Errors and Accuracy in Student Media:
Identifying, Avoiding, and Correcting Common Reporting Errors

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ABSTRACT

Given the changing nature of journalism in today's society, a “sink or swim” mentality has been adopted across publications throughout the media – it is imperative to keep up-to-date with changes that occur throughout the industry, or the fate of a publication may be in jeopardy. One key factor in keeping a given media outlet afloat in these uncertain times in journalism is accuracy, which in turn affects a publication's perceived credibility. In order to maintain readership, it is vital that publications maintain a high standard of accuracy in reporting, which can be severely altered by the inclusion of errors.

This study addresses the importance of avoiding and correcting errors in the media, and explores gaps in existing literature regarding accuracy and errors in student media. By utilizing interviews with experts in the field of student media, as well as a survey of sources cited in Mustang Daily, a daily student publication at California State University, San Luis Obispo, common errors, as well as causes of common errors, were identified. This paper presents recommendations for potential solutions for avoiding errors made in the media, as well as potential means for correcting errors once they are committed.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

This study focuses on various aspects of accuracy in the media, specifically addressing the issue of sacrificing accuracy in the media as a result of errors. The topic of accuracy in the media has been scrutinized the public eye for many decades, and continues to be a prevalent issue. “Long-running studies show that just over half of US newspaper stories contain at least one error” (Giles, 2012).

Errors have plagued the credibility of nearly all publications – large or small – at some point in time, by diminishing the accuracy of the content published. Whether it is by misquoting a source or publishing a factual inaccuracy, errors in the media have been a great source of problems surrounding the issues of accuracy and credibility for publications worldwide.

Background of the Problem

The existing literature regarding accuracy and errors in the media is relatively general and mainly focuses on the issue of correcting errors once they are committed. By getting down to the root of the problem – what common errors are and how they come to occur – publications can work toward avoiding errors altogether and improving accuracy, as well as perceived credibility. Additionally, current literature greatly lacks research and findings regarding errors and accuracy in student media.
Currently, the public is losing confidence in the media (Hatfield, 2005, p. 4). “We’re losing our credibility because sometimes we don’t know what we’re talking about – but then we act like we do” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 4).

According to Berinstein (2006), errors in publications provide a “silver lining” for the media by calling for a higher standard of accuracy in reporting (np).

Because the media industry is currently in the midst of major changes, leaving the future of many publications in question, it is imperative to maintain high levels of readership. Accuracy and credibility play a large role in upholding readership, so conducting research on how to preserve accuracy and avoid errors is vital to the future of publications in a rapidly changing industry.

**Purpose of the Study**

According to current literature on the topic of accuracy in the media, errors committed can lead to a negative public perception of a publication, as well as a variety of negative consequences for those who the published error may potentially affect. These errors can negatively alter a publication’s readership, and trust in the media has been declining for decades as a result.

The consequences of errors are not exclusive to the mainstream media. The issues that go along with errors in reporting also affect the accuracy and credibility of student media.

By investigating what errors are most commonly made in a publication’s content, as well as what the causes of the errors are, media outlets can work toward improving the accuracy of their content. Learning how these common errors can be avoided, as well as corrected, can also benefit a publication’s accuracy. In addition to
improving a publication’s accuracy, the benefits of this research can also enhance a publication’s perceived credibility, and in turn, improve readership.

Setting for the Study

This study was conducted as part of the data collection for a Senior Project at California Polytechnic State University located in San Luis Obispo, California. The study will use the four-year university’s daily student newspaper, Mustang Daily, as a case study. Interviews were also conducted with Mustang Daily students, advisers, and sources, as well as professionals in the field of journalism. These participants were each asked the same set of questions and probes. The study is specifically designed to answer the research questions and fill the gaps in previous literature on the topic of accuracy and errors in the media.

Research Questions

The study used the following research questions to answer fundamental gaps in the existing literature on the topic of accuracy and errors in the media. Each question was created after investigating the existing information on the topic in order to acquire additional pertinent and necessary data from students and professionals in the field of journalism.

1. What are the most common errors made in the media?
2. What are the common causes of errors in the media?
3. What is the public perception of errors in the media?
4. How can common reporting errors be avoided?
5. How can common reporting errors be corrected?
Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to clarify several of the terms on the topic and assist the reader by providing context to the remainder of the study.

**Accuracy**: the quality or state of being correct or precise (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).

**Bias**: is present when one’s beliefs are the most correct set of beliefs (Berinstein, 2006, np).

**Credibility**: the quality of being trusted and believed in (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).

**Error**: a mistake; the state or condition of being wrong in conduct or judgment (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).

**Exaggeration**: a statement that represents something as better as or worse than it really is (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).

**Fraud**: the intention to mislead (Berinstein, 2006, np).

**Miscommunication**: hearing or reading something wrong, not understanding properly, or cultural or personal differences (Berinstein, 2006, np).

**Mistake**: carelessness, laziness, fatigue, human or system error (Berinstein, 2006, np).

**Omission**: someone or something that has been left out or excluded (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).

**Oversimplification**: to simplify something so much that a distorted impression of it is given (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).
Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 included the background of the problem, purpose of the study, and a definition of terms. Chapter 2 will identify the trends regarding accuracy and errors in the media by reviewing the current literature on the topic. Chapter 3 will present the methodology of the study. In Chapter 4, the findings will be presented and organized based on the original research questions presented in Chapter 1. The data will then be presented and organized based on the original research questions. Lastly, Chapter 5 will include a summary of the study and recommendations for professionals in the field of journalism to avoid potential errors, as well as how to correct them, in order to improve both the accuracy and credibility of media publications.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review of literature focuses on existing literature on errors in the media including case studies from both print and broadcast media, information about traditional media and college media, the origins of errors made in the media, and methods of correcting and avoiding errors.

Common Errors in the Media

According to Berinstein (2006), there are a variety of classifications for errors in the media (np). Common errors made in the media include fraud ("the intention to mislead"), mistakes ("carelessness, laziness, fatigue, human or system error"), bias, ("my way is the right way"), oversimplification or exaggeration, omission (purposeful or not), miscommunication ("hearing or reading something wrong, not understanding properly, cultural or personal differences"), data handling errors ("illegibility, data corruption, format changes"), and metadata problems ("incorrect indexing, subject terms that change over time, subjective assessment of article topics") (Berinstein).

According to a survey of newspaper editors and publishers cited by Anderson (2011), “most errors (are) small,” and include “misspelled names, an incorrect address, wrong dates or times, misidentification in a cutline, etc” (p. 3).

Research by Appleman & Bolls (2011) has found that grammar mistakes are another type of error seen in the media (p. 50). It has been found that “grammatically incorrect text requires more mental effort to process than does grammatically correct text, and this inconveniences readers” (Appleman & Bolls,
Additionally, it has been found that “grammatical errors are associated with low retention,” can serve as “distractions,” and ultimately “are associated with low perceived credibility” (Appleman & Bolls, 2011, pg. 60).

According to Ryan & Owen (1977), “objective errors (those which deviate from objective fact) are less common than subjective errors (those in which a source and reporter or editor disagree about how a given item of information should be handled” (p. 32).

Causes of Errors in the Media

According to Berinstein (2006), there are a variety of ways errors in the media occur (np). Among these explanations of how errors occur are the following:

“typos occur, the source is mistaken or lies, the source is inarticulate, the source is incomplete, the author or journalist doesn’t have enough background in the subject to write about it, a publication doesn’t label opinion conspicuously enough, and readers assume it is fact (difference between editorial intention and reader perception), the author or journalist makes incorrect assumptions, an author or journalist doesn’t question what he’s told when he should, an author or journalist or editor is inexperienced, the author or journalist doesn’t consult enough sources, the author misinterprets the information he’s collected, the author mishears, neither author nor editor realizes the implications of a piece until it’s too late, an interview is incorrectly transcribed, a time lag between writing and publication makes the information invalid, facts aren’t checked completely and rigorously, a printer/typesetter error occurs, early information is incomplete and permeated with rumor, or the ‘telephone’ effect kicks in (as the message is repeated, error creeps in, and eventually the truth has disappeared entirely)” (Berinstein).

According to Silverman (2012), it is “standard practice for reporters to invent a few details, provided the made-up facts were nonessential to the overall story” (np). According to Giles (2012), the Internet may play a role in the spread of errors in the media (np). “Thanks to the internet, rumours, inaccuracies and lies have the means to bounce around social networks, blogs and news sites with
unprecedented speed” (Giles). According to Miller (2012), “the internet has clearly put pressure on traditional publications. Stories are published faster. There is less fact-checking and editorial oversight” (p. 32). “In the internet age, the echo chamber can spread false or misleading information so quickly – by a variety of sources – that it seems real, even when it’s patently false” (Miller, 2012, p. 32).

According to Hart (2012) errors may be the result of the rising belief that “accuracy – and reality – are less important than the appearance of evenhandedness” (p. 8). “So long as the fear of being seen as unfair defines the corporate media’s approach to factchecking, they will not be ‘those who deliver the facts’” (Hart, 2012, p. 9).

Giles (2012) points out the idea that errors found in the media may not necessarily be errors at all. “It’s threatening to admit you’re wrong or your side is wrong. So people think of reasons to disbelieve the information that they are given” (Giles, 2012).

**Public Perception of Errors in the Media**

“We’ve learned the hard way that people remember an error a thousand times longer than they remember you didn’t make an error” (Fitzgerald, 2012, np). Even small, relatively inconsequential errors like typos can rankle readers and create a negative impression for them (Berinstein, 2006, np).

According to Berinstein (2006), it is important to reduce errors published in the media, as “civil society groups are calling for media to fully play their societal role in the globalized world by giving a voice to the voiceless, practicing cultural diversity, providing citizens with a global perspective, etc” (np).
Errors in publications affect readers’ evaluation of news articles in a variety of ways (Appleman & Bolls, 2011, p. 58). According to Appleman & Bolls (2011), “grammatical errors are associated with low retention,” and people tend to recall “fewer correct facts from the articles with errors than they did from the articles with no errors” (p. 58). Additionally, “grammatical errors are associated with low perceived credibility” and people “(judge) articles with errors to be less credible than articles with no errors” (Appleman & Bolls, 2011, p. 58).

According to Berinstein (2006), for readers, “to be given false information about important choices in their lives is to be rendered powerless” (np). Errors in the media jeopardize “the public’s trust,” which has “arguably become (the) most valuable asset of all” (Fitzgerald, 2012, np). Consequently, “dissatisfaction with the press is at an all-time high” (Fitzgerald).

“Trust in mainstream news organizations of all political viewpoints has been declining for more than a decade” (Giles, 2012. np).

According to Berinstein (2006), errors published in the media do have a “silver lining” (np). The consequence of an error is a “powerful argument in favor of instituting a higher standard of accuracy in the media” (Berinstein).

Berinstein (2006) points out the role media consumers play in identifying errors, and the perceived effect these errors have on readership (np). According to Harshaw, cited in Berinstein (2006), “whether it’s typos or misidentifications, readers are very sensitive to that and will call you out on it, no matter what size the paper” (np).
According to Berinstein (2006), errors that are published in the media can lead to harm (np). “The harm that can result from error and misinformation includes the following: damage to someone mentioned in the article, book, or publication, damage to people who read the article and act on it, damage to someone who should have been mentioned but wasn’t, false credit to someone who doesn’t deserve it, damage to people who need the information and can’t find it, libel, harm to society, financial harm, health harm, reputation harm, career harm, lost time, lost opportunity, stress, social and relationship harm, death, incarceration, and false arrest” (Berinstein).

According to Palmer (2011), “when subjects do identify stories as inaccurate, it is not so much errors themselves that bother many subjects as it is the effects of those errors on their objectives or their reputations. Generally speaking, the more severe the effects, the more severe the error is perceived to be” (p. 28). Additionally, “there is convincing evidence that (errors) do damage a paper’s credibility in the eyes of the reader” (Palmer, 2011, p. 29).

Avoiding Common Reporting Errors

“We in the non-vested-interest news business would better serve the public if we got it right in the first place” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 4).

According to Berinstein (2006), “fact checking needs to play a greater role in the editing process, anti-plagiarism software should be utilized within newsrooms, and the correction must be evolved to meet a higher standard of disclosure” (np).

Silverman (2012) asserts that fact-checking and verification play an important role in preventing errors published in the media (np). “Never before the
in history of journalism – or society – have more people and organizations engaged in fact-checking and verification. Never has it been so easy to expose an error, check a fact, crowdsource and bring technology to bear in service of verification” (Silverman).

According to Williams (2012), one way to prevent errors from being published in the media is to ensure reports and editors “don’t believe everything they hear, and investigate things the public cannot” (p. 26).

According to Berinstein (2006), “to prevent error, authors, journalists, and other practitioners must recognize the problem, understand how errors get into publications and broadcasts, and be motivated to take preventative as well as remedial action” (np). “However, corporate pressures, lack of time and funds, and political climate and leadership can make such tasks difficult” (Berinstein).

According to Berinstein (2006), these negative factors can be balanced by “training for journalists (and) editors, better public education, particularly in critical thinking, less reward for sensationalism, adequate governmental checks and balances to prevent abuses of our constitutional system” (np).

Berinstein (2006) points out that there are “practical considerations involved in preventing error,” such as “resources and time” (np). “So maybe it’s not a question of which errors, but how many” (Berinstein).

Bernstein (2006) asserts that factors influencing a media outlet’s ability to avoid making errors in the first place include: “the existence of well-understood editorial guidelines, distinction between opinion and fact, accuracy, mechanisms for identifying and correcting errors, and responsiveness to feedback” (np).
According to Berinstein (2006), writers are “responsible for the accuracy of every fact in (their) copy – the spelling of names, the date of an event, the accuracy of an address, every fact” (np). Backfield editors are held responsible for “overall accuracy and fairness, and for enforcing standards,” while copy editors “check verifiable error-prone facts as time allows and consult with writers about factual changes” (Berinstein). “Writers are expected to read edited copies of their stories, as well as headlines, captions, graphics, and related elements when practicable” (Berinstein).

According to Poniewozik (2012), current methods of preventing errors in the media include fact-checking (p. 60). “Sometimes a fact check is a straightforward call” (Poniewozik, 2012, p. 60).

Berinstein (2006) asserts that preventing errors is the responsibility of an entire newsroom (np). “All staff members have a duty to notify a responsible editor of any possible errors in copy, before or after publication in print or on the Web” (Berinstein).

According to Spivak (2010), the public is beginning to play a larger role in detecting errors (p. 42). “Everybody is kind of getting into the game … All over the country, you’re going to see Truth-O-Meters” (Spivak, 2010, p. 42).

**Correcting Reporting Errors**

“How you handle mistakes is an important opportunity to win the trust of consumers” (Fitzgerald, 2012).

According to Strain, cited in Anderson (2011), “it is imperative to acknowledge errors, whether readers have pointed them out or not” (p. 5).
According to Strain, “in doing so, readers will recognize we are vigilant in striving for accuracy and will recognize our transparency when we've made a mistake” (Anderson, 2011, p. 5).

This assertion is backed up by Berinstein (2006), who said “even though not all mistakes are lies, the issues are similar: truth is not making its way to the recipient” (np).

According to a survey of community newspaper cited by Anderson (2011), “most newspaper editors, reporters and publishers ... said they try to correct errors as soon as possible” (p. 2).

According to a study cited by Fowler & Mumert (1988), less than a quarter of newspapers sampled “reported having a written (corrections) policy” (p. 856). However, “a significant number of executives saw a benefit to publishing corrections” (Fowler & Mumert, 1988, p. 856).

According to Weiss (2011), “no publication ... issues a correction when a typo is corrected, but each publication seems to make its own designation of where exactly the line between typo and correctable error lies” (p. 20).

Current methods of correction include the following: “letters to the editor, blog entries and their comments, forum comments, calls to talk shows, errata pages in books, newspaper and magazine blurbs, including editor’s notes, which address matters of editorial judgment rather than accuracy, author Web sites, broadcast announcements (and accompanying Web site corrections), and database article labels and tags” (Berinstein, 2006, np).
According to Berinstein (2006), there are a variety of ways to improve the handling of errors and misinformation once they are detected (np). These include: “define a standard placement for corrections in newspapers, books, and other sources so people will always know where to look for them, define a standard format for corrections that includes enough context to make them meaningful, offer the correction as soon as possible (if the error is discovered late, the correction should still be made), come up with a policy for correcting original statements ... and publicize it widely, and link corrections and the items to which they refer in databases and indexes” (Berinstein).

In recent years, “newspaper editors have ... stressed the need for a standard location or position for correction notices in newspapers, so that readers will know each day where to look for such notices” (Fowler & Mumert, 1988, p. 854).

According to Anderson (2011), most corrections that are made in a publication “appear on a designated page each day or week,” (p. 2) rather than on the same page the error occurred on.

Some newspapers explain who made the mistake and why the error was made in their corrections (Anderson, 2011, p. 3). Meanwhile, some newspapers run “a follow-up story correcting the records” for some errors made (Anderson, 2011, p. 3).

According to Berinstein (2006), the New York Times “recognizes an ethical responsibility to correct all factual errors, large and small (even misspellings of names), promptly and in a prominent reserved space in the paper” (np).
In a study reported by Fowler & Mumert (1988), it was found that exactly half of newspapers sampled “indicated they would publish corrections when a name was published incorrectly,” while 48.5% of newspapers “indicated they would be less likely to correct errors of omission” (p. 856). Other errors likely to be corrected included “figure wrong, date wrong, and typographical error” (Fowler & Mumert, 1988, p. 856).

Berinstein (2006) identifies how the advent of the Internet can influence correcting media errors: “the Web allows authors and publishers to set up errata pages and discussion areas for this purpose” (np). According to Bernstein (2006), author and publisher newspaper can also be beneficial to correcting errors made in publications (np).

According to Berinstein (2006) corrections in broadcast media are few and far between (np). “The vast majority of broadcast media don’t have an online corrections section. Nor do they reserve a portion of their programs to offer corrections to previous stories” (Berinstein). Berinstein (2006) asserts that rather than make corrections, broadcast media “will usually just fix their reports for the next time around … it will be correct next time, but rarely is the previous gaffe ever noted” (np).

Once errors have been published in the media, corrections are not necessarily the next logical step (Anderson, 2011, p. 1). According to Anderson (2011), “not all corrections that newspapers make – when they make them – help clarify the error or misunderstanding created in story” (p. 1).
According to Berinstein (2006), “sometimes a source will call a reporter to point out a mistake in a story, but will not request a correction” (np). However, “this does not absolve the reporter of the obligation to report the error and have it corrected” (Berinstein).

Berinstein (2006) points out that even if a media outlet issues a correction, it is difficult to ensure this information reaches the audience (np). “Unless (the reader) reads a source cover to cover, or listens or watches completely day in and day out, (he or she) can miss corrections” (Berinstein). Furthermore, “even if (the reader) sees or hears (corrections), (he or she) might not focus on or absorb them … if you’re bombarded with corrections all the time, you might just tune them out … and miss something of critical importance (Berinstein).

Another issue that accompanies corrections in the media is that they “are not always linked with the article or other items to which they refer,” making it “easy to miss them” (Berinstein, 2006, np). “Because many corrections offer little or no context, even if you see them, you may not understand their significance” (Berinstein).

According to Berinstein (2006), “corrections are more common than retractions” (np).

According to Phillips (2012), there are seven important steps that should be taken when an error is committed (p. 33). These include “show it to a neutral party, talk to the reporter, write a reporter, speak to the editor, respond with statements only, cut off all access, and use social media” (Phillips, 2012, p. 33).
Another source of correcting errors and misinformation published in the media is the readers themselves (Berinstein, 2006, np). Readers can assist in the correction process with the following tactics: “keep the pressure on database producers to link corrections to the articles to which they refer, rank and rate sources for accuracy, teach critical thinking so people can distinguish between fact and opinion, write op-ed pieces and submit them to major media outlets, pester public editors, and get a dialogue going with ... search engines that index blogs (see if they will incorporate methods for users to rate credibility)” (Berinstein).

It is important to note that “in some instances ... rather than improving credibility, the notice of corrections may serve to damage credibility” (Fowler & Mumert, 1988, p. 854).
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter presents the methods used to collect data for the study including the data sources, collection and presentation of the data, limitations, and delimitations.

Data Sources

For this study, journalism professionals involved with the student newspaper at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, Mustang Daily, were interviewed based on a single questionnaire. This questionnaire was specifically developed to answer the original research questions regarding the topic of accuracy and errors in the media. Additionally, sources cited in the top story published in Mustang Daily each day during the first half of the quarter during which this study was conducted were interviewed using an additional questionnaire.

Participants.

The interview sources for the purposes of this study affiliated with Mustang Daily included the following: Paul Bittick, General Manager; Brady Teufel, faculty adviser; and Brian De Los Santos, 2012-13 Editor-in-Chief. Additionally, individuals who were cited in articles published in Mustang Daily were also interviewed with a separate questionnaire for the purposes of this study.
Table 1

*Working titles, by respondent*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Working Titles</th>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Bittick</td>
<td>Mustang Daily General Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brady Teufel</td>
<td>Mustang Daily faculty adviser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian De Los Santos</td>
<td>Mustang Daily Editor-in-Chief</td>
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**Interview Design.**

The following questions and probes were asked each of the professionals affiliated with Mustang Daily and served as data for the study:

1. How would you, as an expert in your field, describe an error in the media? Please give an example of an error in the media.
2. What would you characterize as the most common errors that occur in Mustang Daily?
3. What do you think are the causes of the errors that occur in Mustang Daily?
4. How do you believe errors in Mustang Daily affect readers’ perception of the publication?
5. How do you believe these errors can be avoided?
6. How do you believe these errors can be corrected? Please give an example of a potential means of correcting errors published in the media.
7. In your opinion, how has the accuracy of reporting in Mustang Daily changed over time? Please provide examples.

The following questions (some of which were taken from an accuracy survey administrated at Plattsburgh State University in New York) were asked each of the individuals cited in Mustang Daily articles selected for this study (Shawn Murphy, personal conversation, January 21, 2013):

1. Were you quoted accurately and taken in context? If not, please describe errors.

2. Were all facts attributed to you in the story correct?

3. Was the interview conducted in person, over the phone, or through email – or some combination? Please explain.

4. Please add any other comments you care to make regarding the student’s work or approach.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, data was collected from both interviews with subject matter experts and a questionnaire surveying Mustang Daily sources, as well as a review of key points in the literature relating to the original research questions.

Subject Matter Experts.

The method of data collection for this study consisted of individual interviews with journalism professionals affiliated with Mustang Daily, as well as questionnaires distributed to selected sources cited in Mustang Daily articles. The professional interviews were conducted during February 2013 and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. During the interviews, experts were asked
questions from a single questionnaire designed to provide answers to the original research questions while gaining insight into the current state of accuracy at Mustang Daily.

**Mustang Daily Questionnaire.**

The questionnaires for sources cited in Mustang Daily articles were distributed and collected via email, in order to maintain consistency in data collection due to time constraints and the limited availability of sources to meet in person.

**Media Accuracy Research Questions.**

For this project, the following five research questions were created for the study to determine what the trends in accuracy and errors in the media are, how errors published in the media can be avoided and corrected, and the effect these errors can have on a publication’s credibility.

**Research question 1: What are the most common errors made in the media?**

- Common errors made in the media include fraud (“the intention to mislead”), mistakes (“carelessness, laziness, fatigue, human or system error”), bias, (“my way is the right way”), oversimplification or exaggeration, omission (purposeful or not), miscommunication (“hearing or reading something wrong, not understanding properly, cultural or personal differences”), data handling errors (“illegibility, data corruption, format changes”), and metadata problems (“incorrect indexing, subject terms that change over time, subjective assessment of article topics”) (Berinstein, 2006, np).
Research question 2: What are the common causes of errors made in the media?

- “Typos occur, the source is mistaken or lies, the source is inarticulate, the source is incomplete, the author or journalist doesn’t have enough background in the subject to write about it, a publication doesn’t label opinion conspicuously enough, and readers assume it is fact (difference between editorial intention and reader perception), the author or journalist makes incorrect assumptions, an author or journalist doesn’t question what he’s told when he should, an author or journalist or editor is inexperienced, the author or journalist doesn’t consult enough sources, the author misinterprets the information he’s collected, the author mishears, neither author nor editor realizes the implications of a piece until it’s too late, an interview is incorrectly transcribed, a time lag between writing and publication makes the information invalid, facts aren’t checked completely and rigorously, a printer/typesetter error occurs, early information is incomplete and permeated with rumor, or the “telephone” effect kicks in (as the message is repeated, error creeps in, and eventually the truth has disappeared entirely)” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

- “It is standard practice for reporters to invent a few details, provided the made-up facts were nonessential to the overall story” (Silverman, 2012).

- “The internet has clearly put pressure on traditional publications. Stories are published faster. There is less fact-checking and editorial oversight. … In the internet age, the echo chamber can spread false or misleading information so
quickly – by a variety of sources – that it seems real, even when it’s patently false” (Miller, 2012, p. 32).

**Research question 3: What is the public perception of errors in the media?**

- “Even small, relatively inconsequential errors like typos can rankle readers and create a negative impression for them” (Berinstein, 2006, np).
- “Grammatical errors are associated with low retention. ... Grammatical errors are associated with low perceived credibility” (Appleman & Bolls, 2011, p. 58).
- “(The consequence of an error is) a powerful argument in favor of instituting a higher standard of accuracy in the media” (Berinstein, 2006, np).
- “The harm that can result from error and misinformation includes the following: damage to someone mentioned in the article, book, or publication, damage to people who read the article and act on it, damage to someone who should have been mentioned but wasn’t, false credit to someone who doesn’t deserve it, damage to people who need the information and can’t find it, libel, harm to society, financial harm, health harm, reputation harm, career harm, lost time, lost opportunity, stress, social and relationship harm, death, incarceration, and false arrest” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

**Research question 4: How can common reporting errors be avoided?**

- “Fact checking needs to play a greater role in the editing process, anti-plagiarism software should be utilized within newsrooms, and the correction must be evolved to meet a higher standard of disclosure” (Berinstein, 2006, np).
• “(Reporters and editors) don’t believe everything they hear, and investigate things the public cannot” (Williams, 2012, p. 26).

• “Training for journalists (and) editors, better public education, particularly in critical thinking, less reward for sensationalism, adequate governmental checks and balances to prevent abuses of our constitutional system” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

Research question 5: How can common reporting errors be corrected?

• “It is imperative to acknowledge errors, whether readers have pointed them out or not” (Anderson, 2011, p. 5).

• “No publication ... issues a correction when a typo is corrected, but each publication seems to make its own designation of where exactly the line between typo and correctable error lies” (Conference Papers, 2011, p. 20).

• “(Methods of correction include) letters to the editor, blog entries and their comments, forum comments, calls to talk shows, errata pages in books, newspaper and magazine blurbs, including editor’s notes, which address matters of editorial judgment rather than accuracy, author Web sites, broadcast announcements (and accompanying Web site corrections), and database article labels and tags” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

• “Define a standard placement for corrections in newspapers, books, and other sources so people will always know where to look for them, define a standard format for corrections that includes enough context to make them meaningful, offer the correction as soon as possible (if the error is discovered late, the correction should still be made), come up with a policy for correcting
original statements ... and publicize it widely, and link corrections and the items to which they refer in databases and indexes” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

• “(Corrections should) appear on a designated page each day or week”

“The Web allows authors and publishers to set up errata pages and discussion areas for this purpose” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

Data Presentation

Data from both interviews with subject matter experts and Mustang Daily survey respondents were interpreted individually for the purposes of this study.

Interviews.

The data collected during each interview were documented through audio recordings through the use of a digital voice recorder, as well as written verbatim notes taken during and after the interviews to document any additional information that could potentially be used to clarify the context of the professionals’ responses. This method of data collection ensures that the data accumulated throughout the interview process is presented in the most complete, accurate, and objective way possible.

Questionnaire.

The data collected during the questionnaires distributed to sources cited in Mustang Daily articles were documented through the collection of the email correspondence containing the participants’ answers to the questions. This method of data collection was used to ensure that all responses collected are interpreted in
the correct context to provide the most accurate interpretation of the respondents’ answers as possible.

**Scoring Protocol**

The quantitative data collected from the survey distributed to sources in Mustang Daily articles was interpreted for the purposes of this study through descriptive analysis. The qualitative data (survey question #4) was not interpreted for the purposes of this study due to time constraints. However, this data can be seen to provide further explanation for respondents’ quantitative answers in Appendix D.

**Limitations**

This study presents limitations based on the timeframe during which it was conducted. This study was performed as part of a 10-week Senior Project. As a result, the study was designed within the parameters of a 10-week time period, so the data collected may not be as extensive as that of a study conducted over a longer period of time.

There are limitations to this study based on the type of data collected and interview process. The study was conducted to gain insight into the state of accuracy at Mustang Daily. Therefore, some limitations may exist based on the assumption that the results are qualitative and opinion-based, therefore making them difficult to be generalized.

**Delimitations**

The main delimitation to this study is the fact that the questionnaire distributed to sources cited in articles published in Mustang Daily was distributed
via email. Because some of the sources were unavailable for in-person interviews, it was decided that all of these questionnaires would be distributed via email to provide consistency and to be able to receive feedback from more people. A potential problem with this method is the fact that email interviews may not provide proper context or the elaborations and additional details that in-person interviews can provide. Therefore, there are some potential limitations based on the clarity and informality of these questionnaires.
Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter 4 will provide descriptions of the experts interviewed in the study and summarize the respondents’ answers to the questionnaire. Because the data were collected through recorded interviews that lasted approximately 30 minutes, it will be presented in the form of direct quotations of paraphrased responses from the interviewees. The answers will then be analyzed and compared to the original research questions and the existing literature on accuracy and errors in the media as reviewed in Chapter 2.

Description of Participating Experts in Related Fields

The subject matter experts chosen for the interview portion of this study were elected based on their association with the case study publication, Mustang Daily, and their ability to provide insights on managing, advising, and student perspectives.

Managing.

Paul Bittick was the managing expert for the study. Bittick has served as General Manager of California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly), San Luis Obispo’s student newspaper, Mustang Daily, for 11 years. He oversees the production of the paper by managing students on both an editorial and an advertising staff. He serves as a liaison between Mustang Daily students and journalism faculty, and manages the financial components of the publication. Bittick has worked in the field of journalism and publishing for 39 years, beginning as a
journalist in the United States Air Force, and having worked for various news publications.

**Advising.**

The student media advising expert selected for this study was Brady Teufel, faculty adviser to Mustang Daily and journalism assistant professor. Teufel has been a part of the Cal Poly journalism department faculty for seven years, and has worked as Mustang Daily faculty adviser for five years. He graduated from University of Missouri in 2001 with a Master's Degree in journalism. Currently, Teufel teaches classes in multimedia journalism, visual communication, and advanced reporting at Cal Poly.

**Student.**

Brian De Los Santos was the subject matter expert selected to provide a student perspective for this study. De Los Santos is journalism major in his fifth year at Cal Poly, and is the Editor-in-Chief of Mustang Daily for the 2012-13 academic year. He has worked at Mustang Daily since his sophomore year at Cal Poly as sports editor, and also has experience working for the San Luis Obispo Tribune, as well as ESPN, and other online sports journalism publications. De Los Santos will graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in journalism this year, and has been accepted to the Medill graduate program in journalism at Northwestern University, which will begin in Fall 2013.

**Mustang Daily Accuracy Questionnaire**

Each subject matter expert was asked to respond to the following questions and probes regarding errors and accuracy in the media, particularly Mustang Daily:
1. How would you, as an expert in your field, describe an error in the media? Please give an example of an error in the media.

Question #1 was asked to gain insight into what exactly can constitute an error in the media, and what variations of errors may exist. The question was designed to clarify what exactly an error – the central focus of the study – can be defined as, to make the term more easily understood for both the experts and the reader.

- Paul Bittick: “An error in the media could be almost anything. That could be the misspelling of a name, it could be a factual error, you know, regarding time, place, that type of specific. It may be a misquote of someone, a typo that creates a misquote” (Appendix A).

- Brady Teufel: “There’s a big continuum of errors in journalism. Factual errors and errors that are on the surface just boldface lies and misleading info, are the most damaging. But then, a media error, in my opinion ... can also be something more stylistic. ... An error could also be more conceptual or philosophical, meaning you didn't get the other side of the story. You interviewed sources that were all very similar” (Appendix B).

- Brian De Los Santos: “An error is, I guess, any time that we get something wrong. ... Anything where we misrepresented the facts – in any way, shape, or form – whether that’s not putting a comma somewhere, or whether that’s misspelling President Armstrong’s name” (Appendix C).
2. **What would you characterize as the most common errors that occur in Mustang Daily?**

Question #2 was designed to gain an understanding of what particular types of errors occur frequently in student media, particularly the case study for this project: Mustang Daily. It serves to provide an example of the type of errors that occur in a daily college newspaper, which is a topic that is hardly present in current literature and research.

- Paul Bittick: “Common or similar type of errors, I see periodically, you’ll see grammatical-type mistakes in there, where grammar needs to be fixed or something that’s misused” (Appendix A).

- Brady Teufel: “If you’re just talking sheer quantity, frequency of errors, it definitely concerns grammar usage, syntax, most commonly. Second tier, in terms of not quite as common but every bit as important, would be more structural errors. ... I would say a more substantive error that I see most frequently would be the error of not answering all readers’ questions” (Appendix B).

- Brian De Los Santos: “We have a problem with numbers and statistics. ... Sometimes we seem to, I guess, overlook the sense of the numbers. ... Titles are another one that are just commonly messed up in journalism” (Appendix C).
3. What do you think are the causes of the errors that occur in Mustang Daily?

Question #3 was created to gain an understanding of how the errors that are published in Mustang Daily are committed. This question was included to get the experts’ insight into any possible sources that may be the underlying causes of errors that occur in Mustang Daily, therefore hindering the accuracy of the publication.

- Paul Bittick: “Part of it, experience (of the students). Part of it, sometimes somebody could be rushing to get it done. For whatever reason, they’re all students, you know, they have other assignments” (Appendix A).

- Brady Teufel: “I think of lot of it is just, people operating within their subject position, within a bubble, so to speak, and not really accounting for the new reader, or the reader who might not know the context that’s needed to understand what’s being written in an article. ... Usage, grammar, spelling errors ... really concerns copy editors. I’d say it’s more education and not knowing the right rules than it is being lazy or sloppy” (Appendix B).

- Brian De Los Santos: “Mustang Daily is one big learning experience. So, one of the main things as to where some errors creep in is from inexperience. Inexperience in editing, inexperience in reporting, inexperience in management – just inexperience all across the board. Of course, when it comes to the newsroom at night, there are always distractions” (Appendix C).
4. **How do you believe errors in Mustang Daily affect readers’ perception of the publication?**

Question #4 was designed to formulate an understanding of the consequences publishing errors can have – not only for the accuracy of a publication’s reporting, but for the perceived reputation of the publication. This question was created to evaluate how the readers of a publication are affected by errors in the media.

- **Paul Bittick:** “I don’t think to students it’s as big of a thing as it is to faculty and staff. Because, you know, you’ll hear more comments from those. And I think students probably have a better understanding of what it is, a student newspaper” (Appendix A).

- **Brady Teufel:** “I think the errors that affect readers’ perceptions are not the errors that, from an adviser perspective, I think are the most egregious. In other words, it’s the spelling, usage, grammar, typo errors that result in the most anti-MD sentiment from the public. ... Sadly, credibility is one of those things where it’s easy to chisel away, but it’s real hard to build up. So I think, you know, multitudes of small errors over time diminish the overall credibility of a newspaper, and they give people ammunition to say those people at MD are doing a sloppy job, or they’re not caring, or they’re not trying, when in fact that’s not the case. ... It’s always about a stupid mistake or a typo. You know, people like to think they’re smarter. And by pointing out a typo that makes them feel better ... they seem to use that for ammunition to say, ‘oh, the rest of the paper is BS.’ So, that, you know, I think those errors –
repeated errors over time – really, really damage the reputation or the credibility of a news organization” (Appendix B).

• Brian De Los Santos: “Any time that we make an error, any time that we come off as a non-professional newspaper, any time we come off and people perceive our writing as childish or high school-ish, we’re losing credibility. ... We want to be credible. And the minute that we don’t have credibility, we really cease to have a reason to exist as a newspaper” (Appendix C).

5. **How do you believe these errors can be avoided?**

Question #5 was designed to gain the perspectives from each expert on how to eliminate the problem of errors being published in the media in the first place. It was asked to gain insight into potential methods of avoiding errors before the occur, or before they are published, in order to uphold the accuracy of the reporting of a publication.

• Paul Bittick: “You need to minimize them, you don’t avoid them. Copy editing. You know, reporters, before they even turn in their stories, reading their story frontwards and backwards – actually works. Reading their stories out loud, reading the story and you’re reading it out loud and you’re having a hard time reading it, obviously there’s something wrong in your whole structure. ... You know, unfortunately we get very reliant on some of the technologies today. Spell check, I’m writing an email and if that little red bar doesn’t come up under the word, I spelled it right, huh? ... Again, you’ve got to read the stories, look at the words individually. ... Your mind is so trained when you’re reading something and you get in the flow of reading it, that you
almost anticipate what the next word is, and so you read over something.
And so as people stop and start reading it back and looking at the words
individually, you realize it has no flow to it. ... Double-checking the facts. ...
Factual errors ... are the ones that can be avoided because of asking"
(Appendix A).

• Brady Teufel: “I think the errors can be avoided by more lines of defense
between the original copy and what’s published. And by lines of defense I
essentially mean eyeballs reading it. And, I would like to see, because a copy
editor’s job ... is so extensive. In other words, you have to be looking at usage,
grahm, spelling, and on the other side of the coin you have to be looking at
facts and whether they’re true. And then a third aspect is that you have to be
making sure a source actually said that, and that source even exists and is
real. ... I think something that would help alleviate errors and reduce them
would be more copy editors, but copy editors with more specific jobs”
(Appendix B).

• Brian De Los Santos: “A bigger emphasis on teaching copy editors greater
style. I mean we have one copy editing class in the department, but
sometimes that’s just not enough. ... Another very, very overlooked thing in
terms of the editing process, and kind of errors, is teaching your reporters
the basics, and teaching the reporters the correct style, and making sure that
at ground zero, when they’re reporting and doing all this stuff, stuff’s coming
in right, and I think that’s one thing that a lot of people overlook” (Appendix
C).
6. How do you believe these errors can be corrected? Please give an example of a potential means of correcting errors published in the media.

Question #6 was designed to form a general idea about what should be done once an error is published. It focuses on potential means of corrections, and brings up the issue of whether an error should be corrected or clarified at all once it is committed in the first place. This concept goes along with maintaining a publication’s perceived credibility.

- Paul Bittick: “You should always run a correction or clarification in the paper. You know, the nice thing is, if you’re running a story online, and you have an error in spelling or something like that, that can be fixed. I don’t think that needs to be done on all stories. ... But it’s very important to correct your errors as correction in the paper. ... If there is a mistake that could be libelous where the newspaper could have some legal vulnerability because of a lawsuit, you basically eliminate the amount they can seek in damages by running a correction” (Appendix A).

- Brady Teufel: “I think at a certain point you cut your losses and you don’t worry about correcting the fact that you missed a serial comma, or that you have a capital letter, or that you have a typo. ... With errors that concern quotes that are misleading, out of context, false ... that paint a source, or that are attached to a source and imply something that’s the complete opposite of what the source intended to imply, should be corrected publicly for the record. And by publicly I mean you put a correction at the very top or the
very bottom of the story, and explain exactly what’s been changed and explain why it’s been changed, and explain how it came to your attention. ...

Transparency and publicity are tantamount” (Appendix B).

• Brian De Los Santos: “We have to maintain ... our connection to the truth and our commitment to the truth. So any time that we’re out there and we make an error, a statement that’s full of errors, we have to correct ourselves. We have to publicly display that we were wrong, and we have to publicly display that we were wrong, and we have to publicly ... give our readers the right information. So whether that’s a correction, whether that’s putting an editor’s note online, whether it’s doing something along those lines, we need to make sure that people know that we’re not trying to hide things, people know that we’re not trying to spin the facts, and we are correctly giving them the information” (Appendix C).

7. **In your opinion, how has the accuracy of reporting in Mustang Daily changed over time? Please provide examples.**

Question #7 was designed to gain insight into whether the accuracy in reporting in student publications is stable over time. Due to a high rate of student turnover, this question was designed to obtain an understanding of whether students in the media face the same issues each year, or whether accuracy is improved over time.

• Paul Bittick: “You know, you’re dealing with ... the same level of students. ... I think it’s probably better now than it was before because we’re dealing with a lot less class-generated news stories vs. staff-generated news stories. And I
think you have a higher level of expectation from those writers and also they have a somewhat more experience level with the stories, too. The more you write the better you get” (Appendix A).

• Brady Teufel: “With the student turnover, it’s not really a continuum. ... It really depends on who is on staff that year, and what their priorities really are. ... I don’t think a lot of editors would ever run an operation that’s loosey-goosey enough to where a fake quote or a made-up story is going to get through. ... I absolutely think that errors get reduced from fall to the end of spring. But, year-to-year, it’s just apples and oranges” (Appendix B).

• Brian De Los Santos: “It’s almost alarming leaving the Mustang Daily when I did, and then coming back and seeing the amount of red on the pages now, because it’s significantly, significantly, significantly less. ... I think it’s just a testament to the kind of students and the kind of writers and the kind of reporters that Cal Poly is trying to produce. And their core, I guess, skills that they’re gaining in classes and that they’re coming into school with – I guess that’s something that’s really, really being developed.”

Media Accuracy Data

For this study, it was important to see what experts had to say due to the relatively insignificant amount of pertinent information that currently exists in the literature on the topic of media accuracy and errors in student publications. In order to acquire this data, Paul Bittick, Mustang Daily General Manager, Brady Teufel, Mustang Daily faculty adviser, and Brian De Los Santos, Mustang Daily 2012-13 Editor-in-Chief, were interviewed for the study. Each of the interviewees was asked
identical questions specifically designed to answer the original research questions in an individual interview setting. The following tables present the respondents’ answers in the form of their individual perspectives on the research questions.

**Research question 1: What are the most common errors made in the media?**

This research question was studied in response to current literature that exists on the topic of errors in the media in general. A substantial amount of research covers the overarching topic of errors in the media, and the general consensus in the literature is that the most common errors in the media include “misspelled names, an incorrect address, wrong dates or times, misidentification in a cutline, etc” (Anderson, 2011, p. 3).

This question was studied to gain insight into what the most common errors that occur in the media are. The literature indicates that in mainstream media, the most common errors that occur are relatively small. However, gaps in the literature exist about common errors in student media. To get a better sense of this, experts in student media were asked this question in order to attempt to fill the gap in the research.

Table 2 summarizes the answers to question #1. The respondents’ answers were somewhat consistent, and were closely tied to the findings summarized in the literature on this topic. Both Bittick and Teufel highlighted grammar as a common mistake, which parallels the findings in current literature. De Los Santos cited numbers, statistics, and titles as common errors, which is also consistent with the literature.
Table 2

*Examples of common errors in student media, by respondent*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Examples of common errors in student media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bittick</td>
<td>Grammatical mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady Teufel</td>
<td>Grammar usage; not answering all readers’ questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian De Los Santos</td>
<td>Numbers and statistics; titles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research question 2: What are the common causes of errors made in the media?**

This research question was studied in order to find out how the common errors that are made in the media come to occur. According to existing literature, “it is standard practice for reporters to invent a few details, provided the made-up facts were nonessential to the overall story” (Silverman, 2012). The literature also highlights the role that the advent of the Internet has brought into reporting accuracy: “the internet has clearly put pressure on traditional publications. Stories are published faster. There is less fact-checking and editorial oversight. ... In the internet age, the echo chamber can spread false or misleading information so quickly – by a variety of sources – that it seems real, even when it’s patently false” (Miller, 2012, p. 32).

This question was designed to investigate the causes of common errors that are published in the media. Because errors can have a significant impact on the accuracy of reporting in a publication, and in turn, the publication’s credibility, it is
essential to evaluate how these errors come to be, in order to avoid them and improve the credibility of a publication. Because of the gap in existing literature about student media, it was important to ask the experts this question in order to determine whether there is a set of causes that is unique to student journalism.

Table 3

*Causes of common errors in student media, by respondent*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Causes of common errors in student media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bittick</td>
<td>Experience; rushing to get it done; being a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady Teufel</td>
<td>Not accounting for new reader; copy editors not knowing the correct rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian De Los Santos</td>
<td>Inexperience; distractions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 3, both Bittick and De Los Santos gave similar answers about the causes of common errors in student media. Each attributed these errors to a lack of experience. Teufel also mentioned inexperience, specifically in copy editing. A potential cause brought to light by Teufel, that is not largely consistent with the existing literature, is not accounting for the new reader and leaving out important general information necessary to understand the content of a story in its proper context.
Research question 3: What is the public perception of errors in the media?

This research question was studied in order to find out how errors published in the media can affect readers’ perceptions of a publication. Trends in existing research reveal that errors “are associated with low perceived credibility” (Appleman & Bolls, 2011, p. 58).

This question was designed to investigate the effects of errors in the media on readers, and in turn, on a publication’s success. Because a publication cannot survive without its readers, it is important to evaluate the role errors can play in readership and perceived credibility. A large amount of literature indicates that errors can be very detrimental to the public’s trust in the media, and can hurt not only a publication’s reputation, but the reputation of the journalism industry in general.

Table 4

Public perception of errors in student media, by respondent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Public perception of errors in student media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bittick</td>
<td>Errors upset faculty and staff more than students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady Teufel</td>
<td>The accumulation of small errors over time upsets readers and decreases credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian De Los Santos</td>
<td>Errors cause a newspaper to lose credibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 4, both Teufel and De Los Santos indicated that credibility is a major factor when errors occur. Bittick highlighted the fact that in a student newspaper setting, students do not tend to react as strongly to errors as faculty and staff members.

**Research question 4: How can common reporting errors be avoided?**

This question was studied to discover proposed methods of avoiding common errors in the media before they occur. The literature highlights a variety of methods that can potentially prevent errors from occurring, however training, reporters and fact-checking practices are among the most prevalent. “(Reporters and editors) don’t believe everything they hear, and investigate things the public cannot” (Williams, 2012, p. 26).

**Table 5**

*Avoiding common reporting errors, by respondent*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Avoiding common reporting errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bittick</td>
<td>Reading stories more thoroughly before turning in; double-checking the facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady Teufel</td>
<td>More people reading stories; copy editors with more fine-tuned job duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian De Los Santos</td>
<td>More learning opportunities for editors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This question was designed to establish preventative measures that could improve newsroom and reporting practices. It was asked to find relevant ways to
avoid errors before they happen in order to enhance the accuracy and credibility of a publication.

Table 5 shows, as the literature indicates, that a variety of ways exist by which errors can be avoided in the media. All respondents highlighted the importance of enhancing the editing process to avoid errors. Bittick emphasized tighter regulations and practices for reporters, while Teufel and De Los Santos geared their responses more toward editors, specifically copy editors.

**Research question 5: How can common reporting errors be corrected?**

This question was studied in order to gain an understanding of potential means of correction errors once they are made, if in fact they should be corrected at all. According to the literature, all errors should be corrected, but it is more important to publish a notification of correction for errors of fact than it is for grammar and syntax errors. “(Methods of correction include) letters to the editor, blog entries and their comments, forum comments, calls to talk shows, errata pages in books, newspaper and magazine blurbs, including editor’s notes, which address matters of editorial judgment rather than accuracy, author Web sites, broadcast announcements (and accompanying Web site corrections), and database article labels and tags” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

This question was studied to gain insight into what correction policies experts believe publications should adopt and enforce, specifically for student media. It was designed to gain the perspectives of three individuals operating under the same publication with distinct roles and viewpoints.
Table 6 indicates that all respondents agreed that corrections should be made whenever an error is committed. Teufel emphasized factual and contextual errors more, while Bittick and De Los Santos indicated that this should be done for errors of any kind.

**Table 6**

*Correcting common reporting errors, by respondent*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Correcting common reporting errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Bittick</td>
<td>Corrections should always be made, particularly if there is a legal vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady Teufel</td>
<td>Putting someone in a false context should always be corrected; corrections should be made note of in stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian De Los Santos</td>
<td>Corrections should be publicly made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mustang Daily Accuracy Survey**

In order to gain an idea of the current state of accuracy in Mustang Daily, a survey was distributed to the first source of the newspaper’s top story each day for the first five weeks of Winter Quarter 2013. There were a total of 10 respondents.

The survey consisted of the following questions:

1. **Were you quoted accurately and taken in context? If not, please describe errors.**

   Question #1 was designed in order to gain an understanding of where Mustang Daily reporting stands on a common reporting error, misquoting.
100 percent of respondents (n=10) indicated that they were quoted accurately and taken in context. While existing literature does indicate that misquoting is a common error in media, it is not classified to be as common as factual errors, so these results are somewhat inconsistent with current trends in the literature.

2. **Were all facts attributed to you in the story correct?**

   Question #2 was designed in order to gain insight into Mustang Daily’s factual accuracy, and the prevalence of factual errors in the publication’s content.

   70 percent of respondents (n=10) indicated that all facts attributed to them in the story they were surveyed about were correct. Because existing literature highlights factual errors as common in the media, this finding is consistent with the literature.

3. **Was the interview conducted in person, over the phone, or through email – or some combination? Please explain.**

   Question #3 was designed in order to gain an understanding of how these interviews were conducted, in order to evaluate how interview tactics potentially influence the accuracy of reporting.

   20 percent of respondents (n=2) indicated that their interviews were conducted in person, 40 percent indicated that their interviews were conducted over the phone (n=4), 30 percent (n=3) indicated that their interviews were conducted through a combination of in-person and over the phone, and 10 percent (n=1) was unable to recall the method of the interview. However, the responses to this question do not reveal much about interview methods as the potential sources
of errors, as approximately 67% (n=2) of interviews for those who indicated not all facts attributed to them were correct were conducted in person, while approximately 33% (n=1) of these respondents indicated that their interviews were conducted by a combination of methods.

4. Please add any other comments you care to make regarding the student's work or approach.

Question #4 was included in this survey in order to include any additional details that may provide further insight into how any errors came about. However, not all respondents provided an answer to this question, and due to time constraints, the qualitative answers to this question were not analyzed for the purposes of this project.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Summary

This study was performed in response to an ever-present issue the field of journalism: accuracy in the media. This study's particular emphasis explored how errors can alter the accuracy of a publication's reporting, and the effect that these errors can have on the public's perception of a publication's credibility. There is little information on this topic about student media in the current literature, and this study set out to fill in the gaps about errors and accuracy in student media. For this purpose, it was essential to collect data from experts in the field of student media. In this particular study, the student newspaper at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Mustang Daily, was selected as a case study.

To find more information about accuracy and errors in student media, the subject matter experts for the study were each interviewed individually based on a single questionnaire designed to answer the following research questions for the study:

1. What are the most common errors made in the media?
2. What are the common causes of errors made in the media?
3. What is the public perception of errors in the media?
4. How can common reporting errors be avoided?
5. How can common reporting errors be corrected?
The questionnaire elicited a variety of responses that were related to the existing literature on errors and accuracy in the media, and provided insight into one of the gaps that exists in this literature: student media.

**Discussion**

By analyzing the data collected from Chapter 4, connections made between experts’ responses provided during the interview process and the existing literature found in Chapter 2, it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the following original research questions.

**Research question 1: What are the most common errors made in the media?**

The experts interviewed for this study all responded by drawing from their personal experience in student media. Bittick and Teufel both cited grammatical errors as the most common, while De Los Santos cited errors dealing with numbers as statistics as the most common. The survey respondents, however, indicated that any errors committed were factual errors.

The literature reflects a similar perspective. “Most errors (are) small ... (and include) misspelled names, an incorrect address, wrong dates or times, misidentification in a cutline, etc” (Anderson, 2011, p. 3).

Overall, it is possible to conclude that the most common errors that occur in the media, and particularly student media, involve grammatical mistakes. However, insight from the experts indicates that these errors are not necessarily the most impactful on a publication’s credibility, and that factual errors can have more damaging effects for a publication.
Research question 2: What are the common causes of errors made in the media?

All three of the experts cited experience, or lack thereof, as a common cause for errors committed in the media. Teufel, however, differed from the other two experts, as he also cited not accounting for the new reader as a common cause for errors.

This idea of inexperience is reflected in current literature. “The author or journalist makes incorrect assumptions, (or) an author or journalist doesn’t question what he’s told when he should, an author or journalist or editor is inexperienced” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

Overall, there is consistency with the experts’ responses and findings in the literature regarding inexperience as a cause for common reporting errors in the media. It is possible to conclude that inexperience in reporting and editing can lead to errors, which negatively affect the accuracy in a publication’s reporting. Additionally, Teufel shed light on an issue that is not widespread in existing literature, but may serve as key insight into issues specific to student media reporting.

Research question 3: What is the public perception of errors in the media?

The consensus among the experts interviewed for this study was that errors in the media tend to upset readers and create a public perception of low credibility of the publication.
The literature reflects this notion. “Even small, relatively inconsequential errors like typos can rankle readers and create a negative impression for them” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

Overall, it is possible to conclude that when errors are committed in a publication, the readers’ perceived credibility of the publication is threatened.

**Research question 4: How can common reporting errors be avoided?**

Bittick and Teufel both suggested a more thorough editing process as a method for avoiding common reporting errors, while De Los Santos stressed learning opportunities for editors as necessary for avoiding these errors. Teufel also suggested that copy editors have more fine-tuned job descriptions in order to be able to focus more on specific accuracy checking.

The experts’ ideas for avoiding common reporting errors are all reflected in existing literature. “Fact checking needs to play a greater role in the editing process, anti-plagiarism software should be utilized within newsrooms, and the correction must be evolved to meet a higher standard of disclosure” (Berinstein, 2006, np). “Training for journalists (and) editors, better public education, particularly in critical thinking (help avoid common reporting errors)” (Berinstein).

Overall, it is possible to conclude that effective efforts for avoiding common reporting errors include a shift in focus toward more in-depth editing, as well as more emphasis on the education of a news publication’s staff members.
Research question 5: How can common reporting errors be corrected?

All three experts interviewed for this study agreed that reporting errors should be corrected once they are committed, and that this correction should be made note of publicly.

The notion of correcting errors publicly once they are committed is reflected in existing literature. “It is imperative to acknowledge errors, whether readers have pointed them out or not” (Anderson, 2011, p. 5). “Define a standard placement for corrections in newspapers, books, and other sources so people will always know where to look for them, define a standard format for corrections that includes enough context to make them meaningful, offer the correction as soon as possible (if the error is discovered late, the correction should still be made), come up with a policy for correcting original statements ... and publicize it widely, and link corrections and the items to which they refer in databases and indexes” (Berinstein, 2006, np).

Overall, this study confirms that errors in the media should be corrected. However, additional research should be conducted to determine the most effective means of correcting reporting errors.

Recommendations for Practice

After completion of this study, substantial data has been collected and analyzed on the topic of accuracy and errors in the media. Given the information collected, it is important to highlight the most insightful content and present it for future media professionals, particularly in student publications. Practitioners may benefit from this study in the following ways: incorporating more training and
education for reporters and editors throughout their time at a publication, enforcing a more meticulous editing protocol, and developing a corrections policy to be displayed publicly, such as on a publication’s website.

**Training and Education.**

Both experts’ interviews and existing literature on the topic of accuracy in the media indicate that in order to avoid publishing errors in the first place, reporters and editors need to undergo constant training and education to be continually improving and staying up-to-date on efficient editing and fact-checking.

Berinstein (2006) stressed “training for journalists (and) editors, better public education, particularly in critical thinking” as a means for maintaining a publication’s accuracy (np). De Los Santos asserted that in order to maintain a publication’s accuracy, it is imperative to “(teach) your reporters the basics, and teaching the reporters the correct style, and making sure that at ground zero, when they’re reporting and doing all this stuff, stuff’s coming in right.”

**Editing Protocol.**

Another factor found in this study to be essential to maintaining the accuracy of a publication is enforcing strict, effective editing practices in a newsroom at all levels.

Writers are “responsible for the accuracy of every fact in (their) copy – the spelling of names, the date of an event, the accuracy of an address, every fact” (Berinstein, 2006, np). “All staff members have a duty to notify a responsible editor of any possible errors in copy, before or after publication in print or on the Web” (Berinstein). Bittick asserted that before reporters submit their stories to be edited,
they should “(read) their story frontwards and backwards.” Teufel emphasized that “something that would help alleviate errors and reduce them would be more copy editors, but copy editors with more specific jobs.”

**Corrections Policy.**

While it is imperative that publications adopt methods to avoid the occurrence of errors, it is equally imperative that publications adopt methods of correcting errors that do occur. This notion was reflected in both existing literature and experts’ interviews.

“How you handle mistakes is an important opportunity to win the trust of consumers” (Fitzgerald, 2012). “It is imperative to acknowledge errors, whether readers have pointed them out or not” (Anderson, 2011, p. 5). According to Teufel, corrections should be “at the very top or the very bottom of the story, and explain exactly what’s been changed and explain why it’s been changed, and explain how it came to your attention.” Teufel asserted that when developing a corrections policy, it is important to maintain that “transparency and publicity are tantamount.” According to De Los Santos, it is vital to “publicly display that we were wrong, and we have to publicly ... give our readers the right information.”

**Study Conclusion**

In conclusion, given the general findings of the study, student media may benefit from both qualitative and quantitative research performed regularly on the topic of accuracy and errors in the media. Routine data collection and interview should be conducted based on the independent needs of each publication, in order to reassess areas in need of improvement in regards to preventing errors and
maintaining accuracy in a given media outlet. Overall, the study presented the collective opinions of several experts in related fields, a survey of sources cited in a student publication, Mustang Daily, used as a case study, and a review of literature on the topic. This study serves as an educational tool for mainstream and student media professionals who are interested in improving a publication’s accuracy and perceived credibility.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Transcripts: Paul Bittick

The following interview was conducted to gain expert opinions from a management perspective based on a questionnaire about errors and accuracy in Mustang Daily.

Interviewer: Sarah Gilmore
Respondent: Mustang Daily General Manager (Paul Bittick)
Date of Interview: 2/19/2013

Interview Transcription:
Sarah Gilmore: “The first question I have for you is: How would you, as an expert in your field, describe an error in the media?”

Paul Bittick: “An error in the media could be almost anything. That could be the misspelling of a name, it could be a factual error, you know, regarding time, place, that type of specific. It may be a misquote of someone, a typo that creates a misquote, you know. Such as, ‘I did not do that’ type of thing, and somehow somebody creates a typo and drops off ‘not,’ it changes the whole meaning of the line. So, you know, there’s all sorts of types of errors in the media. I think, you know, as long as you have students reporting that, and so you’re going to have that part of human error that, you know, I don’t think will ever be totally, completely eliminated.”

SG: “So how would you characterize the most common errors that occur in Mustang Daily?”

PB: “I think what I hear the most, or hear referred to, was ‘I was misquoted.’”

SG: “And who do you usually hear that from?”

PB: “It’s just in general, I mean it’s nobody really in specific. Just knowing from my reporting days, if something comes out and someone doesn’t show somebody favorably, they want to try to sometimes change the focus and then say ‘I wasn’t quoted right.’ They won’t say ‘I was misquoted’ – ‘I wasn’t quoted right.’ And, so, you know, I think probably more than anything, you know, in the Mustang, just more typographicals are more errors. Then will all of the technology we have available today, misquoting shouldn’t be an issue, because you can do what you’re doing right now, which is taping this, because of cell phones. You can tape it, or you can buy a digital recorder very cheap. So, misquoting should not ever be a mistake, you know. I can see a mistake being made more of a typo.”

SG: “OK, are there any other common errors that you see in Mustang Daily?”
PB: “It’s hard to say, because if something’s a common error, you’re going to discuss it and you’re going to quit making that same mistake again. You know, common or similar type of errors, I see periodically, you’ll see grammatical-type mistakes in there, where grammar needs to be fixed or something that’s misused. Some types of misuses by everybody in journalism you see are misuse or overuse of commas. That’s a little thing, but I notice those things, I guess. It’s very commonly misused and overused.”

SG: “OK, what do you think are the causes of the errors that occur in Mustang Daily?”

PB: "Part of it, experience. Part of it, sometimes somebody could be rushing to get it done. For whatever reason, they’re all students, you know, they have other assignments. And, it takes a while, I think, to develop, almost over-analysis of not making a mistake. However we look at it, everybody who works at Mustang Daily are students. How many can say that every paper they’ve turned has come back 100 percent correct? They’ve made mistakes on tests. They’ve made mistakes on assignments. You know, they’re going to make mistakes. It’s a matter of time. That’s why newspapers have editors, copy editors to catch those mistakes. You know, because if reporters were perfect out there, we wouldn’t need to have copy editors. It’s just, mistakes are part of it. You can’t take out human nature, human error, you just can’t.”

SG: “How do you believe errors in Mustang Daily affect readers’ perception of the publication?”

PB: “That’s a great question. I don’t think to students it’s as big of a thing as it is to faculty and staff. Because, you know, you’ll hear more comments from those. And I think students probably have a better understanding of what it is, a student newspaper. One of my comments to faculty and staff when they see an error in the Mustang is, OK well you teach classes, how many of your students turn in perfect papers every time? What makes this different than any other paper is – not that I’m saying I want to see mistakes in it – but mistakes are going to happen, errors are going to happen. You learn from them, you take every one as a learning opportunity and go from there.”

SG: “How do you believe that these errors can be avoided?”

PB: “You need to minimize them, you don’t avoid them. Copy editing. You know, reporters, before they even turn in their stories, reading their story forwards and backwards – actually works. Reading their stories out loud, reading the story and you’re reading it out loud and you’re having a hard time reading it, obviously there’s something wrong in your whole structure. I used to make reporters do that when I was an editor. They didn’t like it. I had a sports writer, he was young, and as I did every day when I came to work as publisher, I read the paper. And I was reading the story and I couldn’t get through it. The first graph didn’t make sense. So after he came into work, I said, ‘Tyler, read me your story.’ And he glanced down and said,
‘yeah, what about it?’ I said, ‘read it to me, read it out loud to me.’ He started to read it and all of a sudden he started stumbling because it didn’t have any flow to it. And he said, ‘oh, it doesn’t make any sense.’ I said, ‘yes, how did it get in the paper? You didn’t read your story.’ He said, ‘well I read through it.’ I said, ‘you didn’t read it.’ You know, there’s a difference between to read through it and to read it. I mean, you know, that is probably one of the most important things, is people learning and using the habit of reading their stories out loud. You know, unfortunately we get very reliant on some of the technologies today. Spell check, I’m writing an email and if that little red bar doesn’t come up under a word, I spelled it right, huh? But that doesn’t mean I used ‘there’ in the right usage when it should have been ‘their.’ And so, you know, or ‘led’ or ‘lead,’ or words that may be spelled right but are used wrong. Again, you’ve got to read the stories, look at the words individually. One of the only ways to look at words individually is reading backwards. Because every time you come upon a word that has multiple spellings, you want to stop and make sure, are we using the correct form for that? And your mind is so trained when you’re reading something and you get in the flow of reading it, that you almost anticipate what the next word is, and so you read over something. And so as people stop and start reading it back and looking at the words individually, you realize it has no flow to it. You just learn different tricks of the trade as a writer, as an editor. Again, you’re not going to not make mistakes. Why does New York Times run corrections? Why does LA Times? Because they make mistakes just like we do. You minimize mistakes.”

SG: “What about factual errors? Do you think there are ways those could be avoided or minimized?”

PB: “Yeah, there’s a lot of ways. Double-checking the facts. I know you guys don’t like me telling war stories, but in the Air Force, I was a journalist, and I went to actual school for being a military journalist trained by the Department of Defense. And, of course this was during Vietnam. And there were guys in this school from all branches of the service – not just Air Force, there was Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, all of it. So I’m in this school, and we went nine hours a day. It was pretty high level, college-level classes in journalism and international relations and things. You had to maintain a 70 percent average, or C average. If you dropped below that for a week, you were on probation. And if you weren’t up above 70 by the end of next week, you were out. Well, for the guys in the Army, that meant usually the next stop was infantry school, then Vietnam. So, you know, there was no grading on a curve. But, on any story you wrote, it was an automatic zero, F, if there was an error of fact in the story. An error in fact can be misspelling of a name, time, a date, address, whatever. So you learned, because if you got a zero on one paper – I mean you’re doing eight papers per week, you’ve got to get that average up on all those other papers to make up for that zero. And if you get two zeros, I mean you were in really deep problems. What it forced me, as a young writer at that time, to learn the importance of asking, ‘oh, your name is Smith, is that S-M-I-T-H?’ Obvious question, but to be 100 percent correct, because the first time you don’t ask the person ‘is that Smith, S-M-I-T-H?’ they’re going to spell their name S-M-Y-T-H. You know, that’s a
factual error, that’s a mistake. So, it’s as bad as, you know, misspelling of Armstrong’s name. So, you learned at that point to double-check every single fact in the story. And don’t be afraid to go back and call somebody if you’ve got a question on something. I’m just double-checking. And that became a habit for me as a reporter. I think it’s one of the best things I ever learned as a reporter – the importance of making sure that everything was correct factually. Probably the thing I have the least amount of tolerance for is factual errors, because those are the ones that can be avoided because of asking. You know, and when you’re copy editing, OK did I spell ‘Smith’ correct? Why, OK? And make sure the editor knows I spelled it correctly in the story so they don’t go in there and say ‘Smith is S-M-I,’ so they know, put a note on the top of the story that says ‘spelling of Smyth in third graph is correct,’ those type of things.”

SG: “OK, how do you believe that these errors, once they’re made, can be corrected? And, if you have any examples of potential means of correcting errors, could you please share them?”

PB: “You should always run a correction or clarification in the paper. You know, the nice thing is, if you’re running a story online, and you have an error in spelling or something like that, that can be fixed. You know, you go in and fix it as soon as you find the error in it. If it’s something that’s of major importance that, you know, you feel you need to, I guess point out that we have changed the story online, there may be some cases that you need to. I don’t think that needs to be done on all stories. If we ran a story that says, ‘meeting is going to be held at 5 p.m.,’ and find out at 4 p.m., or the reporter made a mistake in the story, and you go in and fix it in the story, do you need to put an editor’s note in there … there’s some ethical questions. I’m of the school that you don’t need to online. Someone made a mistake, you fix the mistake, you go on. You know, if there may be some legal issues involved that require it to be worded that we have fixed the story, then you might have to. But it’s very important to correct your errors as correction in the paper. Especially, probably it’s not a big issue here, we haven’t been sued for libel since I’ve been here – and we wouldn’t be sued, the school would be sued. But if you’re at a regular newspaper, if there is a mistake that could be libelous where the newspaper could have some legal vulnerability because of a lawsuit, you basically eliminate the amount they can seek in damages by running a correction. Because you made this mistake, it’s incorrect. And usually, it’s very rare you hear of a paper suit for libel after the paper says, ‘we made a mistake,’ and they run a correction. So, it does protect you that way. So, yes.”

SG: “Do you think there are any errors that don’t necessarily merit a notification of the correction that’s been made?”

PB: “Yeah, I think minor details correcting grammar, correcting spelling – those are just things. OK, hey, we’ve got so-and-so’s last name spelled wrong in the third graph. Well, go online and fix it, it’s not biggie, that’s just fixing a story.”
SG: “OK. In your opinion, how has the accuracy of reporting in Mustang Daily changed over time? And if you have any examples, can you please provide them?”

PB: “Brady will be able to answer that a lot better because he sees the stories and the development a lot better than I do. I think it’s probably stayed about the same. You know, you’re dealing with, again, the same level of students. No, actually I think it’s probably better now than it was before because we’re dealing with a lot less class-generated news stories vs. staff writer-generated news stories. And I think you have a higher level of expectation from those writers and also they have a somewhat more experience level with the stories, too. The more you write the better you get.”

SG: “So, can you identify why there’s been a shift from more class-generated content to more staff-generated content?”

PB: “Yeah, because you only five to seven people in the class compared to 20 to 30. It’s all sheer numbers. That could change though. Next year we’ve got 62 freshmen, 31 transfer students. Last year, we had a total of 47 between the two – almost double.”

SG: “OK, those are all my questions. Do you have anything you want to add about errors and accuracy in Mustang Daily?”

PB: “No. As they say, mistakes happen, you learn from them.”

SG: “OK, thank you very much.”
Appendix B

*Interview Transcripts: Brady Teufel*

The following interview was conducted to gain expert opinions from an advising perspective based on a questionnaire about errors and accuracy in Mustang Daily.

**Interviewer:** Sarah Gilmore  
**Respondent:** Mustang Daily Adviser (Brady Teufel)  
**Date of Interview:** 2/20/2013

**Interview Transcription:**

Sarah Gilmore: “My first question for you is: How would you, as an expert in your field, describe an error in the media? And can you please give an example of an error in the media?”

Brady Teufel: “An error in the media ... I think an error in the media can be anything from a factual error, which, in my opinion, are the most egregious form of errors. This would like getting a number wrong, a name wrong, or dramatically, a position wrong – saying someone agreed with something and they actually disagreed with something. So, there’s a big continuum of errors in journalism. Factual errors and errors that are on the surface just boldface lies and misleading info, are the most damaging. But then, a media error, in my opinion, coming from someone who advises a college newspaper, an error can also be something more stylistic, like the policy within this particular news organization mandates a particular style, and you’re not adhering to it. An error could also be more conceptual or philosophical, meaning you didn’t get the other side of the story. You interviewed sources that were all very similar. You quoted a website in your lead. Wait, that was today. Yes.”

SG: “All right, so my next question is: What would you characterize as the most common errors that occur in Mustang Daily?”

BT: “Oh, most common errors that occur in MD. If you’re just talking about most common errors, an article is about 800 words. And so, you have 800 chances to mess up. And then you include all the grammar, punctuation uses in there, and you have about 5,000 chances to mess up per story. So if you’re just talking sheer quantity, frequency of errors, it definitely concerns grammar usage, syntax, most commonly. Second tier, in terms of not quite as common but every bit as important, would be more structural errors, story structure errors. You’re burying the lead, you’re not including the lead. You’re not highlighting the most important part of the story up at the top. In thinking about this, I would say on par, in terms of quantity, on par with the syntax, grammar spelling errors – call that copy editing errors – on par with those, I would say a more substantive error that I see most frequently would be the error of not answering all readers’ questions. Not putting yourself in the shoes of a reader who maybe just arrived here yesterday as a freshman or a
junior transfer. They don’t know what an acronym like UU means, they don’t know who Armstrong is. They don’t know what block enrollment – they don’t know like all the little insider baseball stuff that we tend to assume everyone knows about, but in actuality, you need to back up as the journalism and say, kind of start from square one, and explain, explain, explain. And a lot of times I think we tend to gloss over details because it’s in our own world. And we don’t step back and say, to an average reader or to a reader that’s not on Mustang Daily, i.e. someone on the web, are they really going to know, or what question am I not answering here? If I’m alluding to the most recent development in a two-year story, you’ve got to have a paragraph that reviews the two-year events. Without that context, the new reader is completely baffled.”

SG: “So are you saying that those are the most common, or the most detrimental type of error in the Mustang Daily?”

BT: “Both. Your question was about common – those are the most common. Now of course errors of omission and not answering the five W’s, not answering readers’ questions are definitely more – what’d you say – serious, or detrimental. Yes, yes.”

SG: “All right, what do you think are the causes of the errors that occur in Mustang Daily?”

BT: “Well, as I said, I think a lot of it is just, people operating within their subject position, within a bubble, so to speak, and not really accounting for that new reader, or the reader who might not know the context that’s needed to understand what’s being written in an article. So why do they do that? So, yeah, that’s part of it, the blinder effect. ‘Oh, I didn’t even think about the fact that someone might not realize what I’m talking about here because I’ve read all those stories and I’ve worked in MD this whole time so I know it.’ From there, I don’t want to call it – it’s not laziness – because I know you guys work your asses off. I’m talking about usage, grammar, spelling errors, and that really concerns copy editors. I’d say it’s more education and not knowing the right rules than it is being lazy or sloppy. Because I, you know, I’ve encountered people that have, you know, held the paid position as copy editor and then I’ve encountered them later on in their career, and, you know, worked with writing on them, and I realize that they don’t know a lot of fundamental spelling usage rules, and yet they were the last line of defense on MD to account for that stuff as a copy editor.”

SG: “So, do you think that problem lies in a lack of knowledge or learning in the journalism curriculum, or in the Mustang Daily hierarchy?”

BT: “Neither. I think it’s education in elementary school. I think it’s a lack of focus on grammar, spelling usage and writing, frankly, in education in today’s society. And, you know, at a certain point, should a journalism program go back to remedial grammar for freshmen? There’s a lot of argument over that. If you got in here with a four-point-whatever GPA, then all those volunteer hours and all those sports
scholarships, then you made the cut, at a certain point professors are going to assume that you know what a serial comma is, and you know the difference between ‘then’ and ‘than’ and ‘it’s’ and ‘its’ and ‘your’ and ‘you’re.’ But, when I see those errors, it makes me think that maybe we should start back with remedial grammar as freshmen. I don’t know. Is that our duty? Obviously, if it’s happening, it becomes incumbent on our department to solve it, or else we’re producing journalists with a giant gap in their education. And there’s the other side of that which is, we’ve got 10 weeks, we’ve got to teach them how to hold a camera, how to write a lead, how to interact with people, how to interview well, how to produce stuff, how to put it on the web, and how to add tags. At a certain point, there’s just no room for spelling. There’s just no room for, you know, going back to remedial grammar. So, what’s the answer?”

SG: “Are there any other causes of common errors in Mustang Daily that you can think of?”

BT: “Causes of common errors in Mustang Daily. I think a third type of error that I see is student journalists getting excited, jumping to conclusions, and trying to run with a kind of story that they’ve already jumped to a conclusion on. And journalism students are taught to approach everything with a neutral mindset. And I think the other errors I see in the paper stem from student journalists not approaching their stories with a neutral mindset, and instead letting their, either agenda or mentality or preconceived assumption seep through into the narrative.”

SG: “OK, so my next question is: How do you believe errors in Mustang Daily affect readers’ perception of the publication?”

BT: “Oh. You know, that’s a great question, because I think the errors that affect readers’ perceptions are not the errors that, from an adviser perspective, I think are most egregious. In other words, it’s the spelling, usage, grammar, typo errors that result in the most anti-MD sentiment from the public. And then it’s the errors of omission and jumping to conclusion and not being neutral that don’t necessarily come back to bite us because the audience doesn’t know, necessarily, that those were omitted. The errors of jargon and insider baseball where reporters are assuming that people know what an acronym stands for or know the history of a particular event – those probably annoy readers. Like readers reading it and have a question in the middle of the story like, ‘wait, what’s the background here?’ That annoys a reader, but you know what? Professional journalism organizations do that all the time. So, I think that’s more forgiven than typos, spelling, getting people’s names wrong, jumping to conclusions. But I don’t think we do a lot of jumping to conclusions.”

SG: “So for those errors that you think do kind of tick readers off more, what do you think that does to their perception or to our readership numbers?”
BT: “You know, sadly, credibility is one of those things where it’s easy to chisel away, but it’s real hard to build up. So I think, you know, multitudes of small errors over time diminish the overall credibility of a newspaper, and they give people ammunition to say those people at MD are doing a sloppy job, or they’re not caring, or they’re not trying, when in fact that’s not the case. So, what was the question again?”

SG: “Just how these errors can affect their perceptions.”

BT: “So, I think the little errors over time … what’s that fable? Whatever it is. But little things over time result in big problems later on. And, you know, I do see, just from being an adviser for five years, I see, in terms of comments and vitriol and anger from readers, it’s always about a stupid mistake or a typo. You know, people like to think they’re smarter. And by pointing out a typo that makes them feel better, like ‘oh look, I caught the journalist misspelling a word.’ They seem to use that for ammunition to say, ‘oh, the rest of the paper is BS.’ So, that, you know, I think those errors – repeated errors over time – really, really damage the reputation or the credibility of a news organization. And I’ve seen that some years, and I’ve not seen it other years. And the years where it’s repeated, by winter or spring quarter in those years, you start to see a lot of comments and reader reaction about the poor spell checking and copy editing going on at MD. I think I’ve seen fewer than three of those this year. And so, I would hope that has the opposite effect. I would hope that lack of errors translates to greater credibility. But, I fear that it’s totally weighted on one.”

SG: “OK, so how do you believe these errors can be avoided?”

BT: “I think the errors can be avoided by more lines of defense between the original copy and what’s published. And by lines of defense I essentially mean eyeballs reading it. And, I would like to see, because a copy editor’s job – the breadth of a copy editor’s job is so extensive. In other words, you have to be looking at usage, grammar, spelling, and on the other side of the coin you have to be looking at facts and whether they’re true. And then a third aspect is that you have to be making sure a source actually said that, and that source even exists and is real. So, the responsibilities of a copy editor are so extensive, I think something that would help alleviate errors and reduce them would be more copy editors, but copy editors with more specific jobs. In other words, a copy editor that’s just looking at figures, facts, and numbers in a story – that’s all they’re doing that night – just figures, facts, numbers. Another one, sitting across from them, just looking at sources, and verifying the accuracy of a quote. Another one, just looking at dangling modifiers, right-branching sentences, passive voice, and, you know, serial commas. Give me that, I think we’d see some major improvement. We’re doing awesome with the few that we have, given that they have to cover all that stuff.”

SG: “OK, so how do you believe these errors can be corrected once they’re made? And if you could please give an example of a potential means of correcting errors that are published in the media.”
BT: “How do I think those errors should be corrected? I think at a certain point you cut your losses and you don’t worry about correcting the fact that you missed a serial comma, or that you have a capital letter, or you have a typo. You know what, you get one chance, in my opinion, at that stuff. If you publish it with a typo, A, it takes to much time – like what are you going to have, a secondary copy editor going to look at published stuff and then correct typos? No one has that kind of time. And no one has that kind of resource. For the non-like, I guess what you would call those is like non-effect or non-damaging style errors, you get one shot and you sleep in the bed that you made. With errors that concern quotes that are misleading, out of context, false, and maybe it was accidental – maybe they heard ‘right’ when it should have been ‘wrong,’ maybe they heard ‘I didn’t’ when it should have been ‘I did’ – but whatever, it doesn’t matter. Errors like that, that paint a source, or that are attached to a source and imply something that’s the complete opposite of what the source intended to imply, should be corrected publicly for the record. And by publicly I mean you put a correction either at the very top or the very bottom of the story, and explain exactly what’s been changed and explain why it’s been changed, and explain how it came to your attention.”

SG: “Do you think that those corrections should take place in the next day’s paper, in the print edition, or only online?”

BT: “Both. When it comes to correcting errors that we actually are guilty of – besides spelling and cursory ones – transparency and publicity are tantamount. Publicity and transparency are totally the most important factors there. So yeah, put it on everything. Put it on a sign outside, put it on a billboard, fly a blimp over. Say we were wrong, do it.”

SG: “OK, so my last question is: In your opinion, how has the accuracy of reporting in Mustang Daily changed over time? And if you have any examples could you please provide them?”

BT: “Accuracy in MD change over time. That’s kind of a tough one because we don’t – with the student turnover, it’s not really a continuum. I’d like to see a continuum but it kind of can like regress and progress almost quarter-by-quarter or year-by-year. It really depends on who is on staff that year, and what their priorities really are. For instance, three years ago we had an editor-in-chief who was very – took grammar, spelling, copy very, very seriously. To the point where she would, before something was printed, she would copy edit it. Like she was the last copy editor. She would go in and copy edit everyone’s stuff, so that she wouldn’t have her name attached to a typo in her paper – or in the paper that she’s in charge of. I wouldn’t expect that of an editor, frankly, I think EIC has better things to do than something like that. But as a result, the copy was phenomenally clean all year. It really kind of depends on priorities. I don’t think that a lot of editors would ever run an operation that’s loosey-goosey enough to where a fake quote or a made-up story is going to get through. You know, we’re too good for that. But, that leaves a big continuum
underneath that for variations, and I think, you know, you just hope that when you point out errors, that it’s an institutional memory that gets preserved among students, you know, and they’re not going to make the same mistake twice. And I would say, it would be more year-to-year. Yes, I absolutely think that errors get reduced from fall to the end of spring. But, year-to-year, it’s just apples and oranges. You know, it’s like you could have six copy editors who start kind of rough fall, by spring they’re kicking ass and they know every grammatical rule and every AP style rule there is to know. But then the following fall, they’re all gone, and you have six new ones fresh. So it’s really hard to, like, infuse or say that there’s a continuum, continuous thread to the years of improvement. I’d like to, but then that’s some of the stuff like boot camp at the beginning that we have, lessons on grammar, rules and regulations posted in the back of the newsroom, policies, critiques of the paper. All those things help the year-to-year progression of accuracy and non-mistakes. But, the next year is just like starting over from scratch.”

SG: “So, those are all my questions. But do you have anything to add about errors and accuracy in Mustang Daily or in the media?”

BT: “You know, something that concerns me more than errors and accuracy – and it does fall into accuracy and I guess it does fall into errors – is just like, the omission of important news. And, could that be an error? I mean, I guess if you’re talking about the duty of journalism to provide citizens with information about all walks of their life, and you neglect to do so, it’s an error. Sometimes, is it an error to like, leave the newsroom on a Thursday and then not really add anything to the paper or the web until like Monday morning. If you consider that an error, it’s a huge error that we’re always committing. Is it an error for the local media to have something that concerns Cal Poly students before we do? I wouldn’t say that’s error. But if we don’t have it within the hour that they do, I’d say that’s an error. Is it an error to not write about the Harlem Shake within 24 hours of that video going viral? I think that’s an error. I think it’s doing a disservice to our readers. So, would you consider those errors fall into your senior project?”

SG: “I think that it gives light to an issue that isn’t traditionally thought of as an error. But like you said, it could be considered erroneous when it’s omission of information, depending on how you define an error. If these are defined as errors, then I think a lot of publications make these errors.”

BT: “Yes, yes, yes, yes. And so, you know, I would just, as an extra add-on, I would just say, I’m not running into a lot of big problems with the errors that I’ve just been discussing. One or two a year, in terms of factual ones that actually result in a source getting pissed off or burned or misconstrued. One or two a year. Copy editing errors, a few a day. But that’s normal. That’s almost any publication. So if you really want me – if there was really one glaring thing that in a perfect world, I would say, you know, biggest potential to be improved, it’s coverage and it’s not going dark – never going dark, 24/7. So solve that one for me, Gilmore.”
SG: “All right, thank you for your insight. I appreciate your time.”
Appendix C

Interview Transcripts: Brian De Los Santos

The following interview was conducted to gain expert opinions from a student perspective based on a questionnaire about errors and accuracy in Mustang Daily.

Interview: Sarah Gilmore
Respondent: Mustang Daily Adviser (Brian De Los Santos)
Date of Interview: 2/21/2013

Interview Transcription:
Sarah Gilmore: “So my first question is: How would you describe an error in the media? And could you please give an example?”

Brian De Los Santos: “An error is, I guess, any time that we get something wrong. And that’s not necessarily always grammatical, but it’s certainly always factual. Anything where we misrepresented that facts – in any way, shape, or form – whether that’s not putting in a comma somewhere, or whether that’s misspelling President Armstrong’s name. That’s an error.”

SG: “OK, what would you characterize as the most common errors that occur in Mustang Daily?”

BD: “We have a problem with numbers and statistics. Of course, we’re nowhere near proficient math majors, but when it comes to getting the numbers, especially getting the numbers right, especially in big stories that have to deal with numbers in terms of campus news, sometimes we seem to, I guess, overlook the sense of the numbers and kind of what we get right and what we get wrong. So, I feel like that’s one thing we always mess up with. Titles are another one that are just commonly messed up in journalism. So those are like – numbers and titles are the two things that I think we mess up the most.”

SG: “OK, how would you describe an error involving a title?”

BD: “In terms of misrepresenting someone’s title, a perfect example is Chip Visci, when he moved, when he switched positions, some people cited him as his old title and he has a new title now, and different things. So that’s – yeah, any time we’re just saying he’s someone who he isn’t, or any time we’re saying someone is someone who they aren’t.”

SG: “OK, what do you think are the causes of the errors that occur in Mustang Daily?”

BD: “Mustang Daily is one big learning experience. So, one of the main things as to where some errors creep in is from inexperience. Inexperience in editing,
inexperience in reporting, inexperience in management – just inexperience all across the board. We’re student journalists and we’re trying to do this the right way, but we don’t always get things right because we’re learning as we’re going. So that’s one of the big things. Of course, when it comes to the newsroom at night, there are always distractions and stuff like that. And sometimes I feel like our distractions kind of get the better of us at night, and sometimes we have to do a better job of refocusing ourselves when it comes to the editing process because we don’t want to let these libelous things go through the paper. But I think we’ve done a good job of trying to remain focused when it comes to editing while also, I guess, enjoying the activities we do at night.

SG: “OK, you mentioned libelous. Could you describe what that is exactly?”

BD: “Libelous is terrible. Libel is anything where we are knowingly portraying someone in a harmful or distasteful light. So, that’s nothing that we should ever be doing. And as a journalist, and as a group of journalists, it’s something that should be almost the cardinal sin of what we’re trying to do here.”

SG: “Have you, in your time at Mustang Daily, ever experienced anything with libel being published?”

BD: “Being published? No. I think we’ve definitely seen some near-libelous situations where we always – whenever libel’s called in to question we always definitely proceed with caution. And I don’t think we’ve ever gotten to the point where we published something that was libelous, but we’ve definitely been in situations where all editors on staff knew that this was a case where we could perhaps libel someone, so we proceeded with caution. But I don’t think we’ve actually published anything with libelous errors in it.”

SG: “OK, how do you believe errors in Mustang Daily affect readers’ perception of the publication?”

BD: “I actually, it’s funny you ask me this question after I went to this meeting today. But we were in a marketing meeting today where we have a class that’s doing focus groups and stuff like that to kind of help us establish our brand as Mustang Daily, and one of the main things that one of the groups came up with was credibility and, I guess, I don’t know what the other word I’m trying to say is, but main thing credibility. And, any time that we make an error, any time that we come off as a non-professional newspaper, any time we come off and people perceive our writing as childish or high school-ish, we’re losing credibility. So, the main thing that we want to discourage – why we don’t want to commit errors is we want to be credible. And the minute that we don’t have credibility, we really cease to have a reason to exist as a newspaper.”

SG: “OK, how do you believe these errors that commonly occur in Mustang Daily can be avoided?”
BD: “A bigger emphasis on teaching copy editors greater style. I mean we have one copy editing class in the department, but sometimes that’s just not enough. And whether it’s going through weekly things in terms of what we’re doing now with copy editors and teaching our writers what to do, what they’re doing well, and what they’re doing that’s not done well, I think that’s something that we can definitely enhance. And I think that’s something that we did this year that’s helping. Another very, very overlooked thing in terms of the editing process, and kind of errors, is teaching your reporters the basics, and teaching the reporters the correct style, and making sure that at ground zero, when they’re reporting and doing all this stuff, stuff’s coming in right, and I think that’s one thing that a lot of people overlook.”

SG: “OK, how do you believe that these errors, once they’re made, can be corrected? And can you please give an example of a potential means of correcting errors that are published in the media?”

BD: “So you’re talking about an error that’s been published on the front page or something like that?”

SG: “Sure.”

BD: “I mean, we have – when we talk about credibility – I mean we have to maintain, I guess, our connection to the truth and our commitment to the truth. So any time that we’re out there and we make an error, a statement that’s full of errors, we have to correct ourselves. We have to publicly display that we were wrong, and we have to publicly give the information, give our readers the right information. So whether that’s a correction, whether that’s putting an editor’s note online, whether it’s doing something along those lines, we need to make sure that people know that we’re not trying to hide things, people know that we’re not trying to spin the facts, and we are correctly giving them the information.”

SG: “OK, in your opinion, how has the accuracy in reporting at Mustang Daily changed over time?”

BD: “Holy shit. I always think about this, thinking about being on staff in 2009, and seeing the editing process. I think that the editing process in 2009 took three or four hours. I think it was, we would get the stories in and we would give them to copy editors, and copy editors would read them on the computer for about two hours. And we had a few stories in there – we probably have like, more stories now in the paper since we’re kind of a bigger paper. But we had stories in there, and they would just go through them for two hours. And it’s because the writing just wasn’t up to par at that point. And they were going in and changing things, rewriting a whole bunch of sentences, and then when we got them on the page, printed out the pages, the pages were filled with red. And it’s almost alarming leaving the Mustang Daily when I did, and then coming back and seeing the amount of red on the pages now, because it’s significantly, significantly, significantly less. It’s almost to a point,
it’s almost alarming that I’m thinking that maybe our – or my – editing skills have slipped and I’m just not seeing things. But I think it’s just a testament to the kind of students and the kind of writers and the kind of reporters that Cal Poly is trying to produce. And their core, I guess, skills that they’re gaining in classes and that they’re coming into school with – I guess that’s something that’s really, really being developed.”

SG: “OK, those are all my questions for my senior project. But do you have anything else you want to add about errors and accuracy in Mustang Daily, or just in general?”

BD: “I just want to harpoon that, over the past, I’ve had the unique ability to see this paper, even when I wasn’t on the paper, on the staff, in 2008, I’ve seen many leaps and bounds in terms of accuracy, in terms of things that have changed over the years. And like I said, when I left and I started working at the tribune and I saw what their editing pages looked like and it was like three, four, five marks a page, and I was just like, I had no idea that this was like what an edited page was supposed to look like. And those writers were professional, they were clean, they were all this. And now, our pages are starting to look like that. And over the years I think that we’ve really, really, really been able to – whether it’s through editing, whether it’s through teaching, whether it’s through experience – teach our reporters how to accurately display stories. And I mean, you can never, ever, ever stop that, I guess stop that process, and become as accurate as you can be. So whether that’s steps that we need to keep continuing taking or things like that, that remains to be seen. But, I think that we’re heading in the right direction and I like where we are right now. We can be better. We can always be better. But, yeah, I think that it’s come a long way.”

SG: “OK, anything else?”

BD: “Nope.”

SG: “All right, thank you very much.”
Appendix D

Survey Data

The following survey questions were distributed to the first source of the top Mustang Daily article every day for a period of five weeks during Winter Quarter 2013. The 10 sources below responded to the survey.

5. Were you quoted accurately and taken in context? If not, please describe errors.

6. Were all facts attributed to you in the story correct?

7. Was the interview conducted in person, over the phone, or through email – or some combination? Please explain.

8. Please add any other comments you care to make regarding the student’s work or approach.

Jeffrey Armstrong
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Combination
4. “Overall a good story.”

Jeffrey Armstrong
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Combination
4. “The student should be more open to the context of the process. In addition, the academic senate requested that I hold off on a decision until they debated the topic. While my quotes were accurate, the context of the process - a holistic approach would have been improved the story.”

Christina Kaviani
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Phone
4. N/A

Robert Eckrote
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Phone
4. N/A

Spencer Takata
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Phone
4. “I asked to see my quotes before they were published, and the person who interviewed me was very quick to respond to my request. I was very satisfied with her professional conduct”

Brian Henson
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Phone
4. N/A

Rachel Fernflores
1. Yes
2. Yes
3. N/A
4. “I’ve been very disappointed this year by MD."

Philip Bailey
1. Yes
2. No
3. In person
4. N/A

Katie Morrow
1. Yes
2. No
3. Combination
4. N/A

Brett Edwards
1. Yes
2. No
3. In person
4. “she waited till last minute to call the leads i gave her”