude would become available. However, when such signs become available, the public becomes much more rigorous and cautious in its reliance.

To my mind, this response is appropriate in the face of a public climate overtaken by post-truth motifs. It can be demonstrated that the public itself cannot give an exhaustive justification for cases in which it alternates between more and less rigorous verification strategies. But on a moment's reflection such a justification can be given in response to the accusations hurled at journalists, as anyone would undoubtedly understand that rigorous verification in every instance comes at the cost of not obtaining knowledge across instances. For these reasons, raising journalistic and public awareness to the philosophical defensibility of multiple coexisting theories of truth, may help us transition into an age of “post-post truth,” in which all doubts about truth have been incorporated into a more robust and flexible notion of how truth-claims can be certified, both in journalistic fact-finding and elsewhere.

However, this is not to say that all of the theories of truth in the journalistic toolkit are equally conducive to the truth. They are not. Although so far I have merely implied this, it is my normative view that exhaustive verification, commensurable with the correspondence theory of truth, is preferable to conjectures about the specification-reliability equivalence. Similarly, exhaustive verification is preferable to a mere juxtaposition of information against preexisting beliefs. If journalists had the time and the resources to engage in exhaustive verification of every detail, I would of course welcome it. But at the moment this remains an unachievable ideal, which only allows us to evaluate journalism according to its degree of proximity to full-blown verification. Nonetheless, such an evaluation can scarcely be applied to specific news items, as most news items combine, as noted above, both more and less rigorous conceptions of truth. Thus, producing a single news item would apparently involve different instances of proximity and distance from the ideal of complete verification. At least analytically, then, a more granular approach to journalistic fact-finding remains crucial (and has been partly explored recently, e.g., Martine & De Maeyer, 2018).
In sum, I would like to raise the following question: is it possible that the present research has overlooked relevant theories of truth? As noted above, the selection of theories of truth for this literature review and analysis was based on the cumulative conditions of their susceptibility to operationalization and their centrality to contemporary analytical philosophy. Thus, I may have been too rash in dismissing Deflationism as non-operationalizable. If readers can devise ways of operationalizing this theory of truth in the context of actual fact-finding (whether journalistic or otherwise), such a move might lead to a significant revision of my conclusions. However, I am at present unaware of how such an operationalization can be devised. And beyond this issue, the theories of truth briefly surveyed above seem to be quite representative of the philosophical literature. But what if the research overlooked important instances of journalistic work?

The sampled factual controversies emerge, as noted, from three main news beats. Although other beats may contain other kinds of factual controversies or perhaps bring to bear different theories of truth or different combinations of the same theories of truth, the economic, political and science-related news beats span various levels of expertise and various types of evidence. Thus, the generalizations presented herein cut across the various beats and evidence types and therefore suggest my study has captured some fundamental features of journalistic truth-seeking challenges. This suggestion may ultimately be falsified, but that would require further empirical research along similar lines.

Finally, the question of whether the findings are representative does not end with the possibility of atypical cases of journalistic fact-finding, and extends to the cultural situatedness of the journalists being studied. Indeed, since I’m dealing exclusively with Israeli journalists, there is an undeniable chance that journalists within other news cultures will apply different standards of evidence when reporting factual controversies, or whose overall theories of truth markedly differ. Although it is conceivable that the specific topographies of values and ideologies in different countries impinge on journalistic fact-finding, there are also scholarly grounds to assume a significant degree of uniformity, both in the realm of micro-level fact-finding practices in Israel and elsewhere (Reich 2009), and at the level of general conceptions of truth among journalists across news cultures (Godler & Reich 2017). Be that as it may, the concern is empirical and should be settled in subsequent research.

Beyond comparing conceptions of truth across news cultures, future research would do well to extend the analytical attempt to elicit truth conceptions from news practices. A reanalysis or meta-analysis of existing newsroom ethnographies bearing on journalistic fact-finding—only this time from a centrally truth-oriented perspective—may be a reasonable research program for the future. Similarly, it is hoped that the above theories of truth will not be simply accepted by the scholarly community, but also challenged to see if additional theories of truth may be applicable if made precise to an extent I haven’t attempted here. Or if the theories mentioned herein can be applied to practices in ways I haven’t thought about. Be that as it
may, it seems to me useful to think of news practices as operationalizations of tacit journalistic conceptions of knowledge and truth.

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Notes

1 In the interest of responsible scholarly communication in this article, it’s worth mentioning, for the sake of clarity, what I mean when I use related concepts, such as “truth,” “fact-finding” and “validation.” In principle, I regard “truth” as a relationship between ideas and things existing independently of those ideas (be they inanimate, biological or sociological), such that the holder of the ideas can infer verifiable propositions about those existing things which, in the course of verification, turn out to confirmed. However, I bracket this conception for the sake of this article, which seeks to identify journalists’ (rather than my own) notions of truth, which may vary significantly from my conception. I regard “fact-finding” as the process by which evidence is gathered in search of truth, however it is conceived. Finally, I regard “validation” as a subcategory of fact-finding consciously aimed at testing a specific, already formed, belief, proposition or conclusion about what the truth is, in a particular context of ideas and things.

2 I leave out theories of truth which either have no conceivable empirical applicability or which have been neglected by mainstream analytical philosophy. The theory of Deflationism, for instance, which is quite popular in today’s mainstream philosophy, denies that all true statements have a common property of some sort, whereas the theory of Perspectivism posits that all knowledge is necessarily tainted by the perspectives of the knowledge-seekers. Whilst Deflationism is difficult to pin down empirically, especially among fact-finders without a philosophical penchant (such as journalists) who do not normally or intentionally look for the common property of all true statements, Perspectivism is not highly regarded among mainstream analytical philosophers.

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