



Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.
The Gravity of Weight

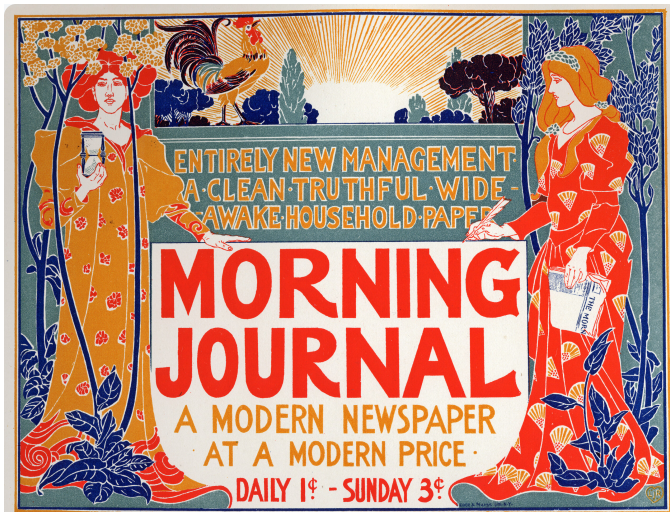
Revisiting "00 Trees in Russia"

Determining what is true in the media remains elusive.

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KEY POINTS

- The media may want the “appearance of documentation,” but determining the facts remains elusive.
- Facts are “communal property,” unlike opinions or beliefs, that can be agreed upon and quantified.
- In this age of artificial intelligence, information presented as facts may be inaccurate.
- The Rashomon Effect occurs when there are multiple and contradictory eyewitness versions of the same story.



"Morning Journal," newspaper. Poster by American artist Louis John Rhead, 1895.

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In the early 1960s, *Harper's Magazine* featured an essay about the challenges of establishing facts in the media. At the time, the focus was on newspapers, as distinguished from news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News & World Report* (Friedrich, 1964).

Otto Friedrich, the article's prolific writer, was a cultural historian and the author of many books, as well as the Managing Editor at *The Saturday*

Evening Post for its last four years and a senior editor at *Time Magazine* for almost 20 years (Thomas, Jr, 1995.)

Friedrich's article stayed with me all these years because of its unusual, catchy title, "There Are 00 Trees in Russia." What is striking is that I misremembered its substance—I remembered it as a scathing criticism of the Russian press, which created a fill-in-the-blank, factitious approach to facts. It would make sense that my bias was negatively disposed to Russia since the feature appeared within a few years of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Wrote Friedrich, "Journalism involves an effort to discover, select, and assemble certain facts, in a way that will be not only reasonably true but reasonably interesting."

Despite an advertising campaign that reflected the public's bias then, "Of course I'm sure—I read it in *Newsweek*," Friedrich found that the facts were often elusive, not always discoverable, and sometimes truly impossible to authenticate.

And that's where the notation of 00 appeared: magazine editors acknowledged the hypocrisy of simply reporting the facts. They wanted, though, "the appearance of documentation," and so they would put 00 in their story and hope that the magazine's fact-checkers would insert the correct number, or at least the most accurate approximation.



The Sun Newspaper. Years ago, if something was seen in print, it was assumed to be true. Poster by American artist Louis John Rhead, c. 1890.

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“As a rule,” continues Friedrich, facts are not scattered around so indiscriminately, like sequins ornamenting some drab material...” Sometimes, an “inundation of minutiae” reflects the notion that a “knowledge of lesser facts” (e.g., how tall a person is or what he or she eats for breakfast) implies knowledge of major facts (e.g., views on matters of substantial importance.)

But “while facts are sacred to writers, readers, and editors, they are sometimes more work than they're worth—particularly when it comes to inconsequential detail” (Dickey, 2019).

There is, though, a “characteristically American desire for certainty,” almost a “fetish for facts,” writes Friedrich, but “Does anyone really know which fact is 'true?'" In other words, “Every man sees the 'facts' according to his own interests, and there is the “certainty of unascertainable facts.”

For example, *Rashomon*, the 1950 film by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, illustrates, in the pursuit of truth and justice, the limitations of establishing what actually happened when the “facts” vary.

Rashomon tells the story of a rape and murder from the perspectives of four people, all of whom have their own interests and report their version of the truth. The name of the film, incidentally, comes from Rashomon, one of Kyoto's gates, under which the events unfold in 12th-century Japan (Walls, 2018).

Each eyewitness account, though dramatically different, is plausible. Kurosawa's talent as a filmmaker is that “he offers no evidence at all by which the viewer may disqualify any of the narratives,” and the audience is left with abject uncertainty (Anderson, 2018).

The film has engendered the so-called *Rashomon Effect*, which occurs, “not just when there are different versions of the truth but where interests, culture, and power converge” on the human need for closure and explanations. The Rashomon Effect induces doubt, not only about one's own judgment but about the judgment of others (Anderson.)



This marker is what is left of the Rashomon Gate, the great south gate to the city of Kyoto, Japan, and under which the events of Kurosawa's film takes place. Source: NPC Collection/Alamy Stock Photo. Used with permission.

Writes Kurosawa, "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk without embellishing." The script portrays such people (Matsunura, 2018).

Rashomon presents a "grimly cynical view" of how people misrepresent their own "despicable behavior," and it demonstrates the "subjectivity of truth" (Bock, 1985).

Though the word *truthiness* first appeared in the 1830s to mean "truth," it was comedian and late-night TV host Stephen Colbert who reintroduced the term *truthiness*, to mean "seeming to be true" in 2005 (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Likewise, comedian and political commentator Bill Maher has a recurring segment on his TV show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, "I don't know it for a fact. I just know it's true."

With all seriousness, for which she later received severe criticism and ridicule, Kellyanne Conway, then Senior Counselor to President Trump, spoke of "alternative facts," in an interview she had with Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press* (2017).

Further, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously spoke of no "knowns." He said, "There are things we know. There are *known unknowns*. That is to say there are things we now know we don't know. But there are also *unknown unknowns*. There are things we don't know we don't know." (Rumsfeld, 2002.)

In other words, Rumsfeld added, “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence...Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean you have evidence that it doesn’t exist.”

The point is that circumstances may seem to be true but may not be, and people may not even realize what they don't know. In this age of artificial intelligence (A.I.), for example, a recent official government report on children’s health included spurious references in its bibliography that were revealed only by the efforts of diligent fact-checkers (Nestle, 2025).

Today the public finds a deluge of information from vast sources in the media and confronts a world far different from the limited news exposure of more than 60 years when Friedrich's piece first appeared.

The government-controlled Russian media does notoriously distort the facts to fit its own version of the truth, as for example, how it has portrayed its war with Ukraine.

When media sources present conflicting and discordant perspectives of the same events today, people can find themselves confused, uncertain, in doubt, and even angry.

"Facts themselves lack the ability to deliver one to the truth. But unlike beliefs or opinions, they are quantifiable. They can be agreed upon. They are *communal property*" (Dickey).



William Glackens, "She Gave Her Darter-in-Law a Piece of Her Mind," 1909.

Source: Barnes Foundation. Public Domain



Hand-drawn Russian Postcard from the 1905 Revolution Mocking Tsar Nicholas II by Georgii Erastov. Tobie Mathew Collection. Russian media notoriously misrepresents events.
Source: Photo credit: copyright Tobie Mathew/Bridgeman Images. Used with permission.

Ironically, despite the information overload to which everyone is now subjected, determining the accuracy of facts has become even more elusive than ever before, and there may still be 00 trees in Russia.

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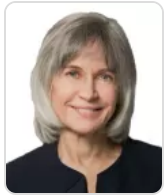
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