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Conceptualizing Truth: A “Norma-Practical” Approach

Dr. Daniel I. Bo

Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria

Dr. Bem, B. Melladu

Lecturer, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria

Abstract:

Reporting the truth is central to mass media practice and it forms, in part, the basis for its value proposition. But, truth is often treated as a vacuous concept, or viewed, at best, as a subjective phenomenon. Nevertheless, subjecting truth to the whims of the beholder questions the validity of media messages, which are anchored on truth quality. Though, the reality of truth in other aspects of human endeavour are not as contentious as in media practice, arguably, there does not exist a universal truth that holds for all things. This paper therefore argues that in relation to media messages, truth is not only realizable it is context specific. Being context specific, it means, in effect, that truth is a measurable phenomenon. The paper is anchored on the coherence and correspondence theories and utilizes the exploratory approach of analysis. The paper concludes that since media reports are bound by time, place, event, and generally defined within a specific context, their truth identity is attainable through fulfilment of such basic criteria like: accuracy, balance, fairness, and objectivity. The paper recommends that journalists should faithfully observe established ethical norms to establish the much-sought truth, in reports they disseminate.

Keywords: Truth, media messages, basic criteria, ethical norms, “norma-practical”

1. Introduction

Journalism, like other professions lays claim to some basic tenets: to communicate truth, always. Truth is central to the tenet of journalism; it is the foundation of its value proposition, expressed in sentences, utterances or beliefs. If journalism must mirror society and events, and fulfil its role as a record of history, truth must be its distinctive feature. Thus, we all want, desire and crave a media that tells us the “truth” about issues and events. Yet, truth is an elusive reality. For instance, AMORI survey carried out in February 2000 for the British Medical Association, showed that 78 percent of British public believe that journalists do not tell the truth (Sanders, 2003). As a result, there are anxieties over the fate of truth in democratic societies (Davies, 2019). Beyond the reality of the survey, there are expressions of constant fear over injuries caused members of the public by lack of truth in media messages. Everette and Merrill (1984:152) reflect these fears: “there are good men and women who will not stand office, concerned that you (press) will find their flaws or invent them....”

This perception of lack of truth in media messages is compounded by absence of truth criteria to accord truth an identity. Viewed as a philosophical concept, truth is an abstract. It can however acquire contextual reality that is rationally justified in media messages. It cannot serve this purpose unless it functions on identifiable principles that would give it a definite form and character. Sigmund Freud provides justification for erecting journalistic practice wholly on truth: “since we demand strict truthfulness from our patients (sources), we jeopardize our whole authority if we let ourselves be caught by them in a departure from the truth” (Bok, 1980:221)

One of the key challenges is finding a definition of truth that will satisfy necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. Pardi (2015) admits, truth is surprisingly difficult to define. No matter what definition you produce, it never sets free from some cases that expose its deficiencies. The implication is that although truth is seen as a functional reality (Blackburn 2013), it cannot be pinned down. The problem is with defining its form and character. Philosophers of diverse persuasions have tried to define truth using epistemological examination and metaphysical evaluation (Pardi, 2015). These approaches have not resolved the controversy. More interesting is the fact that different disciplines of study attach varying perceptions and value to truth. For instance, the principles upon which truth is operationalized in law is different principle from the way scientists see truth. For the Postmodernists, it is satisfying to conclude that truth is result of a common consent based on established values.

The postmodernists broad assumption is to describe truth not as a relationship outside of the human mind but as a product of belief. Our inability to know reality which is outside of us suggests our beliefs must therefore function as filters that keep reality. As a result, it will be preposterous to describe knowledge or truth in terms of reality because there's nothing we can actually say about it that's meaningful. Truth then is defined by what we perceive and ultimately believe.

In this perspective, they link truth to some language games based on consensus beliefs. That is, what we make it to be (Grootuis, 2009). For a profession whose relevance is a function of achieved integrity and how it has been able to

reflect reality truthfully – what Foucault calls “truth regime” (Peters, Rider, Hyvonen and Besley, 2018), truth must be consensual.

For the media, truth, considered as a perceptually relative phenomenon bare of any criteria and form, would imply that every media report, including news may be subject to different versions of truth. In fact, as Dowling (2016) notes, what one says or does would have no meaning outside of oneself. Besides, the relativity of truth will erode media integrity. For, if truth and its elements - accuracy, balance, fairness and objectivity are not realizable, global demand and consensus that has accepted them as norms in media practice is rather contemptuous. Except truth is erected on accepted media norms and professional criteria journalists’ claim of legitimacy would be in doubt. There will be no need to make flirting truth a reference point or guide for media messages. It will also diminish the value of expectations and calls on the media to uphold the “truth”. Ultimately it will render attempts to improve the credibility of the media worthless (Itule, and Anderson, 2007: 458).

As stated earlier, definitions of truth are many. Some definitions view truth as an abstract concept (Ayodele, 1988). Such definitions that attempt to characterize truth by a definite eternal rigidity, the basis upon which media practice can be measured, are clearly not media centric. The bigger challenge is legitimising seeming impossibility of standard criteria for basic media norms like truth and its adjuncts (objectivity, balance, fairness, accuracy). It is like giving up and declaring, ‘it is up to the reader or viewer to negotiate truth (Valenza, 2016). Considering the dynamic nature of society (Ajilore, 2012), conceding to the reader the right to set parameters for what he considers as truth, raises the question whether the reader would also do so for media practitioners.

It is worth to note that being indefinable, does not according to Davidson (1996); Baldwin (1997) means decent alternatives have been exhausted and we can say nothing revealing about it. Neither does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous or untrustworthy. In fact, the concept ‘truth’ exists because it is and as Russell notes, a concept or name “stands for a particular with which the speaker is acquainted, for one cannot name anything one is not acquainted with” (Edwards, 1967: 98). Thus, to say that truth is not realizable, is to assume that we know what truth is. For if we do not know it we cannot say if it is not realizable. And if we know it then to say it can neither be defined nor its characteristics or form established is contradictory and meaningless. So, even if we are persuaded to believe that the concept of truth cannot be defined; we can characterize truth using some fairly simple formula.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The objective of this paper is to provide criteria under which truth acquires a definite form and character in media practice. That is, to provide the “how” or framework to guide journalists in operationalizing broad and often abstract concepts that characterize truth. It does seek to prescribe a universal truth for all – a one-prescription-suits-all. The study does not intend to dwell so much in abstract contentions either.

This study, it is believed, is useful even if the result leads minimally to the broader inquiry. This is despite earlier positions among philosophers which regarded truth as an indefinable, purely abstract concept. The study may not resolve the controversy. It may at best stir more. One is however encouraged that it may, at least, spark further academic activity which may approximate other perspectives to the debate.

1.2. Method

This paper uses exploratory analysis for the treatment of truth. This is predicated on the paper dealing with a subject that is yet to be very clearly defined in terms of established priorities in criteria mapping. This is tandem with Kerlinger’s (1973, p. 406) assertion that “exploratory studies have three purposes: to discover significant variables in the field situation, to discover relations among variables, and to lay the groundwork for later, more systematic and rigorous testing of hypotheses.” Anchored on literature searches, the work uses textual analysis to critically look at truth and its related variables as used by the media.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is primarily hinged on the Coherence theory while the Correspondence theory is used as a support theory. While the correspondence theory link propositions and the outside world as it is, coherence theory rationalizes our contentions based on our beliefs and values without which the world would be nothing but a vacuous abstract. Some, view truth as independent of us – it exists whether we know it or not. For others, it is a product of the criteria we set for its being. Let’s consider that truth is outside of us, then, it is transcendental and can at best only be discovered. If it is human centred, then it is a product of our values and beliefs. This is what Pardi (2015) calls “independent” view and the “epistemic” view of truth. The relevance of these two assumptions is illustrated in the Coherence and Correspondence theories:

1.4. Coherence Theory of Truth

The assumption of the Coherence theory is that a belief is true if it agrees or is consistent with other sets of beliefs we harbour. For instance, if we say “Ogbono” soup is delicious, the statement can only be true if it is consistent with our definition of ‘delicious’. It must also be consistent with our definition of soup. If soup is a derivative or combination of several ingredients (depending on the type of soup), being delicious will also depend on specific conditions that make a soup delicious (example, specific measure of each of the substances required in preparing “Ogbono” soup), subject to a defined health condition.

Thus, coherence theory is built on sets of beliefs and therefore epistemic in nature. This is because it assumes that a given belief exists because of other beliefs we harbour (Pardi, 2015). In other words, other beliefs serve as basis for our original belief. So, the test of coherence view of truth is the belief that our beliefs cohere with many others. As a result, we are convinced to believe that truth lies in many of our beliefs (Davidson, 2008).

1.5. Correspondence Theory of Truth

The correspondence theory stems from the rationalist philosophical tradition. It argues that there is a world independent of our belief that is accessible to the human mind. It asserts that there are propositions that are representations about the world as it is. That is, they correspond with the state of affairs in the world we live in. so, truth is an alignment between propositions and reality.

Take for instance the proposition 'Buhari is a Nigerian'. The statement is true if he is a Nigerian and false if he is not a Nigerian. Thus, the correspondence theory lays out the propositions that are compatible with the reality of the world. Truth is established by its relationship with existing reality. It is not subject to our beliefs but outside of our beliefs.

2. Discussion

2.1. Problem of a Definition

Early attempts to define truth were as challenging as today's efforts. First, every attempt leads to other controversies that create conceptual doubts and further raise other unresolved questions. Indeed, "as soon as you think you have got it pinned down, some case or counter example immediately shows deficiencies, including being plagued by the question 'is it true?' (Pardi (2015). Second, the subject of truth is often viewed as an object. Pardi (2015), for instance, makes reference to an apple in his analysis of truth. Such perspectives seem to ignore broader dimensions in the consideration of truth. In some cases, truth cannot be treated like an object but assemblage of various elements requiring coherence and correspondence. Take the case of alleged murder, correspondence must be established and culpability judged on the basis of established legal norms (Laws).

We can assume that our propositions represent the truth if they correspond to reality. However, to know the content of reality and its relationship with our propositions, we must resort to our humanity. In this context, we view truth as correct, proper, genuine and verifiable information reflecting the factual occurrence of an event.

2.2. Truth in Media Messages

The first step in resolving question of truth in media messages is to ask: is this report the truth of what happened? To answer this question would require giving the event an identity that is distinctively guided, among others by time, place, event, and context. Truth and belief are coterminous and according to MacFarlane (2005) assessment sensitive. The beliefs are a reflection of our values system. The expression of our beliefs and values are characterised in propositions. For some philosophers therefore, propositions are key to understanding truth. It is therefore instructive why our opinions about truth would always vary, depending according to MacFarlane (2005) on the standpoint from which we approach the subject, and with the presuppositions we make of the issue and facts we are dealing with.

Thus, truth is not independent; it can only function in relation to something. That which accords truth functionality is itself not truth. It is the integrity of the relationship that leads to truth. Truth emerges from the relationship between what is and its defining propositions based on existing knowledge or beliefs. Truth cannot therefore function as a futuristic phenomenon. It is about what is or was, for futuristic propositions are mere probabilities.

When it is seen as correspondence, truth is like a mirror of what it is true of. Coherence on the other hand is a mark, a test of truth that sets criteria, based on belief, for its measurement. Truth here means being in accord with things we believe to be – a fact or reality, or conformity to a given standard. What we believe to be truth is based on other things we know and believe.

As a result, what is seen as truth in media messages is best considered within the realm of established professional media norms, which serve as guide to truthful reports. Thus, the truth of each report is unique to it and it is time, event, space, facts and context centred.

2.3. Truth Criteria

The basic question to ask is on what standpoint or platforms can we justifiably say the truth has been presented in a particular report? When we ask: has the media reported the truth? Two things are involved: (i) the occurrence of the event (ii) truth quality in the report - Is what the journalist has put down verifiable? Does it have an identity outside of the journalist's subjectivity? To answer these questions, we have to look at defining elements that give the issue or event reality status.

There is need to look at basic professional criteria that qualify media reports as true. As Wien (2005, 4) notes, we must reflect upon what concepts like truth, "mean and how they are to be operationalized, unless journalism is willing to admit that it is totally devoid of ideas". This calls for intellectual integration of normative values with practical concerns in media practice – a norma-practical view.

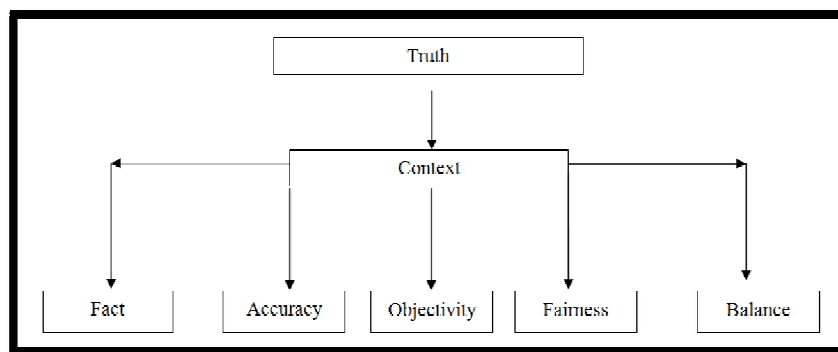


Figure 1: Media Truth Mapping Model
Source: Bo, Daniel (2020)

2.4. Characteristics of Truth

In every report arriving at the truth require fulfilling layers of professional demands. Truth is discovered, not created. As a result, journalists only give an account of an event, without self declaration of its truthfulness. It is the critical media consumers that evaluate its truth value. To reflect the truth about events reported, the journalist should observe the following: Accuracy, fact, balance, objectivity and fairness, presented within a defined context.

2.4.1. Accuracy

One important component that determines the validity of truth is accuracy. Sanders (2003) admit that striving for accuracy is a necessary condition in the quest for truthfulness in media reports. To be accurate is to be careful about attributing to sources and to reiterate only the facts (Wien, 2005). The demands of accuracy are beyond issues of sources and facts. Accuracy requires that all statements, sentences, figures or statistics, including sources used must reflect exactitude. Accuracy can be achieved by ensuring the following:

Fact precision: facts must be used correctly. The facts must reflect their original form, what Wien (2005) refers to as reiterating the facts. It is the way facts are reported that gives vent to realization of truth. Sanders (2003) alluded to the place of facts as truth predicate when he said truthfulness evolves from factual reporting.

Appropriate context: Generally, statements and facts must not only be precise and correctly stated, they must be used in the appropriate context. Context is what defines relevance and accords meaning. For instance, a particular act of aggression can be called a terrorist act while another similar act of aggression may not be seen as a terrorist act based on the context of occurrence.

Attribution: journalists should also reflect what sources say and in the appropriate context in which it was said. Precision is key to attribution. One of the ways to achieve accuracy in reporting is to, as much as possible, let the sources and facts speak.

Interpretation: interpretation of facts and statements made by sources compromises originality. Media consumers are discerning and should be allowed to do the interpretation of facts and statements sources make.

2.4.2. Fact

The word *fact* derives from the Latin word *Factum*, which means “a thing done or performed”. A journalistic fact therefore is a verified claim. It is a statement of verified information. It is not just an assertion, claim or proposition. A given proposition cannot be true if it is not fact driven. Facts are important components of truth. Provability and verifiability constitute important grounds for the integrity of facts. Wien (2005) notes that facts are what can be experienced directly and known in just the same way. It is not a personal view point. Benaroch (2019 admits that for truth to be there must be fact-checking. Facts generally, “exist independently of our thinking” (Edwards, 1967: 98). Facts are so important as a truth predicate that Serena (2018) describes them as indisputable truths. Facts are undergirded by:

Context: Facts must be appropriate and relevant to context. no matter how factual the facts may be, they should not be taken out of context and sometimes, sequence (Patterson and Wilkins, 2002), in order not to distort their truth value. For instance, “she wrote in words” is a linguistic fact, while “the earth is a planet” is a cosmological fact. Although each of the facts above has linguistic value, it is the context of their use that will guarantee their truth value.

Non subjectivity: To qualify as building blocks for truth, the facts presented by journalists must be devoid of the journalist’s opinion. People are not interested in what you think “they want to know what has happened” (Ufer, 2001 in Wien, 2005: 5).

Thus, truth and fact are not synonyms. As a media concept, what is true may not necessarily be a fact, and a fact may not satisfy necessary and sufficient grounds for establishment of truth. It is true, for instance, that the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in 1996 announced the death of Nnamdi Azikiwe. The fact however, was that Azikiwe was not dead. Thus, the report was not true because it was not based on fact. Thus, fact can affirm, contradict or question the validity of truth

Some guidelines, which Sanders (2003:41) calls “structural safeguards” have evolved in the quest for truthfulness in reporting facts. He lists them as: (i) the striving for accuracy (ii) the search for objectivity with the concomitant removal of bias through getting all sides of the story.

2.4.3.Objectivity

Objectivity, McQuail (2005: 200) notes is “the most central concept in media theory relating to information quality”. It is seen by some as synonymous with impartiality and neutrality (Frost, 2007; Mindich, 1988). Lichtenberg (2000); Frost (2007) notes that among various contentions, there are those who believe that objectivity is possible.

To say that objectivity does not exist sounds presumptuous and raises the question whether we can ascribe a name to or conceptualize something that does not exist or has never existed? Rhetorically, a name must be a name of something that is. There cannot be a name of nothing.

What is required for objectivity to be a practical reality according to McDonald (1975:70) is a critical examination of “elements and practices in the reporting process” by “nobly motivated” journalists. Frost (2007: 73) also agrees that objectivity is possible if we free ourselves from “all preconceived ideas or prejudices” and further admits that objectivity is so key to truth that media generally become agitated when their professional objectivity is questioned. Although he further makes reference to the approaches in the hard sciences as more favourable to realizing objectivity, the point he and others have often missed is that even in the hard sciences, the interpretations we give of data are not eternally free from external and internal influences. Language with all its social and other influences is what is used in all human endeavours in fixing, organizing and communicating our findings and thoughts (including analysis of data in the hard sciences). It is itself a product of analysis embodied in the instances of actual speech (written words).

Westerstahl cited in Wien, (2005) opines that truth and objectivity share a symbiotic relationship. Boyer (1981) takes a step further by identifying six elements of objectivity, which he lists as balance, accuracy, presentation, separation, minimizing writers influence and avoiding slant (cited in Wang, 2003: 4). While it could be argued that the characterization of objectivity by these authors has either over/underestimated the boundaries of objectivity, they have also blurred the thin lines that have given objectivity its distinct character.

Shaw *et. al.* quoted in Wien (2005) agrees that balance and fairness are not synonymous with objectivity. Objectivity, according to him is difficult to achieve. What journalists can achieve with relative ease, he notes, is fairness and balance. Another problem with such characterization of objectivity is that it ignores one of the key frames of objectivity-context.

Objectivity itself is not an end in itself. It provides a means to an end. It seeks to establish the truth. That is why Wien, (2005) notes, truth cannot be separated from the concept of objectivity and as Frost, (2007: 73) similarly observes, objectivity “is always linked somehow to the concept of truth”. Viewed within its characteristic boundaries’ objectivity can be achieved by fulfilling the following conditions:

- *Avoid subjectivity:* stereotypes, prejudices, perceptions, imaginations, emotions, sentiments and application of double standards should not influence the journalist’s report.
- *Issue identification:* Clearly identify the issue(s), the facts (important and relevant facts) of the issue, and relevant sources. For every issue, there are key or important facts that define it.
- *Independence:* exercise independence in order to avoid been swayed by perceptions, imagination, emotions, sentiments, and subjective evaluations. As Wien (2005) notes an objective journalist must remain distant from her or his subject and must be able to distil their person out of the journalistic product. He or she should simply report the facts of what has happened.
- *Context:* the facts, sources, questions and statements in every situation should be operationalized within a defined context. It is the context that defines the relevance of the facts used as well as directionality or tone of the report.
- *Unambiguity:* Choice and use of assertions, propositions, words, facts, figures including sources should be very clearly stated, to avoid misunderstanding or ambiguity.
- *Language use:* Use of adjectives, clauses, sentences, etc., that insinuate what is not self evident in the facts also violates objectivity.

Concerns regarding what Ajilore *et. Al.* (2012) considers as limitations imposed by time and space available to transmit messages, rather overstretch the argument. All human activities are bound and influenced by time and space. Post modernist apostles who claim that the filtering process involved in information processing makes objectivity impossible, should be persuaded by the fact that all human activities need some filtering. This necessarily calls for a selection process that is guided by our understanding of nature and the ideals accepted for our common wellbeing. The inverted pyramid approach, which is an effective tool in managing limitations imposed by time and space, rather supports the operationalization of the objectivity concept.

2.4.4. Balance

Balance implies the idea that “the journalist can and should present equally two sides of arguments” (Frost, 2007: 72). Presenting two or all sides to an issue or of a story sounds too simplistic and is a self limitation that has ignored other elements that give balance its distinctive character. Thus, to achieve balance the following criteria needs to be met:

Objective presentation: to achieve balance, the journalist must be objective in the presentation. The integrity of facts used and neutrality of the journalist must be upheld.

Sentence validity: balance finds reality in sentence composition. The use of propositions, statements, and facts, must be accurately and fairly used, and without deviating from the issue or appropriate context. There must also be consistency in the style of presentation.

Numerical equivalence: To be balanced, a report should observe numerical equivalence or proportionate representation. Number has important role to play in achieving balance as the weight of numerical representation can

impact neutrality and credibility. In conflict or controversial issues, for instance, the journalist should endeavour to use equal number of sources on all sides and they should be of equal competence

Issue treatment: Balance can also be achieved through issue treatment. All sides in an issue need to be given equal opportunity to address the key elements in an issue. In doing so, the thematic boundaries and the context must be clearly identified and treated with equal or commensurate representation on all sides.

Context: balance derives meaning to the extent that it is understood within a defined context. Treatment of sources, facts and issues to achieve balance should be context specific and unambiguous.

2.4.5. Fairness

This is another characteristic of truth. To be fair is to insulate oneself against any form of bias, particularly in favouring one side against the other. Fairness is the idea that the journalist gives all sides of the argument or issue impartial representation (Frost, 2007). Thus, it can be realized giving the following conditions:

Even handedness: To attain fairness one needs to be even-handed in representing all sides of an issue. Words, sentences, facts, etc., should not be used or presented in a manner that suggests the journalist has taken side. To achieve this, the report must be free from interpretation or opinion.

Facts in context: Facts presented on either side and issues addressed must share a common context. There should be no doubt as to the specific issue being addressed and context in which it is being addressed.

Source credibility: sources chosen on all sides should share a common frame of knowledge of the issue in question. In the case of conflict and other contentious issues, the ratio of sources on each side, is key in the consideration of fairness. There is need to broaden the range of sources in order to ensure important sources are not left out. Depending on the issue, sources (human) used should be of equal or comparable competences.

Source treatment: range of questions, statements, etc, should be specific, not misleading or ambiguous and if on the same subject or issue, should not vary in context. They should also be relevant and address specific concern(s).

Completeness: the whole story should be told. This calls for thoroughness.

Placement: the level of prominence given to a news item is an attribute of fairness. This is particularly so in controversial issues. For instance, fairness will not be served if comments from one side in a dispute are placed on front page, and response or similar comments from the other group(s) are buried in inside pages.

Language use: journalists must adopt a common frame of presentation that establishes neutrality. Same acts should be treated and described in the same way. For instance, if in a war situation “collateral damage” is the term used to describe bomb or rocket attacks that kill unintended victims, fairness requires that all such attacks irrespective of who launches should be described as such. Otherwise, lack of similarity in use of language would give people inaccurate impression of the issue (FAIR, 2004).

Some scholars treat fairness and objectivity as synonyms. According to Wien, for instance, “objectivity and fairness are synonyms” (Wien, 2005: 9). However, while fairness may be breached by simply placing statement from one group (in a crisis) on the front page and a similar statement from a rival group on the inside pages, this would not however be a violation of objectivity.

2.4.6. Context

Every truth must have a definite context from where it derives its meaning. It is context that influences our understanding of any particular speech or utterance by providing ground for interpretive precision in relation to a speaker’s utterances (Kuypers, 2002). As Macfarlane (2005) agrees, context of assessment and of use are key determinants of truth value. Context is the unique circumstance under which facts, statements, and all other elements receive relevance. It possesses elements that are unique to a given situation and creates a special relationship between existing facts and the truth established. Context is characterized by:

Background: every event or issue has a background. This relates to the circumstances surrounding its occurrence. Background is what gives an event or issue meaning.

Purpose: every event or issue is defined by purpose. Purpose is the interactive activity between background and intervening variables to forge an outcome. For reports to make any meaning they must fit into a particular situation and a stable context through which to view the situation (Kuypers, 2002).

3. Conclusion

Professional and public expectations including normative values place demand on the media to always report the truth. The inference of this demand is that the media can report the truth about events and issues. The problem has been abdicating this professionally contextual reality to abstract philosophical constructs.

Truth is not only realizable; it is product of interaction among mutually inclusive, yet distinct normative values of accuracy, balance, context, fairness and objectivity. These elements may share some similarities; they however have certain characteristics that give each a distinct identity. Thus, a report is true to the extent to which it is accurate, balanced, fair, objective, and defined within a given context. This relationship is not only functionally relevant, it is anchored on the principles of the coherence and correspondence theories and serves as what Blackburn (2013) describes as a simplification and unification of otherwise disconnected phenomena. Agreement of propositions with either the outside world or our beliefs is central in both theories, and since the outside world is which highlight a practical and professional balance that supports criteria for fulfilling truth conditions that make media practice a worthy pursuit.

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