Richard Critchfield: "Genius" Journalism and the Fallacy of Verification

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Critchfield, the first reporter to be awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," practiced what he called "village reporting" in his literary journalism. However, an adherence to the "discipline of verification" proved unreliable. The need for a self-reported estimate of reliability could be a way to improve journalistic credibility

Richard Critchfield could be fairly described as a "genius journalist," as he was the first reporter to be awarded a fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, popularly known as a "genius grant." Critchfield's recognition, in December 1981, marked a hard-earned return to a level of professional stature that a decade earlier probably seemed beyond his wildest dreams. As a former Vietnam correspondent for *The Washington Star*, Critchfield had published in 1968 a contrarian analysis of the failure by the United States to achieve victory, a book that was greeted with a deafening silence by book reviewers, policymakers and—perhaps most significantly—Critchfield's journalistic colleagues in the overseas press corps, and in the media centers of New York and Washington. In a letter to a friend in the publishing industry, Critchfield described the reaction to the book, *The Long Charade*, as "a trauma" of "frustration and disillusionment," and noted that he suffered a "humiliating" reassignment at the hands of his editors from foreign correspondent to labor reporter. Critchfield was particularly taken aback by the studied lack of reaction from the top *Star* editors because much of the material in the book had been gathered in conventional ways and had already been printed in the daily newspaper. "I naively didn't think it would be like this," Critchfield wrote. "Foolish as it sounds, I expected the *Star* to back me up more, since most of what the book says has after all appeared in my dispatches from Saigon already."[1]

MacArthur, which does not use the term "genius grant," also does not explain in precise detail why it chooses to recognize the recipients of its no-strings-attached monetary awards. In its notification to Critchfield, the foundation said only that the award "is given in recognition of your accomplishments in Journalism which demonstrate your originality, dedication to creative pursuits, and capacity for self direction."[2] Based on a review of Critchfield's publication record, it is safe to assume that his fellowship was the result of a dramatic shift he made in his reporting and writing techniques after the release of his Vietnam book, in which he argued that the underlying political dynamics of the country were far more complicated than the American people understood and may have involved high-level infiltration of North Vietnamese agents into the South Vietnamese government. "I left Vietnam in November 1967, convinced that our defeat was not a failure of power but a failure of knowledge," he wrote in a 1985 essay published in *Washington Journalism Review*. "Not only did we—the press, American academics, diplomats, the CIA—fail to learn enough about the Vietnamese communists and their strategy of subversion, we also failed to learn enough about the ordinary Vietnamese peasant out in his village and his Confucian culture."[3] To remedy this lack of knowledge about ordinary life at the basic level of social organization, Critchfield dedicated himself to what he

called "village reporting"[4] and spent much of the rest of his career engaged in a form of immersion journalism that borrowed heavily from the ethnographic techniques of anthropologist Oscar Lewis.[5]

Critchfield's later work, which appeared in more than half a dozen books, foundation reports, and in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Economist*, *Reader's Digest*, and *The Nation*, was a form of literary journalism, marked as it was by the techniques such as immersive reporting, extended dialog, scenic descriptions, and narrative development that critics, including Wolfe,[6] Lounsberry,[7] and Sims,[8] have identified as—to use Hartsock's phrase—"the defining characteristics of the form."[9] As told in his unpublished correspondence as well in essays and elsewhere, the approach he developed was born out of a zeal to present to Western readers a view of peasant life as it was changing under the pressures of modernization and globalization. While much of Critchfield's writing seems remarkably prescient from a distance of three decades in a post-9/11 world, the focus of this study is not on Critchfield's successes but on challenges to the reporting that he did for one of the books that was brought to the attention of the MacArthur judges and likely helped to secure his fellowship. This book, *Shahhat: An Egyptian*, later became the subject of a withering academic critique that included credible accusations of plagiarism. A closer questioning of Critchfield's methodology provides an occasion to consider the need to find ways to evaluate the quality and accuracy, i.e., the truth, of the journalism that is presented as literary journalism. This analysis suggests that one of the central principles of journalistic accuracy, the notion of a "discipline of verification," can lead to serious error and needs modification.

Failures of fact, or allegations thereof, in literary journalism, or journalism generally for that matter, are not new or unusual. What distinguishes Critchfield's case and makes it worthy of closer scrutiny are two qualities: his evident sincerity and dedication to craft. Even Critchfield's harshest critic described him as "an enthusiastic writer whose sense of adventure and evident enjoyment of the company of some of those he writes about gave him a far greater exposure to villages around the world than any of his former colleagues among American foreign correspondents." Critchfield was neither a journalistic psychopath who was out to perpetrate a fraud, nor was he a fame-driven ego out to build a personal brand. He spent most of his professional life working in distinctly unglamorous locations and, until his MacArthur grant, barely making ends meet while working as a freelance reporter and foundation researcher. The error he made that is the subject of this paper is an ordinary kind of error, in which none of the usual excuses apply—he was not a novice reporter committing a rookie mistake, he was not under competitive deadline pressure, he was not misled by manipulative sources. If sincerity and craft, i.e., good intentions, are not enough to ensure that the journalism half of the literary journalism equation holds up, then proponents of this genre may need to reconsider whether it can be viewed as a form of fact-based journalism. To explore this issue, this paper proceeds in three sections: first, a consideration of the concept of truth in journalism; second, an overview of Critchfield's work based on his published reporting, unpublished correspondence, and other documents that are in his archived papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society; and, finally, a closer look at an academic critique of Critchfield's accuracy, which he first rejected but later seemed to accept.

Truth in Journalism

Poststructuralists, and the modernists before them, have provided persuasive arguments

about the elusiveness of truth, but they have not persuaded journalists to abandon its pursuit. "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth,"[10] assert Kovach and Rosenstiel in their 2001 book, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. "This first principle of journalism—its disinterested pursuit of truth—is ultimately what sets it apart from all other forms of communication."[11] But Kovach and Rosentiel are quick to acknowledge that truth is a confusing concept, not to be mistaken for facts, accuracy, or objectivity. The concept of truth in journalism is profoundly laden with misconception, in no small part because journalists are not in the habit of thinking deeply about such ideas. As Fuller describes the situation:

> [M]ost news people talk as if the examined life is hardly worth living. They consider themselves skeptics, but this is not so much a matter of philosophy as of style. Even among themselves, they rarely discuss the nature of the claims of truth they make in their work or the basis of the disciplines they follow in furtherance of these claims.[12]

When it comes to literary journalism, the pursuit of truth is often, though not always, viewed as a basic requirement. Aucoin offers several compelling reasons why verifiability as a defining characteristic of literary journalism is "problematic."[13] But for many critics literary journalism can only bear that designation to the extent that it honors the traditional goal of truth telling. As Yagoda writes in the preface to *The Art of Fact*:

> For us, definition begins with the second half of the formulation, that is, with "journalism." And so for a piece of writing to be included in this anthology, it must first of all be factual. We do not mean to say that we guarantee the veracity of every statement in every piece in the collection. But we did disqualify works that were not, in our view, informed and animated by the central journalistic commitment to the truth (not just The Truth).[14]

Literary journalism's claim on the truth is perhaps central to its impact. MacDonald was directing his ire toward Tom Wolfe and New Journalism, but his comment could be applied more generally. Literary journalism in his view could be said to function by "exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction."[15] Lounsberry, in a far more sympathetic analysis of literary journalism, makes much the same point: "In short, verifiability is fundamental to successful literary nonfiction."[16]

Kovach and Rosenstiel said that a "discipline of verification"[17] needs to be at the heart of journalism and provided a list of possible strategies. In their view, which is shared by Ettema and Glasser, it is the journalist's responsibility to perform the acts of verification. But if this is the case, it puts the reader in a position of having to accept the authority of the journalist on faith. As a practical matter, verification by the reader is much more difficult. Even when a writer is transparent enough to allow an expert reader to test for verifiability, many readers may be disinclined or ill-equipped to do so, as we will see in the case of Critchfield. With a nod to Iser, Sims suggests that readers do not bother to verify even when they can.[18] Instead, warns Kenner, readers are taken in by the conventions of journalistic writing, what he called "the plain style," built up from nonspecialized vocabulary and simple sentence structure.[19]

Operationalizing the concept of journalistic verification remains an elusive task. Like Kovach and Rosentiel, Cunningham and more recently Clark have proposed steps that a well-meaning journalist can take to improve accuracy and move closer to the truth. But it's not clear that any of these proposals, including techniques such as using accuracy checklists, resisting the temptation to add colorful but invented details, developing expertise in a given topic, will lead to an accurate, fact-based account. Lippmann was a proponent of a more scientific approach to reporting, although this idea has never really taken hold. Goldstein argues that this approach is unworkable because "the best scientific thinking today suggests that there is no single scientific method."[20] While this observation is valid, it is also true that certain general approaches do pervade a scientific approach to truth seeking. Much like journalists, scientists have found themselves on the receiving end of intense criticism for ethical failures, a sense of overreach, and their supposedly irrational belief in their ability to get at the truth. Gauch argued that "clearly understood methods" are the best way to allow scientists to "defend science's legitimate claims from influential attacks with a measure of sophistication and confidence." So, too, for journalism, a better understanding of methods and their shortcomings will provide a basis for assessing and improving credibility, and defending against outside attacks.

The Career of a Genius Journalist

Richard Critchfield was a child of the Great Depression, born in Minneapolis on March 23, 1931. He spent his early years in Fargo, North Dakota, where his father was a country doctor and a well-respected member of the community until he was brought low by an ongoing battle with alcoholism and a scandalous affair with a young woman whom he had first met in the aftermath of a botched abortion. His parents separated, and his father died at the age of forty-nine, poisoned to the point of insanity by his drinking. It is not a stretch to suggest that Critchfield's later interest in the families living in the poverty-stricken villages of the world was tied to his own upbringing, particularly the difficult economic times of the 1930s and the emotional turbulence of his parents' broken marriage. Using his MacArthur funding, Critchfield wrote a book-length chronicle of his family, *Those Days: An American Album*, and in it he explained the importance of paying attention to common people and their common ways. "It was their ordinariness that made them matter," he wrote. "Individual life was by its very nature a tragedy; it came to an end; for all of us it was going to be a short way to that grave. But the ordinary life of a society was a comedy that kept going on."[21]

Critchfield's adult life was highly episodic and somewhat disjointed, marked by relatively short stays in disparate parts of the world. This pattern was one of the factors that gave rise to ongoing intimations he was an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency, an organization where his older brother had a long career as a spy and rose through the ranks of covert operations to become head of its Near East Division. Aside from his decade-long tenure at *The Washington Star*, from which he took two long leaves of absence, the journalist never spent much time on the permanent payroll of a news organization or in one place. After graduating with a degree in Far Eastern studies from the University of Washington in 1953, he served in the Army, including a tour in Korea. He began his career in journalism in 1955 as assistant farm editor at Iowa's *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and worked for another Iowa daily before leaving for the Columbia School of Journalism, which awarded him a master's degree in 1957. He next went to work for a news bureau in Washington, D.C., but left to take graduate courses in Austria and then to complete

"a shoe-string trip around the world in 1959 as a freelancer, partly on Yugoslav and Japanese freighters." He spent one quarter at Northwestern University studying Indian history before taking a job as an instructor in journalism at the University of Nagpur, in central India, where he also coached the swim team.

During his two years at Nagpur, Critchfield wrote a journalism textbook, *The Indian Reporter's Guide*; worked on a novel set in India; and spent some of his free time in the Himalayas, an experience that formed the basis for articles he sold to *The Christian Science Monitor*. He was relieved of his teaching duties after Indian Communists staged protests amid charges that he was working for the CIA. At the time his brother was in the region organizing Tibetan refugees to fight the Communists, but the reporter later insisted this was a coincidence. Critchfield's career as a foreign correspondent was greatly aided by his presence on the subcontinent, gaining him writing opportunities with the *Star* and *The New York Herald Tribune* when the Chinese invaded India in 1962 and a job offer from the *Star* in 1964, after rioting broke out in Kashmir.

The *Star* posted him to Vietnam, where he was based until 1967. He started out working in a conventional manner, "emulating Ernie Pyle" as he put it, and his coverage from 1965 was cited by the Overseas Press Club as the best daily newspaper reporting from abroad for that year. But his background in Asian studies and his experience in the region led him to a perspective that was far different from that of the rest of the American press corps. He had run-ins with editors and was quoted in a *Time* magazine article criticizing his fellow reporters for misrepresenting the wave of Buddhist self-immolations as purely voluntary acts and for not spending enough time talking with Vietnamese sources. In a typescript document dated 1969 among his papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Critchfield writes: "In Saigon, I was often told I thought more like a Vietnamese than an American. Presumably this is one reason why the *Star* has asked me to spend a year or two in the United States before taking up another overseas assignment."[22]

Critchfield had high hopes for *The Long Charade*, which detailed his view of what he saw as subversion in the U.S.-backed regimes in Saigon, and he made extensive efforts to get his message out, including secret meetings with the President's Board of National Intelligence Estimates and correspondence with influential members of Congress and administration officials. But the reaction was tepid, and a note from CBS newsman Eric Sevareid was typical in expressing both surprise at Critchfield's thesis and a disinclination to give it much thought: "It does sound radioactive, and I hope I can get to it sooner rather than later."[23]

Critchfield's book put him very much on the outside of mainstream journalistic opinion, but he became more convinced of the value of his approach to covering international policy debates, by focusing on ordinary people who are caught up in the effects. With a promise from his publisher to print another book, the writer took a leave of absence from the *Star* and returned to Asia, eventually securing funding from the newly formed Alicia Patterson Foundation, where a friend of his brother was executive secretary. The Patterson decision process did not go smoothly, and Critchfield speculated that the cloud created by his book and his failure to adopt a conventional critique of the Vietnam War was still hanging over him. Eventually, however, he secured enough funding, including a $2,000 loan from his family, to spend two years on his "village studies." After a year back at the *Star*, which he spent honing his techniques for village reporting while writing about ordinary American families, Critchfield received a Ford Foundation grant that allowed him to devote himself to his chosen subject.

By the time Critchfield received the MacArthur, he had published three more books and

numerous articles as well as long studies for the Agency for International Development and American Universities Field Staff, a nonprofit consortium of schools that sponsored foreign correspondents. But during the decade after he left the *Star*, his earnings and his lifestyle were precarious. Although he knew that he was under consideration for some kind of large grant from MacArthur, the program was not well known and just weeks before he was notified of the award he wrote to his sister and brother-in-law about the stress he was under:

> The future is a pretty blank page right now. Can manage the $3,000 for 1981 and $4,000 for 1982 (or probably $5,000 by now) by drawing down savings $5,000 and still having enough—$6,000-$7,000—to do a village study somewhere next spring from what I earn lecturing and the $5,000 Ford payment in January. Rockefeller could come through with another $12,000-$18,000 (a lot depends on how they feel VILLAGES fared, I guess). The strain is rather getting me down.[24]

The MacArthur grant allowed Critchfield to turn his attention to an idea that he had been toying with for several decades, a family history describing his own roots and explaining the culture of small rural communities in the American Midwest as they developed in the first half of the twentieth century, which became *Those Days*. Before his death in 1994, Critchfield continued his international reporting as well and published three additional books.

The Fallacy of Verification

Although he began his village reporting long before Kovach and Rosenstiel coined the term "discipline of verification," it's clear that Critchfield was deeply concerned with journalistic methodology and willing to go to great lengths both to verify his information and to allow others to check his work. The 1978 book that is the focus of this study ends with Critchfield stressing the importance of verification. The final page of *Shahhat* includes a quote from Anton Chekhov, "Man will become better when you show him what he is like." Referring to that sentiment, Critchfield writes: "This is our common purpose and the reason I have written Shahhat's story, and in the way I did. A real person, his identity and existence are its verification."[25]

An examination of his fact-gathering techniques shows that they align very closely with the "core set of concepts that form the foundation of the discipline of verification" identified by Kovach and Rosenstiel:

1. Never add anything that was not there.
2. Never deceive the audience.
3. Be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives.
4. Rely on your own original reporting.
5. Exercise humility.[26]

For example, in the first of his village books, *The Golden Bowl Be Broken*, published in 1973, Critchfield described how he followed the Oscar Lewis model of "detailed observations, interviews and recorded conversation,"[27] but never added to or invented what he experienced. "Although used selectively, all of the dialogue in this book is taken verbatim from more than a million words written down by my interpreters or myself, as spoken or soon afterward,"

Critchfield wrote.[28] The reporter was also devoted to transparency, often writing about his methods, naming the interpreters he used, and in one case even identifying the depository where the original tape recordings of his conversations could be found. By including extensive detail and using real names, Critchfield was in a way issuing an invitation for others to check his work.

In several articles in magazines targeted at journalists, Critchfield provided more detail about his technique, demonstrating his commitment to first-hand fact gathering and an awareness of the fallibility of standard journalistic techniques, as well as the humility required to subject himself to peasant work for the sake of a story. In a 1985 essay, Critchfield said he began his reporting by backgrounding himself in the subject through extensive reading about "local politics, geography, economics and history, as well as the religion."[29] But he stressed that this was just context for what he observed: "The cultural views that count are those that emerge in the dialogue."[30] In most cases he captured the dialogue with the help of interpreters but as much as possible avoided conducting interviews. He said he feared that interviews would end up "leading a subject, either consciously or unconsciously, along preconceived paths."[31] Perhaps the most striking feature of Critchfield's reporting technique is the emphasis he placed on physical labor.

> Early on I discovered that value of engaging in the same daily physical labor as the men I was writing about, perhaps because hard work was the basic fact in all their lives; after I spent many days with them helping them to herd sheep, spear octopus, harvest wheat or whatever they were doing, a barrier of reserve was overcome, and in time the principal characters began to take our mutual enterprise very seriously and developed what might be called a strong sense of integrity.[32]

Shahhat was initially well received both among popular and scholarly audiences. *The New York Times* said the book was "beautifully written" and "wonderfully evocative, making real and alive rather than picturesque and artificial a country and a people largely unknown to us."[33] *Population and Development Review* called the book "revealing" and said "it provides the social and psychological 'context' so often missing in social science research and literature."[34] But others had their doubts. *American Ethnologist* criticized Critchfield's use of the tools of literary journalism: "It is tempting to try to infuse life into often dull life routines through novelistic techniques, but the credibility lost through excesses of undisciplined subjectivity in such attempts always seems to outweigh any gains of communicated immediacy."[35]

The *Journal of American Folklore* said the book was "enjoyable and readable" and that it contained "penetrating insight" into peasant life.[36] But the reviewer also faulted Critchfield for not living up to the journalistic responsibility to provide a full picture of the forces at work in Shahhat's village, including political and economic ones.

In the late 1980s, Critchfield became the target of Cambridge- and Princeton-educated political scientist Timothy Mitchell, who accused the journalist of plagiarism and of fabricating a racist and historically inaccurate picture in *Shahhat*. Mitchell's critique appeared first in a 1988 conference paper and was published two years later in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.[37] When Critchfield learned of these accusations, he wrote a detailed reply to Mitchell, parts of which were later published the *IJMES*,[38] along with a rebuttal from

Mitchell.[39] Continuing to research the matter, Mitchell published a longer critique, citing even more problems with Critchfield's reporting, as a chapter in a 2002 book, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*.[40] Mitchell's most clear-cut criticism is plagiarism, and he pointed to eight passages showing very clear similarities between Critchfield's writing and that of a French Jesuit, Henry Habib Ayrout, who wrote a 1938 study on Egyptian peasants, *The Fellaheen*. Critchfield conceded that he had relied on Ayrout and had failed to provide full scholarly notation of his debts. His excuse is not a particularly compelling one, that he was busy working on subsequent books and that in any case he had not tried to hide the fact that Ayrout was a key source. But Mitchell's criticism went further, as he argued that a more serious problem than the plagiarism was that the material was plagiarized from an unreliable source. Mitchell's research showed that Ayrout, although widely recognized as an authority on Egypt, had in fact based his books on secondhand accounts. This information was presented after Critchfield had made his rebuttal and was not addressed by the journalist.

Some of Mitchell's criticisms seem like nitpicking, and some of his statements about Critchfield are not accurate. For example, the scholar says that Critchfield left the *Star* for good in 1969, when in fact he was just on extended leave at the time and returned for a time in the 1970s. In the end, Mitchell's most troubling charge goes to the question of whether Critchfield had accomplished what he had set out to do, namely to provide insights into how an entire society was changing based on the experience of an ordinary family. In an Author's Note, Critchfield declares, "This is the story of how a deeply traditional Egyptian, when faced with sudden changes in his way of life, tries to master his condition and communicate with those around him."[41] On the next page, Critchfield argues that his research subject is in important respects "typical of the great mass of poor Egyptians" and that his challenges are "exemplary."[42]

Mitchell refutes these characterizations, however, pointing out that the focus of Critchfield's study was not a typical Egyptian peasant at all, despite his involvement in agricultural work. Shahhat came from an entrepreneurial family that was not trapped in a traditional agrarian economy but was already engaged in the modern world, at least its advance guard, by serving the Western visitors who came to Egypt either as tourists or as archeological researchers. In Mitchell's view, Critchfield was not witnessing change so much as participating in and promoting it:

> This long history of relations between local families, foreign archeologists, and a small-scale tourist industry, mixed in with the agrarian economy of sugarcane and household farming, has formed the complex reality of Shahhat's village. We cannot read Critchfield's work as a portrait of this reality, for the book deliberately ignores the relations between locals and outsiders that have formed it. We should see the book, at best, as one more aspect of those relations.[43]

Not surprisingly, Critchfield's initial reaction to Mitchell's criticism was dismissive. In his published response, he wrote, "I was fascinated by Mitchell's attempt to apply Derridean deconstruction to Shahhat, which, if you know Shahhat himself, becomes wildly inappropriate."[44] As to the charges of plagiarism, Critchfield noted, correctly, that he quoted Ayrout outside of the narrative and was not attempting to hide his use of the French scholar as a

source. That lack of attribution within the narrative was the result of an attempt to maintain the dramatic structure of the book: "A lot of academic-style citations would have ruined the effect. I very likely planned to have references to the Ayrout passages in a 'Notes' section at the end."[45]

Despite these public protestations, Critchfield by the early 1980s had already started to have some misgivings about how clearly he had seen into the soul of the common Egyptian. The assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 made him rethink how well he had understood Egyptian society. In a 1982 letter to an official of the MacArthur Foundation, Critchfield said he had been "badly shaken" by the killing and the lack of mourning by ordinary Egyptians. On a dreary day in London, he spent five hours walking through Wimbledon Common trying to figure out what had gone wrong in his reporting. "After all, if you've done a book about the Egyptian character and then discover you haven't understood it at all, it makes you think," Critchfield wrote.[46] Eventually he made plans to return to do an update on Shahhat's situation. In his final book, *Villagers*, for which he was on a promotional tour when he had a fatal heart attack, Critchfield offered a new assessment of Shahhat, based on a visit in 1992. By this time Shahhat had become a heavy drinker like his father, and also like his father had become a watchman at an archeological site. Critchfield seems to acknowledge the fact that the portrait of Shahhat, no matter how accurately drawn in its particulars, could no longer be described as a generalizable account of life for the Egyptian peasant. He writes: "Yet Shahhat, if his work was seasonal and somewhat sporadic, was paid the equivalent of about a hundred dollars a month, a good wage in rural Egypt. To really look at a poor fellah, we need to consider a landless laborer."[47]

In the next section of the book, Critchfield does exactly that, telling the story of Helmi, a man he had met when conducting his Shahhat research but who did not appear in the book. One could argue that Mitchell was no more or less an expert on Egypt than was Critchfield. But the journalist's pained admission that he had been mistaken about the national character, coupled with his newfound interest in the fellah Helmi, lends credence to Mitchell's critique.

Although Mitchell's criticism of Critchfield was harsh to the point of caricature, it was not the individual journalist who is the ultimate target of his attacks. In his view the real problem was a system of "reviewers, editors, publishers, development experts, policy makers, grant committee members, and university teachers"[48] who were not paying close enough attention to see the internal contradictions of Critchfield's writing. According to Mitchell, "The most important issue is the structure of academic expertise that enabled these forms of prejudice, ignorance, and misrepresentation to flourish and gave such dubious books their circulation and acceptance."[49]

While Mitchell directed this critique at academics generally, clearly the journalism profession, whether in or out of academia, needs to acknowledge its share of the blame and a "structure of expertise" that does little to prevent or identify errors. It's not that journalists and their critics don't think that accuracy is important, it's more that they have been unable to come up with a workable system of promoting the veracity of published work. By applying some of the ideas that have been advanced to ensure truthfulness in literary journalism to the Critchfield example, we can see that the proposed solutions will not necessarily solve the problem. For example, Clark's injunctions to journalists not to invent detail or to deceive readers would have had no effect here.[50] Critchfield included a long section on methodology, and there has been no suggestion that he made up any part of his narrative. His lack of deceptiveness is evidenced by the fact that Mitchell was able to use details that Critchfield included to undermine Critchfield's argument

and conclusions. Cunningham advises that journalists develop expertise in specific fields.[51] But this guidance likewise falls short, as Critchfield was the leading expert on village reporting. His expertise on rural agriculture was recognized by no less an authority than Norman Borlaug, the American scientist who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in leading the Green Revolution (and who was one of those who recommended Critchfield for the MacArthur).[52]

Critchfield's case illustrates a significant gap in the methodological protocols that are used by journalists to get at the truth. The problem with the idea of a "discipline of verification" may be that it encourages journalists to reinforce their own prejudices rather than seeking to overcome them. As Lippmann and Merz warned, the most important factor in false reports is self-delusion, "seeing not what was, but what men wished to see."[53] Verification is most often a process of confirmation, so that facts that are verified or confirmed are included and those that are not confirmed are set aside. In Critchfield's case, his reporting conformed to what he had learned from the experts and confirmed their perspectives. His information was verified according to documentary sources and according to his first-hand experience. But, as Mitchell showed, Critchfield's frame of analysis was skewed and there was no way for him to correct for this error within the methodology that he was using. His verification process failed him. Although this is not a problem limited to literary journalism, it may be a more serious problem in that arena simply because of the volume of literary journalism that is published as books and therefore outside of the editing systems that exist at newspapers and magazines.

Missing from the discipline of verification, as practiced by Critchfield and others, is an explicit acknowledgment of limits. Nearly a century ago Lippmann argued: "You can judge the general reliability of any observer most easily by the estimate he puts upon the reliability of his own report. If you have no facts of your own to check him, the best rough measurement is to wait and see whether he is aware of any limitations in himself. . . ."[54]

But rare is the reporter who provides such an estimate. After all, journalists are trained to report what they know, not what they don't know. It may seem mechanistic, particularly in the context of journalism that aspires to being read as literature, to suggest the need for a self-reported estimate of reliability or limitations. But in Critchfield's case there is evidence that he was aware of the limits of his reporting, as shown in a letter that he wrote to the Egyptian government seeking permission to conduct the village study that led to *Shahhat*.[55] If he had reflected on the fact that he was working in a locale that was open to outside visitors and was not completely free to roam the countryside in search of research subjects, he may have modified his claim to have captured a representative picture of Egyptian life. Similarly, if he was not so intent upon protecting the "novelistic" elements of the book he may have been more likely to include the citations that would have headed off the plagiarism attacks and that would have, perhaps by undermining his claims to the timelessness of Shahhat's situation, forced him to provide a more historically accurate context for his reporting. The acknowledgement and contemplation of the limits to his reporting might also have undercut the claims—implicit in so much anecdote-based reporting—that a single individual stands for a much larger group.

The problem of defective reporting is hardly limited to literary journalism, but the threat it poses may be especially critical here. Weber's critique is referring specifically to New Journalism but his comment applies to literary journalism when he argues that writing that does not live up to its accuracy claims faces "widespread disregard . . . as serious journalism, let alone serious

literature, and the inclination to view it as just another branch of the entertainment industry."[56] For that reason alone, practitioners of the form should constantly seek to improve on reporting methodology. To quote Lippmann and Merz once again:

> Since human beings are poor witnesses, easily thrown off the scent, easily misled by a personal bias, profoundly influenced by their social environment, does it not follow that a constant testing of the news and a growing self-consciousness about the main sources of error is a necessary part of the democratic philosophy. … The process is nothing but the attempt to extract wisdom from experience, and the greater the indictment against the reliability of human witnesses, the more urgent is a constant testing, as objectively as possible, of these results. When you consider how profoundly dependent the modern world is upon its news, the frailty of human nature becomes an argument not for complacency and apology, but for eternal vigilance.[57]

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Endnotes

1. Richard Critchfield to Jonathon Walton, 14 November 1968. Richard Critchfield Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.
2. John E. Corbally and J. Roderick MacArthur to Critchfield, 13 November 1981. Critchfield papers.
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