

Name: Fitzroy Harris

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### **The Age of Political Fact-Checking**

We are now in an era where political leaders may provide information via the media that may be unclear to the majority of the population. Educated individuals can find it difficult to understand the meaning of political speeches. But who ought to clarify and verify facts and comments so that even the average reader may understand? These are the “fact-checkers” of the present-day journalistic landscape.<sup>1</sup> These groups of people have organized into groups such as Politifact.com and FactCheck.org where they investigate and report the actual meaning of “facts” reported by politicians. They function as “truth cops” to the larger population who may not know of issues that directly and indirectly impact their lives. Presidential candidates can be deceitful in their efforts to gain power and in recent years, though not always, have increasingly been misleading the general population. Therefore, according to the director of FactCheck.org, Brooks Jackson, news stories that have been dubbed “adwatch” and other important stories that people may wonder about have come under close scrutiny by journalists.<sup>2</sup>

Also, journalists are increasingly speculating and taking action to uncover the truth in politicians’ speeches in order to make citizens more knowledgeable of the candidates they elect. This is induced with the rise of infotainment (information-based media programming with entertainment content to enhance popularity with audience and consumers) and 24 hour cable news devoted to current events bringing about a faster pace of news production. But in order to understand the emergence of these groups and others, it is necessary to start with a historical

approach and gradually progress to the present. Present functions of fact-checkers will be explored and the influence they have on the news audience. Though fact-checking has always been an important facet in journalism, new practices of online political fact-checking organizations unearth the truth and expose the deceptions in political speeches, thereby instilling trust in news consumers.

### **Background to “fact-checking”**

Though the process of news reporting is centuries old, dating back to Julius Caesar in ancient Rome, the practice of political fact checking is relatively a twenty first century phenomenon. News has been present firstly in oral tradition and passage through word of mouth. With the introduction of the printing press and later newspapers along with the development of journalism as a career field of study, fact-checking the news has become a major practice by journalists in their quest to be objective when reporting news. Before the innovation of the internet, journalists functioned by rules that governed how they reported news stories. As they wrote for newspapers and magazines, primary attention was given to verification and clarification of content that is to be reported. These same principles still apply to modern journalism and function as guidelines for journalistic ethical practices. Though journalism did not become a profession until the 1900s, driving forces that promoted the profession had fact-checking as a fundamental practice before information was release to news consumers. The Encyclopedia Britannica states

“Journalism in the twentieth century was marked by a growing sense of professionalism. There were four important factors...the increasing organization of working journalists, specialized education for journalism, a growing literature dealing with the history,

problems, and techniques of mass communication; and an increasing sense of social responsibility on the part of journalists.”<sup>3</sup>

Though these trends seem self-explanatory, the last of the four is important as will be observed in the professional conduct of journalists. An educational curriculum, advancement in the interest for news reporting, and journalists belief in the obligation to a social responsibility to citizens were motivators behind the development of journalism. However, with these advancements, there had to be some common ground that will guide the behavior of journalists. These included principles and standards of the present day Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics. Among these is a major point of interest that held journalists accountable and is the emphasis placed on checking facts in making news content truthful and understandable to the majority of people when reporting the news.

The general idealistic idea of bringing facts to the public in an impartial manner was embraced by many journalists by the twentieth century as a basic practice to establish trust in journalism. Therefore different societies of journalists issued statements of ethics. The contemporary Society of Professional Journalists also adopted principles about ethical behavior. According to the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics, fact-checking is promoted and incorporated in the role of journalists to operate by four main basic principles and standards. First among these rules require journalists to “seek truth and report it...be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.”<sup>4</sup> Under this first standard are several more fundamental sub-rules by which news reporters should adhere. Journalists are held accountable for any misleading or erroneous information that is reported by this rule. With this necessary code of behavior, journalists seek to promote in its audience a reliance on the journalists for truthful information that is free of personal opinions and biases.

A second standard that is required is to “minimize harm”<sup>5</sup> and by doing this the “ethical journalist treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving respect.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, this rule has sub-rules that address this principle. The belief and practice that value is placed on human life is also a basic characteristic of journalism. This may be further extended to apply the question in the humanities as to what does it mean to be human? In explaining this connection, journalists cultivate trustworthy relationships with their news subjects by reporting what actually is by being mutual. For the journalist, this would be treating sources as equal and securing their right to privacy unless otherwise stated by the source. As the principle explains, the idea behind this practice is to prevent any action that might lead to the defaming or demeaning of a person’s character in any way, in spite of racial differences, class or any distinction among people. Giving attention to the human interests and subjects as well as checking facts help to encourage a trustworthy relationship between journalist and news consumers.

By protecting the rights of its news sources regardless of any differences, the subject that provides information as well as the destination, in this sense other humans, are intertwined in the objectives of journalism. To clearly delineate their motives to the public, the third code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists states that correspondents should “act independently...free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know.”<sup>7</sup> With this ethical behavior, the journalist’s motivations are not driven by passions or their own self preferences, but the importance of citizens being made knowledgeable of the truth which they can apply to their everyday decision making. The journalists believe citizens should be made aware of issues that impact their livelihoods and it should not be the intentions of politicians or any other leading figure in any society to dupe their citizens.

With these three aforementioned claims, the journalists' fourth code demands that journalists "be accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other."<sup>8</sup> Journalism is therefore open to criticisms from the general public and grievances may be voiced about any unethical conduct by journalists. Even though journalists may be critiqued in a negative light by politicians, other critics in the government and the general public, their duties are fundamental in disseminating information that impacts the lives of a country's citizens. Information that is pertinent in situations of crisis or even when there is stability is reported to maintain a well-informed society. Such ethical behavior promotes favor for journalists while at the same time it makes news consumers wary of political deception. Individuals may regain confidence in news reporting as these practices question the behaviors of politicians and try to demand honesty.

### **Present functions of fact-checkers**

Though it may or may not be the objectives of politicians to mislead the public, there may be instances of misunderstanding between governmental figures and the public sphere. It may be argued that a knowledgeable society of people on matters relevant to their lives is important, but misinformed individuals can be a major problem. With the code of ethics that monitor journalists' behavior, it may then be asked why are people still misinformed? Could it be the fault of journalists or is it a result of politicians who are intentional in being deceptive or unclear when giving speeches? This is where contemporary journalism practices have broadened to incorporate fact-checkers. A fact-checker is a person who "checks factual assertions in non-fictional text, usually intended for publication in a periodical, to determine their veracity and correctness. The job requires general knowledge and the ability to conduct quick and accurate research."<sup>9</sup> This idea is applied to news reporting and according to the Washington Post, the idea behind fact-checks is to hold politicians accountable for their words. With this practice,

organizations including Politifact.com and factcheck.org have been created to seek out the truth in political speeches. These groups follow the same journalistic code of ethics in their quest to practice ethical journalism and provide information to citizens that they need to be free and independent.

Citizen's right to know is imperative and news reporters acknowledge and take action to satisfy the public's need. With the organization of a few journalists, a major fact-checking group Politifact.com was formed.

“Politifact is a project of the Tampa Bay Times to help you find the truth in American politics. Reporters and editors from the Times fact-check statements by members of Congress, the White House, lobbyists and interest groups and rate them on our Truth-O-Meter: TRUE – The statement is accurate and there's nothing significant missing. MOSTLY TRUE – The statement is accurate but needs clarification or additional information. HALF TRUE – The statement is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context. MOSTLY FALSE – The statement contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression. FALSE – The statement is not accurate. PANTS ON FIRE – The statement is not accurate and makes a ridiculous claim.”<sup>10</sup>

People are better able to understand the “hidden” meaning in politician's speeches and their confidence is therefore reinforced in the credibility of fact-checkers and the news. Although such practices may be scoffed at by individuals who are being scrutinized such as Mitt Romney or Barack Obama, it is considered necessary by the journalists as they are operating based on ethical conduct and are therefore justified.

Likewise, a similar and frequently used site for citizens to clarify their confusion in political speeches is factcheck.org. Its objective employs basic journalistic conduct and focuses on political candidates to check the truthiness in their speeches. Factcheck.org is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania; established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg, it creates a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels.<sup>11</sup> Its motive “aims to reduce...deception and confusion in U.S. politics...monitor the factual accuracy...said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding.”<sup>12</sup> This is another attempt by news reporters to build a closer relationship with its news audience, providing information in online content where people may have instant access with the aid of technological developments and advancements. Both Politifact.com and factcheck.org offer the viewer/ reader the option to make their suggestions and to write their understanding of information from governmental officials. The news receiver is therefore able to develop a sense of reliability that fact-checkers will unearth the truth and bring the news consumers to a better comprehension of facts and comments made by politicians.

Bringing news consumers to an understanding of the truth is a task in itself for journalists. For the news reporters, these tasks have induced the development of these two organizations and others. The Erie Times-News in Pennsylvania states “in today’s highly polarized political climate, it’s not a surprise that even the hallowed practice of checking the statements uttered by politicians to see if they ring true has come under attack.”<sup>13</sup> This statement gives a reason why fact-checking has become popular. It claims that the present American

political status quo is operating in a divide and there needs to be someone or group who checks the truth in these speeches. Someone to educate citizens in situations where there is uncertainty about the meaning in government speeches, where a new understanding will be obtained or reinforced. The article further states “we are privileged to live in an era when independent organizers have been created to investigate the truth of politician’s ads, stump speeches and debate claims.”<sup>14</sup> The news consumers don’t have control over the information they receive and therefore cannot directly seek for clarification from the person(s) who make whatever claims are being made. Therefore, there is a necessity for fact-checkers who act as mediators between the politicians and the citizens. Fact-checking the political figures are therefore a means to draw readers and news reporters in a trustworthy relationship.

Though news reporters desire a trustworthy relationship with its audience, the main purpose lies with the need to expose the deception and the believability of political speech. Cary Spivak in her article ‘The Fact-checking Explosion’ states “in a bitter political landscape marked by rampant allegations of questionable credibility, more and more news outlets are launching truth-squad operations.”<sup>15</sup> Evidently, there is information that the government may deliberately tweak to avoid the blatant truth in political ads, TV shows, etc. Even though it does not always mean that politicians are deceptive, they are put under pressure to disguise information, which on their part may be considered to be best to protect the general public’s interest, to win votes or to become a favorable political candidate. However, the increasing examination of speeches made by politicians is induced by the idea that voters should not be misinformed, whether it is intentional or not. The close inspection of speeches highlights the fact that there is a lack of credibility given to the news audience. Journalists therefore confront such dishonest conduct and



expose the truth. By this commitment, news correspondents seek to unite with the public and nurture a relationship based on trust between the journalists and the news consumers.

This relationship of trust that journalists seek to develop with its audience through fact-checking is important as the facts must be checked correctly. First, the journalists have to find the facts, then interpret the importance and then share the information with the audience. This can cause problems if not done by following the protocols of ethical standards in journalism. There may possibly be biased fact checkers with political leanings that seek to favor a particular form of government for example, Republican or democratic. The news reporters/ fact-checker must be wary not to indulge in practices that may impede the trusting relationship they pursue with their audience. Technological writer Ron Miller, in his article entitled “Old Rules Still Apply to New Journalists,” gives three rules to help govern fact-checkers behaviors. Miller states “don’t take money from sources to write favorably about them.”<sup>16</sup> This advice originates from the ethical principles already discussed and functions to curtail any unethical behavior by the fact-checkers. Journalists are humans and do have their personal opinions and leanings but this point of emphasis is to lay the ground rule for journalistic conduct. If this is not followed, it may impede the development of a dependable bond between journalists and news consumers.

Another rule that Miller highlights is that “sources don’t get to review your stories before publishing.”<sup>17</sup> Again, this is a fundamental conduct that prevents favoritism between fact-checkers and any form of government, Democratic or Republican. The journalists are required to be independent of any outside influences from any political party. Whatever misleading or blatantly bogus political remark should be made known to the public and the truth uncovered. It should not be the practice of the journalists to write favorably of any political candidate or allow the source to make any alterations before the information is conveyed to the public. Bribery for

monetary gain or tweaking for political endorsement goes against ethical principles and is therefore a discouraged practice with the news organization enforcing this rule. Such actions heighten the trust between journalists and news audience and strengthen the belief that journalists are honest in their profession.

In their effort to heighten honesty, Miller gives a third and important rule that states “check your facts.”<sup>18</sup> The last of the three echoes the loudest as it tries to explain that if information is handled carelessly, it could result in further misunderstandings and confusion from the public’s view. The purpose of the fact-checker is to distinguish between the facts and any possible deception in political speeches, thereby playing an integral role in public governmental debate. With the detection of false claims by politicians and other leading governmental officials, it becomes harder for voters to be misled. Hypothetically speaking, a stronger bond or reliance is being nourished in favor of journalists as citizens become more trusting of fact-checkers and the wider scope of journalism.

### **Impact on the News Audience**

With voters being made knowledgeable and less likely to be fooled, it can be concluded that fact-checking has an impact on the news audience. The recent governmental elections resulted in the presidential debates being of major importance for fact-checking organizations to further the quest for a trustworthy relationship with the news audience. Organizations such as Politifact.com and factcheck.org tried to check speeches for credibility made by Obama and Romney. In an article entitled “The Lying Game: What happens when politicians get caught by the fact-check police” by David Corn, the author explains examples of comments that were checked for truths or lies and the relevance of fact checkers. Corn states that Romney “accused

Obama of adding nearly as much public debt as all the prior presidents combined...and of cutting \$500 million from Medicare.”<sup>19</sup> The former statement was an exaggeration according to FactCheck.org and the latter a “false” assertion according to PolitiFact. However, this is a prime example that voters are now open to embracing the truth in political remarks which makes them more wary of the possibilities of deception. This evident in according to the director of FactCheck.org as he states recent results of a 2012 Political Knowledge Test show significantly better scores for those who say they have visited either a fact-checking website or a news report to assess the accuracy of a political claim. With PolitiFact’s Truth-O-Meter, the reader/ viewer is able to realize the level of misleading of truthfulness in political speeches. Likewise, FactCheck.org reveals the truth and the average eligible voter is able to understand claims made by political candidates that are untrue. Research has shown that these two organizations, and others such as Snopes.com and Poynter.org help to enhance the honestly voters perceive to be in journalism, and with the journalists defining their motives it appears believable in the eyes of the news consumers.

Journalists motives appearing believable and being genuine is substantiated by PolitiFact chief editor Bill Adair. In his online article entitled “Determining if a Politician is telling the Truth,” Adair states that “through our Truth-O-Meter, we graphically show the relative truth of each claim.”<sup>20</sup> This claim is validated by his reference to ethical standards of editing and fact-checking published stories. In addition, the impact that fact-checking has on the news audience is highlighted in his claims that “politicians are liars”:

We fact check every significant claim made in the presidential campaign- from speeches, TV ads, statements in debates, and even bloggers’ claims and chain emails that spread rumors. We comb transcript wires, blogs, local news coverage, and YouTube to find

statements that we think voters might wonder about. Our guiding principle is curiosity. If we think voters might wonder about it, we check it. The result is a site that is newsy, with new items posted nearly every day, plus a reader-friendly archive, so voters can go back in time and check a specific fact or see how accurate a candidate has been.<sup>21</sup>

With this example, Adair highlights the overall extent to which fact-checkers influence news consumers. The internet plays an integral role where information is conveyed to voters and where they have the privilege of interacting with the news providers. Also, with mobile devices, voters are able to download the PolitiFact mobile app and receive live updates on the truth or deceptions in political claims. This extends the possibility for the development of trust. In addition, the news audience is provided with thoroughly checked information that adds further credibility to journalistic work. The journalists' "obligatory" function of a social responsibility to its audience is also of importance. Fact-checkers go the extra mile to bring the truth to citizens. The availability of options that citizens now have to be exposed to the truth allows them to be better able to make decisions that will have a positive effect on their lives and the lives of others.

The positive impacts that fact-checking may have on the news audience may not always apply to political leaders. Though it creates the likelihood for well-informed voters, it doesn't mean that politicians will stop from distorting truth. Director for FactCheck.org states "rarely anyone changes what they say, and we don't expect them to."<sup>22</sup> Though the practice of political fact-checkers tries to keep politicians honest about their claims, it shows that most politicians are immoral in nature and are illusive in their efforts to govern. They consciously alter the truth in order to manipulate the majority of voters. However, though the internet and advances in technology gives way to more "truth cops" proving political claims, it is likely that more people will be aware of these lies. People will have a better command over their vote and will not be

easily deceived. These practices by fact-checking journalists and future developments will become a possible extension of journalism. This could eventually be a sub-section in journalism that aims to develop trust and commitment with the news source and the news audience. In addition to developing confidence and reliance in journalism, the journalists will bring misleading politicians to light and expose their devious behaviors. The revealing of the truth could help citizens choose a leader with the mostly good intentions, as it is observed that all politicians are misleading. However, fact-checkers who are journalists themselves don't replace other journalists; it is just a possible extension of journalism.

## Endnotes

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