

Chapter 12

Believable Fictions: Redactional Culture and the Will to Truthiness

Jeffrey P. Jones

The fatal premise of news is this: that it simply imitates reality or nature; it is transparent, representational and unconstructed. Therefore, so long as it avoids bias, remains impartial and sticks to plain facts in plain language, it is true, and can enforce its truth throughout the world.

John Hartley

The scary part is that our desire to seek the truth is a lot weaker than our desire to tell ourselves what we want to hear, to perpetuate our own beliefs. The truth is not like that, it's not something that comes to us at our convenience.

Errol Morris¹

When comedian Stephen Colbert performed for President George W. Bush and the Washington press corps at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2006, the video recording of the event became one of the most widely circulated and talked about political events of the year on the internet. One observation rarely mentioned was that Colbert's performance wasn't entirely new material. Colbert had delivered many of the best comedic bits in the debut episode of his faux pundit talk show on Comedy Central, *The Colbert Report*, when he unveiled the concept of "Truthiness." The playful term refers to the tendency for bloviated television pundits (such as Fox News's Bill O'Reilly, of whom Colbert's character is a direct parody) and right-wing politicians alike to gleefully trumpet their illogical, gut-centered way of thinking, irrespective of evidence or facts. By essentially repeating this routine in his speech, Colbert used the occasion for a wide-ranging assault on the president, the Washington press corps, and the broader political culture of Washington. In such a culture, the president has shown he can willfully ignore realities and define truth as he wishes, while a dutiful press corps – through its norms, routines, and practices – not only plays along but helps to construct and justify the mirage. Repeatedly Colbert points to the ways in which inconvenient truths can simply be brushed aside in such an environment. "Guys like us," he says (including the president in the statement), "we don't pay attention to the polls. We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in 'reality,' and reality has a well known liberal bias."

Philosophical Foundations for News Media
Why and Journalism (New York: Longman,
Journalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Journalism, 73.
Giving: Deliberative Democracy, Institu-
's Mission," *Political Communication* 24,
149.
150.
Custodians of Conscience: Investigative
Columbia University Press, 1998).
Journalism of Conscience, 138 (emphasis added).
Journalism of Conscience, 139.
Journalism of Conscience, 140.
Journalism of Conscience: A Study in Evidence (Berkeley, CA: Uni-
Journalism of Conscience, 121.
Journalism of Conscience, 116.
Journalism of Conscience: Imaginative Power in
Journalism of Conscience (2005): 140.
2.
Journalism of Conscience is Closer to Silence than to Talk: The
Victims of War," *Critical Studies in Mass*
Journalism of Conscience, 9–10.
Journalism of Conscience, 14–15.
Journalism of Conscience, 14.
Journalism of Conscience: A Study in Solidarity (New York: Cambridge Uni-
92.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
Journalism of Conscience: The Bush White House and Washington's
Journalism of Conscience, 202.
3–4.
The New Yorker, 23 June 2008, 27.

