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*Research Methodology and Journalistic Professionalism*

**KEY WORDS**

methodology, research, journalism, professionalism

**ABSTRACT**

The debate on the methodology of the journalistic profession began when journalism emerged as a field of study at European and American universities, almost a hundred years ago. The interdisciplinary pragmatics of journalism has always been dominated by the theoretical models of academic research and knowledge. The paradox is that journalism, with its inherent methodological roots in social sciences, especially history, sociology, and law, has treated methodology like an orphan child. The backbone of journalistic work – collecting, processing, and the publication of press releases, has always been determined by and will continue to define the crucial stages of journalistic work. This article attempts to describe these first two stages of creating texts and programmes, which make up journalistic research. These are the basic elements of a research workshop and the most important instruments to guarantee quality research. The author redefines the category of ‘research’ – treating it in a broad sense, as a process of collecting and verifying journalistic material, and not just working with existing sources. The study compares journalistic research and epistemology with the logical, legal and ethical postulate of truth. Moreover, the historical contexts of journalistic professionalism, as well as the threats associated with online research, which is commonly used in newsrooms around the world, will be discussed.

A journalist, taking on a subject, begins by collecting information and opinions as data for his press material<sup>1</sup>. The first stage of his work can be done as individual research – interviews, opinion polls, collecting stories, event reconstructions, or by getting data from secondary sources, collected and prepared by other people. The form of research in which data collected and processed by one researcher is reanalyzed by another, Earl Babbie called secondary analysis<sup>2</sup>. In the field of journalism, this process is called research, and those who search for information and data are called researchers. In the Anglo-Saxon cultures, research is every systematic and organized search for knowledge using information sources, the ability to create strategies of their collection, and the methodology of verifying the collected data. All these elements add up to the essence of journalistic work. This article is an attempt to describe

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<sup>1</sup> *Słownik terminologii medialnej*, ed. by W. Pisarek, Kraków 2006, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> E. Babbie, *Badania społeczne w praktyce* [The practice of social research], Warszawa 2004, p. 303.

research as a basic journalistic skill<sup>3</sup>. The author redefines the category of research, treating it largely as a process of obtaining and verifying journalistic material, and not just working on existing sources. Examples of professional failures recalled in the article prove that methodological research is not a common practice known and used among journalists. What is more, in modern newsrooms, less and less time is devoted to collecting and checking information, which results in lowering the quality of the publication and in consequence, the credibility of media. As the work *Journalismus in Deutschland* shows, the time journalists in Germany dedicate to collecting information has drastically reduced over the last 12 years. In 1993, journalists spent 140 minutes a day on research, while in 2005 it was just 117 minutes. Despite this, searching for stories and documentary material is still one of the most important elements of journalistic work, after writing a text and its correction<sup>4</sup>.

### **Essence and aims of journalistic research**

Theoreticians of journalism suggest that journalistic research should not be understood in the categories of an obligation, but rather as an “essential journalistic choice”. Only thanks to this do journalists bring to daylight what others want to hide<sup>5</sup>. No other stage of journalistic work is as laborious, requiring meticulousness and detail, and at the same time, as dependent on chance and intuition. German authors of journalistic textbooks, with Walter von La Roche, underline that research is more important than creating the text or programme<sup>6</sup>. Michael Haller, journalistic research theoretician and author of one of the most well-known books in the field, treats journalistic research (in the basic sense) as an ability to acquire and evaluate information in order to use it in a work. Research, in the broader sense, is a process of reconstructing facts and events, which through language, should lead to presenting a credible (most resembling the material truth) version of events, occurrences and processes<sup>7</sup>.

These elements correspondent to basic stages of research: collecting material, its interpretation, and description, which will be discussed in later parts of the article. The topic is methodological aspects of journalistic research and its influence on professionalism. Methodology of science (detailed), including the classification of sciences, concerns the

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<sup>3</sup> The author is part of a research project on obtaining information by journalists in Polish press, radio and television. Its results will be published in mid-2013.

<sup>4</sup> S. Weischenberg, M. Malik, A. Scholl, “Journalismus in Deutschland 2005”, *Media Perspektiven* 2006, H. 7, pp. 354–355.

<sup>5</sup> W. Schneider, P.-J. Raue, *Handbuch des Journalismus*, Reinbek 1998, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> W. von La Roche, *Einführung in den praktischen Journalismus*, 16. Aufl., München 2004, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> M. Haller, *Recherchieren*, 7. Aufl., Konstanz 2004, p. 39.

methods of research procedures in certain fields or scientific disciplines<sup>8</sup>. Methodology, as one of the fields of epistemology, is sometimes described as a science of getting to know something<sup>9</sup>. Margaret H. DeFleur by research methodology understands “describing, explaining and justifying the used research methods, not the methods themselves”<sup>10</sup>, while Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and David Nachmias refer to methodology as the basics of evaluating knowledge. The system of methodological rules and procedures is not, according to them, neither unchangeable or unreliable – it is constantly improved<sup>11</sup>.

Methodology of journalistic research can thus be called the way in which journalists learn to know certain things about people and events. The word ‘methods’ will also be used to describe certain findings. Operating towards practice, methods – a set of rules regarding the way of doing certain work – in the case of research, collecting, preparing and evaluating information, should answer the question of not “what”, but “how” should something be done. The construction of this work resembles the logic of methodological aspects of journalistic research and considers such issues as: procedures of verifying information sources, the ethical standards of the profession including issues of professionalization, evaluating the importance of information, and finally, the interest of the receiver and further – public interest<sup>12</sup>.

The French etymology of *re-chercher* means ‘search’, ‘find’, ‘teach’. The essence of research is creating hypotheses, and confirming or discarding them in the process of empirical work, checking, evaluating and interpreting both new and known events and information. According to Gilbert A. Churchill, the methods of obtaining information should be based on the fact that only when the researcher [journalist – note M.Ch.] is not satisfied with the secondary data (existing sources) or exhausts them, should he begin to claim primary data, which is direct work with the sources, e.g. through interviews and surveys<sup>13</sup>. Figures 1 and 2 present the methodological stages of the research process used in social sciences and standard procedures, according to which journalistic research is carried out. In the later part of the work, the remaining stages of journalistic research will be presented, corresponding to scientific methodology (fig. 4).

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<sup>8</sup> J. Apanowicz, *Metodologiczne elementy procesu poznania naukowego w teorii organizacji i zarządzania*, Gdynia 2000, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> E. Babbie, E., *Badania...*, p. 303.

<sup>10</sup> M.H. DeFleur, *Computer-assisted investigative reporting: Development and methodology*, New Jersey 2007, p. 212.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. Frankfort-Nachmias, D. Nachmias, *Metody badawcze w naukach społecznych* [Research methods in the social sciences], Poznań 2001, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> S. Clark, M. Herr, *Planning legal research*, qtd. in: S. Lamble, *Documenting the methodology of journalism*, <http://researchjournalism.wordpress.com/methodology/> [accessed: 30.11.2011].

<sup>13</sup> G.A. Churchill, *Badania marketingowe. Podstawy metodologiczne* [Marketing research. Methodological foundations], Warszawa 2002, p. 250.

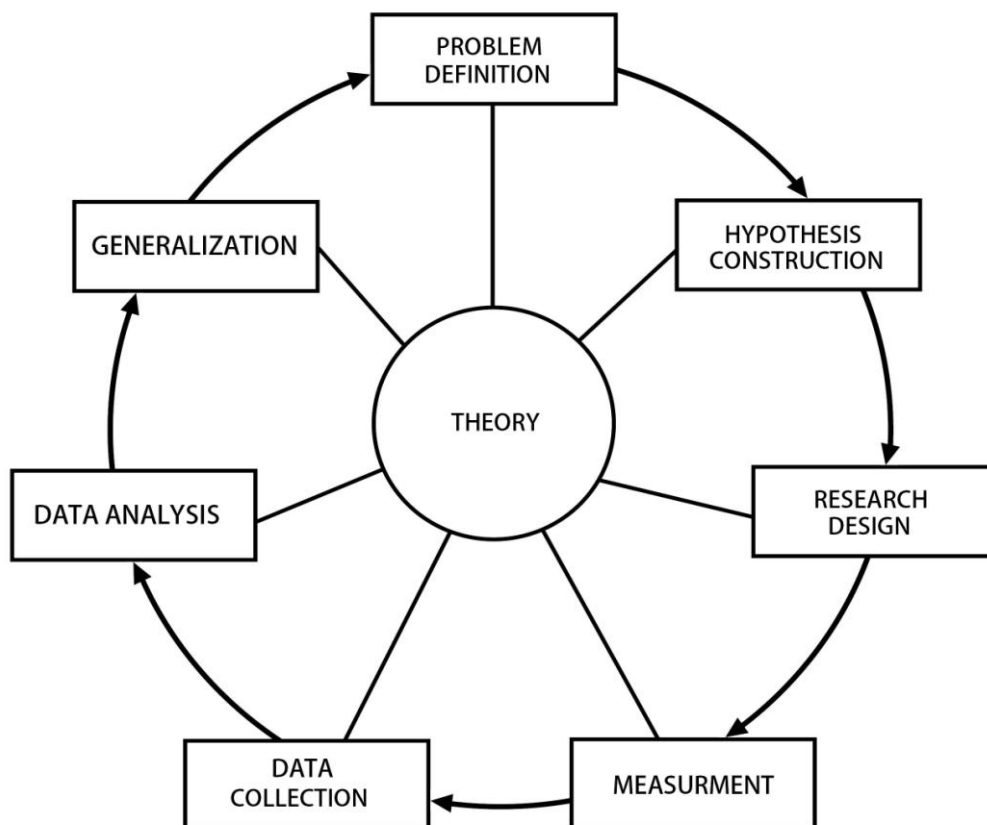


Figure 1. The main stages of the research process in social studies

Source: Ch. Frankfort-Nachmias, D. Nachmias, *Metody badawcze w naukach społecznych* [Research methods in the social sciences], Poznań 2001, pp. 66–87.



## Figure 2. Journalism based on methodological research

Source: Own research.

### **Research and journalistic professionalism. Historical perspective**

In journalism, research is one of the most important instruments guaranteeing quality. Research journalism (Ger. *Recherche-Journalismus*) based on methodological searches, has been developing in the United States, Great Britain, Germany and Austria. The concept of open access to information and its flow in a democratic society means that journalistic research is not only an ideological rule, but also a basic norm of professional media. The greater interest in explaining and investigating the cause of events, the growing freedom of expression and press, and technological innovations brings journalism to the level of a “social system”. The process began in the 1920s, the time when grand and complicated power structures were becoming less and less transparent and understandable for citizens, and journalists had taken on the role of guiding the general public around the nooks and crannies of politics and power. The labor division in editorial offices, separating the work of the journalist-reporter from the duties of the editor-publisher, the growing competition and time pressure meant that even the most simple fact-story had to be properly documented, and in order to do this, fieldwork was not enough. For the journalist-researcher, this challenge was all the more important, as it required a new approach to working with sources: their individual choice and judgment, numerous verifications of information and an analysis of the collected news. A professional analyses his sources based on three basic criteria: access, diversity and level of knowledge. Informant credibility is easily checked by asking questions, to which we already know the answer to<sup>14</sup>.

Accuracy in collecting and using materials was first appreciated by flourishing reporter journalism in the United States. It was established that the author participated in the events he described and reported directly from where they were taking place. This attitude resulted from the marketing strategy of the new mass-media titles, which were winning readers thanks to up-to-date and attractive stories. Errors in research methodology were compensated by first-hand reporting on the described events. Gaining firm knowledge on a given subject became possible through the personal experience of the reporter, direct search into source material through “one’s own effort”. Hence, journalism’s first obligation – according to American pioneers – was to inform. “All the news that’s fit to print” – is the

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<sup>14</sup> B. Hennessy, *Dziennikarstwo publicystyczne* [Writing feature articles], Kraków 2009, p. 117.

motto on the front page of *The New York Times*. It expressed the ideals of freedom, declaring openness for discussion on public issues. “Selling information helped in shaping America’s idea of citizenship, of national community. Printed information was the first consumer good, which contributed to creating this concept”<sup>15</sup>.

The obligation to inform, in the ideal media model, in which facts dominate over values, is concerned with a responsibility for authenticity of the message, its objectivity and reliability. Adolf S. Ochs, who competed with Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, contributed to continuing the tradition of the founder of *The New York Times*, Henry Raymond – objectivity, substance, and credibility, to which he added seriousness. Features of such a message can be achieved only through impeccable professional skills, in which research is the foundation of reliability and authenticity of words and images, an instrument enabling accurate recreation of events according to facts. Due to a “research incident”, Carr van Anda, Ochs co-worker in *The New York Times*, was to become the model for diligent and versatile information retrieval, in which journalists and publishers verify everything, expressing limited confidence even towards the greatest authorities.

Van Anda, educated as a mathematician, was editing a work which contained a complicated equation. Its author was Albert Einstein, and his calculations were quoted in connection with his stay and lecture in Princeton. The editor noted that the equation contained an error and Einstein, after once again checking his calculations, agreed with the journalist. *The New York Times*, in an aura of scrupulousness, began considering science and technological progress as fields worth exploring, while Van Anda himself came down in history as one of the largest enthusiasts of Einstein’s theory of relativity<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, journalism as such was becoming an academic discipline that interested American universities. The standards were set by the famous Columbia Journalism School, founded thanks to the financial aid of Pulitzer. The school continues to treat research as the foundation of its core subject – reporting and writing<sup>17</sup>.

Journalistic research as a separate subject of expert knowledge on journalism in the first-cycle and graduate studies in Poland is not based on education standards for the field of

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<sup>15</sup> T.C. Leonard, *News for All*, Oxford 1996, as qtd. in: B. Golka, *System medialny Stanów Zjednoczonych*, Warszawa 2004, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> “INVESTIGATIONS: Letter from an Old Sweetheart”, *Time Magazine*, [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,935979,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,935979,00.html) [accessed: 8.06.2012]. See also: B. Golka, *System medialny...*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Academic Programs. The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism*, [www.journalism.columbia.edu/page/85-master-of-science-degree/85](http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/page/85-master-of-science-degree/85) [accessed: 7.12.2011].

journalism and social communication<sup>18</sup>. Its issues are discussed during classes in Journalistic Workshop and Journalistic Sources of Information. Research results on the education of journalists in Poland confirm however the usefulness of knowledge connected with research and journalistic sources of information in the future professional work of journalists.

Table 1. The degree of usefulness of knowledge connected with journalistic sources of information in future professional work (N=79)

<b>Knowledge connected with journalistic sources of information</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very useful	44	55,7
Rather useful	29	36,7
Rather useless	4	5,1
Completely useless	2	2,5
No opinion	0	0

Source: *Kształcenie dziennikarzy w Polsce. Opinie i oczekiwania środowiska naukowo-dydaktycznego*, auth. S. Gawroński et al., Rzeszów 2009, p. 55.

### **Research and the theory of knowledge**

The starting point of research theory is the theory of knowledge. We can understand knowledge as follows: as a process of studying the object by the subject (the knowing mind) or as the outcome of this process. In the second case, the study takes on the form of knowledge, which is an outcome of studying, assuming the act of memory<sup>19</sup>. Journalistic research is within the framework of knowledge, as it meets all the above mentioned aims, especially knowledge of the material reality. Moreover, it uses most of the methods of scientific research, among them the methodology of social sciences, with history and sociology. The ultra-rational view (*apriorism*), which assumes the existence of cognitively valuable apriorical knowledge, excludes experience as a source of knowledge. In the theory of empiricism (Francis Bacon, John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill), the starting point is the experience gained by the mind, which has the role of the preceptor creating the true picture from its own perception<sup>20</sup>. It was empiricism that shaped the teleological research tradition, because its purpose was to build a true picture based on authentic narration,

<sup>18</sup> *Standardy kształcenia dla kierunku studiów: Dziennikarstwo i komunikacja społeczna. Załącznik nr 18*, [www.bip.nauka.gov.pl/\\_gAllery/23/35/2335/18\\_dziennikarstwo\\_i\\_komunikacja\\_spoleczna.pdf](http://www.bip.nauka.gov.pl/_gAllery/23/35/2335/18_dziennikarstwo_i_komunikacja_spoleczna.pdf) [accessed: 7.12.2011].

<sup>19</sup> J. Topolski, *Metodologia historii*, Warszawa 1984, p. 255.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 287–293.

composed of real sentences, or at least not being contradictory with reality. For a journalist, this is particularly important because while investigating, and then describing events, people and processes, he uses language and sentences, which are evaluated according to reality.

Here, research is interpreted as a process closely linked with interpersonal communication taking place according to certain rules, e.g. discarding lies and consciously misleading the receiver. Communication through media takes place both according to the acquired convention, which is determined by selecting information based on distinguishing the true from the false, the principles of completeness, impartiality, objectivity, neutrality. The media world has developed certain standards of ethical functioning of media and journalism, on the one side guided by the freedom of expression and responsibility, and on the other, one's own words, which are frames creating the media system. The researcher has the most important role, as it binds him with the basic civil right: the right to information.

### **Research and the postulate of truth**

The basic aim of journalism is striving for the truth. In order to achieve it, it is essential to have a thorough, and prepared in the most detail, journalistic publication based on methodological research, i.e. procedures of collecting, processing and documenting the established working hypothesis of the text, programme, show or documentary film.

The legal doctrine gives the journalist the right to carry out a so-called „proof of truth”, although the very idea of authenticity of the state of affairs presented by the journalist is not understood as a premise, excluding his unlawful actions. A journalist who collects, verifies and prepares press material is also burdened with the necessity to act diligently and reliably, and present the circumstances of the case in a comprehensive and objective manner. This obligation comes straight from Article 12 Paragraph 1 of the Press Law Act. By deciding to use press material, the journalist (editor) should respect the imperative of a comprehensive, not selective choice of information, and present all the circumstances, resisting a “preconceived theory”. He should also consider the seriousness of the charge, the meaning of the information from the point of view of publicly justified interest and the relevance and accuracy of the publication. Directly from the journalistic doctrine of perusing the truth comes the obligation stated in the Press Law Act (Article 6 Paragraph 1) to present the discussed issues truthfully and with accuracy and reliability in collecting and using press material, especially checking the truthfulness of information or revealing their source (Article 12



Paragraph 1 Point 1)<sup>21</sup>. The Supreme Court similarly interprets the obligation to maintain increased reliability as complying with the truth and rational argumentation while passing unfavorable judgment. “The authenticity of certain facts does not exclude the responsibility for false content of press material, if its overall meaning (presenting the person in a positive or negative light) is not adequate with the whole factual layer, which the author could have prepared with diligent and reliable work”<sup>22</sup>. While collecting material, the greatest meaning is in the type and reliability of the source of information (the journalist should rely on a source which is objective or whose credibility is undoubted, checking the correctness of the information by reaching all the other available sources and making sure that the information is coherent with other known facts, and also allowing the person interested to relate to the information. The doctrine links thoroughness with preciseness, accuracy, conscientiousness, thoughtfulness, zealotry and care to detail. The idea of reliability is: honesty, solidness, dutifulness and responsibility for words.

Bernard Margueritte, chairman of the International Communication Forum, an organization, which underlines the meaning of the responsibility of media before society, notices the close relationship between ethics and professionalism: “Only truly ethical media can be professional, and only media truly professional will be ethical. Ethics inspires hard work, loyalty to facts, checking all the circumstances of events. In many materials laziness, negligence, superficiality, relying on one's own opinion and judgment, often unjustified, are visible. [...] The reader must receive everything that he needs to know, not just what he wants to know”<sup>23</sup>.

### **Methodology and methods of journalistic research**

Journalistic work is based on collecting, preparing and publishing press materials. These three stages are extensively presented in Figure 2, locating research in the elementary stage of the journalistic work – obtaining material from sources, gate-keeping and replenishing the collected data. Methodological research assumes using the method of “open approach to the subject”, which means that in the progress of research work and preparing material, we do not know the final outcome and collect all the interesting opinions, facts, research trends,

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<sup>21</sup> The Press Law Act of 26 January 1984, Dziennik Ustaw [Journal of Laws] 1984, No. 5, item 24, as amended.

<sup>22</sup> As qtd. in: B. Gawlik, „Ochrona dóbr osobistych. Sens i nonsens koncepcji tzw. praw podmiotowych osobistych”, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego* No. 771. Prace z Wynalazczości i Ochrony Własności Intelektualnej, No. 41 (1985), p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> A. Zybala, „Płyniemy w jednej łodzi”, *Nowy Obywatel* 2004, No. 2, [www.obywatel.org.pl/index.php?Module=pagemaster&func=viewpub&tid=3&pid=501](http://www.obywatel.org.pl/index.php?Module=pagemaster&func=viewpub&tid=3&pid=501) [accessed: 30.11.2011].

statistical data, connections between facts, and events. Based on this, a hypothesis can be built.

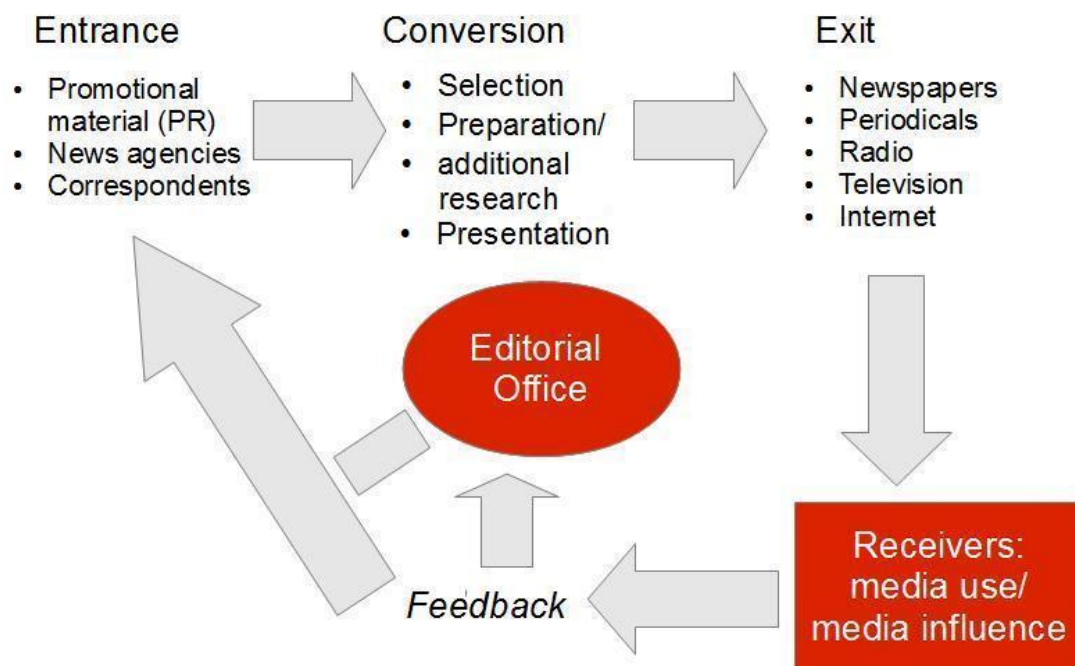


Figure 3. Three stages of journalistic work

Source: M. Chyliński, S. Russ-Mohl, *Dziennikarstwo*, Warszawa 2008, p. 120.

■ Entrance. The standard procedure beginning journalistic research requires creating a working hypothesis. Methodology, defining such terms as ‘observation’, ‘experiment’, ‘hypothesis’, ‘hypothesis verification’, serves the purpose of designing, normalizing and coding research procedures. A hypothesis is treated as a supposition or the possibility of existing (a presence) or not of a given thing, event or also phenomena (process) in a certain place or time. For a journalist, the hypothesis is the possibility of a relation between events or their cause-effect relationship. Tadeusz Kotarbiński defines hypothesis as: “such assumptions concerning the occurrence of certain events or relations between them, which explain an unexplainable set of facts that are the issue”<sup>24</sup>.

Methodological journalistic research begins with searching for information connected with an initial thesis, which is at the same time the topic of the publication. It is assumed that the researcher knows what he is looking for, and the search is directed towards a certain

<sup>24</sup> T. Kotarbiński, *Dzieła wszystkie. Elementy teorii poznania, logiki formalnej i metodologii nauk*, Wrocław 1990, p. 13.

purpose. On average, in the early stage of the research, resources consisting of certain knowledge and experience are tapped and the reporter asks about the meaning of events, numbers and data. Example: “700 thousand people could leave Poland. Immigrants from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are willing to take their place. Is Europe threatened by a new historical migration?”<sup>25</sup>. The author’s initial thesis is based on the assumption that Poles, as citizens of the EU, travel freely to European countries and might indefinitely leave for Western Europe, opening the labor market to incorporate immigrants from former Soviet Union countries.

■ Conversion. The second step is converting the data, that is, searching for the right context of the problem, event or phenomena. It is essential to maintain the rule of proportion in the sources used, for example, by lending a voice to the other side (*audiatur et altera pars*). Preparing research on the subject of European migration, not just Poles, Russians or Belorussians should be asked about their opinion on the matter, but also their individual choices should be confronted with statistical data. If the thesis, which was initially stated, cannot be confirmed, then it should be clearly stated. There is a principle in journalism of stating what one does not know and also prohibiting manipulation. Additional important questions should be posed.

■ Additional research. In this part of the research process, all doubts concerning the topic thesis of the publication should be resolved. This requires analyzing the collected data once more – numbers, opinions, expert statements, and then confronting them with the initial hypothesis or even the motives of the author in the choice of subject. Typical questions would be: Are my informants neutral? Am I neutral towards the subject? The problem of migration concerns certain age groups (young people), some of who consider living abroad as temporary. 700 000 people intending to leave Poland (there lacks a precise time horizon!), should be compared with the number of those, who are returning or have returned from their labour emigration.

■ Cause and effect. Questions about the cause, background and consequences of events should precede the moment the journalist formulates conclusions and postulates. Facts described in the work should be presented clearly, which increases its cognitive value. In the analyzed example, the motive, which pushes people towards migration is the difference in wages between the Eastern and Western Europe. The process of evening out these disproportions will continue, and its outcome will be the reduction of migration.

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<sup>25</sup> S. Czeriepanowa, „Wszystko wyjdzie w praniu”, *Ogoniok* 13.06.2011, as qtd. in *Forum* 2011, No. 30, pp. 19–21.

■ Verification. In this part, sources and their credibility are verified, as is the reliability of the collected data, the repeatability of results. Checking and evaluating the collected information is the next important stage of research work. Michael Haller proposes creating a check-list<sup>26</sup>, according to which the material should be “sifted”. The evaluation of research results takes place according to the following scheme:

- results of research work allow us to prove or exclude an initial thesis and satisfy the curiosity of the researcher and his potential public;
- roles in the events and attitude of its participants were established and precisely recreated;
- actions and responsibility of certain participants were established, cause and effect relationships were explained;
- after verification, the researcher no longer has any doubts as to dates, names and the accuracy of relations.

■ Exit. The last stage of journalistic work is presenting the collected material in the medium for which it was prepared. The type of medium and research material collected as a result determines the decision on the shape of the publication. Logically, during the stage of collecting material and documentation, workshop rules connected with the publication should be considered, including issues regarding the architecture of information and journalistic text. Choosing the genre, one also chooses the work tool, which is the language and means of communication.

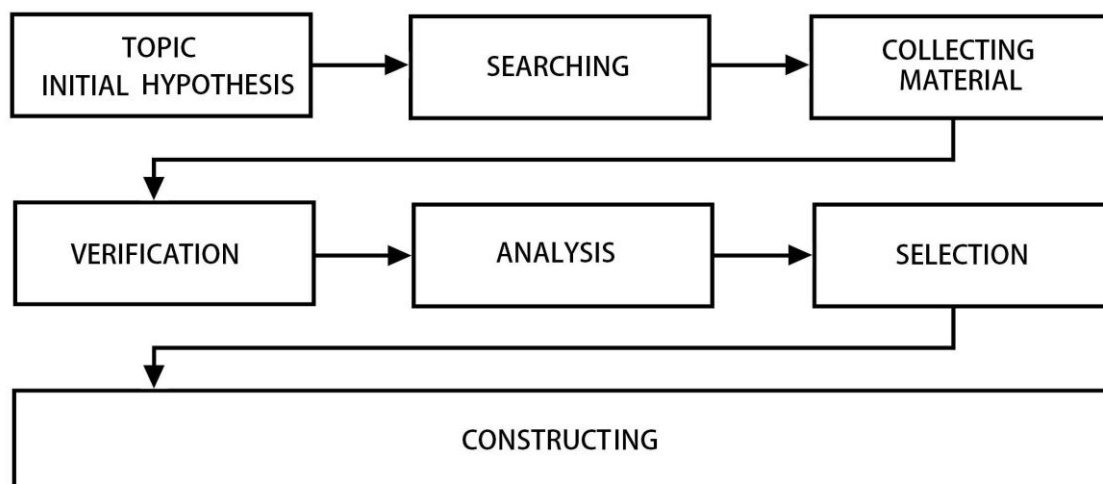


Figure 4. Stages of research

<sup>26</sup> M. Haller, *Recherchieren...*, p. 229.

Source: Own research.

### **The circling method**

A classic research method is circling around a topic, lighting it from every possible angle, searching for „a way to land in the mind of the reader”. The method of circling is based on systematic and standardized searches. They must be done according to a certain scheme, which cannot change depending on the personal attitude of the author towards the described story.

Example: The city authorities want to build a bypass that will relieve the city center of traffic. Means for the construction come from numerous sources, also from European Union subsidies. The project of the road, negotiated for years, should be constructed in such a way, so as not to disturb the existing buildings and infrastructure. When the work begins and the road takes on a certain shape, it turns out that its course collides with an old cemetery, on which burials are still taking place. The investor claims that construction work will take place on the oldest, closed part of the cemetery, but local residents begin protesting. A reporter from the local newspaper visits the site, asks questions, digs deeper, confronts inhabitants and uses all the procedures of methodological research. The collected information does not present a clear picture. On the contrary, thanks to systematic research, the reporter has contradictory and mutually excluding versions. Based on the collected material, it would be difficult not only to prepare a comprehensive problem article, but even reliable information. The journalist verifies versions presented by his information sources (participants of the conflict), and next, according to the rules of methodology, analyses them. The circling method suggests conducting a site inspection with the parties in question – the cemetery administration, road construction and the families of those buried and threatened with exhumation. A geodesist invited by the journalist as an independent expert, shows the planned route of the road directly on the site. It turns out that instead of just a few single tombs, whole “quarters” of the cemetery are to be destroyed and each one consists of several dozens of graves. The reporter’s text is illustrated with pictures and precise plans with the marked course of the road through the burial ground. A scandal breaks out, and the paper that revealed the “hard truth”, is preparing a series of publications intended to reveal the manipulation and disinformation used to hide the real route of the planned bypass from public opinion.

In the above example, the circling method had excellent results. The journalist was not satisfied with the opinion of one or the other side, and he became suspicious learning about

contradictory versions. The decision was to solve a typical conflict situation by means of an impartial and neutral expert (the third party technique), who was a geodesist with territorial orientation and capable of excellent map and project reading. In the circular method, it is important to reach all the possible sources. In the described example the journalist found the cemetery administrator, who showed him the old parish books describing the borders of the burial grounds from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This was how he gained arguments for asking one side of the conflict the “difficult questions”. Numerous visits to the site were documented in photographs, and talking with the local residents, families visiting the graves, finally, with workers in the company building the bypass, enabled him to fully confirm the initial hypothesis: the cheapest and shortest, route was chosen, counting on no one remembering the memory of the dead.

### **The jigsaw puzzle method**

The journalist, as a communicator, works in a purposeful and organized manner<sup>27</sup>. Processing reality, “deconstructing” events and putting them together again, finding links between certain facts. There are three commonly known and used ways of linking facts: thematic (connecting each detail with an event), temporal (chain of events, time sequences), and cause-effect (one fact cannot appear without the other).

The re-arrangement of facts is the ability to construct a text. The journalistic text is made up of many elements, which are created during research. They can formulate separate motifs of the text or programme, they can intersect and merge into one – it is important however that they create one logical structure.

In a situation where a journalist, for justified reasons, cannot chose the method of circling around a subject, he usually decides to use the jigsaw puzzle method. It owes its name to putting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which requires a good imagination, sense of space, good memory and most of all, patience. Putting together certain elements, similar solutions, out of which only one is correct. The method, as in the puzzle game, leads to breakthrough results, when out of the chaos of elements the whole picture is revealed. The method is also based on collecting individual relations, interviews, descriptions and documents. Interestingly, the more elements are collected, the greater the probability of success, because if a picture, made up of many elements, lacks one small part, it does not

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<sup>27</sup> B. Garlicki, *Selekcja informacji w dziennikarstwie*, Kraków 1981, p. 7.

disrupt the entire work. The case is different with a picture consisting of only a few pieces, then the absence of one element excludes creating a whole.

In the jigsaw puzzle method, the most difficult is its initial stage, when we, for instance, face a wall of silence from the witness or blanks in documentation, which cannot be reconstructed. In this case, it is worth considering using another research method, such as reconstruction of events.

### **Reconstruction of events**

A procedure that aims at recreating an event, episode or series of events, is called a reconstruction. If it is properly undertaken, and responsibly used, it can be very beneficial for the subject and content of the publication. This method of research must include:

- chronology;
- precise reconstruction of the described events;
- indicating and defining the participants of the described events, their part and presented versions of events;
- defining the cause, and also the effects and consequences of actions and events;
- the meaning of events and processes for receivers.

In the ethical and professional standards of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), recreating the course of events for publication has the following rules:

- each reconstruction should be clearly marked;
- if the program contains reconstruction interlaced with original footage, it should be repeatedly marked;
- viewers cannot have doubts as to what they are watching at a given moment;
- one cannot fabricate/forged facts;
- reconstruction should be in accordance with reality and fair towards all the participants of events;
- reconstruction should resemble what is known for sure about the event or series of events;
- reconstructing controversial events or those that can influence the public opinion on living people, cannot claim or suggest that something is a fact, if it cannot be proven. If some detail is not known – for example, a facial expression or uttered word – it cannot be independently created; however, if this type of detail is essential for the continuity of the story, it should be

clearly stated that it has been fictionally created. In crime reconstructions, unjustified presentation of violence and drastic scenes, encouraging imitation, should be avoided<sup>28</sup>.

In the history of journalism, one of the most perfect examples of reconstructing events is a report by Truman Capote for the *The New Yorker*. The 1966 book – *In Cold Blood* – is a document of the crime committed by two recidivists on a four-person family of a farmer from Holcomb in the state of Kansas. Authentic events were in detail recreated by the author, as was the well-known investigation, pursuit of the criminals, court hearings and the behavior of the killers, up to their execution. In the author's note to the first edition of the book, already in the first sentence, we find the enumeration of research work methods: "All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned, more often than not numerous interviews conducted over a considerable period of time"<sup>29</sup>.

Capote faithfully remembered 94 per cent of all the conversations he had during his stay in Kansas, and what proves he was a perfect researcher-documentalist is the fact that *In Cold Blood* took him six years to write.

### **Part of the truth is not the truth**

An example of bad research, breaking all possible methodological rules, was a piece on Bronisław Geremek's alleged cooperation with the People's Republic of Poland Security Service (pol. *Służba Bezpieczeństwa – SB*), published on the Internet portal Fronda.pl. Its editor in chief Tomasz P. Terlikowski admitted, already after publishing the article, that reporters did not investigate the case thoroughly, nor check their assumptions or hypothesis. Rephrasing the thoughts of Lec, one can say that "sailing towards the sources", they forgot that in order to reach them, one always has to swim against the current.

"The moment we received word that the documents [concerning prof. Geremek] are not as clear-cut, we immediately published [...] an explanation by PhD Piotr Gontarczyk, who examined the case in detail. Following that, we published an interview with Wojciech Sawicki, who presented the complicated situation of a researcher. Now, after thoroughly checking the case and further consultation, we can only withdraw the formulated assumptions. And say loud and clear that we apologize. This duty I take on myself. [...] A belief that only the truth is interesting, led us to publishing a document, that we did not carefully check. And

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<sup>28</sup> *Vademecum dziennikarstwa BBC* [Guidelines for factual programmes], transl. ed. by K. Jakubowicz, Warszawa 1993, p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> T. Capote, *In Cold Blood*, London 2000.



now it leads us to an apology. It will not change the published texts, comments made or words uttered. We do not want to pretend, that they did not happen. But they will help, if only slightly, to fix the harm we did to the memory of the departed and his family, and most of all, avoid making a similar mistake by others examining archives or gossiping about documents [...]. And I assure our readers that I and the whole team at Fronda.pl, will make an effort so that these kind of mistakes never happen again because »only the truth is interesting«!<sup>30</sup>

Such situations as the one described above, show how important research and its proper documentation really is. If it is not there, receivers will make an assumption that publishers who do not or cannot care for details, probably also have an equally irresponsible approach to serious issues. From here, it is just one step away from losing credibility<sup>31</sup>.

Challenging for a researcher are situations where true and the false information are interwoven. A skillful juxtaposing of seemingly true data placed in a certain context makes it difficult to verify. When the content is attractive and seems probable, the working rule should be: “part of the truth is not the truth”.

In mid 2011, a prankster by the name of AptiQuant created a website resembling a vaguely unfamiliar research institute with the same name, dealing with sociology of the Internet. The institute apparently researched the IQ level of a group of one hundred thousand users of the web browser Internet Explorer. Conclusions of the research done by AptiQuant were shocking – users of IE had a lower than average IQ! In the same “research”, it was found that users of Chrome, Firefox and Safari have a slightly higher than average IQ, and users of Camino, Opera and Internet Explorer with a Chrome Frame are the brightest. The interesting news, that Internet Explorer deprives of people of their intelligence, reached *CNN*, *BBC*, *Daily Mail*, *Forbes* and numerous other media around the world. The utter nonsense accumulated by a disappointed user of subsequent, little-functional versions of Explorer, did not alarm publishers and editors. It was the viewers who did not believe it, and discovered that the site was a hoax<sup>32</sup>.

### **Online research**

The revolution in communication led not only to a change in the habits of media content users, but also to a change in tools and procedures in the models of obtaining and processing data. The flow in information in the times of Twitter, Facebook, RSS and Internet live

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<sup>30</sup> T.P. Terlikowski, *Przepraszam!*, [www.fronda.pl/news/czytaj/tytul/przepraszam](http://www.fronda.pl/news/czytaj/tytul/przepraszam) [accessed: 21.09.2011].

<sup>31</sup> See Ch. Urban, *Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press. A Report for the ASNE Journalism Credibility Project*, Reston 1999.

<sup>32</sup> A. Szyłło, „Internet Explorer pozbawia inteligencji?”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* 5.08.2011, p. 6.

broadcasts is faster, more diverse and intensive. The most important feature of these new media is the uninterrupted flow of content, which results in new distribution channels for information and opinions journalists make. In the research *Internet in the work of journalists*, 99 per cent of journalists admitted that they use the global network in their work. More than half (57.1 per cent) believed that the credibility of the Internet as a source is the same as other sources, and 6.7 per cent of respondents saw it as a medium more credible than other sources of obtaining information. Only one in five questioned (21.9 per cent) had doubts concerning the credibility of the Internet, claiming that other media are more credible. 82.9 per cent stated that online research was their way of preparing materials for publishing, and 75.2 per cent searched for news there<sup>33</sup>. The data reflects the common use of electronic research and great trust of journalists towards Internet sources. This results from what seems to be constant pressure to meet deadlines, competition between media, and most of all, a common belief that “an average story delivered on time is more useful than a signed and sealed topic appearing too late”<sup>34</sup>. Fighting with constant lack of time, journalists make many *ad hoc* decisions. Here is an example of just such a case.

In September 2011, the credibility of the Polish Press Agency (PAP), and with it, several Internet services, was jeopardized after an impersonator, pretending to be MP Beata Kempa, sent a statement claiming her resignation from candidating for Parliament. The agency posted the newswire, quoting part of the statement, which was apparently sent to the editorial office. Meanwhile, in another agency newswire, Mariusz Błaszczak, chairman of the Law and Order (PiS) parliamentary club, claimed that Kempa is not resigning from running in the elections, and the case will be directed to the public prosecutor’s office because the statement sent to the agency was false. Shortly after, the MP herself claimed on her website that most likely, someone hacked her parliamentary email or used her email address. Although heads of PAP explained that they maintained all the standard procedures, which were verifying the email address from which the statement came from and attempting [*sic!* – note M.Ch.] to call MP Kempa, yet the necessity to urgently publish the news prevailed<sup>35</sup>. The mentioned example shows that there are no routine research procedures or they are not followed even in media institutions of first-rate importance. In this situation, the opinion of David Nicholas, quoted by Magdalena Szpunar, that credible information online is

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<sup>33</sup> W. Sokołowski, *Internet w pracy dziennikarzy*, [www.epr.pl/internet-w-pracy-dziennikarzy,e-pr](http://www.epr.pl/internet-w-pracy-dziennikarzy,e-pr) [accessed: 19.05.2009].

<sup>34</sup> T. Harcup, *Dziennikarstwo. Teoria i praktyka* [Journalism. Principles and practice], Łódź 2010, p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> *PAP za szybko podał informację o rezygnacji Beaty Kempy*, [www.press.pl/newsy](http://www.press.pl/newsy) [accessed: 28.10.2011].

information confirmed by many sources<sup>36</sup> does not hold. If it did, the information about Beata Kempa's resignation from parliamentary elections, published after PAP in many serious news portals, should be viewed as credible. Nicholas did not take into account that journalists and editors (and not just civic journalists or bloggers) do not take the effort to verify information, but limit themselves to copying it. „Recycling” and growing “chains of exploitation” of journalistic material (online publications, content sent to mobile devices, print), copied and disseminated without verification, upholds errors. The outcome is misinformation against which Carl M. Cannon warned in the *American Journalism Review*: “This is the real computer virus: misinformation. Despite years of warnings, this malady keeps creeping its way into the newsprint and onto the airwaves of mainstream news outlets”<sup>37</sup>.

In April 2011, on the anniversary of the presidential plane crash near Smoleńsk, PAP released an agency wire containing a seemingly trivial spelling error, which nonetheless placed in a certain context proved harmful for both the professionalism of the agency, as for the local media which repeated the error. The part of the PAP newswire copied by the largest internet services in Poland was: „przed uroczystościami w Lesie Kaczyńskim, które w poniedziałek rozpoczną się ok. godz. 16.00”<sup>38</sup>. The mistake was for many hours repeated by Internet portals such as wyborcza.pl, rp.pl, wp.pl, and Salon24.pl. Excessive trust towards the content passed on by the press agency and the notorious use of the copy-paste procedure by some Internet publishers, is in itself a reprehensible practice, but it becomes a scandal when a journalist, not reading the information copy-pastes it! In this context, the old journalistic rule *Go with what you have got* should be followed by an equally old rule of editorial professionals: *When in doubt, leave out*.

One of the most often visited online sites and source of “useful knowledge” also for journalists, is *Wikipedia*. When it was compared with *Encyclopedia Britannica*, it turned out that the online encyclopedia has 33 per cent more errors, hence the difficulty of considering it a source of credible information. *Wikipedia* errors have become legendary and so have slip-ups of media and authors who trusted it. The know-it-all, racing against the clock hot-heads, who make up the three-thousand person team of social contributors of the digital encyclopedia, informed on the death of the legendary co-creator of Apple Steve Jobs three years before his death, and claimed Margaret Thatcher was a fictional character. “Yes,

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<sup>36</sup> M. Szpunar, „Internet w procesie gromadzenia danych o charakterze wtórnym”, *Studia Medioznawcze* 2009, No. 2, p. 144.

<sup>37</sup> C.M. Cannon, “The Real Computer Virus”, *American Journalism Review* April 2001, pp. 28–35.

<sup>38</sup> Transl.: “before the ceremony in the Kaczynski Forest, which will begin on Monday at 16.00”. The surname of the president was mistakenly used instead of the name of the location – the Smolensk Forest.

sometimes someone contributes information that has errors commonly perceived as the truth. I always tell others that the fact that they heard something does not make that information true” – commented creator of *Wikipedia* Jimmy Wales. British critic of online publications Tom Scott assumed that readers should be warned against bad journalism, which is usually the result of bad research. He created a set of labels, with which he stamps unreliable texts. “This article contains unsourced, unverified information from Wikipedia; Journalist does not understand the subject they are talking about; This article is based on an unverified, anonymous tip-off; Statistics, survey results and/or equations in the article were sponsored by a PR company”<sup>39</sup> are just a few of them.

Many people are not aware that behind the information on, for example, medical discoveries, are not years of scientific work, but an *ad hoc* research by PR specialists. “Media are so desperate to cheaply obtain content that more and more often, they publish advertisements sent to them by PR agencies” – regrets Tom Scott<sup>40</sup>. This attitude of journalists and the media is justified by the economy of research, according to which journalists eagerly use secondary sources, even those sponsoring journalistic publications. The scale of this practice is visible in the growing number of media publications inspired by entities specialized in communication management, and during a time when the world economy is at its peak in handling non-material goods. One of the most important commodities is the attention of the mass viewer, which both PR and journalism have to compete for. Their cooperation is therefore a result of economic factors and the fact that both underwent substantial aggregation<sup>41</sup>.

### **Search methodology and the architecture of a journalist text**

The basic research criteria are its functional criteria, being the size of the text, purpose of publication, composition, illustration layer etc. Based on functionalism and construction, a division into reporter and journalistic subsystems of information was made. The genre features are therefore a code allowing reading a message mutually understandable between the sender and the receiver. An additional criterion may be the range of users.

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<sup>39</sup> T. Scott, *Journalism Warning Labels*, [www.tomscott.com/warnings/](http://www.tomscott.com/warnings/) [accessed: 8.06.2012].

<sup>40</sup> K. Kopacz, 'Przeczytaj i zaklej', *Press* 2010, No. 12, pp. 52–53.

<sup>41</sup> M. Chyliński, „Dziennikarstwo i public relations w ekonomicie zainteresowania publiczności”, *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze* 2011, No. 3/4.



Figure 5. Labels created by Tom Scott warning against incompetent journalism

Source: Journalism Warning Labels, [www.tomscott.com/warnings/](http://www.tomscott.com/warnings/).

The genre convention allows presenting news in a clear, factual way, which in turn naturally determines the method of working with sources. The classical construction of a journalistic work, according to which the introduction has the most interesting and undoubted facts, while background and less important details are the development, is actually an extension of the rule: “Give first what is most important and what you are certain of”. Researching, the journalist prepares a list of questions and should refrain from judgment and comments, select problems without bias and take care to be neutral.

Methodical research should resemble the journalistic work. The most important is the event itself, summarized in a climax. Next, the background is set, behind the scenes and links between sequences of events or its participants and the less important details. At this stage of research we must find an answer to the question *what happened?*, and it should be stated in the first three lines of the work. This is how the journalist and writer Mario Vargas Llosa defined a lead: “Do you know what those three lines are? – Vallejo looked at him with a devilish stir in his eye – It’s what the Americans call a lead, the head, remember this forever [...] All the most important facts collected in the three first lines. Let’s say »two dead and five

million dollar losses are the outcome of a fire that yesterday destroyed most of the Wiese department store, one of the main buildings in the center of Lima<sup>42</sup>.

The lead must answer the Five Ws: who, what, when, where and why? Although a professional who wants to reveal the background of events, explain the causes, relations, motives or consequences, he does not stop at collecting and verifying the most important information. He must cater to the following construction elements of his work. According to the rule of the inverted-pyramid, the opening paragraphs contain the answer to the most important research questions, while the lower part contains additional and less important information. A strict selection based on methodological criteria makes it easier to reach the bottom of a case and eliminate mistakes and uncertainties. Verified facts and opinions open the text, while less reliable assumptions and statements are the later development, the transitive part. The final paragraphs serve the purpose of once more analyzing data, conclusions and generalizations.

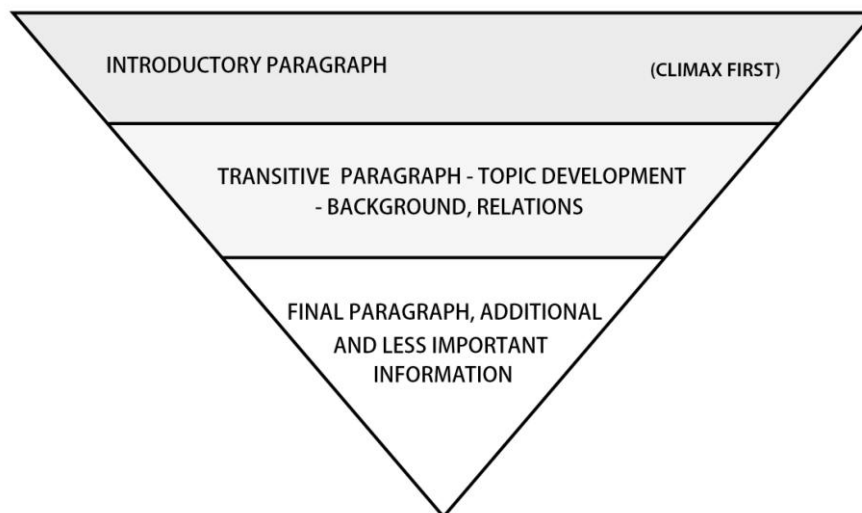


Figure 6. Research and architecture of a journalistic text

Source: Own research.



Journalistic research as an organized search for knowledge and an independent, systematic pursuit of truth, determining new facts in order to publish them, is one of the fields of media studies and communication. Research theory and methodology are strictly connected with the functions of journalism and relations between actual reality and the one described and

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<sup>42</sup> M. Vargas Llosa, *Rozmowa w „Katedrze”* [Conversación en la Catedral], Warszawa 1969, p. 163.

presented in the media. Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies, pioneers of the modern approach to the profession and theory of journalism, and Robert E. Park, founder of the Chicago School of Sociology and enthusiast of the participant observation method, proved in their research on mass communication and the role of the individual creating the message that research and analysis used in social studies will in a natural way be used in journalism. Indeed, Park was one of the first sociologists, who began using press publications in his work.

The subject of this article can be a starting point for a discussion on journalistic methodology in the broader sense, and it's author hopes to provoke an exchange of thought – also by journalists themselves. The subject is much too vast and complex to be discussed in one work. It seems that *Studia Medioznawcze [Media Studies]* could be a perfect forum for a broader debate on the subject of journalistic methodology and the arguments posed by the author will further echo. Legal regulations, above all the obligation to accuracy and reliability while gathering and using press material, ethical norms, and finally, journalistic pragmatism shows that journalists have to acquire methodological standards of academic research – most of all, procedures used in social research. Although many standards of journalistic research meet certain intellectual and ethical norms, like the obligation to the truth, even the best journalistic practices will not replace scientific and academic standards. The urgent necessity of introducing the methodological research of social studies into journalistic reality is justified by the examples of unreliability due to a lack of thereof and ignoring the basic rules of working with sources – selection, critical judgment, finally, no additional research.