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Is this journalism?: a study of whether the snapshots on the front page of USA Today adhere to journalistic standards

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IS THIS JOURNALISM?: A STUDY OF WHETHER THE SNAPSHOTHS ON THE FRONT PAGE OF USA TODAY ADHERE TO JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Emily Arnette Vines
B.S., University of Florida, 1998
May 2002
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VITA .................................................................................................................................... 52
This thesis examined 22 Snapshots on the front-pages of *USA Today* from April 2001 to determine whether they adhered to the journalism standards of wholeness, accuracy, and credibility. Fourteen were found not whole, 8 were not accurate, and 3 were not credible according to the definitions of this thesis. The researcher compared the data in the Snapshots to the data obtained from the cited source and interviewed sources as well as a news assistant and graphics editor at *USA Today*. The researcher found four possible explanations for the poor quality of the Snapshots and examined the routines of Snapshot production, which she then compared to those of traditional journalists.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A graphic revolution occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries according to Daniel Boorstin. The telegraph, photograph, and television all gave rise to this revolution. Today, graphics are omnipresent. Driving down the interstate on the way to work, billboards call for your attention while a light in the shape of a gas pump reminds you to stop for fuel. At the office, graphics make your computer’s desktop more interesting and files easier to find. This inundation of graphics often begins when the morning paper arrives and continues throughout the day; it is the graphics in the newspaper that this study will address.

Newspapers are using graphics to bring more to the coverage of a story. In 1989, Sandra Utt and Steve Pasternack studied 161 daily newspapers with circulations greater than 25,000 and found that the majority of papers had been recently redesigned to include more color and graphics. A 1993 study found that 78.1 percent of the newspapers studied had information graphics on their front pages and almost half ran color information graphics every day. “Information graphics have become a regular and vital part of the way news is reported today,” write Utt and Pasternack.

Today newspapers present information graphics as news. An information graphic presented in a journalistic context implies that the graphic is news and adheres to the same journalistic standards, or values, as the copy. Information presented as news that does not adhere to news standards can mislead the reader.

USA Today is recognized as a leader in information graphic presentation on news pages. In 1987, USA Today had 13 graphic artists on staff that worked in shifts throughout the day and night to finish approximately 39 graphics an hour before the daily deadline. Large circulation, awards, and imitation by others reward USA Today for its use of color and graphics.

The information graphic, or “Snapshot,” on the front page of USA Today exists beneath news briefs and alongside news articles. The Snapshot is part of the editorial content. As one reads the front page, all of the information looks like news, but is it? Do the Snapshots adhere to journalistic values? In an article about “The Graphics Explosion,” Robert Hilliard writes that graphics have been accepted as a news vehicle,
but reservations exist about the graphics director or editor acting as a judge of journalistic values.¹⁰

*USA Today* names the source of the information in the Snapshot below the graphic. This source could be any institution from the United States Census Bureau to McDonald’s Corporation, which leads one to ask whether this Snapshot is a function of journalism or public relations.

Information graphic research traditionally addresses issues of reader comprehension, reader recall, and attention-getting ability.¹¹ This study will examine the relationship between information graphics and journalistic standards, specifically whether the Snapshots on the front pages of *USA Today* during April 2001 adhere to journalistic standards.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) established the first codes of journalism in 1923.¹² These codes included responsibility, truthfulness, impartiality, and fairness.¹³ Until 1996, the Society of Professional Journalist’s (SPJ) Code of Ethics held objectivity as a core value. The SPJ then replaced objectivity with words like truth and accuracy.¹⁴

Recently the ASNE Journalism Values Institute (JVI) outlined journalistic standards. These standards are balance/fairness/wholeness, accuracy/authenticity, leadership, accessibility, credibility, and judgment. The ASNE definitions will be the basis for understanding journalistic values in this thesis.

This thesis will primarily examine wholeness, accuracy, and credibility because they are hallmarks of journalism values and are able to be measured.

The researcher also contacted *USA Today* and gave someone on the graphics staff and someone on the editorial staff the opportunity to respond. The researcher asked the staff members questions about the wholeness, accuracy, and credibility of the Snapshots as well as questions about their production.

The goal of this thesis is to study the Snapshots on the front page of *USA Today* during the month of April 2001 and determine whether they are whole, accurate, and credible through an analysis of the Snapshots’ images, comparison of the Snapshots to the original studies, and interviews with the Snapshots’ sources and staff members at *USA Today*. Then the researcher will offer four possible explanations for any deviations from these journalism values.

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¹³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will address the history and function of information graphics as well as the problems with presenting information graphics in newspapers. Then it will examine journalistic standards as academics and journalists have defined them. It will conclude with an examination of communication codes.

2.1 History of Information Graphics

Information graphics are “the charts, graphs, diagrams, and pictographs used to relay statistical and other types of information through visual image.”

Information graphics have existed since the time when caveman told stories through drawings on walls. Egyptians also used information graphics when they drew maps to chart the Nile River floods. The history of information graphics would be incomplete, Stovall writes, without mentioning Leonardo da Vinci, who used graphics in his journal to explain his ideas when words would not suffice. And Rene’ Descartes, who lived during the first half of the 17th century, created the Cartesian grid, a system of horizontal and vertical lines that allowed him to plot points on a plane. This grid is the basis for many charts and graphs used today to plot statistical data.

The most notable direct link to modern charts and graphs is from the work of Scottish-born writer and scientist William Playfair. In 1786, he published a book titled The Commercial and Political Atlas, which had 44 charts, many of which plotted numerical information over time using line charts. Playfair also used a graph with horizontal bars to show import and export information. In a later book, Playfair created a graph out of a circle divided by lines radiating from the center. Playfair had created the line chart, bar chart, and pie chart that people so often use today.

Playfair and Joseph Priestly, an English scientist and teacher, were the first to use time-line graphs, according to Peter Wildbur and Michael Burke. They also cite J. H. Lambert, a Swiss-German mathematician, in the 18th century and Florence Nightingale in the 19th century as important pioneers in the development of information graphics. Nightingale used a polar-area diagram to present casualty numbers. This was the beginning of the belief that one could objectively measure, and present graphically, social phenomena.

America witnessed a graphic revolution during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the advent of the rotary press, the high-speed press, photographs, motion pictures, and television. In the 1960s, American newspapers experienced a graphic revolution when newspapers began to use more legible type, reduce or eliminate headline decks, eliminate column rules, and balance the page with horizontal stories and pictures.

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1 Baird, 129-30.
2 Stovall, 9-12.
3 Ibid.
5 Wildbur, 11-12.
6 Ibid. 12.
7 Boorstin, 12-13, 119.
at the bottom of the page. Although graphics had existed for some time, journalists did not begin to use them until the 1960s and 1970s. Maps were the most widely used graphic in newspapers until newspapers began using graphics to enhance the coverage of a story.

“The revolution in newspaper design, which began almost 20 years ago, is continuing,” Sandra Utt and Steve Pasternack wrote in a 1984 analysis of newspaper front pages. “Overall, American daily newspaper front pages are more graphically pleasing today than ever before.” The study conducted by Utt and Pasternack in 1989 of 161 daily newspapers with circulations greater than 25,000 found that the majority of newspapers had recently redesigned their pages to include more color and graphics. Another study of graphics in newspapers found an average of 31.56 graphics per newspaper and an average of 4.5 per edition.

A 1993 study found that most of the sampled newspapers displayed information graphics on their front pages. The study also found that more than one-third of the newspapers ran more than an average of six information graphics every day and more than one-half ran an average of three to six. Ninety percent of the newspapers reported running more information graphics at the time than they did five years before the study.

In 2000, a study of 125 newspapers found that almost half of the newspapers ran more than six information graphics on an average weekday. Three-quarters of the respondents said they ran more information graphics than they did five years before.

The birth of USA Today in 1982 “legitimized the use of graphics in a way that revolutionized the newspaper industry.” USA Today used color and a weather map that covered half of a page. “While many critics have vehemently chastised USA Today for its many sins and mistakes, there is little doubt that it has had a more profound effect on the profession of journalism than any other publication of the second half of this century.”

2.2 Function of Information Graphics

“Excellence in statistical graphics consists of complex ideas communicated with clarity, precision, and efficiency.” The display should show data, and then it should encourage the reader to consider the substance of the information rather than the methodology, design, or technology that went into the production of the work. The

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9 Ibid. 4-6.
11 Ibid.
12 Utt “How Do They Look,” 621-27.
14 Utt “Infographics Today,” 149.
15 Ibid. 150.
17 Stovall, 14.
18 Ibid. 4-6.
display should not distort the data, but should show many numbers in a limited space and make the data comprehensible. It should promote comparison of different data and present the data on a spectrum from a general overview to the fine details. The display should have a fairly clear purpose such as description, exploration, tabulation, or decoration. Lastly, the display should connect with the statistical and verbal aspects of the data.  

The function of graphics is to reveal data in a way that is often more accurate and enlightening than traditional statistical presentations. People have often argued that graphics could easily mislead a reader, but a graphic is no different than any communication in its ability to deceive. The work of John Tukey in the 1960s created a new respect for statistical graphics when Tukey, a well-respected data analyst, used graphics to explain complicated data.  

In 1970, J.W. Tukey and M. B. Wilk explored traditional statistical techniques for data analysis and various ways to present study results. Among this technical analysis, the authors discuss the increasing use of graphics and their appeal to readers. Graphical presentation is an important part of data analysis and is often able to relay more information than standard tables of information. The appeal of graphics is due to their attractiveness and a quality they refer to as “smoothness.” Smoothness allows the reader to comprehend information in a graphic that would be more difficult to understand when written in numerical form. The ability to present difficult information clearly and effectively is a virtue of a well-done graphical representation.  

Kevin G. Barnhurst specifically discusses visual aspects of newspapers and reviews the history of newsprint, photography, charts, typography, and layout. Many scholars as well as people involved in newspaper production, embrace charts for their appeal to readers, and authors believe charts can be more effective than text, particularly when the chart condenses vast amounts of information.

Stovall describes the changes in the presentation of news as a “graphic revolution” and makes “observations” about information graphics. Graphics allow a presentation of information that could not be presented otherwise, such as the sequence of events that led up to a car accident. Information graphics also allow newspapers to show relationships in numerical data. Stovall references the “show, don’t tell” adage of journalism. Graphic presentation allows readers to draw their own conclusions.

Graphics provide another way for editors to make a page more visually appealing, allow editors to show a large amount of data to a reader, and draw the reader’s attention to the data. They also allow newspapers to offer information that may not be directly associated to the presentation of the story, like the Snapshots in USA Today. Or, a
newspaper may link stories from around the nation to a map of the United States in the center of the stories providing geographic context.  

There are principles a graphic journalist should follow. Graphics should clearly and efficiently present accurate information. Graphic journalists should understand graphic forms and various uses. And graphics should be full of information and visually appealing as well as serve the mission of the publication.  

The primary role of information design is to effectively communicate information, and this role implies a responsibility to present information in an accurate and unbiased manner.  

This thesis will examine whether Snapshots on the front page of USA Today serve the stated function of information graphics, to present accurate information clearly and effectively.  

2.3 Problems with Information Graphics in Newspapers  

Accuracy is a primary concern for journalists, and editing exists to insure accuracy. Graphic journalists should also produce accurate work, but editing in journalism often does not occur with graphic production. Editors may fail to edit graphics because they may not be familiar or comfortable with graphics. Editors may feel that there is little chance of error existing in an information graphic, or they may not even be involved with their production. 

Graphic journalists may not know much about journalistic standards and may therefore concentrate on artistic presentations rather than accuracy, writes Stovall in one of the few works that addresses journalism standards and information graphics. Graphic journalists may not be able to accurately interpret numerical data or understand the context that surrounds the information, leading to mistakes. Or they may not understand various forms of graphic presentation, like pie charts. 

There are five primary sources of error. The first is inaccurate information, possibly from unreliable sources or outdated information. Sometimes mistakes are results of errors due to time constraints or poor work habits. Errors also arise when a graphic journalist does not understand the information, does not understand charts or when to use which chart, as well as when the graphic journalist presents the information in an inappropriate context, which may contribute to an inability to meet the standard of wholeness as defined in this thesis.  

There are seven common practices that lead to graphic errors.  

• Comparing the non-comparable, such as charting dollar figures over long periods of time without making note of inflation.  
• Including graphic artwork sometimes called “chart junk,” which interferes with the starting point of the graphic.  
• Using improper time intervals and improper scaling may give the reader the wrong impression about the data.

27 Stovall, 4-8.  
28 Ibid. 163.  
29 Wildbur, 6.  
30 Stovall, 137.  
31 Ibid. 137-139.  
32 Ibid. 140-145.
• Presenting figures that do not add up or charts that carry little or no data.
• Improperly locating places on a map and showing non-proportional scaling of maps.\textsuperscript{33}

Graphic journalists are just as responsible as traditional journalists for presenting accurate information. Graphic journalists should thoroughly check their information and editors should hold them accountable for the accuracy of their work. Editing systems should be developed to check graphics, just as they check copy, and editors should be mindful of the time it takes to produce a good graphic. It is the information that allows for a good graphic, not the form. “The best graphics are those that are clear and full of information. The journalist owes the reader every effort in getting that information right.”\textsuperscript{34}

A recent study of 125 newspapers found that two-thirds of the newspapers edited information graphics to the same degree that they edited articles. At 40 percent of the newspapers, both the news and graphics departments edited the information graphics. While at 39.3 percent of the newspapers, the news department was responsible for the editing. All of the newspapers reported editing their information graphics for accuracy, 96.8 percent for misleading information, 96.8 percent for completeness, 96 percent to make them graphically pleasing, 95.2 percent for graphic appropriateness, and 92 percent to remove clutter.\textsuperscript{35}

Although there is literature available concerning the history of graphics and the proper methods of graphic design, there are few works addressing the connection between graphics and journalism. Stovall comes closest to this topic in his consideration of graphic elements in journalism. Yet, he only establishes guidelines for proper graphic design. Aside from accuracy, he fails to address the tenets of journalism. The literature shows that graphics are part of the news and that newspapers consider journalism values like accuracy when editing information graphics, but does not show that information graphics in newspapers adhere to journalistic standards. The purpose of this thesis is to examine whether Snapshots on the front pages of USA Today adhere to journalism standards.

2.4 Academics Outline Journalism Values

Throughout modern journalism’s history, academics have studied the tenets of journalism. The core tenets include accuracy, fairness, and balance, which contribute to the wholeness of a story, as well as the all-encompassing tenet of objectivity. And, all of these core tenets are associated with the broad standard of credibility. This section will examine academic research on and definitions of journalism values. The following section will look at how journalists have defined journalism values.

Accuracy became an issue during the rise of the penny papers in the 1830s when people could compare newspapers for timeliness, accuracy, and completeness.\textsuperscript{36} The penny papers revolutionized journalism in America and led to the creation of newspapers similar to those printed today. Until the 1830s, newspapers were mostly partisan.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. 145-151.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. 152.
\textsuperscript{35} Utt, “Update on Information Graphics in American Newspapers,” 60.
People had to buy these party papers through subscriptions at about six cents per issue. But distributors sold the penny papers on the streets for a penny and made newspapers accessible to more people. The penny papers relied on advertising instead of subscription fees for revenue. Since newspapers were not reliant on party support, these penny papers printed news as we see it presented in newspapers today; they included police reports, local as well as foreign news, and society news.

Schudson traces the roots of objectivity to the time after World War I when journalists became skeptical about their world. This skepticism developed from the rise of public relations and propaganda during the war. “Nothing could have been more persuasive than the war experience in convincing American newspapermen that the facts themselves are not to be trusted.” By 1930, objectivity was a journalistic value, even though many thought it was an unachievable goal.

In 1942, Robert M. Hutchins, then chancellor of the University of Chicago, began the Commission on Freedom of the Press at the suggestion of Henry R. Luce of Time, Inc. The commission examined the responsibilities of media makers and asked the question, “Is the freedom of the press in danger?” The answer was “yes.”

The commission explained the requirements of the press, which included the journalistic values present in modern journalism. The first requirement was a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context that gives them meaning, which meant that the news had to be accurate, not lie, and distinguish between fact and opinion. The second requirement was a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, which meant media should publish viewpoints other than their own. And in a summary of the five requirements, the commission named a regard for truth and fairness as an indicator of quality news.

Accuracy research began in 1936 with Mitchell V. Charnley. Charnley sent articles from three Minneapolis dailies to people named in the articles with questions about the accuracy of the pieces. Since then, much journalism research has focused on the issue of accuracy.

In a 1977 study, Leo Bogart asked editors of small and large newspapers to list attributes that signaled quality. Both editors of small and large papers listed accuracy.

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37 Ibid. 15.
38 Ibid. 19.
39 Ibid. 22.
40 Ibid. 122.
41 Ibid. 141.
42 Ibid. 142.
43 Ibid. 157.
46 Ibid. 21-22.
48 Ibid. 29.
and impartiality in reporting as the top two attributes of editorial quality. Accuracy might seem to be a self-evident value, but it is not always easily attained.\textsuperscript{51}

In another accuracy study, William B. Blankenburg defined accuracy as “a truthful reproduction of an event or activity of public interest” and an inaccuracy as “a flaw in the reproduction.”\textsuperscript{52} The study of 332 stories found inaccuracies in about half the stories, using the same methodology as Charnley. The errors included omission, misquotation, typographic and spelling errors, as well as incorrect names and figures.

A study in 1990 found that editors of newspapers of different sizes evaluate excellence differently.\textsuperscript{53} Editors at large papers valued staff enterprise, staff professionalism, and comprehensive news coverage more than editors at small papers who valued community leadership and strong local news coverage.\textsuperscript{54} In this study, George A. Gladney judged content standards according to news interpretation, visual appeal, accuracy, comprehensive coverage, and good writing.\textsuperscript{55}

In a 1991 study on fairness and balance, Lacy, Fico, and Simon wrote, “Fairness and balance are at the heart of journalistic concerns about the social responsibility, the professional performance and the public credibility of the press.”\textsuperscript{56} The authors divided fairness into two categories: successful or attempted contact mentioned and no contact. To measure balance, the researchers measured the number of words the article gave to each side of a controversy.\textsuperscript{57}

\subsection*{2.5 Journalists Outline Journalism Values}

The previous section explored how academics identify journalism values and now the literature review will examine professional identifications of journalism values. The first codes of journalism were the Canons of Journalism, which the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) adopted in 1923.\textsuperscript{58} These codes included modern values of responsibility, truthfulness, impartiality, and fairness.\textsuperscript{59} By the time the Commission on the Freedom of the Press released its study in 1947, objectivity was “no longer a goal of the press; it was a fetish.”\textsuperscript{60} The Society of Professional Journalist’s Code of Ethics named objectivity as a core value until 1996 when it replaced objectivity with words like truth and accuracy.\textsuperscript{61}

Basing their research on a 1995 ASNE report, “Timeless Values: Staying True to Journalistic Principles in the Age of New Media,” 30 ASNE Journalism Values Institute editors redefined traditional journalistic values. The core values and definitions are as follows:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 64,66.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid. 66.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 367.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Siebert, 85.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 88.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Mindich, 5-6.
\end{itemize}
• **Balance/Fairness/Wholeness** – to reflect the “Wholeness” of communities. Coverage needs to capture diverse voices and viewpoints, solutions and problems, the profoundly ordinary as well as the unusual, the good with the bad.

• **Accuracy/Authenticity** – to get the facts right but also to get the “right facts.” Coverage needs to provide background, context and perspective and it must capture the tone, language, experiences and emotions of people.

• **Leadership** – to frame and illuminate important issues in the communities a newspaper serves. Coverage needs to stimulate discussion about public concerns and help people see possibilities for moving forward.

• **Accessibility** – to connect the public to important community issues. Coverage needs to create give-and-take between the newspaper and its communities, and connect citizens to one another.

• **Credibility** – to consistently fulfill journalistic values over time and convey a deep understanding of the communities a newspaper serves.

• **Judgment** – to act as the regulator of the other journalistic values by selecting, shaping and bringing definition to what is important, interesting and meaningful in a community. 

Academics and journalists have identified modern journalism values, including accuracy, balance, objectivity, and truthfulness. Academics and graphic designers have outlined the function of graphics. But scholars have not yet studied the interaction between these two worlds. The present study will serve to fill this hole in the literature.

### 2.6 Codes

Communication, including communication between news producers and readers, involves signs and codes. A sign refers to something other than itself and signs are organized into codes. Codes are “governed by rules which are consented to by all members of the community using that code.” Since any conventional part of social life that is governed by rules can be considered a code, John Fiske differentiates between “codes of behavior,” such as the codes of manners or codes of rugby, and “signifying codes.” Although signifying codes cannot be completely separated from their users’ social practices, Fiske uses the word code to refer to signifying systems.

All signifying codes have basic features. These features include conveying meaning and performing a social or communicative function. Also, they depend on their users’ shared cultural background, their users must agree upon them. Appropriate media and/or channels of communication transmit these codes. These codes of communication apply to the conversation between *USA Today* and its audience.

Communication occurs through agreed upon codes. Fiske identifies codes as analogue and digital, presentational, elaborated and restricted, broadcast and narrowcast,

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64 Ibid. 64.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid. 64-65.
or arbitrary and aesthetic. For the present study, we will only address broadcast and narrowcast codes.

“A broadcast code is one that is shared by members of a mass audience: it has to cater to a degree of heterogeneity. A narrowcast code, on the other hand, is one aimed at a specific audience, often one defined by the codes that it uses.”\(^\text{67}\) An operatic aria targeted to opera lovers is an example of a narrowcast code, while a pop song uses a broadcast code.\(^\text{68}\)

A broadcast code is defined by the kind of audience it attracts. It is targeted to a general, broad audience. These codes are simple, immediately appealing, and do not require a well-educated reader.\(^\text{69}\)

Since media producers and media consumers exist in the same culture, they share a common language made up of symbols and codes. They must agree on the meaning of these codes to communicate effectively. This shared experience produces unstated expectations.\(^\text{70}\)

The theory of uses and gratification further explores the relationship between news producers and their audience. One assumption of this theory is that audience members select media that best satisfies their needs.\(^\text{71}\)

The researcher will use these theories on codes and communication to explore the relationship between *USA Today* and its audience.

### 2.7 Summary

The literature has established that American newspapers have experienced a graphic revolution, that newspapers are using graphics to enhance stories and to attract readers, and that *USA Today* is a leader in newspaper graphic design. Academics and journalists have defined journalistic standards, but few authors have touched on the relationship between these standards and newspaper graphics.

While previous research has addressed information graphics and journalism standards, only Stovall’s work has examined both information graphics and journalism standards. But, Stovall’s work does not examine whether information graphics adhere to journalism standards, it only states that they should and explores reasons why they may not. The present study will contribute to the literature on information graphics and journalism standards by examining information graphics on the front pages of *USA Today* to determine whether they adhere to the journalistic standards of wholeness, accuracy, and credibility.

\(^\text{67}\) Ibid. 73.
\(^\text{68}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{69}\) Fiske, 73.
\(^\text{70}\) Ibid. 77.
\(^\text{71}\) Ibid. 155.
CHAPTER 3  
RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHOD

The research questions are as follows:

**RQ1:** Does the Snapshot’s image represent the whole of the data?  
A graphic image fills nearly the entire Snapshot. If the graphic does not illustrate  
the whole of the data and instead illustrates only a portion of the data, it may skew  
the meaning of the data or may cause confusion or oversimplification.

**RQ2:** Does the Snapshot accurately report the findings of the study?  
The information in a Snapshot appears to be news. Readers, journalists, and  
academics expect news to be accurate, therefore any inaccuracies fail to meet a  
key journalistic standard. Inaccuracies may mislead a reader.

**RQ3:** Is the Snapshot’s source credible?  
Attribution is a key aspect of credibility. If the source cited in the Snapshot is not  
solely responsible for the data presented, then the source has not been fully  
disclosed and the attribution is not complete. Incomplete attribution may mislead  
a reader and undermine credibility.

3.1 Structuralist Theory  
This method of this thesis is based on structuralist theory. Structuralism denies  
the possibility that one can know the reality of the world in an objective manner; it denies  
absolute final truth. Unlike the empiricist, the structuralist does not attempt to measure  
reality. Instead the structuralist works to discover the conceptual structures that cultures  
use to understand the world they live in.\(^1\)

Binary opposition, under structuralist theory, divides the world into two  
categories; something exists in either category A or category B.\(^2\) In this thesis, a  
Snapshot is either accurate or not accurate, the source is credible or not credible, and the  
image is either whole or not whole.

The weakness of this method is that it does not provide a category for findings  
that may not clearly fit into either category A or category B. Since the researcher will  
judge wholeness subjectively, according to the correlation of the image and the data in a  
Snapshot, it is possible that some of the images may appear whole to the researcher and  
not whole to another evaluator and vice versa. This thesis, however, does provide  
definitions for each journalism value under study and the researcher can determine  
whether each Snapshot adheres to the definitions or does not. And in the case of  
accuracy, there is no gray area, the Snapshot data is either reported correctly or is not.  
Overall, this method provides a clear way to categorize the findings of this thesis and  
present the data clearly.

3.2 Key Concepts  
Whole or Not Whole  
A Snapshot will be considered whole if the researcher determined that the image  
does not oversimplify, confuse, or mislead. This is a subjective measure. The researcher

\(^2\) Ibid. 116.
compared the images in the Snapshots to the data displayed in the Snapshots. Due to the small number of Snapshots in the sample, the researcher will discuss the reason each Snapshot was considered whole or not whole.

**Accurate or Not Accurate**

A Snapshot will be accurate if the numbers in the Snapshot accurately match the numbers from the original study. To evaluate accuracy, the researcher obtained a copy of the original studies from the sources cited in the Snapshots. The researcher searched the sources’ Web sites to find the data. If the data was unavailable online, the researcher called the source to request the original survey or poll results. The researcher then compared the numbers from the original studies to the numbers published in *USA Today*. The researcher also contacted the sources and requested to speak with the persons who conducted the research featured in *USA Today*. The researcher asked the person who conducted the original study or who compiled the numbers that *USA Today* published, whether he or she believed the Snapshot was accurate.

The researcher also contacted *USA Today* and requested to speak with the person responsible for the Snapshots on the front page of the newspaper. The researcher spoke with the news assistant and the graphics editor and asked them questions about the production of Snapshots and the specific questions that arose from this thesis.

**Credible or Not Credible**

Credibility is often measured according to reader opinion. For this thesis, however, the researcher will analyze attribution to measure credibility. Attribution is a key ingredient in credibility because it provides the reader with a clear source for the information reported and as such allows the reader to assess the potential bias or legitimacy of the source. Journalistic credibility exists when the information is transparent. A Snapshot, therefore, will be credible if the source cited is solely responsible for the data presented in the Snapshot. If there is a source that funded or commissioned the research presented in *USA Today* that is not named, the Snapshot will be not credible because the source named would be incomplete. To determine credibility, the researcher contacted the person who conducted the study presented in *USA Today* and asked him or her who funded the study. If the person who conducted the study was not available, the researcher attempted to interview someone connected to the study. The researcher asked this person whether or not someone from *USA Today* contacted him or her and whether or not he or she knew that the research findings had been published.

### 3.3 Evaluation Measures

In this thesis, the researcher will examine wholeness, accuracy, and credibility according to the following definitions:

- **Wholeness** – The image in the Snapshot depicts the whole of the data, it does not mislead or oversimplify. The image does not overshadow or skew the data. The researcher will make a subjective decision about the wholeness of a Snapshot’s imagery and will discuss the reasoning behind each decision.

- **Accuracy** – *USA Today* accurately reports the findings of a study. The researcher will compare the data in the Snapshot to the data in the original report, which the researcher will obtain from the source cited in the Snapshot. The researcher will contact someone from the cited source and ask whether he or she believes the Snapshot is accurate.
• Credibility – The source named in the Snapshot is the only source responsible for the research published in USA Today. Credibility can be difficult to measure, so this thesis will look at a key aspect of credibility – attribution, which gives readers an opportunity to assess the quality of information reported as well as the quality of this reporting. The researcher will contact someone from the named source and ask who funded the study. The researcher will determine whether the citation in the Snapshot is complete and otherwise reliable.

• Other Values – The researcher will discuss the remaining values in the conclusion. These values are either difficult to measure or, as in the case of balance and fairness, do not require extensive analysis because a Snapshot generally has a single source.

3.4 Procedures
The first step in this method involved locating the research featured in the Snapshots. The researcher searched the Internet via the search engine Google.com. The researcher searched for the source cited, such as “centers for disease control and prevention” or “JD Jungle.” Once the researcher found the source’s Web site, she searched the site using key words from the Snapshot such as “handgun deaths” or “women in law school.” If the researcher could not find the data, she would find contact information and call or e-mail someone from the source and request the research. She also made note of contact information for the sources.

For a source like Planet101.com, the researcher went to the Web address. She contacted the source via a contact e-mail address on the site, but it was returned to her. She then searched Lexis-Nexis and Google.com for contact information but found none.

The researcher compared the data from the sources to the data in the Snapshots. She then created a list of general and specific questions regarding the Snapshots and began to call the sources.

The researcher tried to conduct phone interviews with someone from the source cited in each Snapshot who conducted or participated in conducting the research presented in the Snapshot. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions, listed in the appendix, such as whether someone from USA Today spoke with him or her, whether USA Today presented the data accurately, and who funded the study. The questions addressed wholeness, accuracy, and credibility. The researcher also contacted and interviewed members of the graphics and editorial staff at USA Today and asked them open-ended questions regarding accuracy, credibility, and wholeness. These questions are also listed in the appendix. The questions listed in the appendix for both the researchers involved in the original research and for the USA Today staff members were used as a guide for the interviews. The researcher asked any other questions that arose during the course of the thesis research and the interviews.

The methodology of this thesis indicates that the researcher should contact the person responsible for each study presented in the Snapshots in USA Today. For the Gallup polls, there is not one person who is in charge of each survey. A team of people from the Gallup Organization, including the editor-in-chief Frank Newport and managing editor Jeff Jones, often work together with their partners, USA Today and CNN, to devise questions and interpret answers, according to a staff member at Gallup. The organization at Gallup altered the way the researcher investigated the Snapshots from Gallup. After unsuccessfully attempting to speak with Frank Newport and Jeff Jones, the researcher e-
mailed the list of questions in the appendix to Jeff Jones along with specific questions for the Snapshots featuring Gallup polls.

In the conclusion of this thesis, the researcher will address the other ASNE values listed in the introduction. The remaining values are leadership, accessibility, balance, fairness, and judgment.

The period of study, April 2001, was chosen at random and does not stand out as an unusual month; it does not have a holiday such as Christmas that might influence the Snapshots. The sample size of the Snapshots is 22.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

The researcher found 8 of the Snapshots whole and 14 not whole, 11 of the Snapshots accurate, 8 not accurate, and was unable to determine the accuracy of 3 Snapshots. Seventeen Snapshots were credible, 3 not credible, and the researcher was unable to determine the credibility of 2 Snapshots.

TABLE 1 – Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snapshot Number/Date</th>
<th>Does the Snapshot’s image represent the whole of the data?</th>
<th>Does the Snapshot accurately report the findings of the study?</th>
<th>Is the Snapshot’s source credible?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 3/30-4/1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 4/2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 4/3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 4/4</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 4/5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 4/6-4/8</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 4/9</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. 4/10</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. 4/11</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. 4/12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. 4/13-4/15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. 4/16</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. 4/17</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
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<td>14. 4/18</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. 4/19</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. 4/20-4/22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. 4/23</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. 4/24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. 4/25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. 4/26</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. 4/27-4/29</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. 4/30</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chapter will first address Snapshot production procedure and then each Snapshot will be addressed individually and discussed according to the three research questions. The researcher will first examine wholeness, then accuracy, and then credibility for each Snapshot.

The results are listed in order according to date except those that cite Gallup as the source. All Snapshots will be addressed in order from 1-22 except for the Gallup Snapshots, numbered 6,10,12,14,16,17, and 18, which will be addressed in the following section. The researcher contacted one person from the Gallup Organization about all of the Snapshots that cite Gallup. The information from the Gallup Organization interview will be discussed and then each Gallup Snapshot will be analyzed in the same manner as the other Snapshots.
4.1 Snapshot Production Procedures

The researcher interviewed both the news assistant and the graphics editor at *USA Today*. According to them, they are the primary people involved in Snapshot production.¹

The news assistant often collects her data from a Web site or contact, she then sends the content to her editor who reviews it and returns it to her. The content then goes to the graphics department. The graphics editor will look at the text, and if he approves it, will assign it to an artist. If the text is not acceptable, he will send it back to the department that requested the graphic. He did not say how often he deems the text unacceptable, but rather described it as part of the creative process.

Once an artist has completed the image, the graphics editor will review the content and the image. If the Snapshot meets the graphics editor’s criteria, the proof is sent to the copy desk of the department that originated the information, and a proofreader reviews it. If the copy desk finds mistakes, they will correct them and send the proof back to the graphics department. The graphics department will generate another proof, it goes to the copy desk again, and once approved, is returned to the graphics department. Then an editorial assistant will put it into the system for images.

4.2 Snapshots

**Snapshot #1**

**Friday/Saturday/Sunday, March 30-April 1, 2001 – Students’ views vary on standardized tests**

The Snapshot’s image does not reflect the whole of the data. The image is oversimplified reflecting the subject, not the data. The image is a bar graph; the bars are composed of response bubbles found on standardized test answer sheets. One bubble on each bar is filled in. The data states that 40% of American college students think tests such as the SAT should be eliminated, 39% think they are necessary, 13% believe they should be improved, and 3% think they are good indicators. The image represents a standardized test answer sheet, but does not represent the findings of the poll.

The researcher was unable to determine the accuracy of the Snapshot because she could not obtain a copy of the original data. A representative from the cited source, Student Advantage, said that she was unable to find the poll.

The Snapshot’s source is credible. Student Advantage is cited and is responsible for the data. The researcher was unable to interview the person who conducted the survey. According to a senior manager at Student Advantage, the person who conducted the survey is no longer with the company as the whole editorial department is gone.

**Snapshot #2**

**Monday, April 2, 2001 – Why are Americans always in a rush?**

The Snapshot’s image does not represent the whole of the data. The image is of a runner while the data addresses people doing things faster than their parents did, finding slow people irritating, feeling that they cannot slow the world down, and feeling guilty about taking time to relax. The image of an athlete does not address these varied topics relating to the hurried lives of average Americans. A runner does not symbolize “Americans in a rush,” therefore the image is misleading.

Students' views vary on standardized tests

When asked what they think of tests such as the SAT, American college students replied:

- They should be eliminated: 40%
- The exams are not good indicators of student ability, but they are necessary: 39%
- They should be improved: 13%
- They are good indicators: 6%

Note: 2% said "No opinion."

Source: Student Advantage online survey of 15,000 respondents Feb. 20
By Lori Joseph and Sara Wacl, USA TODAY

Why are Americans always in a rush?

- They do things faster than their parents ever did: 72%
- They find slow people irritating: 52%
- They can't make the world slow down: 40%
- They feel guilty taking time to relax: 31%

Note: Respondents could mention more than one reason
Source: Hilton Generational Time Survey of 1,250 adults in January.
By Lori Joseph and Keith Simmons, USA TODAY
The researcher cannot determine the accuracy of the Snapshot because the company that conducted the study, Yankelovich, will not release it or speak with the researcher about it.

The Snapshot’s source is credible; it cites a Hilton Generational Time Survey. Although the researcher was unable to speak with a representative from Yankelovich, the researcher was able to determine through Internet research that the Hilton Hotels Corporation sponsors these surveys and Yankelovich Partners conducts them.

Snapshot #3
Tuesday, April 3, 2001 – 670,000 killed with guns in the USA

The Snapshot’s image does not reflect the whole of the data. The data states that the number of people killed with guns in the United States during the last 20 years was near or more than the populations of North Dakota (673,949); Vermont (588,654); Austin, Texas (587,873); Boston (555,249); Seattle (537,150); and Washington, D.C. (519,000). The image is a chalk outline of a body on a street with tape labeled “crime scene” around the area. The image does not represent the number the deaths or the manner of the killings. The people killed with guns in the United States in the past 20 years died not only from homicides, but also from suicides, legal interventions, and unintentional shootings. Not all of the deaths resulted from crimes; therefore, the image of a crime scene is misleading.

The Snapshot does not accurately report the information. At the time the Snapshot was published, mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) only existed for the years before 1999; that number is 620,525. According to data from the Census Bureau released on the Internet on April 2, 2001, the population of North Dakota on April 1, 2000 was 642,200; Vermont was 608,827; and the District of Columbia was 572,059. The researcher was unable to find the population of the cities named in the Snapshot on the Census Bureau’s Web site.

Ken Kochanek, who works with mortality rates at the CDC in the Division of Vital Statistics at the National Center for Health Statistics, said that the mortality number probably came from Handgun Control, a non-profit organization. The numbers sound accurate to the research director at Handgun Control who remembers coming up with the 670,000 figure and the location comparisons. The 670,000 figure is consistent with the number published in an article by James Brady, from Handgun Control, on March 30, 2001.

The Snapshot’s sources are credible. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Census Bureau, and Handgun Control are cited and do track these figures.

Snapshot #4
Wednesday, April 4, 2001 – Laura Bush should blaze her own trail

The image in the Snapshot does not reflect the whole of the findings; it is oversimplified. The numbers show that 83% of the respondents felt that Mrs. Bush should not emulate anyone; she should be herself. The image is a wooden sign with jagged sides; the poll results are printed on the front. The image does not represent the findings because it does not indicate a direction or show that there is a specific, individual path that the respondents think Mrs. Bush should carve out for herself.

The Snapshot is accurate. The numbers in the Snapshot match the numbers from the poll on women.com. The researcher spoke with Eileen Livers, the vice president of editorial programming for ivillage.com, which has taken over women.com. The person
USA TODAY Snapshots®

670,000 killed with guns in the USA
The number of people killed with guns in the past 20 years is near or more than the population of each of the following states and cities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/city</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>673,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>588,654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin, Texas</td>
<td>867,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>555,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>537,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, D.C.</td>
<td>519,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures from 1981 through 2000
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics

By Adrienne Levis, USA TODAY

USA TODAY Snapshots®

Laura Bush should blaze her own trail
First lady Laura Bush has been likened both to her predecessor, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and her mother-in-law, Barbara Bush, but when asked whom she should emulate, Americans replied:

- No one: She should be herself 83%
- Hillary Rodham Clinton: 3%
- Barbara Bush: 3%
- Eleanor Roosevelt: 3%
- Jacqueline Kennedy: 1%
- Nancy Reagan: 1%
- Rosalynn Carter: 1%

Source: Women's.com, online survey of 254 respondents, as of March 6

By Lori Joseph and Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY
who conducted the poll is no longer with the company because many of the women.com producers are no longer employed at ivillage.com, according to Livers. The Snapshot is credible. The source cited, women.com, was indeed the source responsible for the data.

Snapshot #5
Thursday, April 5, 2001 – Strongest quakes in 20th century

The Snapshot’s image represents the whole of the data. The data lists the strongest earthquakes and the image is of ground that is broken by fissures.

The Snapshot does not accurately represent the findings of the study. The Snapshot is correct when it lists earthquakes in Chile 1960 (with a magnitude of 9.5 on the Richter scale), Alaska in 1964 (9.2), Russia in 1952 (9.0), Ecuador in 1906 (8.8), Alaska in 1965 (8.7), India in 1950 (8.6), and Indonesia in 1938 (8.5). But, the Snapshot displays the following inaccuracies: Alaska in 1957 with an earthquake that measured 8.8, but it measured 9.1; Kuril Islands in 1958 with an 8.7, but it was in 1963 and 8.5; Chile in 1922 with 8.5, but it is not on the top ten list at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) National Earthquake Information Center.

The researcher spoke with Waverly Person, chief of USGS National Earthquake Information Service. The data is not the result of a particular study, but rather is collected over time. He did not know it was in USA Today and did not speak with anyone from USA Today about the data. He found in his records an earthquake that occurred in Chile in 1922, but it measured 8.39 on the Richter scale.

The source is credible. The Snapshot cites the USGS.

Snapshot #7
Monday, April 9, 2001 – Coldest cities in the USA

The Snapshot’s image is oversimplified and does not represent the whole of the data. The data list the coldest cities in the United States and their mean temperatures. The image is a city skyline. The image does not refer to temperatures; it only refers to location.

The Snapshot does not accurately report the findings. USA Today lists Williston, North Dakota with a mean temperature of 40.1, but the source lists 40.8.

The researcher was unable to determine the Snapshot’s credibility. The Snapshot cites Planet101.com and that is where the researcher found the data, but the researcher was unable to contact anyone at Planet101.com. The researcher did contact the Web site via e-mail only to have the e-mail returned. Therefore, the researcher was unable to determine who commissioned and funded the research.

Snapshot #8
Tuesday, April 10, 2001 – How often do you check your e-mail?

The Snapshot’s image is oversimplified and therefore not whole. The image is an envelope and a computer. The data in the Snapshot is that 38% check their e-mail about once a day, 29% several times a week, 17% several times a day, 9% hourly, 6% about once a week, and 1% less than once a week. The image does not show e-mail or a person checking e-mail, therefore, it does not represent the data.

The Snapshot does not accurately report the findings of the study. The accurate data is as follows: 38% check their e-mail about once a day, 29% several times a day, 17% several times a week, 9% hourly, 6% about once a week, 1% less than once a week. Dr. Michael Suman worked with the study and said that USA Today did not contact him.
and he did not know it was in the newspaper. Dr. Jeff Cole was ultimately responsible for the study and did not respond to correspondence or phone calls from the researcher.

The Snapshot’s source is credible. The source cited is UCLA Center for Communication Policy and that is where the researcher found the study online.

**Snapshot #9**

**Wednesday, April 11, 2001 – Cows are producing more milk**

The Snapshot’s image represents the whole of the data. The data shows that the average amount of milk United States dairy cows produced in the month of February has risen from 1,185 pounds in 1991 to 1,343 pounds in 1996 and to 1,440 pounds in 2001. The data is displayed on a horizontal bar graph with a milk carton on the end of each bar. The image also shows three cows, each image above another, which fade as they descend from 2001 to 1991.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the study. Ty Kalaus, a dairy statistician at the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), said he is the contact person for this information; he is also named on the press release with the 2001 figures. Kalaus said that he did not speak with anyone from *USA Today* about the data. The Snapshot sounds accurate and it covers all of the findings from the research, he said. He also said that he is happy when NASS results are in *USA Today*.

The Snapshot is credible. The NASS is cited as the source and it is the United States Dairy Association, of which the NASS is a branch, that commissions/funds the data the NASS produces.

**Snapshot #11**

**Friday/Saturday/Sunday, April 13-15, 2001 – How inmate population has climbed**

The Snapshot’s image does represent the whole of the data. The data states that the number of people in prisons or jails was 1.15 million in 1990, 1.9 million in 2000, and based on current growth rates, will be 2.29 million in 2005. The image is an ascending line graph with the bars of a cell door as the background.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the study. The researcher spoke with Allen Beck, the chief of correction statistics and the person who conducted the research with an associate. Beck did not recollect knowing that the data was in *USA Today* and said that he speaks with reporters all of the time. The numbers in *USA Today* are correct, he said. But, the Snapshot does not represent all of the findings from his research and the projection for growth that *USA Today* chose was one of the growth projections in the report. He said he believes it is a good thing to have his work published in *USA Today*.

The source is credible. The Snapshot cites the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and that is the agency responsible for the data. The BJS is a federal statistical agency.

**Snapshot #13**

**Tuesday, April 17, 2001 – Americans take their offices on vacation**

The Snapshot’s image does represent the whole of the data. The data states that 45% of those polled create an idea to improve work during a vacation, 43% take their cellular phones, 23% leave their phones on so that work can contact them, 14% bring their beepers, 11% call their offices once or twice during vacations, and 9% take a laptop computer. The image is a person on the beach with a desk and laptop computer as well as other office supplies. The image of a man appearing to work during a vacation corresponds to the data.
The researcher cannot determine the accuracy of the Snapshot because the company that conducted the study, Yankelovich Partners, will not release it or speak with the researcher about it.

The Snapshot’s source is credible; it cites a Hilton Generational Time Survey. Although the researcher was unable to speak with a representative from Yankelovich, the researcher was able to determine through Internet research that the Hilton Hotels Corporation sponsors the Hilton Generational Time Surveys and Yankelovich Partners conducts them.

**Snapshot #15**

**Thursday April 19, 2001 – Americans are frequent fliers**

The Snapshot’s image is not whole. The data in the graphic explains that between November 1999 and November 2000, almost 85 million Americans flew at least once on a commercial flight. It also states that 39% of those people took three or more personal or business trips during that year. The image is misleading because it shows empty airline seats while the data explains that Americans are frequent fliers.

The Snapshot does accurately report the findings of the study. The researcher spoke with Elizabeth Grossman, a senior statistician from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) who wrote up the report. She said she did not know it was in *USA Today* and therefore, she does not know if it is accurate.

The source is credible. The Snapshot cites a Bureau of Transportation Statistics Omnibus Survey, and BTS did fund the study, which was contracted out to Omnibus Household Survey.

**Snapshot #19**

**Wednesday, April 25, 2001 – Most businesses want tax-free shopping online, CFOs say**

The Snapshot’s image does not represent the whole of the data. The numbers show that 57% of chief financial officers of U.S. companies think the moratorium on Internet taxing should be extended. The image shows a coin falling into a blue hat with white stars on it. The numbers show that over half of the CFOs do not want money to go to the government from taxes. The image and the data do not correspond.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the study. Christine Pardi, the public relations manager for RHI Management Resources said that she knew the results were in *USA Today*. *USA Today* sent her a copy to proofread before they published it. She was involved in formulating the questions, but not in conducting the poll because they contract that out. She said the Snapshot was accurate and straightforward and that it does represent all of the findings from the research.

The Snapshot’s source is credible. The Snapshot cites RHI Management Resources and that is who commissioned the study, according to Pardi. She said that she always likes to see their findings in *USA Today*.

**Snapshot #20**

**Thursday, April 26, 2001 – More women applying to law school**

The Snapshot’s image is not whole. The data states that in 2001, 50.2% of law school applicants were women compared to 10% in 1970. The image is a bar graph composed of three books. One book is the base and the other two are the bars, the bar representing 10% is much shorter than the one representing 50.2%. Although books are related to law school, they do not relate to the number of women applying to law school.
SNAPSHOTS

#15

USA TODAY Snapshots®

Americans are frequent fliers
- Between November 1999 and November 2000, approximately 85 million Americans flew at least once as passengers on a commercial airline.
- More than one-third (39%) of these took three or more personal or business trips during this period.

Source: Transportation Security Administration

By Lori Joseph and Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY

#19

USA TODAY Snapshots®

Most businesses want tax-free shopping online, CFOs say
Chief financial officers of U.S. companies were asked whether they think the moratorium on Internet taxing should be extended. They replied:
- Yes: 57%
- No: 27%
- Don't know: 16%

Source: RHI Management Research survey of CFOs of companies with more than 20 employees; survey conducted Feb 13

By Lori Joseph and Adrienne Levid, USA TODAY

#20

USA TODAY Snapshots®

More women applying to law school
In 2001, 30.2% of law school applicants were women.
In 1970, 10% of law school applicants were women.

Source: 7Jungle magazine

By Lori Joseph and Bob Laird, USA TODAY
Applicants do not even have schedules or books for school. The image does not represent the data in any way.

The Snapshot does not accurately report the findings. According to the press release from the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) on August 23, 2000, the number of female applicants to law school in 2000, not 2001, was 34,891 (50.19%). According the premier issue of *JD Jungle*, which is a magazine targeted to lawyers and legal professionals, in May 2001, the percentage of women applicants to law school this year, for the first time, outnumber men at 50.2%.

The source is not credible. The Snapshot cites *JD Jungle*, but the vice president of marketing at *JD Jungle* told the researcher that the data in its story was from either LSAC or the National Association of Law Professionals. The researcher contacted both organizations and found the LSAC was the source of these numbers. The researcher spoke with the LSAC resident statistician Bob Carr and the LSAC media relations specialist, neither of whom spoke with *USA Today*. The LSAC keeps track of these numbers, which are widely available, according to Carr. He also said that the numbers sounded accurate.

**Snapshot #21**

**Friday/Saturday/Sunday, April 27-29, 2001 – Most populous cities**

The Snapshot’s image does represent the whole of the data. The data is a bar graph with images of human bodies composing the bars. The data compares populations from 1991, represented by beige body images, to 2000, represented by brown body images. The longer bars have more people and therefore reflect the findings – increased populations are shown with increased numbers of body images.

The Snapshot does not accurately report the findings of the study. The numbers from the source are for 1991 and projections for 2001, not 2000 as stated in the graphic.

The researcher was unable to determine the Snapshot’s credibility. The Snapshot cites Planet101.com and that is where the researcher found the data, but the researcher was unable to contact anyone at Planet101.com. The researcher did contact the Planet101.com via e-mail only to have the e-mail returned. Therefore, the researcher was unable to determine who commissioned and funded the research.

**Snapshot #22**

**Monday, April 30, 2001 – Population grows by the hour**

The Snapshot’s image is oversimplified and does not represent the whole of the data. The Snapshot states that the world’s population grows by almost 9,000 people each hour. The image is of a globe with numbers from a clock inside its border. A math problem is on the face of the globe/clock with the following data: Born 15,020 – Die 6,279 = Increase 8,741. The image itself does not imply growth of any kind; instead it shows two static symbols, a globe and a clock face.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the study. Peter Johnson with the International Programs Center at the Census Bureau told the researcher that the information sounds correct, but he does not remember whether *USA Today* contacted them about the data.

The source is credible. The Snapshot lists the Census Bureau and it is the Census Bureau’s data.
SNAPSHOTS

**Most populous cities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tokyo</th>
<th>Mexico City</th>
<th>Sao Paulo, Brazil</th>
<th>Seoul, South Korea</th>
<th>New York</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Planet101.com*

By Lori Joseph and Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

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**Population grows by the hour**

The world's 6.1 billion population increases by nearly 9,000 people each hour.

- Born: 15,020
- Die: 6,279
- Increase: 8,741

*Source: Census Bureau*

By Marc E. Mullins, USA TODAY
4.3 Snapshots That Cite Gallup

Some of the findings from the Gallup polls can be grouped together, and do not need to be individually reported, as do the findings above. The wholeness of each Snapshot’s image, its accuracy when compared to the data, and credibility will be addressed as it relates to each Snapshot with Gallup data, but the information collected from interviewing Jones will be listed only once in the following paragraphs.

USA Today and Gallup are in close contact and Gallup does not actively monitor USA Today. Gallup trusts that USA Today is reporting their data accurately and they have not had any problems with USA Today inaccurately reporting their data. The researcher sent Jeff Jones, the managing editor at Gallup, via e-mail, the numbers in the Snapshots from Gallup and he stated that they are accurate according to Gallup records. USA Today and CNN are partners with Gallup in their polls, but Gallup does conduct some polls on its own. “We are in regular contact with USA Today about our polls. We communicate with their polling editor. When we do a poll with them, he is obviously intimately involved in what we do,” writes Jones.

The Snapshots do not represent all of the findings from a particular poll. The polls often address several areas and last from five to eighteen minutes. A Snapshot might use one question from a poll. They absolutely want their findings in USA Today.¹

**Snapshot #6**

**Friday/Saturday/Sunday, April 6-8, 2001 – Americans fear school shootings**

The Snapshot’s image does not represent the whole of the data. The image is a pencil and paper, with the end of the eraser displaying a pie chart. The numbers show that 31% think it is very likely that a school shooting could happen in their community and 34% think it is somewhat likely. The image of school supplies is oversimplified and does not relate to school shootings.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the poll.

The Snapshot is not credible. It cites Gallup as the source, but it was a USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll, according to Jones.

**Snapshot #10**

**Thursday, April 12, 2001 – Powell most-sought speaker**

The Snapshot’s image does represent the whole of the data. The Snapshot states that 79% of American adults were interested in hearing Colin Powell give a speech followed by President Bush (69%), Jimmy Carter (66%), Oprah Winfrey (59%), and Bill Clinton (51%). The respondents could choose more than one person, according to the Snapshot. The image shows five podiums in descending height from Colin Powell to Bill Clinton.

The Snapshot is not accurate. The possible responses in the poll were very interested, somewhat interested, not too interested, not at all interested, and no opinion. The Snapshot combines the “very interested” and “somewhat interested” results and presents them as “most interested.” This is not accurate because it does not present the data as it appears in the poll’s findings.

This Snapshot is credible. It cites Gallup and it is a Gallup poll according to Jones.

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¹ Jeff Jones, interviewed by author, e-mail correspondence, 19 September 2001.
SNAPSHOTS

USA TODAY Snapshots®

Americans fear school shootings
Asks about the likelihood of a school shooting happening in their community, adults say the chances of such an incident are:

- Very likely: 31%
- Somewhat likely: 34%
- Somewhat unlikely: 20%
- No opinion: 2%
- Very unlikely: 13%

Source: Gallup Poll of 1,015 adults, March 5-11. Margin of error: ±3 percentage points.

By Frank Pompa, USA TODAY

USA TODAY Snapshots®

Powell most-sought speaker
American adults were asked whom they would be most interested in hearing give a speech. Here’s what they answered:

- Colin Powell: 79%
- President Bush: 69%
- Jimmy Carter: 66%
- Oprah Winfrey: 59%
- Bill Clinton: 51%

Note: Respondents could choose more than one.
Source: Gallup Poll of 1,000 adults, Nov. 19-21. Margin of error: ±3 percentage points.

By William Riser and Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

#6

#10
Snapshot #12
Monday, April 16, 2001 – Not America’s favorite day

The Snapshot’s image does not represent the whole of the data. The data explains that 35% “dislike” filing their taxes, 31% “hate” filing, 21% “like” filing, 6% neither love nor hate, 4% have no opinion, and 3% “love” filing. The image is a grid, 3 squares by 3 squares, with the number 16 in the center square. Nine squares and the number 16 do not relate to Americans’ feelings about filing taxes.

The Snapshot accurately reports the data. The source is credible. Gallup is cited and is the sole source, according to Jones.

Snapshot #14
Wednesday, April 18, 2001 – Half of adults in USA are married

The Snapshot’s image does not represent the whole of the data. The Snapshot states that 51% of Americans polled are married, 18% never married, 11% are divorced, 8% widowed, 7% are living with partner, 3% are separated, and 2% had no response. The image is of two gold rings bound together. Since just over half of those polled are married the image would be whole if it also showed an image representing the 49% not married. The image is misleading because it only represents half of the data, not the whole.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the poll.

The Snapshot is credible, Gallup is cited and Gallup is responsible, according to Jones.

Snapshot #16
Friday/Saturday/Sunday, April 20-22, 2001 – Almost half say their dogs could hurt someone

The Snapshot’s image is whole. The image is a drawing of a dog’s mouth from a side view with two large top teeth and several small bottom teeth. The data states that 49% believe their dogs are capable of inflicting serious harm to a human if provoked and 49% believe their dogs are not capable. Showing a dog’s mouth and teeth, which are capable of biting or not biting, shows the possibility of a dog proceeding to bite or not bite. The image does not favor one part of the data over another.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the poll.

The source is credible. The Snapshot cites Gallup and Gallup is the source, according to Jones.

Snapshot #17
Monday, April 23, 2001 – Many Americans bilingual

The Snapshot’s image is whole. It shows a human face with a dialogue bubble, as in a cartoon, coming out of its mouth. The data is shown with the bubble and is as follows: 55% Spanish, 17% French, 10% German. The largest part of the bubble is allocated to show that 55% speak Spanish, then a smaller portion for French speakers, and an even smaller portion for German speakers.

The Snapshot accurately reports the findings of the study.

The source is credible, USA Today cites Gallup.
**Snapshot #18**  
**Tuesday, April 24, 2001 – Some Americans fear school shootings in their community**

This is the same data that was presented in a Snapshot on April 6-8 in *USA Today*. The image is different, but still not whole. This image is of a chalkboard. Like the image of the pencil and paper, this image is oversimplified representing school supplies, but not school shootings.

The Snapshot does not accurately report the findings of the study, which asked about the likelihood of a school shooting happening in the respondent’s community. The original poll from Gallup has the following results: 31% very likely, 34% somewhat likely, 20% somewhat unlikely, 13% very unlikely, 2% no opinion. The Snapshot shows that 34% believe a school shooting in their neighborhood is somewhat likely, 31% believe it is very unlikely, 20% somewhat unlikely, 13% very likely, and 2% no opinion.

The source citation is not complete and therefore not credible. The Snapshot cites Gallup, but it is a *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll, according to Jones. Therefore, it fails to meet the standards of credibility for this study.

**4.4 Summary**

The researcher found 14 of the Snapshots’ images did not reflect the whole data in the Snapshots. The images were often broad instead of specific to the data.

The information in the 11 Snapshots was inconsistent with the data the researcher found from the sources and therefore deemed inaccurate. The data in these 11 Snapshots did not match the data from the sources. The researcher was denied access to 3 of the original surveys and therefore was unable to determine their accuracy.

The researcher found 3 of the Snapshots not credible because of incomplete citations of the sources. The researcher was unable to determine the credibility of 2 Snapshots because they were from a Web site with no contact information listed on the Internet.
SNAPSHOTS

Some Americans fear school shootings in their community

Adults asked about the likelihood of a school shooting happening in their community say the chances of such an incident are:

- Somewhat likely: 34%
- Very likely: 13%
- Somewhat unlikely: 20%
- Very unlikely: 31%
- No opinion: 2%

Source: Gallup Poll of U.S. adults March 9-12; margin of error of percentage points.

By Web Bryant, USA TODAY

#18
USA Today is a media leader in graphic presentation. Since its launch in 1982, it has made wide use of colorful graphics on news pages, including “Snapshots” in the lower left hand corner of the front page of each section. Although USA Today trumps other papers graphically, the front-page Snapshots reviewed in this thesis fall short of traditional journalism values. As Table 1 shows, the USA Today Snapshots were not consistently accurate, whole, or credible. There are four possible explanations for this. These explanations are hypotheses, not proven statements. They are possible reasons that the Snapshots do not adhere to the journalism standards of wholeness, accuracy, and credibility as defined in this thesis.

One possible explanation is that USA Today gives the audience journalism they will accept, journalism that is simple and entertaining, but does not adhere to the tenets of journalism. The exploration of this possibility will include John Fiske’s work on communication and his analysis of codes.

Fiske believes that communication, including communication between news producers and readers, involves signs and codes. These codes convey meaning and perform a social or communicative function, and they depend on their users’ shared cultural background, their users must agree upon them. In the next section, we will see how these codes of communication apply to the conversation between USA Today and its audience.

The second possible explanation is that the USA Today staff members who create the Snapshots are not trained journalists and apparently are not expected to act like reporters or traditional news editors. The staff members may be focused on aspects of the Snapshots other than accuracy, wholeness, and credibility, such as simplicity and color.

The third possible explanation is that the Snapshots’ sources are not treated as and do not behave like traditional news sources. Generally a journalist interviews a source, the source is aware that he will be in the newspaper and checks the story for accuracy. When a source is misquoted or even feels misrepresented he speaks up. When a source checks a story he holds the journalist accountable for the quality of his work and helps to ensure the accuracy of the piece. But, Snapshot sources (1) often may not know their work is in USA Today, (2) know and may not care about the quality of the work because they just want the publicity, or (3) know but may not bother to check the Snapshots.

And, the fourth possible explanation is that USA Today focuses more on the economic considerations of Snapshot production than on the quality of journalism in the Snapshots. This would indicate that the image reigns supreme. The eye-catching images draw a person’s attention, so he or she then buys the newspaper and makes more money for USA Today and its parent company Gannett. This economic hypothesis also involves the money USA Today spends on graphic production, more money appears to be invested in the graphic side of Snapshot production than in the news-gathering side.

The following sections will explore these four possibilities and include the researcher’s interviews with Snapshot producers at USA Today.

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1 Fiske, 1.
5.1 Explanation #1 - *USA Today* And Its Audience Agree On Snapshot Quality

The first possible explanation for the Snapshots’ failure to adhere to journalism standards is that the audience lets *USA Today* get away with it. *USA Today* readers accept this shoddy journalism. They want simple and entertaining journalism.

*USA Today* communicates with the reader through text and images. The text and images send two messages. The first message is obvious: it is the story the journalist tells and is spelled out in the headline. The second message is hidden in the quality of the journalism. If a journalist knows that his readers are paying attention, that his work has to be accurate, whole, and credible, he will produce work that adheres to these tenets. If the readers expect the journalism to be accurate, whole, and credible above all else, and the journalist does not adhere to these tenets, the readers will be unsatisfied, they will not continue to buy the paper, advertisers will not want to advertise in this newspaper, and it will eventually go out of business.

The journalists’ and readers’ satisfaction with their communication can be seen through the success of the newspaper. As long as both parties accept the other’s message, the newspaper will remain profitable and the reader will remain happy with his newspaper.

As mentioned in the previous section, John Fiske believes that communication occurs through agreed upon codes, including broadcast and narrowcast codes. A broadcast code caters to a heterogeneous audience, it is simple, immediately appealing, and does not require a well-educated reader, while a narrowcast code is targeted to a specific audience.

*USA Today* is America’s largest-selling daily newspaper with an approximate circulation of 2.3 million. In order to have mass appeal, *USA Today* must use wide, broadcast codes that a heterogeneous audience will accept. *USA Today* uses broadcast codes to reach this audience.

Media producers and media consumers exist in the same culture, they share a common language made up of symbols and codes. They must agree on the meaning of these codes to communicate effectively. Their shared experience produces unstated expectations.

With a Snapshot *USA Today* communicates a message it expects its readers to accept, and based on its success, they do. When one reads or purchases *USA Today*, he appears to accept “Snapshot” journalism that does not adhere to journalism values. He is looking for a quick, easy take on a subject. This is a tacit understanding between the reader and *USA Today*; it is not explicit.

The theory of uses and gratification, which assumes that audience members select media that best satisfies their needs, furthers this argument. According to this theory, *USA Today* would define its audience as one that wants simple and entertaining journalism. The problem with journalism that is simple and entertaining is that these qualities can get in the way of accuracy, wholeness, and credibility.

As Table 1 shows, this study found 14 of the 22 Snapshot images not whole. During a phone interview, the researcher asked the graphics editor at *USA Today* about

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2 Ibid. 73.  
4 Ibid. 77.  
5 Ibid. 155.
Snapshots 6 and 18 concerning school shootings. The images were of a pencil with a pie chart on the eraser and of a blackboard with the pie chart drawn in chalk (see Snapshots pages 79 and 82). Both of these images are wholesome images of school supplies, they do not relate to school shootings directly. They do not reflect the data. In response to questions about the wholeness of the images in the school shooting Snapshots, the graphics editor replied that school shootings are a sensitive issue, and that he does not want to show images of dead people. They try hard to adhere to high standards, he said, but they also want things to be simple, clear, and easy to read. They do not want Snapshots to have unnecessary images or words. He tries to break it down to the essentials to get the message across.⁶ The graphics editor places more importance on an image’s palatability than its ability to wholly reflect the data.

Table 1 also shows that three of the Snapshots were not credible, and the researcher was unable to determine the credibility of two Snapshots. Snapshot 20 is one of the Snapshots whose source was found not credible. This Snapshot features data on the number of women applying to law school and cites *JD Jungle*, but the vice president of marketing at *JD Jungle* told the researcher that the data was from the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) or the National Association of Law Professionals. The researcher found that the LSAC tracks these figures and spoke with their resident statistician. The news assistant who complied the data did not research the information she found in *JD Jungle*, if she had, she would have cited the correct source of the information, the LSAC. She compromised the credibility of the Snapshot when she did not confirm the information she found in *JD Jungle*.

The researcher asked the graphics editor about another Snapshot with a simple image that not only failed to reflect the data but also contradicted it. When the researcher asked him about the image in Snapshot 15, which showed empty seats on a plane with a headline stating that Americans are frequent fliers, the editor said he could not respond because he did not have the image or the information in front of him. The researcher faxed and e-mailed the graphics editor detailed questions and the corresponding Snapshots. Due to his demanding position, he said, he was unable to take time to answer the questions.⁷ This is an unusual response for an editor. Most are highly sensitive to issues of accuracy, wholeness, and credibility and quick to show that they care about the quality of their work.

The problems this thesis found with the Snapshot images could be discerned by any *USA Today* reader who cared to pay serious attention. It is obvious that the vacant airplane seats do not reflect the data stating that more Americans are frequent fliers. Yet *USA Today* is not losing readers. It is gaining readers. The readers are apparently accepting this level of journalism and not finding such graphics improper. *USA Today* continues to give its audience what it wants. Now the discussion will examine the Snapshot producers at *USA Today*, including their production routines and criteria for Snapshots.

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⁷ Ibid.
5.2 Explanation #2 - Snapshot Producers Do Not Behave Like Trained Journalists

Although the readers and producers of USA Today may agree on the low journalistic quality of Snapshots, another explanation for the poor quality of the graphics is that the Snapshot producers are not trained journalists. This becomes apparent when we examine the Snapshot producers’ production procedures and the standards they said were most important to them. This section will also explore how the staff members’ criteria and routines contribute to the Snapshots’ failure to adhere to journalistic standards.

The news assistant oversees the news-gathering for most of the front page Snapshots. She looks for valuable, everyday, upbeat information. She either receives information or searches for it herself, and she obtains a lot of research from Gallup polls and various Web sites. She has many contacts in various companies and public relations firms as well as people who send her information. She also has contacts that are willing to do polls specifically for her. She often develops an idea and searches different Web sites for the information.8

The news assistant’s primary concerns are: the numbers need to add up, and she needs to know the margin of error, the number of people polled, and the date of the survey. She wants recent information. The sample polled needs to include a diversity of people of both genders and varied races, and the sample should be large.9

Beyond this, however, the news assistant does not probe deeply. When the researcher asked the news assistant if she pulled polls off of a Web site without speaking to someone from the site, she said that polls on the Internet are not always reliable, so it is important to her to speak with someone from the company about the poll, verify the information, and get more information about the sample. But when the researcher asked her about Snapshots 7 and 21, which cite Planet101.com, she could not clearly recall speaking to someone from the Web site. The researcher’s efforts to contact Snapshot sources show that it is common practice not to contact sources. Only one source that the researcher spoke with clearly recalled speaking with someone from USA Today about data for a Snapshot, this was the public relations manager at RHI Management Resources featured in the April 25, 2001, Snapshot “Most businesses want tax-free shopping online, CFOs say.” While it is not certain that the researcher contacted the same people the news assistant would have spoken with, several sources who identified themselves as the official contacts for the data featured in the Snapshots said they did not speak with anyone from USA Today.

As the table shows, the researcher herself was unable to determine the credibility of the Planet101.com Snapshots. The researcher made attempts through the e-mail address on Planet101.com, but the e-mails were returned to her unanswered. She also searched the Internet via the search engine Google.com and Lexis-Nexis for any news stories about the Web site that might contain contact information. The researcher did not find any contact information for the Web site. It seems quite likely that the news assistant could not have reached Planet101.com even if she tried. If she did not speak with someone at Planet101.com, the assistant compromised the credibility of the two Snapshots because she was unable to ascertain the credibility of the source or the accuracy of the data.

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9 Ibid.
The news assistant’s news-gathering procedures stray from traditional journalism procedures. Journalists traditionally speak with sources, verify information, and fact-check the information they put in stories. Journalists also seek balance and in order to do so include multiple sources in their articles. All Snapshots however are one-source stories, the reporter and editors do not have the scope to achieve traditional news norms. Some may argue that the limited space of a Snapshot does not allow for dense information with multiple sources, but according to the literature, that is the point of an information graphic, to present a large amount of data in a clear manner. And although it may be difficult to have more than one source for a Snapshot, the news assistant can at least interview the one source she does use.

The graphics editor said he wants the Snapshots to be easy to read and clear. Since the Snapshot has a limited space, readability and suitability of the information are paramount. The graphics editor also wants an active, descriptive headline. And he wants the Snapshot to show the information. His other standards include a pie chart adding up to 100%, eliminating insignificant data, and focusing the information with words and visuals to produce a simple statement with a lot of impact. There was no indication that the editor probed beyond this, for instance, asking the news assistant if she consulted sources, independently verified data, etc. These are the things editors typically do. The graphics editor gives the artists creative room, but if an image is not appropriate he will send it back to the artist. The graphics editor ultimately decides which images pass and which fail.

The editorial gatekeeping did not seem to work even by USA Today’s limited standards for graphics. As stated in the previous section, the researcher asked the graphics editor about the two Snapshots that cited data from Gallup on Americans fearing school shootings, Snapshots 6 and 18. These are the two Snapshots that cited the same data, but only Snapshot 6 accurately reported the findings. USA Today strayed from journalism values once when they ran the same data in the same month, but the deviation from journalism standards is more dramatic because they reported it inaccurately the second time. No one in the newsroom or graphics department even realized that they had run the data earlier in the month. And, what happened to the accurate data? How did the numbers get switched? Although the graphics editor did speak with the researcher regarding the Snapshots and general production procedures, when the researcher e-mailed specific questions to the graphics editor she was unable to get answers to these questions. The graphics editor wrote that he was too busy to respond to the e-mail containing these specific questions and the news assistant just never responded.

Neither the news assistant nor the graphics editor is a traditional journalist. During interviews with the researcher, they both stated that their primary concerns were not journalism values, but rather statistical and presentational concerns.

The news assistant’s primary concerns are statistical. But these statistical concerns are very basic, the numbers simply need to add up. In the Snapshot on April 10, “How often do you check your e-mail?” the numbers in the pie chart added up to 100%, but were labeled incorrectly. Instead of correctly reporting that 38% of

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
respondents check their e-mail about once a day and 29% several times a day, *USA Today* reported the opposite. The Snapshot is inaccurate even though the numbers add up to 100%. This mistake is more deceiving than if the numbers did not add up. A mistake is obvious when the numbers do not add up; it signals the reader that something is wrong with the picture. Whereas, when the data is simply labeled incorrectly, there is no red flag. A Snapshot is not necessarily accurate just because it adds up to 100%. The editing at *USA Today* is superficial; the Snapshot just needs to look accurate. As the table shows, 8 of the Snapshots in this thesis were not accurate.

While the news assistant is focused on the statistics, the graphics editor is focused on the image. His primary concerns are that the image is clear and the Snapshot is easy to read.  

Although both of the Snapshot producers have concerns about Snapshot production, neither appeared concerned about the questions the researcher had for them regarding the wholeness, accuracy, and credibility of the Snapshots. This reaction furthers the distinction between the news assistant and the graphics editor and traditional journalists. As noted earlier, a journalist takes his craft seriously and is alarmed when the credibility, wholeness, and accuracy of his work are called into question. He is sensitive to questions regarding the integrity of his work and eager to respond and defend his work. The failure of both the news assistant and the graphics editor to respond to the detailed questions the researcher e-mailed them and their evasiveness during phone interviews reinforces their distance from traditional journalism and its core tenets. The researcher gave them a chance to respond and they did not, which suggests they do not care about the problems with the Snapshots and that they do not acknowledge the importance of credibility, accuracy, and wholeness.

Graphic journalists are just as responsible as other journalists for producing accurate work and their editors should hold them accountable for the accuracy of their work, according to Stovall. Yet, it does not appear as though anyone is holding the graphics editor and the news assistant accountable for the accuracy, wholeness, and credibility of their work. While they should be responsible for the Snapshots’ accuracy, credibility, and wholeness problems, so should their editors. The editors’ jobs are not only to manage the employees, but also to manage the product.

Although graphic journalists are expected to produce accurate work, editing does not always occur in graphic production the way it does in traditional journalism. Editors may not examine graphics closely due to unfamiliarity with the form or due to a belief that they will not contain inaccuracies.

While the editorial department may be unfamiliar with graphics, the graphics department may be unfamiliar with editorial procedure and journalistic standards. Or, these graphic artists may be inept at statistical interpretation and presentation. It appears that the editors at *USA Today* trust the Snapshot producers to get the data right and then only copyedit the work. Editing procedures, like those in place for traditional

15 Stovall, 152.
16 Ibid. 137.
17 Ibid. 137-139.
journalists should be created for graphic journalists.\textsuperscript{18} This has not happened with \textit{USA Today} Snapshots.

This section has shown that Snapshot producers differ from traditional journalists, and that Snapshot production differs from traditional news production. News production typically involves a reporter researching a story and speaking to several sources. But a Snapshot is produced when the news assistant receives information from a company or public relations firm, finds information that would fit in a Snapshot, or has a firm conduct a poll specifically for her.\textsuperscript{19} Both the news assistant and the graphics editor deviate from traditional journalism routines and their criteria deviate from traditional journalism standards. The next section will further explore how Snapshot sources and the news assistant’s method of news-gathering differs from the sources and methods of traditional news production.

5.3 Explanation #3 – Snapshot Sources Differ From Traditional News Sources

Snapshot sources fall into two categories: internal and external. The internal sources include people at the Gallup Organization, which is a \textit{USA Today} business partner. External sources are all other sources. The external sources can be divided into two categories: those who do not know they are in \textit{USA Today} and those who know, but are not concerned with journalism standards because they are only concerned with getting their names in the press. The second group is primarily public relations professionals seeking to place their clients in the newspaper.

The news assistant does not routinely interview sources, she simply collects data, often from polls. The news assistant never calls Gallup, except to tell them that she is using the information and when it is running. She said she feels they do a good job and she does not need to follow up with them.\textsuperscript{20}

Bypassing sources sets the Snapshots up for failure; \textit{USA Today} is not double-checking their facts. And, the likelihood of error increases when the unaware sources do not check the Snapshots because they do not know they are in the newspaper in the first place.

Many of the sources contacted in this thesis were either unaware that their work was in \textit{USA Today} or unconcerned with checking the data in the Snapshots. Waverly Person, the chief of the United States Geological Survey’s (USGS) National Earthquake Information Service did not know that earthquake statistics from the USGS were in the April 5, 2001, Snapshot and did not speak with anyone from \textit{USA Today}. Neither did Ty Kalaus, a dairy statistician at the National Agricultural Statistics Service who said he is the contact person for the data in the April 11, 2001, Snapshot about cows producing more milk. While Elizabeth Grossman, a senior statistician from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics who wrote the report featured in the April 19, 2001, Snapshot “Americans are frequent fliers,” said she did not even know the data was in \textit{USA Today}. As noted, Gallup, which was featured in seven out of 22 Snapshots, does not actively monitor \textit{USA Today}, according to Gallup’s managing editor Jeff Jones.

When sources are misquoted in newspapers they often speak up, especially when they are opinion leaders. If the story is small they may only contact the newspaper and ask for a correction or apology. If the discrepancy is large, the source my turn to other

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 152.
\textsuperscript{19} Joseph, 2001.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
media outlets to get her message out and possibly begin damage control. In the most severe cases, a source can turn to legal action. But this system of checks and balances is not occurring with the Snapshot producers and their sources.

This step alone, speaking with sources, would increase the accuracy of the Snapshots because the news assistant could verify the numbers. And more importantly, the source would be alerted to the fact that his data would be in *USA Today*. The source would become a watchdog, he could notify *USA Today* of any inaccuracies. Then *USA Today* might pay more attention to the accuracy of their work. They would know that someone is watching.

So far this discussion has looked at three possible explanations for the Snapshots’ deviation from journalism values. We have considered that *USA Today* and its audience agree on the quality of the Snapshots, that they should first be simple and entertaining and then adhere to traditional journalism standards. We have also considered the possibilities that the Snapshot producers are not qualified producers of journalism and that the lack of communication between *USA Today* and its sources contributes to the poor quality of the Snapshots. The discussion will now explore the possibility that economic considerations inhibit quality journalism in Snapshots.

**5.4 Explanation #4 - Economic Considerations Outweigh Journalism Values**

A fourth possible explanation for the poor quality of the Snapshots is that *USA Today* is more focused on the economic considerations of Snapshot production than the Snapshots’ adherence to journalistic standards.

There are two economic considerations that could interfere with the quality of the Snapshots. First, Gannett wants *USA Today* to attract readers and make money for the company. The colorful graphics in the Snapshots lure readers, who buy the paper and contribute to the success of *USA Today*. The colorful graphic is more vital to making money so the quality of the journalism appears to be a secondary consideration.

Another economic consideration involves the staff members *USA Today* uses in the news and graphics departments. The two primary front-page Snapshot producers are the graphics editor in the graphics department and the news assistant in the news department. The graphics editor is a senior staff member who oversees an entire department at *USA Today*. The news assistant is on the other end of the corporate ladder. This entry-level position is often a place for recent graduates willing to pay their dues in the news business.

More manpower and senior staff members cost money. *USA Today* invests in the graphics side of Snapshots production and not in the news side. The editor of the graphics department at *USA Today* oversees Snapshot production in his department; his involvement is constant and he works with several designers. But the same attention is not given to the Snapshots in the news department where an assistant is often the only one compiling the news for the Snapshots. Again, the graphic elements come first. What the Snapshot looks like appears to be more important to *USA Today* than what it says.

Fiske allows us to see the economic considerations that occur to a newspaper editor in the following example. His analysis involves a photograph that ran in the United Kingdom’s *Observer Review*.

The *Observer Review* published a photograph in 1976 with a group of black youths on the left facing a group of policemen on the right and the headline read
“Young, Bitter, and Black.” The image ran at the top of the front page and was the length of the masthead. The Observer cropped the photo to make it long and narrow.

In 1978, the editor of The Times of London, Harold Evans, was asked to comment on the photograph. He described the Observer’s photograph as an example of “perceptive picture editing” and “resourceful photography.” He commented that leaving trees and houses in the photograph would have distracted the reader from the primary images; the size and shape of the image created drama and detail that grabbed the reader’s attention. Like most news executives, Evans’ thoughts on the news include more than accuracy, wholeness, and credibility. News executives want to grab the reader’s attention, to reach the audience and increase revenue. The Snapshots on the front page of USA Today serve this purpose. The color immediately draws the reader’s eyes to the Snapshot and he can then identify the image with a quick glance.

News producers’ priorities must involve economic concerns. A newspaper must sell its product in order to meet budgets and produce profits. The news firm’s objective is to make money and the news organization is meant to provide the money-making product.

Since USA Today is known for its images and colorful graphics, the economics of news production is certainly a top concern for USA Today and its parent company Gannett, which owns USA Today along with 96 other American daily newspapers. But these considerations become a problem when they interfere with the quality of the journalism.

5.5 Summary

This thesis has shown that the Snapshots on the front page of USA Today do not adhere to the accuracy, wholeness, and credibility standards of journalism. And they do not serve the purpose of information design, to effectively communicate information through the presentation of accurate information.

The four possible reasons explored in this thesis for the failure of the Snapshots to adhere to the tenets of journalism include: (1.) The Snapshot producers and the readers may agree upon this level of journalism, which is simple and entertaining, but not always accurate, whole, or credible; (2.) The Snapshot producers do not behave like traditional journalists and do not produce journalism that centers on journalism values; (3.) USA Today fails to interview sources and the lack of a dialectic between USA Today and its sources increases the chance of error in the Snapshots; and (4.) The economic considerations of Gannett and USA Today interfere with the production of accurate, whole, and credible Snapshots.

The Snapshots’ departure from journalism values likely results from a combination of the four possibilities. USA Today is successful and the readers apparently accept the journalism it produces. The Snapshot producers are not traditional journalists focused on accuracy, wholeness, and credibility above all other concerns, and they do not seem to interview the sources of the Snapshots. And, Gannett does want a money-making product, so economic concerns may take the spotlight and leave journalism values in the shadows of the boardroom. It is these routines that contribute to the Snapshots’ deviation from the journalism values of accuracy, wholeness, and credibility.

21 Fiske, 105-107.
23 Stovall, 4-8.
We have seen that news producers have to handle many different demands on their time and their product. But, they must find a balance between economic, technical, and journalistic concerns. Ultimately, journalistic concerns should take precedence for the benefit of the reader and the news organization. News organizations that stray from these values will ultimately lose credibility, in turn losing readers and advertiser dollars.

Once a newspaper ignores journalism standards in part of the newspaper, it damages all parts. If one part that purports to be news, not entertainment, deviates from journalism standards two consequences can follow. First, once part of the newspaper loses credibility the other parts are liable to lose it as well. Second, a decline in standards in one part of the newspaper can lead staff members elsewhere in the newspaper to question their need to adhere to the rigid standards of journalism. The problem is pervasive, either a newspaper has standards or it does not.

In the next chapter we will consider *USA Today’s* place in journalism history and address its future, as well as explore other research possibilities on this matter.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

This thesis investigated whether the Snapshots on the front page of USA Today adhere to the journalism standards of wholeness, accuracy, and credibility. The researcher examined the 22 front-page Snapshots from April 2001 and found 14 not whole, 8 not accurate, and 3 not credible.

The front-page Snapshots appeared on the same pages as the news and purported to be news, but the Snapshots did not consistently adhere to news standards. The Snapshots that deviated from journalism values misled readers with inaccurate data, sources that were not credible, and images that did not wholly reflect the data.

USA Today will certainly have a place in journalism history as a leader in graphic presentation on news pages. But, it is not yet clear whether future generations will see USA Today as a pioneer that worked to improve a new form of journalism, or as a trend setter for low-quality journalism at mass market newspapers.

USA Today could be producing poor-quality information graphics because they are working with a new form of journalism – “graphic journalism,” which involves a new kind of journalist, a “graphic journalist.” The newness of this form may involve a learning curve, which could explain the problems this thesis found with USA Today’s Snapshots. USA Today could be the penny paper of the 21st Century. As Michael Schudson has shown, the penny papers, which for a time resulted in sensational reporting, led to the objective journalism we know today.\(^1\) USA Today could be heading toward quality graphic journalism of tomorrow.

Graphic artists who were formerly trained only in graphic design will need to acquire professional standards through education and those headed into the profession need to learn journalism values in their college courses. Just as colleges and universities after the 1830s began to teach journalism and develop the standards of wholeness, accuracy, and credibility, colleges and universities will need to head down a similar path today. If they do, graphic journalism could improve in the same way modern journalism has during the last two centuries. But if graphic design and journalism departments do not begin to connect at universities, and newspapers like USA Today continue to produce graphic journalism without serious attempts to adhere to the basic tenets of journalism, the future is bleak. Until these new graphic journalists have learned both journalism standards and graphic design, graphics in the newspaper will certainly continue to deviate from journalism standards.

If USA Today is not working to improve graphic journalism, it is establishing low standards that could become status quo in the industry. As a highly successful industry leader, USA Today’s standard of journalism is a model for other newspapers.

Although this thesis has shown that there are problems with Snapshots’ adherence to journalism standards, it is not clear whether this problem is limited to the Snapshots on the front page of USA Today or if this problem pervades information graphics throughout USA Today and possibly throughout many newspapers. And, it is not clear whether this problem is limited to information graphics. It is possible that not only the graphics in USA Today stray from journalistic standards but also the copy. Future research can examine whether the problems found in this thesis are isolated to the Snapshots on the

\(^1\) Schudson, 122.
front page of *USA Today* or are an indication of problems throughout *USA Today* and the newspaper industry as a whole.

*USA Today's* standards should parallel those set forth by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). There should be no distinction between graphic journalism and traditional journalism standards. Both forms should be whole, accurate, and credible, as well as adhere to the other standards set forth by the ASNE. These additional values are leadership, accessibility, balance, fairness, and judgment.

According to the Snapshots studied in this thesis, *USA Today* has not shown leadership, which the ASNE defines as illuminating important issues and showing possibilities for moving forward. And along the same lines, the Snapshots are not connecting the citizens to community issues or one another and therefore, do not adhere to the ASNE standard of accessibility. The Snapshots also fail to meet the standards of balance and fairness because they typically have only one source and do not capture more than one viewpoint on the subjects they feature. Critics may argue that information graphics cannot and should not adhere to the standards of balance and fairness through the use of multiple sources. While this may be a valid argument, it does not change the fact that the Snapshots in *USA Today* do not usually have more than one source and therefore fail to adhere to this standard as defined by the ASNE.

The ASNE defines the standard of judgment as “acting as a regulator of other journalism values by selecting, shaping and bringing definition to what is important, interesting and meaningful in a community.”

This final standard encompasses all of the ASNE journalism values and explains that a newspaper should execute these standards. Although Snapshots are limited by space and form, Snapshot producers can still showcase important data, interview more than one source, and shine a spotlight on topics that will connect members of the national and worldwide community.

The present research has identified important problems with Snapshot production at *USA Today*, but it has only offered a glimpse into information graphic production and news values at *USA Today*. In order to draw more definitive conclusions about the nature of Snapshots at *USA Today*, future research should examine Snapshots from more than one month, ideally a random sample of Snapshots that spans several years. However, if this future research involves contacting sources to find out how they interacted with *USA Today*, the researcher is sure to have problems with these interviews. The researcher of this thesis often found that Snapshot sources were not familiar with the Snapshots in which they were cited and could not remember if they spoke with someone at *USA Today*; some mentioned that the length of time that had passed since the Snapshots ran and the date the researcher interviewed them hindered their ability to remember whether they spoke with someone at *USA Today*. Some of the people responsible for the data featured in Snapshots were no longer with the companies cited, this was the case with Snapshot 4, which cited women.com. But, a study that includes a sample of Snapshots from several months or years will allow future researchers to examine whether Snapshots’ adherence to journalism values has improved or worsened across time.

Future researchers can use the four possible explanations proposed in the thesis for the failure of the Snapshots to adhere to journalism values as a basis for definitive

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research. Exploration of each possibility would require various approaches. Explanation #1, *USA Today* and its audience agree on Snapshot quality, would require a survey of *USA Today*’s audience with questions about reader satisfaction. Explanation #2, Snapshot producers do not behave like trained journalists, could be explored through a case study of the individuals at *USA Today* who produce Snapshots and an in-depth analysis of their daily routines. Explanation #3, Snapshot sources differ from traditional news sources, could be explored by conducting in-depth interviews with Snapshot sources and traditional sources and comparing their experiences and attitudes. And, explanation #4, economic considerations outweigh journalism values, could involve an analysis of *USA Today*’s business reports to determine how much money they allocate to the editorial and graphics departments for business operations and staff salaries, as well as an analysis of the influence the colorful graphics have on the economic success of *USA Today*.

In order to draw conclusions about the relationship between information graphics in newspapers and journalism standards in general, research must be conducted on a random sample that includes various newspapers. Research that includes newspapers other than *USA Today* will address the nature of journalism standards and information graphics in the newspaper industry as a whole and allow researchers to compare the quality of graphic journalism at several newspapers to one another and to *USA Today*. And, a sample across several years and several newspapers will offer the opportunity to analyze whether the quality of graphic journalism in the newspaper industry has improved or worsened through the years.

Although this thesis only addressed one month of *USA Today* Snapshots, it found serious problems with their adherence to the tenets of modern journalism. And, this research is one of the first to demonstrate that newspaper graphics do not conform to journalism standards. As the literature showed, there is a hole in the research on this topic that needed to be addressed and future studies are sure to continue this investigation.
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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

PHONE INTERVIEW SURVEY (For Source Cited in Snapshot)
1. Did you speak with someone from USA Today about your study?
   If yes:
   a. Did you contact USA Today or did someone contact you?
   b. What information did USA Today request?
2. Did USA Today present the information accurately?
3. Does the Snapshot represent all of the findings from your research?
   If no:
   a. What’s missing?
4. Who commissioned/funded the study?
5. Did you want your research findings in USA Today?
6. Were you glad your research findings were in USA Today?

PHONE INTERVIEW SURVEY (For USA Today staff member)
1. Which department(s) work on the Snapshots?
2. How many people work on each Snapshot?
3. How do you gather information for the Snapshots?
4. How do you edit Snapshots?
5. Who decides on the imagery in the Snapshots?
6. What are the main considerations when designing a Snapshot?
* The researcher will also ask someone from USA Today any questions about the wholeness, accuracy, and credibility of the Snapshots that have arisen from this research.
VITA

Emily Vines was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1975. She moved to Florida in 1988 where she attended high school and college. In 1998 Vines graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in psychology. She went on to attend graduate school at Louisiana State University where she received her master of mass communication degree in 2002. She is currently living in New York City and working in magazine publishing.