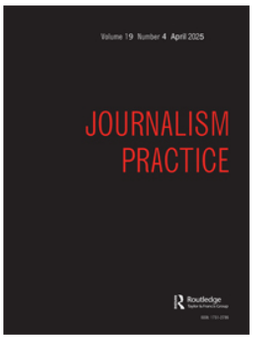

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Authenticity, Neutrality, and Authority: Truth Constructed in the Discourse of News

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a framework of discourse truth for analyzing how truth is constructed in news discourse. Using the UAM CorpusTool, this framework is applied to a corpus of 160 news articles, totaling 142,894 words, collected from the websites of Cable News Network (CNN) and Fox News. The analysis highlights three key dimensions of discourse truth: authenticity, neutrality, and authority. Authenticity is primarily constructed through evidentiality (including direct evidence, hearsay, and inference) and quotations (direct or indirect). Neutrality is achieved through third-party attribution (specified or unspecified sources) and low modality (lexical or grammatical). Authority is established through identity credentials (e.g., names, titles, and institutional affiliations) and personalization strategies (i.e., personalizing the experience of subjects, journalists, or audiences). Both CNN and Fox News emphasize authenticity, neutrality, and authority, focusing primarily on the first two aspects, although they differ in their use of specific discourse devices. These findings provide novel insights into how the truth of news is constructed and understood.

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Authenticity; authority; discourse truth; neutrality; news discourse; truth

Introduction

Recent geopolitical tensions such as the US-China trade war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have spurred a surge in disinformation, which significantly erodes public trust in news media (Harjuniemi 2022; Humprecht 2019; Monsees 2023). This decline in news trust has reignited scholarly debates about the nature of truth in journalism, prompting scholars like Freedman (2018), Hannan (2018), and Bennett and Livingston (2018) to revisit the essential question of how news reflects reality. This inquiry builds on decades of scholarship, including foundational frameworks such as Tuchman's (1972) concept of "objectivity as a strategic ritual," Zelizer's (1990) argument on journalistic "personalization," Montgomery's (2001a, 2001b) theory of "authentic talk," and Scannell's (2014) inquiry into "live" broadcasting. These seminal works remain critical for understanding how media practices shape truth (claims), particularly amid contemporary crises that challenge traditional notions of news credibility.

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Audiences often judge the truth of news by its alignment with reality, yet overlook the roles of language practices, power relations, and social values in shaping what is deemed to be "true." Challenging the notion of truth as static or inherent, Feng (2022) argues that it is instead a dynamic process constructed within news discourse. To advance this perspective, he introduces "discourse truth," a concept distinct from objective truth, and he applies it to analyze how truth is negotiated and framed in the discourse of television news interviews. However, his study focuses specifically on a subgenre of broadcast news discourse known as "affiliated news interview," which is characterized by its interviewer and interviewee representing the same news institution (Montgomery 2007). By situating discourse truth primarily within this narrow context, the applicability of this concept to other forms of media remains underexplored, thereby limiting its empirical scope.

To address this gap, the present study extends the analytical scope of discourse truth to written news formats. By conducting a comparative analysis of Cable News Network (CNN, a liberal-leaning outlet) and Fox News (a conservative-aligned outlet), this research aims to verify the broader adaptability of this concept and to elucidate its truth-construction strategies in print and digital news discourses. Specifically, it is expected to achieve three objectives: (1) defining discourse truth's parameters used in written news discourse; (2) refining and validating its theoretical framework through empirical analysis of CNN and Fox News; and (3) identifying similarities and differences in discourse truth construction between the two outlets. Beyond theoretical contributions, this study is predicated to interrogate how discourse truth shapes perceptions of truth in an era rife with disinformation, thereby offering insights for media practitioners and policymakers to navigate across complex digital media ecosystems.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. First, it establishes a theoretical framework for analyzing discourse truth in news discourse. Next, the methodology section outlines the empirical data sourced from CNN and Fox News digital platforms and details the use of UAM CorpusTool for data annotation and analysis. The analysis section then systematically examines truth-building strategies based on the proposed theoretical framework, focusing on how truth is constructed in the discourse of CNN and Fox News. Finally, the conclusion assesses the theoretical and practical implications of discourse truth construction, exploring how discourse truth shapes journalistic objectivity in an era of "post-truth."

Discourse Truth in the News

Defining Discourse Truth

The concept of discourse truth was first introduced by Feng (2022), who defines it as "the truth constructed through discourse actions and practices in the news" (2403). This concept builds on the fundamental principle of truth-telling. Truth-telling constitutes the ethical cornerstone of journalism, mandating the dissemination of rigorously verified facts while minimizing bias or distortion (Ward 2009, 2012). This principle operates through three interdependent mechanisms: (1) factual accuracy, which requires that journalists cross-check sources and corroborate evidence to ensure the accuracy of their reports (Saurí and Pustejovsky 2012; Ward 2012); (2) procedural objectivity, which requires that journalists adopt a neutral, balanced, and detached stance in news reporting

so that it can enable audience autonomy in interpreting the news events (Lichtenberg 1998; Muñoz-Torres 2012; Wien 2005); and (3) ethical transparency, which is enforced through practices like source attribution, conflict-of-interest disclosures, and privacy protections (Katz and Mays 2019; Michailidou and Trenz 2021). Collectively, these standards safeguard credibility by aligning news narratives with empirical reality while resisting ideological or commercial pressures.

In the past, truth-telling was understood primarily through the framework of positivism, which held that scientific methods and empirical observations are the most trustworthy ways of ascertaining truth. This perspective prioritizes the verification of claims through direct experience and evaluates the accuracy of information based on observable data and scientific evidence (Muñoz-Torres 2012; Schudson 2003; Ward 2009). However, in today's digital landscape, the proliferation of multiple types of reports, including those that may be false or misleading, poses an enormous challenge to the traditional concept of truth-telling. In particular, the surge of disinformation has emerged as a primary catalyst eroding core journalistic principles such as objectivity, accuracy, and truth-telling, largely destabilizing public trust in media ecosystems (Katz and Mays 2019; McNair 2017; Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi 2021).

Scholars have long scrutinized the interplay between language practices and truth-telling in news discourse. For example, Fairclough (1992) discusses the "conversationalization" of public discourse, while Montgomery (2001a) stresses the importance of "authentic talk" in broadcast news. Hutchby (2001) analyzes "witnessing" practices in news interviews, and Zelizer (1990) investigates journalistic "personalization" in news narratives. Building on these works, Feng (2022) finds that truth-telling is achieved mainly in two ways. First, it arises from journalists' adherence to professional practices such as interviewing, fact-checking, and impartial editing, which enable them to gather information, produce content, and report stories with detachment, fairness, and impartiality, thereby striving to approximate objective reality. Second, truth-telling is achieved through discursive construction, which Feng (2022, 2403) terms as "discourse truth." This type of truth materializes through language practices such as lexical choices, modality markers, and (re)wording.

Discourse truth differs from actual facts reported in the news. According to Yang (2008, 61, our translation), "facts" constitute the objective foundation of journalism. They are "actual occurrences or existing states in the world" and is independent of human mediation. In contrast, discourse truth emerges through subjective processes of journalistic interpretation, evaluation, and narrative framing. Facts serve as the raw material for news production, while discourse truth forms through the processing of these facts. Although discourse truth cannot fully reduplicate those facts, it can achieve epistemic validity by representing them through discursive practices (Feng 2022; Tuchman 1978).

The Framework of Discourse Truth

This study further develops Feng's (2022) concept of "discourse truth" by constructing a theoretical framework that integrates Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action. Habermas conceptualizes communication as a process of mutual understanding between the speaker and the hearer, which is grounded in three universal validity claims: truth, rightness, and truthfulness (38). The first claim posits that words accurately reflect the

world's objective reality, emphasizing the congruence between language and the material world. The second claim concerns the appropriate use of language, evaluating discursive adherence to shared sociocultural norms governing speaker-hearer interactions. The third claim addresses consistency between expressed language and speaker's internal states, ensuring that one's words and actions truly convey his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

Extending Habermas's theory of communicative action, Montgomery (2007) argues that news authenticity hinges on its alignment with three validity claims, namely truth, appropriateness (paralleling Habermas's "rightness"), and sincerity (paralleling Habermas's "truthfulness"). Truth spans a spectrum from empirically verifiable facts (e.g., verified statistics in news reports) to context-dependent interpretations (e.g., analytical claims in interviews). Appropriateness emphasizes adherence to genre-specific conventions, such as the practice of balancing adversarial questioning with journalistic neutrality in political interviews (e.g., Clayman 1988, 1992; Clayman and Heritage 2002; Ekström 2001). Sincerity centers on audience perceptions of journalistic intent, whether through unscripted immediacy in live reporting or impartiality in news delivery (Feng 2016, 2020). Montgomery (2007, 218) demonstrates that these claims are prioritized differently across news subgenres. News presentations foreground truth and sincerity, prioritizing factual accuracy and perceived impartiality. In contrast, news interviews emphasize appropriateness and sincerity. News authenticity thus arises not from fixed criteria but from contextually negotiated credibility, where each subgenre calibrates these three dimensions to sustain the legitimacy of news discourse.

Drawing on the above discussion, we propose a theoretical framework for analyzing "discourse truth," which comprises three interdependent dimensions: authenticity, authority, and neutrality (see Table 1). The "authenticity" dimension corresponds to the journalistic claim to truth. It is realized mainly through evidentiality and quotation. Evidentiality indicates the source or basis of information in a statement, essentially showing how a speaker knows what s/he is saying. It concerns whether information is based on direct evidence ("I saw … "), hearsay ("It is reported … "), or inference ("It seems … ") (Aikhenvald 2004). Evidentiality can enhance the authenticity of news by clarifying whether information comes from direct observation, reliable sources, or other means.

Table 1. The framework of discourse truth.

Dimensions	Strategies	Examples and discursive devices
Authenticity	Evidentiality	(1) **I saw** … (direct evidence) (2) **It is reported** … (hearsay) (3) It **seems …** (inference)
	Quotation	(1) He said, "**It is … "** (direct) (2) He said that **it was** … (indirect)
Authority	identity credentials	(1) **Poland** (nationality) **striker** (role) **Robert Lewandowski** (name) told CNN that …
	Personalization	(1) **The 11-year-old girl** … (subject) (2) **You** know … / **You**'ll see (audience) (3) **I've been told** … (journalist)
Neutrality	Third-party attribution	(1) **According to Dr. Smith** … (specified attribution) (2) **Experts/officials say** … (unspecified attribution)
	Low modality	(1) **might/could/possibly/suggests** (lexical) (2) **It is believed that** … **/It appears that** … (grammatical)

Quotation suggests that the words conveyed are from someone else, usually eyewitnesses, experts, public figures, or official documents (Zelizer 1989, 371). Quotation is either direct or indirect. Direct quotation refers to a statement—usually presented within quotation marks—that comes directly from the source. Using direct quotations, reporters pass on information without any changes or manipulation. An indirect quotation is a rephrased version of an original statement that does not use quotation marks. Quotations serve various purposes, such as adding credibility, capturing specific words, or emphasizing points, and they are thus essential for conveying authenticity in news reports.

The "authority" dimension aligns with the journalistic claim to appropriateness, where journalists justify the legitimacy of the speaker/participant as a credible source of his/her words or actions. Authority is realized mainly through identity credentials and personalization. The former refers to the qualifications, experiences, and backgrounds that establish a speaker's authority or credibility. According to Thornborrow (2001), identity credentials, such as educational background, professional experience, official titles, or field expertise, validate the speaker's qualification in talking (also see Feng 2020, 2022).

According to Zelizer (1990, 371), personalization concerns journalists' personal experience or "physical presence" in the news site, a practice that legitimizes their journalistic authority by framing them as a primary storyteller. While Zelizer's analysis centers on journalists' personalization, we extend this concept to incorporate non-journalists' personal experiences. This broader sense of personalization can be categorized into three types: (1) subject personalization, which focuses on the experiences of participants in the story such as victims and witnesses; (2) journalist personalization, which incorporates journalists' personal experiences into the reporting; and (3) audience personalization, which creates a narrative that resonates with audiences' experiences, interests, and emotions. Personalization can enhance the credibility of news but may also raise questions about its objectivity.

The "neutrality" dimension aligns with the journalistic claim to sincerity, namely journalists' commitment to objectivity in reporting/presenting news. Neutrality is realized mainly through third-party attribution and low modality. Third-party attribution is a practice in which the speaker references an external source to support, verify, or add credibility to her claims (Clayman 1988, 1992; Clayman and Heritage 2002, 2023; Feng 2017, 2022; Montgomery 2007). This approach allows journalists to distance themselves from what has been reported, thereby maintaining a neutral(istic) position in the news (Clayman 1988, 1992; Clayman and Heritage 2002; Feng 2022). There are two types of third-party attributions: specified and unspecified. The former involves quoting the statements of a specific, named source such as an official, expert, or eyewitness (e.g., "According to Dr. Smith, … "). The latter concerns a general source without specification, for example, attributing information to "experts" or "officials." It is commonly used in news where anonymity is required or when multiple sources are involved.

Finally, low modality refers to language that expresses a lower degree of certainty, commitment, or confidence in a statement (Feng 2022; Montgomery 2007; Saeed 2000). It serves to soften claims or express doubt, thus enhancing objectivity and leaving room for alternative perspectives, particularly in situations where either absolute certainty is impossible or evidence is inconclusive (Feng 2022). Two types of low

modality are identifiable: lexical and grammatical. The former involves specific words or phrases that denote uncertainty or tentativeness, such as "might," "could," "possibly," or "suggests." The latter concerns grammatical structures used to soften the statement's strength, e.g., "It is believed that … ," "It appears that … ," "if … " Such expressions suggest that the information is offered as an interpretation rather than a definitive truth.

Data and Methods

The data of this study are a corpus of news articles collected from CNN and Fox News. To ensure a fair comparison, we processed the dataset as follows. First, we extracted news articles from CNN and Fox News websites across four categories: sports, politics, business, and science & technology, spanning October 2023 to October 2024. For each news article, we recorded its metadata including news type (image, text, and video), title, URL, and publication date, and compiled them into an Excel database. Then, we manually deleted news articles consisting solely of images or videos to meet textual analysis requirements. To ensure methodological rigor and eliminate selection bias, we implemented a systematic randomization protocol using Python's Pandas library, which randomly sampled entries from each of the four categories within the dataset.

The process involves using the "pd.read_excel" function to load the data, the "df.sample" function to randomly filter the news articles, and the "random_rows.to_excel" function to generate a new file containing 20 randomly filtered news articles. Finally, we manually retrieved the filtered news articles directly from CNN and Fox News websites. Each article preserved its original metadata (including title, authors, publication date, URL, and textual content) and underwent a standardized preprocessing step where non-textual elements such as embedded images were systematically removed. Then, the selected articles were processed into plain text and imported into the UAM CorpusTool to establish two primary corpora: C1CN (Corpus 1: CNN News, 79,292 words) and C2FN (Corpus 2: Fox News, 63,602 words), collectively totaling 142,894 words. Each corpus was further divided into four subcorpora corresponding to the predefined categories (see Table 2).

Using the UAM CorpusTool, we developed an annotation scheme based on the discourse truth framework (see Figure 1) and systematically annotated discourse truth strategies across C1CN and C2FN. To ensure intercoder reliability, two authors independently annotated the data, followed by a third author reviewing all the annotations. Any discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussions among the authors until a consensus was reached. Figure 2 illustrates an example of this annotation process, and Figure 3 shows a sample of the annotated features.

Table 2. The number of articles and words in C1CN and C2FN.

Category / Corpus	Sports		Politics		Business		Sci &Tech		Total	
	Articles	Words	Articles	Words	Articles	Words	Articles	Words	Articles	Words
C1CN	20 (121)	18180	20 (487)	25657	20 (581)	17976	20 (173)	17479	80	79292
C2FN	20 (138)	18417	20 (369)	17388	20 (616)	14208	20 (680)	13586	80	63602
Total	**40 (259)**	**36597**	**40 (856)**	**43045**	**40 (1197)**	**32184**	**40 (853)**	**31065**	**160**	**142894**

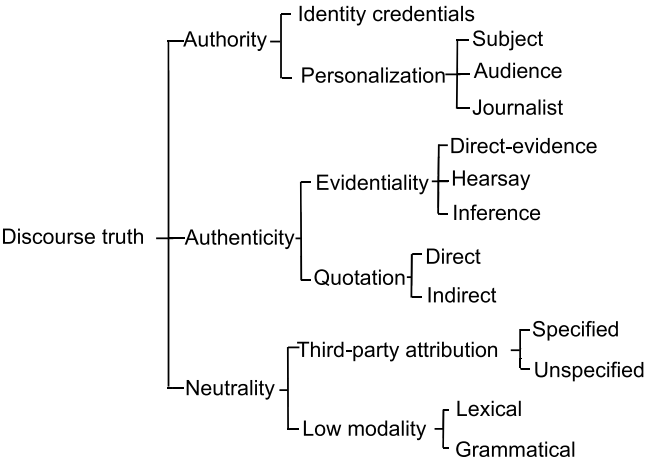

Figure 1. The annotation scheme of discourse truth.

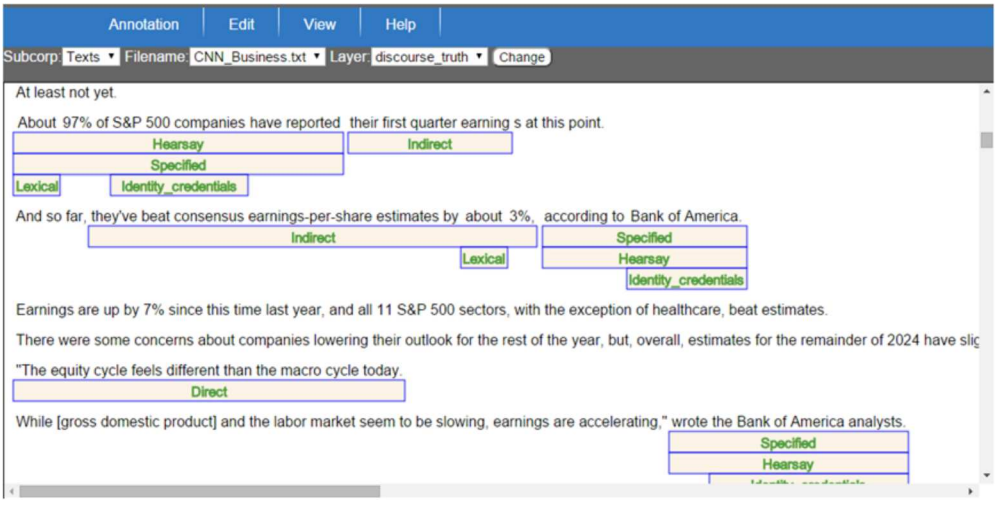

Figure 2. A captured image of the annotation.

Next, we compared the frequency of discourse truth strategies annotated across C1CN and C2FN and conducted a qualitative analysis of their forms and functions in the news. The following sections elaborate on the key findings of the analysis.

Truth Constructed in CNN and Fox News

Table 3 presents the frequency of discourse truth strategies used in C1CN and C2FN, including each feature's absolute frequency (n), percentage (%), and normalized frequency (per 1000 words, nf). As shown in this table, both CNN and Fox News emphasize authenticity, neutrality, and authority in constructing discourse truth, with *authenticity*

File	Pretext	<discourse_truth feature="direct"/>	Posttext
Texts/CNN_Science.txt	...Bolton said he often refers to Io as	"Jupiter's tortured moon"	because of the ferocious forces it regularly enco...
Texts/CNN_Business.txt	...Is that doom and gloom overstated? Tracy Chen:	I definitely think so.	The CRE market is very rate sensitive. If we are...
Texts/Fox_Sports2.txt	...the county's parks and recreation department to	"expressly designate"	whether they're for male, female or coed athletes...
Texts/Fox_politics.txt	...Roll Call reported that Huffman calls himself a	"nonreligious humanist."	He, along with Raskin, founded the Congressional...

Figure 3. A sample of an annotated feature: "direct quotation."

Table 3. Discourse truth in C1CN and C2FN.

		Combined			C1CN			C2FN		
Dimensions	Strategies	n	%	nf	n	%	nf	n	%	nf
Authenticity	Evidentiality	2283	21.64	16.0	1290	22.29	16.3	993	20.85	15.6
	Quotation	2921	27.69	20.4	1602	27.68	20.2	1319	27.69	20.7
	Subtotal	**5204**	**49.33**	**36.4**	**2892**	**49.97**	**36.5**	**2312**	**48.54**	**36.4**
Neutrality	Third-party attribution	2128	20.17	14.9	1179	20.37	14.9	949	19.92	14.9
	Low modality	963	9.13	6.7	546	9.43	6.9	417	8.75	6.6
	Subtotal	**3091**	**29.30**	**21.6**	**1725**	**29.81**	**21.8**	**1366**	**28.68**	**21.5**
Authority	Identity-credentials	1641	15.55	11.5	882	15.24	11.1	759	15.94	11.9
	Personalization	614	5.82	4.3	288	4.98	3.6	326	6.84	5.1
	Subtotal	**2255**	**21.37**	**15.8**	**1170**	**20.22**	**14.8**	**1085**	**22.78**	**17.1**
Total		**10550**	**100.00**	**73.8**	**5787**	**100.00**	**73.0**	**4763**	**100.00**	**74.9**

emerging as the highest priority across the two outlets. The combined corpora (C1CN and C2FN) include 5,204 cases of authenticity, with C1CN contributing 2,892 cases and C2FN 2,312 cases, representing approximately 50 percent. Both corpora contain 36 cases per 1,000 words, with no significant statistical variation between them ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, $p = 0.9218$; see Appendix Table A1[1]).

Neutrality emerges as the second most frequent discursive practice in both corpora. C1CN records 1,725 instances (29.81%), while C2FN shows 1,366 instances (28.68%), with comparable frequency rates of approximately 22 cases per 1,000 words in two corpora. The statistically insignificant difference ($\chi^2 = 0.12$, $p = 0.7336$; see Appendix Table A1) indicates that both outlets have a shared adherence to journalistic objectivity.

While *authority* remains a notable discursive practice in both corpora, it is less prominent than authenticity and neutrality. CNN's corpus (C1CN) contains 1,170 instances (20.22%), compared to Fox News' (C2FN) 1,085 instances (22.78%). However, normalized frequency reveals a statistically significant divergence ($\chi^2 = 12.17$, $p < 0.01$; see Appendix Table A1): CNN averages 14.8 cases per 1,000 words, while Fox News shows a higher emphasis at 17.1. These results indicate that both outlets emphasize authority in their reporting. Fox News demonstrates a higher emphasis on it, a result driven by its prioritization of audience personalization (which will be further discussed in the "Establishing Authority" section below).

Emphasizing Authenticity

Both CNN and Fox News emphasize authenticity as a core discursive practice, realized primarily through evidentiality and quotation. As shown in Table 3, *evidentiality* accounts for 21.64 percent of all discursive markers (2,283 instances across C1CN and C2FN), with no statistically significant difference in normalized frequency between the two outlets ($\chi^2 = 0.94$, $p = 0.3332$; see Appendix Table A2). *Quotation* emerges as a marginally more prevalent strategy, constituting 27.69 percent of markers (2,921 instances), though similarly lacking significant inter-corpus variation in normalized frequency ($\chi^2 = 0.53$, $p = 0.4669$). These parallels suggest that two outlets are convergent in choosing evidentiary reinforcement.

Evidentiality distinguishes among direct evidence, hearsay, and inference (Aikhenvald 2004). *Direct evidence* typically originates from two sources: authoritative speakers with recognized expertise, or first-person accounts employing experiential verbs (e.g., "saw," "observed"). In Example (1), the use of the first-person pronoun alongside the perception verb "saw" directly positions the speaker as an eyewitness. This strategy establishes the speaker's firsthand knowledge of the event, thereby enhancing the report's authenticity by anchoring claims in verifiable experiences (Feng 2022; Hutchby 2001).

(1) One of us saw it during one of our first jobs out of college coaching junior girls' basketball. (Fox News)
(2) CNN Correspondent Veronica Miracle asked … (CNN)
(3) "You have to know your child," he said. (Fox News)

Hearsay is the most commonly used form of evidentiality in both C1CN and C2FN, mainly realized through two syntactic patterns: (1) verbal process + source (or source + verbal process) (Examples 2 and 3) and (2) prepositional phrase + source (Example 4). Given journalism's inherent reliance on secondhand information, such structures serve to authenticate source credibility and discursive legitimacy, thereby reinforcing journalistic claims to truth (Zelizer 1989).

While CNN and Fox News occasionally use *inference* strategies, primarily marked by cognitive verbs like "think" to signal speculative claims (Example 5), such approaches are less commonly used than direct evidence or hearsay due to their inherent reliability deficit.

(4) Scientists have observed Io's powerful volcanoes spewing lava fountains that are dozens of miles high and can even be seen with large telescopes on Earth, according to NASA. (CNN)
(5) Now, some economists think the Fed won't cut interest rates at all this year. (CNN)

Quotation is another widely used strategy in both C1CN and C2FN. This practice enhances the perceived authenticity of reporting by signaling that information is derived from external sources rather than from journalists themselves (Feng 2022; Montgomery 2007; Zelizer 1989). Quoted statements can be categorized as direct or indirect. Direct quotations explicitly attribute speech through specific markers. They are usually enclosed in quotation marks (Examples 6 and 7) or introduced by a colon when the

Table 4. Quotation in C1CN and C2FN.

	Combined			C1CN			C2FN		
Quotation	n	%	nf	n	%	nf	n	%	nf
Direct	1459	49.95	10.2	766	47.82	9.7	693	52.54	10.9
Indirect	1462	50.05	10.2	836	52.18	10.5	626	47.46	9.8
Total	**2921**	**100.00**	**20.4**	**1602**	**100.00**	**20.2**	**1319**	**100.00**	**20.7**

speaker is named beforehand, as shown in Example (8), where Jared Cohen's statement follows the colon. In contrast, indirect quotations paraphrase speech without quotation marks or colons, instead using reporting verbs like "mentioned" to signal attribution, as shown in Example (9).

(6) "As rates go up, our solutions are even more valuable to consumers and merchants," he said. (CNN)
(7) … the percentage of U.S. mortgages considered to be "seriously underwater" rose in the first quarter of 2024 … (Fox News)
(8) Jared Cohen: If you reflect back on most of the last 20 years, the geopolitical center of gravity has been in the Middle East. (CNN)
(9) There are other ways to safely view the eclipse, Deobhakta mentioned. (Fox News)

Table 4 shows that both corpora exhibit comparable proportions of direct and indirect quotations. C1CN comprises 766 direct quotations (47.82%) and 836 indirect quotations (52.18%), while C2FN contains 693 direct quotations (52.54%) and 626 indirect quotations (47.46%). However, the analysis reveals a statistically significant divergence in the use of direct quotations between CNN and Fox News ($\chi^2 = 5.39$, $p = 0.0203$; see Appendix Table A3). CNN demonstrates a preference for indirect quotations (10.5 instances per 1,000 words) over direct ones (9.7 instances), while Fox News exhibits the opposite pattern, favoring direct quotations (10.9 instances) over indirect ones (9.8 instances), though indirect quotation usage shows no significant variation between the two outlets ($\chi^2 = 1.68$, $p = 0.195$).

A single statement may include both direct and indirect quotations, by blending the exact words with rephrased parts of the original statement. This technique enables journalists to subtly incorporate their own interpretations while creating the impression that they are presenting original information. Consider:

(10) Barrett urged others to "never, ever" turn to credit cards to get by unless they know with "absolute certainty" it can be repaid. (CNN)

In this example, the expressions "never, ever" and "absolute certainty" are drawn verbatim from an interview with Barrett, a mother of twins whose credit card reached its limit during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rest of the statement following the verb "urged" is indirect. By blending direct and indirect quotations together, the news selectively highlights Barrett's emphatic expressions ("never, ever," "absolute certainty") while recontextualizing them into a broader news report (Ekström 2001; Feng 2017; Zelizer 1989). This approach subtly incorporates the reporter's interpretation, by framing it as though it originated from Barrett, a third-party source, thus projecting a sense of authenticity and neutrality.

Displaying Neutrality

Table 3 shows that *neutrality* ranks second in constructing discourse truth, totaling 3,091 instances (29.3%) across C1CN and C2FN. Neutrality is primarily achieved through third-party attribution and low modality. *Third-party attribution* is the most prevalent neutrality strategy in the combined corpus, accounting for 20.17 percent of all cases (2,128 instances). The frequency differs marginally between two subcorpora: C1CN contains 1,179 cases (20.37%), while C2FN has 949 cases (19.92%). Both corpora exhibits comparable normalized frequencies (approximately 14.9 cases per 1,000 words), with no statistically significant variation ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, $p = 0.9239$; see Appendix Table A4). In contrast, *low modality* appears less frequently, comprising 9.13 percent of total instances (963 cases) in the combined corpus. C1CN contains 546 cases (9.43%), C2FN contains 417 cases (8.75%), and both corpora yield a normalized frequency of seven cases per 1,000 words. Similar to third-party attribution, no significant inter-corpus difference is observed ($\chi^2 = 0.56$, $p = 0.4553$).

Third-party attribution involves attributing a statement to someone other than the speaker or audience, often as a way for the speaker to shift her footing. Goffman (1981, 131–132) defines footing as the communicative alignment between speakers and hearers, wherein hearers can be categorized as "ratified" or "unratified" and further classified as "addressed" or "unaddressed." Speakers may perform the role of "animator," "author," and/or "principal." Footing shift occurs when the speaker adjusts to these roles. Third-party attribution can be viewed as a typical practice of footing shift. By attributing what is said to a third party (the "principal" role), journalists can adopt the roles of animator and/or author, distancing themselves from the content to maintain a neutral(istic) position (Clayman 1988, 1992; Clayman and Heritage 2002, 2023; Feng 2017, 2022; Montgomery 2007).

Third-party attribution can be classified as *specified* or *unspecified* based on the clarity of the attributed sources. Our analysis shows that explicit source attribution is prevalent in both corpora, in which 1,737 instances (81.63%) directly reference sources, compared with only 391 instances (18.37%) lacking specific attribution (see Table 5).

Specified attribution is often formed in the structure of "source + attribution marker + attributed information." For example:

(11) "I will create a government efficiency commission tasked with conducting a complete financial and performance audit of the entire federal government," Trump said in his speech. (Fox News)

(12) Jared DeMarinis, Maryland's administrator of elections, told CNN his state issued a rule that requires political ads that involve AI-generated content to include disclaimers … (CNN)

Table 5. Third-party attribution in C1CN and C2FN.

	Combined			C1CN			C2FN		
Third-party attribution	n	%	nf	n	%	nf	n	%	nf
Specified	1737	81.63	12.2	965	81.85	12.2	772	81.35	12.1
Unspecified	391	18.37	2.7	214	18.15	2.7	177	18.65	2.8
Total	**2128**	**100.00**	**14.9**	**1179**	**100.00**	**14.9**	**949**	**100.00**	**14.9**

In Example (11), the candidate Donald Trump is identified as the source of the attributed statement "I will create … ," with the verb "said" serving as the attribution marker. In Example (12), the source is "Jared DeMarinis," with "told" as the attribution marker for the attributed statement "his state issued a rule that … " Both cases cite the sources with their names and/or titles. By doing so, they have not only enhanced the credibility of the quoted statements but also reinforced the objectivity of the news under reporting.

Unspecified attribution involves citing a source that is either anonymous or unknown to the audience (Zelizer 1989, 372). In Example (13), "experts" is cited without clarifying who they are; in Example (14), "reportedly" suggests that there is a report about Russian media framing the debate as a victory for Russia, but the source is not identified. Although these sources are unspecified and therefore lack concrete evidence to support the claims, the use of attribution indicates that journalists attempt to distance themselves from the reported statements, thereby reinforcing their position as neutral and objective (Clayman 1992; Feng 2022).

(13) Experts warn that the market is overvaluing Trump Media given the company's fundamentals. (CNN)
(14) Russian media have reportedly touted the debate as a victory for Russia, with Putin positioned to dictate terms in the war in Ukraine … (Fox News)

Another way journalists demonstrate neutrality is through the use of low modality. Modality reflects a speaker's level of belief in or commitment to a statement and can be either deontic or epistemic (Saeed 2000, 125). Deontic modality expresses attitudes like obligation, ability, or willingness, such as "We must wait" (obligation), "You can do it" (ability), or "We will do it soon" (willingness). Epistemic modality, on the other hand, reflects a speaker's certainty about a statement. When certain, high modality is used, e.g., "It is definitely a car"; when uncertain, low modality is used, e.g., "It is likely a car."

Because news reports aim to convey factual information, a high modality is generally used. However, when uncertainty arises, journalists employ low modality to show objective stances toward the truth of a statement (Feng 2022). Low modality is achieved by using either lexical expressions (e.g., "perhaps") or grammatical structures (e.g., "if … "). Table 3 shows that low modality is relatively infrequent in both corpora, occurring 963 times (9.13%) in total, with lexical low modality comprising 86.19 percent and grammatical low modality comprising 13.81 percent (see Table 6). In addition, our analysis reveals statistically significant differences between the corpora in the use of lexical low modality ($\chi^2 = 4.5$, $p = 0.0338$) and grammatical low modality ($\chi^2 = 10.8$, $p = 0.001$; see Appendix Table A5). These discrepancies stem from the outlets' divergent preferences: one favors

Table 6. Low modality in C1CN and C2FN.

	Combined			C1CN			C2FN		
Low modality	n	%	nf	n	%	nf	n	%	nf
Lexical	830	86.19	5.8	491	89.93	6.2	339	81.29	5.3
Grammatical	133	13.81	0.9	55	10.07	0.7	78	18.71	1.2
Total	**963**	**100.00**	**6.7**	**546**	**100.00**	**6.9**	**417**	**100.00**	**6.6**

lexical modality markers, while the other relies more on grammatical constructions. However, when aggregating both forms into a unified low modality category, no significant inter-corpus variation emerges.

Let us consider the following examples.

(15) The long-running antitrust litigation around swipe fees began in 2005 and could go to trial if the card issuers and merchants aren't able to agree on a new settlement that passes the judge's review. (Fox News)
(16) He's warned that Jewish voters will be to blame if he loses in November. (CNN)

Example (15) demonstrates low modality through both lexical and grammatical expressions. It used the low modality modal verb "could" and an if-clause, expressing the journalist's uncertainty about whether the litigation on "swipe fees" will "go to trial." In contrast, Example (16) employs low-modality narration via an if-clause to frame a hypothetical scenario (potential electoral defeat). By avoiding definitive claims about the outcome, the language minimizes certainty, thereby reinforcing the report's objective tone.

Establishing Authority

Authority concerns the credibility of speakers/participants in shaping and legitimizing truth claims. According to Table 3, authority ranks third among the three dimensions of discourse truth, accounting for 2,255 cases (21.37%) across C1CN and C2FN. This dimension operates through two primary mechanisms: identity credentials and personalization. *Identity credentials* emerge as the most frequently used authority strategy in both corpora. C1CN contains 882 instances (15.24%) and C2FN 759 instances (15.94%). Statistical analysis ($\chi^2 = 2.08$, $p = 0.1494$) confirms no significant difference in normalized frequency between the two corpora (see Appendix Table A6).

Identity credentials function as qualifications that affirm and legitimize the speakers' role and identity as credible voices on a given topic (Montgomery 2007; Thornborrow 2001; van Leeuwen 2007, 2008). News outlets usually introduce speakers, including reporters, by providing identity credentials such as names, titles, professions, or institutional affiliations (Feng 2020, 2022). This practice is commonly observed in CNN and Fox News. In Example (17), the speaker is identified by name ("Matt Gross"), role ("a spokesperson"), and institutional affiliation ("Affirm"), which establish his authority on the topic of "interest rates" mentioned in the quote. Similarly, Example (18) attributes the statement to unnamed "officials" from "the Coast Guard," leveraging their institutional credibility to enhance the trustworthiness of the claim. Both cases demonstrate that verifying a speaker's identity, whether through professional credentials or institutional affiliation, can establish their authority as qualified speakers and thereby strengthen the credibility of their statements.

(17) "Rising interest rates have an impact but do not flow through on a one-to-one basis," Matt Gross, a spokesperson for Affirm, told CNN. (CNN)
(18) Officials from the Coast Guard said at the beginning of the MBI hearing earlier this month that the vessel was not independently reviewed before its journey to the bottom of the sea according to standard practice. (Fox News)

Personalization is the least frequently used strategy across C1CN and C2FN, accounting for only 5.82 percent of the total cases (614 instances; see Table 3). Personalization suggests that the participant is personally involved in the news event (Hutchby 2001; Montgomery 2001a; Scannell 2001). Based on prior definitions, this study identifies three forms of personalization: subject-, journalist-, and audience-oriented. According to Table 7, the two corpora differ markedly in the proportion of *subject personalization* cases (C1CN: 37.15%; C2FN: 22.39%). However, their normalized frequencies are comparable: C1CN contains 107 instances (1.3 per 1,000 words) and C2FN 73 instances (1.1 per 1,000 words). Statistical analysis confirms no significant difference between them ($\chi^2 = 1.13$, $p = 0.2874$; see Appendix Table A7).

Subject personalization means integrating individuals' firsthand experiences into news stories to establish their authority in analyzing or interpreting the events being reported. Consider:

(19) As several people are shown casting their votes, a woman, who says she is an Orthodox Christian of the Russian Church, expresses her gratitude. (CNN)

In Example (19), the news identifies "a woman" as a participant in the voting process. By foregrounding her firsthand experience of casting a vote and her explicit gratitude for the opportunity, the narrative legitimizes her perspective as credible and representative.

While C1CN exhibits a higher absolute frequency of *journalist personalization* (124 instances, 43.06%), compared to C2FN (84 instances, 25.77%) (Table 7), statistical analysis of normalized frequencies reveals no significant disparity between the two corpora (C1CN: 1.6 per 1,000 words; C2FN: 1.3 per 1,000 words; $\chi^2 = 1.42$, $p = 0.2327$) (Appendix Table A7). This indicates that both CNN and Fox News prioritize journalist-driven narratives at comparable levels in their news coverage.

Journalist personalization concerns journalists' physical presence in the news event (Zelizer 1990). In television news, phrases like "our correspondent XXX is in XXX" emphasize journalists' physical presence in the news field (Feng 2020, 145). Similarly, in news interviews reporters often reassure audiences by sharing personal experiences related to their information-gathering efforts, using expressions like "I've been told" (Feng 2022, 2408–2409). Specific broadcast techniques such as stand-ups, on-camera sign-offs, and soundbites further reinforce journalists' presence, suggesting that they have "witnessed" the event (Feng 2022; Hutchby 2001). In written journalism, journalist personalization manifests through two primary strategies: embedding reporters' on-site photographs and employing self-mention markers (Hyland 2001). These techniques function to signal the journalist's direct engagement in news-gathering, thereby situating the reporter as an authoritative speaker in the news reporting. Consider:

(20) Fox News confirmed that Netanyahu's cabinet approved a "special situation" – similar to a state of emergency – on Israel's home front on Monday. (Fox News)

In this example, "Fox News" stands for journalistic agency, demonstrating its firsthand verification of Netanyahu's cabinet approving a "state of emergency." By highlighting such original reporting practices, the outlet reinforces the authority and authenticity of its claims.

Table 7. Personalization in C1CN and C2FN.

	Combined			C1CN			C2FN		
Personalization	n	%	nf	n	%	nf	n	%	nf
Subject	180	29.32	1.3	107	37.15	1.3	73	22.39	1.1
Audience	226	36.81	1.6	57	19.79	0.7	169	51.84	2.7
Journalist	208	33.88	1.5	124	43.06	1.6	84	25.77	1.3
Total	**614**	**100.00**	**4.3**	**288**	**100.00**	**3.6**	**326**	**100.00**	**5.1**

Audience personalization occurs infrequently in both corpora but shows a statistically significant difference in normalized frequency ($\chi^2 = 84.06$, $p = 0.000$; see Appendix Table A7). While C1CN contains 57 instances (19.79%), C2FN features 169 instances (51.84%), a threefold increase in occurrence rate compared to C1CN (Table 7). By pinpointing specific instances, we observe that the key difference lies in the fact that Fox News, within its "Business" category, tends to incorporate commercial information into the news, whose audience personalization is markedly reflected through the use of direct address or second-person pronouns. Consider:

(21) If you can qualify for a student loan refinance at a lower rate that you're currently paying, there are often few downsides to refinancing. (Fox News)

In this example, the text explicitly targets students seeking loan refinancing through direct address (e.g., "you"). While the tone engages readers, its primary purpose is commercial-oriented—promoting financial products. However, there are more instances where audience personalization is used not for promoting or advertising but for building journalistic authority. For example:

(22) Have you ever wondered what the future will look like? Well, you don't have to wait too long, because 2024 is going to be a year full of amazing innovations that will blow your mind. (Fox News)

In this example, the audience is invited to envision "what the future will look like." To engage them, the report incorporates their personal experiences of imagining, anticipating, and being overwhelmed by "amazing innovations," thereby making the message appear authentic and relatable.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study has developed a framework for analyzing discourse truth in news reporting and applied it to examine how truth is constructed in CNN and Fox News articles. The analysis shows that journalists build the truth of news across three key dimensions: authenticity, neutrality, and authority. Authenticity is primarily constructed through evidentiality (such as direct evidence, hearsay, and inference) and quotations (direct or indirect). Neutrality is achieved through third-party attribution (with both specified and unspecified sources) and low modality (lexical and grammatical expressions). Authority is established mainly through identity credentials (e.g., names, titles, and institutional affiliations) and personalization (personalizing the experiences of subjects, journalists, and audiences).

Both CNN and Fox News tends to construct the truth of news by emphasizing its authenticity, displaying journalistic neutrality, and establishing the authority of speakers or participants involved in the news. They prioritize in particular the first two aspects, employing similar discursive strategies such as quotations, evidentiality, third-party attributions, low modalities, identity credentials, and personalization to reinforce the authenticity and neutrality of news. Despite notable similarities, their discursive strategies differ in at least four aspects: (1) Compared with CNN, Fox News employs more "authority" devices (e.g., identity credentials) in constructing "truth"; (2) Fox News prefers direct quotations to ensure verbatim sourcing, while CNN uses more indirect quotations to contextualize source statements; (3) Fox News tends to integrate commercial promotion strategies into its business coverage through audience personalization, whereas CNN maintains a more detached tone; and (4) CNN uses more lexicalized low-modality language, contrasting with Fox News' preference for grammatical low-modality markers. These differences reveal subtle influences of institutional norms and ideological preferences on the construction of truth in news discourse.

These findings reveal the socially contingent nature of news truth construction. Contemporary research posits that in today's "post-truth" media landscape, truth emerges as a fluid construct dynamically shaped by public opinion, political agendas, and media framing (Harjuniemi 2022; Humprecht 2019; Monsees 2023; Waisbord 2018). Building on this argument, our study contends that truth in news discourse is achieved through discursive strategies that balance authority, authenticity, and neutrality. First, news media often establish credibility and truthfulness through invocation of authority. Authority may come from citing credible sources like experts, policymakers, or institutions and from highlighting their credentials, qualifications, and professional roles. It may also come from firsthand stories of people who witnessed an event or those directly involved. By sharing their personal experiences, these accounts make the claims all the more grounded and believable (Feng 2016, 2022). However, audience reception of these credibility markers is mediated by ideological alignment. Audiences sharing similar beliefs usually see these references and quotes as proof that backs up the story. Conversely, audiences with opposing views often push back, dismissing such sources as either manipulative or ideologically biased.

Second, news media tend to make their stories feel true by using methods like quotation and evidentiality. For example, they might include exact words from an interview or reference official documents. This makes the news seem less like the journalist's opinion and more like a neutral report of reality, which audiences tend to trust because they can check the sources themselves (Lichtenberg 1998; Wien 2005). However, relying too much on quotes without explaining their meaning risks misinterpretation. If a story is just a list of quotes without context, readers might feel the journalist is hiding behind other people's words instead of explaining the bigger picture. In addition, overuse without analysis might result in journalists deflecting or avoiding responsibility.

Third, news media often demonstrate neutrality by attributing statements to a third party or using less assertive language with low modality (Post 2015). This approach avoids sounding overly certain and helps journalists avoid taking a clear side. However, this careful wording can backfire. While it reduces accusations of bias, it also makes information feel unclear and less trustworthy. What is more, some audiences see such vague wording as a way to dodge responsibility. If a news story says "critics claim the policy is

unfair" without naming who those critics are, people might suspect the journalist is hiding something or pushing a hidden agenda. Finally, younger audiences raised on social media often prefer bold, direct headlines, while older readers might accept cautious language as "balanced." This split shows there is no perfect way to please everyone. Neutrality strategies that work for one group can annoy another. Still, most journalists keep using these methods because they are seen as "safe" in today's polarized world.

As we have mentioned earlier, the way people build "truth" through language is never completely neutral, as truth claims are contingent upon the socio-political contexts, power relations, and rhetorical frameworks that govern their articulation. For example, a news report about climate change might use emotional language to push for action, cite only oil-funded scientists to downplay risks, and compare current disasters to historical events to shape understanding. News as a primary source of public information does not present absolute facts but rather a constructed reality shaped by various factors such as journalists' perspectives, institutional norms, and social, political, and economic contexts (Schudson 2003). This constructivist view raises critical concerns about the reliability of news, particularly in cases where truth is intentionally distorted to serve specific agendas. For instance, political propaganda frequently employs selective reporting and strategic framing to present a skewed version of reality, aligning with the interests of particular parties (Ahlstrand 2021). Similarly, corporate news outlets may prioritize profits over objectivity, slanting their coverage to favor advertisers or sponsors. As we have seen, Fox News occasionally uses the strategy of audience personalization in its business coverage to promote certain products or services. While this does not render all news deceptive, it reveals that every "truth" presented is partially shaped by invisible forces. Even when people are not intentionally lying, their cultural background, organizational pressures, and communication styles filter how "truth" gets defined and shared.

Moreover, truth constructed through discourse carries the risk of misleading the public and perpetuating falsehoods. For example, politicians might keep repeating simplified slogans that ignore complex realities, or media outlets might selectively frame stories to match their audience's biases. Over time, these manipulated narratives likely spread false ideas as if they were real, making it hard to distinguish fact from fiction. This problem gets worse when false claims are repeated across social media or partisan news platforms. Studies (e.g., Harjuniemi 2022; Humprecht 2019; Monsees 2023) show that fake news has become increasingly common in recent years, amplifying disinformation and deepening divides in public opinion. As lies outpace facts, trust in institutions like science and journalism erodes. Without critical thinking or fact-checking, society risks becoming trapped in collectively woven "myths," fueling harmful decisions and widening divisions.

In conclusion, this study offers novel insights into the construction of truth in news discourse. By applying the "discourse truth" framework to analyze articles from CNN and Fox News, we have shown how language choices, institutional norms, and ideological preferences subtly influence the construction and understanding of "truth." However, there are still some limitations. First, certain strategies have double roles. Take quotation for example. On the one hand, quoting experts or officials makes a story seem more trustworthy. On the other, this practice allows reporters to present themselves as neutral, as if they were just "reporting the facts." This makes it hard for us to discern whether a news outlet is genuinely building its credibility or hiding ideological biases through its

detachment practice. Moreover, this study only looked at written articles. Today's news consists of not just verbal text but also photos, videos, and other semiotic modes. A single image or a headline font choice can sway opinions just as much as a quoted expert. To better understand this, future studies could examine how visual and multimodal texts (like images, videos, or fonts) shape what we accept as "truth." For example, does TV news present facts differently from short videos on TikTok? Do media in other countries use similar strategies, or are there cultural differences? Answering these questions would help researchers, media practitioners, and policymakers tackle today's "post-truth" challenges. After all, in a world where anyone can share "news" online, understanding how truth is constructed, and deconstructed, is key to making informed decisions.

Note

1. All the *p*-values presented in the article were evaluated based on the normalized frequencies between the C1CN and C2FN corpora, with detailed information available in Appendix.

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