

Deciding What's True: Fact-Checking Journalism and the New Ecology of News

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## ABSTRACT

### Deciding What's True: Fact-Checking Journalism and the New Ecology of News

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This dissertation studies the new class of political fact-checkers, journalists who specialize in assessing the truth of public claims — and who, it is argued, constitute a professional reform movement reaching to the center of the elite US news media. In less than a decade this emergent genre of news has become a basic feature of political coverage. It figures prominently in national debates and commands the direct attention of elite political actors, who respond publicly to the fact-checkers and dedicate staff to dealing with them, especially during electoral campaigns. This study locates fact-checking in a wider practice of “annotative journalism,” with precursors in the muckraking tradition in American news, which has come into flower in an online media environment characterized by promiscuous borrowing and annotation. Participant observation and content analysis are used together to examine the day-to-day work of the news organizations leading the fact-checking movement. This approach documents the specific and forceful critique of conventional journalistic practice which the fact-checkers enact in their newswork routines and in their public and private discourse. Fact-checkers are a species of practical epistemologists, who seek to reform and thus to preserve the objectivity norm in American journalism, even as their daily work runs up against the limits of objective factual analysis. In politics, they acknowledge, “facts can be subjective.” Fact-checkers are also active participants in an emerging news ecosystem in which stories develop, and authority is constructed, in patterns of citation and annotation across discursive networks of media and political actors. This study demonstrates

how attention to these media-political networks subtly informs and constrains the work of producing objective assessments of factual claims. And it suggests that the objective status of the fact-checkers themselves can be seen as a function of their position in media-political networks, reproduced in formal and informal partnerships and, most immediately, in the pattern of outlets which cite and quote and link to them. This perspective helps to account for the surprising limits of the political critique offered by professional fact-checkers, who argue for a more honest, fearless journalism but carefully avoid the largest and most controversial political conclusions that emerge from their own work. In seeking to redefine objective practice for a changed media environment, the new genre of fact-checking underscores the essentially defensive nature of what has been called the “strategic ritual” of journalistic objectivity.



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## Introduction

This dissertation is about the fact-checking movement — what a journalism review has called “The Fact-Checking Explosion” — in American news.<sup>1</sup> It examines a set of emergent practices, and an accompanying journalistic discourse, which have coalesced into a reform movement reaching to the center of the elite news media. The largest question this project tries to address is this: How has the Internet — not as a technological force, but as a complex of affordances rendered meaningful by new practices, norms, and organizations — transformed journalistic work and the world of news production? The new actors and behaviors studied here will also, I think, reveal deeper currents in the practice of journalism and its defining professional norm.

Reform movements have complicated beginnings. As we shall see, professional fact-checkers trace the roots of their new genre to a style of reporting that emerged, in fits and starts, two decades ago. But a fair date for the birth of fact-checking as it is practiced today is December 9, 2001. As discussed in the next chapter, on that day just two months after September 11 an irate conservative blogger issued what would later be seen as a call to arms against the mainstream news media: *It's 2001, and we can Fact Check your ass.*<sup>2</sup> The phrase quickly became part of Internet lore. It would be repeated thousands of times as a kind of shorthand for the animosity between blogger-journalists and their professional counterparts. As a *New Yorker* piece on the

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<sup>1</sup> Carey Spivak, “The Fact-Checking Explosion,” *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Layne, “More Funny Fisk, from Sept. 19,” *Ken Layne.com* (blog), December 9, 2001, [http://kenlayne.com/2000/2001\\_12\\_09\\_logarc.html#7775149](http://kenlayne.com/2000/2001_12_09_logarc.html#7775149) (accessed September 15, 2010, via archive.org).

world of online journalism would note, “The Internet is also a venue for press criticism (‘We can fact-check your ass!’ is one of the familiar rallying cries of the blogosphere’).”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the rallying cry augured not just press criticism, but entirely new forms of journalism and of political speech. In the last decade a new class of dedicated fact-checking organizations has emerged, using trained staff and dedicated resources — with budgets sometimes in the millions of dollars — to assess the truth of public claims. These new fact-checking groups bridge the media and political spheres. They operate at the state level and nationally. Some are non-profit groups who promote transparency and “good government.”<sup>4</sup> Other are openly partisan. The left-oriented Media Matters offers an impressive example: Founded in 2004, it employs dozens of staffers in a cutting-edge Washington, DC, facility to monitor and combat claims made by Republican pundits and politicians.<sup>5</sup> Various counterparts exist on the right, led by NewsBusters, launched in 2005 by a conservative media watchdog group. The language of fact-checking has also been adopted by elected officials themselves, who now routinely issue statements purporting to “fact-check” their political opponents, based on their own research or citing dedicated fact-checkers.

The largest “explosion” in fact-checking, however, has taken place in the precincts of professional journalism.<sup>6</sup> Newsrooms have long employed fact-checkers, of course, who verify the information in an article before it goes to print. References to proofreaders first appeared in US periodicals early in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and full-fledged fact-checking departments emerged at

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Lemann, “Amateur Hour: Journalism Without Journalists,” *New Yorker*, August 7, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> One national example is the Sunlight Foundation; many states have groups such as the Michigan Truth Squad, launched in 2010 by the Center for Michigan.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Clark, “Media Matters Stakes Claim As High-Volume Watchdog,” *National Journal*, September 4, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> For overviews see Ben Smith, “The Facts About the Fact Checkers,” *Politico*, November 1, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1011/67175.html> (accessed November 1, 2011); Spivak, “The Fact-Checking Explosion.”

national magazines in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>7</sup> In daily news, however, fact-checking generally stops where reported speech begins: Internal fact-checking mainly ensures a reporter got the quote right, not that the claim being made is actually true. This distinction may not always hold in long-form magazine journalism — for instance at the *New Yorker*, whose celebrated fact-checking department has been described as something akin to a research arm for journalists.<sup>8</sup> Even at that magazine, however, fact-checking aims to expunge error and falsehood, not to call attention to it. The response to a misleading claim is either to fix it, or to cut it.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the journalists studied here practice what might be called fact-checking after the fact: assessing claims once they are already in the news. Participants in the fact-checking movement commit to *publicize* errors and falsehoods. Scores of print and broadcast outlets around the country, large and small, now produce this kind of fact-checking.<sup>10</sup> The movement comprises major print outlets such as the Associated Press — a recognized leader — and, increasingly, the *New York Times*. But it also includes many regional and local journalists, working in initiatives such as the “Political Polygraph” series by the *Denver Post*; the “Truth Needle” at the *Seattle Times*; and AZ Fact Check, a fact-checking site run jointly by the *Arizona Republic*, a local NBC affiliate, and the journalism school at Arizona State University.

The undisputed leaders of the fact-checking movement are the three sites this dissertation studies most closely: FactCheck.org, founded in 2003 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center;

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Silverman, *Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech* (New York: Union Square Press, 2007); *OED Online*, s.v. “Proofreader,” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/265354> (accessed October 21, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> John McPhee, “Checkpoints,” in *Silk Parachute* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 165-196.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Canby, interview by author, email, February 26, 2012. See discussion in Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer, *The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012: An Overview* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> A pair of 2007 reports documented this rise, though by all accounts the real surge came after 2008. See Justin Bank, *Newspaper Adwatch Stories: Coming Back Strong* (Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center,

PolitiFact, launched in 2007 as an independent project of the *Tampa Bay Times*; and the *Washington Post*'s "Fact Checker" column, introduced for the 2008 presidential campaign and revived in 2011 as a permanent feature. These outlets have become established voices in national political discourse, cited frequently by news outlets from National Public Radio to the Daily Show. They have won numerous awards for their work; in 2009 PolitiFact received a Pulitzer Prize, US journalism's highest honor, for its coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign. (FactCheck.org was also a nominee.) Within the profession the award was taken as validation of a claim often made by PolitiFact itself: that fact-checking constitutes "a new form of journalism," reinventing the watchdog tradition for a digital age.<sup>11</sup>

As we shall see, these professional fact-checking sites are adapted in myriad ways to the present technological, economic, and professional moment in journalism. They have fashioned a news genre ideally suited to a media world characterized by relentless borrowing and annotation. They have also created a kind of news that responds to — indeed, that enacts — a widespread critique of the practice of objectivity, one that long predates the Internet but has gained force with the advent of new media. The fact-checking phenomenon invites consideration, I think, under three related scholarly frameworks in communications and technology research.

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November 9, 2007); Bob Papper, *TV Adwatch Stories: On the Rise* (Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center, November 9, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Jack McElroy, "PolitiFact Is Most Important Pulitzer This Year," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, [http://blogs.knoxnews.com/editor/2009/04/politifact\\_is\\_most\\_important\\_p.shtml](http://blogs.knoxnews.com/editor/2009/04/politifact_is_most_important_p.shtml) (accessed March 8, 2012).



## Blogging and journalism

The phenomenon of fact-checking speaks first of all to the vast and varied literature about blogging and journalism that has emerged over the last decade.<sup>12</sup> The fact-check is one of the basic, signifying moves of blogging as a kind of news discourse. At the same time, whether (or which) fact-checking sites should even count as blogs is hard to say. The definition of blogging, always contested, has only become murkier since traditional news outlets almost universally took up the practice — and as many pioneering blogs have professionalized and lost the outsider status that, to some, had defined the genre.<sup>13</sup> The professional fact-checkers studied in these pages don't consider themselves bloggers. They dismiss blog-based research as unreliably partisan and won't cite it in their own articles. But the new fact-checkers publish mainly online, on sites that exhibit many of the conventional features and formats we associate with blogging.<sup>14</sup> Their day-to-day newswork relies on the same affordances of the Web — especially for linking and annotating and juxtaposing texts — that bloggers do.<sup>15</sup> More than that, the new genre of professional fact-checking may be read as a response to the critique of the mainstream media that has defined bloggers as a group and informed their own journalistic practice.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> One useful recent review of this literature is Eugenia Mitchelstein and Pablo J. Boczkowski, “Between Tradition and Change a Review of Recent Research on Online News Production,” *Journalism* 10, no. 5 (October 1, 2009): 562–586.

<sup>13</sup> On this point see e.g. David Domingo and Ari Heinonen, “Weblogs and Journalism: A Typology to Explore the Blurring Boundaries,” *Nordicom Review* 1 (2008): 3-15. Chapter two of this dissertation offers as a case study Talking Points Memo, one of the first blogs to gain status among professional journalists. TPM was founded by a sometime journalist, employs paid reporters and editors, has won professional awards, and produces a many long-form pieces, as well as video. It might more accurately be called an online news site, though it retains many characteristics of style and presentation we associate with blogs.

<sup>14</sup> But not all of those features; some elite fact-checkers, for instance, don't allow comments on their articles.

<sup>15</sup> On these affordances see Lucas Graves, “The Affordances of Blogging: A Case Study in Culture and Technological Effects,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 331–346.

<sup>16</sup> The history of the genre and its critique of conventional journalism is discussed in chapter one.

Research on blogging and journalism can be divided, for the present discussion, into two broad, overlapping areas of focus.<sup>17</sup> One addresses what might be called the professional question: where blogs fit in the field of journalism today or historically; how they challenge professional norms and practices; and how news organizations have responded.<sup>18</sup> Taxonomical work began very early on to define and categorize various emergent online “journalisms,” with respect both to technical platforms used and to oppositional politics or a media-critical stance.<sup>19</sup> Any number of studies have added nuance to these taxonomies with detailed comparisons of old media and new in terms of news produced, reporting practice, and revealed norms.<sup>20</sup> And efforts by established news organizations to incorporate the new habits and tools — by linking out from news stories, deploying in-house blogs, enlisting readers in their work, and so on — have drawn a great deal of interest in journalism studies.<sup>21</sup> These institutional efforts and the discourse around them are typically read as trying to domesticate or “hijack” the new genre, minimizing

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<sup>17</sup> This scheme mirrors roughly that in C.W. Anderson, “Journalistic Networks and the Diffusion of Local News: The Brief, Happy News Life of the ‘Francisville Four’,” *Political Communication* 27, no. 3 (2010): 289–309.

<sup>18</sup> Theoretical overviews of the professional or jurisdictional question are in Seth Lewis, “The Sociology of the Professions, Boundary Work, and Participation in Journalism: A Review of the Literature” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Boston, MA, May 26–30, 2011); Wilson Lowrey, “Mapping the Journalism–Blogging Relationship,” *Journalism* 7, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 477–500; and Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson, “Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism,” in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, ed. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 88–101.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Axel Bruns, *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (New York: P. Lang, 2005); Mark Deuze, “The Web and Its Journalisms: Considering the Consequences of Different Types of Newsmedia Online,” *New Media & Society* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 203–230; Sara Platon and Mark Deuze, “Indymedia Journalism: A Radical Way of Making, Selecting and Sharing News?,” *Journalism* 4, no. 3 (August 2003): 336–355; Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, “New Media and Internet Activism: From the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to Blogging,” *New Media & Society* 6, no. 1 (February 2004): 87–95; Melissa Wall, “‘Blogs of War’: Weblogs as News,” *Journalism* 6, no. 2 (2005): 153–172.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Mark Deuze, Axel Bruns, and Christoph Neuberger, “Preparing for an Age of Participatory News,” *Journalism Practice* 1, no. 3 (2007): 322–338; Donald Matheson, “Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism,” *New Media & Society* 6, no. 4 (August 1, 2004): 443–468; Zvi Reich, “How Citizens Create News Stories,” *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 5 (2008): 739–758.

<sup>21</sup> David Domingo et al., “Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond,” *Journalism Practice* 2, no. 3 (2008): 326–342; Jane Singer, “Stepping Back from the Gate: Online Newspaper Editors and the Co-Production of Content in Campaign 2004,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 265–280; Sue Robinson, “‘Someone’s Gotta Be in Control Here’: The Institutionalization of Online News and the Creation of a Shared Journalistic Authority,” *Journalism Practice* 1, no. 3 (2007): 305–321.

the economic and professional threat posed by bloggers, news aggregators, or the Internet generally.<sup>22</sup>

The second area of focus in research on blogs and journalism emphasizes the wider news system taking shape and patterns of interaction within it. Research in this vein has seen blogs, news aggregators, and traditional news outlets as comprising a shared ecosystem, and tried to draw conclusions about its structure and how news moves through it. Many studies document the degree to which bloggers link to the traditional news outlets (and above all to elite news sources) that continue to provide most original reporting.<sup>23</sup> Blogs appear to occupy a downstream role in this emerging news ecology, positioning themselves in contradistinction to professional journalists even as they analyze and reframe stories reported in the mainstream news for their own audiences.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, wider-angle network analytic research has pointed to the typical rhythms by which information or news stories move across the online news landscape, and to the network roles revealed by patterns of linking and citation between different kinds of news sites.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See also C.W. Anderson, “Between Creative and Quantified Audiences: Web Metrics and Changing Patterns of Newswork in Local US Newsrooms,” *Journalism* 12, no. 5 (July 1, 2011): 550–566; Daniela V. Dimitrova et al., “Hyperlinking as Gatekeeping: Online Newspaper Coverage of the Execution of an American Terrorist,” *Journalism Studies* 4, no. 3 (January 2003): 401–414; Robinson, “The Mission of the J-Blog Recapturing Journalistic Authority Online,” *Journalism* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 65–83; Singer, “The Political J-Blogger,” *Journalism* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 173–198.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Stephen D. Reese et al., “Mapping the Blogosphere: Professional and Citizen-Based Media in the Global News Arena,” *Journalism* 8, no. 3 (2007): 235; John Kelly, *Pride of Place: Mainstream Media and the Networked Public Sphere*, Media Re:public (The Berkman Center for Internet & Society, 2008). On newspapers as a source of original reporting, see *How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem in One American City* (Project for Excellence in Journalism at the Pew Research Center, January 11, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> See also Brian Murley and Chris Roberts, “Biting the Hand That Feeds: Blogs and Second-Level Agenda Setting” (presented at the Southern Political Science Association, Atlanta, 2006); David W. Park, “Blogging With Authority: Strategic Positioning in Political Blogs,” *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 250–273.

<sup>25</sup> Eytan Adar and Lala A. Adamic, “Tracking Information Epidemics in Blogspace,” in *Proceedings of the 2005 IEEE/WIC/ACM International Conference on Web Intelligence (WI’05)* (Washington, DC: IEEE Computer Society, 2005), 207–214; Jure Leskovec, Lars Backstrom, and Jon Kleinberg, “Meme-Tracking and the Dynamics of the News Cycle,” in *Proceedings of the 15th ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining* (Paris, France: ACM, 2009), 497–506; Matthew S. Weber and Peter Monge, “The Flow of Digital News in a Network of Sources, Authorities, and Hubs,” *Journal of Communication* 61, no. 6 (2011): 1062–1081.

However, the influence of new media on the day-to-day work of professional journalists, and on the kinds of news they produce, has been harder to document. Meme-tracking and even agenda-setting studies inherit to a degree the media model implied by “diffusion of news” research from the 1960s: A story or topic is a discrete pattern of information — “the president has been shot” — whose progress we can trace through the populace or across the organs of the news media.<sup>26</sup> But the relationships between old and new media actors, and their effect on what becomes news, defy efforts to fix either news stories or journalistic roles so firmly. Reporters compete with bloggers, endure constant criticism from them, and also avidly consume their work.<sup>27</sup> What is the effect of this new feedback loop? A handful of well-studied cases (several reviewed in chapters one and two) suggest that even as they produce little original reporting, “blogs can socially construct an agenda or interpretive frame that acts as a focal point for mainstream media, shaping and constraining the larger political debate.”<sup>28</sup> More than that, though, news stories take shape in the individual, local interactions among various media actors — journalists, activists, bloggers, etc. — in ways that complicate the distinction between reporting, on one hand, and opinion, critique or even political action, on the other.<sup>29</sup>

As we shall see, professional fact-checkers enjoy a unique vantage point on the mechanics of this news ecology, and on the changing role of professional journalism within it. In their daily work the fact-checkers behave as a species of meme-tracker. They reconstruct the media-

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<sup>26</sup> A classic example is Bradley S. Greenberg, “Diffusion of News of the Kennedy Assassination,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1964): 225–232.

<sup>27</sup> In a 2008 survey of U.S. journalists, more than 70 percent checked a list of blogs on a regular basis, and more than three-quarters found blogs helpful in developing story ideas; see Dina Mayzlin and Hema Yoganasimhan, “Link to Success: How Blogs Build an Audience by Promoting Rivals” (working paper at the Yale School of Management in New Haven, CT, May 2008).

As early as 1999, one survey of newspaper reporters found that 92 percent used online resources in newsgathering; Bruce Garrison, “Diffusion of Online Information Technologies in Newspaper Newsrooms,” *Journalism* 2, no. 2 (August, 2001): 221-239.

political career of claims and counterclaims that dominate headlines for a day or a week — and then they intervene, yielding verdicts that ripple out across the professional news media, the blogosphere, and the political world. The professional fact-checking sites operate very self-consciously as hybrids of old and new media practice, organizing veteran print and broadcast reporters around a modernizing genre meant to update political journalism for today’s media world. But this hybrid project is hard to read, at least straightforwardly, through the lens of domestication or co-optation. It involves a kind of newswork that these reporters and editors struggle to reconcile with professional norms, and one which reliably yields controversies that threaten their status as objective journalists.

### **Intermedia influences**

Though it is not always framed this way, research on the blogging-journalism axis draws our attention to “intermedia” links and effects in journalism. Here this is understood in the broadest terms, as the question of how different news organizations, genres, and media technologies or platforms interrelate and interact at different moments in media history. The intermedia lens is indispensable for understanding change in the news “system,” as well as the routine conduct of journalism in given period: the migration of entire paragraphs of text from one newspaper to another (and from Europe to America) in the eighteenth century, for instance; or the assembly of a live radio broadcast out of newspaper headlines in the 1920s and 1930s; or the rise in recent decades of news talk formats in which journalists interview other journalists about the issues of

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<sup>28</sup> Henry Farrell and Daniel Drezner, “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” *Public Choice* 134, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 15–30.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, “Journalistic Networks and the Diffusion of Local News”; Graves, “The Affordances of Blogging.”

the day.<sup>30</sup> As a kind of news, fact-checking makes salient and explicit the intermedia links that conventional reporting practice tends to obscure, and which journalism research has dealt with only episodically.

Intermedia research has focused on relationships and influences that are widely acknowledged in journalism studies, but often bracketed out. (A good example is the fact the first thing a network news producer does in the morning is to scan a stack of newspapers, or conversely that the typical print newsrooms has a few monitors tuned to the 24-hour cable news channels.) Most research with an explicit intermedia focus adopts what can broadly be called an agenda-setting framework. Thus the seminal study in this vein tracked coverage of the crack cocaine “epidemic” in the mid-1980s to demonstrate that print media (and especially the *New York Times*) set the agenda for news broadcasts on three national TV networks.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, a large-scale study of “inner-ring” and “outer-ring” newspapers in the 1992 presidential campaign found evidence that the former “prestige” group (the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*) shaped the news agenda of the latter (newspapers like the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Newark Star-Ledger*).<sup>32</sup> The adoption of new media technologies may alter these patterns of influence. Thus one recent study found evidence of greater editorial homogeneity in a pair of competing capital-city dailies after these had launched online editions.<sup>33</sup> The convergence was

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<sup>30</sup> On the first see William Slauter, “News and Diplomacy in the Age of the American Revolution” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2007); on the second (and the “Press-Radio War” of the 1930s) see Gwenth L Jackaway, *Media at War: Radio’s Challenge to the Newspapers, 1924-1939* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1995); on the third see e.g. “dialogical news” discussed in Eran N. Ben-Porath, “Internal Fragmentation of the News,” *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 3 (2007): 414–431.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen D. Reese and Lucig H. Danielian, “Intermedia Influence and the Drug Issue: Converging on Cocaine,” in *Communication Campaigns About Drugs: Government, Media, and the Public* (Routledge, 1989), 29–46. The authors draw a distinction between such “convergence” on a sensational, media-driven story, and more routine agenda-setting; however the former can be considered a subset of the broader category of intermedia agenda-setting.

<sup>32</sup> Daron R. Shaw and Bartholomew H. Sparrow, “From the Inner Ring Out: News Congruence, Cue-Taking, and Campaign Coverage,” *Political Research Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 1, 1999): 323–351.

<sup>33</sup> Pablo J. Boczkowski and Martin de Santos, “When More Media Equals Less News: Patterns of Content Homogenization in Argentina’s Leading Print and Online Newspapers,” *Political Communication* 24, no. 2 (2007):

attributed to enhanced “monitoring and mimicry” afforded by publishing online — reporters and editors at each paper had a new source of editorial cues, constantly updated, about what their counterparts were working on.

As that suggests (and as all of the above studies note) the patterns of story selection or framing revealed in intermedia research have their roots in real journalistic behaviors — in newswork. This includes first of all the fairly institutionalized editorial cue-taking by risk-averse producers and editors who look to their peers, and especially to elite news outlets, for evidence of what is important or safe to cover each day.<sup>34</sup> (Hence Herb Gans’s much-quoted observation that, “if the [New York] *Times* did not exist, it would probably have to be invented.” A competitive but deeply consensus-driven field like journalism *needs* an editorial standard-bearer and agenda-setter.)<sup>35</sup> Beyond story selection routines, though, mechanisms of intermedia influence may include any number of habits and norms reproduced among reporters working a beat, a campaign, a war: stock narratives and story frames, informal rules about what counts as news and what doesn’t, casual banter by which reporters covering an event converge on the same “lede,” and etc.<sup>36</sup> The image of the “boys on the bus” in the 1972 campaign crowding around *Times* correspondent Johnny Apple to see how he framed a dispatch can be read as an intermedia

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167–180.; Boczkowski, “Technology, Monitoring, and Imitation in Contemporary News Work,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 1 (2009): 39–59.

<sup>34</sup> This is well-documented in for instance Herbert J Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004); Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973).

<sup>35</sup> Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 181; see discussion in Reese and Danielian, “Intermedia Influence,” 34-5.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Darnton gives a personal account of “occupational socialization” as a reporter in “Writing News and Telling Stories,” *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 175–194. On stock narratives see e.g. Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).

mechanism; so can that of a cub reporter on the crime beat learning for the first time that that a black victim is “no story.”<sup>37</sup>

Journalistic roles that reach across news organizations and news genres also open avenues for intermedia contact and cross-pollination. The corps of elite journalists who offer analysis and opinion on news “talk” programs have been described as forming discursive networks that “knit these shows into a seamless forum of mainstream journalism and provide a centripetal force toward consensus.”<sup>38</sup> The new abundance these venues in the 1990s was held to change the tenor of political reporting, producing more interpretive news.<sup>39</sup> This effect extended even to traditional outlets where, it was argued, reporters adjusted their focus and their style in hopes of securing a lucrative spot as an on-air pundit.<sup>40</sup> More than that, a back-and-forth dynamic between hard news outlets and talk venues may have prolonged the lifespan of particular stories, and acted as a crucible for political scandal.<sup>41</sup> (Observers accounted for this intermedia effect in various ways, from the simple need to fill airtime — “too much time and space chasing too little information” — to the erosion of traditional newsroom standards in the face of competition from new media platforms.)<sup>42</sup> Talk formats were also sometimes seen, as blogs since have been, to

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<sup>37</sup> The first image is from Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 79; cited also in Shaw and Sparrow, “From the Inner Ring Out,” 324. The second is in Darnton, “Writing News and Telling Stories,” 188; the lesson was conveyed by a police detective, but need not have been.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen D. Reese, August Grant, and Lucig H. Danielian, “The Structure of News Sources on Television: A Network Analysis of ‘CBS News,’ ‘Nightline,’ ‘MacNeil/Lehrer,’ and ‘This Week with David Brinkley,’” *The Journal of Communication* 44, no. 2 (1994): 93.

<sup>39</sup> One detailed cross-media study of the “Clinton Crisis” found that 40 percent of all statements made by journalists were interpretive, and nearly half of those were completely unsubstantiated “punditry.” See *The Clinton Crisis and the Press* (Washington, DC: Committee of Concerned Journalists, February 1998).

<sup>40</sup> James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 116-126.

<sup>41</sup> James W. Carey, “Lawyers, Voyeurs, and Vigilantes,” *Media Studies Journal* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1999): 16-22; Marvin Kalb, *The Rise of the “New News”: A Case Study of Two Root Causes of the Modern Scandal Coverage* (Cambridge, MA: The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, October 1998).

<sup>42</sup> Carey, “Lawyers, Voyeurs, and Vigilantes”; see also Todd Gitlin on the media practice of “covering the coverage,” in “Media Lemmings Run Amok!,” *Washington Journalism Review*, April 1992.



have a democratizing effect on the news — forcing elite outlets to focus on popular issues and perspectives they might otherwise have ignored.<sup>43</sup> The interplay between various outlets and formats thus affects not just how news travels, but how stories unfold. It affects what becomes news.

At the level of story construction, an attention to intermedia effects reminds us how misleading is the iconic act of news-*gathering* at the center of journalism’s self-conception. It remains true that most original reporting appears first in daily newspapers; less often remarked is that original reporting occupies only a fraction of the news in any medium, including print.<sup>44</sup> (One basic reason for this, today as in the past, is the large share of news that originates in public announcements by officials, corporations, etc.)<sup>45</sup> Most of the stories a journalist writes (or produces) already have a news history of some kind. The work of reporting begins with knowing what has already been reported; this may be the most basic reason journalists are so attuned to their competitors in other news outlets.<sup>46</sup> Newspapers credit one another for a major breaking story, sometimes, but not for the details and context that flow routinely from one report to the next. A great deal of news reporting adds only incrementally to developing story, or perhaps

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<sup>43</sup> Benjamin Page, in his vivid dissection of the uproar over Clinton appointee Zoe Baird’s employment of undocumented immigrants, makes a convincing argument that talk radio acted as a crucible for popular outrage over an issue which elite reporters would otherwise have overlooked. See Benjamin Page, *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 77-105.

<sup>44</sup> A study of Baltimore’s news “ecosystem,” often cited as evidence that newspapers provide most original reporting, also found that 83 percent of reports *across all news outlets* were “essentially repetitive.” One of the stories tracked in depth was about budget cuts, for instance; only nine of 18 articles in print outlets contained “significant new information.” Pew Research Center, *How News Happens*, 9-10.

<sup>45</sup> The Baltimore study cited above found that the news media “triggered” just 15 percent of stories, with government triggering 62 percent; see Pew Research Center, *How News Happens*, 2. This recalls Leon Sigal’s finding that enterprise reporting accounted for just 26 percent of front page stories in elite US newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s; *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973).

<sup>46</sup> A survey of political journalists in Germany found that more than 90 percent considered other news outlets an important source of “background knowledge” for their articles, by far the most common reason chosen for using other news media. Carsten Reinemann, “‘Everyone in Journalism Steals from Everyone Else’: Routine Reliance on Other Media in Different Stages of News Production” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association in New Orleans, LA, 2004).

reframes it for a different audience, a different genre, or a different medium. One study of elite media networks has noted that, “Even specialized publications and the alternative press can be seen as part of the [elite-dominated] framework, in the sense that they must contend with the way events have been framed elsewhere” — in outlets such as the *New York Times*.<sup>47</sup> One might make the same point a little differently: reframing stories that have appeared elsewhere is a basic feature of newswork, even at elite newspapers. Stories circulate among many different traditions and practices of journalism: objective, professional journalism but also partisan journalism, alternative journalism, trade journalism, ethnic journalism, etc.<sup>48</sup>

Another way to say this is that much of the news landscape is occupied by outlets and formats which exist mainly in relation to other outlets and formats — news offered as a supplement, an alternative, or a corrective to “mainstream” accounts. Intermedia links become apparent in an immediate and material way in news stories that refer directly to other news stories, that clip and quote and link to competing accounts in order to dispute them or build on them (or, sometimes, both). Consider a favorite example, from the 2008 US presidential race. After candidate Dennis Kucinich was excluded at the last moment from a Democratic primary debate hosted by CNN, the left-leaning radio and television program “Democracy Now!” rebroadcast key parts of the debate, splicing in on-air responses from Kucinich. The episode used digital editing technology to “re-host” the debate as it should have run, in the eyes of the

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<sup>47</sup> Reese, Grant, and Danielian, “The Structure of News Sources on Television.” 94.

<sup>48</sup> This is informed by my own experience working in niche outlets which both drew upon and drove daily newspaper coverage, in an oddly reciprocal relationship. Beat reporters typically subscribe to specialist outlets focused on their coverage area (e.g., *Jane’s Defense Weekly* for the national security beat) as a source of background information, expertise, and story ideas which can be redrawn for a wider audience. Meanwhile editors of trade magazines and policy journals harvest breaking news as well as story ideas, sources, case studies, and etc., from accounts in the mainstream press.

producers.<sup>49</sup> This is journalism that combines news reporting and media criticism — a kind of meta-journalism whose fodder is not simply the news as it happens, but the news as it is being reported.

What will here be called *annotative journalism* critiques other sources of news even as it draws on them, in ways that trouble the distinction between reporting and comment.<sup>50</sup> Fact-checking as a genre assembles news out of other stories, addresses gaps in those stories, and is designed in myriad ways to be incorporated into future stories. As we shall see, professional fact-checkers produce a kind of annotative journalism — though one that valorizes original, objective reporting, and one whose media critique remains mostly implicit.

### **Objectivity and networks**

Finally, this project speaks to the long literature on the objectivity norm in American journalism. Fact-checkers confront the question of what constitutes objective truth more often and more directly than most of their professional peers. As we shall see, they hew closely to the notion that journalism should “separate facts from values and ... report only the facts.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, they enact a powerful and very specific critique of the way reporters have typically applied that norm. Fact-checkers endeavor to do what most troubles conventional journalism: to assess and very often to contradict official accounts. Inevitably, they confront thorny, interest-laden and politically charged questions that seem to resist the separation of facts from values, at least in any decisive and convincing way. This work draws fact-checkers into debates that may

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<sup>49</sup> *Democracy Now!*, “Breaking the Sound Barrier: Democracy Now! Re-Hosts NBC Las Vegas Debate to Include Kucinich After NBC Wins Appeal to Exclude Him,” January 16, 2008. The show has used the same technique to enliven presidential press conferences after the fact, inviting on-air guests to discuss the tough follow-up questions which reporters on the scene failed to ask.

<sup>50</sup> This term is defined and developed in chapter two.

undermine their claim to objectivity. It enmeshes them in political networks that, I will argue, threaten in a material way to *make* them less objective.

That the news tends to reproduce official accounts and perspectives is a basic trope of journalism studies. This has been read in different but mostly complementary ways. Most basically, perhaps, it results from the fact that official doings matter; a primary function of a democratic press is to report on what government does.<sup>52</sup> In the context of time- and resource-constrained news production routines, this promotes an institutional reliance on official sources.<sup>53</sup> In the words of one overview, “Media dependence upon officials is often said to result largely from the nature of newsgathering routines and the need for easy, regular access to legitimate sources who possess valuable information.”<sup>54</sup> This general agreement that newswork matters does not preclude wider readings of the reproduction of elite consensus, however. Organizational routines may reflect or reinforce larger sociological and ideological factors, such as the shared class background of media and policy elites (especially since the 1960s) and, more generally, a common investment in “establishment” values and discourse.<sup>55</sup> The primacy of bureaucratic agencies and relationships in newswork has been held to structure the very way journalists understand the world, such that “reporters systematically cannot and will not see as news things which might seriously challenge an agency’s idealizations of what is going on and

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Schudson, “The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism,” *Journalism* 2, no. 2 (2001): 150.

<sup>52</sup> The question of to what degree a democratic press *should* reflect official perspectives is nicely raised in W. Lance Bennett, “Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States,” *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990): 103–127.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Gans, *Deciding What’s News*; Sigal, *Reporters and Officials*; Tuchman, *Making News*.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin I. Page, “The Mass Media as Political Actors,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29, no. 1 (March 1996): 22.

<sup>55</sup> Gans, *Deciding What’s News*; Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).; Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1989); Tuchman, *Making News*.

what should be happening.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, challenging official accounts may be dangerous, exposing journalists and the organizations that employ them to political and economic risks.<sup>57</sup>

However, the practice of objectivity by fact-checkers also invites scrutiny under another, very distinct lens, one that has been increasingly applied to journalism: science and technology studies.<sup>58</sup> This is for two reasons. First, fact-checkers are products of an emerging news world which, as has often been noted, challenges once-stable distinctions: between journalist and audience, between professionals and non-professionals, and even between different news organizations. Science studies, and in particular actor-network theory (ANT), offer a conceptual vocabulary for talking about the destabilization — institutional, discursive, even physical — of established journalistic categories and the rise of new-media hybrids: “With its habit of blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human, ANT brings with it a unique language for naming the new sorts of actors, networks and processes emerging in the field of journalism.”<sup>59</sup>

What has been described as a “semiotics of materiality” may be especially apt for thinking about the construction of news in the digital, intermedia world described above, in which fact-checkers and other journalists more transparently than ever assemble news artifacts out of other news artifacts.<sup>60</sup> This perspective also invites questions about what journalistic work actually consists of, just as ANT has made visible varieties of scientific labor — both in the lab and

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<sup>56</sup> Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*, 134.

<sup>57</sup> Gaye Tuchman, “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity,” *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 660–679.

<sup>58</sup> Three examples are Pablo Boczkowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*, (MIT Press, 2005); Emma Hemmingway, *Into the Newsroom: Exploring the Digital Production of Regional Television News* (London: Routledge, 2008); Mark Tremayne, Amy Schmitz Weiss, and Rosental Calmon Alves, “From Product to Service: The Diffusion of Dynamic Content in Online Newspapers,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 825–839.

<sup>59</sup> Fred Turner, “Actor-Networking the News,” *Social Epistemology* 19, no. 4 (2005): 321-2.

<sup>60</sup> This phrase from John Law suggests in essence that ANT applies the “linguistic turn” to the material world. As he continued, “It takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials — and not simply to those that are linguistic.”

beyond it — that fall outside of classic, Popperian notions of what scientists do. This parallel encourages us to take seriously not just newswork but what I will here call “media work”: the routine labor of forging relationships with other media entities, and promoting journalists and their stories out across media networks.

A more specific reason for appealing to science studies lies in the unusual nature of fact-checking’s truth claims. These are journalists who specialize in adjudicating factual disputes. They not only *report* fact, but publicly *decide* it. Fact-checkers often invoke scientific knowledge and procedure as a standard, one they cannot achieve — because in politics, “truth is not black and white” — but which they always aspire to. The animating argument of science studies is, of course, that even scientific truth is rarely black and white. More radically, ANT describes the truth of a claim as a function of the networks — of people, institutions, machines, ideas, and so on — it enrolls in the world: “By itself a given sentence is neither a fact nor a fiction; it is made so by others, later on.”<sup>61</sup> In ANT’s terms every published fact-check can be seen as an actor network, gathering resources and establishing links in the effort to create a black box — something that will be taken for granted, not challenged.<sup>62</sup> This is not a view held by professional fact-checkers, who share with most members of industrial society, and certainly most journalists, the conviction that truth is a matter of evidence and not of consensus or contingency. But it is a compelling view for describing the practical realities of their efforts to settle public controversies — efforts which demand close attention to the mediated careers of public claims, including their own. And it underscores the position of the fact-checkers themselves as nodes in a media-

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<sup>61</sup> Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 25.

<sup>62</sup> Michel Callon defines an actor network as “a network of simplified entities that in turn are other networks.” See “Society in the Making: The Study of Technology as a Tool for Sociological Analysis,” in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, eds. Wiebe Bijker, Thomas Hughes, and T. J. Pinch (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 90.

political network, whose status as objective journalists depends in part on the way that others use and talk about their work.

### **Methodological note**

This dissertation relies on a mix of textual and ethnographic methods: participant observation, formal and informal interviews, content analysis, and some historical research. This mix reflects the unusual topic and the way that I came to it. My first contact with fact-checking groups came in the fall and winter of 2010. I had been interested in what I thought of as news annotation, and specifically in finding a way to talk about how blogging had altered the news landscape. I planned to study this through comparative case studies of a handful of major stories, using content analysis and social network analysis to reveal patterns in the ways these stories developed in the interplay between blogs and traditional news outlets. Various fact-checking groups — I didn't yet understand the vital distinctions these entities draw among themselves — turned up over and over in my case studies, for instance during the health-care debate of 2009. The fact-checkers seemed to have an unusual vantage point on the movement of claims and counterclaims in public discourse today. Interviews and perhaps a few site visits would offer a way to study news annotation in action — some purchase on the material dimension so hard to recover in faceless networks of news texts and blog posts.

This was true, though not precisely in the way I had expected. Even more interesting than what bloggers and fact-checkers had in common was what set them apart: the latter's deep ties to the world of professional journalism, and their commitment to its reigning ideal. Fact-checking began to come into focus as a phenomenon in its own right, one with distinct, almost competing histories in blogging discourse and in professional journalism. I had compiled a vivid catalog of

episodes from the decade-long conflict between bloggers and journalists; suddenly most of these looked like cases of, or arguments about, fact-checking. (Many appear in the following pages.) I began to think of fact-checking as a kind of contested practice or discourse, unclaimed and therefore unstable. Various participants and observers — often a difficult line to draw — saw it in different ways. As fact-checking gained attention during the last two years it has been enrolled into the agendas of not just bloggers and journalists but political actors, media reformers, and academics. This dissertation, itself a certain claim on fact-checking, focuses on the work of what I call the elite fact-checkers, but also tries to trace the contours of a wider discourse that sprawls across the media and political worlds.

One of two primary research pegs for this project is ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. Since mid-2010 I have conducted more than 30 semi-structured and unstructured interviews with professional fact-checkers, including editors, staff, and interns; with current and former staff at partisan fact-checking groups; with traditional print, broadcast, and online journalists, including internal fact-checkers; and with political strategists and “opposition researchers” affiliated with Democratic as well as Republican candidates. I also conducted roughly 160 hundred hours of formal participant observation in three East Coast cities. This included the opportunity to observe a total of eight days of intern and staff training at two leading fact-checking groups. It also included two weeks as an unpaid, virtual staff member during which I participated in all editorial meetings; performed both staff and intern duties; and researched and wrote bylined fact-checking articles for publication. (It is important to observe that this level of participation was only possible because of my experience as a journalist. More broadly, that background shaped my relationships with all of the professional fact-checkers I came to know. It yielded access and insights which may have been impossible otherwise. But it also colored my understanding of



fact-checking, fostered a basic sympathy for these journalists and their project, and perhaps closed off perspectives available to a researcher who doesn't share such a tie with his or her informants.)

Formal fieldwork and interviews marked the beginning of a longer and continuing engagement in the fact-checking milieu — of public and private exchange with my principal informants as well as others active in this world. I have participated in two public panels discussions with my informants; I have been interviewed several times about their work; and I have traded informal advice and opinions with them about various initiatives and controversies in fact-checking. This engagement crested in the final months of 2011, when I helped to organize a 50-person, day-long conference which featured my key informants as well as journalists, activists, educators, and researchers interested in fact-checking. Being involved with my informants in multiple contexts and registers has produced occasional conflicts of interest — for instance, in designing a conference that fulfilled the formal goals of funders, while also being sensitive to the concerns of my informants, protecting my relationship with them, and pursuing my own research interests. It is fair to question my role in the evolving discourse this dissertation examines. However, I hope it will also be clear that this kind of engagement has been an invaluable source of perspective, one I have tried to be reflective about in the pages that follow.

The second basic methodological peg for this dissertation is content analysis, in the broadest sense of that term. In research about journalism content analysis most often refers to studies, generally quantitative, that apply a reproducible analytic procedure to some corpus of news texts. Some of this appears in the pages that follow, for instance in comparing the media profiles of different fact-checkers. (Social network analysis is also employed to compare the online footprint of fact-checking groups.) However, this project relies primarily on a kind of textual

analysis that would not be unfamiliar in the humanities: close reading of news texts with an awareness of the events and circumstances that produced them. This kind of analysis pays attention to, but mostly doesn't count, any number of elements of content and style as they seem relevant: sources used, claims made, tone of voice, format, and etc. Crucially for this project, many of the fact-checking pieces I analyze, especially in chapters three and four, were published during my fieldwork. Grounding content analysis in participant observation affords an inside-and-out view which reads news texts in light of the actual newswork and internal deliberations that produced them.

Finally, it must be stressed that in practice these methodological lines became quite blurred. It is common in some ethnographic research to apply the word "text" liberally, for instance to a performance or a conversation — to anything that can be "read." The quotation marks mostly drop away, however, in fieldwork with media actors who both practice and discuss their work via literal texts which, if they don't originate as words on a computer screen, very quickly become available that way. Once so available, these texts become fodder for further debates about journalism, blogging, and fact-checking. Chapter three suggests that professional fact-checkers perform an unusual variant of the reporter's role as witness: they witness *mediated* events. The same can be said of this dissertation, which reports on an intensely mediated discourse of and about fact-checking.

This discourse produces a stream of documents — editor's notes, blog posts, media transcripts, conference transcripts — that defy firm categorization as either news texts or ethnographic texts. Participants similarly cross the lines between scholarship, advocacy, and practice. How to classify, for instance, the work of a journalism professor and social-media pundit who communicates primarily by widely cited blog posts about issues in blogging,

journalism, and fact-checking? (Several such voices appear here.) Do these posts belong in the final bibliography, which by convention typically includes scholarly articles but not newspaper or magazine pieces, and presumably not most blogging? Of course; such work is simultaneously an instance of the discourse this project focuses on, and a critical, scholarly resource for analyzing that discourse. As we shall see, this is a duality that also applies to the hybrid journalistic genres explored in these chapters.

### **Chapter overview**

The five chapters that follow proceed in a rough arc from a broad theoretical and historical consideration of fact-checking as a practice in digital media and in journalism, to a close examination of the work of three elite, professional fact-checkers who lead the movement today.

Chapter one is a study of the encounter between blogging and journalism over the last decade. This account emphasizes the annotative, fact-checking, media-critical impulse of blogging — a defining trait but one often overshadowed by attention to blogs as “grassroots” journalism. The idea that blogging could provide a crowd-sourced corrective for the sins and biases of traditional journalism, a notion professional fact-checkers strenuously reject, emerged clearly in the genre-defining discourse among the earliest generations of bloggers, who drew heavily on ideas and practices from the world of Free Software. This analysis traces blogging’s critique of journalism in part to an unusual socio-technical sensibility cultivated by participation in online discourse and networks — to bloggers’ sense of themselves as an evolving, collective technological phenomenon.

Chapter two develops the idea of “annotative journalism” through a pair of case studies: an investigation of bureaucratic malfeasance by the progressive newsletter *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* in

1958, and one by the website Talking Points Memo in 2007. Both cases illustrate a kind of journalism that proceeds mainly through the critical analysis of published texts. This intertextual style of newswork complicates the distinction between news reporting and commentary or critique, a distinction basic to the objectivity norm in professional journalism. In these cases, crucially, annotative journalism emerges as a style of newswork most comfortable inhabiting a larger political critique — a sense-making context unavailable to the new class of professional, objective fact-checkers.

Chapters three and four focus on the fact-checking movement in professional journalism, and primarily on the three elite fact-checkers who lead that movement: FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker. Chapter three opens with a history of these three elite outlets and of the wider professional milieu that produced them. It then turns to a close, extended reading of the journalistic routines and discourse that constitute fact-checking as a kind of newswork. This begins with a look at the process of story selection — how professional fact-checkers choose statements to check from countless claims made daily by political figures, candidates, pundits, and other voices in political discourse.

Chapter four continues this examination of the day-to-day work of fact-checking. Relying on a mix of content analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, it studies the way fact-checkers research and rule on public claims, and the way they talk about that work. These procedures include questioning the public figures being challenged; tracing the origins of dubious statistics or questionable claims; selecting authoritative sources of data and of expert opinion; and finally, making arguments and rendering verdicts in published fact-checks. The discussion emphasizes the deeply mediated nature of this style of newswork, and how the texture of that mediation subtly informs the analytical context for assessing factual claims.

Chapter five turns outward, from the fact-checkers' internal routines and discourse to their public role and their external relationships: with their audience, with other journalists, and in the political sphere. Fact-checkers occupy a contested and uncertain position in political life. The questions of an appropriate mission for fact-checking, and of the effects it can or should have in the world, are fraught ones that challenge the fact-checkers' claim to objectivity and place surprising limits on their truth-telling mission. The tensions and conflicts that have attended the fact-checking movement as its influence has grown, seen in several controversies discussed in this chapter, offer valuable insights about the traditional practice of objectivity in American journalism.

## Chapter 1 - From Free Software to Fact-Checking

The decade-long encounter between journalism and blogging has been endlessly chronicled by scholars, by pundits, and by journalists and bloggers themselves. It can be told as a story of technological succession, of economic transformation, and of occupational contestation, pitting professional reporters and editors against the upstart amateurs who, it is often supposed, seek to make them irrelevant. The encounter plays out in boardrooms and conference halls, in white papers and journalism reviews, and of course online, in periodic and very public outbreaks of hostility which together form a vast archive of jurisdictional conflict. Many such episodes are visited in this dissertation.

This chapter offers an alternative history of that encounter, one that emphasizes the annotative, fact-checking, media-critical impulse of blogging rather than its potential as a vehicle for “grassroots” journalism. I review the historical and discursive links between the worlds of Free Software and blogging as the source of the claim — in certain circles, the consensus — that blogs and other online fact-checkers can ameliorate public discourse by provide a collective, organic corrective to the errors and biases of professional journalism. And I trace in this milieu the emergence of “transparency” as a seemingly necessary or natural alternative to the professional journalistic ideal of objectivity.

Consider a recent illustration.<sup>1</sup> As the debate over health care reform took shape in early 2009, James Fallows made a bold prediction about the cleansing effect the Internet would have

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this health-care case, written by the author, appears in Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer, *The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012: An Overview* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February 2012). It first appeared in the proposal for this dissertation.

on that national conversation. The veteran journalist had chronicled the collapse of President Clinton's health care reform initiative in the 1990s, paying special attention to misinformation that circulated freely on talk radio as well as in the elite media. One especially damaging charge grew out of an influential dissection of the Clinton proposal by Betsy McCaughey, a future lieutenant Governor of New York, writing in the *New Republic*; as rendered by George Will in *Newsweek* in early 1994, "Escaping government control to choose your own doctor or buy other care would be virtually impossible. Doctors could be paid only by government-approved plans, at rates set by the government. It would be illegal for doctors to accept money from patients, and there would be 15-year jail terms for people driven to bribery for care they feel they need but the government does not deem necessary."<sup>2</sup> Variants of this claim were repeated widely despite the fact that (as Fallows noted in a 1995 post-mortem) one of the bill's first provisions held that, "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as prohibiting the following: (1) An individual from purchasing any health care services."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, today's "ecology of news and opinion" would be much less hospitable to such malicious distortions, Fallows declared on the radio in May and again in July of 2009. The "instant feedback" provided by blogs and other fact-checkers would deflate the most egregious falsehoods before they could gain traction, whereas "in those days something that was plainly false, and provably false, could not be knocked down because there was not an alternative machine to deal with it." He pointed to the example of bloggers (in tandem with the "progressive" fact-checking group Media Matters for America) successfully debunking a new

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<sup>2</sup> George Will, "The Clintons' Lethal Paternalism," *Newsweek*, February 7, 1994; Elizabeth McCaughey, "No Exit: What the Clinton Plan Will Do for You," *New Republic*, February 7, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> James Fallows, "A Triumph of Misinformation," *Atlantic*, January 1995.

claim by Betsy McCaughey, about restrictions on medical care buried in the 2009 stimulus bill, which had been picked up by Rush Limbaugh and the *Wall Street Journal*, among others.<sup>4</sup>

Then rumors of a plan for state-run euthanasia reached a fever pitch in the national media. The idea that new health care rules would save money by requiring seniors to undergo counseling on “how to end their life sooner,” as McCaughey put it on the radio show of former Republican senator and presidential contender Fred Thompson in mid-July, had been percolating among conservative pundits for months; the media furor peaked after Sarah Palin’s reference on Facebook to “Obama’s death panel.” Palin’s claim proved no less contagious for being immediately and widely debunked, by journalists as well as dedicated fact-checkers such as FactCheck.org, Media Matters, and PolitiFact.<sup>5</sup> A front-page *New York Times* headline declared, “False ‘Death Panel’ Rumor Has Some Familiar Roots” — even as Republican leaders repeated the charge and crowds took it up at “town hall” meetings across the country, presaging major losses for the party that had supported health-care reform in the 2010 midterm elections.<sup>6</sup>

In one sense at least Fallows’s prediction was accurate — not just fact-checkers but many TV and print reporters challenged the rhetoric about “death panels,” often in their own voice.<sup>7</sup> But these interventions seem to have done little to promote a more reasonable public discourse about health care. Within a week of Palin’s Facebook post, Fallows had officially reversed course in

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<sup>4</sup> James Fallows interviewed in WNYC, *On the Media*, “Rewrite,” May 22, 2009; and WNYC, *On the Media*, “The Origin of Rumors,” July 31, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Bank, “Palin vs. Obama: Death Panels,” FactCheck.org, August 14, 2009, <http://www.factcheck.org/2009/08/palin-vs-obama-death-panels/>; Angie Drobnic Holan, “Sarah Palin Falsely Claims Barack Obama Runs a ‘Death Panel,’” PolitiFact, August 10, 2009, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/aug/10/sarah-palin/sarah-palin-barack-obama-death-panel/>; “Fox News Personalities Advance Palin’s ‘Death Panel’ Claim,” Media Matters for America, August 10, 2009, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200908100054> (accessed September 15, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Jim Rutenberg and Jackie Calmes, “False ‘Death Panel’ Rumor Has Some Familiar Roots,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2009, A1.



his blog at the *Atlantic*: “I said two weeks ago that I thought today’s communications system had caught up with people who invented facts. I was wrong.”<sup>8</sup>

### “We can Fact Check your ass”

Events may have forced Fallows to backtrack. But his faith in the inbuilt corrective mechanisms of today’s highly networked media ecosystem — in an “alternative machine” that would find and expose political falsehoods — captured a consensus that had been taking shape for more than a decade. This germs of this idea are evident in the earliest conversations among bloggers about their new genre, discussed in this chapter. But the fact-checking impulse was expressed most famously — and gleefully — on December 9, 2001. On that day, just two months after September 11, an irate conservative blogger issued what would later be seen as a call to arms. After dissecting a skeptical news report on the US military campaign in Afghanistan, Ken Layne made the following declaration:

It’s 2001, and we can Fact Check your ass. And you, like many in the Hate America movement, are no longer able to dress your wretched ‘reporting’ in fiction. We have computers. It is not difficult to Find You Out, dig?<sup>9</sup>

The object of this attack was Robert Fisk, a veteran Middle East correspondent for London’s *Independent*, perhaps best known as one of the few Western journalists to interview Osama Bin Laden. Layne and other so-called “war-bloggers” dismantled Fisk’s dispatches so regularly that “to fisk” became a verb, standing for the “line-by-line critique” of news reports that is one of

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<sup>7</sup> Regina G. Lawrence and Matthew L. Schafer, “Debunking Sarah Palin: Mainstream News Coverage of ‘Death Panels,’” *Journalism* 13, no. 6 (December 21, 2011); see also Brendan Nyhan, “Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate,” *The Forum* 8, no. 1 (April 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Fallows, “I Was Wrong,” *Atlantic.com*, August 13, 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2009/08/i-was-wrong/23254/> (accessed September 15, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ken Layne, “More Funny Fisk, from Sept. 19,” *KenLayne.com* (blog), December 9, 2001, [http://kenlayne.com/2000/2001\\_12\\_09\\_logarc.html#7775149](http://kenlayne.com/2000/2001_12_09_logarc.html#7775149) (accessed September 15, 2010, via archive.org).

blogging's primary reflexes.<sup>10</sup> But Layne's pithy description of the new medium's capabilities vis-à-vis the old — “we can Fact Check your ass” — left a wider footprint in online discourse. It emphatically captured the shared belief that a new technology (“We have computers”) had changed the balance of power between reporter and reader. The phrase became part of Internet lore, ground for sly puns and insider references by bloggers of any political persuasion.

I will emphasize that the impulse to fact-check and “fisk” news reports has been basic to bloggers' practice of, and discourse about, journalism. This fact-checking role, so important to participants themselves, tends to be overlooked under the rubric of “citizen journalism” or “grassroots journalism,” terms suggesting a new practice that seeks to supplant the old rather than to correct it, to modify it, to speak to it. As the editor of Microcontent News — “The Online Magazine for Weblogs, Webzines, and Personal Publishing” — opined in a 2002 interview, bloggers have two distinct news-related roles: to “help break stories with their own grassroots reporting,” and to “fact-check and filter stories that have come out.” The collective nature of the latter enterprise was apparent from the start; as he continued, “Any individual blog post may have factual errors. But *the Blogosphere as a whole is actually quite robust*. I trust the Blogosphere to keep Journalists honest.”<sup>11</sup> A *60 Minutes* episode in 2004 would yield what may still be the most dramatic example of keeping journalism “honest” in this way: the career-ending dismantling, by a handful of conservative blogs and their readers, of Dan Rather's report on

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<sup>10</sup> William Safire, “Blargon,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> John S. Rhodes, “WebWord Interview > About the Blogosphere,” WebWord.com, June 22, 2002, <http://www.webword.com/interviews/hiler.html> (accessed September 15, 2010). Italics added.

President Bush’s service in the National Guard.<sup>12</sup> As one analyst opined at the time, “Today, bloggers are fact-checking Dan Rather’s ass but good.”<sup>13</sup>

Elite journalists took note. The dean of Columbia’s Journalism School observed in a 2006 *New Yorker* piece on the emerging news landscape, “The Internet is also a venue for press criticism (‘We can fact-check your ass!’ is one of the familiar rallying cries of the blogosphere’).”<sup>14</sup> Of course, to neatly classify online fact-checking as “press criticism” suggests that it is something secondary to real journalism, and especially to reporting. As we shall see in this chapter and the next, that taxonomy belies the complexity of journalistic work online, and occludes the *ecological* mindset that participants adopted to understand their role in the networked news environment. “Take the universe of weblogs as a complex system,” one of the best-known early bloggers instructed in 2002. “What, if anything, is ‘emerging’ out of that system? One possible answer is that *the collective act of weblogging is producing a basic form of journalism...*”<sup>15</sup>

What was the origin of this utopian conviction — far from universal, but for its adherents quite *natural* — that a self-organizing body of loosely connected volunteers would constitute a reliable corrective for the failings of conventional journalism? That the idiosyncratic, even whimsical interests and obsessions of bloggers individually prone to disagreement and factual error would “on the whole” yield accuracy and truth? Fred Turner has asked the same question of an earlier techno-utopian consensus, one that anticipated and informed current ideas about

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<sup>12</sup> This episode has been written of widely. A thorough account is in Arthur Hayes, *Press Critics Are the Fifth Estate* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 35-41.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff Jarvis, “Dan’s Mistake: What the Old Media Need to Learn from the New,” *New York Post*, September 20, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Lemann, “Amateur Hour: Journalism Without Journalists,” *New Yorker*, August 7, 2006, 44-29.

<sup>15</sup> Jason Kottke, “Steven Johnson on ‘Emergence,’” Kottke.org (blog), February 25, 2002, <http://kottke.org/02/02/steven-johnson-on-emergence> (accessed September 15, 2010). Italics added.

collective wisdom of the blogosphere. As he wrote in an article on the “Hackers’ Conference” of 1984,

In the mid-1990s, as the Internet and the World Wide Web went public, a utopian near-consensus about their likely social impact seemed to bubble up out of nowhere. The Net would level social hierarchies, distribute and personalize work, and dematerialize communication, exclaimed pundits and CEOs alike. The protocols of the Net were said to embody new, egalitarian forms of political organization. They offered the technological underpinnings for peer-to-peer commerce, and with them, claimed many, an end to corporate power. And well above the human plains of financial and political haggling, suggested some, those same protocols might finally link the now-disembodied species in a single, harmonious electrosphere.

Individually, these predictions popped up across American culture — and ultimately, around the world — throughout the following decade. But where did they come from? And how did they suddenly seem to be everywhere at once?<sup>16</sup>

The faith in online fact-checking should of course be seen as a particular case of that broad utopian consensus about Internet technology, which Turner’s work has grounded in the counterculture ideology of 1960s (and, through that, in cybernetic research and discourse dating from the post-war period).<sup>17</sup> While visibly recapitulating or re-instantiating these more general utopian claims about the Internet, however, the view of blogs as a fact-checking force draws on a particular discourse and set of practices that emerged distinctly between 1999 and 2003 in bloggers’ very self-conscious efforts to establish and understand their new genre.

I argue here that this emerging consensus drew most directly on the Free Software movement, both as an explicit model for online journalism and in a common sensibility cultivated by blogging as by open-source work. For lack of a better term I refer to this as a cybernetic or socio-technical sensibility, meaning an attentiveness to the interwoven social and technical dynamics of online networks, and beyond that a shared sense that bloggers together

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<sup>16</sup> Fred Turner, “How Digital Technology Found Utopian Ideology: Lessons From the First Hackers’ Conference,” in *Critical Cyberculture Studies: Current Terrains, Future Directions*, ed. David Silver and Adrian Massanari (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 257.

constitute a network phenomenon exhibiting reliable properties — including a kind of collective intelligence. Cybernetic is not always the right term, however. The discourse about blogging and online fact-checking, like the discourse about open-source software, reveals a recurring tension between a classically liberal, Habermasian view of reasoned debate and deliberation, and more cybernetic models for the information-processing power of masses of people linked by the Internet.<sup>18</sup> The “wisdom” of the networked crowd is not always deliberative.

Almost from the moment their new pastime became a verb, and well before the general public had heard it, bloggers began to discuss its past, present and future at conferences, in books, and of course online. The discussion that follows draws on various sources of this navel-gazing discourse, including a collection of essays (most originally blog posts from the late 1990s) published in 2002; a pair of textbooks by four well-known bloggers, also from 2002; “the Lydon interviews,” a 2003 series of audio interviews by a public-radio veteran and early blogger Christopher Lydon; and finally, the seminal 2003 BloggerCon conference on blogging at Harvard’s Berkman Center.<sup>19</sup> Following Turner’s analysis of the Hacker Conference, I treat the first BloggerCon as a site of “ideological work” that managed the contradictions implicit in bold utopian claims about how the blogosphere collectively would ameliorate public discourse.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> On hacking and liberalism see E. Gabriella Coleman and Alex Golub, “Hacker Practice Moral Genres and the Cultural Articulation of Liberalism,” *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 255–277.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Bausch, Matthew Haughey, and Meg Hourihan, *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs* (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 2002); Rebecca Blood, *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002); John Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002). Chris Lydon’s interviews are available at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/lydondev/>. The first BloggerCon, hosted by the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, took place October 4-5, 2003, at the Harvard Law School in Cambridge, MA.

<sup>20</sup> Turner uses “ideological work” as developed by Bennett Berger, *The Survival of a Counterculture: Ideological Work and Everyday Life Among Rural Communards* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981). The illuminating idea applies helpfully though perhaps not perfectly to the case I study; see discussion below.

## Genealogies of blogging

At least two main genealogical narratives have taken hold among both actors and observers of blogging. One of these origin stories is journalistic and hearkens back to the unruly, partisan press of early America. “If any one person deserves the appellation ‘patron saint of the blogs,’ it is Benjamin Franklin,” declares a 2007 history of blogging, whose main argument is that the new form marks a return to the original American conception of a popular press.<sup>21</sup> Blogging has also been likened to the passionate muckraking of figures such as Lincoln Steffens and I.F. Stone, a comparison I take up in the next chapter. At the 2003 BloggerCon, the “father of” references became a running joke: Bloggers linked their new avocation in spirit to Franklin, to Samuel Johnson, to Ralph Waldo Emerson, and to Stone, among others.

Scholars have likewise looked to previous eras to understand emerging forms of online journalism. One of the first analyses of online news discourse (Usenet posts on the Zapatista uprising of the mid-nineties) saw a parallel in early partisan newspapers which “served to bind together members of an already established community.”<sup>22</sup> Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone argue that the Web erodes the carefully ordered, “univocal” character of the modern newspaper, marking a return of sorts to the “multivocal” news of the industrial era.<sup>23</sup> These comparisons sometimes extend beyond the United States. Highlighting the “fragmentary character of information” then and now, historian Robert Darnton has likened today’s news environment to that of pre-revolutionary Europe, when journalism consisted of short, autonomous paragraphs

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<sup>21</sup> Aaron Barlow, *The Rise of the Blogosphere* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Russell, “Chiapas and the New News: Internet and Newspaper Coverage of a Broken Cease-Fire,” *Journalism* 2, no. 2 (August 1, 2001): 217.

<sup>23</sup> John Nerone and Kevin Barnhurst, “Beyond Modernism: Digital Design, Americanization and the Future of Newspaper Form,” *New Media & Society* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 467–482.

copied from newspaper to newspaper.<sup>24</sup> Will Slauter, a student of Darnton, has tracked the flow of these paragraphs across the Atlantic, reconstructing what he calls “the 18th-Century blogosphere.”<sup>25</sup>

The second origin story is the subject of this chapter. This narrative, not incompatible with the first, points to blogging as an instance of a prevailing technological order. Seen through this generally utopian lens, blogs as a media phenomenon manifest basic technical qualities, and thus basic values, of the Internet — qualities and values which set blogs apart from conventional media like broadcast or print, and from the conventional journalism those technologies produce. In this way, for instance, the reverse-chronological order of blog entries has been called a “genetic trait” of the Web that reflects the last-in-first-out logic of a programming “stack,” in contrast to the editorial judgment that orders news stories on the page.<sup>26</sup> Bloggers maintain that their domain is decentralized and ahierarchical, like the Internet itself, and unlike the highly concentrated news industry whose journalists obey a strict editorial pecking order. Blogging is seen to be “open” and “transparent” whereas traditional journalism is anything but, rendering an often distorted picture of the world through the opaque judgments and hidden processes of a professional priesthood. And crucially, blogging seems to embody some sort of organic, network logic, bringing a collective scrutiny to bear on the news produced by professional journalists.

Each of these stark dualities begs to be challenged, but together they suggest a common way of understanding the relationship between blogs and journalism, and how the former transform the latter. Dave Winer, a software developer whose “Scripting News” is often credited as the first

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Darnton, “Blogging, Now and Then (250 Years Ago)” (talk at the Book History Colloquium, Columbia University, New York, November 16, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Will Slauter, “Recycling the News in the 18th-Century Blogosphere” (talk at Columbia University, New York, February 27, 2008).

blog (and who authored popular blogging tools as well as organizing the seminal BloggerCon conferences) described the transformation this way in a 2004 post:

No matter how diligent Our Good Reporter is, something is lost in translation. This is observable. Ask any expert who's been interviewed on a subject of any subtlety [sic] or complexity. The reporter always mangles it. Enter the weblogs. They make it possible for the experts to go direct, without any intermediaries. A person who wants info can now find out what people think without going through the reporter. This is revolutionary. *This is what the Internet does to everything it touches.*

Is the expert writing his or her expertise publicly without intermediaries journalism? I don't know. I tend to think it is. . . . But no matter what we call it, it's a big deal. *Because now we can route around confusion.* And god knows we need this, in a world where people think Saddam Hussein bombed the WTC and Iraqi nuclear power plants are being raided in the middle of the night by god knows who.<sup>27</sup> [italics added]

Such rhetoric of transformation and disintermediation is immediately recognizable in the “geek” milieu, which is to say within that broad category of technologists and technology advocates or activists concerned with the Internet. Among geeks it is common knowledge that the first industry the Internet “touched” in this way was their own, closing the gap between makers and users of software to create a new, collaborative model of “free” software production — one that would radically shape the growth of the Internet in turn. Winer's assertion that “now we can route around confusion” invokes the widespread claim that “the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it,” a cousin of the most famous geek credo, “information wants to be free.”<sup>28</sup> Such overtly techno-utopian strains can't be heard always or everywhere in the blogging universe, of course. But I will suggest that Internet activism and the Free Software movement in particular have had a profound formative influence on the way bloggers understand

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<sup>26</sup> Scott Rosenberg, *Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters* (New York: Crown, 2009), 9-11.

<sup>27</sup> Dave Winer, “Jay, I Didn't Ask If Blogging Is Journalism,” <http://www.bloggercon.org/2004/04/16>, April 16, 2004 (accessed December 20, 2010 via archive.org).

<sup>28</sup> The author of the first phrase is Free Software pioneer and Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder John Gilmore. It first appeared in Philip Elmer-DeWitt, “First Nation in Cyberspace,” *Time*, December 6, 1993, 62. The second phrase originated with Stewart Brand, who has said he first uttered it at the hacker conference in 1984; it



themselves and their role as reformers of journalism. The technological origin story underlies and informs the journalistic one.

### **Open-source journalism**

The links between the worlds of Free Software and blogging are both direct and indirect, a matter of particular people (and particular software) as well as of discursive themes — “crowd-sourcing” is a good example — that resonate today not just in journalism but in politics, business, academia, and so on.<sup>29</sup> It is tempting to say that the connection is “overdetermined.” The first generation of elite bloggers, who emerged and found one another roughly between 1997 and 1999, came mainly from the world of software and Web development.<sup>30</sup> Many were active in or had opinions about Free Software. As Scott Rosenberg writes, “It was predictable that programmers dedicated to the open-source movement, which rose to prominence in the late 90s, would embrace blogging as a convenient tool for sharing expertise: their methodology depended on open collaboration across the Net.”<sup>31</sup> More than that, some of the best-known evangelists of Free Software and the Creative Commons became early enthusiasts and promoters of blogging; the careers of figures such as Cory Doctorow and Doc Searls testify to the easy confluence between the two worlds. Others, including “blogfather” Dave Winer, appear to have been

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later appeared in his *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1987) at 202. There Brand adds, “Information also wants to be expensive. . . . because it can be immeasurably valuable to the recipient.”

<sup>29</sup> This can be seen as a matter of the values embedded in widespread information technologies becoming “encoded” into organizational forms, economic routines, and etc.; see Gina Neff and David Stark, “Permanently Beta: Responsive Organization in the Internet Era,” in *Society Online: The Internet in Context*, eds. Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 173–188.

<sup>30</sup> This echoes one link Turner finds between the counterculture and the New Economy: “Part of the answer is that a few hackers actually *were* hippies,” in “How Digital Technology Found Utopian Ideology,” 259.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenberg, *Say Everything*, 166.

bloggers first and open-source advocates later, partly by way of debates over the standards on which blogging platforms depend.<sup>32</sup>

In hindsight this confluence seems inevitable. A basic claim of the Free Software movement is that the Internet makes it possible for a self-organizing group of volunteers to accomplish tasks of profound technical complexity.<sup>33</sup> As Eric Raymond famously has written, “Linux is subversive. Who would have thought even five years ago (1991) that a world-class operating system could coalesce as if by magic out of part-time hacking by several thousand developers scattered all over the planet, connected only by the tenuous strands of the Internet?”<sup>34</sup> What makes Linux and other feats of open-source “magic” work is much debated, but a common dynamic of Free Software projects is to encourage broad participation at many different levels of expertise, from virtuoso hackers who take on leadership roles to interested users who submit “bug reports” identifying possible software glitches. This exemplar of a newly empowered or active public has offered an irresistible metaphor for blogging in at least two ways: Bloggers represent a very active (and very critical) audience for conventional journalism, and they draw heavily on the energy and expertise of their own audiences. It is hard not to hear echoes of “Linus’s Law” (for Linux founder Linus Torvalds) that “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” in the blogger’s refrain that “My readers know more than I do.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Winer, “What is Open Source?”, Scripting News (blog), September 15, 2000, <http://scripting.com/davenet/2000/09/15/whatIsOpenSource.html> (accessed September 8, 2010); Winer, “Why I Stand Up for Stallman,” Scripting News (blog), October 31, 2011, <http://scripting.com/stories/2011/10/31/whyIStandUpForStallman.html> (accessed September 8, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> The difference between “free” and “open-source” software concerns whether the movement should highlight a moral or a practical dimension. This important distinction is not central to the present discussion; I use Free Software to refer broadly to the historical movement, and the adjective “open-source” to describe particular software or projects.

<sup>34</sup> Eric S. Raymond, *The Cathedral & the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary* (O’Reilly Media, 2001), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 2004).

These parallels have been most explicit in formal calls for “open publishing” or “open-source journalism.” The latter phrase was first used to describe an experiment by the magazine *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, which in 1999 chose to submit a planned article on cyberterrorism to informal peer review by readers of the technology news site Slashdot. The reviews were overwhelmingly negative, and the editor of *Jane’s* decided to withhold the piece pending major revisions. An article in Salon declared this “open-source journalism,” explaining: “Just as open source programmers would critique a beta release of software filled with bugs, the Slashdot readers panned the first release of Jane’s journalistic offering — and the upgrade, apparently, will be quick to follow.”<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile the site Slashdot itself, which both runs and reports on open-source software, has been cited as a pioneer of open publishing. Readers submit almost all of the articles (usually analyses of the technology news of the day, with links back to news sources) and moderate the ensuing discussion, with editorial privileges granted on the basis of “karma” accrued in their activities on the site. Slashdot is only partially “open”; staff editors approve or reject items submitted by readers, and decide which items to feature on the site’s front page. In direct response to Slashdot, which first appeared in 1997, other reader-run news sites (such as Kuro5hin, launched in 1999, and Plastic, in 2001) applied the open publishing concept more rigorously.<sup>37</sup>

The idea of open publishing, and its debt to open-source software, were elaborated most fully by the Indymedia network of citizen journalists. Indymedia originated in an effort by media

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Leonard, “Open-Source Journalism,” Salon.com, October 8, 1999, [http://www.salon.com/technology/log/1999/10/08/geek\\_journalism/](http://www.salon.com/technology/log/1999/10/08/geek_journalism/) (accessed September 15, 2010). See also Jin Moon, “Open-Source Journalism Online: Fact-Checking or Censorship?”, Freedom Forum Online, October 14, 1999, <http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=7802> (accessed September 15, 2010).

activists to provide an alternative source of news about the protests against the November 1999 summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle. In the final weeks before the protests began, an Australian open-source developer, working remotely, contributed the online publishing software that became the platform for Seattle's Independent Media Center. The IMC platform allowed observers in the streets to file reports and photographs that often contradicted mainstream accounts, and in some cases forced professional news outlets to revise their stories. The idea proved contagious: Within 10 months of the "Battle of Seattle" a network of 30 IMC's had been established using the same software, and by 2002 more than 80 IMC's existed worldwide.<sup>38</sup>

Not every IMC operates identically, and some use alternatives to the original publishing platform. Researchers have pointed to tension between participants who write news and devise editorial guidelines, and who may see themselves working in a broad tradition of alternative media, and the "tech guys," identified with the world of hacking and free software, who have practical control over how those guidelines are implemented.<sup>39</sup> In general, however, open publishing at Indymedia sites describes both *access* (such that anyone can submit a story on any topic, within basic guidelines) and *transparency* (meaning editorial decision-making is accountable to the public). The developer of the IMC platform, Matthew Arnison, defined the concept in a 2001 essay titled, simply, "Open publishing is the same as free software":

Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can

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<sup>37</sup> For a taxonomy of open publishing cases that includes these examples and many others, see Axel Bruns, *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Bruns, *Gatewatching*, 84-88; Sara Platon and Mark Deuze, "Indymedia Journalism: A Radical Way of Making, Selecting and Sharing News?", *Journalism* 4, no. 3 (August 2003): 336-355.

<sup>39</sup> Platon and Deuze, "Indymedia Journalism," 346-9.

see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.<sup>40</sup>

The rest of Arnison's "rant" (his term) goes on to draw out various parallels: Free Software and open publishing both demonstrate that "information wants to be free." Both are "revolutionary responses to the privatisation of information by multinational monopolies." Both empower users to become creators. And to accomplish that, both promote an ethic of radical transparency. This link is unmistakable in Free Software projects, where the ability to become a contributor (and in more complex ways, the day-to-day management of these projects) flows from an original act of transparency: the commitment to distribute the source code for a piece of software.<sup>41</sup> But the same dynamic is held to apply to news production. It is because the "working parts of journalism are exposed," Arnison writes, that the reader has the chance to become "a writer and an editor and a distributor." Finally, the real-world success of open-source software such as Linux offers a kind of proof of what is possible in participatory journalism. "Who will do the investigative journalism? ... Will anyone get paid for their work? ... Where will be the sustained efforts by hundreds of people?" Arnison asks. "I am hoping the above questions about open publishing have already been answered by free software." In response to his tract, observers suggested a corollary to Linus's Law, to be called Arnison's Law: "Given enough eyeballs, problematic content is shallow."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew Arnison, "Open Publishing Is the Same as Free Software," March 2001, <http://purplebark.net/maffew/cat/openpub.html> (accessed September 14, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Free Software projects rely on a legal device which effectively turns copyright on its head, called "copyleft." Rather than reserving all rights in a work to its author, copyleft grants anyone the right to borrow and build on the work, but only if the resulting products are released on equally open terms. In effect, it uses copyright law to "lock open" a creative work and all of its derivatives.

<sup>42</sup> The first reference appears to be Guy West, "Storytelling, Technology, and Activism," April 13, 2005, <http://www.cybered.org/talks/aic.html> (accessed September 14, 2010).

### **Bloggers as a recursive public**

However, open publishing as both an idea and a practice has been largely superseded by the phenomenon of blogging. (Reader-moderated news sites like Slashdot and Kuro5hin have seen their audiences and their significance wane sharply in recent years. Once-canonical distinctions between open publishing and blogging seem to be forgotten today; in 2007 *Time* had Slashdot heading a list of the “Most Overrated Blogs.”)<sup>43</sup> Formal calls for a journalism built on open-source principles are only one case in a much wider and messier discourse, a loosely shared set of ideas about what the Internet does to news through the medium of blogs. I’d like to suggest this shared narrative is grounded in a kind of ecological, socio-technical thinking that is promoted by the practice of blogging itself, and reinforced in bloggers’ endless discussions of what their work means.

A useful scaffolding here is Christopher Kelty’s notion of a “recursive public,” one “vitaly concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public.”<sup>44</sup> Kelty uses the term to describe Free Software participants, or sometimes Internet geeks in general, defined as those users who understand the network “as representing a moral order.”<sup>45</sup> This public is recursive because the medium that unites it is also its principal concern. As he explains, “The fact that the geeks described here have been brought together ... in ways that were not possible before the Internet is at the core of their own reasoning about why they associate with each other. They are

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<sup>43</sup> “TIME.com’s First Annual Blog Index,” Time.com, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/0,28757,1725323,00.html> (accessed September 15, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Christopher M. Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Kelty, *Two Bits*, 35.

the builders and imaginers of this space, and the space is what allows them to build and imagine it.”<sup>46</sup>

Two features of this argument are crucial.<sup>47</sup> First, Kelty understands his recursive public (or sometimes publics) as always “standing outside” of established power, offering critique in the form of ideas and software and projects that claim better ways of doing things. (The long list of civic concerns that the words “open source” have been hopefully attached to — journalism, voting, government, education, etc. — offers a good example.) Second, this broad geek public comes to its politics by way of material practice and day-to-day experience as much as formal political discourse.<sup>48</sup> “Getting” open-source software, or peer-to-peer networks, or Usenet, or the Internet itself is a matter of common experiences, common references (stories, jokes, software code, etc.) and even a common sense of wonder. Formative texts are as likely to be technical manuals (for instance, a still-influential 1976 “commentary” on Unix distributed for decades by illicit photocopy) as the pronouncements of Eric Raymond or Lawrence Lessig, though these matter too. These common experiences form the basis for the roughly overlapping set of beliefs — such as “information wants to be free” — that frame the geek’s moral universe, anchored by ideas about keeping the Internet itself whole and “neutral.”

A political imagination grounded in material practice hardly sets geeks apart. However, the rules by which Free Software developers associate can be written into code, and the code they write shapes the ways that people associate online. For Kelty’s geeks, operating systems and social systems often amount to the same thing; “geeks use technology as a kind of argument, for

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<sup>46</sup> Kelty, *Two Bits*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> See discussion of this argument in Lucas Graves, “Review Essay: The Struggle for Internet Freedom,” *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (August, 2011): 149–158.

<sup>48</sup> Here Kelty relies extensively on Charles Taylor’s understanding of “social imaginaries,” as elaborated for instance in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

a specific kind of order: they argue about technology, but they also argue through it.”<sup>49</sup> This complicates the determinism apparent in the various technological principles and “laws” geeks love to invoke. Claims about what a technology wants or will accomplish — like Winer’s “This is what the Internet does to everything it touches” — are usually also claims about what people *should* want or *must* accomplish.

The development of blogging platforms and tools has taken place mostly in the commercial world. (One popular platform, Movable Type, moved to an open-source license in 2007.) Nevertheless the early public of elite bloggers exhibited the same recursion Kelty sees in Free Software projects. Bloggers proposed, implemented, and endlessly analyzed the technical and practical innovations — these can be hard to distinguish — that shaped their association and what it was taken to mean. In this way, blogging seems to cultivate an acute socio-technical self-awareness; the utopianism of bloggers, like that of Internet geeks more widely, rests on a shared sense of how people and software code interact to produce emergent phenomena, like the “blogosphere” itself. This socio-technical sensibility will illuminate how bloggers think about blogging and journalism. That is, this should not be taken as an argument about how blogging expresses values hard-wired into the Internet, but rather how bloggers’ *sense* that it does guides and organizes their self-conscious challenge to journalism.

### **From weblogs to blogging**

It has been easy to suppose, especially for journalists, that today’s analytical, link-heavy, often quite specialized blogs evolved out of an older trend toward personal publishing online. As a 2002 piece in the *American Journalism Review* explained,

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<sup>49</sup> Kelty, *Two Bits*, 29.



In general, ‘blog’ used to mean a personal online diary, typically concerned with boyfriend problems or techie news. But after September 11, a slew of new or refocused media junkie/political sites reshaped the entire Internet media landscape. Blog now refers to a Web journal that comments on the news — often by criticizing the media and usually in rudely clever tones — with links to stories that back up the commentary with evidence.<sup>50</sup>

By most accounts that has the history backwards. Personal online journals existed in various forms since at least 1994. But what defined a new genre in the weblog — very early instances include “Scripting News,” “CamWorld,” and “Robot Wisdom,” whose creator coined the term “weblog” in 1997 — was the curatorial formula of “links-plus-commentary.” As a well-known early blogger wrote of his initial aversion to the form, “I hated the fact that the essence of weblogging ... was the off-site link.”<sup>51</sup> A 1999 review on Slashdot called blogs “personal foraging sites,”<sup>52</sup> while *Whole Earth* instructed, “Think of a weblog as a journal of one person’s explorations as he or she cruises uncharted sectors of the Net, reporting on the interesting life-forms and geological formations.”<sup>53</sup> The author’s personality and interests came across in the links — often to news items — the site chose to curate. An article in the online magazine Feed found a striking historical analogy:

A Web log really, then, is a Wunderkammer. That is to say, the genealogy of Web logs points not to the world of letters but to the early history of museums — to the ‘cabinet of wonders’ or Wunderkammer, that marked the scientific landscape of Renaissance modernity: a random collection of strange, compelling objects, typically compiled and owned by a learned, well-off gentleman ... [The] Wunderkammer mingled fact and legend promiscuously, reflecting European civilization’s dazed and wondering attempts to assimilate the glut of physical data that science and exploration were then unleashing.

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<sup>50</sup> Catherine Seipp, “Online Uprising,” *American Journalism Review* 24, no. 5 (June 2002): 42-47.

<sup>51</sup> Derek Powazek, “What the Hell is a Weblog and Why Won’t They Leave Me Alone?,” Powazek Productions (blog), February 17, 2000, <http://www.powazek.com/wtf/>; reprinted in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 3-6.

<sup>52</sup> Jon Katz, “Here Come The Weblogs,” Slashdot, May 24, 1999, <http://tech.slashdot.org/story/99/05/13/1832251/Here-Come-The-Weblogs> (accessed January 31, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Mark Fraunfelder, “Blogging,” *Whole Earth* 103 (Winter 2000): 52.

Just so, the Web log reflects our own attempts to assimilate the glut of immaterial data loosed upon us by the “discovery” of the networked world.<sup>54</sup>

In an early history of the young genre, originally posted in September of 2000, blogger Rebecca Blood argued that this eclectic curation was the source of the genre’s appeal: “These weblogs provide a valuable filtering function for their readers. The web has been, in effect, pre-surfed for them. Out of the myriad web pages slung through cyberspace, weblog editors pick out the most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling.”<sup>55</sup> She stressed that from the start blogging had offered critical perspectives on the news, questioning “the accuracy or inaccuracy of a highlighted article or certain facts therein” and pointing readers to news sources beyond the “corporate media.” The “sarcasm and fearless commentary” of weblogs, Blood continued, “reminds us to question the vested interests of our sources of information and the expertise of individual reporters as they file news stories about subjects they may not fully understand.”

The *Wunderkammer* metaphor points up an important paradox visible in even these very early accounts of what blogs were, and were for — on one hand, highly idiosyncratic and individualized Web sites, but on the other, a kind of organic collective that works to “filter” or “assimilate” new information. That sense of blogs as a collective Internet filter was unmistakable when popular bloggers (including many cited here) gathered publicly for the first time, in March of 2000, on a panel at Austen’s SXSW conference. The breathless opening paragraph of a local newspaper report about the panel is revealing:

They are called weblogs — blogs for short. In the space of a mere two years, this new breed of Web site has begun changing the way Net denizens navigate through the Internet’s sometimes mind-boggling info-clutter.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Julian Dibbel, “Portrait of the Blogger as a Young Man,” Feed, May 3, 2000,

<http://www.feedmag.com/feature/cx329lofi.html>; reprinted in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 69-77.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Blood, “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” Rebecca’s Pocket (blog), September 7, 2000, [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html); reprinted in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 7-16.

<sup>56</sup> Doug Bedell, “Blogging Your Mind,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 13, 2000, 1F.

The piece went on to note the emergence of “meta-blogs” — those which mainly curated other blogs — and cited an estimate that “anything new on the Web will *filter through the blog system* in some form in about 30 days” (italics added). Bloggers at the forum moved easily between the idiosyncratic and the collective sense of their enterprise, and between the value of writing a blog and that of reading them. “All of sudden, the entire Web became an associative bookmark for me,” one noted of his introduction to the genre. “You cultivate people who are reliable and trustworthy. Weblogs are a very valuable filtering tool for so many of us.”<sup>57</sup>

However, as early as that SXSW session, a rift was already apparent between veteran bloggers and a new cohort of “online diarists.”<sup>58</sup> Blood made this divide the fulcrum for her brief history of blogging, explaining that the genre was being transformed by several free and user-friendly blogging platforms unveiled in the second half of 1999, especially the hugely popular Blogger.<sup>59</sup> (Most estimates suggest that the total blogging universe grew from several dozen mostly home-made sites to thousands over that year, and to tens of thousands during 2001.) The newer converts behaved more like journal-keepers than curators, offering a stream of personal updates or observations: in Blood’s words, “something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, a quick refection on some subject or another.” They did not link out as often and when they did it was usually to friends, with whom they might engage in open conversation across their sites.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bedell, “Blogging Your Mind.”

<sup>58</sup> Bedell, “Blogging Your Mind.”

<sup>59</sup> Blood, “Weblogs.”

<sup>60</sup> The “stabilization” of blogging as the Web’s “native” format is researched at length in Ignacio Siles, “From Online Filter to Web Format: Articulating Materiality and Meaning in the Early History of Blogs,” *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 5 (October 1, 2011): 737–758.

This new population with its new habits occasioned predictable hand-wringing by the old guard, upset that “Blogger was diluting the very identity of the weblog pursuit.”<sup>61</sup> Blood would try, unsuccessfully, to enforce a linguistic distinction between the “filter-style weblog” and the “journal style blog.”<sup>62</sup> Though her historical essay celebrated the new genre in all of its diversity, the piece betrayed an unmistakable fear that the critical space opened up by annotative, linking blogs would be lost in the “tsunami” of personal journals. In a typical blogging reflex, ironic commentary about the hand-wringing quickly followed. As a manifesto ostensibly by angry old-school bloggers — the “BLOGMA 2001 Committee” — declared in November of 2000,

This campaign is targeted at the new bourgeoisie, who even now tag themselves the ‘A-list’ and revel in the circlejerking vacuousness that marks their bilious output. This is an affront to every true weblogger who ever did the hard yards finding gems on the Net that no one else would think of searching for, and bringing them into the light. These decadents, however, have nothing better to do than to talk about themselves...<sup>63</sup>

Such episodes have a long history online. As the *Times* would write of a later rift in the blogging world, precipitated by the arrival of so-called “war-bloggers,” “It is one of the enduring cycles of the Internet: the techies build a utopia and then complain when the noisy crowds crash their party.”<sup>64</sup> One thinks of the complaints by online veterans when AOL users, unversed in “netiquette,” first gained access to Usenet newsgroups in 1993 (an episode known to geeks as the “eternal September”). Like their precursors on Usenet, the first generation of bloggers had devoted a great deal of energy to defining what they did and devising norms around it — in this case, mostly, an etiquette of linking. Many early posts discussed questions such as when to credit

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<sup>61</sup> Rosenberg, *Say Everything*, 114-5.

<sup>62</sup> Blood, “Weblogs”; see also Blood, “How Blogging Software Reshapes the Online Community,” *Communications of the ACM* 47, No. 12 (December 2004): 53-55

<sup>63</sup> BLOGMA 2001 Committee, “BLOGMA 2001 Missive One: Uphold the Weblog,” in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 137-9.

<sup>64</sup> David Gallagher, “A Rift Among Bloggers,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2002, C4.

another blog for a cool link, and what is acceptable behavior for soliciting links from others.<sup>65</sup>

Usenet added “flaming” and “trolling” to the online glossary; blogs have contributed “link whores.” Bloggers have often joked about this navel-gazing tendency itself, often dismissed as “blogging about blogging.” As one wrote in 2002,

I’ve rarely seen any genre, medium or format featuring so much meta discussion as do a lot of weblogs. Questions like ‘Why do we blog?’ are repeatedly asked and answered, outlines for ethics, manifestos and guidelines for blogging are made and commented on, what makes their way of publishing different from that of the more traditional media is discussed. Etcetera. And then some.<sup>66</sup>

However, Blood also claimed that this behavioral shift was not simply a matter of a wider population asserting its tastes: Certain of the new blogging platforms, notably Blogger, did not feature a separate link field inviting the user to supply a pointer to an outside website. Of course, one might respond that this simple, free-form interface was key to Blogger’s success — that it outpaced the “filter-style” platforms precisely by catering to popular preferences. But leaving out the link field does appear to have been a conscious decision by Blogger’s creators to ease the restrictiveness of the genre.<sup>67</sup> Blogger’s slogan was “Push-button publishing for the people,” and its founders wrote popular, journal-style blogs. As one later explained, in a 2001 interview, “I always chided against the early definition of weblogs as link lists or annotations of the Web. This was largely how weblogs were defined — even by us, at first — and partially led to the trivialization of the format...”<sup>68</sup> Like Kelty’s geeks, then, bloggers argued about technology but also through it, promoting their vision of the new genre in the tools they developed and the practices they adopted.

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<sup>65</sup> See for instance Cameron Barret, “More About Weblogs,” in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 28-33.

<sup>66</sup> Letrice, “Blogging about blogging,” Everything2 (online encyclopedia), October 18, 2002, <http://everything2.com/title/blog> (accessed January 31, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> See also Siles, “From Online Filter to Web Format,” 747-8.

<sup>68</sup> Evan Williams interviewed in Giles Turnbull, “The State of the Blog Part 2: Blogger Present,” in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 82.

### **The social laws of blogging**

The early history of blogging illustrates how self-consciously the first bloggers went about defining their community and establishing their genre. It also suggests that it seemed immediately natural to consider the development of blogging in terms of a feedback loop between technical features and social practice. The first generation of bloggers was not monolithic in its thinking about the genre, but these debates, along with all of the parodies and meta-commentary they provoked, may only have reinforced the sense that blogs comprised a sort of evolving network entity. In a material way being a blogger meant observing and creating network phenomena, watching things “filter through the blog system” — not just links but ideas, jokes, techniques, bits of software code, and so on. In a telling bit of blogger lore known as the “girl on a bike” episode, in 2001 two popular bloggers (with a secret offline romance) posted identical accounts of a childhood recollection on the same day. They did not link to one another or even acknowledge the overlap; very quickly, however, others began to post the same recollection to their own sites. The episode produced some confusion among readers of these blogs — and before long, detailed analyses of how it happened and what it said about the genre.<sup>69</sup>

Reflections on these network dynamics show up in one of the genre’s first “how-to” books, *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*, advertised as “Your Complete Guide to Creating and Maintaining Weblogs.” Interspersed among technical exercises and feature lists, the authors (the founders of two popular blogging services, including one half of the secret romance) offer nuanced discussions of the socio-technical mechanics of blogging: the nature of “distributed

conversation,” the large-scale effect of “focusing attention” online, the spread of “memes” across the blogosphere, and so on. What becomes transparently clear reading the volume is how this sort of thinking permeates the day-to-day work of running a blog, especially when that is understood as managing an online community. Consider their discussion of the feedback loop that drives popular blogs:

As a weblog gains more readers, an interesting feedback loop emerges. Its readers send more links of interest, creating a *decentralized recommendation network* that expands the weblog’s reach. Now the readers, as well as the author, are filtering vast quantities of information online to find the tidbits that address the blog’s area of focus. As this cycle continues, the quality of the links often improves, and the readership grows and contributes further links. The cycle ends only when each individual begins to recommend links beyond the scope of the author’s interest. At that point, *the system self-corrects...*<sup>70</sup> [italics added]

This sort of systems-thinking subtly formats the audience as a computing resource. Similar considerations attend each decision about the various technical features one can deploy using Blogger, Wordpress, and similar platforms. Should you check the box that lets visitors leave comments? (It’s the best way to cultivate an audience, but it will vastly increase the demands upon the blogger.) Should you archive weekly, monthly, or not at all? (Archiving too frequently may cramp the reader experience.) Site design, archives, comments, linking habits, posting frequency, tone of voice, content — all of these factors and others interact in complex ways to shape your online community, the authors insist.

Good design in everything from magazines to buildings demands sophisticated thinking about how environments structure human action and interaction, of course. But rarely in our experience — especially our everyday experience — are these dynamics so visible or so immediate. Rarely do we have call to think about other people as inputs into a system: Check this

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<sup>69</sup> Rebecca Mead, “You’ve Got Blog: How to Put Your Business, Your Boyfriend, and Your Life Online,” *New Yorker*, November 13, 2000; reprinted in Rodzvilla, ed., *We’ve Got Blog*, 47-56.

box and these behaviors will follow. It is true that most blogs languish in obscurity. But personal recollections by those who do cultivate a following— and there are a great many such accounts — all but brim over with wonder at the physics of online audiences. Well-know journalist Andrew Sullivan has written that he started his blog in 2000 as a “vanity site”:

But within a couple of weeks, something odd started happening. With only a few hundred readers, a few started writing back. They picked up on my interests, and sent me links, ideas, and materials to add to the blog. Before long, around half the material on my site was suggested by readers. ...

Within six months, I was amazed to find I was pulling in close to 5,000 individual visits a day, from a couple of thousand separate people. ... I also noticed, as many other bloggers do, that the site was beginning to take over my life. If I didn't post for a day or so, I'd get emails asking me if I were ill. This was getting to be a performance as much as a job.

But there was instant gratification. With each month, the numbers grew. Unlike regular journalism, where ... the only feedback you really get is a few nice (or rough) comments from friends or outraged letters to the editor, each morning I would get up to a hundred emails about something I'd written just a few hours before — and a statistical report telling me how many people had dropped by in the previous 24 hours. All the familiar writer's anxiety about his work was overwhelmed by a sea of instant response. I added a letters page. Soon emails were flooding in responding to other emails. Again, the numbers rose till by last summer I was getting close to 8,000 visits a day.<sup>71</sup>

Sullivan doesn't use the technical jargon, but note the effect he describes: His posts themselves generated direct feedback from readers, but enabling comments (a “letters page”) introduced a new phenomenon, feedback about the feedback. Bloggers with no journalistic background echo similar themes: how it feels to find a community that shares an esoteric interest; how one link from an “A-list” blog made traffic skyrocket; and, almost always, how much more the audience gives back than it receives. “As soon as I began posting every day, I started getting email. The voices were friendly, encouraging. My hits rose steadily, and people

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<sup>70</sup> Bausch, Haughey, and Hourihan, *We Blog*, 30-31.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “A Blogger Manifesto: Why Online Weblogs Are One Future for Journalism,” *Sunday Times of London*, February 24, 2002, available at [http://time-blog.com/daily\\_dish/culture.php](http://time-blog.com/daily_dish/culture.php) (accessed December 16, 2010).



started to link back. ... I was hooked,” explained the skeptic-turned-blogger cited earlier.<sup>72</sup>

Blogging memoirs evoke the journalist’s cliché of seeing one’s name in print for the first time, or of meeting a reader in person, but the scale and the immediacy lend a different quality.

### **The evolving blogosphere**

With the launch of blogging software and services in 1999, a rapid succession of technical innovations would tweak these natural laws of the blogging universe, and suggest new ways of thinking about it. In addition to the comments page, the year 2000 saw the introduction of the “permalink” — a way to point to a specific post on another blog, rather than just to the main page, where new items might have crowded out the post in question. Over the course of 2001 and 2002 several developments relating to content-syndication standards began to yield new views of the “blogosphere,” a term first deployed in January of 2002. One key innovation was “trackback,” which gave bloggers the ability to see (and to let readers see) which other sites were linking back to a given post — a kind of real-time citation list, and thus an index of a distributed conversational thread. The same underlying technology (essentially, an agreement among blogging platforms to update a central census) fueled the various meme-tracking sites, such as Blogdex and Technorati, which offered pictures and analysis of what was happening at any given instant in the “link economy” of the blogs.<sup>73</sup>

These technical innovations appeared to propagate by the same rapid feedback cycles that governed individual blogs. “This pattern — development of free tools in response to widespread practice — continues to shape Weblogs and blogging,” Blood wrote in a 2004 journal article.

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<sup>72</sup> Powazek, “What the Hell is a Weblog,” 5.

“When any sizable number of bloggers start doing something, someone, it seems, will construct a tool to automate it — further popularizing the activity.”<sup>74</sup> A simple example, and one that illustrates the fine line between technical and practical innovation, is the “blogroll” that runs down the side of many blogs. The first blogroll was published in 1998 as one blogger’s list of *all* known weblogs, an index of the brand-new genre, which newcomers would request to be added to. As the total universe grew beyond reach this index was trimmed to a list of favorite or like-minded blogs, which became a widely copied convention and a way for popular bloggers to acknowledge one another. Built into blogging platforms, the blogroll became another box to check and form to fill out, one of the basic, signifying features of the genre.<sup>75</sup>

Along with new technology and techniques spread new idea about what blogging was and how it worked. The case of the permalink is instructive. Blogger introduced the feature in March of 2000 to address a problem that arose as blogs began to link to one another more frequently. As one of the developers involved has explained, “The problem was that links were rolling off of weblogs’ front pages, so references made by other sites were quickly out of date.”<sup>76</sup> But the blogging intelligentsia soon perceived wider systemic effects. The permalink gave blog entries the same discursive status, technically speaking, as the outside media sources blogs so often linked to. More than that, it gave the blogosphere history, turning it into a kind of organic archive. Tom Coates of the popular Plasticbag.org blog described being nonplussed by the feature at first; permalinks “seemed to be a kind of weird abomination — a sin against *what links*

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<sup>73</sup> This account of the technical evolution of blogging draws on Bausch, Haughey, and Hourihan, *We Blog: Blood, “Weblogs”*; Blood, “How Blogging Software Reshapes the Online Community”; Rosenberg, *Say Anything*, 101-130; and Michele Tepper, “The Rise of Social Software,” *netWorker*, September, 2003, 19-23.

<sup>74</sup> Blood, “Blogging Software,” 55.

<sup>75</sup> Rosenberg, *Say Anything*, 86-88.

<sup>76</sup> Mena Trott, “Interview with Paul Bausch,” *sixapart.com*, September 30, 2003, [http://www.sixapart.com/blog/2003/09/interview\\_with.html](http://www.sixapart.com/blog/2003/09/interview_with.html) (accessed December 22, 2010).

*were there to do*” (original italics) in that they didn’t take the reader anywhere new, he wrote in 2003. However, he continued,

it was effectively the device that turned weblogs from an ease-of-publishing phenomenon into a conversational mess of overlapping communities. For the first time it became relatively easy to gesture directly at a highly specific post on someone else’s site and talk about it. Discussion emerged. Chat emerged. And — as a result — friendships emerged or became more entrenched. The permalink was the first — and most successful — attempt to build bridges between weblogs. It existed way before Trackback and I think it’s been more fundamental to our development as a culture than comments. ... The creation of the permalink built-in *memory* — links that worked and remained consistent over time, conversations that could be archived and retraced later. The permalink *stopped* all weblog conversations being like that guy in Memento.<sup>77</sup> [original italics]

It is fascinating to consider how the role of an individual site archive changes under this organic conception. When content of a particular site is what matters, a local archive preserves and indexes history; when the conversation between sites is what matters, the local archive threatens to erase history by breaking links, and care must be taken to ensure that the original address for a post still works once it has been placed in the archive. Note also Coates’s easy recourse to the language of emergence — conversation and friendships *emerged* from the new technical arrangement — as well as the clear sense that permalinks, comments, and trackback fit together in some larger, collective evolutionary narrative.

This sense was widely shared. Another blogger, an architect and software developer who worked on syndication standards, predicted in 2002 that permalinks and trackback would provide “the key” to the Semantic Web, Tim Berners-Lee’s sometimes controversial vision of building

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<sup>77</sup> Tom Coates, “On Permalinks and Paradigms,” Plasticbag.org (blog), June 11, 2003, [http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2003/06/on\\_permalinks\\_and\\_paradigms/](http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2003/06/on_permalinks_and_paradigms/) (accessed December 20, 2010). From the “About” page of Coates’s blog: “I am passionate about the internet and care a lot about social software, the coming trends towards mass amateurisation and democratisation, media distribution and network-enabled appliances.”

machine-readable logic, and thus a new order of intelligence, into the Web.<sup>78</sup> (The reasoning was that they tied links directly to the relevant unit of information — to the post, not the page.)

Similarly, technology journalist and pundit Steven Johnson argued in a 2002 *Salon* essay that blogs collectively were coming to function as a sort of human-powered software for making sense of the Web: “The true revolution promised by the rise of bloggerdom is not about journalism. It’s about information management.”<sup>79</sup> Johnson observed that all of the furious writing and linking done by bloggers already worked as a sort of “kitchen cabinet” for Google’s famous PageRank algorithm, a basis for assigning context and relevance to Web pages and thus for turning “a disorganized mess into a more coherent universe of useful data”; he predicted that ultimately this “Blogger Effect” would be the engine for software that competed with Google. (This view has been borne out in a sense by the recent emphasis on so-called “social search” grounded in social networks like Facebook — the notion that users will increasingly navigate the online world, and seek out information, entertainment, products, and etc., through networks of friends rather than general-purpose search engines or directories.)<sup>80</sup>

The view of the blogosphere as exhibiting emergent properties for information processing has produced heated debates about what this media engine looks like: Is it democratic? Is it meritocratic? (Clay Shirky’s 2003 essay, “Weblogs and Power Laws,” argued a small handful of popular voices — a media elite — dominated the blogging world, no less than in traditional

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<sup>78</sup> David Galbraith, “Permalinks and Trackback Are the Key to the Semantic Web,” davidgalbraith’s weblog, November 7, 2002, <http://davidgalbraith.org/rss/permalinks-and-trackback-are-the-key-to-the-semantic-web/50/> (accessed December 22, 2010). From Galbraith’s “About” page: “My Dad is a physicist and I grew up reading popular science books. As a hobby, I have spent the last 3 years working on a physics problem that tries to relate logical entropy to natural selection and shows how systems self-configure to ‘learn’. It sounds pretentious, and it probably is, but if you are interested, some of the notes are in the sidebar. Secretly, this is what really keeps me awake at night.” On the semantic web, see Tim Berners-Lee, James Hendler, and Ora Lassila, “The Semantic Web,” *Scientific American* 284, no. 5 (May 2001): 34-43.

<sup>79</sup> Steven Johnson, “Use the blog, Luke,” *Salon.com*, May 10, 2002, <http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/05/10/blogbrain/index1.html> (accessed December 16, 2010).

media.<sup>81</sup> This provoked a furor among bloggers who saw it as challenging the genre's democratic claims.) The rhetoric of emergence all but begged to be applied to journalism. In a 2002 post, well-known blogger Jason Kottke wrote,

Take the universe of weblogs as a complex system. What, if anything, is “emerging” out of that system? One possible answer is that the collective act of weblogging is producing a basic form of journalism, which you might call “bottom-up journalism” or “peer-to-peer journalism”.

It works like this: individual bloggers, each acting in their own self-interest . . . post bits of information to their weblogs.

Then the feedback loop starts. Readers and other bloggers take those initial bits of information, rework them, and feed them back into the system in the form of weblog posts, email feedback, or comments on individual weblog posts. Rinse. Repeat. . . .

On the specific question of journalism, is the weblog network efficient at journalism? Probably not right now, but maybe that's not the point. I have a hunch that weblogs are not “for journalism”, in the same way that the Internet is not “for business”, but that they will have an important role to play in the informal movement, filtering, dissemination, and refining of information.<sup>82</sup>

These ideas about blogging flowed into wider currents in technology and business literature.

Blogs were seen as an exemplar of a new class of “social software,” along with wikis, photo- and file-sharing sites, and social networks like Facebook.<sup>83</sup> Blogging was likewise a signature instance of the so-called “Web 2.0,” a term that enjoyed wide play in business media after an eponymous 2004 conference. The meaning of this heavily marketed phrase remained vague, to the benefit of its promoters, but in general it connotes software and services that used the Internet

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<sup>80</sup> See Chris Sherman, “What's the Big Deal With Social Search?”, Search Engine Watch, August 14, 2006, <http://searchenginewatch.com/article/2068090/Whats-the-Big-Deal-With-Social-Search> (accessed June 26, 2012).

<sup>81</sup> Clay Shirky, “Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality,” shirky.com, February 8, 2003, [http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw\\_weblog.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html) (accessed December 20, 2010). See also Matthew Hindman, Kostas Tsioulioulis, and Judy Johnson, “‘Googlearchy’: How a Few Heavily-Linked Sites Dominate Politics on the Web” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3-6, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Kottke, “Steven Johnson on ‘Emergence.’”

<sup>83</sup> Tepper, “Rise of Social Software.”

— and people on it — as a platform or an operating system, “harnessing collective intelligence” just as a computer program harnesses operating system resources.<sup>84</sup>

### **Face to face at BloggerCon**

Fairly developed claims about what blogs meant for journalism — and specifically the idea that they collectively could act as both a filter and a corrective for the errors and biases of news production — thus were in the ether well before the journalistic establishment began to recognize the new genre in a serious way, roughly during the 2004 presidential election. These ideas occurred to different bloggers at different times, grounded in individual experience and reinforced in endless online discussions of the phenomenon, sometimes with explicit reference to the model of open-source software and to popular ideas about networks and emergence.

These notions were also hammered out face-to-face. The technology conference, or “con,” is a vital feature of geek community and identity. Anthropologist Biella Coleman, studying gatherings of Free Software developers, calls them the “ritual underside” of the hacker public — a chance not only to cement personal relationships cultivated online, but also to perform, celebrate, and “re-enchant” the routine work and the ethical commitments that bind this group.<sup>85</sup> In hindsight certain of these gatherings seem pivotal not only in reproducing such identities but also adapting them or forming new ones. Fred Turner points to the original Hackers’ Conference, in 1984, as a key site in forging the utopian, cyber-libertarian consensus that would become dominant in the “New Economy” of the 1990s and beyond. As Turner writes, “transformations in the symbolic character of hackers required face-to-face ideological work, carried out within a

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<sup>84</sup> Lucas Graves, “Web 2.0,” *Wired Geekipedia*, September 10, 2007, [http://www.wired.com/culture/geekipedia/magazine/geekipedia/web\\_2\\_0](http://www.wired.com/culture/geekipedia/magazine/geekipedia/web_2_0) (accessed December 26, 2007).

forum built for the purpose.”<sup>86</sup> Ideological work is that work needed “to keep a group’s convictions in some viable relationship to its interests and circumstances,” when changing circumstances threaten misalignment.<sup>87</sup> In the case of hacker culture, this meant reconciling founding hacker principles to emerging economic opportunities and forms; for bloggers, as we shall see, it meant articulating and cementing revolutionary claims for their new medium, while resolving or finessing the contradictions inherent in that rhetoric.

The first BloggerCon, held in October 2003 at Harvard’s Berkman Center, appears to have played a similarly pivotal role in articulating and confirming a particular consensus about blogging and journalism. The conference was organized by “blogfather” Dave Winer, who had a fellowship as a sort of blogger-in-residence at the Harvard’s Berkman Center, evangelizing and organizing blogging across the university.<sup>88</sup> Bloggers in attendance included many well-known names; some had gained national recognition for their blogs (such as Josh Marshall and Glenn Reynolds) but more were established journalists, authors, pundits, and academics. It was by most accounts a smashing success, with more than 250 attendees, and would be followed by BloggerCon II and III in 2004, and BloggerCon IV in 2006. (This is not to say the event was universally appreciated. Even before the conference opened, it fell in for criticism as yet another example of certain bloggers’ propensity for navel-gazing.)<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Gabriella Coleman, “The Hacker Conference: A Ritual Condensation and Celebration of a Lifeworld,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2010): 47–72.

<sup>86</sup> Turner, “How Digital Technology Found Utopian Ideology,” 259.

<sup>87</sup> Berger, *The Survival of a Counterculture*, 18. Berger studied ideological work in the context of rural communards trying to enact countercultural ideals in a real-world community — one that survived more than a decade, in part by ideological adaptation. However he applies the term flexibly, for instance to adjustments in political platforms, corporate policy and rhetoric, and etc. See e.g. p. 19, n. 22.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Festa, “Newsmaker: Blogging Comes to Harvard,” CNET News, February 25, 2003, <http://news.cnet.com/2008-1082-985714.html> (accessed December 20, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Orłowski, “Webloggers Deal Harvard Blog-Bores a Black Eye,” *The Register*, August 13, 2003, [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2003/08/13/webloggers\\_deal\\_harvard\\_blogbores/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2003/08/13/webloggers_deal_harvard_blogbores/) (accessed December 20, 2010).

The striking contrast with the SXSW panel in 2000, whose blogging “celebrities” (figures such as Jason Kottke and Meg Hourihan) were unknown outside of that intimate community, reflected the genre’s growing status but also the organizers’ ambitions for it. Turner writes that the Hackers’ Conference embodied the idiosyncratic concerns of “cultural entrepreneurs” Stewart Brand and Kevin Kelly, above all to develop the idea of a “hacker ethic.”<sup>90</sup> In the same way the agenda and list of attendees at BloggerCon were shaped by the particular obsessions of Winer and fellow travelers such as moderator Chris Lydon, a former public radio journalist who had been conducting a series of “podcast” interviews with pioneering bloggers, including many of the BloggerCon panelists. Winer and Lydon were unabashedly convinced of blogging’s potential as a revolutionary democratic medium that would transform journalism for the better. As Winer had told a reporter upon coming to Harvard, “In some areas ... the web logs have largely replaced the professionals. ... When a big story hits, I don’t necessarily trust the professional journalists to tell me what’s going on. If I can get the web logs from the people who were actually involved, I’ll take that.”<sup>91</sup>

If a conference is a ritual and a site of “ideological work” it is also, in a fairly formal way, a claim — a claim about what matters and about the right way to understand the themes it addresses. Its design reflects this claim but also advances it, building or reinforcing networks of people and ideas. The central claim of BloggerCon was that blogging is transformative. The first day consisted of four conference-wide panels on this transformation in the fields of journalism, education, and politics, and “thinking itself.”<sup>92</sup> Listening to these sessions it is hard not to be struck by how relentlessly and explicitly participants pushed for agreement on blogging’s

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<sup>90</sup> Turner, “How Digital Technology Found Utopian Ideology,” 265.

<sup>91</sup> Festa, “Blogging Comes to Harvard.”



revolutionary impact in these domains.<sup>93</sup> Even tentative resistance — for instance from Esther Dyson, hardly an Internet skeptic, suggesting the “collective wisdom” of the blogosphere might be less apparent as the medium became more democratic — met with a chorus of disapproval. Participants exhorted one another to describe blogging’s effect in the most sweeping terms. In response to Dyson’s comment, and to wide applause, one participant declared, “I’d like to suggest that in fact this *is* utopia... The reason it seems like it’s not utopia is that what we can now imagine is so amazing, and it sucks by reference.” He continued:

Blogging happened once before, it happened in the Enlightenment. . . . I think Dave Winer is Samuel Johnson, the rise of the essay and the cheap printing press in Europe was in fact the blog of the time . . . suddenly people could write essays and we had that explosion and that did create the revolution and we’re doing it again. Human nature is incredibly fungible thanks to the meme which is now replacing the gene.

The question of how blogging would transform journalism was the theme of the first panel and persisted throughout the day. Participants moved seamlessly between understanding this as a potential to be fulfilled, and as an ineluctable technological force remaking news production on the Internet model. The latter view was as likely to be advanced by journalists as by technologists. Thus, Gawker founding editor Elizabeth Spiers declared, “From a larger perspective, it’s a continuation of how the Internet generally has transformed things. . . . It has made the media industry generally a lot more meritocratic.” Salon.com founder Scott Rosenberg explained the clash in terms of the essential nature of old and new media:

We have this thing called blogging which is inherently individualistic and inherently disruptive of hierarchy and then we have these hierarchical and established media organizations . . . They are excited and they are also afraid because they are hierarchical and they are invested mostly in the idea that the individual is subordinated to the organization.

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<sup>92</sup> Information about the agenda, panelists, and attendees is from the original BloggerCon website, at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/bloggerCon> (accessed December 20, 2010, via archive.org).

<sup>93</sup> All quotes from attendees are transcribed from video and audio recordings of the conference, downloaded from <http://media.skybuilders.com/BloggerCon/> (accessed December 20, 2010).

A consensus quickly formed that a basic effect of blogging was to make journalism more transparent. Citing Goffman, conservative blogger Glenn Reynolds argued that blogs contributed to the vanishing organizational “backstage.” Rosenberg agreed that “the impact of blogs in this area is that an institution like the *New York Times* is forced to become more transparent or more blog-like as an institution,” pointing to a recent piece explaining how the paper selects letters for publication. “This was an extraordinary thing, the *New York Times* that I grew up reading 25 years ago would never have done that, you weren’t supposed to know,” he averred. Josh Marshall, founder of Talking Points Memo, saw another kind of transparency enforced by the sort of reporting that blogs do:

What I tried to do from the beginning of the time I started the site is write about things that are being discussed within the Washington press corps but aren’t getting published. ... If all the journalists in Washington kind of know something and no-one’s talking about it, I’m enough of a populist to think more people should know that, let’s get it out there.

Equally striking was the consensus that in understanding these effects, blogs must be seen in the aggregate, as a collective entity — an engine powered by individuals but yielding net effects. These references were legion. The blogosphere was called “distributed intelligence,” a “global mind,” a “wise mob,” an Emersonian “universal spirit” and a “coming together of consciousness,” among similar terms. Adam Curry, a blogger, podcaster, and former MTV video jockey, suggested that “perhaps this is just the start of us really connecting all brainwaves ... *we’re kind of all acting as human routers, content routers literally*” (italics added). Management consultant Jim Moore, who had authored an essay describing bloggers as part of a “Second Superpower” on the global stage, insisted that conference participants take the collective view:

I think it’s not good to focus only on this as an individual phenomenon. It is that, and certainly those of us as we’ve started to blog understand the personal transformation you go through, but it’s really a collective phenomenon, and a lot of the interesting

action is in all the meta-analysis and meta-relationships that can be structured and can be explored.

This sense of blogs as a kind of networked intelligence fueled the most ambitious claims about how the new genre would transform journalism: by making it more accurate and honest, less biased toward established views. Participants agreed almost universally that blogs provided information and critical perspectives absent from conventional news outlets, pointing repeatedly to the most important story of the day, the Iraq war. Likening old media to “the Matrix,” journalist and open-source advocate Doc Searls claimed that “there’s a lot more in the blogs, there’s a consciousness of what’s going on out there ... people are bringing up stuff that nobody is talking about anywhere else, least of all in the orthodox media.” Lydon emphatically agreed:

I think we’re much too modest about what we’ve discovered here in blog world. Going from blog world to, forgive me, public radio or even the *New York Times* is stepping down in levels of consciousness, expression, critical thinking. ... I think we ought to be a lot bolder about saying we’ve found something, we’ve found a kind of candor, we’ve found a kind of shit-detector, authenticity detector, relevance detector that’s going to change the world.

The claim that blogs somehow collectively constitute a reliable, networked “shit detector” invites obvious questions. How could the blogosphere have “gotten Iraq right,” a participant asked, when liberal and conservative bloggers were so manifestly divided on the wisdom of the war? Another remarked, “Emerson had a day and a horse trip before he could actually begin a conversation, where now we can spread lies and mistakes on our weblogs faster than ever before. I’m wondering is this collective wisdom a safe thing given the experience of the last century? Is the second superpower going to be someone we can trust?” (Moore would respond, “What we have now for the first time is a kind of critical mass of connected people and connected minds . . . and that to me is like Athens, it’s like the invention of democracy, but we have to *do* it.”) At root these doubts express the basic tension between blogs as an individual and a collective

phenomenon, and relatedly, between blogging as a fallible human endeavor and some sort of technological black box yielding predictable, consistent results.

Turner writes that the “ideological work” of the first hacker conference was to “rehabilitate” the hacker image, much reviled in the popular press, and to bring it into alignment with emerging economic forms. This meant, for instance, resolving or at least addressing the conflict between New Economy entrepreneurialism centered on a newly ascendant software industry, and the ethical commitment among many hackers to freely sharing the source code for the software they created. This tension was a major theme at the conference, producing Brand’s famous formulation that, “On the one hand, information wants to be expensive, because it’s so valuable. ... On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time.” It was resolved in part by agreeing that information freedom was an important ideal but one that could not always be realized, and by emphasizing other features of the hacker identity, such as personality. (This new consensus would of course produce a backlash of sorts in the Free Software movement, organized expressly around the commitment to sharing source code.)<sup>94</sup>

In a similar fashion, utopian claims at BloggerCon were tweaked and trimmed to ease the cognitive dissonance they produced.<sup>95</sup> Searls offered a sort of compromise framing to address the paradox of a conflicted collective intelligence. “It’s not that cut and dried,” he declared. “There is a rolling wisdom that goes on that has lots of contradiction in it all the time. The important thing is that it’s connected and that more of us participate in it.” Moore took that rhetorical cue,

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<sup>94</sup> Turner, “How Digital Technology Found Utopian Ideology.”

<sup>95</sup> However, important differences apply. Turner described an established community adapting to industrial change. Attendees at BloggerCon shared an avocation that was only a few years old, and one that, while identified (at events like this one) as an agent of basic change in the media industry, only provided a living for a handful of the bloggers

pointing to a “rolling collectivity” that might be quite diverse but still permitted “deeper and deeper truth-finding” and was, at any given moment, a better barometer than “the national political scene.” Reynolds adopted a sort of hopeful incrementalism, in which the workings of the blogosphere promote an iterative, “asymptotic approach to the truth.”<sup>96</sup> Repeating the saying that a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth puts its boots on, Lydon asked him, “Do we ‘fact-check your ass’? Is this a cleansing process or just ... a mob of misinformation?”

Reynolds responded,

A lie was famously able to get halfway around the world pretty quickly when that statement was coined, now I think the truth catches up a lot better and you see the ability to correct things quite rapidly. ... It’s really a chance to put an idea out there, get a response and repetitively filter through these responses and feedback that you get till you arrive at something that’s more like a consensus view of reality. Which of course could still be wrong but at least it’s a consensus that’s wrong instead of an idiosyncratic wrongness.

These refinements did not so much resolve as navigate or finesse the tension between combative blogs and collectively wise ones. They elevated the value of participation in its own right (a familiar reflex) and also seemed to suggest that the blogosphere’s intelligence lies in the very disagreement it encompasses, a position with more obvious rhetorical than logical force. If they were retrenchments, however, they did not cede as much ground as it might appear. Toward the close of the day David Weinberger, a philosopher and co-author of “The Cluetrain Manifesto,” worked the emerging “rolling collectivity” consensus into a forceful, technology-fueled attack on the ideal of objectivity itself:

One of the things the Web in general and blogging in particular has done is driven the last nail into the coffin of the myth of objectivity, which for a generation we’ve known isn’t really possible since it means seeing the world when nobody’s looking at

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present. The adjustments I describe did not seize an economic opportunity or resolve an existential threat, so much as further develop an emerging identity and hone its ideological claims.

<sup>96</sup> Reynolds credited this phrase to fellow conservative blogger Mickey Kaus, who has used it to compare blogging and journalism; see Tim Rutten, “To Err Is Human, but to Think Out Loud ...,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, E1.

it. ... Now with blogs because they're linked ... we have multiple subjectivities, not simply subjectivities, not even intersubjectivity, it's these multiple subjectivities that we can get multiple viewpoints on any one issue, which is where I'd suggest that the common wisdom resides, it's a property of the Net itself. *Truth is a property of the Net itself at this point.* [Italics added]

Weinberger's attack pointed to what has emerged as the anchoring journalistic value among bloggers, a marker of their remove from conventional news reporting and an ever-available defense of blogging's claim to accuracy or truth-seeking: transparency.

### **“Transparency is the new objectivity”**

The ideal of transparency has surfaced constantly in discussions of what sets “open source journalism” and blogging apart from professionally produced news. “What is it going to take to get the media companies to let us inside and see how they work?” Winer asked plaintively in the opening panel of BloggerCon, anticipating a routine complaint among bloggers distressed that most reporters still refuse to link to sources or post all of the material they use. Glenn Greenwald, a well-known left-libertarian blogger and constant critic of professional journalism, appealed to this ethic during an online exchange with the *Washington Post* and *Wired* magazine, both of which had refused to publish the chat logs that led to the arrest of alleged WikiLeaks informant Bradley Manning: “If I obtained a newsworthy chat log that I intended to write about, it would literally never occur to me to write about it without publishing the entire log ... That's just basic transparency and respect for one's readers.”<sup>97</sup>

More than a basis for antagonizing journalists, though, transparency has provided the ideological fulcrum for turning bloggers' own lack of status as objective professionals from a failing into a virtue. Weinberger made this clear in a widely cited 2009 post that captured

blogging's bid for status with a blunt substitution. "Transparency is the new objectivity," he declared, explaining that hypertext offers a new and better alternative to traditional systems of credentialing:

What we used to believe because we thought the author was objective we now believe because we can see through the author's writings to the sources and values that brought her to that position. Transparency gives the reader information by which she can undo some of the unintended effects of the ever-present biases. Transparency brings us to reliability the way objectivity used to. ...

We thought that that was how knowledge works, but it turns out that it's really just how paper works. Transparency prospers in a linked medium, for you can literally see the connections between the final draft's claims and the ideas that informed it. ...

In short: Objectivity is a trust mechanism you rely on when your medium can't do links. Now our medium can.<sup>98</sup>

The post and the ensuing discussion demonstrated the diverse rhetorical labor performed by blogging's transcendent ideal. Appeals to transparency neatly elide human and technological agency, grounding a behavioral imperative in a new digital order. The moral force of the appeal draws on a sense of technological appropriateness or inevitability. Appeals to transparency may also address anything from reporting practices to moral or political commitments.<sup>99</sup> Both "sources and values" are to be helpfully exposed for the reader in the new regime of linking. That is, an argument for a transparent style of newswork easily shades into, and perhaps lends force to, the defense of partisan blogging as a viable form of journalism.

Finally, the appeal to transparency may support two very different truth claims. A weaker version holds that because true objectivity can't be attained, it is better to disclose personal

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<sup>97</sup> Glenn Greenwald, "Washington Post and Transparency: Total Strangers," Salon.com, July 9, 2010, [http://www.salon.com/2010/07/09/transparency\\_6/](http://www.salon.com/2010/07/09/transparency_6/) (accessed September 17, 2010).

<sup>98</sup> David Weinberger, "Transparency Is the New Objectivity," Joho the Blog, July 19, 2009, <http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2009/07/19/transparency-is-the-new-objectivity/> (accessed September 8, 2010).

<sup>99</sup> See e.g. "Impartiality: The Foxification of News," *Economist*, July 7, 2011; Mathew Ingram, "Is Transparency the New Objectivity? 2 Visions of Journos on Social Media," Nieman Journalism Lab, September 28, 2009, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/09/is-transparency-the-new-objectivity-2-visions-of-journos-on-social-media/> (accessed September 8, 2010).

commitments (financial, political, etc.) than to maintain one has none. Jay Rosen, who, borrowing a phrase from Thomas Nagel, calls journalistic objectivity the “View from Nowhere,” imagines a reporter adopting the transparent stance thus: “Look, I’m not going to pretend that I have no view. Instead, I am going to level with you about where I’m coming from on this. So factor that in when you evaluate my report. Because I’ve done the work and this is what I’ve concluded...”<sup>100</sup> Here transparency is the best available option given the limits of human cognition and communication. It remains up to the reader to determine, having followed links and assessed sources and biases, where the truth lies.

But as this chapter has shown, a stronger potential claim lurks behind these arguments, which hint that truth may *emerge* from the transparent linking and citing and analyzing performed by large networks of discussants weighing in on a some subject. It is in this sense that Weinberger could argue at BloggerCon that “truth is a property of the Net itself” — invoking the notion that truth is somehow embedded in the links forged by individual bloggers, expressed in the network those links form, discernible perhaps to the right algorithm. As embodied in an ethic of citing and linking — to documents, to interlocutors — transparency makes possible whatever collective wisdom is said to reside in the network.

Bloggers and their advocates move easily between the weak and the strong versions of the transparency argument. As we shall see, professional fact-checkers also invoke transparency to defend their work, even as they refuse to abandon their claim to journalistic objectivity. In at least this sense, then, transparency qualifies as a new objectivity: Both are supple ideals, associated with particular sets of practices but sufficiently imprecise or flexible to be enlisted by

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<sup>100</sup> Rosen, “The View from Nowhere: Questions and Answers,” PressThink (blog), November 10, 2010, <http://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/> (accessed October 18, 2011).



different actors in boundary drawing and ideological contestation. The following chapter uses the literature of journalism studies to explore more closely the kind of newswork bloggers engage in, and the relationship it suggests between transparency and objectivity.

## Chapter 2 - Annotative Journalism and the Practice of Objectivity

The rubric of “grassroots journalism,” often embraced by bloggers themselves, has tended to obscure a utopian, cybernetic sensibility at the heart of blogging’s challenge to journalism. That is to say, that challenge has mainly proposed to *fix* journalism — to filter and fact-check professional news accounts — rather than to *replace* it. But what does a journalism of critique and correction and annotation look like? What sort of reporting does online fact-checking yield, and how does it differ from that produced by professional reporters and editors in established news organizations?

To begin to answer that question, consider a recent, minor episode from the annals of blogging and journalism. The June 27, 2010, issue of *Time* magazine featured a piece on China’s growing role in Africa which began this way:

If you want to see what’s wrong with Africa, take a trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The size of Western Europe, with almost no paved roads, Congo is the sucking vortex where Africa’s heart should be. Independent Congo gave the world Mobutu Sese Seko, who for 32 years impoverished his people while traveling the world in a chartered Concorde.<sup>1</sup>

The day after the piece appeared online, the blog of the left-leaning media watchdog Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) carried a brief critique taking issue with that introduction: “But if you’re going to charge Congo with being ‘what’s wrong with Africa,’ you’d better give credit where credit is due,” wrote editor Julie Hollar. “Independent Congo didn’t give the world Mobutu; that gift belongs to the U.S. and Belgium, who supported the overthrow and

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Perry, “China’s New Focus on Africa,” *Time* 176, no. 1 (July 5, 2010), 1.

assassination of democratically-elected Patrice Lumumba and helped prop up the horror that was Mobutu for decades afterward.”<sup>2</sup>

The exchange might have ended there. However, less than 24 hours after FAIR’s post appeared, *Time* reporter Alex Perry turned up in the comments to defend his work: “Fairness and accuracy in reporting? Are you kidding? The piece is about China’s adventures in Africa. And you’ve managed to inform your readers that it is, actually, some sort of Western conspiracy to cover up Western colonial crimes. Pot and kettle, Julie.” Other commenters quickly chimed in to defend Hollar’s critique, and Perry found himself in an increasingly nasty verbal melee with FAIR’s staff and scores of readers. Over a series of posts he accused the group and its supporters of racism (in denying Africans political agency) and of peddling “half-arsed conspiracies”: “Do you think I have a controller with a husky voice who directs my coverage by meeting me in badly lit subteranean [sic] car parks? Grow up. People who do my job die sometimes. I’ve known three myself. Do you really think we’d take those risk to tell lies?” Perry argued that his critics had no experience with “actual reporting” and misunderstood the rules of “ethical journalism” — the difference “between the ‘mainstream media’ you so deride, and that kind of biased and inaccurate invective that you represent and which so pollutes the Web today.”<sup>3</sup>

Though FAIR has existed since 1986, the episode was immediately framed as a clash between old media and new. When a FAIR editor emphasized that the group offers press criticism, Perry disagreed: “It’s ignorant, five-minute toss-it-off blogging, based on uninformed bias and barely thought-out conspiracy, of the kind that passes itself off as informed comment,

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Hollar, “Congo: The Sucking Vortex Where Africa’s Heart Should Be,” FAIR Blog, June 25, 2010, <http://www.fair.org/blog/2010/06/25/congo-the-sucking-vortex-where-africas-heart-should-be/> (accessed November 30, 2010).

but whose content and effect is to mislead, distort and disinform.”<sup>4</sup> Readers saw the exchange through the same lens, even as they sided against the professional journalist. One remarked triumphantly that blogs “dissolve much of what is left of the msm’s credibility,” while another exclaimed, “Thank God we don’t have to rely on networks and newspapers as our only news sources anymore.”<sup>5</sup> Readers also cited government and NGO data to challenge Perry’s dates and statistics. After six days, Perry finally bowed out of the conversation. But comments, almost all hostile to the reporter, poured in for weeks as liberal blogs pointed their readers to what was widely characterized as a comical overreaction by an old-media journalist. “Time Magazine Reporter Goes Mental Over Congo Piece,” declared a headline at the Huffington Post.<sup>6</sup>

Soon new evidence came to light. A popular progressive blog, Jonathan Schwartz’s “A Tiny Revolution,” found an earlier piece by Perry — called “Come Back Colonialism, All Is Forgiven” — which opened with a Congolese river captain lamenting the end of white rule. Though the piece went on to note the horrors of Belgian rule in the Congo, the excerpted passage seemed to establish a pattern of apologism in Perry’s work. Remarkably, Schwartz also discovered just the sort of conspiracy the journalist had scoffed at, in *Time*’s own Cold War history. The blogger turned up a recent book by the CIA’s former station chief in the Congo, reproducing a lengthy passage in which the retired spy describes how, in 1960, an ambassador’s last-second phone call to *Time* founder Henry Luce resulted in a cover story on Patrice

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<sup>3</sup> Perry, comments on “Congo: The Sucking Vortex,” comments posted June 26, 29 and 30, 2010, <http://www.fair.org/blog/2010/06/25/congo-the-sucking-vortex-where-africas-heart-should-be/> (accessed November 30, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Perry, comment on “Congo: The Sucking Vortex,” comment posted June 30, 2010, <http://www.fair.org/blog/2010/06/25/congo-the-sucking-vortex-where-africas-heart-should-be/#comment-26379> (accessed November 30, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Comments on “Congo: The Sucking Vortex,” posted July 5 and 7, 2010, <http://www.fair.org/blog/2010/06/25/congo-the-sucking-vortex-where-africas-heart-should-be/> (accessed November 30, 2010).

Lumumba being relegated to the international section.<sup>7</sup> Schwartz also dug into *Time*'s archives to offer choice quotes from the magazine's abjectly negative, and racist, coverage of Lumumba's presidency: "With a primeval howl, a nation of 14 million people reverted to near savagery, plunged backward into the long night of chaos. Tribe turned upon tribe. Blacks turned upon Europeans..."<sup>8</sup> The magazine's reporting had openly mocked Lumumba's warnings of a Belgian plot to assassinate him, just months before his execution in a coup backed by Belgium and the United States.

The story of Perry's collision with FAIR ultimately broke into the mainstream media, in a small way, via *Rolling Stone*'s Matt Taibbi. Thanking Schwartz for the tip, Taibbi characterized Perry's work as an example of "White God" reporting, "a formula I'm very familiar with from my Russia days. In it the moral of every story you write has to be that the backward subject country cannot survive without the indulgence, political protection, and gigantic brain-power of the superior Western societies."<sup>9</sup> And the episode quickly came to the attention of online news pundits such as Dan Gillmor and Jay Rosen, who suggested fellow journalism professors take it up as a case study in the "pathologies of bloggers vs. journalists."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Cohen, "Time Magazine Reporter Goes Mental Over Congo Piece," Huffington Post, July 13, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ben-cohen/time-magazine-reporter-go\\_b\\_644012.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ben-cohen/time-magazine-reporter-go_b_644012.html) (accessed November 30, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Schwartz, "I Happen to Have Marshall McLuhan Right Here," A Tiny Revolution (blog), July 3, 2010, <http://www.tinyrevolution.com/mt/archives/003328.html> (accessed November 30, 2010). The title refers to a memorable scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*.

<sup>8</sup> "Congo: The Monstrous Hangover," *Time* 76, no. 3 (July 18, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> Matt Taibbi, "A White God Freakout," Taibblog, July 6, 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/taibblog/a-white-god-freakout-20100706> (accessed November 30, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.twylah.com/jayrosen\\_nyu/tweets/17789781338](http://www.twylah.com/jayrosen_nyu/tweets/17789781338) (accessed November 30, 2010).

## Annotative journalism and the ecological consensus

This colorful episode is typical in a number of ways. It illustrates the fact-checking impulse that has animated online news discourse for more than a decade. It also neatly captures the social and technical affordances of the Web within the journalistic ecosystem: for annotation and critique, for filtering news content and shaping news audiences, for transforming the online response to a piece of news into a new story altogether.

Most of all, it adds one more vivid example to the long catalogue of occupational animosity between establishment journalists and bloggers of all political stripes. These episodes form an online lore of sorts, one basic to blogging's project of self-definition. This lore is continually renewed by new outbreaks of hostility, such as last year's nasty, public exchange between Bill Keller, then editor of the *New York Times*, and Arianna Huffington of the Huffington Post, in which the former likened the latter to a Somali pirate.<sup>11</sup> The persistent antagonism has become a running joke among pundits of online journalism, but also a source of frustration. In a 2011 conference address media scholar Jay Rosen placed on exhibit a dozen recent instances of this "twisted psychology," explaining that,

Six years ago I wrote an essay called *Bloggers vs. Journalists is Over*. It was my most well read piece at the time. And it made the points you would expect: This distinction is eroding. This war is absurd. Get over it. Move on. There's bigger work to be done.

But since then I've noticed that while the division — bloggers as one type, journalists as another — makes less and less sense, the conflict continues to surface. Why? Well, something must be happening under the surface that expresses itself through bloggers vs. journalists. But what is that subterranean thing?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Keller, "All the Aggregation That's Fit to Aggregate," *New York Times*, March 10, 2011, sec. Magazine; Arianna Huffington, "Bill Keller Accuses Me of 'Aggregating' an Idea He Had Actually 'Aggregated' From Me," *The Huffington Post*, March 10, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/bill-keller-accuses-me-of\\_b\\_834289.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/bill-keller-accuses-me-of_b_834289.html) (accessed March 30, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Jay Rosen, "The Twisted Psychology of Bloggers vs. Journalists: My Talk at South By Southwest," *PressThink* (blog), March 12, 2011, <http://pressthink.org/2011/03/the-psychology-of-bloggers-vs-journalists-my-talk-at-south-by-southwest/> (accessed November 20, 2011).

Rosen went on to suggest that “bloggers and journalists are each other’s ‘ideal other’”: reporters see the larger economic and institutional threat to professional, objective journalism embodied in the person of the blogger, while for bloggers, “the conflict with journalists helps preserve a ragged innocence, which is itself a kind of power.” More than that, though, for bloggers the critique of conventional journalism has been intimately tied up with both the practice and the articulation of a new alternative. The cases most often held up as examples of what bloggers can accomplish *in* journalism have also been, more or less overtly, assaults *on* professional journalism — most spectacularly the debunking, by a network of right-wing blogs, of National Guard memos used in a *60 Minutes* report on President Bush’s service during the Vietnam War, a controversy which arguably cost longtime CBS anchor Dan Rather his job.<sup>13</sup> As Donald Matheson has written, the “discourse of weblogs as journalism is also organized, particularly in the US, around the idea of challenging mainstream journalism.”<sup>14</sup> Reviewing the work of four prominent bloggers, from the left as well as the right, David Park finds that they assert authority and claim proximity to their readers primarily by “strategic positioning” in opposition to journalism: “They are authorized, they seem to say, precisely because they are *not* journalists, and this independence is played off as if it makes them closer to the authentic needs of the audience.”<sup>15</sup>

The corresponding discourse among reporters has been read through the lens of journalism’s always-tenuous professional project.<sup>16</sup> Writ broadly that project seeks, “via occupational struggle, to monopolize a form of journalistic expertise, which itself is discursively constructed

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<sup>13</sup> See Arthur Hayes, *Press Critics Are the Fifth Estate* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 35-41.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Matheson, “Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism,” *New Media & Society* 6, no. 4 (August 2004): 452.

<sup>15</sup> David Park, “Blogging With Authority: Strategic Positioning in Political Blogs.” *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 266.

out of various journalistic practices and narratives, including the claim to professional objectivity.”<sup>17</sup> From almost the moment they understood blogging as a genre and themselves as a group, bloggers have challenged that professional monopoly in word and in deed. Journalists’ primary response has been to defend their “jurisdictional claim” to speak authoritatively to the public about matters of public interest, asserting their political neutrality and their institutional advantages (in training, expertise, access, resources, etc.) while also taking measures to domesticate the new medium. Thus, for instance, blogs launched by newspaper sites have been characterized as trying to “recapture” journalistic authority online, adopting new practices while at the same time advancing traditional newsroom norms.<sup>18</sup> The solipsistic linking habits of such professional “j-blogs” can seem to reinforce that view: One analysis of linking patterns concludes that “elite traditional media entities have *hijacked the blog form*, a tool designed for outward, networked conversations, to maintain internal elite, conversations within their network neighborhood of other trusted, traditional media entities.”<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Seth Lewis sees journalists struggling to reconcile their “professional logic of control” with a “participatory logic” that characterizes online media.<sup>20</sup> (Note that such analyses themselves reflect normative,

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Wilson Lowrey, “Mapping the Journalism-Blogging Relationship,” *Journalism* 7, no. 4 (November, 2006): 477–500.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson, “Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism,” in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 88-101.

<sup>18</sup> David Domingo et al., “Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond,” *Journalism Practice* 2, no. 3 (2008): 326–342; Susan Robinson, “The Mission of the J-Blog Recapturing Journalistic Authority Online,” *Journalism* 7, no. 1 (February, 2006): 65–83; Jane Singer, “The Political J-Blogger,” *Journalism* 6, no. 2 (May, 2005): 173–198.

<sup>19</sup> Sharon Meraz, “Is There an Elite Hold? Traditional Media to Social Media Agenda Setting Influence in Blog Networks,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 3 (April, 2009): 702. Italics added. See also Daniela Dimitrova et al., “Hyperlinking as Gatekeeping: Online Newspaper Coverage of the Execution of an American Terrorist,” *Journalism Studies* 4, no. 3 (January 2003): 401-414.

<sup>20</sup> Seth Lewis, “The Sociology of the Professions, Boundary Work, and Participation in Journalism: A Review of the Literature” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Boston, MA, May 26-30, 2011).



even utopian notions, seen in the previous chapter, about what the new media technology is meant for and how it should be used.)

The conflict between bloggers and journalists can be read in more than one way. It has played out across multiple, overlapping registers — economic, legal, professional and, importantly, personal. The *Time* reporter’s response to his online critics all but begs to be seen as jurisdictional line-drawing by a member of a besieged profession, as a kind of “boundary work.”<sup>21</sup> Perry asserted his authority by invoking his proximity to events in Africa, his long experience covering the region, and the grave dangers he and other reporters face. He distinguished his own ethical and objective reporting from what he characterized as the politically motivated, conspiracy-minded, factually inaccurate “invective” produced by FAIR and its readers, easily dismissed as “five-minute, toss-it-off blogging.” However, and this consistent with the idea of boundary work, this discourse of professional demarcation is un-self-conscious, natural, even visceral. What FAIR offered as a factual correction clearly betrayed, to the reporter, the group’s partisan agenda. To his eye it “doesn’t qualify as criticism, which can be an honorable pursuit,” and it certainly doesn’t qualify as journalism.<sup>22</sup> Finally, this is not an academic exercise manifesting some abstract, professional “logic of control”: The reporter was, literally and very publicly, under attack. As in so many of these confrontations, the defense of the journalist and the defense of journalism cannot easily be disentangled.

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<sup>21</sup> This term first emerges in sociological debates over the “problem of demarcation” in science: the question of what sets science apart from other forms of knowledge production. Thomas Gieryn used “boundary work” to stress that demarcation is “routinely accomplished in practical, everyday settings” — it is matter of “ideological effort” and “rhetorical style” as much as of unique methods or norms. The central insight is less surprising in disciplines the term has since been applied to, like journalism, that never enjoyed scientific authority. See “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (December 1983): 781.

<sup>22</sup> Perry, comment on “Congo: The Sucking Vortex,” comment posted June 30, 2010, <http://www.fair.org/blog/2010/06/25/congo-the-sucking-vortex-where-africas-heart-should-be/#comment-26379> (accessed November 30, 2010).

The persistence of this conflictual frame highlights an imprecision in what might be called the “ecological consensus” about the respective news roles of bloggers and professional journalists. As emphasized in the previous chapter, from the outset the blogging community turned to ecological, cybernetic, and systems-oriented metaphors to describe their emergent genre and its relationship to journalism. Consider three brief examples from prominent observers of the blogging scene, themselves journalists and of course bloggers:<sup>23</sup>

In many ways, bloggers and journalists are in a mutually symbiotic relationship, working together to report, filter and break the news. ... Like any ecosystem, the Blogosphere demonstrates all the classic ecological patterns: predators and prey, evolution and emergence, natural selection and adaptation. (John Hiler, 2002)

The rise of blogs does not equal the death of professional journalism. The media world is not a zero-sum game. Increasingly, in fact, the Internet is turning it into a symbiotic ecosystem — in which the different parts feed off one another and the whole thing grows. (Scott Rosenberg, 2002)

We need to move beyond the increasingly stale debate of whether blogging is or isn't journalism and celebrate Weblogs' place in the media ecosystem. (J.D. Lasica, 2003)

Such ecological language subtly masks the question of *in what sense* bloggers and journalists are “working together” — as partners, or only from some Archimedean vantage outside the “ecosystem”? The above quotes evoke “predators and prey” while also insisting on symbiosis as the dominant metaphor. Most ecological relationships are not symbiotic, of course; even to “feed off one another” suggests two very distinct possibilities. This imprecision underscores, I think, the difficulty that even avid enthusiasts have had in reconciling the claim that bloggers *build on* professional journalism with the demonstrable fact that they relentlessly *attack* it. To treat the

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<sup>23</sup> Quotes from John Hiler, “Blogosphere: The Emerging Media Ecosystem: How Weblogs and Journalists Work Together to Report, Filter and Break the News,” *Microcontent News*, May 28, 2002; J.D. Lasica, “Blogs and Journalism Need Each Other,” *Nieman Reports* 57, no. 3 (Fall, 2003), 73; Scott Rosenberg, “Much Ado About Blogging,” *Salon.com*, May 10, 2002, [http://www.salon.com/2002/05/10/blogs\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2002/05/10/blogs_2/) (accessed December 22, 2010).

conflict as pathology — as a “twisted psychology” — evokes the professional struggle nicely but obscures the ways in which that critique of news might itself produce a kind of reporting.<sup>24</sup>

Academic research has to a large extent adopted an ecological framework as well. Any number of studies point out that blogs engage in little primary reporting and instead rely on accounts in the mainstream media, and especially the work of elite news outlets; this suggests “a more complementary relationship between weblogs and traditional journalism ... than is typically assumed.”<sup>25</sup> A study that followed several major news threads in the “news ecosystem” in Baltimore (including print, broadcast, and the Internet) found that most stories added no new information; of those that did, however, 95 percent appeared in traditional media, and primarily in newspapers.<sup>26</sup> Following the “day-to-day practices” of citizen reporters, Zvi Reich concludes that their inferior access to and relationships with human sources (among other obstacles) constitute “undeniable weaknesses,” and that as a result “ordinary citizens can serve as a vital complement to mainstream journalism, however not as its substitute.”<sup>27</sup> Such observations have prompted various efforts to accommodate a new, distinctly downstream role for blogs within established models of political communication. Thus elite news outlets are held to have an agenda-setting relationship to bloggers, who in turn engage in “second-level agenda-setting,” which affects attribute rather than issue salience — telling us *how* to interpret the issues which

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<sup>24</sup> The reference is to Rosen, “The Twisted Psychology of Bloggers vs. Journalists.”

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Reese et al., “Mapping the Blogosphere: Professional and Citizen-Based Media in the Global News Arena,” *Journalism* 8, no. 3 (2007): 235. See also Tanni Haas, “From ‘Public Journalism’ to the ‘Public’s Journalism’? Rhetoric and Reality in the Discourse on Weblogs,” *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 3 (2005): 387–396; Meraz, “Is There an Elite Hold?”; and Melissa Wall, “Blogs of War’: Weblogs as News,” *Journalism* 6, no. 2 (2005): 153–172.

<sup>26</sup> *How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem in One American City* (Washington, DC: Project for Excellence in Journalism at the Pew Research Center, January 11, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Zvi Reich, “How Citizens Create News Stories,” *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 5 (2008): 739, 751.

journalists have primed us to care about.<sup>28</sup> Blogs are said to operate not as gatekeepers, in the sense of David White’s classic mid-century study of newspaper editors, but instead as “gatewatchers” who publicize and prioritize stories selected from the vast collective corpus of news produced every day.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, cases in which bloggers appear to lead the way on a big story — such as the *60 Minutes* controversy or the Trent Lott affair of 2002, discussed below — suggest that sometimes new media do set the agenda for old.<sup>30</sup> Noting the Trent Lott case in particular, Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrel explain that top political bloggers exert an influence far out of proportion to the size of their audience, because that audience includes so many elite journalists: “Because opinion-makers within the media take blogs seriously, the latter can have a much wider impact on politics.”<sup>31</sup> These widely studied cases encourage more nuanced perspectives on how blogs may add to or develop an unfolding news story even in the absence of much original reporting. Considering several such examples, I have suggested that bloggers take advantage of the affordances of the genre — for juxtaposition and annotation of documents — to perform a kind of “distributed news analysis.” Collectively they “act as an engine for distilling and dissecting news accounts, testing them against one another and against established facts to

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Murley and Chris Roberts, “Biting the Hand That Feeds: Blogs and Second-Level Agenda Setting” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Atlanta, GA, January 5-7, 2005). Whether blogs are effective in influencing attribute salience has not been established.

<sup>29</sup> Axel Bruns, *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005);

“Gatewatching” defined on pages 17-23. See David M. White, “The ‘Gatekeeper’: A Case Study in the Selection of News,” *Journalism Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1950): 383–396.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Cornfield et al., *Buzz, Blogs, and Beyond: The Internet and the National Discourse in the Fall of 2004* (Pew Internet & American Life Project at the Pew Research Center, May 16, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Henry Farrell and Daniel Drezner, “The Power and Politics of Blogs,” *Public Choice* 134, no. 1 (January 1, 2008), 29–30. A 2004 version of this paper treats the Trent Lott affair more fully; on that episode see Esther Scott, *Big Media Meets the “Bloggers”*: Coverage of Trent Lott’s Remarks at Strom Thurmond’s Birthday Party (Cambridge, MA: Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, February 1, 2004).

solidify the bed of ‘what is known’ — the real, factual context for future news accounts.’<sup>32</sup> C.W. Anderson has combined content analysis and ethnographic research to reconstruct the unfolding of one local story within an urban media ecosystem. He complicates the distinction between reporters, bloggers and activists with his notion of “fact entrepreneurs,” who pursue both political and journalistic agendas in promoting and shaping a developing story.<sup>33</sup>

Building on that ecological consensus, this chapter seeks to develop a framework for understanding the textual practices of bloggers as a form of newswork, one that defies inherited distinctions between factual reporting and opinion or critique. I call this *annotative journalism*: reporting that proceeds mainly through the critical analysis of published news texts and other documents. The clash between the *Time* correspondent and his online critics was easy to dismiss as mere commentary. The facts in question were decades old and did not bear on the main subject of the piece; the discussion yielded new information, perhaps, but little that looked like news. However the same textual practices, animated by the same critique of conventional journalism, have also produced what the profession recognizes as genuine scoops.

Here I review closely two such cases, one drawn from the muckraking tradition in American reporting, and the other from the world of blogging. Though the first case dates from the 1950s, both highlight an *intertextuality* that is deeply unsettling to objective journalism, and which draws our attention to the elisions involved in producing objective news narratives in which the facts seem to speak for themselves. In this way these cases underscore the mutual embeddedness of the material and ideological dimensions of journalistic work — the relationship between

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<sup>32</sup> Lucas Graves, “The Affordances of Blogging: A Case Study in Culture and Technological Effects,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 339.

<sup>33</sup> C.W. Anderson, “Journalistic Networks and the Diffusion of Local News: The Brief, Happy News Life of the ‘Francisville Four’,” *Political Communication* 27, no. 3 (2010): 289–309.

political commitments (including the commitment to “neutrality”) and reporting strategies, textual practice, and the felt qualities of the medium itself. As a form of newswork the annotative, intertextual, fact-checking journalism produced by bloggers coheres within a larger political and media critique. This insight will help to understand the tensions encountered by professional fact-checking groups discussed in subsequent chapters, groups which have attempted to reconcile annotative practice with a formal commitment to objective journalism.

### **I.F. Stone and the nuclear testing controversy**

Annotative journalism finds a remarkable precedent in the work of I.F. Stone, and especially in *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, the newsletter he produced from January 1953 through the end of 1971. The muckraking tradition in American journalism has often been seen as an antecedent of blogging.<sup>34</sup> The obvious parallel is that like many of today's best-known bloggers, muckrakers did not strive to be dispassionate presenters of fact. Instead they wedded their reporting to popular causes, and could be openly hostile to the political and business establishment. (Stone openly supported any number of progressive groups and causes. In 1965 for instance he addressed a rally of the Students for a Democratic Society.)<sup>35</sup> Observers who draw this connection to blogging sometimes point to Lincoln Steffens' passionate disavowal of a disinterested or detached stance for journalism, offered in the introduction to a collection of his essays on urban blight and corruption. “This is all very unscientific, but then, I am not a scientist. I am a journalist,” Steffens wrote, continuing:

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<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Scott Rosenberg, *Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters* (New York: Crown, 2009), 161-2; Aaron Barlow, *The Rise of the Blogosphere* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 88-90 and 103-112.

<sup>35</sup> D.D. Guttenplan, *American Radical: The Life and Times of I.F. Stone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 393-4.

I did not gather with indifference all the facts and arrange them patiently for permanent preservation and laboratory analysis. I did not want to preserve, I wanted to destroy the facts. My purpose was . . . to see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, would not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. That was the journalism of it. I wanted to move and to convince.<sup>36</sup>

But a second, methodological link joins the muckraker and the blogger, beyond the common impulse “to move and to convince.” As early as 1894 the muckraking method was described as producing a journalism “quarried out of official records.”<sup>37</sup> Reporters such as Steffens and Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell built their cases against entrenched economic and political powers by poring over evidence from public sources such as court documents, legislative proceedings, agency reports, and so on. As the *Columbia Journalism Review* wrote of Tarbell’s famous investigative series on the Standard Oil Company,

Tarbell’s biggest obstacle, however, was neither her gender nor Rockefeller’s opposition. Rather, her biggest obstacle was the craft of journalism. She proposed to investigate Standard Oil and Rockefeller by using documents — hundreds of thousands of pages scattered throughout the nation — then fleshing out her findings through well-informed interviews with the company’s current and former executives, competitors, government regulators, antitrust lawyers, and academic experts.<sup>38</sup>

This research-driven approach was not, however, unrelated to the refusal to separate facts from values. As D.D. Guttenplan writes of the progressive muckraking of the 1930s, in which Stone learned his craft, “it was the Populist critique of the economy that gave the facts so painstakingly assembled by the muckrakers their significance.”<sup>39</sup> In this respect it may be useful to speak of distinct threads in the muckraking tradition, or of a spectrum that spans both advocacy and hard-nosed investigation. Michael Schudson has seen the muckraking tradition carried forward by investigative or “enterprise” journalism in the mold of the Watergate

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<sup>36</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Phillips & co, 1904), 12. Quoted for instance in Rosen, “The Twisted Psychology of Bloggers vs. Journalists.”

<sup>37</sup> The description is from Henry Demarest Lloyd, quoted in *Harvey Swados, Years of Conscience: The Muckrakers* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962), 13-14. It is discussed in Guttenplan, *American Radical*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Steve Weinberg, “Ida Tarbell, Patron Saint,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 40, no. 1 (May/June 2001): 29.

investigation, an episode that has become a professional touchstone for American reporters. This “is a journalism true to an ideal of objectivity but false to the counterfeit conventions justified in its name”; it is an aggressive journalism but *not* one of advocacy or opinion.<sup>40</sup> As we shall see, however, that does not describe Stone’s reporting, which editorialized in a way that would be uncomfortable to professional journalists in his era and today.

Two episodes from Stone’s career will illustrate how the *Weekly* married document-driven muckraking to the newsletter format in a way that anticipated the annotative journalism practiced online today.<sup>41</sup> The first, which Stone would call “the biggest scoop I ever got” and the best illustration of his reporting style, was the *Weekly*’s unmasking of an official campaign to discredit the nuclear test-ban movement — and to forestall a resumption of US-Soviet talks over such a ban — with misleading seismic data. Opponents of banning nuclear tests, led by Dr. Edward Teller, had argued that the Soviets would be able to cheat by testing weapons in secret, underground. On March 6, 1958, the Atomic Energy Commission gave ammunition to those arguments by publishing the results of the first US underground nuclear test, carried out in Nevada the previous September. The AEC report claimed seismologists had not been able to detect the blast beyond a radius of about 250 miles — far less than the 1,000 kilometers (about 600 miles) between “seismic listening posts” that Moscow had tentatively agreed to. In a matter of days, however, Stone’s reporting would force the AEC to retract its claim, destroying Teller’s argument that, because of the potential for cheating, “nuclear disarmament is a lost cause.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Guttenplan, *American Radical*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 189.

<sup>41</sup> The *Weekly* was not the only or the first newsletter in this vein. One model was George Seldes’ *In Fact*, launched in 1940, which offered a similar mix of left-leaning opinion, analysis and press criticism.

<sup>42</sup> An early account of this episode is in Eric Alterman, “The Ironies of Izzymania,” *Mother Jones*, June 1988, 34-37; see also Guttenplan, *American Radical*, 337-9; and Andrew Patner, *I.F. Stone: A Portrait* (New York: Pantheon,



The most remarkable feature of this reporting coup is that Stone accomplished it using only public documents and news reports. National reporters had been invited to Nevada to cover the underground test in September 1957. The *New York Times* reported from Las Vegas that it “seemed to have conformed with predictions of A. E. C. scientists that the explosion would not be detectable more than a few hundred miles away.”<sup>43</sup> As Stone would later explain, however, his edition of the *Times* included a tiny “shirt-tail” reporting a claim that the blast had been detected in Toronto; later editions had similar bulletins from Rome and Tokyo. (See figure 2.1.) The *Times* did not acknowledge the contradiction, or follow up in the months to come. But it caught Stone’s eye. Lacking even the resources to cable those cities for more information, Stone filed the clippings away.<sup>44</sup>

When the AEC report on the underground test finally came out six months later, national reporters enjoyed a tour of the blast site and reported on the peacetime nuclear applications to be yielded by this safe new testing regime.<sup>45</sup> Stone however saw the report as an obvious effort to bolster the case against disarmament and, as he reported in the March 10 *Weekly*, to “make a liar” out of Harold Stassen. (Eisenhower’s former negotiator with the Soviets, Stassen had continued to argue for the feasibility of a testing ban — even testifying before Congress — after the White House reversed course and dismissed him.) The cover story that week took aim directly at Dr. Teller’s “hint-and-run” campaign against nuclear disarmament, dissecting the scientist’s public statements to show that they were politically motivated. Half of the four-page

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1988), 55-58. Teller’s “Meet the Press” appearance is quoted in I.F. Stone, *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* VI, no. 10 (March 10, 1958): 1.

<sup>43</sup> Gladwin Hill, “First Atomic Blast Set Off in a Tunnel,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1957, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Stone’s firsthand recollections appear in Alterman, “Ironies of Izzymania,” and in a documentary, *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* (1973), by Jeremy Bruck; see also Guttenplan, *American Radical*, 337 and 442-5.

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. Ray Herbert, “Newsmen See Site of Subsurface Atom Test,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1958, 2.

newsletter simply reprinted Stassen's recent congressional testimony, with explanatory boldface subheads inserted to guide the reader and reinforce the argument.

Boxed quotes dot the issue — freestanding textual excerpts with no editorial voice other than a provocative title or a jarring juxtaposition.<sup>46</sup> A quote box on the front page helpfully juxtaposed Teller's claim that “disarmament is a lost cause,” from a recent appearance *Meet the Press*, to a more noxious line of reasoning he had advanced in an earlier magazine article: “We must overcome the popular notion that nuclear weapons are more immoral than conventional weapons.” Another box asked, “Is Fallout as Negligible as Dr. Teller Says?” over a quote from the scientist likening fallout to smoking a cigarette every two months — followed by three damning paragraphs from a paper in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. (See figure 2.2.) Stone's own words fill just a third of the issue, though his voice is everywhere.<sup>47</sup>

That issue also noted the pesky “shirt-tails” from September that seemed to contradict the new AEC report. But as it went to press Stone lodged a request for information with the Coast and Geodetic Survey in the Commerce Department, which, as he reported a week later, “seemed to be unaware of the AEC release.” Right away the government scientists confirmed that the explosion had been detected in Alaska and Arkansas, and within days gave Stone a list of 19 seismic stations across the US and Canada that had recorded the nuclear test. He confronted the AEC with the new information. By the time the next *Weekly* came out, on March 17, the AEC had issued a “note to editors and correspondents” amending its earlier report to say “earth waves” from the blast had been detected more than 2,000 miles away. Stone's cover story provided a blow-by-blow account of his own reporting under the headline, “Why the AEC

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<sup>46</sup> The first issues of the *Weekly*, from 1953, featured a straightforward layout with no text boxes or lengthy excerpts. By the late sixties the newsletter included at least one quote box, and usually two, on every page.

Retracted that Falsehood on Nuclear Testing.” He also lambasted the press for missing the significance of the correction until a senator’s press release called attention to it.<sup>48</sup>

Stone thus produced a remarkable piece of investigative journalism — one with a direct impact on a vital area of national security policy — without any inside or anonymous sources, using information available to any reporter (or any citizen) who looked for it. However, it is important to understand that he had long been an open advocate of nuclear disarmament. In July 1957, Stone dedicated an entire issue of the *Weekly* to printing official statements from a meeting of top scientists convened by Bertrand Russell to discuss the nuclear threat. “The Scientists Warn Mankind,” the headline bellowed, followed by a brief editor’s note which began,

As we went to press on July 18 not a single newspaper in the United States had been sufficiently interested to publish the text of the warning issued by twenty world famous scientists of the Soviet and Western blocks after a historic meeting in the little Nova Scotian fishing village of Pugwash the week before.

Stone inserted provocative subheads — “War Would Leave No Country Unscathed” — to organize the text of the main Pugwash statement. (He also faithfully highlighted conclusions that complicated the anti-nuclear argument, e.g., “Medical X-Ray Worse Than Fallout.”) A text box on the final page noted that bulk rates had been reduced, “In an effort to get the widest possible distribution for this historic document....”<sup>49</sup>

Stone was also already suspicious of the AEC and its “Madison Avenue Techniques,” in the words of an October 1957 headline in the *Weekly*. That article used Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*, then newly released, to frame an analysis of government efforts to downplay nuclear risks — most dramatically in choosing the name “Project Sunshine” for a study of nuclear

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<sup>47</sup> Stone, *Weekly* VI, no. 10 (March 10, 1958).

<sup>48</sup> Stone, *Weekly* VI, no. 10 (March 10, 1958) and no. 11 (March 17, 1958).

<sup>49</sup> Stone, *Weekly* V, no. 29 (July 22, 1957).

fallout. “It is as if from the very start the intent was to make us assume that the radioactivity let loose by nuclear testing was something like sunshine and natural radiation,” Stone wrote. The story went on to dissect the recent congressional testimony of a top AEC scientist, annotating the sometimes heated questioning with notes on the background and motives of the speakers. The result reads something like a first pass at novelizing a screenplay. (See figure 2.3.) One of the most embarrassing exchanges, in which the scientist concedes it may be “a small fib” to speak of clean nuclear weapons, is excerpted into a quote box to undercut similar claims made by Henry Cabot Lodge before the United Nations.<sup>50</sup>

In this way Stone’s opposition to nuclear testing and his critical view of the news media inform the annotative, document-driven approach that yielded his big scoop. From the outset Stone saw the AEC as a tool of political and military interests bent on discrediting the disarmament movement he supported. He noticed and filed away the suspicious “shirt-tails” because he put little faith in the *Times*’ report that the underground test confirmed official claims, and, more than that, because he was looking for evidence those claims were false. (Stassen’s testimony months later on the viability of monitoring may have amplified those doubts and encouraged Stone to look for more evidence that the test had been detected.) Stone’s progressivism and his distrust of authority create the context in which a discrepancy between documents becomes a “story” worth reporting. His factual analysis is of a piece with his media and political critique.

This approach demands that documents be treated explicitly as such, as texts to be scrutinized and compared. Not only did Stone credit a senator for rescuing a story the press would have missed — already at the margin of acceptable journalistic behavior — he specifically

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<sup>50</sup> Stone, *Weekly V*, no. 40 (October 21, 1957).

credited a press release. Throughout these issues of the *Weekly Stone* refers directly to news articles, government reports, congressional testimony (including line numbers), interview transcripts, and press releases, rather than weaving their contents into a narrative whose material seams and sources are hidden from the reader. The March 17 issue that finally put all the pieces together is a story about a story: how I.F. Stone spotted the evidence hiding in plain sight, outwitted the bureaucracy, and forced a government agency to change its tune. It is hard to tally the ways this would make a *New York Times* reporter uneasy.

It is important to note that the coherence of this annotative approach assumes as much about the *Weekly's* readers as about its author. A shared critique of the political and media establishment permitted reporting and presentation to be fragmentary and unfinished. Stone did not have to wait until he had the whole story. He could present inconclusive but suggestive bits of evidence — like his first mention of the shirt-tails on March 10, or in the same issue, the point that an above-ground Soviet test had been detected and thoroughly analyzed by the US in a matter of hours — because his readers shared an interpretive framework and understood where the story might lead. Likewise a few sentences from either friend or enemy could stand alone in a quote box, with only an ironic headline to add context, because annotator and reader would see it the same way.

### **Stone and the Gulf of Tonkin incidents**

It is worth briefly reviewing a case that shows the same annotative techniques at work in a much larger controversy. Stone played a decisive role in uncovering the truth behind the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 2 and 4, 1964, and more generally behind the escalation of US

involvement in Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> His reports quickly cast doubt on the circumstances of the first incident, suggesting that it may have been provoked, and on whether the second incident had occurred at all. In this case however no official retraction was forthcoming; though Stone pursued the issue doggedly in the *Weekly* and elsewhere, his suspicions would not be confirmed until the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. (In 1995, and again in the 2003 documentary “The Fog of War,” Robert McNamara admitted that the second incident never took place.) Still, Stone had the contours of the story within weeks of the incidents — again, relying entirely on public documents and news reports. As one historian observed in a 2009 interview,

It was one of the most remarkable accomplishments in history of investigative journalism, I think you could say, given his physical condition. He was practically stone deaf at this point in his life, so he couldn’t go to cocktail parties, he couldn’t chat it up with inside dopesters. He could only look in the public record. But, at the same time, he did have a larger critique in mind, and that is that the Vietnam War was sparked by anti-colonial nationalism and not by Moscow.<sup>52</sup>

As in the nuclear testing stories, that larger critique made Stone suspicious of official accounts and sensitive to contradictory data. One source of such data was the overseas press, which elite US news outlets would not cite authoritatively. In the August 10 *Weekly*, which went to press just two days after the first incident, Stone noted North Vietnamese radio reports suggesting it may have been a response to nearby shelling (then unacknowledged) by US and South Vietnamese warships. The August 24 issue featured a lengthy, boxed excerpt from *Le Monde*, under the straightforward header, “U.S. Secret Operations Against North Vietnam Began 3 Years Before Rebellion in South.” The front page of the September 28 edition went so far as to

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<sup>51</sup> As a result of what was portrayed as North Vietnamese aggression, the US Congress on August 10 passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which would become the basis for American escalation in Vietnam. Stone is generally credited as the first US journalist to question the Johnson Administration’s version of events. This account draws mainly on Stone’s *Weekly* itself; context can be found in Guttenplan, *American Radical*, 385-6 and 392-2.

<sup>52</sup> Jackson Lears interviewed in WNYC, *On the Media*, “Heart of Stone,” July 10, 2009.

excerpt an article in China's *Peking Review*, pointing out logical flaws in the US account of the incidents.<sup>53</sup>

However, Stone's main source of information was still the US press. The first issue after the incidents cited three *New York Times* pieces and one from the *Washington Post* to make a point the papers themselves had not: that "South Vietnam has been carrying the war to the North with US support," which Stone called "carrying on war behind our backs." As in the test-ban controversy, his analysis was framed by a deep skepticism about the elite news media and its cozy relationship with official Washington.<sup>54</sup> The August 24 edition, under the headline "What Few Know About the Tonkin Bay Incidents," opened by flatly asserting that the "American government and the American press have kept the full truth about the Tonkin Bay incidents from the American public." Stone noted that reporters at the United Nations talked openly about the hypocrisy of the US about-face on "retaliatory raids," but then failed to point it out in their dispatches. After building his case from congressional testimony and various press accounts, he concluded,

These circumstances cast a very different light on the Maddox affair, but very few Americans are aware of them. The process of brain-washing the public starts with off-the-record briefings for newspapermen in which all sorts of far-fetched theories are suggested to explain why the tiny North Vietnamese navy would be mad enough to venture an attack on the Seventh fleet, one of the world's most powerful. Everything is discussed except the possibility that the attack might have been provoked.

The piece ventured support for North Vietnamese claims that the second confrontation never even occurred: "It is strange that though we claim three boats sunk, we picked up no flotsam and jetsam as proof from the wreckage. Nor have any pictures been provided. Whatever the true

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<sup>53</sup> Stone, *Weekly* XII, no. 27 (August 10, 1964); no. 28 (August 24, 1958); and no. 32 (September 28, 1964).

story, the second incident seems to have triggered a long planned attack of our own.” In the September 28 *Weekly Stone* continued this theme, calling a *New York Times* piece on a recent skirmish an example of “phony news stories” that advance the cause of war, and contrasting it to a more skeptical Associated Press account. He took particular exception to the use of anonymous sources to uncritically advance the White House line, anticipating a basic critique bloggers level against their peers in the mainstream media today.

Several years later, in a series of articles in the *New York Review of Books*, Stone would build a decisive case that the US had not only planned but already begun a major escalation in Vietnam well before the Tonkin incidents. His raw material was mainly congressional testimony by Administration and Pentagon officials at hearings on Tonkin in 1964 and 1966. Writing for the *NYRB*, Stone could not take the liberties in presentation and format that he took in his own newsletter. But his reporting in these articles — especially “McNamara and Tonkin Bay: The Unanswered Questions” — reads like forensic document analysis, parsing phrases and comparing dates to find the gaps in official accounts. Most damning, he demonstrated that McNamara prevaricated in the timeline he offered to the Senate in 1964, suppressed the transcript of that testimony for two years, and carefully tailored later statements to conceal the ruse.<sup>55</sup>

Several times Stone refers back to his own work in these pieces — for instance, noting that one of them was inserted into the *Congressional Record*. This violates the journalistic norm against making oneself part of the story. But it is consistent with “cause” journalism, and more

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<sup>54</sup> Once again, the *Weekly's* annotative layout reinforced this critical stance, highlighting the follies of reporter and politician like. “Prize Explanation,” announced a quote box on August 24, over Sen. McCarthy speculating on CBS’s “Face the Nation” that the North Vietnamese attacked the US Navy because “they were bored.”



importantly with Stone's method. Understanding the media strategies of political figures and government agencies, as well as the political ramifications of a news story — that is, understanding the links between reporters and officials — is essential to the annotative analysis he performs. News stories and press releases are not just sources of information but texts to be deconstructed. Any good reporter reads between the lines, of course. But Stone's politics allowed, and his approach to making news demanded, that he make those readings explicit for readers.

### **Objectivity and intertextuality**

The decades of the *Weekly's* publication coincide with what Dan Hallin has called the “high modern” period in American journalism. Dominated by the Cold War political consensus, this was an era “when the historically troubled role of the journalist seemed fully rationalized, when it seemed possible for the journalist to be powerful and prosperous and at the same time independent, disinterested, public-spirited, and trusted and beloved by everyone, from the corridors of power around the world to the ordinary citizen and consumer.”<sup>56</sup> The professional doctrine of journalistic objectivity which took shape after World War I was, by the 1950s and 1960s, deeply entrenched.<sup>57</sup> Stone's politics made the *Weekly* an outlier, a bridge of sorts between Progressive Era muckrakers and the adversarial, advocacy journalism that would thrive again in the 1960s and 1970s. The *Weekly* was part of the long parallel tradition we now

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<sup>55</sup> Stone, “Fulbright: From Hawk to Dove (Part 2),” *New York Review of Books* 7, no. 12 (January 12, 1967); “McNamara and Tonkin Bay: The Unanswered Questions,” *NYRB* 10, no. 6 (March 28, 1969); “The Supineness of the Senate,” *NYRB* 12, no. 3 (February 13, 1969).

<sup>56</sup> Dan Hallin, “The Passing of the ‘High Modernism’ of American Journalism,” *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 16.

<sup>57</sup> Schudson, *Discovering the News*.

sometimes call “alternative” journalism, so named precisely for rejecting the profession’s reigning orthodoxy.<sup>58</sup>

But to focus on Stone’s advocacy, or even on his open hostility to political and media elites, is to miss the most interesting part of the story. A faithful mid-century reader of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* who came across the *Weekly* would have been struck not just by the lack of objective voice but by any number of jarring textual elements and practices. Newspapers occasionally quote official documents or other print sources; the *Weekly* did this every issue and often at great length, with text excerpts filling half or more of some editions. Newspapers articles acknowledge their competitors only reluctantly, and almost never quote their work; the *Weekly* was filled with direct references to other news outlets, praising or more often criticizing their work, and reprinting the words of journalists as well as of the officials they interviewed. News reporters often fail to mention the documentary source of a claim or a quote, especially when that is a press release; Stone invariably gave his readers this material context. Most striking is what’s missing from the *Weekly*: human sources. Stone very rarely quoted from personal interviews with officials, and seems almost never to have attributed claims to anonymous sources. The episodes reviewed above show how these unusual features embodied Stone’s reporting routines as well as his political and media critique.

Superficially, in fact, the *Weekly* might have been more familiar to readers in previous centuries. Colonial and early American newspapers were assembled from bulletins copied, often verbatim, from other, mostly European newspapers.<sup>59</sup> Early papers also dedicated a great deal of

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<sup>58</sup> Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London: Sage, 2002). Citing Atton, Schudson and Anderson emphasize that alternative media “almost by definition . . . claim journalistic status by challenging mainstream media’s norms and practices,” in “Objectivity, Professionalism and Truth Seeking in Journalism,” 96.

<sup>59</sup> Will Slauter, “Recycling the News in the 18th-Century Blogosphere” (talk at Columbia University, New York, February 27, 2008).

space to printing official transcripts, public announcements, and commercial lists, as well as letters from correspondents.<sup>60</sup> Schudson offers as typical a colonial reader who used a Boston paper not for news but as “a reference source that recorded political texts such as royal and gubernatorial speeches and proclamations.”<sup>61</sup> The composition of newspapers began to change with the rise of the penny press and then of paid reporting through the nineteenth century; but even into the early 1900s papers typically carried, for instance, the whole of the President’s State of the Union address, sometimes filling an entire edition.<sup>62</sup>

Of course these various news texts and public documents were not critically annotated and dissected and compared in the fashion of Stone’s *Weekly*, nor even of the “news analysis” pieces that have become increasingly common since the 1950s. On the contrary, the imperative to relay a raw political text to readers — to literally *make public* official documents and transcripts — diminished as journalists claimed the authority to interview and interpret and analyze. Documents and bulletins were displaced by bylined news narratives, produced by an increasingly professional class of reporters and built around quotes chosen to illustrate and reinforce those narratives.

It is important not to overstate the case. Newspapers still sometimes carry lengthy excerpts from reports, speeches and similar texts, in extraordinary instances — the Pentagon Papers or the WikiLeaks diplomatic cables, both cases of *making public* against official wishes — as well as more routine ones. Barbie Zelizer has remarked on the latitude reporters enjoy in choosing

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<sup>60</sup> Charles E. Clark and Charles Wetherell, “The Measure of Maturity: The Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1765,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 2. (April 1989): 279–303. The authors’ content analysis finds 16 percent of the space in the *Gazette* dedicated to those four categories between 1728 and 1765; news occupied 29 percent.

<sup>61</sup> Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 38; cited in Michael Schudson, “Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper,” in *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995): 46.

between “text” and “talk,” contrasting the strategies used by different papers after the release of newsworthy documents such as the Tower Commission report on the Iran-Contra affair.<sup>63</sup> (She even finds papers employing “boxed-in quotes” to highlight key passages.) But such textual excerpts are vastly outnumbered by reported speech in conventional news accounts, and they are typically deployed in the same fashion as reported speech: to buttress and illustrate a reporter’s interpretation of what is newsworthy (for instance, the key findings of a report) rather than to sustain a critical analysis of the texts themselves.

The use of irony offers a revealing lens. Stone could employ irony liberally in arraying textual excerpts against each other, and in coming up with pithy headers — “Prize Explanation” — for his boxed quotes. In contrast conventional reporting adopts the ironic voice warily and only when moral circumstances permit it, for instance in subverting the claims of an official who has been exposed as corrupt. In such cases, James Ettema and Ted Glasser write, an ironic juxtaposition “transfigures the conventions of journalistic objectivity so that the very textual devices intended to assure the differentiation of fact and value become the means to express their fundamental unity.”<sup>64</sup> The investigative reports that permit this sort of ironic “condemnation” are not only exceptional, they cut against the grain of conventional journalistic objectivity, invoking an evidentiary rather than detached and neutral basis for the reporter’s authority.

In this way the *Weekly* exhibited a promiscuous intertextuality that objective reporting, with few exceptions, abhors. Hallin writes of the “wholeness and seamlessness” that has characterized

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<sup>62</sup> Schudson, “The Politics of Narrative Form: The Emergence of News Conventions in Print and Television,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 4 (Fall, 1982): 97-112; Schudson, “Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper.”

<sup>63</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “Text, Talk, and Journalistic Quoting Practices,” *The Communication Review* 1, no. 1 (1995): 33-51.

<sup>64</sup> James S. Ettema and Theodore L. Glasser, “The Irony in — and of — Journalism: A Case Study in the Moral Language of Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Communication* 44, no. 2 (Spring, 1994): 5-28.

the high-modern self-understanding of professional journalists.<sup>65</sup> But the same adjectives apply to stories produced under the objectivity norm, which guides reporters to obscure not only their politics but also their reporting practices and their position in a political economy of information. A large tradition in journalism research has focused on techniques of story construction, in print as well as broadcast, designed to efface the reporter's role and make it seem as if "the facts speak for themselves," in Gaye Tuchman's phrase.<sup>66</sup> Selecting sources and deploying quotes or soundbites are the key "strategies of newswork" in this regard. Zelizer has written that "reporters use quoting practices to create the illusion of a whole." She suggests that these quoting practices, especially the use of anonymous or collective sources, do not clarify discourse but rather "blur its spatial and temporal parameters."<sup>67</sup> Quoting establishes a journalist's authority, for instance by emphasizing proximity to events or to powerful individuals, while also establishing distance and technical neutrality. She writes elsewhere that,

Quotations thus act somewhat like the gestures of verbal communication. They offer a place for leakage of meanings and facilitate the communication of claims that are perhaps problematic, risky, or uncomfortable for the speakers who use them. In relying on quotes to make claims without the accompanying responsibility, journalists maximize their communicative authority when quoting.<sup>68</sup>

The muckraking tradition also sought to make the facts speak, of course, but in a way that highlighted rather than obscured the journalist's role in giving them voice. The *Weekly's* "quoting practices," uncommon in a news report, would seem perfectly natural in a critical essay or an academic argument. The combination seems unfamiliar, I think, because it constantly draws the reader's attention to the work of reporting — Stone's and that of his counterparts — as

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<sup>65</sup> Hallin, "High Modernism," 14.

<sup>66</sup> Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 664, 676.

<sup>67</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "'Saying' as Collective Practice: Quoting and Differential Address in the News," *Text* 9, no. 4 (January 1989): 372-3.

<sup>68</sup> Zelizer, "Text, Talk, and Journalistic Quoting Practices," 35.

well as to the production of elite consensus. Stone's work is missing that seamless coherence, the quality of splendid isolation that characterizes news reports carefully grounded in a specific place and time — the “dateline” — but not in the web of documents and sources from which they are built, especially when those are other news reports.

This quality of textual isolation seems so natural that its strangeness eludes notice: the fact that news organizations, so interdependent and oriented to one another in their daily work, and so overlapping in the texts they produce, are nevertheless so reluctant to acknowledge one another within those texts.<sup>69</sup> Exceptions to this rule only confirm its force — the “in other newspapers” page, radio programs that review the front page of the local paper, oddities like the “Readings” section of *Harpers* magazine, and of course the occasional acknowledgment in print or on the air that another outlet broke the story first. Consider how uncommon was Walter Cronkite's watershed 1972 broadcast on Watergate, which repackaged reporting by the *Washington Post* and openly credited the paper.<sup>70</sup> The circumstances were unusual; the *Post* had been mostly alone in pursuing the controversial story. (It is perhaps telling that some of the frankest statements of the routine copying and cue-taking in the news business have been made in court, for instance in a 2010 amicus brief by Twitter and Google declaring that “for decades, television and radio news stations have broadcast information obtained from newspapers. And newspapers and Internet news organizations learn and write about events originally reported on television.”<sup>71</sup>) One can imagine a history where the news more closely resembled, for instance,

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<sup>69</sup> A useful overview of research on news organizations' interdependence is in Carsten Reinemann, “‘Everyone in Journalism Steals from Everyone Else.’ Routine Reliance on Other Media in Different Stages of News Production” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communications Association, New Orleans, May 27, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Frank Rich, “And That's Not the Way It Is,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2009, sec. Opinion.

<sup>71</sup> Brief for Amici Curiae Google Inc. and Twitter, Inc. in Support of Reversal, 2010 WL 2589770, \*3 (June 22, 2010).

academic discourse, with reporters openly drawing from and commenting on the work of their peers — something, I will suggest, like the world of news-related blogging today.

More than one factor may account for the aversion to intertextuality in traditional journalism, and especially in straight news reporting. Different influences may apply in different eras, and norms in this regard have not been static. One durable explanation is competitive pressure, both professional and commercial, that makes reporters and the organizations employing them reluctant to point audiences to other news outlets — even ones the journalists themselves have relied on or responded to. This reluctance may be especially pronounced when the competition comes from new media, or from outside the profession altogether. As noted above, the tendency of newspaper websites to link primarily to other mainstream news outlets, and above all to their own material, has been explained as a “conscious gatekeeping decision” reflecting “unwillingness to give up control of the visitors news experience.”<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps just as important, though, is that intertextuality violates objective journalism’s standard of internal completeness and coherence.<sup>73</sup> It reminds us that other versions of the story exist, and in this way, as I’ve suggested, it draws attention to the work of story construction. One thinks of Joan Didion’s account of the careful, collaborative staging of campaign press events, with television cameras all oriented to hide the backstage throng of reporters and technicians and equipment — and thus to reinforce the naturalness of a candidate’s seemingly impromptu game of catch on an airport tarmac.<sup>74</sup> Turning the cameras around would raise awkward questions about the news value of the event, just as having to cite another news report suggests at a

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<sup>72</sup> Daniela Dimitrova et al., “Hyperlinking as Gatekeeping: Online Newspaper Coverage of the Execution of an American Terrorist,” *Journalism Studies* 4, no. 3 (January 2003): 409; see also Jane B. Singer, “The Political J-Blogger,” *Journalism* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 173–198.

<sup>73</sup> Herb Gans touches on these qualities in *Deciding What’s News* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 162, 172.

minimum that one's own work is less timely or complete. Such comparisons invite scrutiny of the choices different reporters make; indeed, direct references to the competition often indicate that a news outlet has had to account for itself in some way. In February 2011, for instance, the *New York Times* was forced to acknowledge that it had agreed not to disclose the CIA ties of an American contractor arrested in Pakistan after "several foreign news organizations" reported the information, leading officials to lift the ban.<sup>75</sup> The *Times* neglected even to name the other outlets, but online critics were quick to contrast its reports to those in the *Guardian*, provoking wide discussion of the behind-the-scenes relationships with official sources that govern news production.<sup>76</sup>

In its relentless intertextuality, the *Weekly* prefigured a kind of reporting that would emerge a half-century later on the Internet. Here I call this annotative journalism, defined simply as *journalism that proceeds mainly through the critical analysis of published texts, where those may be news accounts, official documents, and other publicly available texts*. The phrase appears to have been first used in 1995 to mean a novel online story format in which a reporter employs hyperlinks literally to annotate, for instance, a speech by the President.<sup>77</sup> My emphasis is, rather, on the material practice of annotation as a kind of newswork — on excerpting and juxtaposing

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<sup>74</sup> Joan Didion, "Insider Baseball," *New York Review of Books* 35, no. 16 (October 27, 1988).

<sup>75</sup> Mark Mazzetti et al., "Raymond Davis, Held in Pakistan Shootings, Worked With C.I.A.," *New York Times*, February 21, 2011, sec. World; Declan Walsh and Ewen MacAskill, "American Who Sparked Diplomatic Crisis Over Lahore Shooting Was CIA Spy," *Guardian*, February 20, 2011, sec. World News.

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. Glenn Greenwald, "The NYT's Journalistic Obedience," Salon.com, February 21, 2011, [http://www.salon.com/2011/02/21/nyt\\_16/](http://www.salon.com/2011/02/21/nyt_16/) (accessed February 21, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> The author of the phrase was Nora Paul, a specialist in information systems in journalism, then at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. In a speech Paul argued, "There may be some entirely new models for the news story. Imagine this, instead of having a news story on the President's speech, the text of the speech is displayed. Embedded in the speech's text are links which explain the event alluded to, or the history of the proposal mentioned, or compares his position on the topic as stated in previous addresses, or gives a brief bio on the person mentioned, and why they were mentioned. I call this annotative journalism." See "Content: A Re-Visioning. Production in the Electronic Products Newsroom" (speech given to the Editor & Publisher Interactive Newspapers Conference of 1995, February 6, 1995, in Dallas, TX).



and deconstructing news texts as a form of reporting that can unearth new facts, drive a story forward, and even yield major scoops.

Without going too far afield into critical theory, it is worth pausing to consider annotation as a textual practice. In the context of online journalism, Mark Deuze defines annotation as “adding explanation to information.” Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis identify “annotative reporting” that supplements a news account with a “point of view, angle or piece of information ... missing from coverage in the mainstream media.” Following them, Axel Bruns points out that alternative media “frequently focus on reanalyzing and reinterpreting mainstream media reports,” linking this kind of journalism to the “multiperspectival news” called for by Herbert Gans.<sup>78</sup>

However, annotation need not explain or supplement; it may also refute, or remark upon, or simply call attention to. What defines annotation is simply that it acts upon a text. Annotation is in this way textually aware; it opens up a distance between two or more texts, and it communicates by exploiting that distance. This textual awareness affords a particular economy of communication, one visible in various annotative genres which have emerged historically, such as published marginalia or florilegia meant to serve as guides to a work, an author, or a topic. The mere fact of an excerpt’s selection (perhaps by a particular authority) is itself a comment which may convey as much information as the excerpt itself. Ann Moss writes that florilegia “can structure a moral reading of texts, without the reader having to erase any of the text or rewrite it into a different code ... they compose a signifying universe which is wholly literary, in which texts illuminate texts in a self-sufficient environment where dialectical

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<sup>78</sup> Mark Deuze, “Online Journalism: Modelling the First Generation of News Media on the World Wide Web,” *First Monday* 6, no. 10 (October 1, 2001), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/893/802> (accessed February 23, 2012); Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, *We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information* (Reston, VA: The Media Center at the American Press Institute, September 2003); Axel Bruns, *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 26.

inference and extra textual reference are only minimally necessary.”<sup>79</sup> With similar economy Stone could structure a moral reading of the news with the simple juxtaposition of quotes from competing authorities, or by adding his own headline to a passage excerpted from a news account or published report.

All of this is to say that the logic of annotation is critical rather than integrative or narrative. As Emile Benveniste distinguishes narrative from discourse, “the objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator ... Here no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves.”<sup>80</sup> The critic, in contrast, speaks in a discursive mode. In a 1957 essay, “The Triumph of the Fact,” Dwight Macdonald distinguished the critical from the scientific sense of fact. (The literary critic was himself an avid annotator, frequently adding “renunciatory footnotes” to later editions of his own essays rather than simply revising the texts.) Macdonald’s rendering of the critic’s encounter with truth could apply, with only a few tweaks, to a crusading journalist like I.F. Stone:

An umpire, like a scientist, deals with measurable phenomena according to generally accepted rules, but the critic works with standards peculiar to himself, although they somehow correspond to standards each of his readers has individually developed.... While Faulkner’s superiority over Marquand cannot be proved, it can be demonstrated. This is a different operation involving an appeal — by reason, analysis, illustration, and rhetoric — to cultural values which critic and reader have in common, values no more susceptible of scientific statement than are the moral values-in-common to which Jesus appealed but which, for all that, exist as vividly and definitely as do mercy, humility, and love.<sup>81</sup>

Annotative journalism as I use the term is a critical journalism — not in the routine sense of fault-finding or denunciation, though that is often the case, but in that it operates by evaluating

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<sup>79</sup> Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996), 106.

<sup>80</sup> Emile Benveniste quoted in Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (October 1, 1980), 7.

and assessing news texts within a larger normative framework. It moots objective journalism's constantly reinforced distinction between reporting, on one hand, and critique or commentary on the other. Annotative journalism shares objective journalism's concern with factual accuracy; it conforms in at least some cases to Jean Chalaby's definition of journalism as "fact-centered discourse."<sup>82</sup> But, rather than weaving facts into what Tuchman has called "webs of facticity," it makes the facts cohere with an explicit appeal to values.<sup>83</sup>

### **Talking Points Memo and the "running massacre"**

Perhaps the best illustration of annotative journalism online is the work of the news blog Talking Points Memo, launched in 2000 by Joshua Marshall. TPM has been compared in its idiosyncrasy to *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, and the similarities are unmistakable. Marshall's handful of major reporting successes have all come by focusing on stories or on angles which, as his posts often pointed out, were being neglected in mainstream coverage. When one of these stories does break into national headlines, due in part to TPM's persistent focus, the blog appears in hindsight to have been ahead of traditional news outlets. In a much-studied case, in 2002 TPM and a handful of other progressive blogs plugged away relentlessly at the segregationist remarks made by Senator Trent Lott at the 100th birthday of Senator and former "Dixiecrat" Strom Thurmond. Marshall pointed to similar rhetoric in Lott's past, and posted segregationist documents and other historical material that brought Lott's comments to life in an unflattering way. Widening

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<sup>81</sup> Dwight Macdonald, "The Triumph of the Fact," *Anchor Review* (1957); reprinted in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review Books, 2011), 203-235.

<sup>82</sup> Jean K. Chalaby, "Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention: A Comparison of the Development of French and Anglo-American Journalism, 1830s-1920s," *European Journal of Communication* 11, no. 3 (1996): 303-326. Chalaby identifies a list of characteristics that includes objectivity, reliability, accuracy, timeliness, and abundance of information.

<sup>83</sup> Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

coverage ultimately led to Lott's resignation as Senate Majority Leader, and brought TPM to the attention of the political and media establishment in Washington.<sup>84</sup>

Like Stone, Marshall is open about his progressive political views as well as his criticism of conventional journalism, though he is less radical than Stone on either front. Before TPM he wrote mainly for liberal publications like the *American Prospect*, and he has used the site to take up political causes, for example campaigning against the privatization of Social Security. In a more general way, TPM undeniably found its voice as part of a network of progressive blogs focusing on scandal and corruption in the White House of George W. Bush. (The site has arguably lost that voice since Bush left office.)

TPM bears a strong material resemblance to the *Weekly* as well. Like other news-related blogs, TPM excerpts heavily from published sources: public reports, pending legislation, posts on other blogs, and, constantly, professional news accounts in print and broadcast. When a piece does feature reported speech by, for instance, a public official, the quote typically comes from an interview with another news outlet. Marshall has explained that he tries not to draw a bright line between original reporting and this kind of news "aggregation." (This is despite the fact that, since a 2005 campaign to raise money for its "Muckraking Fund," the site does have paid reporters on staff who interview sources, cover events, and so on.) And like Stone, the bloggers at TPM develop their evidence over a period of weeks or even months, in full view of (and with assistance from) their readers, rather than amassing it privately for a single, airtight exposé. "We have kind of broken free of the model of discrete articles that have a beginning and end,"

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<sup>84</sup> For background on the site and its founder see Scott Rosenberg, "The Rise of Political Blogging," in *Say Everything*, 131-164; and David Glenn, "The Marshall Plan: Break News, Connect the Dots, Stay Small," *Columbia Journalism Review* 46, no. 3 (September/October 2007), 22-27. Additional detail on the Trent Lott affair is there and in Esther Scott, "Big Media" Meets the "Bloggers": Coverage of Trent Lott's Remarks at Strom Thurmond's Birthday Party (Cambridge, MA: Case Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, February 1, 2004).

Marshall has said. “Instead there are an ongoing series of dispatches.”<sup>85</sup> The fragmentary and incomplete coverage this produces — a suspicious remark here, an incongruous fact there — has been likened by other journalists to reading an investigative reporter’s private notebook.<sup>86</sup>

Journalistic encomiums to TPM have sometimes recognized its challenge to the traditional division of labor in newswork, in mixing “liberal opinion with original reporting” and in a style of investigation that involves “synthesizing the work of other news outlets with original reporting and tips from a highly connected readership.”<sup>87</sup> What has been difficult for professional journalists to recognize is that the site’s reporting successes have come not in spite but because of a wider political critique that frames its annotative journalism. This was clearly illustrated in TPM’s most celebrated work, covering a scandal that enveloped the Justice Department in 2007. That work earned a Polk Award for Marshall and his staff, the first time a blog had received the honor. The Polk recognizes investigative, “enterprise” reporting with a real-world impact; the award citation noted that TPM had “connected the dots and found a pattern of federal prosecutors being fired for failing to do the Bush administration’s bidding,” and that its “tenacious investigative reporting sparked interest by the traditional news media and led to the resignation of Attorney General Albert Gonzales.”<sup>88</sup>

TPM’s bloggers “connected the dots,” as usual, by reading the news — in this case, local press accounts of federal prosecutors being dismissed in various parts of the country in early

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<sup>85</sup> Noam Cohen, “Blogger, Sans Pajamas, Rakes Muck and a Prize,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2008, sec. Business.

<sup>86</sup> Sam Apple, “Quick Off the Blog,” *Financial Times*, July 28, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Quotes from Apple, “Quick Off the Blog”; and Cohen, “Blogger Rakes Muck and a Prize.”

<sup>88</sup> On TPM’s coverage of the scandal also see Apple, “Quick Off the Blog”; Glenn, “The Marshall Plan”; Paul McLeary, “How TalkingPointsMemo Beat the Big Boys on the U.S. Attorney Story,” *CJR’s Behind the News* (blog), March 15, 2007, [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/how\\_talkingpointsmemo\\_beat\\_the.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/how_talkingpointsmemo_beat_the.php) (accessed October 18, 2011); Terry McDermott, “Blogs Can Top the Presses,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 2007, A1; and Rosenberg, “The Rise of Political Blogging.” Award citation in Cohen, “Blogger Rakes Muck and a Prize.”

2007. “What’s the White House Doing to Prosecutors?” asked the headline of the first post to establish a suspicious pattern, in mid-January (see figure 2.4); that entry highlighted seven recent dismissals, each linked back to local news coverage.<sup>89</sup> (TPM was not alone in seeing this larger picture. Senator Diane Feinstein had raised questions about fired US Attorneys, as the site noted, and at least one of the local accounts quoted her to point to a pattern of dismissals.)<sup>90</sup> Soon, TPM was offering minute, line-by-line analysis of reported speech, official statements, legal documents, and other texts that emerged in the widening scandal. A master timeline at the site indexed all of the relevant documents and events, reaching back to the start of the Bush Administration in 2001. Called simply the “TPM Canned US Attorney Scandal Timeline,” the document served as both a guide and an indictment — an annotated argument that the events deserved the label TPM had given them.<sup>91</sup>

Typical of TPM’s reporting on the scandal was its effort to reconstruct a pair of high-pressure phone calls from Republicans on Capitol Hill to a federal prosecutor in New Mexico. After being dismissed, the prosecutor revealed that two lawmakers had pushed him — and he had refused — to announce indictments against state Democrats before an upcoming election. He would not name lawmakers involved, however. TPM led the campaign to confirm their identity, both with its own sources on the Hill and by aggregating the work of other reporters on the case. As accounts of the incident began to multiply in the news ether, TPM ran a series of posts highlighting each new revelation and pointing to discrepancies in the claims made by various sources to different news outlets. (See for example figure 2.5.) On the basis of these comparisons

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<sup>89</sup> Justin Rood, “What’s the White House Doing to Prosecutors?”, Talking Points Memo, January 16, 2007, <http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/002347.php> (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Kelly Thornton and Onell R. Soto, “Job Performance Said to Be Behind White House Firing,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 12, 2007.

<sup>91</sup> See “TPM Canned US Attorney Scandal Timeline,” Talking Pointe Memo, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/usa-timeline.php> (accessed October 17, 2011). The first edition appears to have been posted March 19, 2007.

the site could identify errors in new reports (correctly arguing, for instance, that what an AP reporter had interpreted as Senator Pete Domenici’s “denial” wasn’t really that); endorse those that were on the right track (quickly lending credence to an anonymous tip to a McClatchy reporter); and establish what would be at stake in forthcoming congressional hearings on the incident.<sup>92</sup>

Relying on news accounts as evidence demanded critique of those accounts. It meant assessing them for accuracy and completeness, and also reading between the lines to determine who their sources were and what interests they served. On TPM (as on other news-related blogs) criticism of the “MSM” offers a ready framing device for analysis that runs counter to conventional news narratives. An irony-laden post by Marshall in March 2007 provided a biting example, opening this way alongside a headshot of a *Washington Post* reporter:

So there you have it: the White House’s side of the canned US attorney story provided by the Post’s John Solomon. . . . It turns out the whole thing is just one of those unfortunate misunderstandings the Bush White House now and again finds itself in.<sup>93</sup>

More than a scathing review, though, the critique offered the clearest formulation Marshall had yet given of what the “canned US attorney story” really was and why it mattered, a scaffold for his argument that the firings amounted to a political purge. He analyzed anonymous White House leaks to the *Post* not for the information they contained, but rather for what they revealed about the Administration’s strategy for handling the crisis. As Marshall described this approach, before deconstructing *Post* article claim by claim, “Now, there’s a certain inattention in the piece

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Kiel, “Wilson, Domenici: No Comment,” Talking Points Memo, March 1, 2007, <http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/002658.php> (accessed October 17, 2011); Kiel, “Today’s Must Read,” Talking Points Memo, March 1, 2007, <http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/002661.php> (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>93</sup> Josh Marshall, Talking Points Memo, March 3, 2007, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/012760.php> (accessed October 17, 2011).

to the growing body of evidence which casts doubt on the new administration story. But when a White House tries to get out ahead of a story like this it's key to note the admissions of salient facts that come along with the larger bamboozlement." Nothing in the ensuing analysis would have shocked the conscience of national political reporters, who may have read the *Post* piece the same way themselves. Like Stone, Marshall offered readers an account of what insiders, including reporters, were saying or thinking in private. Recall his admonition at the 2003 BloggerCon conference: "If all the journalists in Washington kind of know something and no one's talking about it, I'm enough of a populist to think more people should know that, let's get it out there."<sup>94</sup>

The scandal came to a head in March of 2007, as TPM's persistent attention drew other reporters to the story. Congressional hearings and a trove of incriminating Justice Department emails added fuel to the fire. Several glowing profiles that month focused on the site's role in driving coverage of the affair. In an interview, Marshall resorted to ecological language to explain his site's impact: "This is sort of the nature of our role in the journalistic ecosystem... Once a story catches fire, the big players are going to start getting the big scoops."<sup>95</sup>

But that understates the resistance TPM's narrative encountered at first from its better-established peers. Two months earlier, when the site was all but alone in covering what Marshall was already calling a "running massacre" of federal prosecutors, *Time*'s Washington bureau chief took issue with that framing. "It's all very suspicious-sounding," Jay Carney wrote on

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<sup>94</sup> Marshall, "Weblogs and Journalism" (panel held at BloggerCon I, Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA, October 4, 2003).

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in McLeary, "How TalkingPointsMemo Beat the Big Boys on the U.S. Attorney Story." Other profiles of TPM that month included Eric Alterman, "Now You Tell Us," Think Again (blog), Center for American Progress, March 15, 2007, [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/03/now\\_you\\_tell\\_us.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/03/now_you_tell_us.html) (accessed October 18, 2011); and Robert Niles, "Lessons from 'Talking Points Memo' and the U.S. Attorney Scandal," Online Journalism Review, March 20, 2007, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/070320niles/> (accessed October 18, 2011).



Swampland, the magazine's political blog, summing up the details that TPM had drawn attention to. "Of course! It all makes perfect conspiratorial sense! Except for one thing: in this case some liberals are seeing broad partisan conspiracies where none likely exist."<sup>96</sup> (A *Los Angeles Times* editorial would make the same argument, declaring that "cries of a conspiracy are premature.")<sup>97</sup> Once Democrats had scheduled hearings on the affair — and prompted by a teasing post from Marshall — Carney conceded there might be more to the story, and that he would follow the hearings with great interest. But he also offered a full-throated defense of his caution as a professional, objective journalist: "I wasn't willing to go that far [by calling the affair a conspiracy] because it was purely speculative. Suspicions aren't facts."<sup>98</sup>

Finally in mid-March, Carney declared that Marshall "and everyone else out there whose instincts told them there was something deeply wrong and even sinister about the firings" had been right. He explained why he had believed there was less to the affair than met the eye:

When this story first surfaced, I thought the Bush White House and Justice Department were guilty of poorly executed acts of crass political patronage. I called some Democrats on the Hill; they were 'concerned,' but this was not a priority. The blogosphere was the engine on this story, pulling the Hill and the MSM along. As the document dump proves, what happened was much worse than I'd first thought. I was wrong. Very nice work, and thanks for holding my feet to the fire.<sup>99</sup>

Bloggers on the left were predictably triumphant.<sup>100</sup> The fact that Carney's reporting amounted to calling "some Democrats on the Hill" was easily read as further proof of

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<sup>96</sup> Jay Carney, "Running Massacre?", Swampland (blog), January 17, 2007, [http://swampland.time.com/2007/01/17/running\\_massacre/](http://swampland.time.com/2007/01/17/running_massacre/) (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>97</sup> "The Rumor Bill," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 2007, sec. Editorials.

<sup>98</sup> Carney, "Note from Underground," Swampland (blog), March 2, 2007, [http://swampland.time.com/2007/03/02/note\\_from\\_underground/](http://swampland.time.com/2007/03/02/note_from_underground/) (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>99</sup> Carney, "Where Credit Is Due," Swampland (blog), March 13, 2007, [http://swampland.time.com/2007/03/13/where\\_credit\\_is\\_due/](http://swampland.time.com/2007/03/13/where_credit_is_due/) (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>100</sup> See e.g. the comments at "TIME's Jay Carney apologizes to Josh Marshall, TPM, and the bloggers," Democratic Underground, [http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=show\\_topic&forum=132&topic\\_id=3164083](http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=show_topic&forum=132&topic_id=3164083) (accessed October 17, 2011).

professional journalism's subservience to political interests.<sup>101</sup> (It supports the well-established idea that journalists "index" the range of opinions in their coverage to those advanced by political elites.)<sup>102</sup> Just as illuminating, however, is the seamless and un-self-conscious way the reporter, describing his own journalism, applied the evidentiary language of "facts" and "proof" to the prosaic reality of sourcing a piece of political news. Carney had objected, quite reasonably, that "suspicions aren't facts." But what kind of facts in January or February could have confirmed the suspicions? Carney didn't specify, perhaps even to himself, what his calls to Capitol Hill might have turned up — a source willing to supply evidence that the affair was a conspiracy, or a source willing to supply a quote naming it a conspiracy?<sup>103</sup> Both are "sources" in the everyday vocabulary of journalism. Routine newswork elides the distinction between facts *in* a statement and the fact *of* a statement, an elision that both negotiates the tension between conventional reporting practices and the formal commitment to truth.

Similarly, Carney didn't specify what evidence in the documents now made it objectively factual to speak of a "broad conspiracy." Some damning details had surfaced, for instance the phone calls from Capitol Hill to the prosecutor in New Mexico, and emails from as early as 2005 that suggested coordination between the White House and the Justice Department about federal prosecutors. But how unusual is that sort of coordination? And was the pressure from Republican lawmakers linked to the Administration? What exactly constituted the conspiracy?

What is clear is that by mid-March it was becoming *uncontroversial* to speak of the affair in the language of scandal and conspiracy. This was due not only to the evidence coming to light,

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<sup>101</sup> Digby [Heather Parton], "Hats Off In Swamp," Hullabaloo (blog), March 13, 2007, <http://digbysblog.blogspot.com/2007/03/hats-off-in-swamp-by-digby-jay-carney.html> (accessed October 17, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Lance W. Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990): 103–127.

but to changing political circumstances: the fact of growing media attention; the fact of the congressional hearings; the fact that Justice Department officials began to resign; the fact that the President addressed the issue for the first time, admitting that “mistakes were made”; and perhaps most of all the fact that political leaders, including some Republicans, were calling for the resignation of the Attorney General. In some sense Marshall won a prestigious reporting award for the triumph of an argument about how the affair should be read, an argument subsequently borne out by events which TPM itself helped to set in motion.

The vocabulary of objective reporting has difficulty parsing an episode such as this one. The *Time* reporter finally credited the “instincts” that allowed Marshall and others to see a conspiracy where he could not. But those were, undeniably, political instincts, grounded in a critique of the Bush Administration and of the journalists covering it. Marshall and his staff at TPM were as much prosecutors as reporters, openly mustering evidence against the White House in a way that would be deeply uncomfortable, and risky, for a professional journalist. Marshall had gone out on a limb in the early days of the scandal; that a consensus would emerge so quickly around his version of events was in no way inevitable. I.F. Stone, moved by similar distrust of a White House, had sketched the outlines of a grave conspiracy to lead the nation into war within weeks of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. But it would be decades before his account was completely ratified.

### **Annotative journalism and professional fact-checking**

The following chapters turn to the dedicated fact-checking groups which have emerged in the United States over the last decade. I call these organizations “dedicated” in that they specialize in

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<sup>103</sup> Other news reports had aired such accusations from prominent Senate Democrats; see Thornton and Soto, “Job

fact-checking public statements by officeholders, candidates and other political figures, as well as advocates, pundits and sometimes journalists. Several have political agendas on the left or the right but many others, including the two groups I study most closely, are staffed by professional journalists. The latter enact — in their discourse and their newswork routines — a powerful and specific critique of conventional American journalism, even as they hew to its core precepts. Schudson’s description of the renewed investigative impulse of the 1970s applies very well to these professional fact-checkers, who also seek to practice “a journalism true to an ideal of objectivity but false to the counterfeit conventions justified in its name.”<sup>104</sup>

In the language of the ecological consensus, these dedicated fact-checkers manifest a high degree of adaptation to the emerging news ecosystem. Like bloggers, they exploit the affordances of hypertext for citation and annotation, for linking and quoting and excerpting. Their style of newswork is profoundly intertextual and relies on formal and informal ties to other news organizations. Fact-checkers draw on published news accounts as a source both of dubious claims and of the evidence to check those claims, while they encourage other news outlets to cite their research. Fact-checkers pay avid attention to the traces their work leaves through the news ether, and to how it is assessed by journalists, political figures, high-profile bloggers, and the wider online public.

However, professional fact-checkers reject larger utopian claims for the networked news ecosystem they take part in. They have little faith in the collective truth-seeking capabilities of social media, discussed in chapter one, and carefully distinguish their own work from what bloggers call fact-checking. They practice a highly circumscribed version of the annotative

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Performance Said to Be Behind White House Firing.”

<sup>104</sup> Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 189.

journalism discussed in the this chapter. The fact-check is in some ways the elemental, constitutive act of that journalism; think of I.F. Stone citing a scientific text to refute Edward Teller's glib nuclear assurances. The new, professional fact-checkers likewise challenge and question public claims. But they treat each fact in isolation, offering lone acts of criticism divorced from any political critique beyond the claim to offer a better, more honest journalism.

Figure 2.1: I.F. Stone clipped "shirt-tails" from the Times indicating the 1957 US nuclear test was detected far more widely than officials claimed. The paper's main report confirmed the official account.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, I

**SOUTH POLE SETS RECORD FOR COLD**

**102.1° Below Zero Reported by I.G.Y. Group Impresses Group on Way There**

By **BILL BECKER**  
Special to The New York Times.  
DAVISVILLE, R. I., Sept. 19—A world's record low temperature of 102.1 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit, at the South Pole was reported today by officials of the International Geophysical Year.  
The marrow-chilling drop appear at the bottom of the world next Monday.  
The announcement was made by Dr. Harry Wexler, chief scientist of the United States Antarctic program during the I. G. Y. year. It was the high point of the fourth and final day of briefings for Antarctic-bound scientists at the Naval Construction Battalion Center here.  
Dr. Wexler also read the following from the message:  
"Temperatures of minus 90 or lower had been registered for ninety-three hours, apparently consecutively."  
The warmest it had been for the seven days preceding Tuesday was minus 83 degrees.  
At thirty feet above the surface, a temperature 27 degrees higher (about minus 75) was reported. At 1,400 feet, it was reported to be about minus 80

**Seismographs on Coast Record Shock of Nevada Atomic Blast**

**Tokyo, Rome Stations Report Readings but Scientists in Most Parts of World Watch in Vain for Tremor Signs**

Yesterday's atomic blast inside a Nevada mountain jolted much of the Western and Southwestern United States, though in a manner that could be detected only by instruments.  
Scientists in most other parts of the world reported watching in vain for tremors from the mountain areas of the world.  
Scientists had hoped that the blast might answer the question. Portable recording gear was set up at various points in the mountains with this in mind.  
No tremors were detected at the Lamont Geological Observatory in Palisades, N. Y., or in Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. Instruments of high sensitivity had been installed in the cave by the Coast and Geodetic Survey at a point 50 feet underground for the period of the blast.

Scientists who had sought an atomic blast to probe the interior of the earth with shock waves were not surprised at the meager results in view of the smallness of the charge. They expressed a hope that a bigger blast be used next time. The force of this one was reported to be equivalent to about 1,000 tons of TNT.

"quake" at its source. Caltech is about 240 miles from the site of the explosion.

**San Francisco Report**  
Special to The New York Times.  
SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 19—The underground explosion of an atomic bomb at the Nevada site was faintly recorded on Sept. 19 and which was graded at 5.25.

**Tokyo Reports Shock**  
Special to The New York Times.

**TOKYO**, Friday, Sept. 20—What Japanese scientists believed to be shock wave from the underground atomic blast in Nevada was faintly recorded on instruments at Tsukuba Research Institute this morning. The shock was recorded at 2:12.50 A. M., Japan Time. [This would indicate that the initial wave took 12 minutes 50.1 seconds to reach Japan.]  
Professor Takahiro Hagiwara of Tokyo University, through whom data was being cleared from various stations in Japan, said the shock had come thirty-two seconds later than they had estimated. The period of shock was one second.

For twenty minutes following the original shock various waves were recorded by Mr. Hagiwara said they were not so clearly defined as the initial shock.

**Rome Studies Recording**  
Special to The New York Times.

**ROME**, Sept. 19—A "small but quite distinct" seismic movement was recorded at fifty minutes past 6 P. M., Rome time, Dr. Enrico Medi, Director of the National Italian Geophysical Institute, said the delay of 50 minutes corresponded exactly to the time needed for shock waves to cover the distance of 6,190 miles separating Rome from the explosion site if the explosion took place exactly at 6 P. M., Rome time, as scheduled.

**Toronto Pulse Reported**

**TORONTO**, Sept. 19 (Canadian Press)—A University of Toronto seismograph in a midtown wine cellar picked up a "rather weak pulse" today.

J. Alec Mair, graduate student in charge, attributed it to the underground atomic test in Nevada.

**First Atomic Blast Set Off in a Tunnel**

By **GLADWIN HILL**  
Special to The New York Times.

**LAS VEGAS, NEV., SEPT. 19**—The first underground nuclear explosion on record was detonated this morning at the Atomic Energy Commission's desert proving ground near here. The event marked the successful trial of a new method of staging atomic tests.

Both the shock and the radiation of the blast were bottled up in the soft rock of a 7,000-foot-high mountain. The explosion took place in a chamber at the end of a horizontal tunnel 900 feet below the mountaintop. The blast was small in comparison to others set off here previously.

There were reports from points in California about 300 miles away that some seismographs recorded a small tremor

Continued on Page 13, Column 2

in the mercury low was not sage. Characteristic of temperatures that are lower than higher elevations.

ed States polar in established as the coldest this year the minimum was 90 ro, recorded at northern Si-y, 1892.

**Pep Talk**

ent came as a nearly 100 scientists leave soon for news was greeted cheers and the men, head-

present crew he by Dec. 15 rd also served short pep talk by Sir Hubert Australian ex-

clared that, in e little things t as the seismographs recorded a small tremor

ishness on the part of many divers individuals.

He expressed the hope that various governments would continue Antarctic experiments beyond the I. G. Y. of 1953. The I. G. Y. program began last July 1. Sixty-four nations are participating in the study of the universe.

Other speakers at the final me were Dr. Willy I. L.

**Recorded in Pasadena**  
Special to The New York Times.

**PASADENA, Calif., Sept. 19**—Observers in Pasadena got a better "view" of today's nuclear blast than those only two and a half miles from ground zero on the Nevada atomic test site.

The Nevada viewers saw only a small dust cloud and a few rocks roll down a mesa slope as the subterranean atomic explosion ripped into a chamber 900 feet below ground at the end of a 2,000-foot zigzag tunnel.

Scientists at California Institute of Technology seismological laboratory here witnessed the blast on a seismograph drum. Fifty seconds after the explosion at 10 A. M., a pen touching the moving drum began to jiggle, recording shock waves from the shot.

"The record looks like that of a typical earthquake of a magnitude of 4 to 5," Dr. Frank Press, laboratory director, said.

The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 was rated at 6.2 on the Richter seismic scale. The Caltech rating today was a projection of the strength of the

**FIRST ATOM BLAST SET OFF IN TUNNEL**

Continued From Page 1

at the moment of the blast—10 A. M., Pacific Daylight Time (1 P. M. Eastern Daylight Time)

the explosion was undiscernible. Conventional above-ground atomic detonations of comparable force observed from this point usually involve a brilliant flash of light followed by sound and shock waves.

Reporters who have witnessed many of this year's tests at close range were barred from the reservation today by the A. E. C. for unannounced reasons.

"recovery" sury

**MCKINNEY PICKED FOR ATOMIC POST**

**President Overrides G.O. Protests to Put Democrat in International Agency**

Special to The New York Times.

**NEWPORT, R. I., Sept. 19**—President Eisenhower overrode Republican protests today and appointed Robert M. McKinney a Santa Fe, N. M., publisher as the United States representative on the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The senator was selected by the Senate majority leader, publicly protested news of Mr. McKinney's pending appointment before Congress. Meade Alcorn, Republican national chairman, made known his displeasure at the White House.

**Stiff Fight in Prospect**

The protests almost may mean a stiff fight in the Senate over the appointment next January. But Mr. McKinney has strong backing in the Senate. Senator Clinton P. Anderson, New Mexico Democrat, is a potent force in the joint House-Senate Committee on Atomic Energy.

Mr. McKinney will leave Vienna soon for preparatory meetings of the international atomic energy group.

He publishes two newspapers—The Santa Fe New Mexico

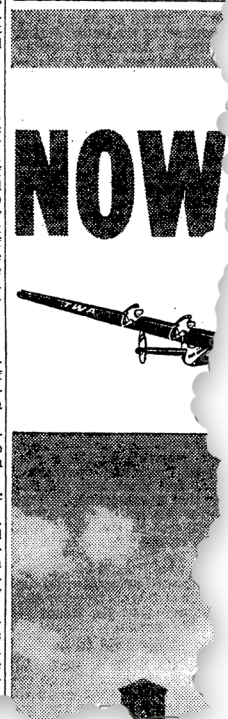


Figure 2.2: The *Weekly* used boxed quotes with ironic headlines or jarring juxtapositions to make editorial points. These are from the edition of March 7, 1958.

**Dr. Teller's Point of View**

**"I believe that disarmament is a lost cause."**

—*Meet the Press, Sunday, March 2.*

**"We must overcome the popular notion that nuclear weapons are more immoral than conventional weapons."**

—*This Week Magazine, Oct. 13, 1957.*

1

**Is Fallout as Negligible as Dr. Teller Says?**

**"World-wide fallout is as dangerous to human health as being one ounce overweight or smoking one cigarette every two months."**

—*Dr. Teller on Meet the Press, Mar. 2.*

"Collecting the uncertainties inherent in any attempt to evaluate the biological consequences of nuclear weapons tests, past and future, one loses confidence in all prediction.

"If tests stop, or do not increase in fission yield, and if stratospheric fallout proves to be uniform, and if the estimates of 'average soil' prove correct (or too pessimistic), and if Sr-90 distribution in human bone proves to be Gaussian, and if there proves to be a threshold dose for radiation, then there will be little to be concerned about for the next five or ten years.

"On the other hand, should the 'test rate' increase, should stratospheric fall-out prove very varied, should the estimates of discrimination factors and the concept 'average soil' prove too optimistic, should the distribution of Sr-90 in human bone prove to be log normal or worse, should small amounts of radiation—10 to 100 rads—prove to be carcinogenic [cancer producing]—should all these possibilities prove true, then the consequences of even another five years' testing could be serious. . . .

"Thus, from the purely scientific point of view, many uncertainties preclude the drawing of final conclusions concerning the hazards of weapons testing. All judgment is essentially moral in character. From what I suppose, then, to be a 'moral bias,' my own conclusion is that nuclear tests should be stopped, if it is at all possible to do so with safety."

—*Dr. Wm. F. Neuman, "Uncertainties in Evaluating the Effects of Fall-Out from Weapons Tests", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Jan. 1958, a "paper based in part on work performed under contract with the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission at the University of Rochester."*

2

**How Soon It Could Be Done**

Mr. STASSEN. It is my view that this first step [a two year cessation of nuclear testing] could be negotiated within the next six months successfully with all the states concerned. I believe it would best be consummated at a summit meeting between the heads of government. I feel such a summit meeting, if we begin to prepare for it along these lines now, could be held within four or five months, that it I think could best be held at the United Nations with the Secretary General as sort of a moderator and manager of it, so that all the other nations felt that this was within the United Nations context, was not something that was pulling away from the United Nations, and I believe that a treaty along these lines could actually come before the U. S. Senate before this session ends, BECAUSE ALL OF THE TECHNICAL, THE LEGAL, THE SCIENTIFIC WORK IS IN AN ADVANCED STAGE. [Emphasis added.]

—*Before the Senate Disarmament Subcom. Feb. 28.*

3

*Special 4-Page on Nuclear Testing*

Inside: Stassen's Testimony on How A Soviet-American Agreement Could Be Policed and Inspected

**I. F. Stone's Weekly**

VOL. VI, NO. 10      MARCH 10, 1958      WASHINGTON, D. C.      15 CENTS

**Dr. Teller's Campaign Against A Ban on Testing**

Dr. Edward Teller's first victory in his fight to continue nuclear testing occurred last year when an "armistice" seemed imminent. This was in June, a few weeks before the test ban was announced.

Dr. Teller's Point of View

"I believe that disarmament is a lost cause."

**Figure 2.3:** Stone often annotated published texts. Here his editorial remarks guide readers through a congressional hearing about “clean” nuclear weapons.

MIT's Prof. Norbert Wiener On Why the Lag In U. S. Science, See Page 3

## I. F. Stone's Weekly

VOL. V, NO. 40      OCTOBER 21, 1967      WASHINGTON, D. C.      16 CENTS

Lifting the Curtain on "Project Sunshine" and the AEC's Madison Avenue Techniques

### The "Hidden Persuader" in the Nuclear Testing Controversy

A method has popularized the manner with Congressional and the public.

The subcommittee questioned Dr. Libby as to why the Atomic Energy Commission had chosen the name "Project Sunshine" for its study of the danger from fallout:

**Representative VAN ZANDT.** Dr. Libby, just how did you arrive at naming this Project Sunshine?

**Dr. LIBBY.** Well, it happened in the summer of 1953 at the RAND Corp. [the Defense Department's subsidiary, Research and Development Corporation—IFS] at Santa Monica. I have been trying to think for the last several hours just how it happened. I do not remember and I do not know, Mr. Van Zandt. We recognized the need for some name, and one of the boys in the meeting invented this name, and we took it. I am sorry, I have no better memory.

#### Hickenlooper Lends A Hand

Senator Hickenlooper (R. Iowa), always the AEC's most faithful ally on the Joint Committee, believing that this dangerous question had been safely by-passed, proceeded to develop the "hidden persuaders" in the use of the term Project Sunshine:

**Senator HICKENLOOPER.** Mr. Chairman, May I ask Dr. Libby—as I understand it, sunshine is stimulated by radiation, is it not?

**Dr. LIBBY.** Yes, sir; in the ultimate sunshine is derived from radiation.

**Senator HICKENLOOPER.** And sunshine, as we know it, and as life exists, is completely vital to life?

**Dr. LIBBY.** Yes, sir.

**Senator HICKENLOOPER.** And the effect of the sun and radiation is vital to life. I am not trying to say how the term came up, but it seems to me there is quite a close correlation between sunshine and the effects on human life of radiation.

**Dr. LIBBY.** I am trying to find out how this name was invented. I am sorry I have not been more successful. I have given you the chronology of it.

Senator Hickenlooper's lyrical enthusiasm over radiation and sunshine was too much for Congressman Chet Holifield (D. Calif.), the chairman of the subcommittee. He broke in:

**Representative HOLIFIELD.** There is this exception, however, that sunshine is beneficial to the growth of life, and radiation seems to be the other way. Is that not right?

**Dr. LIBBY.** At least radiation has many deleterious effects, Mr. Holifield. I think it has a few good ones.

No one asked Dr. Libby what these good ones were but even Congressman Cole, the most conservative Republican on the Joint Committee, was troubled:

**Representative COLE.** Mr. Chairman, on this point of the name, Project Sunshine, I fear a feeling may have developed that that name was deliberately selected to mislead the public with respect to the importance of the subject under dis-

*(Continued on Page Four)*

I. F. Stone's Weekly, October 21, 1967

Holifield Cuts Into the Double-Talk About Cosmic Rays and Natural Radiation

#### Dr. Libby Finally Admits That Strontium 90 Makes Bomb Fallout Different

(Continued from Page One)

Since you were connected to a rather direct degree project from its inception, can you assert un-  
"Maybe . . . A Small Fib"  
"What seldom realized is that the tests themselves are . . ."

#### "Maybe . . . A Small Fib"

"What is seldom realized is that the tests themselves are enabling us to develop weapons with reduced fallout so that radiation hazards in the event of hostilities can be restricted to military targets."

—Henry Cabot Lodge, UN General Assembly debate on nuclear testing.

Senator ANDERSON. Doctor, I want to come back to this question of clean weapons. . . . In your speech you referred to a clean weapon. Do you still feel we have a clean weapon?

**Dr. LIBBY.** Well, sir, I think we all know what the facts are. It is a question of how you describe the situation. We certainly have succeeded in cleaning them up to a great degree. If you call cleaner "clean," maybe you are telling a small fib. . . .

Senator ANDERSON. I am only trying to say that a lot of our people have been reassured on this question by this co-called clean weapon, and it is still a dirty weapon. We have also learned how to make our weapons even dirtier than they originally were. I think it is dangerous to use terms like . . . "clean" when we still mean "dirty" . . . I just hope no one will think there is no fallout danger when it comes to the use of weapons in atomic warfare, because it will come.

—*The Nature of Radioactive Fallout and Its Effects on Man, Hearings Holifield Subcommittee, Joint Cong. Committee on Atomic Energy, p. 1233.*



**Figure 2.4:** In its first post on what would become a major scandal at the Justice Department, TPM spotted a suspicious pattern in reports from other news outlets. The site's coverage won a prestigious reporting award.



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## What's the White House Doing to Prosecutors?

By Justin Rood - January 16, 2007, 1:50PM

During a floor speech on the topic moments ago, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) said the White House has told her it was replacing from five to 10 Senate-confirmed U.S. attorneys with its own interim appointees.

We know of seven who have left during the last couple of months, many under unusual circumstances. Here is our list:

San Francisco - 1/16/07 - **Kevin V. Ryan** - **unclear**

Nevada - 1/15/07 - **Daniel Bogden** - **pushed out**

San Diego - 1/12/07 - **Carole Lam** - **pushed out**

New Mexico - 12/19/06 - **David Iglesias** - **pushed out**

Arizona - 12/19/06 - **Paul K. Charlton** - **unclear**

Seattle - 12/15/06 - **John McKay** - **unclear; likely pushed out**

Little Rock (Ark.) - 12/15/06 - **Bud Cummins** - **pushed out**

Feinstein said she also knew of seven, and listed those above. Curiously, she mentioned an eighth -- from Texas. We haven't been able to identify that one.

There is an eighth recently-departed U.S. attorney we know of, which some readers have noted: **Debra Wong Yang**, the former U.S. Attorney in Los Angeles, Calif. Yang was overseeing the investigation into Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-CA). She **announced** her resignation in October 2006, but to date there hasn't been evidence that her departure was forced.

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**Figure 2.5:** Here TPM gathers facts and annotates passages from seven distinct news sources in order to reconstruct a pair of incriminating phone calls at the center of the scandal.




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### Today's Must Read

By Paul Kiel - March 2, 2007, 9:12AM

**McClatchy Newspapers** filled in the blanks last night, citing "two people with knowledge of the incident" that Rep. Heather Wilson (R-NM) and Sen. Pete Domenici (R-NM) were the two lawmakers who called in mid-October to pressure New Mexico's U.S. Attorney David Iglesias about his office's investigation of a state Democrat.

Iglesias himself has all but named Wilson and Domenici (he said in a [TV interview](#) that he was "not surprised" that Wilson and Domenici had refused to comment) and given his [detailed description](#) of the calls to NPR yesterday, we already have a pretty good idea of what he'll be telling the House Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

There were two calls. Here's how McClatchy describes the first, from Rep. Wilson:

Wilson was curt after Iglesias was "non-responsive" to her questions about whether an indictment would be unsealed, said the two individuals, who asked not to be identified because they feared possible political repercussions. Rumors had spread throughout the New Mexico legal community that an indictment of at least one Democrat was sealed.

And here's Iglesias' own description of that call:

The first call was in mid-October. The caller was asking "this was not a staff member, an actual member of Congress -- the person was asking about 'I want to know if there are any sealed indictments.' And I said, 'Sealed indictments? We only do that for juvenile cases or national security cases. It's fairly unusual.' Instantly red flags went up. I didn't want to talk about it. Federal prosecutors can't talk about indictments in general until they're made public. So I was evasive, I shucked and jived like Walter Payton used to for the Chicago Bears, and the call was ended rather abruptly...."

A little bit later, Sen. Domenici followed up, according to McClatchy:

Domenici, who wasn't up for re-election, called about a week and a half later and was more persistent than Wilson, the people said. When Iglesias said an indictment wouldn't be handed down until at least December, the line went dead.

Iglesias' description:

Approximately a week and a half later I got a second call from another member of Congress wanting to know about when the corruption matters were going to be filed. Again, red lights went on. It was a very unpleasant phone call, because I know that members of Congress should not be making phone calls about pending matters, pending investigations, indictment dates, things of that nature.

And Iglesias is not the only one who seems like he might drop a bomb on Tuesday. As Josh [pointed out](#), the former U.S. Attorney from Arkansas' Eastern District Bud Cummins gave a rather pointed "no comment" [to the AP](#) when the reporter asked if officials from the Justice Department or White House had urged him not to testify before Congress.

Or as Cummins [told The Washington Post](#), "If [the committee] would like to hear one of the few facts I have, I'm happy to tell them."

So what do the other U.S. attorneys who will testify, Seattle's U.S. Attorney John McKay and San Diego's Carol Lam, have in store for the committee? That's not clear.

McKay is sure to get questions about persistent rumors in the Seattle legal community that he was pushed out "to appease Washington state Republicans angry over the 2004 governor's race." As [The Seattle Times reported](#), "Some believe McKay's dismissal was retribution for his failure to convene a federal grand jury to investigate allegations of voter fraud in the race." McKay, who reportedly got one of the most glowing performance reviews from the Justice Department, has already [said](#) that he was given no reason for his dismissal.

But the one prosecutor people are most eager to hear from -- Lam, who headed up the Duke Cunningham investigation -- has been utterly silent (except for those indictments two days before she stepped down, you know). The top FBI official in San Diego has already [said](#), "I guarantee politics is involved." Will Lam say the same?

PERMALINK | TOPICS: [David Iglesias](#), [Must Read](#), [U.S. Attorneys](#)

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### Chapter 3 - The Elite Fact-Checkers: Finding Facts to Check

The persistent rumor that Barack Obama was not born in the United States may have begun with a fact-checking error. In 1991, according to one news report, a brochure put out by a literary agency included this mistake in the future president's biography: "Barack Obama, the first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review, was born in Kenya and raised in Indonesia and Hawaii."<sup>1</sup> Others have traced the rumor to a chain email circulated by supporters of Hillary Clinton during the Democratic primary race in the spring of 2008.<sup>2</sup> What is undisputed is that doubts only gained force after the Obama campaign tried to quell them by releasing a digital copy of the candidate's Hawaiian birth certificate, in June of 2008. As PolitiFact would write soon after, "Then the firestorm started."<sup>3</sup> The document provoked a string of new questions: Why wasn't it signed? Where was the embossed seal? Why was the certificate number blacked out? Shouldn't there be creases, from folding?

By their own accounts, fact-checkers at FactCheck.org and PolitiFact went to unusual lengths to address rumors about the president's real name, birthplace, and background. PolitiFact sought copies of every public record it could find on Barack Obama: his marriage certificate, driver's license file, property records, and official registration with the Supreme Court of Illinois. A reporter emailed the birth certificate released by the Obama campaign to Hawaii's Department of Health; "It's a valid Hawaii state birth certificate," a spokesman confirmed. A Hawaiian

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<sup>1</sup> Dylan Stableford, "'Born in Kenya': Obama's Literary Agent Misidentified His Birthplace in 1991," Yahoo News, May 18, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/born-kenya-obama-literary-agent-misidentified-birthplace-1991-214423507.html> (accessed May 21, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Smith and Byron Tau, "Birtherism: Where It All Began," Politico, April 22, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html> (accessed May 21, 2012).

colleague produced her own birth certificate so the two could be compared. Nevertheless, the fact-checkers conceded that conspiracy theorists could always raise some new doubt. The resulting article, the most-viewed in PolitiFact's history, concluded this way: "It is possible that Obama conspired his way to the precipice of the world's biggest job, involving a vast network of people and government agencies over decades of lies. Anything's possible. ... But step back and look at the overwhelming evidence to the contrary and your sense of what's reasonable has to take over."<sup>4</sup>

FactCheck.org went one step further, contriving to have two reporters visit the Chicago headquarters of the Obama campaign in August of 2008 to look at the candidate's physical birth certificate.<sup>5</sup> (This was largely a matter of good fortune. A press contact for the campaign, who had resisted calls to release a new version of the certificate, finally relented and invited FactCheck.org to see the document; as it happened, two staffers were going to Chicago for a conference.) The journalists held the document in their hands and felt the raised seal. They took pictures of the seal, of the signature from Hawaii's registrar of vital statistics, and of the official certificate number, and posted these online in high resolution for readers to examine. Titled "Born in the U.S.A.," the article testified that,

FactCheck.org staffers have now seen, touched, examined and photographed the original birth certificate. We conclude that it meets all of the requirements from the State Department for proving U.S. citizenship. Claims that the document lacks a raised seal or a signature are false. We have posted high-resolution photographs of

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Hollyfield, "Obama's Birth Certificate: Final Chapter," PolitiFact, June 27, 2008, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2008/jun/27/obamas-birth-certificate-part-ii/> (accessed May 21, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Amy Hollyfield, "Obama's Birth Certificate: Final Chapter." This was among the articles cited when PolitiFact won a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 2009; see <http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/8406> (accessed May 21, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, telephone, May 22, 2012.

the document as “supporting documents” to this article. Our conclusion: Obama was born in the U.S.A. just as he has always said.<sup>6</sup>

Fact-checkers were forced to revisit the question many times as it surfaced over the next several years, and could now point to the conclusive testimony from that visit to Obama’s headquarters. “Our friends from FactCheck.org went to Chicago, held the document in their questioning hands and examined it closely. Their conclusion: It’s legit,” asserted a PolitiFact item in 2009, written after a correspondent for the news site WorldNetDaily.com raised the issue again in the White House press room.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, Donald Trump and Sarah Palin once again hinted at doubts about the president’s natural-born status during the tentative early days of the Republican presidential primary. The *Washington Post*’s Fact Checker columnist noted the “fine work” of his two fact-checking rivals in debunking such “‘birther’ nonsense,” and linked to FactCheck.org’s piece as decisive proof that the birth document featured a raised seal and a signature.<sup>8</sup>

Conventional news outlets could, in turn, cite the work of the fact-checkers to challenge the rumors. After CNN host Lou Dobbs questioned Obama’s birthplace on his program in 2009, NPR’s *Morning Edition* featured FactCheck.org founder Brooks Jackson to offer an authoritative rebuttal. “This is nonsense,” Jackson declared on the air. The NPR narrator continued: “That’s Brooks Jackson, a former senior investigative reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and for CNN itself. He now runs FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan outfit associated with the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Center. His researchers examined and held candidate Obama’s

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<sup>6</sup> Jess Henig, “Born in the U.S.A.,” FactCheck.org, August 21, 2008, <http://factcheck.org/2008/08/born-in-the-usa/> (accessed May 21, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Farley, “Birthers’ Claim Gibbs Lied When He Said Obama’s Birth Certificate Is Posted on the Internet,” PolitiFact, July 28, 2009, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/jul/28/worldnetdaily/birthers-claim-gibbs-lied-when-he-said-obamas-birt/> (accessed May 21, 2012).

Hawaiian certificate of birth during last year’s presidential campaign. Jackson says President Obama was born where he says he was.”<sup>9</sup>

The episode captured with unusual clarity the fact-checker’s role as testifier: “Jackson says President Obama was born where he says he was.” This is the most basic rationale the new professional fact-checkers offer for their own existence — to be a trusted authority weighing in on factual questions readers don’t have the time or ability to resolve for themselves. But the actual reporting involved in certifying Barack Obama’s background was extremely atypical. Fact-checkers rarely have call to travel, or even to leave their desks. Their articles don’t feature datelines, or on-the-scene descriptions from inside the courtroom or the campaign headquarters. Fact-checkers testify but rarely witness. “It’s desk work,” one experienced PolitiFact reporter told me:

When I do my fact-checking, I don’t go out to meetings. I sit at my desk, I read reports, I read transcripts, I use the phone all the time. ... A lot of reporters like idea of going out and eye-witnessing things. I like that too, but I don’t think that’s what’s needed for political fact-checking. I don’t think you get closer to the truth with politics actually being at the press conference.<sup>10</sup>

Consider a much more typical example of what fact-checkers do every day. During a week I spent at the headquarters of FactCheck.org, in Philadelphia, a delegation of Russian journalists on a tour of the United States visited the fact-checking organization to learn what it does and how it works. An editor explained fact-checking this way:

It’s standard journalism practices that should be used more by more journalists, but sometimes they don’t have the time or they’re on deadline, and ... so it becomes ‘he

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<sup>8</sup> Glenn Kessler, “More ‘Birther’ Nonsense from Donald Trump and Sarah Palin,” Fact Checker, April 12, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-donald-has-a-memory-lapse/2011/04/14/AFrme2MD\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-donald-has-a-memory-lapse/2011/04/14/AFrme2MD_blog.html) (accessed May 21, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> NPR, *Morning Edition*, “Dobbs’ Focus On Obama Birth Draws Fire To CNN,” July 31, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, interview by author, telephone, February 25, 2011.

said, she said,’ and the reader is left confused and not really knowing what’s the truth. And that’s where we try to come in.<sup>11</sup>

To illustrate, the editor mentioned an article encountered while reading the *New York Times* on the way to work, just a few weeks earlier. It was a report on a speech by Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, then a rumored presidential contender. Three paragraphs in the reporter quoted an attack line directed at President Obama: “Let’s look at their record. In the last two years, the federal government spent \$7 trillion and our economy lost seven million jobs. I guess we ought to be glad they didn’t spend \$12 trillion. We might have lost 12 million jobs.”<sup>12</sup> A quick trip to the Bureau of Labor Statistics website would have revealed that actual job losses under the current White House were less than half of what Barbour had claimed. “It doesn’t take a lot to get that information,” the FactCheck.org editor stressed. And yet, “It was a fact that went completely unchallenged by the *New York Times* reporter — and the *New York Times* is the best paper that we have in the country.”<sup>13</sup>

The case offered to the visiting journalists in Philadelphia was typical in a number of ways that will be developed in the following chapters. First, it centered on a well-known politician who was a possible candidate for high office. Professional fact-checkers subscribe in a very explicit and public way to what Herb Gans has called “journalism’s theory of democracy,” and see their core mission as helping citizens to make well-informed choices at the ballot box.<sup>14</sup> They sometimes describe this as “accountability journalism.” (“PolitiFact remains one of the few places in American journalism where elected officials ... are held accountable for what they

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<sup>11</sup> Author’s field notes, June 8, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Zeleny, “Barbour Slams Obama on Economy and Energy,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/14/barbour-slams-obama-on-economy-and-energy/> (accessed June 8, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Author’s field notes, June 8, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert J Gans, *Democracy and the News* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

say,” an editor’s letter explained in 2010.)<sup>15</sup> However, that mission does not extend to holding other journalists accountable for their work. The piece FactCheck.org published the day after Barbour’s speech opened by stating flatly that he had “grossly exaggerated” the real job-loss numbers. It linked to the *New York Times* report (and to a transcript of the speech) as evidence of what the governor had said. But it did not fault the paper at all for failing to challenge the easily checkable claim.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the episode captures very well the “desk work” fact-checkers routinely engage in, even as it advertises an idealized version of that work. The analysis in this case could not have been simpler: The governor cited two statistics, and the fact-checkers compared these to authoritative data. To verify the \$7 trillion in spending, FactCheck.org linked to the Budget of the United States Government, as issued by the Office of Management and Budget. To show that the job loss figure was “not even close,” the article linked to “Table B-1. Employees on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector and selected industry detail,” at the BLS website. Throughout my fieldwork I heard examples like this invoked to explain what fact-checkers do. As we shall see, though, the work of selecting claims to check and establishing their truthfulness in an authoritative way raises thorny practical and epistemological questions, and exposes fact-checkers to wide-ranging criticism from politicians and other media and political voices.

Finally, both of the episodes mentioned above hint at how deeply mediated is the practice of fact-checking journalism at every stage. Fact-checkers scan the news and pore over transcripts looking for suspicious claims; they trace the media origins of political rumors and bogus

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<sup>15</sup> Bill Adair, “Does PolitiFact Seek ‘the Comfort of the Middle Ground?’”, PolitiFact, July 12, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/jul/12/does-politifact-seek-comfort-middle-ground/> (accessed February 23, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Lauren Hitt, “Barbour Inflates Obama’s Job Losses,” FactCheck.org, March 15, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/03/barbour-inflates-obamas-job-losses/> (accessed June 8, 2011).



statistics; they reconstruct for readers the media-political career of these claims; and they promote their conclusions eagerly to other journalists, encouraging news outlets to cite their findings and to invite them on the air. Fact-checkers do, in one sense, assume the journalist's traditional role as witness: They witness and report on *mediated* events. Fact-checkers are both students of and participants in a news ecosystem which assembles news, and constructs authority, through citation and annotation of other media.

### **The elite fact-checkers**

The analysis that follows focuses on the three elite, national fact-checking sites: FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker. As noted in the introduction, however, the language and practice of fact-checking is contested terrain. Its shifting borders include professional journalists, bloggers, media critics, and political actors. Fact-checks appear in press releases from members of Congress; in news stories about a debate or a campaign ad, for instance; and from dedicated outlets that specialize in this kind of research. Fact-checkers may take aim at politicians, at pundits, or (despite the reluctance of the three elite sites) at reporters who let political rhetoric go unchallenged.

The first dedicated fact-checking site in the United States appears to have been Spinsanity, founded in 2001 by three recent college graduates. The site described itself as a “nonpartisan watchdog dedicated to unspinning misleading claims from politicians, pundits and the press.”<sup>17</sup> It ran through the 2004 presidential campaign, ultimately producing more than 400 fact-checking articles by the three co-authors. Its work was syndicated in media outlets including Salon.com and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and yielded a best-selling 2004 book about the news media and

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<sup>17</sup> “About Spinsanity,” Spinsanity, <http://www.spinsanity.org/about/> (accessed September 14, 2010).

the Bush White House. (In a sign of the disciplinary lines that overlap in fact-checking, after Spinsanity closed one of the founders became a reporter; another joined the staff of a journalism review; and the third became a political scientist, studying media and political behavior.)

Partisan media “watchdog” groups on the left and the right have been among the loudest voices in the fact-checking arena. Media Matters for America, whose mission is to “systematically monitor a cross section of print, broadcast, cable, radio, and Internet media outlets for conservative misinformation,” may be the largest fact-checking group in the country, with 70 employees in 2010 and a budget of \$10 million. The organization operates as a kind of permanent political campaign, with staffers scanning broadcast, print, and online news outlets in three shifts spanning an 18-hour day, and producing hundreds of articles per week.<sup>18</sup> (In a 2010 interview the then-chief of staff described the mission as “to stop a smear in its tracks,” arguing that this involves doing the investigative work that reporters too often neglect.)<sup>19</sup> Conservative counterparts include the 25-year-old Media Research Center and its NewsBusters site, focused on “documenting, exposing and neutralizing liberal media bias.”<sup>20</sup> The organization has roughly a dozen people on staff (assisted by numerous outside contributors) monitoring the news media and posting 20 to 30 items per day about what they see.<sup>21</sup>

The three fact-checkers focused on here don’t view such partisan critics as peers and, as we shall see, take pains to distinguish their own objective journalism from what they see as political argument. FactCheck.org, a foundation supported fact-checking site based at the University of

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<sup>18</sup> Author’s field notes, October 15, 2010; Charles Clark, “Media Matters Stakes Claim As High-Volume Watchdog,” *National Journal*, September 4, 2010; “About Us,” Media Matters for America, [http://mediamatters.org/p/about\\_us/](http://mediamatters.org/p/about_us/) (accessed September 9, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Tate Williams, interview by author, Washington, DC, October 15, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> “About NewsBusters.org,” <http://newsbusters.org/about-newsbusters-org> (accessed June 23, 2012). Another MRC site, TimesWatch, monitors the *New York Times*.

<sup>21</sup> Rich Noyes, interview by author, telephone, February 25, 2011.

Pennsylvania, came on the scene in 2003; an editorial staff of six now produces five to 10 fact-checking articles per week. In 2007 it was joined by PolitiFact and by the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker column. PolitiFact, owned by the *Tampa Bay Times* but based in Washington, DC, has five journalists on staff producing 15 to 20 fact-checks each week for its national site. (Journalists from the Congressional Quarterly contributed during PolitiFact's first year. The site also has a network of state franchises, discussed below.) The *Post*'s Fact Checker column launched initially to cover the 2008 campaign but was revived as a permanent feature in 2011. The columnist and one assistant fact-checker produce about five items per week.<sup>22</sup>

These three dedicated fact-checking outlets, with one or two counterparts at traditional news organizations, have become a recognized professional cohort in elite journalism. "Call it the Fact-Checking Summit," announced one report on a mid-2012 meeting at the National Press Club, continuing:

The key players in journalism's burgeoning fact-checking movement were on the scene: pioneer Brooks Jackson, who launched and runs FactCheck.org; Bill Adair, editor of the Pulitzer-winning PolitiFact, the Tampa Bay Times initiative that also has regional branches around the country; Glenn Kessler, who writes the The Fact Checker for the Washington Post; and longtime D.C. correspondent Jim Drinkard, who oversees accountability reporting for the Associated Press.<sup>23</sup>

The three sites are led and staffed by reporters and editors with long backgrounds in print and broadcast news. They offer a reformer's critique of conventional journalism, rejecting what is now often called "false balance" or "he said, she said" reporting.<sup>24</sup> "I am a journalist of many

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<sup>22</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2010; Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010; Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012. See also Cary Spivak, "The Fact-Checking Explosion," *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Rem Rieder, "A Busy Season for Political Fact-Checkers," *American Journalism Review*, June/July 2012.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase "he said, she said" has been used to indicate hard-to-adjudicate factual disputes since at least Anita Hill's Senate testimony at the 1991 confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas; William Safire, "On Language," *New York Times*, April 12, 1998, sec. Magazine. As early as 2003 it became a label for reporting that fails to adjudicate factual disputes even when clear evidence does exist: see e.g. Brent Cunningham, "Re-thinking Objectivity," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2003, 24-32; Jay Rosen, "He Said, She Said,

years — a recovering ‘he said, she said’ reporter, I suppose,” Brooks Jackson, the founder of FactCheck.org, joked at the opening of a fact-checking conference I helped to organize.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, they see themselves as working squarely in the tradition of professional, objective journalism, and subscribe to norms that wall reporters off from the political realm. Thus for instance, a published call for student interns at FactCheck.org stressed that they must be able to “think independently and set aside any partisan biases” (see figure 3.1). Interns are discouraged from participating in political causes or events, or from adorning their office with political materials.<sup>26</sup> As noted earlier, Michael Schudson’s description of an earlier cohort of upstart reporters applies as well to the new professional fact-checkers, who seek very self-consciously to practice “a journalism true to an ideal of objectivity but false to the counterfeit conventions justified in its name.”<sup>27</sup>

The three elite national fact-checkers form a kind of fraternity. “We’re friendly,” a group of state PolitiFact reporters were told during a training session — an unusual lesson for journalists to hear about their main rivals.<sup>28</sup> The three sites cover much of the same material, cite one another in their work, and, as we shall see, come together in moments of controversy. They are rivals joined in a very self-conscious project of pioneering a new kind of journalism. When PolitiFact and the Fact Checker launched, in 2007, Brooks Jackson invited his new counterparts to a conference on “the rise of media fact-checkers.” He welcomed them warmly to the fold; both in turn credited FactCheck.org for inspiring their new ventures. “Well, thanks very much, Brooks, and you’re certainly the father of this movement,” said Michael Dobbs, the *Post*’s

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We Said,” PressThink (blog), June 4, 2004, [http://archive.pressthink.org/2004/06/04/ruten\\_milbank.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2004/06/04/ruten_milbank.html) (accessed September 17, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Brooks Jackson (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News,” meeting hosted by the New America Foundation, Washington, DC, December 14, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Author’s field notes, March 17, 2011, and June 8, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (Basic Books, 1978), 189.

original Fact Checker columnist. “It’s great that we’re now a fraternity. We’re not just ink-stained wretches, we’re ink-stained fact-checkers, and we’re proud of our calling.”<sup>29</sup> When another reporter, Glenn Kessler, took over the newspaper’s fact-checking column in 2011, Jackson and PolitiFact founder Bill Adair soon took him to lunch, welcoming the new Fact Checker to their very small club.<sup>30</sup> “I wouldn’t say we’re competitors, I think we view each other as part of the same peer group,” Kessler would later note.<sup>31</sup>

The elite national fact-checkers are at the center of a wider circle of journalists and news organizations who recognize and take part in the fact-checking movement to varying degrees. In this milieu a kind of institutional history has begun to cohere, one in which fact-checkers trace the roots of the movement through common people and events in their own news careers, reaching back to the 1980s. A decisive turning point, all agree, came with the 1988 US presidential contest between Vice-President George H.W. Bush and Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.<sup>32</sup> Even before that race had concluded it came to be seen as a nadir in American political campaigns, and in campaign reporting. As media critics and journalists themselves argued, coverage became increasingly irrelevant by continuing to focus on speeches and policy papers while mostly ignoring the vicious and truth-distorting “air war” that absorbed most of the candidates’ money and, perhaps, decided the outcome.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Dobbs (comment at “Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers,” conference at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Washington, DC, November 9, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Author’s field notes, February 15, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> C-SPAN, *Q&A*, “Q&A with Glenn Kessler,” January 15, 2012; see transcript at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/303324-1> (accessed April 18, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Lori Robertson, “Campaign Trail Veterans for Truth,” *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2005, <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=3784> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Tom Rosenstiel, “Policing Political Ads,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1990.

After the election *Washington Post* columnist David Broder wrote a series of columns about the debacle, and called on reporters to start “truth-squadding” campaign ads.<sup>34</sup> He drew attention to like-minded voices in journalism and in academia (notably, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Larry J. Sabato, who became regular resources for reporters and media critics writing on these questions). As the 1990 campaigns took shape, Broder offered a recipe for reporters to avoid past mistakes:

We should treat every ad as if it were a speech by the candidate himself. In fact, it will be seen and heard by far more people than any speech he gives to a live audience. ... Demand the supporting evidence from the candidate airing the ad, get rebuttal information from his opponent and then investigate the situation enough ourselves that we can tell the reader what is factual and what is destructive fiction. ... And we ought not to be squeamish about saying in plain language when we catch a candidate lying, exaggerating or distorting the facts.<sup>35</sup>

The 1988 race had offered a handful of prototypes, as Broder noted. Late in the campaign, after Dukakis had made an issue of false charges leveled in his opponent’s ads, some reporters took the cue by writing about deceptive advertising from both candidates.<sup>36</sup> (The infamous “Tank” ad accusing Dukakis of voting against national defense received special attention. After the critiques appeared, the Bush campaign held a press conference to defend its TV spots.) During the 1990 races such “adwatch” pieces multiplied, especially in newspapers, where they were informally known as “truth boxes.” One hopeful report on the trend noted,

This year, the American news media have embarked on what many campaign professionals and journalists consider the first real advance in press coverage of

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<sup>34</sup> David Broder, “Should the Media Police the Accuracy of Political Ads?”; “Five Ways to Put Some Sanity Back in Elections,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 1990; “Put Sanity Back Into Our Elections,” February 25, 1990; “Sick of Issueless Campaigns,” March 28, 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Broder, “Five Ways to Put Some Sanity Back in Elections.”

<sup>36</sup> Broder, “Should the Media Police the Accuracy of Political Ads?”; see e.g. Lloyd Grove, “Campaign Ads Play Fast and Loose With the Truth,” *Washington Post*, October 21, 1988, A1.

politics since Theodore White began looking behind the scenes at the mechanics of campaigning in his landmark book, “The Making of the President 1960.”<sup>37</sup>

In the 1992 election, more than half of the largest US newspapers ran at least one adwatch report, a figure that would rise (though fitfully) to reach 80 percent in 2006.<sup>38</sup> Broadcast news outlets also began running adwatch segments more regularly, led by the 24-hour CNN, which embraced the format eagerly.<sup>39</sup> A survey of TV news directors found that the number airing adwatch segments rose from below 10 percent in the mid-1990s, to nearly half a decade later.<sup>40</sup>

FactCheck.org was a kind of stepchild of this surge in adwatching. Brooks Jackson, then a political correspondent at CNN, was drafted by the network in 1991 to work on adwatch segments. He had misgivings about the assignment: “I was reluctant to do it, because it didn’t fit what I had by training and long experience at the AP and the *Wall Street Journal* come to think of as objective journalism, because it called for a little bit of editorializing — calling things false or misleading and stating a conclusion.” He embraced the new format, though, and it became popular at the network; soon the segments began to challenge claims beyond political advertising, taking the name “Fact Check.” To refine the format Jackson worked closely with communications scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson, whose research suggested that poorly designed adwatch pieces might actually reinforce the messages they intend to debunk.<sup>41</sup> (Research on this

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<sup>37</sup> Rosenstiel, “Policing Political TV Ads”; see also Bill Adair and Angie Drobnic Holan, “Remembering David Broder and His Passion for Fact-Checking,” PolitiFact, March 11, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/mar/11/remembering-david-broder/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Justin Bank, *Newspaper Adwatch Stories: Coming Back Strong* (Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center, November 9, 2007). The study examined the 34 largest newspapers with full text available for searching.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2012; see also NPR, *All Things Considered*, “Media & The Campaign: Better This Year?,” May 26, 1992.

<sup>40</sup> Bob Papper, *TV Adwatch Stories: On the Rise* (Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center, November 9, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Broadcast Adwatch Effects: A Field Experiment,” *Communication Research* 21, no. 3 (June, 1994): 342–365; Jamieson and Cappella, “Setting the Record Straight Do Ad Watches Help or Hurt?,” *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 2, no. 1 (January, 1997): 13–22.

so-called “eye candy” effect resulted in, for instance, the technique of setting the ad under review off at an angle rather than letting it fill the screen.)<sup>42</sup>

By 2003, however, CNN’s interest in the format had waned and Jackson found himself looking for a job. He and Jamieson launched FactCheck.org that year with funding from the Annenberg Foundation. Initially conceived as a project for the 2004 election, FactCheck.org proved unexpectedly popular (its fame grew after being cited by Vice-President Dick Cheney in a debate with his Democratic challenger, John Edwards) and was established as a year-round venture.<sup>43</sup> The site’s mission statement declares, “We are a nonpartisan, nonprofit ‘consumer advocate’ for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics.”<sup>44</sup> In an interview shortly after the site launched, Jackson offered a more reform-minded reading of the site’s role in journalism:

Well, you know, ever since Teddy White wrote that wonderful book, *The Making of the President, 1960*, reporters have been, I think, tilting too far in the direction of reporting campaigns as horse races... I think the pendulum swung a generation or even two ago a little too far in the direction of reporting process. If FactCheck.org makes a small effort toward nudging that pendulum back in the direction of covering substance, then I think we will have accomplished something worth accomplishing.<sup>45</sup>

The launch of FactCheck.org was accompanied by a surge in fact-checking by newspapers and television stations. This has been described, both at the time and in hindsight, as a reaction to what political journalists saw as unusually harsh “air war” in the 2004 race — in particular the “Swift Boat” spots raising vicious rumors about the Vietnam service of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. One journalist commented after the race, “I think the Swift Boat Veterans

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<sup>42</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2012; see also Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *UnSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* (New York: Random House, 2007), 52-3; Robertson, “Campaign Trail Veterans for Truth.”

<sup>43</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2012; Eugene Kiely, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, March 17, 2011; Spivak, “The Fact-Checking Explosion.”

<sup>44</sup> See “About Us,” FactCheck.org, <http://factcheck.org/about/> (accessed May 8, 2012).



for Truth is really what caused the rebirth or certainly the explosion of fact-checks that's now taking place. ... It sort of gave a second life to some of the tools that maybe hadn't been used as much in recent campaigns."<sup>46</sup>

The next presidential election cycle brought the two new dedicated fact-checking sites. PolitiFact's founder and top editor Bill Adair, also the Washington bureau chief for the *Tampa Bay Times* (formerly called the *St. Petersburg Times*), has traced his interest in fact-checking to the mid-1980s. As a college student in Arizona, he read work by Kathleen Hall Jamieson on the impact of campaign commercials, and produced a senior thesis about a deceptive ad campaign by state hospitals seeking to avoid new regulations. Adair has recalled the 1990s surge in fact-checking that followed Broder's columns as intense but short-lived, ultimately stifled by a backlash from politicians and the public. ("I think that journalists got scared in the 1990s that to say something's false was to be biased, was to take a side," he commented in an interview.)<sup>47</sup>

A personal turning point as a journalist came while covering the 2004 campaigns, and especially an angry speech by Georgia's Zell Miller at the Republican National Convention.<sup>48</sup> The episode comes up often in the fact-checking milieu: Miller listed a litany of military programs Democratic presidential contender John Kerry had voted against, to suggest he was weak on defense — though, as political journalists understood well, many were procedural votes

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<sup>45</sup> WNYC, *On the Media*, "Not So Fast," January 16, 2004, <http://www.onthemedial.org/2004/jan/16/not-so-fast/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Robertson, "Campaign Trail Veterans for Truth"; see also PBS, *Newshour*, "Fact Checking the 2004 Presidential Debates," October 21, 2004; and discussion at "Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers."

<sup>47</sup> Bill Adair, interviews by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2010, and February 19, 2011; see also comments at "Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers."

<sup>48</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2010; see also comments at "Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers"; Gabrielle Gorder, "Just the Facts: An Interview with Bill Adair, Founder and Editor of PolitiFact," NPF Newsbag, National Press Foundation, October 3, 2011, <http://nationalpress.org/blogs/newsbag/just-the-facts-an-interview-with-bill-adair-founder-and-editor-of-politifac/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

against versions of bills Kerry ultimately supported.<sup>49</sup> “The speech ... was kind of an epiphany for me, where I did nothing but write a horse-race story and really felt guilty about it,” Adair has said, adding on another occasion, “This grew out of my own guilt. I had covered political campaigns and felt that I had been a passive co-conspirator in sort of passing along inaccurate information and hadn’t fact-checked it the way I should.”<sup>50</sup>

Adair proposed PolitiFact to his editors at the *St. Petersburg Times* — with the tentative name “Campaign Referee” — as a version of FactCheck.org built around a database, rather than a blog. “My idea was, take what FactCheck was doing and package it in a way that was less of a blog, and takes advantage of the Web,” he explained. “By building it from scratch we were able to create what I think is truly a new form of journalism.” Every claim evaluated by PolitiFact’s fact-checkers receives a “Truth-O-Meter” rating along a six-point scale, running from “True” to “Pants on Fire.” Completed rulings become part of a database that can be accessed according to the topic, the rating, and, crucially, the speaker, making it possible to look up the complete Truth-O-Meter record of public figures tracked by the site.<sup>51</sup> The overarching goal, the website declares, is “to help you find the truth in politics.”<sup>52</sup>

In 2010 PolitiFact began licensing its brand and its methodology to state media partners, who pay roughly \$30,000 the first year and about \$1,000 per month thereafter. The tenth such franchise, PolitiFact Tennessee, went live in January 2012, as a partnership between two newspapers, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and the *Knoxville News Sentinel*. State franchises

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<sup>49</sup> Miller was challenged about his version in interviews following the speech; see CNN, *Live Event/Special*, “Interview with Senator Zell Miller,” September 1, 2004; MSNBC, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, September 1, 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Bill Adair (comments at “Fact-Checking in the News” and at “The Facts of Political Life,” panel discussion at the New America Foundation, Washington, DC, February 28, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2012; author’s field notes, February 7, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> “About PolitiFact,” PolitiFact, <http://www.politifact.com/about/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

operate independently after being trained in the PolitiFact methods. They commit to producing several items per week, which run on a dedicated page at [politifact.com](http://politifact.com) and become part of the master Truth-O-Meter database. In turn, state media partners sell ads against their stories at the site, and also have the right to carry PolitiFact stories in their print editions or to syndicate them to other news outlets in the state.<sup>53</sup> An editor's note welcoming Tennessee to the fold offered this summary of the PolitiFact network: "Our national staff and state partners have dedicated the equivalent of 35 full-time journalists to fact-checking and have published more than 4,800 Truth-O-Meter articles."<sup>54</sup>

The *Washington Post* also inaugurated its fact-checking column in 2007. Political reporter Michael Dobbs had retired from the *Post* but was invited back to cover the 2008 presidential race. "I wanted to correct what I saw as some of the flaws in political reporting, the focus on the horse race and the 'he said, she said,'" Dobbs explained at the fact-checking conference in 2007. He proposed a column that would award some sort of Pinocchio prize to politicians who distorted the truth: "To my surprise, there was virtually no debate at all. Nobody discussed these sort of deep, underlying journalistic issues, which they would have agonized over just a few years ago."<sup>55</sup> The Fact Checker column ran through the election, rating statements on a four-Pinocchio scale; truthful claims earned a Geppetto. It was revived as a permanent feature in 2011, under Kessler, and now carries roughly five fact-checks per week online. (Select columns

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<sup>53</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2012; Steve Meyers, "PolitiFact Takes Lesson from Fast-Food Industry as it Franchises Fact Checking," Poynter, May 3, 2011, <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/102422/politifact-takes-lesson-from-fast-food-industry-as-it-franchises-fact-checking/> (accessed December 1, 2011); Spivak, "The Fact-Checking Explosion," author's field notes, February 7, 9, and 17, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Bill Adair, "Introducing PolitiFact Tennessee, Our 10th State," PolitiFact, January 16, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2012/jan/16/introducing-politifact-tennessee-our-10th-state-si/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Michael Dobbs (comments at "Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers").

appear in print, usually on Sundays in the opinion pages.) In December of 2011 the Fact Checker site began compiling average Pinocchio scores for the best-known political figures it rates.<sup>56</sup>

Like their peers, Dobbs and Kessler trace a kind of pre-history of professional fact-checking in their own careers. In an interview, Kessler pointed to fact-checking articles he wrote covering the 1996 presidential race for *Newsday*, and cited his background covering diplomacy and international affairs — beats which demand interpretation by the reporter.<sup>57</sup> Dobbs has noted his own experience investigating the “Swift Boat” campaign against John Kerry (an episode many fact-checkers mention) and, in the 1980s, covering Eastern Europe and the fall of the Soviet Union: “When we were covering that story, we did not try to be fair and balanced; we tried to be fair, but we didn’t try to be balanced.” In a report on the history of fact-checking, prepared for a conference I helped to organize, Dobbs found an early precursor in fact-checking sidebars the *Post* ran in the early 1980s, challenging misstatements by President Ronald Reagan. (See figure 3.2.) According to one journalist’s recollections cited in the report, the *Post* abandoned the practice after too many readers objected: “We stopped truth-squadding every press conference. We left it then to the Democrats. . . . We would quote both sides.”<sup>58</sup>

### **“The art of finding a checkable fact”**

The job of the professional fact-checker begins with choosing claims to check from countless public utterances made every day on matters large and small. Editors at PolitiFact sometimes call this “the art of finding a checkable fact.” Like building a newspaper or a newscast out of the

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<sup>56</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012; Ben Smith, “Kessler to Pen Post Political Fact Column,” *Politico*, December 23, 2010, [http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1210/Kessler\\_to\\_pen\\_Post\\_political\\_fact\\_column.html](http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1210/Kessler_to_pen_Post_political_fact_column.html) (accessed February 22, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012; see also *Q&A*, “Q&A with Glenn Kessler.”

day's events, it is a trickier and more fraught process than the routine cases, such as Governor Barbour's "gross exaggeration," can make it seem. Finding facts to check involves judgements of newsworthiness, fairness, practicality, and to some critics at least, scientific validity. For dedicated fact-checking groups it invariably means formulating policies about what kinds of claims can or should be checked and who in public life merits this sort of scrutiny. Fact-checkers go about this selection process naturally and usually without controversy, even as they sometimes acknowledge the larger questions it raises.

The elite, professional fact-checkers all focus their attention on political figures, and especially on officeholders and candidates. "It is my commitment that every politician in America should face the Truth-O-Meter," PolitiFact founder Bill Adair declared, quite earnestly, during a visit to a classroom of journalism students.<sup>59</sup> This focus is in keeping with the fact-checkers' core mission of providing a tool citizens can use to make informed political choices. Brooks Jackson, the founder of FactCheck.org, explained that mission this way: "Our job, it seems to me, and the only job that any journalist can really properly aspire to, is to be a resource for those citizens who honestly are bewildered and confused and looking for help in sorting out fact from fiction."<sup>60</sup> This democratic mission echoes clearly in the official literature of the elite fact-checkers and comes up constantly in formal and informal discourse. It is embodied in the permanent report cards maintained by PolitiFact and, since the end of 2011, by the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker column. Like a baseball card, these pages offer key statistics summarizing

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Dobbs (comments at "Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers"); Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Author's field notes, October 3, 2011. Adair has made the declaration elsewhere; see e.g. Abby Brownback, "Facing the Truth-O-Meter," *American Journalism Review*, March, 2010, <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4868>.

<sup>60</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

the performance of an individual political figure; a voter can easily compare the fact-checking records of, say, President Obama and his Republican challengers.<sup>61</sup>

One outside analysis found that over the course of 2010 nearly three-quarters of Truth-O-Meter rulings by PolitiFact focused on “current and former political officeholders and elected officials.”<sup>62</sup> The share is higher FactCheck.org and especially at the Post’s Fact-Checker, which targets “statements by political figures and government officials.”<sup>63</sup> However professional fact-checkers also take on statements from political action committees, labor unions, trade associations, and other political entities. FactCheck.org focuses on “major U.S. political players,” including such groups; the organization also puts real energy into debunking chain emails and responding directly to readers who ask about the political rumors they encounter online. “I had no idea when we started out the extent to which people were being bamboozled by this stuff,” Brooks Jackson explained in an interview. “It’s just under the surface and the mainstream news organizations don’t pay much attention to it. But an awful lot of people are getting what they think is information this way.”<sup>64</sup> On the first day of a training session I observed, interns were armed with a detailed protocol for responding to these reader queries, including an 11-page list of the most common Internet rumors and how they had been debunked.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bill Adair has used this analogy: “I think of it as like the back of a baseball card. You know — that it’s sort of someone’s career statistics.” See C-SPAN, *Washington Journal*, August 4, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Eric Ostermeier, “Selection Bias? PolitiFact Rates Republican Statements as False at 3 Times the Rate of Democrats,” *Smart Politics* (blog), February 10, 2011, [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2011/02/selection\\_bias\\_politifact\\_rate.php](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2011/02/selection_bias_politifact_rate.php) (accessed February 11, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Glen Kessler, “About the Fact Checker,” *The Fact Checker*, March 1, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/about-the-fact-checker/2011/12/05/gIQAa0FBYO\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/about-the-fact-checker/2011/12/05/gIQAa0FBYO_blog.html) (accessed April 11, 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Author’s field notes, June 6, 2011.

PolitiFact casts the widest net, challenging “anyone who speaks up in American politics,” as a draft statement of principles I was given explained. The group interprets this mandate playfully at times. In addition to organized political groups and chain emails PolitiFact has taken to task, for instance, “bloggers,” “a yard sign,” and “18% of the American public” (who, as measured by one poll, continued to believe President Obama is a Muslim).<sup>66</sup> During my fieldwork, PolitiFact’s national staff had fun rating a claim about gun deaths made in the funny pages by “Doonesbury” character Mark Slackmeyer.<sup>67</sup> The illustration for the piece featured a colorful panel from the comic strip, and the analysis turned mainly on an email interview with strip creator Garry Trudeau. (Trudeau helpfully clarified that in citing the number of deaths by gunfire “at home,” his fictional radio host meant Americans killed in the US, not necessarily in their dwellings.) Now “Doonesbury” comes up — between Debbie Dooley, a Tea Party member in Georgia, and Chris Dorworth, a Florida state legislator — in PolitiFact’s permanent database of public figures who have faced the Truth-O-Meter. The accompanying headshot is of Slackmeyer, not Trudeau.

Professional fact-checkers differ most sharply in their stance on scrutinizing fellow media figures. None of the three sites will directly challenge a reporter or a news outlet as the source of a claim, in the manner of openly partisan media critics like Media Matters or the Media Research Center. However, PolitiFact does examine statements by pundits, columnists, and editorial writers, which sometimes means challenging fellow journalists. The group has sought to expand this focus, though it can complicate relationships with other media outlets. (For instance, ABC’s

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<sup>66</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, “Obama a Muslim? No He’s Not. The Evidence Has Not Changed,” PolitiFact, August 26, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2010/aug/26/18-percent-american-public/obama-muslim-no-hes-not-evidence-has-not-changed/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Doonesbury Strip Says 270,000 Americans Have Been Killed by Guns Since 9/11,” PolitiFact, February 14, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/14/doonesbury/doonesbury-strip-says-270000-americans-have-been-k/> (accessed February 15, 2011).

“This Week,” which agreed to a formal fact-checking partnership with PolitiFact in April 2010, initially balked at including fact-checks of its own pundits in the Truth-O-Meter feed on the show’s website.)<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile both FactCheck.org and the *Post*’s Fact-Checker column don’t challenge pundits or opinion journalists. At FactCheck.org this was sometimes explained to me as a matter of resources — it would require additional staff to check “the talking heads,” when it is hard enough keeping up with falsehoods peddled by politicians.<sup>69</sup> However excluding pundits also seems to be conflated with a general ban on challenging opinion. During a training session, an editor at FactCheck.org walked interns through the transcript of a recent episode of ABC’s “This Week,” looking for claims to check. When the economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman appeared on the page, the editor skipped past his remarks: “We don’t care what Paul Krugman says. He’s a liberal economist, and he’s got an opinion, and he’s not running for office.”<sup>70</sup> (In contrast, Krugman’s claims have been assessed more than a dozen times by PolitiFact, where he has earned unusually high marks for overall veracity.)

Though they differ somewhat in whom they check, elite fact-checkers agree on that basic criterion of what to check: facts, not opinions. This is a constant refrain. In the training session just noted, the FactCheck.org editor turned from Krugman’s comments to an extended “This Week” interview with Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, an obvious candidate for fact-checking. Asked about his stance on the federal government’s 2009 “bailout” of American automakers, Romney declared that billions of dollars would have been saved had the automakers moved more quickly into bankruptcy. “That’s an opinion, there’s no way to fact-check that,” the

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<sup>68</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Eugene Kiely, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, March 17, 2011.



staffer told the interns, explaining that Romney hewed to a “different philosophy” economically from the Obama Administration. In contrast Romney’s next claim, that the President had promised unemployment would stay below 8 percent, was easy to check and provably false. A segment featuring a former White House economic advisor yielded a quick flurry of checkable facts, such as the assertion that the economy had added a million private-sector jobs in the last six months. The editor seized on the remark: “*That’s* something we can fact-check. It’s a fact, it’s a number.”<sup>71</sup>

The same point was driven home during a three-day training session for state political reporters being inducted into the PolitiFact network.<sup>72</sup> Every Truth-O-Meter item begins with the “ruling statement,” the precise claim being checked. This is usually a brief, verbatim quote, though it may also paraphrase the person being checked; what it can’t ever be is a statement of opinion. The Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual” prepared for PolitiFact franchises repeats the lesson: “So what’s a good fact to check? First, needless to say, it can’t be an opinion.”<sup>73</sup> The manual goes on to explain that there’s no way to check the assertion that, for instance, taxes should be lower.

Of course many factual claims also prove impossible to verify, making “checkability” a basic criterion. Fact-checkers rely whenever possible on public data sources and independent experts, and cannot weigh in decisively where such resources aren’t helpful. Many important but unverifiable claims emerge in the area of national security; two examples I heard were the claim that more al Qaeda members operate in Pakistan than Afghanistan, and President Obama’s

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<sup>70</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011.

assertion that the US no longer tortures prisoners.<sup>74</sup> (There is an irony in this, as elite fact-checkers have called their movement a response to the failure of the American press during the run-up to the Iraq War.<sup>75</sup> Fact-checking groups would have been hard pressed to decide whether Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” in any convincing manner.)

The high “spike rate” for pieces which can’t be verified is a point of pride at PolitiFact. At a training session, an editor described the work that went into a Truth-O-Meter item on whether Barack Obama’s presidential campaign had hidden the candidate’s real stance on the North American Free Trade Agreement. The piece was spiked, after a great deal of research, by a higher-up who said simply, “You don’t have it. You don’t have the proof.” “And I was proud,” the editor continued, “because I think it showed our high standards.”<sup>76</sup> The Truth-O-Meter manual echoes the point: “There’s no shame for the reporter who wrote an item that got spiked. There simply weren’t enough facts for the Meter.”<sup>77</sup>

The three elite fact-checkers all focus on statements which may be false. There is little point in confirming, say, that there are fifty states in the union; fact-checkers apply a “reasonable person” standard to dismiss claims which are self-evidently true, or which most people know to be true. They differ in their approach to suspect statements, however. FactCheck.org only publishes analyses of claims that turn out to be false. If a reporter knows or if research shows that a budget statistic is accurate, for instance, the work stops there. (Exceptions may be made when a truthful claim is widely believed to be false, according to Jackson.) More than once I heard this explained as matter of resources — to write up an analysis of truthful claims would

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<sup>74</sup> Angie Holan, interview by author, telephone, February 25, 2011; author’s field notes, February 7 and 9, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> See for instance Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking*.

<sup>76</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011.

leave less time to debunk false ones. “We’re not going to write when they’re right, because we don’t have enough time,” an editor instructed during training. “We’re only looking for stuff that’s wrong.”<sup>78</sup> The focus on falsehood colors the selection process. “We look for things that don’t sound right,” Brooks Jackson has explained.<sup>79</sup>

Fact-checkers who formally rate public statements along a truthfulness scale take a different approach, one that models in principle at least an experimental protocol. At PolitiFact, choosing a claim to check initiates a somewhat formalized set of procedures that always results in a ruling, unless insufficient evidence is found. A statement of principles I was shown declared, “Fact-checking journalism has often focused on falsehoods, which paints a distorted picture of the political discourse. ... Our goal is to rate the claims that people are curious about. If a claim ends up being True, we still publish an item.” (Just over one-third of published Truth-O-Meter items receive a rating of True or Mostly True.)<sup>80</sup> This open approach lends some validity to the statistical “report cards” on individual politicians and to other, sometimes playful measures PolitiFact has developed. (The site’s iPhone app features a “Truth Index,” modeled on stock-market indices, meant to capture overall political mendacity day by day. It also offers subject-specific tallies that indicate, for instance, a disproportionate level of deception in the health-care debate.) However, PolitiFact stops short of claiming scientific rigor in its selection process. Asked by a student journalist how the group chooses facts to check, Bill Adair responded, “We’re guided by news judgement. And we are all journalists, we’re not social scientists.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Brooks Jackson (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News”).

<sup>80</sup> PolitiFact statistics on total Truth-O-Meter rulings through mid-2012 indicate the following distribution: True, 17 percent; Mostly True, 19 percent; Half True, 21 percent; Mostly False, 14 percent; False, 20 percent; Pants on Fire, 9 percent.

<sup>81</sup> Author’s field notes, October 3, 2011.

In my own experience at PolitiFact finding claims to check, it was very tempting to focus on items which I thought were probably false — to behave, in effect, more like a policeman than a scientist. Veteran fact-checkers have reported something similar. Glenn Kessler, the *Washington Post*'s Fact-Checker columnist, has said the main piece of advice his predecessor offered was to run more “Geppettos,” the label given to truthful claims on the site’s four-Pinocchio scale. Nevertheless, Kessler lamented, he managed to give only four or five true ratings in the course of a year — “the problem is there’s so many untrue statements out there that I haven’t really found the opportunity to do it.”<sup>82</sup>

### **News values and fact-checking**

Even discarding statements of opinion and those which are obviously true or seem impossible to verify, fact-checkers have many more claims to choose from than they can possibly examine. To sort through them they apply a version of journalism’s familiar “news sense” — the principles of story selection, difficult to articulate, which reporters and editors pride themselves on acquiring on the job.<sup>83</sup> Fact-checkers focus first of all on claims about important policy matters, claims which highlight the choice between political candidates (usually, accusations leveled by one candidate against another), and claims which have caused controversy or received media attention. Though their rulings frequently turn on narrow questions of phrasing, fact-checkers also purport not to challenge verbal slips or mistakes made “under the klieg lights,” as I heard.<sup>84</sup> “I make a distinction between statements that are made in prepared speeches versus things that might be said off-the-cuff,” the *Post*’s Glenn Kessler has

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<sup>82</sup> “Q&A with Glenn Kessler,” *Q&A*, C-SPAN, January 15, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/303324-1> (accessed April 18, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> See discussion of journalism’s “fundamental biases” in Jack Fuller, *News Values: Ideas for an Information Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7-10.

explained.<sup>85</sup> The same point was emphasized in training sessions at PolitiFact as well as FactCheck.org, whose interns were told, “We’re not here to poke anybody in the eye.”<sup>86</sup>

Fact-checkers temper this news sense with a fairly self-conscious effort to take into account what average citizens understand or care about. All of the sites solicit statements to check from their readers, and point out when an item ran by popular demand. At PolitiFact, roughly one-third of Truth-O-Meter items originate in reader queries, I heard. Internally, staffers sometimes refer to “the Mabel test,” invoking a hypothetical middle-income American far from Washington, DC. The statement of principles argued, “Our most important principle in choosing a fact to check is whether a typical person who heard the statement would wonder, *Is that true?*” Similarly, when visiting journalists asked how FactCheck.org selects facts to check, an editor explained the group’s news judgement this way: “Is this of some national significance? Is it something that most people would be interested in knowing? ... Or is it just so outrageous and crazy that it’d be something that we should do?”<sup>87</sup>

Fact-checking thus embodies distinct elements of “accountability” journalism as well as “explanatory” or “service” journalism, all terms I heard fact-checkers use to describe what they do. Fact-checkers also cultivate their own occupational sense of items which will be fun or challenging to investigate, independent of their political significance or service to readers. Like other journalists, they enjoy the opportunity to interview interesting people or to write about unusual subjects. The “Doonesbury” item mentioned above is one example; though the analysis was straightforward, the piece offered a chance to talk to a famous cartoonist and to describe the

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<sup>84</sup> Author’s field notes, October 3, 2011.

<sup>85</sup> NPR, *Talk of the Nation*, “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire,” January 10, 2012.

<sup>86</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 8 and 15, 2011; comments at “Fact-Checking in the News.”

strip panel by panel, including the visit from a space alien that sets up a final wisecrack. Humor and even local boosterism find a place in fact-checking. As spring approached in 2011, PolitiFact Georgia rated the “claim” by Atlanta’s celebrity groundhog General Beauregard Lee to be more accurate than Pennsylvania’s better-known Punxsutawney Phil. (The boast was judged to be “Mostly True” based on weather service data and an interview with a human meteorologist.)<sup>88</sup>

In other cases the analysis itself holds appeal. During my visit to PolitiFact the site issued a “Barely True” rating (since relabeled “Mostly False” in a site-wide revision) to Vice President Joe Biden for the claim that shutting down Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor would require seven new lanes on highway I-95.<sup>89</sup> Nobody had proposed to shut down the rail line; Biden’s comment was meant to illustrate the importance of the nation’s rail infrastructure, a point which PolitiFact’s analysis (concluding the real figure would be as little as one lane in each direction) hardly disputed. But the piece, which took a day and a half to report, raised all kinds of challenging questions: How had Biden come up with the figure? Would all of the Amtrak riders take to their cars? (Wouldn’t some opt for the bus, or even the airport?) How should you account for daily peaks and valleys in ridership? How does population growth figure into the math? The panel of editors who reviewed the item remarked on its complexity and joked about trying to get their heads around all of the variables.<sup>90</sup>

The news sense developed by traditional newspaper editors or broadcast news producers embraces these elements as well. Some stories seem self-evidently important; others are justified

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<sup>88</sup> Willoughby Mariano, “Metro Atlanta Groundhog Boasts More Accuracy than Punxsutawney Phil,” PolitiFact Georgia, February 4, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/georgia/statements/2011/feb/04/general-beauregard-beau-lee/metro-atlanta-groundhog-boasts-more-accuracy-punxs/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Joe Biden Says that Closing Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor Would Force I-95 to Expand by Seven Lanes,” PolitiFact, February 11, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/11/joe-biden/joe-biden-says-closing-northeast-corridor-would-fo/> (accessed February 12, 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Author’s field notes, February 11, 2011.

in terms of audience appeal or utility; and still others aim for peer recognition or tickle a shared journalistic sensibility. (These categories are neither exclusive nor exhaustive, of course.) But the fact-checker's news sense also differs from the deadline reporter's, most markedly in a diminished emphasis on timeliness, originality, and exclusivity. The elite fact-checking outlets routinely issue verdicts days or even weeks after the statement being checked was made. And fact-checks run regardless of whether another news outlet or fact-checker has already covered the same ground.

As noted, fact-checkers take pride in the work that goes into each piece and the time it takes to produce. They often say that what distinguishes their brand of journalism from deadline reporting is having the time and the space to investigate an issue thoroughly. "This is not one-call journalism," one editor told a group of state reporters — including several seasoned veterans — being trained in the PolitiFact method. Trainees learned that Truth-O-Meter items can take days, and sometimes much longer, to report thoroughly.<sup>91</sup> The group celebrates a willingness to tackle complex questions that might put off other fact-checkers. (One example I heard several times was the claim by Republican presidential hopeful Herman Cain, a businessman, to have saved Godfather's Pizza as CEO of the restaurant chain. PolitiFact largely confirmed Cain's boast in a 1,600-word fact-check that cited more than 30 distinct sources and took two weeks to research.)<sup>92</sup>

FactCheck.org's Brooks Jackson made the same point to me more than once. "If you're going to do it right, it takes time," he said, mentioning a newly posted piece on federal salaries

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<sup>91</sup> Author's field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Angie Drobic Holan, "Did Herman Cain turn around Godfather's Pizza?", PolitiFact, June 10, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/jun/10/herman-cain/herman-cain-godfathers-pizza-turn-around/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

which had gone through two weeks of reporting and revisions.<sup>93</sup> The group’s interns heard the message from the start of their training: “Take your time. We have the luxury of time. We’re not trying to beat the clock. . . . One of our luxuries is that we can be thorough.”<sup>94</sup> The standard explanation for the failure of traditional reporters to challenge false claims, which I heard from nearly every fact-checker I spoke to, was that deadline pressures simply don’t permit it. Similarly, fact-checkers appear to worry less than their traditional peers about getting “scooped,” or about finding a new “hook” for an item that has been challenged before. False claims resurface all of the time, PolitiFact trainees learned, and fact-checkers have to be prepared to cover an old issue anew.

The old way of thinking in the newsprint era was, if it was in the paper we just assumed everybody had read it. How many times have you heard that from an editor — “We had that, let’s move on.” You don’t want to repeat the news, it doesn’t seem as fresh. But in the case of fact-checking, it’s really not a good answer to say, “Well, we ran that.”<sup>95</sup>

The same applies to items that have been already refuted by another site. A tremendous amount of overlap exists in the claims checked by FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the Fact-Checker, who frequently cite one another in their published articles. “That’s the nature [of fact-checking],” Kessler has explained. “It doesn’t really matter that they’ve done it before and I haven’t.”<sup>96</sup>

Fact-checkers concede that disagreement in their rulings can cause discomfort. As Kessler noted in an on-air interview, “We sometimes get a little ruffled when we come to different conclusions. . . . But generally we tend to see eye-to-eye on things.”<sup>97</sup> PolitiFact in late 2011

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<sup>93</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Glenn Kessler (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News”).

<sup>97</sup> *Q&A*, “Q&A with Glenn Kessler.”



reconsidered a ruling, on Vice-President Biden's rhetoric linking budget cuts to rising crime, after both readers and the other elite fact-checkers saw it very differently. "It was a disconcerting schism for us. It's much more satisfying when the major fact-checking organizations agree, because we know we've reached the same conclusions independently," an editor's letter remarked.<sup>98</sup> (As we shall see in the next chapter, fact-checkers take refuge in one another's work when controversy arises. Defending PolitiFact's controversial choice for the 2011 "Lie of the Year," the claim by many Democrats that Republican budget plans would "end Medicare," Bill Adair has stressed that his fellow fact-checkers also singled it out as an egregious falsehood.)<sup>99</sup>

This is not to say the relationship is not competitive. Staffers have a sense of which outlet fact-checked a claim first, or best. Jackson, who launched FactCheck.org in 2003, has commented ruefully on the increased pressure to turn items around quickly since his rivals appeared on the scene: "When we're fact-checking a debate, for example ... we used to wait and go through the transcript, but now there's so much competition from these other guys, people expect us to get our stuff up in less than 24 hours."<sup>100</sup> PolitiFact in particular takes pride in being a little quicker than its peers, managing to weigh in on public controversies while they are still unfolding in the news.<sup>101</sup> But, as noted earlier, this is the friendly competition of rivals pioneering a new enterprise. The elite fact-checkers often appear together at conferences and panel discussions. They praise one another at these public forums, in their published work, and in internal discussions and training sessions.

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<sup>98</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, "When Fact-Checkers Disagree," PolitiFact, "October 21, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/oct/21/when-fact-checkers-disagree/> (accessed October 25, 2011).

<sup>99</sup> See e.g. Adair's comments at "The Facts of Political Life."

<sup>100</sup> Brooks Jackson (comment at "Fact-Checking in the News").

<sup>101</sup> Author's field notes, February 17, 2011.

Even as they downplay competitive pressure and tell staffers to slow down, not speed up, fact-checkers clearly do strive to be timely and relevant. They package fact-checking stories around current events (such as a debate or a convention) and around trending topics. Thus in the spring of 2012, as US gas prices spiked, all three sites ran features checking the “gassy rhetoric” (the Fact-Checker) of the “gasoline price blame game” (PolitiFact).<sup>102</sup> Like most journalists, fact-checkers take for granted their readers value such timeliness. They pay close attention to daily (and even hourly) traffic statistics, and to the “SEO challenge,” referring to search engine optimization. Posting a fact-check while an issue is still in the news can bring in new readers who find an item via Google or another search engine. To make sure its coverage of a major debate or speech ranks highly on Google, PolitiFact may post a story shell with a descriptive headline — such as “Fact-Checking the Republican Debate” — before the event has even begun.<sup>103</sup>

A rapid response also boosts a fact-checker’s chance of being cited by political figures or by fellow journalists — and thus, though they sometimes disavow this goal, of influencing public debate. While I visited PolitiFact a veteran reporter, often praised for his ability to quickly fact-check complex issues, took just a few hours to produce a 1200-word rebuttal of a claim by President Obama about the debt relief promised in his new budget. The piece was quickly vetted

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<sup>102</sup> Robert Farley and Eugene Kiely, “Obama Wanted Higher Gasoline Prices?”, FactCheck.org, March 23, 2012, <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/03/obama-wanted-higher-gasoline-prices/> (accessed April 26, 2012); Glenn Kessler, “Gassy Rhetoric on Gasoline Prices,” The Fact-Checker, February 27, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/gassy-rhetoric-on-gasoline-prices/2012/02/26/gIQAqPAXdR\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/gassy-rhetoric-on-gasoline-prices/2012/02/26/gIQAqPAXdR_blog.html) (accessed April 26, 2012); Molly Moorhead, “Gasoline Price Blame Game: 2012 Edition,” PolitiFact, March 22, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2012/mar/22/gas-price-blame-game-2012-edition/> (accessed April 26, 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7, 2011 and June 15, 2007.

and went live just after 4:30 PM on the same day as the president's speech.<sup>104</sup> The next morning, during his inaugural press briefing, incoming White House press secretary Jay Carney repeated the President's claim. ABC's correspondent bluntly challenged his math, citing PolitiFact: "Right, but when PolitiFact says it's false for the President to say that he's not adding to the debt, it doesn't matter? This White House is still going to continue to make the claim that you're not adding to the debt, even when nonpartisan people have looked at it and said you actually are?" The official transcript suggests Carney was caught off balance: "I'm not an economist. I know you've heard phrases like that before. (Laughter.) But I'm not. And we absolutely stand by the budget." Still, President Obama did not repeat the claim in subsequent speeches.<sup>105</sup>

In choosing claims to check, fact-checking groups are anchored to the news cycle but also, necessarily, behind it. They serve competing aims. One is to draw readers — and perhaps to make a difference in public discourse — by weighing in when it counts. Timeliness makes a difference here. But another goal is to build a permanent database of carefully checked facts and political records which citizens can consult whenever they need to. "We are not just about producing a daily product with the political news of the day," founder Bill Adair explained shortly after PolitiFact launched. "We are serving voters by creating a database that they can go to before the election to say, 'Huh, I'm kind of interested in Obama or Biden, or whoever. Let me see how they stack up.'"<sup>106</sup> A database has, or should have, a longer shelf life than a news story. Several times I heard fact-checkers remark on sudden spikes in traffic to old items that have become relevant again.

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<sup>104</sup> Louis Jacobson, "Barack Obama Says White House Budget Would Not Add to the Debt Within a Few Years," PolitiFact, February 15, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/15/barack-obama/barack-obama-says-white-house-budget-would-not-add/> (accessed February 15, 2011).

PolitiFact explicitly addresses this tension between old and new with the “layered” structure of its Web site, organized around the Truth-O-Meter. Each Truth-O-Meter ruling is a news story but also a data point, factored automatically into various statistics and available for editors to pull into topical feature stories, sometimes much later. A Truth-O-Meter item I wrote as a participant-observer, about Indiana governor and Republican presidential contender Mitch Daniels, offered a good illustration.<sup>107</sup> This was the first time a claim by Daniels had been rated; posting the piece required a new entry for him in the database, including a headshot and a brief bio. PolitiFact’s content management system automatically generated a page called “Mitch Daniels’s file,” where his career statistics are automatically tabulated (as of mid-2012 these include three “false” rulings and one “Pants on Fire”) and any stories involving him are listed.<sup>108</sup>

My Truth-O-Meter piece was posted at 5 PM on February 17, nearly a week after Daniels made his claim at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference. It immediately appeared on the news feed at the front of the site, in condensed form: a data box including Daniels’s picture, the statement being checked, and PolitiFact’s ruling. Clicking on that data box brought up the full 670-word story. The Truth-O-Meter ruling also was quickly folded into two topical meta-stories: one about various claims made at the CPAC meeting, and another about a flurry of budget-related claims.<sup>109</sup> (See figure 3.3.) Truth-O-Meter items may be pulled into new topical stories weeks or even months later. In my case both of the topical pieces had actually been

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<sup>105</sup> The White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney,” February 16, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/16/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-2162011> (accessed February 20, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Bill Adair (comment at “The Facts of Political Life”).

<sup>107</sup> Lucas Graves, “Mitch Daniels Says Interest on Debt Will Soon Exceed Security Spending,” PolitiFact, February 17, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/17/mitch-daniels/mitch-daniels-says-interest-debt-will-soon-exceed/> (accessed February 17, 2011).

<sup>108</sup> Author’s field notes, February 17, 2011.

<sup>109</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Fact-Checking CPAC,” PolitiFact, February 11, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/feb/11/fact-checking-cpac/> (accessed February 17, 2011); Louis Jacobson, “Let The Budget

posted before the Daniels item was ready; an editor simply tacked a new paragraph onto the articles and added the relevant data boxes.<sup>110</sup>

A final question fact-checkers wrestle with in choosing statements to examine is balance. Professional fact-checking groups strenuously reject the “false balance” of what journalism critics, and sometimes the fact-checkers themselves, call “he said, she said” reporting. At the same time they make a point of their commitment to check “both sides” of the American political arena, unlike partisan media critics who fact-check from the left and the right. Michael Dobbs, the *Post*’s original Fact-Checker columnist, has written that “if you criticize only one side (in the manner of the left-leaning Media Matters, for example), you are no longer a fact checker. You are a tool in a political campaign.”<sup>111</sup> The elite fact-checkers reinforce this distinction constantly, in public statements as well as in private training sessions and day-to-day conversation. “They are rebutting people they don’t agree with,” Brooks Jackson said of partisan sites. “When I say fact-checking, I am talking about neutral, nonpartisan critiques of false statements, whoever makes them. They don’t fit my definition of fact-checking.”<sup>112</sup> PolitiFact’s “Beyond the Truth-O-Meter” feature, a round-up of fact-checking work from around the Web, never links to Media Matters, NewsBusters, or similar sites.<sup>113</sup> Most entries point to the same small handful of sources: FactCheck.org, the *Post*’s Fact Checker, the Associated Press, the general-interest Snopes.com (which debunks “urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation”) and state-level operations such as Arizona’s AZ Fact Check (a partnership of two news outlets and Arizona State University).

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Battling Begin,” PolitiFact, February 15, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/feb/15/let-budget-battling-begin/> (accessed February 17, 2011).

<sup>110</sup> Author’s field notes, February 17, 2011.

<sup>111</sup> Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking*.

<sup>112</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

In practice the commitment to monitor “both sides” requires a different sort of balancing act, one designed to achieve rough parity in checking liberal and conservative claims but without enforcing strict counts. Running more items about one party may accurately reflect political reality, for instance during a primary race, but also risks the appearance of bias. Kessler has said that he strives for balance but does not keep a running tally by party, until an end-of-year review.<sup>114</sup> He described the dilemma at a daylong discussion of fact-checking I helped to organize:

If I end up writing a number of columns that are just on Republicans, and it’s kind of the season because of the primaries, I start getting lots of emails from readers saying, “When are you going to write about, you know, ‘Obummer?’ ... I try to kind of balance it as much as I can [though] it depends what’s in the news. ... Because, you begin to lose credibility with your readers if they feel like you’re only writing about one side.”<sup>115</sup>

The same problem came up in training sessions for new PolitiFact journalists in an important primary state. The state had begun to be deluged by speeches and advertisements from various Republican contenders. But with no real competition in the other party, a real danger existed that there simply would not be enough Democratic claims to check. Reporters were encouraged to unearth statements by Democrats wherever they could — from labor unions, party leaders, local officeholders, columnists, and so on. At the same time, they were instructed never to count, which leads to second-guessing and artificial balance.<sup>116</sup> In my experience the same policy applied at PolitiFact’s national newsroom. Though staff there aim for rough balance, no formal procedure exists to make sure equal numbers of claims are being checked from the left and the right. While I was there a political scientist at the University of Minnesota published a detailed

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<sup>113</sup> See “Beyond the Truth-O-Meter,” PolitiFact, at <http://www.politifact.com/curation/national/archive/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>114</sup> *Talk of the Nation*, “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire.”

<sup>115</sup> Glenn Kessler (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News”).

<sup>116</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

statistical analysis of PolitiFact's rulings over the previous year.<sup>117</sup> Staffers were relieved to find that even with no strict procedure in place, the analysis showed they checked Democrats and Republicans at roughly the same rate.<sup>118</sup> "We try to check roughly the same number of claims by Democrats as we do for Republicans, but we have to go where the claims are and lately there have been more made by Republicans," Bill Adair told an interviewer during the 2012 election.<sup>119</sup>

### **Working in the transcript economy**

Finally, finding facts to check has to be understood as a kind of work. Some of this labor takes place in the background, performed as a matter of course by journalists who follow politics closely and consume the news avidly. Professional fact-checkers develop an eye (or ear) for good claims to check and may show up at the office with a story idea plucked from the morning's news. Other items "come in over the transom," in the words of a PolitiFact editor. Readers frequently suggest claims to check, as do political operatives eager to see their opponents challenged, and reporters working in traditional newsrooms. (Sometimes, it was claimed, outside reporters will tweet a suspicious claim from one of the politicians they cover, followed by the instruction, "PolitiFact?")<sup>120</sup>

But finding facts to check can also be tedious and tiresome work. It involves not just reading the newspaper but poring over it, and over press releases, speeches, congressional testimony, and TV and radio transcripts. It means watching and occasionally transcribing political ads and other campaign videos as well as debates, press conferences, interviews, speeches, and similar events.

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<sup>117</sup> Ostermeier, "Selection Bias?"

<sup>118</sup> Author's field notes, February 10, 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Gorder, "Just the Facts."

Both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact have routinized the process, though in different ways, in order to cover campaigns thoroughly and to maintain a steady flow of checkable items. Both organizations rely on student interns to do some of this work.

During campaigns, FactCheck.org uses a monitoring system that embodies the two-party logic of American politics and journalism. During the 2010 midterm elections, for instance, staff and interns were each given a list of ten candidates to track, including Democrats and Republicans, culled from a list of competitive races in *Cook's Political Report*.<sup>121</sup> The training sessions I observed took place as Republicans were beginning to campaign in earnest for the 2012 presidential nomination. On the first day interns received a handout, neatly divided into “Democrats” and “Republicans,” which listed their initial assignments for the summer. In addition to seven declared and suspected Republican contenders, these included the congressional leadership of both parties, as well as the organizations that would be “spending the money”: the three national campaign committees for each major party and also well-monied outside groups associated with the left and the right, such as the AFL-CIO, the US Chamber of Commerce, Moveon.org, Crossroads GPS, and so on.<sup>122</sup>

Assignments in hand, and before learning what makes a good claim to check, the interns received a detailed lesson in “setting up your system” for monitoring candidates. This consisted, first, of signing up for the myriad electronic channels employed by modern political campaigns: Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, email lists, and news feeds on campaign websites. (One of the interns became alarmed at this — would she have to “friend” or “like” the candidates to track them on Facebook? Would *real* friends see? No, fortunately.) Interns also

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<sup>120</sup> Author's field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>121</sup> Eugene Kiely, interview by author, March 17, 2011.



learned how to set up alerts on YouTube and Google Video to automatically find new videos by or about one of their campaigns. And they were guided through the various news and politics sites they should visit at least once a day, sites that cover the minutiae of political campaigns and aggregate video clips, transcripts, and so on — “the source material you need to do your job.” These included news outlets (Politico, the Daily Note, Real Clear Politics) but also some party-oriented sites, such as GOP.gov and GOP12. As a FactCheck.org editor explained, “a fact is a fact, a video is a video, this is what he said.” Such openly partisan sites can’t be trusted for analysis, but are perfect for harvesting claims.<sup>123</sup>

Discovering a new speech, campaign ad, or other political text via one of these channels only begins the process of identifying suspicious claims. During my visit two interns were led, via a blog at the political newspaper *The Hill*, to investigate Democratic “robocalls” being conducted in a number of contested congressional districts. The website of the Democratic National Campaign Committee had a sample of the robocall script; an editor helped them to identify several dubious statements in the text, bolding the suspicious language. (One, which would produce a fact-checking controversy later in the year, was the claim that a Republican budget plan would “end Medicare.” The editor identified it as plainly false.)<sup>124</sup> The binary logic of American politics pervades this selection work completely. Walking interns through the transcript of a Mitt Romney interview, a FactCheck.org editor drew their attention to a comment the Republican candidate made about the need for government to invest in basic research. The editor said the remark should be saved, predicting that at some point Romney would contradict

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<sup>122</sup> Author’s field notes, June 6, 2011.

<sup>123</sup> Author’s field notes, June 6, 2011.

<sup>124</sup> Author’s field notes, June 9, 2011.

himself by criticizing President Obama for such public investments. “There’s no wasted reporting,” interns learned.<sup>125</sup>

More striking to me, though, was the way in which monitoring a campaign meant plugging in, *submitting* to a torrent of political communication. Every speech act by a candidate quickly leaves traces across multiple channels: an emailed press release, key quotes tweeted by the campaign staff, a bulletin on Politico, perhaps a video clip. “You know what they’re doing, you know where they’re going, you know what they’re saying, pretty quickly,” interns were told. Twitter was described as by far the most useful monitoring tool, one that had transformed fact-checking. Fact-checkers “follow” (subscribe to tweets by) not just their candidates but also the other reporters and political sites covering those candidates — “that’s how news is broken now, sometimes even before the AP starts writing a story about it.” One editor told me that the expensive ad-tracking service FactCheck.org subscribed to had become almost redundant: As soon as a new campaign ad “drops,” somebody — the campaign itself or a reporter or blogger — will tweet about it.<sup>126</sup>

PolitiFact organizes the process of finding facts to check differently. Suspect statements reside in a monthly spreadsheet called “the buffet,” maintained on Google Docs. (See figure 3.4.) All week long staff and especially interns add entries to this spreadsheet, consisting of a verbatim quote to be checked along with the speaker, date, and the name of the media outlet, with a link if possible. At PolitiFact’s national office this was called “stocking the buffet” or, sometimes “trawling for shrimp”; the point of the metaphor, trainees learned, is being able to pick and choose from an assortment of delectable items. A four-page list of useful “buffet sources” I was

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<sup>125</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>126</sup> Eugene Kiely, interviewed by author, March 17, 2011; author’s field notes, June 6 and 7, 2011.

given included many of the same party leaders and political groups FactCheck.org's interns covered, as well as pundits, editorial pages, and television programs. However, the first sources on the list were two transcription services and the Congressional Record. Every entry included a link, when possible directly to the pages that fact-checkers care about: press releases (for politicians) and transcripts (for broadcast programs). Asterisks marked programs that don't provide a full transcript online, meaning LexisNexis would have to be used. In other words this was not mainly a list of political voices but a library of textual resources, of places to find statements.<sup>127</sup>

PolitiFact's buffet grows quickly, with dozens of items sometimes added in a single day. The sources mined depend on the day's news — during my visit for instance, the President's Super Bowl interview with Bill O'Reilly yielded eight statements for the buffet. (Five of those became Truth-O-Meter items, published individually and aggregated into a topical story about the interview.)<sup>128</sup> But staff also rely on routine weekly political programming. Mondays and Tuesdays see many items culled from the five major "Sunday shows," while later in the week the buffet often fills with statements made on prime-time discussion programs on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. PolitiFact editors periodically scroll through the buffet to highlight (literally) promising items and to assign them to fact-checkers. Experienced reporters may also circumvent the buffet, however, proposing a fact-check directly to an editor.<sup>129</sup>

Stocking the PolitiFact buffet proved more difficult than I expected. It is possible to read through dozens of pages of transcripts from a speech or a television program and turn up only a

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<sup>127</sup> Author's field notes, February 7-21, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

<sup>128</sup> See Angie Drobnic Holan, "Fact-Checking Bill O'reilly's Interview with President Barack Obama," PolitiFact, February 7, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/feb/07/fact-checking-bill-oreillys-interview-barack-obama/> (accessed April 27, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> Author's field notes, February 7-21, 2011.

handful of checkable claims — and fewer interesting or important ones. (White House press briefings, fact-checkers agreed, can be especially fruitless.) The question to be researched must be reducible to a distinct and verifiable claim. PolitiFact calls this the “ruling statement”: the precise claim being assessed, which appears at the top of every Truth-O-Meter item. However, politicians and pundits are practiced at building arguments that resist such analysis — as one staffer put it, at “lying with facts.”<sup>130</sup>

My first day “trawling for shrimp” reinforced this lesson. My visit coincided with the uprisings in Egypt’s Tahrir Square, and I began by looking for claims relating to those events. The buffet was already filled with material from the Sunday political shows, so I turned to Fox and MSNBC transcripts from the previous week. I was especially interested in Glenn Beck’s show on Fox News: The pundit was being ridiculed by liberals and by fellow conservatives for a series of broadcasts making the case that leftists in the US and popular uprisings in the Middle East were linked in a global project of Islamic socialism.<sup>131</sup> (Neoconservative Bill Kristol wrote in his magazine, “When Glenn Beck rants about the caliphate taking over the Middle East from Morocco to the Philippines, and lists (invents?) the connections between caliphate-promoters and the American left, he brings to mind no one so much as Robert Welch and the John Birch Society. He’s marginalizing himself, just as his predecessors did back in the early 1960s.”)<sup>132</sup>

Though Beck plied this fascinating theme for many days, I could not find a distinct claim to address via the Truth-O-Meter. Beck’s broadcasts joined the Muslim Brotherhood (and their “offspring” al Qaeda) together with elements as seemingly diverse as American labor unions, the

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<sup>130</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7, 8, 2011.

<sup>131</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7-8, 2011.

<sup>132</sup> William Kristol, “Stand for Freedom,” *Weekly Standard*, February 14, 2011 (published online February 5, 2011), [http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/stand-freedom\\_541404.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/stand-freedom_541404.html) (accessed February 7, 2011).

Weather Underground, Francis Fox Piven, and the protest group Code Pink. But Beck hedged his rhetoric — “I’m not saying they are plotting together” — even as he painted a picture of a “strange alliance between the left and the Islamists.”<sup>133</sup> Some claims could be tested by asking spokespersons for various left groups if they really favor a global caliphate, perhaps, but Beck’s larger message amounted to an opinion: that these elements *should* be discussed together because of their shared critique of the West. Was that objectively absurd? It seemed so to me, but not in a way that could be straightforwardly fact-checked.

Meanwhile, I also read through transcripts of MSNBC’s “liberal” political programming for claims about the uprisings. What immediately stood out was how the network’s hosts had engaged the same “Beck” episodes I’d been scanning, using clips from his own show to mock him and to challenge his entire premise rather than specific factual claims. All week long MSNBC pundits (and guests from Media Matters and the *Nation*, among other outlets) constructed a counter-narrative in which Beck’s distortions were held to illustrate the danger Fox News posed to meaningful political discourse: “Can you imagine how stupid our debates are going to be about foreign policy in this country for the next few months after Fox spent the entire week of the Egypt revolution broadcasting these conspiracy theories day after day after day?”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> See Fox News Network, *Glenn Beck*, March 31, 2011, and February 1, 2011. For instance, the host argued, “The radicals here in America that are operating as Marxists and communists that are in support of this, their goals include the transformation of America into an Islamic state, the destruction of the western world. There’s a strange alliance between the left and the Islamists that we’re seeing. I think it’s all part of the coming insurrection. You can call it a new world order or a caliphate, but the world right now is being divvied up. And the uber left and the Islamists, and the global elites are moving in the same direction. I’m not saying they are plotting together. The Islamists and the uber left are. And they share some commonalities. I mean, honestly, I can’t tell the difference between extreme leftists and radical Islamists.”

<sup>134</sup> MSNBC, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, February 4, 2011. See also *The Ed Schultz Show*, February 7, 2011; and *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, February 4 and 7, 2011.

Opinion journalists (of every stripe) enjoy more latitude than formal fact-checkers in the kinds of arguments they can engage with and the sort of refutation they can offer.<sup>135</sup>

The experience of stocking the buffet illustrated the obvious point that fact-checkers don't operate in a political vacuum. Statements emerge in political contexts — very often in rancorous public arguments — which color their perceived importance or interest. It also illuminated an important shift in the material environment in which news is produced — one that makes FactCheck.org and PolitiFact possible and pervades journalistic work more generally. This is could be called *routine transcription*: to a remarkable degree today, words uttered in public or on the air quickly become searchable text on the Internet.

PolitiFact during my visit subscribed to two sources of transcripts. LexisNexis offers transcripts of most US news programming within a few days of the broadcast. The Congressional Quarterly's CQ.com provided nearly instantaneous transcripts of remarks made by political figures in a range of forums, from speeches and conferences to interviews on cable news networks. CQ.com's feed updates with surprising speed; a new transcript appears every few minutes. But most items in the buffet do not rely on these services, as government agencies, campaign offices, and news outlets increasingly publish their own transcripts online. (NPR and CNN, for instance, post the transcribed text of almost all of their news programming. MSNBC publishes transcripts of its partisan talk shows, but not conventional news broadcasts. Fox News releases only high-profile segments expected to generate wide interest, such as Bill O'Reilly's Superbowl interview with President Obama.)

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<sup>135</sup> Author's field notes, February 7-8, 2011.

It would be hard to overstate how much fact-checking relies on — is a creature of — this routine transcription. It pervades the day-to-day work at FactCheck.org and PolitiFact. Fact-checkers constantly hunt for transcripts, read through them, ask about them, and send one another links to them. A great deal of the training for new fact-checkers deals with where to find and how properly to handle transcripts. Trainees at both organizations were told never to assume that a newspaper article reported a quote accurately, but always to go back to the transcript if possible. The accuracy of the transcript itself is a trickier issue. “If we have access ... listen to the video itself, because the transcripts can be wrong,” FactCheck.org interns learned. One intern found a transcript of Fox News Sunday which quoted Sarah Palin as referring to \$46 billion when she had said four-to-six billion dollars.<sup>136</sup>

Where transcripts don’t exist, finding a steady supply of facts to check becomes difficult. This challenge came up in training sessions for state PolitiFact reporters: Many campaign events would be only lightly covered and take place in informal or semi-private settings, with no transcripts available from the usual sources — the national news media, the campaigns, or transcription services. Fact-checkers were encouraged to record these events themselves and transcribe them as necessary in order to find new claims to check.<sup>137</sup>

Reporters have long relied on the text of prepared remarks distributed on paper at an event such as a campaign speech or a congressional hearing. For decades major newspapers like the *New York Times* have employed transcription services to cover, for instance, the Sunday political shows, which usually generate an article or two on Monday. But the volume of routine transcription today marks a sea change. Now publicists for the Sunday shows not only post

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<sup>136</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7-21, 2011, June 6-10, 2011, and June 15-18, 2011.

same-day transcripts online, but mail out choice quotes each week to any reporter or blogger who subscribes to their mailing list. An interview with a former publicist for ABC's "This Week" confirmed the obvious: the goal of this aggressive transcribing is precisely to be reported on, blogged about, tweeted, forwarded, and etc.<sup>138</sup> In this way routine transcription embodies an increasingly recursive electronic news media, in which news content both addresses and assembles other news content.

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<sup>138</sup> Emily Lenzner, interview by author, telephone, November 2, 2009.




**Figure 3.1:** An ad for FactCheck.org’s fellowship program describes the group’s mission and indicates the qualities it looks for in student interns.

## FactCheck.org Fellowship Program

FactCheck.org, the award-winning political website at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, is now accepting applications for its 2011–2012 fellowship program. The next class of fellows will be trained during an eight-week, paid summer program at FactCheck’s offices at APPC from June 5–July 30. Those who are trained this summer must agree to work 10 to 15 hours per week at FactCheck.org during the fall and spring semesters, if their work merits continued employment.

We are a nonpartisan, nonprofit “consumer advocate” for voters. The fellows at FactCheck.org help our staff monitor the factual accuracy of claims made by political figures in TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. They help conduct research on such claims and write articles for publication on our website under the guidance and supervision of FactCheck.org staff. The fellows must have an ability to write clearly and concisely, an understanding of journalistic practices and ethics, and an interest in politics and public policy. The fellows also must be able to think independently and set aside any partisan biases.

The deadline for applications is Feb. 28. For more information, contact FactCheck.org Philadelphia Director Eugene Kiely at [Eugene.kiely@factcheck.org](mailto:Eugene.kiely@factcheck.org).



**FACTCHECK.ORG**  
ANNENBERG POLITICAL FACT CHECK

THE ANNENBERG  
PUBLIC POLICY CENTER  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Figure 3.2: An example of an early fact-checking sidebar from the *Washington Post* of August 27, 1985, contesting claims in a speech on South Africa by President Ronald Reagan.

## Reagan Says Pretoria Has Eliminated Segregation in Public Places

PRESIDENT, From A1

national hotels now admit persons of all races, as do some restaurants and some places of entertainment. But a number of these facilities, particularly in smaller communities, remain segregated.

Reagan made no comments about such major features of apartheid as segregated education or the fact that blacks are denied voting rights. He repeated the Botha government's contention that the black majority in South Africa is "a combination of minorities" because of tribal divisions.

In another telephone interview, with Washington Broadcast News, Reagan once more criticized pending congressional attempts to impose economic sanctions on South Africa.

"I will tell you that I am basically opposed to the idea of punitive sanctions," Reagan said. "I think in this particular case, South Africa, they would hurt the very people we are trying to help."

Reagan declined to say whether he would veto a sanctions measure if it reaches his desk, "because you never know just exactly what it's going to look like when it gets there." But senior administration officials said last week that Reagan has resolved to veto any sanctions bill, although he may take milder action against South Africa by executive action.

Reagan's latest comments in defense of the South African regime and his policy of "constructive engagement" to work quietly for moderation of apartheid were the highlights of three seven-minute telephone interviews he gave on Saturday.

In an interview with WRHC of Miami, the president was not asked about South Africa but did defend another kind of sanctions, "the restraints and restrictions that we have with regard to our relations with Cuba."

Reagan said the United States would be "very happy to help open

the door" for Cuba if it wanted to prove by deeds instead of words that it was ready "to come back to the community of American nations."

"But at the present time, they are openly a satellite of the Soviet Union and taking their orders from the Soviet Union," Reagan said. "And we see no opening for us to be of help."

Asked whether Central America and the Caribbean will be "entirely" free of communism when he leaves office, the president said there has been progress but added, "I don't know whether we can accomplish that 'entirely'—to qualify that word." Reagan said the progress "is far more outstanding than many of us have realized over the last couple of years."

In his interview with WSB, Reagan said his administration has made it plain to South Africa that "apartheid is very repugnant to us." He then defended U.S. policy, which he said has been responsible for "some very substantial changes" in the country.

He said these changes include allowing blacks to join labor unions and have their own unions, buy property in formerly white areas and own businesses "in some 40 white-dominated business districts."

The president said he was "very pleased" to see the "clarifying statement" of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, head of the Moral Majority, in which he apologized for calling Nobel prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu "a phony."

Reagan said Falwell had "mistakenly used the word to describe the thing that he had found, that he was not recognized as a 'black leader of all the blacks.'"

The president was asked whether he fears a pro-communist government might take power in South Africa if the Botha government collapses. He replied indirectly, saying that he thinks that the Soviet Union is, "in its usual style, stirring up the pot . . ."

In the Washington Broadcast News interview, the president said he was looking forward to his November summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in order to set "an agenda for the future so that we can eliminate the hostilities and the suspicions, if that's possible." He then denounced the Soviet Union.

"There's no question but that the Soviet Union has made it plain that they are embarked on an expansionist program," Reagan said. "They believe in the one-world communist state—the world revolution."

## Reagan's South Africa

*President Reagan cited four "very substantial changes" in South African society that, he said in a radio interview released by the White House yesterday, had "resulted . . . [from] our present relationship" with the South African government. Glenn Frankel of The Washington Post Foreign Service addressed each of those points in a dispatch from Johannesburg yesterday:*

**Reagan said: ". . . Now the blacks have ability—being in labor unions or even having their own labor unions."**

Black South Africans can belong to labor unions. However, that achievement cannot be credited to the Reagan administration's policy of "constructive engagement." It was legislation passed in 1979, when Jimmy Carter was president, that gave blacks the right to join unions, though the government sharply restricts the rights to bargain collectively or go on strike.

**Reagan cited "the fact they [blacks] can buy property in the heretofore white areas, that they can own businesses in some 40 white-dominated business districts."**

The president may have been referring to a government policy, implemented about four years ago, that allows some blacks to own houses and acquire 99-year leasehold rights for the land under them in black townships, such as Soweto, that are located in the 87 percent of South Africa that is considered white territory. So far, that policy has been mired in red tape, and only in Soweto have blacks been able to acquire leaseholds in significant numbers. The government is considering converting those lease rights into the right to actually own the land involved.

As for businesses, a government policy announced last year but yet to be enacted into law would allow blacks to open businesses in white central cities where most urban blacks shop. But the properties would still be owned by whites.

Generally, South Africa's Group Areas Act, one of the pillars of the apartheid system of racial segregation, clearly defines by race the various residential and business districts in the country and restricts each race group—including Indians and so-called "coloreds"—to their own designated areas. They cannot own or rent property outside their designated "group area." The Influx Control Act, another pillar, requires blacks to have written government permission to enter "white areas."

Two weeks ago, Minister of Constitutional Development Chris Heunis reassured whites at a meeting of members of the ruling National Party that the Group Areas Act would not be scrapped.

**Reagan said: "They [the South African government] have eliminated the segregation that we once had in our own country—the type of thing where hotels and restaurants and places of entertainment and so forth were segregated—that has all been eliminated."**


In fact, hotels and restaurants must have special government permits to serve blacks. Perhaps two dozen hotels and three dozen restaurants in Johannesburg have such permits, while many hotels and restaurants remain off-limits to blacks. Most sports grounds and some stage theaters are integrated, but there are no integrated movie houses in South Africa. This leads to the incongruity of places like the Sandton City mall in suburban Johannesburg where blacks can stay at a luxury hotel but cannot attend the movie theater next door. This permit system began under the government of the late prime minister John Vorster a decade ago, long before Reagan took office. "Jim Crow" restrictions imposing strict segregation in buses and trains still apply, although airplanes have been integrated for several years.

**Reagan said: "They [the government] recognize now interracial marriages and all."**

The law banning mixed marriages was repealed this year, and many commentators here credit quiet lobbying from the Reagan administration plus the desire of the South African government to bolster constructive engagement as important factors behind the repeal. However, a black married to a white cannot legally live with his or her spouse in a white area.

**Figure 3.3:** The PolitiFact file for Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, as of mid-2012. The site's database compiles a running report card for every person or group whose claims have been checked.

### Mitch Daniels's file:



**Republican from Indiana**  
Mitch Daniels served as director of the Office of Management and Budget under President George W. Bush and is now the governor of Indiana.

**Our Mitch Daniels feeds**


- [A feed of statements by Daniels](#)
- [A feed stories mentioning Daniels](#)

**Daniels's statements by ruling**

Click on the ruling to see all of Daniels's statements for that ruling.

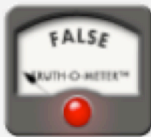
True	0
Mostly True	0
Half True	0
Mostly False	0
<b>False</b>	<b>3 (75%)</b>
<b>Pants on Fire</b>	<b>1 (25%)</b>

**Recent statements involving Mitch Daniels**




[Mitch Daniels](#)

Says Steve Jobs was responsible for creating more jobs than the stimulus bill.




[The stimulus was almost certainly bigger](#)




[Mitch Daniels](#)

"Nearly half of all persons under 30 did not go to work today."




[Because many of them were in school](#)




[Mitch Daniels](#)

Says that in 41 states, government workers "are better paid than the taxpayers who support them."




[Cited analysis assumes every job's the same](#)



[Mitch Daniels](#)

"Within a few years, we will be spending more on interest payments than on national security."



[Comparing today's apples with tomorrow's oranges](#)

[See them all](#)

**Figure 3.4:** A page from PolitiFact’s “buffet,” an internal spreadsheet of possible claims to check compiled continuously by staffers as well as student interns. Editors highlight promising items.

Statement	Speaker	Date	Location	URL	Staffer
Bono's fortune comes from child labor sweatshops	James Delingpole, 365 Ways to Drive a Liberal Crazy,	2/2/2011	E-mail		
"...the reason why the Tucson event felt more like a pep/political rally than a memorial service is, people at the event were instructed to applaud by means of the Jumbotron."	Cato Ulicensis, Jim Hofst	1/15/2011	American Conservative Values and Gateway Pundit blogs	http://american-conservativevalues.com/blog/jumbotron-tucson-memorial-instruct-people-applaud.html	
Godfather's Pizza was near bankruptcy, but he "turned that company around"	Herman Cain		Fox interview on Cain website, at 3:05 mark	http://www.hermancain.com/inner.asp?z=2	
"Joe Biden (was) saying that Mubarak is not a dictator."	Sean Hannity	2/3/2011	Hannity	Nexis Transcript	
"the Muslim Brotherhood is in fact a terrorist organization that is a threat to the west, a threat to everyone who cherishes our way of life and our civilization."	Michelle Malkin	2/3/2011	Hannity	Nexis Transcript	
"You (Chris Christie) already have more experience now than Barack Obama did."	Neil Cavuto	2/3/2011	Your World	Nexis Transcript	
"They have the 10th largest army in the world because in part we fund it so well, and they have -- their tanks are American tanks. Their fighter jets are American fighter jets."	Rachel Maddow	2/2/2011	MSNBC	Nexis Transcript	
Mubarak "was the first Arab leader to recognize the new government of Iraq, controversial and challenging."	Rachel Maddow	2/2/2011	MSNBC	Nexis Transcript	
"...at every level (of the Egyptian army), as Brian points out, you have officers who have been trained or have done advanced training at our military academies and at our universities"	Andrea Mitchell	2/2/2011	Rachel Maddow Show	Nexis Transcript	
"Gamal Mubarak is actually -- from sources I have -- is running the show, is engaged with the dispatch. He is the one who led the elections in December 2010, overwhelming landslide on behalf of Mubarak's party in which they won 209 seats out of 221 in a massive fraudulent scam."	Steve Clemons	2/2/2011	Rachel Maddow Show	Nexis Transcript	
Washington is proposing a new federal tax that would raise the price of juice drinks and soda. They say it won't be much, but anything is too much when you're raising a family these days.	Americans Against Food Taxes	2/6/2011	Print ad	http://nofoodtaxes.com/ads/	
They want to put taxes on a lot of the (something) I buy... juice drinks, sports drinks...	Americans Against Food Taxes	2/6/2011	TV ad that ran during Super Bowl	http://nofoodtaxes.com/ads/	

## Chapter 4 - The Elite Fact-Checkers: Deciding What's True

Having found a statement that piques the curiosity or just doesn't "sound right," like Governor Barbour's suspiciously high job-loss statistics, the fact-checker turns to the work of trying to determine, in an authoritative and convincing way, whether or not it is true. Very often this begins with a phone call or an email to the person who made it, or to their staff. Even a claim that directly contradicts official data merits a call to the author. "We asked James Richardson, Barbour's spokesman, how the governor arrived at the 7 million figure. We are waiting for a response and will pass it along if we get one," the final line of that fact-check explained, though FactCheck.org's analysis made it hard to imagine what sort of reasonable explanation the governor could provide.<sup>1</sup>

This is a matter of journalistic fairness — the subject of a piece must be given the chance to respond — but also of research methodology. When a visiting journalist asked how the group goes about checking facts, a staffer at FactCheck.org explained, "In terms of process ... one of the things we do here is go to the people who make these kinds of claims and say, 'Well, back it up. What evidence do you have?' ... [Then] at least we've got a basis to start from. ... We've got some parameters and we can check the information and prove them right or wrong."<sup>2</sup> As Barbour's case illustrates, though, the burden of proof rests with the author of a claim. The analysis will run even if the person being checked never responds.

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Hitt, "Barbour Inflates Obama's Job Losses," FactCheck.org, March 15, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/03/barbour-inflates-obamas-job-losses/>.

<sup>2</sup> Author's field notes, June 8, 2011.

PolitiFact requires its fact-checkers to contact the author of a claim and specifically encourages them to make that the very first step in checking it. The Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual” explains that this makes the research easier by providing a “road map to the facts.” But it also reinforces a very self-conscious distinction between fact-checking and standard political reporting. As an editor told me and explained to trainees, calling the statement’s author first encourages fact-checkers to keep an open mind and inhibits the reporter’s reflex of amassing evidence for a final “gotcha” interview. The point for the fact-checker is to research a claim, not to get a quotable reaction from an embarrassed official. Another difference from conventional reporting practice is that having contacted a statement’s author, PolitiFact reporters are under no obligation to air his or her views with a standard “response quote.” “We include a response from the person making the claim only if it’s relevant, only if it speaks to the facts you’re checking,” trainees learned. “We don’t allow them to use PolitiFact stories to score their talking points. We are about the facts.”<sup>3</sup>

The effort to verify a claim may provoke a direct response from its author. This sometimes takes place behind the scenes. For instance, after President Obama quoted Ronald Reagan to defend a new minimum tax rate for the wealthy — the so-called “Buffett Rule” — the *Post*’s Fact Checker wrote that the Republican hero had been taken out of context.<sup>4</sup> As Glenn Kessler explained in an interview, even before the column went live a White House official called his editor to complain about the piece and argue it shouldn’t run.<sup>5</sup> (It did.) In other cases the subject may publish a pre-emptive attack on the fact-checker. Contacted by PolitiFact to back up her

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn Kessler, “President Obama: Quoting Reagan Out of Context,” Fact Checker, April 12, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/president-obama-quoting-reagan-out-of-context/2012/04/11/gIQAaOsZBT\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/president-obama-quoting-reagan-out-of-context/2012/04/11/gIQAaOsZBT_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

claim that a Democratic congresswoman had said abortion “is better for unplanned babies than having to eat Ramen noodles,” conservative pundit Michelle Malkin responded on her blog. She posted the entire email from the PolitiFact reporter as well as her own response, which accused him of having made up his mind already; of not understanding blogger “snark”; and of failing to recognize the difference between opinion and fact, a critique fact-checkers hear often. “I am an opinion journalist who has always been transparent about my ideology,” Malkin wrote. “You are opinion journalists who masquerade as neutral arbiters of fact. Nice work if you can get it.”<sup>6</sup> PolitiFact trainees were told to assume any email they send in the course of research might become a public document.<sup>7</sup>

### **Tracing false claims**

However, in general public figures and especially political campaigns now expect to be contacted by fact-checkers and usually have lists of sources at the ready to support claims made in an advertisement or during a debate or a major speech, like the State of the Union address. “You’ll find that the presidential campaigns are accustomed to [us], they know us, they have respect for what we do even if they don’t agree with every ruling we make,” I heard during one training session. Fact-checkers accord a working respect to campaigns which deal with them in this “professional” manner, and often complain or joke about those that never get back to them.

Documentation provided to support a political claim is called the “backup sheet” or sometimes just the “backup.”<sup>8</sup> Presidential campaigns have prepared backup sheets to document

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<sup>6</sup> Michelle Malkin, “PolitiFact to “Debunk” Ay Gwen Moore/Abortion Post,” Michelle Malkin (blog), February 22, 2011, <http://michellemalkin.com/2011/02/22/politifact-to-debunk-my-gwen-moore-abortion-post/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s field notes, June 6-8, 2012, and June 15, 2012.

claims in television ads since at least the 1992 election. “When we’re putting together a campaign ... we are the original fact-checkers. Real professional campaign operatives do not put out an ad that they haven’t fact-checked,” Republican political consultant Ladonna Lee explained at a 2007 forum on media fact-checking. “For 20 years, I have not delivered an ad to a television or radio or newspaper without the documentation package with it, because we know we will be tasked to be truthful.”<sup>9</sup> (Television stations have some discretion to reject ads that make unsupported claims. However, Lee stressed that routine backups are primarily response to journalistic fact-checking.) Backup documents for campaign ads often follow a standard format: a full-page grid with verbatim quotes (and sometimes visual descriptions) from the advertisement arrayed against explanation and sources relevant to each claim. These sources are most often news articles and, increasingly, the fact-checkers themselves.<sup>10</sup> (See figure 4.1.)

Very often the backup information provided directly undermines the claim being made. Nearly every fact-checker I spoke to remarked on this. One example mentioned several times at PolitiFact concerned attacks by Mitt Romney, while he sought the 2008 Republican nomination, blaming President Bill Clinton (and thus Democrats) for weakening the US military in pursuit of a “peace dividend.” To back up the claim a Romney staffer emailed a page from the federal budget that showed reductions in defense spending under the Clinton White House. But the very same budget page showed clearly that those declines had actually started earlier, under the first President Bush; Romney’s remark was rated “Half True.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ladonna Lee (comments at “Pants On Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise Of Media Fact-Checkers,” conference hosted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Washington, DC, November 9, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, email, May 4, 2012; author’s field notes, June 6-8, 2012, and June 15, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Adair, “Defense Cuts Had GOP Support, Too,” PolitiFact, October 21, 2007, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2007/oct/22/mitt-romney/defense-cuts-had-gop-support-too/> (accessed May 4, 2012); author’s field notes, February 17, 2011, June 8, 2011, and June 15, 2011.



The piece I wrote checking Governor Mitch Daniels followed the same pattern.<sup>12</sup> Daniels had claimed in a speech that interest payments on the US debt would soon outpace national security spending. Obeying PolitiFact protocol, I began by calling his press secretary. She didn't answer, so I left a message and sent a follow-up email. I then started writing economists to ask for help dissecting the claim. Four hours later the press secretary wrote back, explaining that the current defense budget was close to \$700 billion, and that by the end of the decade, according to White House estimates, interest on the debt would top that; she documented the second point with a link to a two-year-old article in the *Washington Examiner*. But Daniels had said “in a few years,” not by the end of the decade, and he referred broadly to “national security” spending. Even before verifying the data or talking to any economists, I knew the governor had taken some rhetorical license.<sup>13</sup>

Especially during campaigns, political figures now often quote — and misquote — professional fact-checkers to bolster their own claims or discredit their opponents. In a 2007 survey of local television news directors, 29 percent of those who ran “ad watch” stories (and nearly half in large TV markets) reported that those stories were then cited in future campaign advertisements. In one-third of those cases, news directors said the new ads distorted the fact-checking segments they cited.<sup>14</sup>

Trainees at both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact heard examples of this. Thus, for instance, in 2011 PolitiFact Ohio awarded the National Republican Campaign Committee a “Barely True,” just a notch above “False,” for a press release blaming an Akron-area Representative (and her

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<sup>12</sup> Lucas Graves, “Mitch Daniels Says Interest on Debt Will Soon Exceed Security Spending,” PolitiFact, February 17, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/17/mitch-daniels/mitch-daniels-says-interest-debt-will-soon-exceed/>.

<sup>13</sup> Author's field notes, February 14-15, 2011.

fellow Democrats) for the “spending spree” that made it necessary to boost the federal debt limit.<sup>15</sup> One day after the ruling was published, the NRCC issued a new press release trumpeting that PolitiFact had rated its attack “True”; that claim in turn received a “Pants On Fire,” the lowest possible rating.<sup>16</sup> (The “Barely True” rating on PolitiFact’s Truth-O-Meter has since been changed to “Mostly False,” to better reflect its low standard of truth.)

The backup sheets provided with campaign advertising, I was told, are particularly egregious in distorting the sources cited or taking them out of context. An experienced FactCheck.org intern pointed me to a piece she wrote dissecting an attack ad by Arkansas Lieutenant Governor Bill Halter, fighting Senator Blanche Lincoln in 2010 for the state’s Democratic Senate nomination.<sup>17</sup> Halter’s ad claimed Lincoln had cut Social Security, and spliced together her statements in a recent debate to create the impression that she planned to do so again. But the backup documents could only point to Lincoln’s “yes” vote 16 years earlier on an amendment, never passed, which would have reduced spending across all entitlement programs, not just Social Security, and only under very specific conditions. The backup also included cites meant to show that Halter “fought to protect” Social Security, which FactCheck.org’s piece went on to challenge.<sup>18</sup> (Several days later, Halter was questioned about the attack ad in an MSNBC interview that drew on FactCheck.org’s research; the fact-checkers quickly posted another piece

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<sup>14</sup> Bob Papper, *TV Adwatch Stories: On The Rise* (Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, November 9, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Koff, “Nrcc Says Rep. Betty Sutton’s ‘Spending Spree’ Maxed Out Federal Debt,” PolitiFact, May 31, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/ohio/statements/2011/may/31/national-republican-congressional-committee/nrcc-says-rep-betty-suttons-spending-spreemaxed-out/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Koff, “We said what? NRCC claims PolitiFact Ohio confirmed claim that Rep. Betty Sutton ‘maxed out federal debt,’” PolitiFact Ohio, June 1, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/ohio/statements/2011/jun/01/national-republican-congressional-committee/we-said-what-nrcc-claims-politifact-ohio-confirmed/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Author’s field notes, June 8, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Melissa Siegel, “Halter’s Ad: Misleading Senior Voters,” Factcheck.org, June 4, 2010, <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/06/halters-ad-misleading-senior-voters/> (accessed June 8, 2011).

about that interview, contesting Halter’s assertion that he had not taken Lincoln’s comments out of context.)<sup>19</sup>

Several political operatives I interviewed stressed that tactical considerations govern what kind of claims go into a campaign ad. The question is always whether the possible cost of being challenged outweighs the perceived political benefit of making the claim. The standard in “opposition research,” one told me, is not whether a claim is true but whether it is “defensible.”<sup>20</sup>

If no “backup” is available, fact-checkers turn to the Internet and to proprietary news databases such as LexisNexis. False claims and dubious statistics usually emerge from news articles which a politician has cited glibly or taken out of context. “Often they’ll rely on some news report that itself is flimsy, or they’ll take a report from a blog that supports their point of view,” PolitiFact trainees learned. Early in the Republican primaries for the 2012 presidential race, Representative Michelle Bachmann took advantage of Memorial Day to launch an assault on the president’s economic policies: Because of those policies, she declared in a radio interview, families were paying 29 percent more for the traditional weekend barbecue. A new fact-checker chose the claim for his first PolitiFact item, despite warnings that Bachmann’s staff rarely returned calls.<sup>21</sup> This case was no exception. Persistent searching online finally turned up a *New York Post* piece, from a few weeks earlier, titled “That Cookout Will Cost You 29 Percent More this Year.” The fact-checker interviewed the reporter on the piece; the figure turned out to be based on the newspaper’s calculations using food prices in New York City. Reconstructing the analysis ingredient by ingredient (hamburgers, hot dogs, potato salad, etc.) with national

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<sup>19</sup> Melissa Siegel, “Halter Questioned On Misleading TV Ad,” FactCheck.org, June 8, 2010, <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/06/halter-questioned-on-misleading-tv-ad/> (accessed June 8, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Josh Grossfield, interview by author, telephone, November 10, 2011; Mike Rice, interview by author, telephone, November 11, 2011; Richard Schlackman, interview by author, telephone, November 10, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s field notes, June 16, 2011.

figures from the Consumer Price Index produced a price jump of just 10 percent. Economists interviewed further suggested that White House policy had little to do with the price increase; Bachmann earned a “False.”<sup>22</sup>

As that suggests, finding the origin of a suspicious claim or statistic often begins with typing it into Google. Glenn Kessler, the *Post*'s Fact Checker columnist, said in an interview, “When I encounter a weird [or] strange fact, one of the first things I do is google the figures, which is an amazingly efficient way to figure out where it comes from.”<sup>23</sup> He offered the example of a point House Speaker John Boehner had pressed in a fall 2011 speech to business leaders, and in an earnest-sounding letter to the White House, released to the media: that the Obama administration had 219 new regulations in the works which would cost the economy more than \$100 million apiece. Kessler googled the curiously precise statistic. It appeared to originate an opinion piece on the news site Politico, by a well-known expert in “regulatory studies” who had served in the Bush administration. In an interview, she helpfully walked Kessler through her analysis of data from the federal government’s Regulatory Information Service Center, which identifies “major” rules estimated to have an economic impact of more than \$100 million. Kessler found that many of the rules would not be completed for years, if ever; some had been on the list since before Obama took office. And many were considered “major” because they would generate \$100 million in economic activity or consumer benefits, rather than imposing new costs. A spokesman for Boehner conceded the language was misleading; the Speaker earned three Pinocchios.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jake Barry, “Michele Bachmann Says Food Prices For Barbecues Up 29 Percent Because of Barack Obama,” PolitiFact, June 27, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/jun/27/michele-bachmann/michele-bachmann-says-food-prices-barbecues-29-per/> (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Glenn Kessler, “John Boehner’s Misfire on Pending Federal Regulations,” Fact Checker, September 16, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/john-boehners-misfire-on-pending-federal-regulations/2011/09/15/gIQAufuhVK\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/john-boehners-misfire-on-pending-federal-regulations/2011/09/15/gIQAufuhVK_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

In this way much of the work of assessing a claim lies in discovering where it originated. Even the most outrageous claims, or perhaps especially those, have some sort of provenance, a media-political career which fact-checkers try to reconstruct. A now-classic example among fact-checkers was the explosive statistic that President Obama's late-2010 trip to India would cost US taxpayers \$200 million per day. Both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, along with many news outlets and blogs, quickly traced that figure to a single article in the *Press Trust of India*, quoting an unnamed official in Maharashtra. The analysis by FactCheck.org helpfully reproduced the statistic's media trajectory, from the conservative news aggregator Drudge Report to Rush Limbaugh's radio show and the *Washington Times*.<sup>25</sup> PolitiFact rated the claim "False" after Republican presidential hopeful Michelle Bachmann repeated it in a CNN interview, and likewise traced its path "in the blogosphere and over conservative airwaves."<sup>26</sup> Both fact-checking sites made a tentative effort to estimate the actual costs of such trips, which is standard government policy not to disclose. But the force of their refutation lay in revealing the claim's unlikely source and the way it had spread, unsubstantiated, across partisan regions of the modern media landscape.

### **Working with sources**

As these cases suggest, checking facts usually turns on a contest of sources. The examples I heard cited time and again to explain what fact-checkers do, like Haley Barbour's "gross exaggeration" of job losses, underscore the simplicity and reliability of the enterprise. They seem to require no interpretation and leave little room for disagreement. A public figure deploys a

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<sup>25</sup> Lara Seligman, "Trip to Mumbai," FactCheck.org, November 3, 2010, <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/11/ask-factcheck-trip-to-mumbai/> (accessed May 1, 2012).

statistic about jobs, or the budget, or taxes, etc.; a fact-checker consults the authoritative data on the subject; the politician either has or hasn't distorted the "real" numbers. Usually, well-established conventions guide fact-checkers in choosing these sources and using their data. Why only count "nonfarm" jobs in assessing a claim about unemployment, a FactCheck.org intern wanted to know? Because that's the standard everyone uses, she was told.<sup>27</sup> But not every case is so clear-cut; inevitably, seams appear in the consensus about what data are appropriate and which sources can be trusted. Sometimes even official statistics can invite disagreement (for instance in debates about whether the official unemployment rate understates the problem, discussed below). The need to rely on experts for interpretation and analysis introduces another frequent source of controversy.

Relying on official, public data sources is basic to the elite fact-checkers' claim to objectivity. "We are neutral and scrupulously fair," PolitiFact trainees were told. "We examine all sides of an issue, we use the most unbiased sources we can find, and then we reach a decision." In practice this means using government data whenever possible. A draft statement of principles emphasized that, "The best sources are independent and nonpartisan. At the national level we often rely on federal agencies such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau, the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Budget Office. At the state level, we seek similar independent government agencies." Likewise, new interns at FactCheck.org received a four-page list of trusted "web resources" that consisted almost entirely of such government agencies. Training at both organizations stressed the need to consult these original data sources rather than relying on a news report or policy paper about, for instance,

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Farley, "Rep. Michele Bachmann Claims Obama's Trip to India Will Cost the Taxpayers \$200 Million a Day," PolitiFact, November 3, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2010/nov/04/michele-bachmann/rep-michele-bachmann-claims-obamas-trip-india-will/> (accessed May 1, 2012).

unemployment rates or the federal budget. “We want to make sure we’re working with primary sources of information like the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and not secondary information, or worse,” a staffer at FactCheck.org explained.<sup>28</sup>

The claim to objectivity also rests on fact-checking’s “transparent” approach to journalism, which requires the sources used in analyzing a claim to be revealed to the reader. Every Truth-O-Meter item PolitiFact publishes features a sidebar listing all of the documents consulted and people interviewed during the research, even those not mentioned in the body of the article. Like an academic bibliography, this source list includes publication and interview dates, with web links provided whenever possible. The typical ruling relies on five to ten sources, but some cite many more. (See figure 4.2.) FactCheck.org offers a similar bibliography at the end of its feature articles; shorter “wire” pieces only include links in the body of the text. The *Post*’s Fact Checker column also links to documents cited, but does not publish a separate list of sources.

The need to be transparent was stressed constantly during training sessions at PolitiFact and in internal documents like the Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual,” with a section on “Sources and our commitment to transparency.” The source list attached to each article serves as a constant reminder that this is a “new kind of journalism,” a phrase I heard many times. Revealing sources very self-consciously performs the idea of scientific reproducibility. The practice of “showing your work” acts simultaneously as a way to argue and persuade, and a defense against critics who remain unconvinced. One editor explained to me, “When you publish links to the original report, when someone else can follow your reporting and really take it apart, it’s more scientific. It’s not perfectly scientific, but anyone can verify it.” (The group has considered publishing

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<sup>27</sup> Author’s field notes, June 7, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 7, 8 and 15, 2011.

research and interview notes along with each piece, but reporters objected that their sources would stop taking their calls. “We’re not that transparent yet, but we’ll get there,” I heard.)<sup>29</sup>

In keeping with this “transparent” approach, both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact use only on-the-record sources. (In contrast the Fact Checker sometimes quotes government officials anonymously in providing context for a claim.) FactCheck.org has no stated policy but, as Brooks Jackson explained, “we don’t cite anonymous sources as proof of anything factual. Why would anyone believe it if we did? ... We think of our pieces as meeting the high standards of academic scholarship.” He went on to volunteer his own view that conventional journalism too easily indulges requests for anonymity, which should be granted only in the most extreme circumstances.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile PolitiFact policy emphatically bans off-the-record or on-background sources. “The phrase ‘sources said’ should not appear in a PolitiFact item,” the Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual” declares, adding as an editorial note that officials who refuse to be quoted by name have been “tolerated for too long” by Washington journalists. Trainees were told that anonymity violates the basic logic of fact-checking — “You can’t have an anonymous source debunking a fact.” They learned that nothing would upset PolitiFact editors more than violating this rule.<sup>31</sup>

Though fact-checkers favor original data sources, in practice these are rarely enough to render a verdict. Even straightforward numerical comparisons raise thorny questions which a reporter may not feel qualified to answer. My fact-check of Governor Daniels offered a case in point.<sup>32</sup> Daniels had claimed interest on the debt was about to exceed national security spending.

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<sup>29</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, interview by author, telephone, February 25, 2011; author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 15-17, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, email, May 8, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Graves, “Mitch Daniels Says Interest on Debt Will Soon Exceed Security Spending.”



Official data were easy to find, but hard to decipher: Should I use interest payments as projected in the latest White House budget, as it turned out Daniels had? Doesn't Congress hold the "power of the purse"? And what counts as "national security" spending? The official Defense budget excluded the cost of ongoing wars, which seemed like it should count. And what about the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security? Was there some sort of convention? At the suggestion of PolitiFact editors I interviewed two experts who walked me through various permutations: one from OMB Watch, a budget watchdog, and another from the Concord Coalition, which advocates deficit reduction. Happily, both budget experts agreed that the governor's math did not add up. The fact that one hailed from a group associated with deficit reduction only seemed to make the case stronger.<sup>33</sup>

The need to consult experts presents a real problem for fact-checkers, threatening always to draw them into a highly politicized landscape of analysis and opinion retailed in service of ideological agendas. "You're going to seek independent, non-biased sources — of which in today's world there are none," a PolitiFact editor joked during training. Similarly, interns at FactCheck.org were warned to watch out for "think tanks in Washington" that pursue political agendas — though "there are some good ones that at least provide information in addition to their spin." Navigating this landscape is a matter of getting at the facts while ignoring the spin, trainees at both groups were told. It is also a matter of tacit journalistic knowledge. As I heard repeatedly, certain groups and specific experts are "academically solid" and can be trusted to provide honest data or thoughtful analysis despite their broader ideological orientation.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Author's field notes, February 14-15, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Author's field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 7 and 15, 2011.

Like many news organizations, fact-checkers attach broad political labels — “left-leaning,” “pro-Republican,” and so on — to various think tanks to guide their readers. A draft statement of PolitiFact’s principles explained, “In a political atmosphere that is sharply polarized along party lines, it can be difficult to find an expert who is truly independent. ... [M]any groups that are technically nonpartisan, such as think tanks, are actually aligned with a political party. We disclose their leanings if we quote them.” Assigning these labels is a matter of loose convention, however. Fact-checking groups vary in the adjectives they pick, and the think tanks sometimes object. (This is especially true on the left, I heard, with groups like the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute complaining about being called “liberal” or “left-leaning.”)<sup>35</sup>

More often, readers, bloggers, and other critics attack the fact-checkers for choosing particular sources or failing to disclose political ties. This became a major issue, for instance, after PolitiFact rated “Mostly False” Mitt Romney’s claim that White House economic policy had disproportionately hurt women.<sup>36</sup> The policy director for Romney’s campaign responded with a stern and widely publicized letter; among other critiques it revealed that one expert PolitiFact cited (much-quoted Brookings economist Gary Burtless) had donated to the Obama campaign while another, identified as a Princeton professor, previously had been chief economist in Obama’s Labor Department. “I have no way of knowing whether PolitiFact was aware of this and failed to disclose it, or whether she failed to identify her role in the Administration — frankly, I am not sure which would be worse,” the Romney official admonished. PolitiFact responded by publishing her letter, interviewing four additional economists and adding an editor’s note explaining the controversy. (It did not alter the ruling.)

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

The elite fact-checkers negotiate this terrain of politicized expertise in different ways. PolitiFact reporters are encouraged to interview multiple human sources when researching a claim. Nearly every Truth-O-Meter item cites at least two or three experts, and some use many more. An item in early 2012 consulted 14 different historians and military experts in awarding a “Pants on Fire” to Mitt Romney, who had said the US Navy and Air Force under President Obama are the smallest they’ve been since 1917 and 1947, respectively.<sup>37</sup> (When a critic at the website Politico objected to the analysis, an editor’s letter trumpeted the number of experts interviewed.)<sup>38</sup> PolitiFact items often feature analysis from groups with opposing ideologies, a strategy sometimes described as “triangulating the truth.” Trainees were instructed to “Seek multiple sources. If you can’t get an independent source on something, go to a conservative and go to a liberal and see where they overlap.” Such “triangulation” is not a matter of artificial balance, trainees were told: The point is to make a decisive ruling by forcing these experts to “focus on the facts.”<sup>39</sup>

The emphasis on experts is less pronounced at FactCheck.org, though most features do include one or two such interviews. As at PolitiFact, the group’s fact-checkers generally note the political leanings of the think tanks they consult and seem to factor this into their analysis. This can mean citing groups with different orientations, or simply emphasizing where an expert has diverged from the party line. For instance, FactCheck.org has twice firmly refuted the Laffer

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<sup>36</sup> Molly Moorhead, “Romney Campaign Says Women Were Hit Hard by Job Losses Under Obama,” PolitiFact, April 6, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/apr/10/mitt-romney/romney-campaign-says-women-were-hit-hard-job-losse/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Mitt Romney Says U.S. Navy Is Smallest Since 1917, Air Force Is Smallest Since 1947,” PolitiFact, January 18, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/jan/18/mitt-romney/mitt-romney-says-us-navy-smallest-1917-air-force-s/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Bill Adair, “‘There’s a Fair Chance PolitiFact Spoke to Other Experts’ — Yes, 13 Others,” PolitiFact, January 19, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/blog/2012/jan/19/theres-fair-chance-politifact-spoke-other-experts-/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

Curve, the basis of the “supply-side” notion that tax cuts stimulate enough additional economic activity to offset any decline in government revenue.<sup>40</sup> In each case the analysis highlighted testimony from economists with conservative think tanks, and who had worked in the Bush Administration. Among economists, “there’s no dispute” that tax cuts lead to lower revenues, one expert at the “conservative American Enterprise Institute” was quoted as saying. The subtext was clear: Even conservative economists won’t stand behind supply-side claims.

Glenn Kessler, the *Washington Post*’s Fact Checker columnist, relies on experts far less than his peers. Kessler explained that while he may interview an economist or a policy expert to make sure he understands an issue completely, he tries not to quote such sources for validation in the published column. “I’m the kind of reporter who is reasonably confident in his judgments,” he said in an interview. “I like to speak with my voice, because I have actually covered just about everything in Washington. ... You can see my bio, you can see what I’ve covered. I bring a unique perspective of having listened to bullshit in Washington for 30 years.”<sup>41</sup> (Experience as a foreign correspondent is particularly good training for a fact-checker, Kessler averred, because reporters covering diplomacy and international affairs are expected to be more interpretive.) The decision to keep expert testimony to a minimum is meant to give the column a distinct, matter-of-fact voice that sets it apart from its rivals. But it also helps to shield the site from the inevitable critics who read bias into the sources fact-checkers use. “You can get so easily burned,” Kessler explained, pointing to the controversy over PolitiFact’s sources in the piece on

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<sup>40</sup> Lori Robertson, “Supply-side Spin,” FactCheck.org, June 11, 2007, [http://www.factcheck.org/taxes/supply-side\\_spin.html](http://www.factcheck.org/taxes/supply-side_spin.html) (accessed May 8, 2012); Robertson, “The Impact of Tax Cuts,” FactCheck.org, January 16, 2008, <http://factcheck.org/2008/01/the-impact-of-tax-cuts/> (accessed May 8, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

women's job losses. His own analysis of the same claim included a response quote from a Republican official, but did not cite any economists.<sup>42</sup>

As noted earlier, the elite fact-checkers frequently check the same statements and sometimes cite one another as sources. However, with occasional exceptions, they do not cite the work of partisan media watchdogs and fact-checking sites, such as the conservative Media Research Council (and its subsidiary site NewsBusters) or the progressive Media Matters.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, in public and private discourse the elite fact-checkers strenuously reinforce the distinction between their own work and that of these partisan outlets. Searching Google for a FactCheck.org article about the Sunday political shows, an editor came across results from Media Matters. This prompted a quick lesson for interns: "There's a lot of groups out there that claim to be fact-checking when they're not. They're just fact-checking the opposition, like Media Matters." Such sites are a good place to find transcripts or video clips, the staffer said, but, "They're coming from a bias, either right or left. They're out to expose the other side. They conveniently leave out the truth or distort the truth for their own purposes. ... They're coming from a certain point of view, and it's going to be distorted. You can't really trust what they say."<sup>44</sup>

All of the elite fact-checkers echoed this argument at the December, 2011, fact-checking forum I helped to organize in Washington, DC. Media Matters (not represented at the forum) often debunks the same claims as the nonpartisan fact-checkers, and regularly cites their articles

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<sup>42</sup> Glenn Kessler, "Are Obama's Job Policies Hurting Women?", *The Fact Checker*, April 10, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/are-obamas-job-policies-hurting-women/2012/04/09/gIQAGz3q6S\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/are-obamas-job-policies-hurting-women/2012/04/09/gIQAGz3q6S_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Media Matters appears in a number of items at both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, almost always identified as a liberal media watchdog. Most of these mentions come in the course of reconstructing some online controversy, though a handful of articles do cite Media Matters' work in an authoritative way.

<sup>44</sup> Author's field notes, June 6, 2011.

as evidence. (The site also criticizes the elite fact-checkers, and in particular PolitiFact, when rulings go against Democratic politicians.) In some cases the analysis of a claim across these outlets is indistinguishable; why not cite Media Matters when their work is sound?<sup>45</sup> “It’s just so one-sided, and that I think is why they are not a credible source,” PolitiFact’s Bill Adair explained. “If I were a liberal I would, I’m sure, look at Media matters all the time and treasure it, but I really think our role as journalists is to dig to the original stuff and do our own analysis.” Kessler agreed: “The one thing I will say about Media Matters is that it is impressive the amount of data that they collect in terms of really watching these networks and radio stations in ways that I cannot possibly keep up with them. But the fact that they only look at one side is a real problem for them. . . . I don’t think that anyone can really take them that seriously.”<sup>46</sup>

The reluctance to cite partisan media critics is of a piece with a wider aversion to using blogs as authoritative sources. This is not a firm policy, but the elite fact-checkers generally will not credit a lesser-known blog in the way they would a fellow fact-checker. In one instance, a PolitiFact trainee investigated the claim, by the White House press secretary, that Republican presidential hopefuls had not once used the terms “middle class” or “education” during a recent debate.<sup>47</sup> Verifying this meant reading closely through the entire 22,000-word transcript for those terms or their analogues. (Though technically accurate the claim earned a “Barely True,” because the candidates were never asked about education and used other words to talk about the middle class.) In the course of doing the research the reporter found a blog which had conducted a

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<sup>45</sup> I asked this question, as did several other participants; the meeting was framed in part as a discussion of the fact-checking landscape.

<sup>46</sup> Bill Adair and Glen Kessler (comments at “Fact-Checking in the News,” meeting hosted by the New America Foundation, Washington, DC, December 14, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Maryalice Gill, “Democrats Say Republican Presidential Candidates Did Not Mention Middle Class or Education in Debate,” FactCheck.org, June 24, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/jun/24/jay-carney/democrats-say-republican-presidential-candidates-d/> (accessed June 24, 2011).

parallel analysis, and included it in the source list with her first draft. An editor took it out, explaining, “You did the work, they also did it.”<sup>48</sup>

This raises an important point that will surface again later: In general the elite fact-checkers see the blogging world — and the Internet as a whole — as a carrier of political misinformation, rather than a corrective to it. This default view is reinforced by their day-to-day experience tracing false claims, and by the steady torrent of criticism and invective they receive from online partisans. Cases in which the fact-checkers do, technically speaking, cite a blog only confirm the preference for establishment sources. Both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact have several times drawn on legal analyses by SCOTUSblog and the Volokh Conspiracy, for instance. But these are highly respected blogs written by well-known legal scholars who teach at top-ranked law schools and have argued cases before the Supreme Court. Like well-known think tanks, they may have points of view (the Volokh Conspiracy for instance is considered to have a libertarian outlook). But their academic credentials and establishment status — and the perceived quality of their work — distinguish them from what fact-checkers see as a stew of online vitriol and partisanship.

### **Checking Glenn Beck**

A close review of a PolitiFact item I wrote as a participant-observer will illustrate — subjectively, of course — some of the questions that attend the fact-checker’s work of researching claims, consulting experts, and establishing authority, and how that work is embedded in media networks.

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<sup>48</sup> Author’s field notes, June 16, 2011.

As noted, my main visit to the Washington-based fact-checking group coincided with the popular uprisings in Egypt in early 2011. The Arab Spring was a topic of obvious interest and importance; the “buffet” of possible claims to check quickly filled with statements about Egypt, and PolitiFact would publish five related Truth-O-Meter items during the uprisings. I searched through transcripts of political talk shows on MSNBC and the Fox News Channel and found, with some difficulty, a small handful of claims that seemed promising.<sup>49</sup> A business analyst on Fox had offered the surprising statistic that Egyptians spend more than half of their income on food, while Americans spend only 6 percent. Rachel Maddow, the liberal MSNBC host, had likened the uprisings to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in that “nobody really saw it coming”; I wondered whether this bit of conventional historical wisdom was really true. But Fox News host Glenn Beck (who has since left that network) made an alarming claim about Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood that seemed the best candidate for the Truth-O-Meter. On his February 4 broadcast, Beck explained the following to his listeners:

We told you this week how if Mubarak does step down, however, the Muslim Brotherhood would be the most likely group to seize power. They’ve openly stated they want to declare war on Israel and they would end the peace agreement with Israel and they would work towards instituting something we told you about, a caliphate.<sup>50</sup>

Truth-O-Meter items render a verdict on a single claim, usually a verbatim quote, known as the “ruling statement.” With an editor’s approval I began researching the claim that the Muslim Brotherhood had “openly stated they want to declare war on Israel.” I tried to put aside my general misgivings about Beck’s program and engage the question with an open mind; I knew little about the Islamic political organization and it seemed entirely possible that the claim would turn out to be at least partly true. Following PolitiFact protocol I tried first to contact a

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<sup>49</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7-8, 2011.



spokesman for the *Glenn Beck* show, though I was assured by other reporters that his staff never responds to fact-checkers. The obvious next step was to determine where the claim had originated. On a broadcast three days earlier, Beck had quoted a “top official” in the Muslim Brotherhood as declaring that, “The people should be prepared for war against Israel.”<sup>51</sup> I assumed this was his basis for saying the Brotherhood meant to declare war. Not realizing yet that the website for Beck’s show published a source list for his broadcasts, I searched Google for that exact phrase. More than 20,000 results appeared, all of which appeared to be from the previous two weeks.<sup>52</sup>

Documenting the precise origin of the words proved tricky. The earliest reference I could find was on the website of the English-language *Jerusalem Post*, in a February 1 article that began this way: “A leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt told the Arabic-language Iranian news network Al-Alam on Monday that he would like to see the Egyptian people prepare for war against Israel, according to the Hebrew-language business newspaper *Calcalist*.” The piece also mentioned a name, “Muhammad Ghannem.” It seemed important — maybe even a coup of sorts — to locate that original Al-Alam story, which wasn’t linked to by the *Jerusalem Post* or any of the subsequent coverage in English. After a fruitless hour or more trying to navigate the Iranian network’s website with various online translation tools, I hit on a strategy that worked. Translating the name “Ghannem” into Arabic and pasting that into Al-Alam’s search box brought up a January 31 article which (rendered into English by Google Translate) appeared to report on a news interview with Ghannem the day before, on the subject of US support for the Egyptian military. Halfway down it included a sentence, in the reporter’s

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<sup>50</sup> Fox News Network, *Glenn Beck*, February 4, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> *Glenn Beck*, February 1, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Author’s field notes, February 8-11, 2011.

voice, paraphrasing the Muslim Brother's call for civil disobedience and "the willingness of people to war against Israel, until the world realizes that the Egyptian people are ready for everything ... to get rid of this system."<sup>53</sup>

Consider the media trajectory this suggests. The inflammatory words were vocalized on the air, in Arabic, in an Al-Alam interview on January 30.<sup>54</sup> Somehow they came to the attention of a Hebrew-language business paper; perhaps the *Calcalist* routinely monitors Iranian media, or some reader alerted the paper to the broadcast. Then the *Jerusalem Post* ran its web item in English, attributed entirely to the other newspaper. The new piece was only three paragraphs long but featured an arresting title that gave the phrase a new author: "Muslim Brotherhood: 'Prepare Egyptians for War with Israel.'" At least two kinds of translation come into play here. Arabic words have been translated into Hebrew and then into English, more or less faithfully. People might disagree about both the literal meaning of the words or the sense in which they should be taken, depending on rhetorical practices, social norms, and etc. But a second translation is at work as well. A person's speech has been attributed to an organization. A phrase buried in a lengthy discussion of US ties to Egypt's military has been extracted from that context and made into a damning headline. Material in one news report has become the subject of another news report, about a declaration of war.

Now a nodal document existed to anchor Ghannem's fiery words in online discourse — a textual artifact in English, with its own URL, from a respected journalistic source. Variants of the phrase propagated rapidly across blogs, discussion groups, news sites, and cable television. (Ghannem's name appeared with various spellings in English, including "Ghannam" and

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<sup>53</sup> Author's field notes, February 8-11, 2011.

“Ghanem”; here I use what appeared to be the most common.) The day the *Jerusalem Post* article appeared Beck repeated the quote on his Fox show:

How do they feel about Israel? Well, a top official in the Muslim Brotherhood has just said that — he said this while expressing support for the Egyptian protesters. And this is critical that you remember this. “The people should be prepared for war against Israel.” ...

You don’t believe me? I don’t really care. Do your own homework. Don’t trust me on anything. Do your own homework. Go to GlennBeck.com and look all of it up. If you don’t believe our research, go find it yourself.

The next day the phrase appeared on the website of Senator Mark Kirk, in a press release with the text of his floor speech calling on the President to “heed growing warnings about the Muslim Brotherhood, their leaders and plans for taking Egypt back to the 13th century.” The same day the words turned up in articles at the *Washington Times*, the *New York Post*, *Investors Business Daily*, and the *Business Insider*. These reports all identified the phrase’s author as a “leader” or “leading member” of the Muslim Brotherhood, with no explanation of that status. (In fact I could not determine Ghannem’s relationship to the group beyond establishing that he was not in its official leadership body; one conservative research institute described him as a Brotherhood “representative in London.”)<sup>55</sup> Subtle rhetorical elisions gave the statement more authority in standing for the aims of the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole. An editorial in the *Washington Times* declared matter-of-factly that the group’s “foreign policy was succinctly summed up by brotherhood leader Muhammad Ghannem.” Was that succinct summing up a well-researched factual claim, a considered opinion, or merely a glib writerly device? What resources would a reader have to marshal to assess the link being offhandedly asserted between quoted *text* and official *policy*?

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<sup>54</sup> Much later, I discovered a video of the interview itself as archived by the Middle East Media Research Institute, a conservative media monitoring group. See <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/2787.htm> (accessed June 25, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> See Middle East Media Research Institute, <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/2787.htm> (accessed June 25, 2012).

This is at least one way news travels in today's media networks — not through the simple diffusion of information or “stories,” but via a process of translation and recontextualization that assembles news, and constructs authority, through citation and annotation of other media. Fact-checkers in their daily work are students of this process. As in the cases described earlier, tracing the spread of the claim — documenting the ease with which it was repeated and amplified — was part of the work of evaluating it. Reasonably or not, the shape of the phrase's network footprint began to color my judgement. If this Ghannem's declaration of hostility was so important, why hadn't elite US news outlets covered it? In fact, as the published Truth-O-Meter item would point out, CNN and NPR and the news wires were carrying official reassurances about the peace treaty from Brotherhood spokesmen.

Nevertheless, the question was impossible to research without relying on experts. Assuming Ghannem's words had been accurately quoted, the ruling seemed to turn on one question: whether they reflected Brotherhood policy. But how to know what that official policy was; or whether it was sincere; or, if the evidence pointed in more than one direction, which version should count? I found any number of news articles and scholarly reports that seemed to bear on these questions. But my confidence that I was reading this evidence correctly came from having scholars agree it was ludicrous to say the Brotherhood planned to declare war on Israel. Note also how assessing whether the group had *said* it wanted war led — inevitably, given the tricky question of who could speak for the Brothers — into evaluating whether they really *intended* to declare war. The “facts” of who Ghannem was and what his words meant were not stable starting points for analysis; they would be shaped by the comparison to other things the Brotherhood had

said. (In other words, if his statements varied wildly from official policy, that *in itself* would suggest he was not an authoritative spokesperson or that his words had been misinterpreted.)<sup>56</sup>

I began by sending emails to Middle East experts at the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (Two of these groups had been cited in a Truth-O-Meter item two weeks earlier, about the Brotherhood's ties to al Qaida.) I was mindful that this is the foreign policy elite which journalists have been criticized for relying on so unquestioningly, but I didn't know where else to begin. Only one expert responded, giving me the names of four other academics who study the Muslim Brothers, including one I'd seen quoted widely in the news. All four of those scholars confirmed that Ghannem was not a member of the organization's governing council, and that though the sprawling movement included many divergent views, Glenn Beck had grossly mischaracterized its aims. Based on this testimony I gave Beck's claim a provisional rating of "False"; in a review session three PolitiFact editors agreed unanimously. The source list published with the article included 18 different sources used to document the claim's origins or to support my analysis: two *Glenn Beck* transcripts and a posting on his website; an article on the Muslim Brotherhood's website; seven news articles or editorials; two policy reports; a congressional press release; an earlier Truth-O-Meter item; and the four expert interviews.<sup>57</sup>

Once published, the "False" ruling immediately began to carve its own textual trail through media networks. The Truth-O-Meter item went live shortly after 11 AM on February 15. A condensed data box bearing just Glenn Beck's picture, his claim, and the ruling appeared at the

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<sup>56</sup> This evokes the notion Gaye Tuchman called a "web of facticity." As she wrote, "to flesh out any one supposed fact one amasses a host of supposed facts that, when taken together, present themselves as both individually and collectively self-validating." *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 86.

<sup>57</sup> Author's field notes, February 8-11, 2011.

top of PolitiFact's news feed. Beck's official file automatically registered one more "False" rating. At 11:16 AM a blurb with a link to the piece was tweeted on PolitiFact's official Twitter account; before noon it had been re-tweeted 80 times. PolitiFact also posted a summary of the item on its Facebook page, where dozens of people commented on it in a few hours. Allies and opponents of Glenn Beck began to weigh in immediately. The day the item went live, Media Matters turned it into a headline: "PolitiFact Gives 'False' Rating To Beck Claim That Muslim Brotherhood Wants To Declare War On Israel."<sup>58</sup> That post linked back to PolitiFact and reproduced the bulk of the original article; other progressive bloggers in turn linked to the Media Matters item.

The Truth-O-Meter ruling also came to the attention of Glenn Beck's staff. Two days after the item was posted Stu Burguiere, the in-house blogger at GlennBeck.com, ran a point-by-point refutation under a mock-up of PolitiFact's Truth-O-Meter graphic, with the needle pointing to "UTTERFAIL."<sup>59</sup> PolitiFact had conceded that Beck accurately quoted the *Jerusalem Post*, Burguiere noted; shouldn't that make his claim true by definition? Wasn't the newspaper the right target for this fact-check? He took aim at one of the experts consulted, from a research center at George Washington University, by way of an in-joke invoking Beck's long-running crusade against the legacy of President Woodrow Wilson: "They go, without irony, to quite possibly the least trustworthy source imaginable when dealing with Glenn Beck: The Woodrow Wilson Center. I'm not kidding." (Interestingly, the first comments at the Media Matters post on the item had predicted this line of attack.) The "Stu Blog" post summed up,

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<sup>58</sup> Media Matters staff, "PolitiFact Gives 'False' Rating to Beck Claim that Muslim Brotherhood Wants to Declare War on Israel," Media Matters, February 15, 2011, <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201102150034> (accessed February 16, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Stu Burguiere, "Politifail. Factchecking Politifact's claims about the Muslim Brotherhood and Glenn Beck," Stu Blog, February 17, 2011, <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/blog/stu/politifail-factchecking-politifact's-claims-about-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-glenn-beck/> (accessed February 18, 2011).

So, the FALSE rating comes from Glenn accurately quoting a newspaper, accurately quoting a Muslim Brotherhood member, who apparently doesn't rise high enough on the Muslim Brotherhood popularity list for the Woodrow Wilson Center. What a devastating case.

As further proof Burguiere cited violent anti-Israel rhetoric from a popular cleric, whom the German daily *Der Spiegel* had identified as an intellectual leader of the Brotherhood. Later that day Beck picked up this line of reasoning on his television program: "PolitiFact says that my statement about the Muslim Brotherhood wanting to war with Israel is false despite the fact that we showed you the words of Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Oh, that guy, he's rated the ninth-most influential Muslim on earth with an audience of 60 million people a week."<sup>60</sup> I received several personal emails from his fans taking issue with my analysis, and directing me to the evidence compiled on Beck's website. These were civil but direct. "I suggest you change your 'truth-o-meter' to reflect the accuracy of Glenn's statement, and perhaps consider reprimanding the Jerusalem Post instead of Glenn Beck," one wrote. "For further reference, there's a well laid out argument found at glennbeck.com ... I suspect you don't care and simply want to bash Glenn Beck."<sup>61</sup>

The episode underscores the open-ended nature of online discourse and the difficulty of resolving factual debates in any conclusive way. (As the then-editor of the *New York Times* put it at the close of a week-long dialogue with a prominent blogger and citizen-journalism advocate, "My study of the blog culture is, I readily admit, very cursory and incomplete, but it's striking that there seems to be no end to any argument in your world.")<sup>62</sup> Such factual disputes bring to mind the image, nicely drawn by sociologist of science Bruno Latour, of a skeptical scientist,

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<sup>60</sup> *Glenn Beck*, February 17, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Email to author, February 19, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Bill Keller quoted in Jeff Jarvis, "Keller of The Times writes: The final chapter," BuzzMachine, March 3, 2005, <http://buzzmachine.com/2005/03/03/keller-of-the-times-writes-3/> (accessed December 20, 2010).

“the dissenter,” confronting a cluster of citations which must be untangled and dealt with individually if a scientific claim is to be challenged. What was the Muslim Brotherhood’s *real* stance toward Israel? Who speaks for the group? What counts as “speech” — all rhetoric, or just official policy? Beck had his list of links, and I had my own. Latour writes of scientific literature in *Science in Action*,

Again, it is a question of numbers. A paper that does not have references is like a child without an escort walking at night in a big city it does not know; isolated, lost, anything may happen to it. On the contrary, attacking a paper heavy with footnotes means that the dissenter has to weaken each of the other papers, or will at least be threatened with having to do so... The difference at this point between technical and non-technical literature is not that one is about fact and the other about fiction, but that *the latter gathers a few resources to hand, and the former a lot of resources, even from far away in time and space.*<sup>63</sup> [italics added]

In this material sense the debate over facts online becomes quite technical. Of course, it is not really just a question of who has the longer list of citations; sources come with varying levels of authority and they may be deployed more or less reasonably to build a case. But making these assessments takes real work; it is a matter of argument, not self-evident fact, and the results are always vulnerable to challenge. This is precisely PolitiFact’s project, and that of the other fact-checkers: to say what is settled and what is not, or in the language of science studies, to close black boxes by amassing enrolling authoritative allies, both human (experts) and non-human (documents, statistics). The circuit traveled by Ghannem’s words shows clearly the elisions in attribution that muddy this sort of analysis.

Both my analysis and the refutation at Glenn Beck’s website would continue to be recruited into online political debates in the weeks to come. The episode resurfaced months later during a mediated confrontation between Fox News, PolitiFact, and Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show*. In a mid-

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<sup>63</sup> Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 33.



June interview on Fox News, Stewart had declared that polls found the network’s audience to be the “most consistently misinformed media viewers”; PolitiFact analyzed his claim and rated it “False.”<sup>64</sup> In response, on his own show two days later Stewart declared, with mock seriousness, “I defer to their judgment and I apologize for my mistake. ... To not do so ... would undermine the very integrity and credibility that I work so hard to pretend to care about.”<sup>65</sup> He then launched into a four-minute review of the abysmal PolitiFact record compiled by various Fox News hosts. As Stewart narrated, 21 “False” and “Pants on Fire” statements from Fox filled the screen until the comedian’s face was barely visible. (See figure 4.3.) PolitiFact responded to the attention eagerly, with an editor’s letter offering the “annotated edition” of Stewart’s broadcast: a summary of all of the rulings he referred to, in the order cited.<sup>66</sup>

### **Operating the Truth-O-Meter**

Of the elite national fact-checkers, PolitiFact has the most carefully developed and articulated process for researching political claims and rendering a verdict. In part this stems from the group’s franchise model. In order to license the PolitiFact method to state partners, beginning in early 2010, the group had to codify that method; it had to develop clear policies and procedures which could be imparted in training sessions and incorporated into official literature, both public and private. This yielded PolitiFact’s most important repository of organizational knowledge, the Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual.” The primary goal of the training manual,

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<sup>64</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Jon Stewart Says Those Who Watch Fox News Are The ‘Most Consistently Misinformed Media Viewers,’” PolitiFact, June 20, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/jun/20/jon-stewart/jon-stewart-says-those-who-watch-fox-news-are-most/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>65</sup> Comedy Central, *The Daily Show*, “Fox News’ False Statements,” June 21, 2011, [http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-june-21-2011/fox-news-false-statements?xrs=share\\_copy](http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-june-21-2011/fox-news-false-statements?xrs=share_copy) (accessed October 18, 2011).

<sup>66</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Jon Stewart’s PolitiFact Segment: The Annotated Edition,” PolitiFact, June 22, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/jun/22/jon-stewarts-politifact-segment-annotated-edition/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

originally developed at a state partner's request, is to ensure that rulings remain roughly consistent across a growing number of semi-independent franchises. In my observation the evolving document has become a key institutional resource whenever PolitiFact faces controversy or criticism, a master text for resolving internal debates and crafting the public statements the group sometimes issues to explain its methods.<sup>67</sup>

The focus on process also jibes with PolitiFact's notion of pioneering a new kind of database journalism, compiling records and statistics which will be relevant far beyond the current news cycle. Trainees were told not to forget to include the full date — day, month, and year — in all of their work: "We're going to be around in 100 years." This database model is central to PolitiFact's mission, emphasized to new fact-checkers as well as to potential media partners. As I heard more than once during visits to PolitiFact, voters in 2010 had access to a resource never before available to assess their candidates, and by 2012 the database would be still richer. One of the added benefits of licensing franchises to state newspapers is the ability to track promising local politicians early in their careers; by the time they reach the national stage PolitiFact will already have a detailed record of their statements in its database. In the same vein, in 2009 PolitiFact began tracking campaign promises kept and broken. For this aggregate data to be meaningful, however, the methods used to generate each ruling have to be as consistent and well-reasoned as possible.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Author's field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011. See for instance Bill Adair, "Principles of PolitiFact and the Truth-O-Meter," February 21, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/feb/21/principles-truth-o-meter/> (accessed February 21, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Author's field notes, February 9-11, 2011, and June 15, 2011; see also Steve Meyers, "PolitiFact Takes Lesson from Fast-Food Industry as it Franchises Fact Checking," Poynter, May 3, 2011, <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/102422/politifact-takes-lesson-from-fast-food-industry-as-it-franchises-fact-checking/> (accessed December 1, 2011).

The trademarked Truth-O-Meter anchors PolitiFact’s fact-checking routine. Every ruling the group publishes rates the veracity of a claim along the Truth-O-Meter’s six-point scale. An editor’s letter in 2011 described the ratings to readers this way:

The meter has six ratings, in decreasing level of truthfulness:

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>69</sup>

Truth-O-Meter definitions have been tweaked and clarified as PolitiFact’s methodology has evolved. Most significantly, in mid-2011 the rating “Barely True” was changed to “Mostly False” in response to frequent complaints that the original label gave too much credit to largely misleading statements. (PolitiFact polled readers before finalizing the switch. An editor’s letter claimed, “We got hundreds of messages through Twitter, more than 1,000 posts on Facebook and more than 850 e-mails. At least 95 percent of them supported the change.”)<sup>70</sup> Such tweaks always threaten the integrity of the database, however, and for that reason are not undertaken lightly. The switch to “Mostly False” applied retroactively to all statements in the database (an editor’s note was appended to affected rulings). Reading through the relabeled rulings, it seems

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<sup>69</sup> Bill Adair, “Principles of PolitiFact and the Truth-O-Meter,” February 21, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/feb/21/principles-truth-o-meter/> (accessed February 21, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Bill Adair, “A Change in the Meter: Barely True Is Now Mostly False,” PolitiFact, July 27, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/jul/27/-barely-true-mostly-false/> (accessed May 8, 2012); see also Hannah Vinter, “Bill Adair, Editor of Politifact: ‘Readers Love this Kind of Accountability Journalism.’”

likely some would have been rated more generously (perhaps earning a “Half True”) if the tougher rubric already had been in place.<sup>71</sup>

As the name suggests, journalists at PolitiFact regard the Truth-O-Meter with some playfulness. The “O” reminds reporter and reader alike that a machine for reliably and scientifically determining what is true doesn’t exist, and probably can’t exist. (Calling it simply the “Truth Meter” would have conveyed something far more earnest.) In the office PolitiFact staff joked that the Truth-O-Meter “is not a scientific instrument.” The “owner’s manual” also plays with this status; like a real product manual, the front page of the version I saw congratulated the user for the purchase of this instrument and warned that “incorrect operation can cause an unsafe situation.” (A final “safety instruction” indicated the Truth-O-Meter should be disconnected during electrical storms.) This playfulness is in keeping with one of the fact-checking principles stressed in the manual and in PolitiFact’s other literature: that “reasonable people can reach different conclusions about a claim.”<sup>72</sup> As trainees learned, “This is a human enterprise, and the truth is not black and white. The very philosophy behind the Truth-O-Meter is, shades of gray.” In this way the idealized instrument embodies, I think, a reflexivity that fact-checkers at PolitiFact and elsewhere bring to their novel enterprise.<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, the fictional device plays a vital organizational role at PolitiFact. The iconic Truth-O-Meter graphic features prominently in the group’s editorial and promotional output. News outlets which cite a ruling or feature a PolitiFact journalist as a guest are encouraged to display the symbol. The Truth-O-Meter lies at the center of PolitiFact’s appeal to

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<sup>71</sup> See for instance Maryalice Gill, “Democrats Say Republican Presidential Candidates Did Not Mention Middle Class or Education in Debate,” FactCheck.org, June 24, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/jun/24/jay-carney/democrats-say-republican-presidential-candidates-d/> (accessed June 24, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Adair, “Principles of PolitiFact and the Truth-O-Meter.”

potential media partners to invest in a new and more rigorous form of journalism; it is literally what a franchisee licenses, and the basis for the training sessions its reporters receive. As noted in the previous chapter, the Truth-O-Meter is also basis for the modularity of PolitiFact’s website, the hinge that lets it function as both a news feed and a database. (This modularity helps to resolve a recurring tension between making news and keeping records, as rulings can be pulled from the database to create topical news stories. It also resolves potential tension between the state sites and PolitiFact National. The main news feed can poach interesting items from the state newsrooms while ensuring that credit and advertising revenue accrue to the outlet that did the work.)<sup>74</sup>

PolitiFact’s fact-checkers take the “proper operation” of the Truth-O-Meter very seriously in their day-to-day journalism. As both an artifact and a process the instrument is the principal means for organizing the work of checking facts, and the basis for their claim to consistency and objectivity. As the “owner’s manual” stated, “We often say we’ve created a new form of journalism. That’s especially true when we have to make a Truth-O-Meter ruling. ... We’ve essentially had to create a new type of journalistic jurisprudence, a set of principles that guide our Truth-O-Meter rulings and make them solid and consistent.”<sup>75</sup>

The proper operation of the Truth-O-Meter can be divided into two phases. First, fact-checking articles must be reported and written consistent with the PolitiFact principles and procedures described in various cases above: for instance, identifying a clear “ruling statement”; giving its author the chance to supply evidence; consulting original data sources over secondary reports; identifying all sources used, and so on. Though the research that goes into a Truth-O-

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<sup>73</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 15-16, 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7, 10, 11, 16, and 17, 2011.

Meter item can be tricky and time-consuming, writing these pieces was, in my experience, straightforward and quite fun. Most PolitiFact stories follow a fairly simple, expository recipe. Several times I heard this described as the “inverted pyramid upside-down”: Items open with the context for a statement, proceed through the detailed analysis, and conclude with the most important information, the ruling. The “owner’s manual” distilled this into a paragraph-by-paragraph template for new fact-checkers to apply while learning how to write for the Truth-O-Meter.<sup>76</sup>

The key to this formula is that Truth-O-Meter items enact for the reader the process of researching a claim. The reporting itself supplies the narrative arc, including key paragraph transitions: “We decided to check the claim that...”; “Then we called...”; “That led us to this resource...”; “We concluded that...” Because fact-checkers make *explicit* truth claims, the work of story construction becomes fairly transparent and straightforward. Like a legal argument — a comparison that comes up constantly at PolitiFact — a fact-check repeatedly justifies itself to the reader, explaining why a claim was chosen and, especially, how the final ruling was reached. As we have seen, many fact-checking articles are stories about the news, recreating the spread of misinformation across media networks. But every Truth-O-Meter item is also a story about reporting work — about the conduct of journalism.

In the course of researching and writing a Truth-O-Meter item, the reporter assigns a tentative rating. Once an item has cleared the first round of edits, the second phase in the operation of the Truth-O-Meter begins. PolitiFact reporters and editors jokingly call this the “star chamber”: an ad hoc panel of three PolitiFact editors (not including the original author) who

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<sup>75</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

debate the ruling in consultation with the published definitions of the Truth-O-Meter ratings, and a set of guiding principles for interpreting those definitions. These guiding principles were developed in 2010, drawing on the “case law” of existing rulings and on the experience of the three PolitiFact editors who had made all of the rulings up to that point. “It’s not like there are principles that you learned in J-school about how to do Truth-O-Meter rulings,” trainees were told. “We invented the Truth-O-Meter and therefore we had to invent the principles on how to use it.”<sup>77</sup> An editor’s letter in 2011 listed them for the public:

**Words matter** — We pay close attention to the specific wording of a claim. Is it a precise statement? Does it contain mitigating words or phrases?

**Context matters** — We examine the claim in the full context, the comments made before and after it, the question that prompted it, and the point the person was trying to make.

**Burden of proof** — People who make factual claims are accountable for their words and should be able to provide evidence to back them up. We will try to verify their statements, but we believe the burden of proof is on the person making the statement.

**Statements can be right and wrong** — We sometimes rate compound statements that contain two or more factual assertions. In these cases, we rate the overall accuracy after looking at the individual pieces.

**Timing** — Our rulings are based on when a statement was made and on the information available at that time.<sup>78</sup>

In my observation the guiding principles come up frequently in star chamber sessions, invoked by name or implicitly. Many rulings turn on the tension between the first two, “words matter” and “context matters.” (As trainees learned, the principles are listed in order of importance.) Previous rulings may also be invoked to clarify how a principle applies, again on the analogy of “common law.” Most star chamber sessions last 10 or 15 minutes and involve little controversy; of more than 25 I observed altogether, only a handful proved at all contentious. (Technically two of three panelists must agree on the final ruling, though unanimity

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<sup>77</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 16, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Adair, “Principles of PolitiFact and the Truth-O-Meter.”

is strongly preferred and usually achieved.) But some sessions become quite heated. In one case I witnessed the disagreement lasted most of an afternoon, and the panel had to reconvene twice.<sup>79</sup>

Even agreeable star chamber sessions proved revealing. Consensus toward a final ruling builds in path-dependent and not perfectly consistent ways; as fact-checkers freely admit, the process is as much art as science. The line between adjacent Truth-O-Meter ratings can be hard to draw. This makes numerical claims, often quite easy to research, among the trickiest to rule on: How accurate does a quoted statistic have to be to qualify as “True”? Or as “Half True”? In a very early Truth-O-Meter item, from 2007, Representative (and frequent presidential candidate) Ron Paul earned a “Mostly True” for claiming 5,000 Americans had died in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>80</sup> As the “owner’s manual” explained, though Paul had exaggerated the figure by 13 percent, his larger point was that a lot of Americans had died in the wars — a fact the correction did not undercut. Conversely, my fact-check of Governor Daniels awarded him a “False” for anticipating a budget event by perhaps six or seven years.<sup>81</sup> Arguably, the fact that interest payments will eventually pass national security spending offered an “element of truth” that warranted a slightly better rating. The harsh ruling reflected how transparently deceptive the statement had been in comparing budget figures separated by an entire decade, without revealing that math to his audience.<sup>82</sup>

In some cases the ruling statement must be tweaked or trimmed to achieve consensus. For instance, in a television interview in early 2011 Representative Michele Bachmann decried the latest overreach of big-government liberalism: “To think that government has to go out and buy

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<sup>79</sup> Author’s field notes, December 3, 2010, February 7-18, 2011, and June 16-17, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Jody Kyle, “Fatality Count Isn’t That High,” PolitiFact, September 9, 2007, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2007/sep/09/ron-paul/fatality-count-isnt-that-high-/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>81</sup> Graves, “Mitch Daniels Says Interest on Debt Will Soon Exceed Security Spending.”

<sup>82</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 16, and 17, 2011.



my breast pump for my babies? You want to talk about the nanny state? I think you just got a new definition of the nanny state.”<sup>83</sup> Her claim stemmed from an IRS rule change classifying breast pumps as medical expenses, meaning mainly that they could now be purchased with special health accounts employees may set aside from their paychecks before taxes are deducted. Clearly, Bachmann turned a misleading phrase in equating the new tax status with state-bought breast pumps. But was her claim “False,” or did it contain a large enough grain of truth to merit a “Barely True”? The star chamber debated the question briefly. Refocusing the ruling statement on Bachmann’s actual choice of words — that the government would “*go out* and buy” breast pumps, which seemed to rule out a partial subsidy — helped to build a consensus around “False.”<sup>84</sup>

The most exciting — and instructive — star chamber I witnessed involved what promised to be a fairly straightforward ruling on unemployment figures. In a speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference, Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney had come up with a dramatic way to depict the state of the US labor market: “Today there are more men and women out of work in America than there are people working in Canada.”<sup>85</sup> This proved deceptively difficult to parse, because of the many different ways of calculating unemployment and underemployment. Economists interviewed suggested that it was possible to make Romney’s math add up, but not by official US unemployment statistics, nor even by an expanded government definition that includes workers who are “marginally attached” to the labor force.

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<sup>83</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, “Michele Bachmann Says the Government Will Buy You a Breast Pump for Your Baby,” PolitiFact, February 18, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/18/michele-bachmann/michele-bachmann-says-government-will-buy-you-brea/> (accessed February 18, 2011).

<sup>84</sup> Author’s field notes, February 18, 2011.

<sup>85</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Mitt Romney tells CPAC that more are out of work in U.S. than employed in Canada,” PolitiFact, February 11, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/feb/11/mitt-romney/mitt-romney-tells-cpac-more-are-out-work-us-employ/> (accessed February 11, 2011).

Meanwhile, as “backup” Romney’s staff offered a larger measure that counts Americans forced to settle for part-time work.<sup>86</sup>

Editors arguing for a “False” invoked the PolitiFact principle that “words matter.” Romney had said “out of work” and therefore clearly did not mean to count underemployed, part-time workers. (This is the same logic FactCheck.org used to debunk the claim in a pithy analysis that simply compared official labor statistics from the US and Canada.)<sup>87</sup> However, extending that argument further, “out of work” Americans might include happily retired persons or even children — in which case his statement would be literally true, but nonsensical, some staff pointed out. That is, “words matter” in a very bounded way. Even literal interpretation followed established conventions — maintained by economists but also journalists and political figures — for talking about economic data.

Another major argument for finding the claim “False” relied on “triangulating the truth.” Economists interviewed from both the left (the Brookings Institution) and the right (the Heritage Foundation) disputed Romney’s claim. More than that, both argued that the comparison was somewhat arbitrary. “No doubt the total number of people out of work in the United States exceeds the total workforce of Luxembourg,” the conservative economist was quoted as saying. “The U.S. and Canada have similar land masses and languages, but otherwise, the comparison strikes me as, let’s be diplomatic, ill-chosen.”<sup>88</sup>

The case for Romney was equally revealing. One PolitiFact editor felt strongly that US unemployment statistics tend to understate the problem by excluding underemployed workers

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<sup>86</sup> Author’s field notes, February 11, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> D’Angelo Gore, Brooks Jackson, Michael Morse, and Eugene Kiely, “FactChecking Republicans at CPAC,” FactCheck.org, February 14, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/02/factchecking-republicans-at-cpac/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

and people who have given up looking for a job altogether. Every journalist in the meeting understood this well-established critique. The article draft even pointed out that counting all Americans who have left the work force involuntarily might make Romney's comparison work; however, no reliable, official count of such former workers exists, and this was not how Romney's staff had justified the claim. Still, the objecting editor felt a rating of "Barely True" or even "Half True" would better "tell the story" of the unemployed. Politics had intruded here, but not binary party politics. The editor was invoking a normative claim about what the role of journalism is and whose story it should tell. (An opponent in the star chamber chided, "Don't let your personal bias against unemployment cloud your judgment.") Ultimately the objecting editor was mollified somewhat by the writer's promise to "beef up the empathy" while preserving the "False" ruling, and several sentences were added to the piece. The Truth-O-Meter manual urges journalists to think like judges. But the star chamber doesn't rule on a fixed document. Both the claim being assessed and the analysis of it may shift or evolve in the interests of achieving consensus.<sup>89</sup>

In this case the star chamber broke down. Editors were forced to reconvene twice, and an indecisive panelist had to be replaced before a ruling of "False" could be rendered. Having three panelists vote did not yield a clean majority because of the strong preference for unanimity, and perhaps because of a reluctance to ignore the writer's firm objection to a softer rating. (In roughly 90 percent of cases, the writer's original ruling survives the process, I heard.) The Truth-O-Meter process is not bulletproof. It operates best as a flexible device for achieving consensus

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<sup>88</sup> Author's field notes, February 11, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Author's field notes, February 11, 2011.

in routine cases, and participants were unprepared for a situation where consensus was difficult to achieve.<sup>90</sup>

In my observation PolitiFact journalists share a sense that, while the Truth-O-Meter is not an infallible scientific instrument, treating it like one reminds reporters that this is “a different kind of journalism” and helps them to practice it. “At the end of the day, the ‘star chamber’ is three people who are trained in journalism but are putting their judgement into the Truth-O-Meter,” one fact-checker told me, emphasizing that the difference between adjacent rulings can turn on values.<sup>91</sup> It matters less that the mechanism operate perfectly than that it operate routinely, by embodying a commitment and orienting a set of activities which may vary widely in particular cases. The fictional device *objectifies* not just the process of deciding what’s true, but also the practical and epistemological questions that attend that fraught enterprise. It makes it easier for journalists to talk or joke about these challenges, and thus to critique and adjust their own methods. It makes it possible to acknowledge their own imperfection as arbiters of truth, without relinquishing their faith in and commitment to objectivity. The Truth-O-Meter is not scientific, but it encourages the humans who use it to proceed more scientifically.<sup>92</sup>

### **Context and consistency**

The most difficult question professional fact-checkers face, and the most controversial, is how to address the divide between what words say and what they seem to mean. This divide surfaces clearly in the necessary friction between “words matter” and “context matters,” the two

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<sup>90</sup> Author’s field notes, February 11, 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Angie Drobic Holan, interview by author, telephone, February 25, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> In this regard the Truth-O-Meter resembles, ironically, the anonymous networked public that Internet geeks count on to reliably make good software, or liberate information, or settle factual debates. As suggested in the first chapter, this stated faith in the network doesn’t *discount* the human role so much as it helps to *organize* it.

basic principles of PolitiFact's Truth-O-Meter. Fact-checking almost always involves plucking a statement from the context of a wider argument. (For this reason, fact-checks often include a disclaimer explaining that to find a statement true or false is not to take a position in the debate that yielded it. In arguing that a Republican budget proposal would not "end Medicare," as discussed below, all three of the elite fact-checkers stressed that they were not endorsing the changes to the health program.) But not every phrase can be so cleanly severed from the language around it and the circumstances that produced it. For fact-checkers, "context" becomes a way to talk about what a statement intends to convey or how "reasonable people" are likely to interpret it.

Training sessions at FactCheck.org and PolitiFact emphasized the need to look beyond the literal truth of a statement. "Context is everything. They're very cute with how they word things," a FactCheck.org editor explained to new interns, pointing to a just-published piece about the federal government's "bailout" of Detroit automakers.<sup>93</sup> "And today, I'm proud to announce the government has been completely repaid for the investments we made under my watch by Chrysler because of the outstanding work that you guys did," President Obama had declared in a speech at a Chrysler plant in Toledo, Ohio. As the editor explained, "The 'under my watch' is the fudge word here." In fact the government would never see \$1.3 billion of the \$12.5 billion funneled to the automaker under the Bush and Obama administrations; the new president simply put those losses in his predecessor's column. Worse still, it was the Obama White House that officially agreed to forgive the shortfall. "I don't think the taxpayers care whether they got Bush money or Obama money, they just care about getting their money back," the FactCheck.org editor joked. Assessing the claim meant in part judging how it had been constructed to advance a

political goal. To the press office in the White House, though, the analysis seemed to unfairly pick apart a claim that had been worded carefully in order to satisfy the fact-checkers. As the FactCheck.org staffer explained to me, a White House contact called to complain that, in effect, “We’re damned if we do and we’re damned if we don’t.”<sup>94</sup>

This is a common complaint about the interpretive latitude fact-checkers assert in finding defensible statements misleading. Kessler, the *Post*’s Fact Checker columnist, gave the example of a piece he’d just written on Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.<sup>95</sup> To defend a proposed minimum tax rate for the wealthy, Reid had declared on the floor of the Senate that, in 2011, “there were 7,000 millionaires who didn’t pay a single penny in federal income taxes. Instead, ordinary Americans footed the bill — and that’s not fair.” Kessler could only find much lower figures by consulting IRS data and the “nonpartisan” Tax Policy Center, and asked a spokesman for Reid to explain. The spokesman pointed to a different study by the Tax Policy Center — one counting millionaires by the less restrictive (though perhaps more familiar) standard of “cash income,” rather than adjusted gross income. Kessler gave the Senate Leader two Pinocchios, explaining the ruling this way: “Faced with a choice between using an actual IRS figure cited by the White House or using an inflated statistic with little relevance to the definitions in the bill, Reid chose the latter.” But Reid’s spokesman objected strenuously. He wrote by email, as quoted in the *Post* column,

The fact Senator Reid cited is correct. You checked it, I provided you with a citation proving that it is correct. End of story. ... If you consider a true statement for which I

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<sup>93</sup> Eugene Kiely, “Chrysler Paid in Full?,” FactCheck.org, June 6, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/06/chrysler-paid-in-full/> (accessed June 7, 2011).

<sup>94</sup> Author’s field notes, June 6-7, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012; Glenn Kessler, “Hyping Stats About The ‘Buffett Rule,’” Fact Checker, April 18, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hyping-stats-about-the-buffett-rule/2012/04/17/gIQABtPnOT\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hyping-stats-about-the-buffett-rule/2012/04/17/gIQABtPnOT_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

can provide a clear citation to merit even a single ‘Pinocchio’ then the *raison d’être* of your blog is beyond me.

Dealing with context presents an especially acute problem for fact-checkers who rate statements on a numerical scale. “There are many cases where statements will be literally true yet give a misleading picture,” Brooks Jackson explained to me.<sup>96</sup> The need for such contextual nuance argues against trying to rate statements scientifically at FactCheck.org: “I could never justify doing [that],” he said. “We’re part of an Ivy League university here. Somebody would say, ‘Well exactly what scale did you use to determine that?’ So we have always stayed away from trying to assign some sort of ‘mendacity index’ to things.”

A case study in the problem emerged when the campaign of Mitt Romney, by April 2012 the presumptive Republican presidential candidate, devised a counterattack to Democratic rhetoric about a Republican “war on women.” In campaign speeches and interviews, Romney began to repeat a disturbing statistic: More than 92 percent of US jobs lost since President Obama took office were lost by women. “His policies have been, really, a war on women,” Romney asserted in an interview on Fox News. The job-loss figure, derived from Bureau of Labor Statistics data, was perfectly accurate. But it was also deeply misleading, fact-checkers and other observers argued: Men accounted for 60 percent of total jobs lost in the recession that began in 2007. The first two years saw heavy declines in male-dominated economic sectors, such as construction and manufacturing, while the damage took longer to spread to government, education, and health-care, sectors that disproportionately employ women. This is a typical cycle seen in earlier recessions, some economists noted.

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<sup>96</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010; see also Ben Smith, “The Facts About the Fact Checkers,” Politico, November 1, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1011/67175.html> (accessed November 1, 2011).

All three elite fact-checkers provided that detailed economic context. FactCheck.org, unburdened by the need to assign a rating, could explain simply that “Romney’s statistic is accurate, as far as it goes. But it’s not the whole story.”<sup>97</sup> (The piece quoted a conservative economist arguing that Obama’s “anti-growth” policies were, if anything, hurting male sectors such as coal mining and oil drilling, while his health-care law would boost female employment.) The *Post*’s Fact Checker argued that female job losses were an “under-reported phenomenon” but that “at this point this figure doesn’t mean very much.”<sup>98</sup> The column declined to assign a rating on its Pinocchio scale, however, calling the statistic “true but false” — a conclusion ridiculed by conservative bloggers and the media watchdog NewsBusters as further evidence of liberal media bias.<sup>99</sup> And PolitiFact explained that “the numbers are accurate but quite misleading,” rating the claim “Mostly False” for ignoring “critical facts that would give a different impression.”<sup>100</sup> The Romney campaign objected in a widely publicized letter, and conservative news outlets and bloggers lampooned PolitiFact’s analysis.<sup>101</sup> “I don’t get it,” wrote one blogger, continuing:

It’s true, but nevertheless “Mostly False,” because... because what? Because Obama isn’t responsible for the numbers?! How does that make the assertion “Mostly False”?

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Farley, “Obama’s ‘War on Women’?”, FactCheck.org, April 12, 2012, <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/04/obamas-war-on-women/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>98</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Are Obama’s Job Policies Hurting Women?”, Fact Checker, April 10, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/are-obamas-job-policies-hurting-women/2012/04/09/gIQAGz3q6S\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/are-obamas-job-policies-hurting-women/2012/04/09/gIQAGz3q6S_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>99</sup> Brent Baker, “Stephanopoulos Agrees 92% Women Job Losses Statistic ‘Accurate’ After ABC’s World News Called It ‘Mostly False,’” NewsBusters, <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/brent-baker/2012/04/16/stephanopoulos-agrees-92-women-job-losses-statistic-accurate-after-abc-#ixzz1v9yl2e2b> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>100</sup> Molly Moorhead, “Romney campaign says women were hit hard by job losses under Obama,” PolitiFact, April 10, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/apr/10/mitt-romney/romney-campaign-says-women-were-hit-hard-job-losse/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>101</sup> As described previously, PolitiFact responded with an editor’s note and published the letter from the Romney campaign, linked to from the Truth-O-Meter article.



The assertion is simply a number, and you've said the number is correct. The conclusion should be "Completely True."<sup>102</sup>

The ratings used by PolitiFact and the *Post's* Fact Checker are designed to address literal and contextual meaning, by providing multiple grades of truth. As I heard from all of the elite fact-checkers, the truth is not black and white. But scoring context-sensitive claims in a consistent way has proven difficult. Kessler explained that the crucial divide on his four-Pinocchio scale, and the trickiest to judge, lies between two Pinocchios (defined as "significant omissions and/or exaggerations") and three ("significant factual error and/or obvious contradictions"). This marks the line between claims that are contextually misleading and those that shade into outright factual deception, a distinction which can be hard to make. "I freely admit, the difference between two and three Pinocchios is hard to say," Kessler said, adding that he does his best to be consistent.<sup>103</sup>

Editors at PolitiFact have tried to devise clear internal policies for dealing with claims that are misleading in context. The typical case, which I heard discussed many times, concerned implied responsibility: Politicians often take credit or assign blame for some shift by stating that it happened since they took office, or since the person they hope to unseat did. (Mitt Romney's claim about job losses among women is an example.) Initially, PolitiFact rated these claims "True" as long as the dates and figures given were accurate. This approach is easy for politicians to "game," however, and leads to fact-checkers certifying or even amplifying deceptive

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<sup>102</sup> Anna Althouse, "Romney campaign says 92.3% of the jobs lost under Obama were women's jobs," Althouse (blog), April 11, 2012, <http://althouse.blogspot.com/2012/04/romney-campaign-says-923-of-jobs-lost.html> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012; see also C-SPAN, *Q&A*, "Q&A with Glenn Kessler," January 15, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/303324-1> (accessed April 18, 2012); Ben Smith, "The Facts About the Fact Checkers."

messages. A new policy was devised to take into account how “reasonable people” interpret such statements.<sup>104</sup> As an editor’s letter early in 2012 explained,

About a year ago, we realized we were ducking the underlying point of blame or credit, which was the crucial message. So we began rating those types of claims as compound statements. We not only checked whether the numbers were accurate, we checked whether economists believed an office holder’s policies were much of a factor in the increase or decrease.<sup>105</sup>

In practice, as the editor’s letter also acknowledged, this results in many rulings of “Half True.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, for instance, in early 2012 two new ads from Republican and Democratic national committees received “Half True” ratings for real trends falsely imputed to the President: respectively, that on his watch, 13,000 people have been added to food stamp rolls every day, and “security funding for Israel is at an all-time high.”<sup>107</sup>

The risk of devising such a policy is always that it will be applied too formulaically. Even subtle shifts in language or setting may undercut what seemed a clear and categorical standard. Thus, for instance, in his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama offered the following hopeful employment statistics: “In the last 22 months, businesses have created more than 3 million jobs. Last year, they created the most jobs since 2005.”<sup>108</sup> The day of the speech, following its established rationale, PolitiFact rated that claim “Half True.” The ruling explained, “Obama is correct on both counts when using private-sector job numbers. But he went too far

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<sup>104</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 15-16, 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Bill Adair, “Tuning the Truth-O-Meter,” PolitiFact, January 25, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2012/jan/25/tuning-truth-o-meter/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 2011, and June 15-16, 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Louis Jacobson, “NRCC ad blames Barack Obama for food stamp use rising by 13,000 a day,” PolitiFact, January 25, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/feb/29/national-republican-congressional-committee/nrcc-ad-blames-barack-obama-food-stamp-use-rising-/> (accessed May 8, 2012); “DNC Ad Says That ‘Under President Obama, U.S. Security Funding For Israel Is At An All-Time High,’” PolitiFact, February 29, 2012, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/mar/02/democratic-national-committee/dnc-ad-says-under-president-obama-us-security-fund/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

when he implicitly credited his administration policies.”<sup>109</sup> Readers objected strenuously, however, and some editors felt the verdict was too harsh. In a rare revision, the next morning PolitiFact changed the ruling to “Mostly True” after deciding the president wasn’t “implicitly crediting his own policies” as strongly as they had initially believed.<sup>110</sup> (This did not satisfy progressive pundits. MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, a frequent critic of the site, declared, “Mostly true? PolitiFact, you are fired. ... You are a mess. You are fired. You are undermining the definition of the word ‘fact’ in the English language by pretending to it in your name.”)<sup>111</sup>

The president’s choice of language played a role here: He hadn’t used a trigger phrase such as “on my watch” or “since I took office,” which PolitiFact has previously interpreted as implied credit-taking. But surely the ritual logic of the State of the Union address also cut against PolitiFact’s standard analysis. Political custom requires the president to give the address. He is expected to offer an honest assessment, but also a hopeful one. The president had not chosen to insert the phrase into a campaign ad or a stump speech. (The address is both different from a political advertisement, and an unusually powerful form of political advertising.) To some extent the institutional political context mooted the distinction between stating a trend and taking credit for it.

In these cases critics faulted the fact-checkers for ignoring literal truth. It should be noted, finally, that the roles of contextualist and literalist are often reversed. Beginning in the spring of

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<sup>108</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Have private-sector jobs grown by 3 million in 22 months, with the best annual totals since 2005?”, PolitiFact, January 25, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/jan/25/barack-obama/have-private-sector-jobs-grown-22-months-best-annu/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>109</sup> “Original version of PolitiFact’s fact-check on Obama jobs claim from State of the Union 2012,” PolitiFact, <http://www.politifact.com/obamajobs/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> Adjusting a ruling once published is extremely rare. Such changes always merit an editor’s note and sometimes a longer account; this episode produced the letter explaining the problem of implied blame or credit. See Bill Adair, “Tuning the Truth-O-Meter.”

2011, the three elite fact-checkers issued a string of articles contesting a widely repeated Democratic attack line: that health-care changes envisioned in the budget proposed by House Republican Paul Ryan, of Wisconsin, would “end” or “abolish” or “kill” Medicare.<sup>112</sup> Their analysis was remarkably consistent. All three explained that the Ryan proposal left the current system intact for today’s Medicare recipients and those qualifying over the next decade, and that under a new “premium support” system future retirees would have to cover more but by no means all of their medical expenses.<sup>113</sup> All noted that a *Wall Street Journal* article frequently cited as proof the plan would “essentially end Medicare” had been taken out of context. (The words “as program that directly pays [medical] bills” were left out.) PolitiFact and FactCheck.org both took issue with the apparent age of seniors in TV ads which showed them stripping to pay for medical expenses, or being wheeled off a cliff by a Ryan lookalike. (The seniors depicted were clearly too old to be affected by the proposal.) Both fact-checkers also stressed that adding a simple qualifier like “as we know it” to the claim would make it more defensible.

It would be difficult to overstate the ferocity of the reaction from critics on the left.<sup>114</sup> The furor peaked after PolitiFact made the claim their “Lie of the Year” for 2011.<sup>115</sup> (FactCheck.org

<sup>111</sup> See Eric Dolan, “Maddow: PolitiFact is undermining the word ‘fact,’” *Raw Story*, January 25, 2012, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/01/25/maddow-politifact-is-undermining-the-word-fact/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> FactCheck.org has challenged the claim at least four times; the Fact Checker investigated it twice; and PolitiFact and its state franchises published nine related Truth-O-Meter items in 2011.

<sup>113</sup> See e.g. Angie Drobnic Holan and Louis Jacobson, “Throw-Granny-from-the-Cliff Ad Asks What the U.S. Would Be ‘Without Medicare,’” *PolitiFact*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/may/25/agenda-project/throw-granny-cliff-asks-what-country-would-be-with/> (accessed May 8, 2012); Brooks Jackson, “Test Market for Spin,” *FactCheck.org*, May 19, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/05/test-market-for-spin/> (accessed May 8, 2012); Glenn Kessler, “Mediscare Redux: Is McConnell Holding Debt Ceiling Hike Hostage to Ryan Medicare Plan?,” *Fact Checker*, June 13, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/mediscare-redux-is-mcconnell-holdingdebt-ceiling-hike-hostage-to-ryan-medicare-plan/2011/06/11/AGrG5jQH\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/mediscare-redux-is-mcconnell-holdingdebt-ceiling-hike-hostage-to-ryan-medicare-plan/2011/06/11/AGrG5jQH_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>114</sup> One summary is Greg Sargent, “Dems Brush Off PolitiFact Finding,” *Plum Line*, December 20, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/post/dems-brush-off-politifact-finding/2011/12/20/gIQA1zkg7O\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/post/dems-brush-off-politifact-finding/2011/12/20/gIQA1zkg7O_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

and the Fact Checker included it on similar lists.)<sup>116</sup> The day of the announcement, in a post titled “PolitiFact, R.I.P.,” *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman wrote, “This is really awful. Politifact, which is supposed to police false claims in politics, has announced its Lie of the Year — and it’s a statement that happens to be true, the claim that Republicans have voted to end Medicare.”<sup>117</sup> A critic writing at Harvard’s Nieman Watchdog site drafted a 1,000-word letter of apology for PolitiFact founder Bill Adair to issue; in it Adair would admit that the elite fact-checkers had been so eager to “cast a pox on both houses” that they treated a claim that was “essentially true” as an egregious falsehood.<sup>118</sup> (The fact-checker’s alleged surrender to “false equivalence” had been predicted in advance.)<sup>119</sup> Media Matters accused the group of enabling political lies that “act as a cancer on American democracy.”<sup>120</sup> “Fact checkers are under assault!”, Kessler wrote in the introduction to his own piece on the worst lies of the year, adding for emphasis this nasty quote from the media-insider website Gawker:

Politifact is dangerous. Stop reading it. Stop reading the ‘four Pinocchios’ guy too. Stop using some huckster company’s stupid little phrases or codes or number systems when it’s convenient, and read the actual arguments instead. You’re building a monster.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Bill Adair and Angie Drobnic Holan, “Lie of the Year 2011: ‘Republicans Voted to End Medicare,’” PolitiFact, December 20, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/dec/20/lie-year-democrats-claims-republicans-voted-end-me/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>116</sup> Brooks Jackson, “The Whoppers of 2011,” FactCheck.org, December 20, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/12/the-whoppers-of-2011/> (accessed May 8, 2012); Glenn Kessler, “The Biggest Pinocchios of 2011,” Fact Checker, December 22, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-biggest-pinocchios-of-2011/2011/12/21/gIQAzbfAP\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-biggest-pinocchios-of-2011/2011/12/21/gIQAzbfAP_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Paul Krugman, “PolitiFact, R.I.P.,” Conscience of a Liberal (blog), December 20, 2011, <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/politifact-r-i-p/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>118</sup> Dan Froomkin, “What Politifact Should Do Now,” Watchdog Blog, December 21, 2011, <http://blog.niemanwatchdog.org/2011/12/what-politifact-should-do-now/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>119</sup> Paul Waldman, “He Lied/She Lied,” American Prospect, December 6, 2011, <http://prospect.org/article/he-liedshe-lied> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>120</sup> Jamison Foser, “Politifact’s Flawed ‘Lie of The Year’ Selection Only Encourages More Lying,” Media Matters, December 20, 2011, <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201112200016#.TvEHsSlaJLE.twitter> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>121</sup> Jim Newell, “PolitiFact Is Bad for You,” Gawker, December 20, 2011, <http://gawker.com/5869817/politifact-is-bad-for-you> (accessed May 8, 2012).

The liberal critique was also remarkably consistent, faulting the fact-checkers for allowing a slavish literalism to obscure the larger truth of what the proposed Medicare changes would mean. The *essential* nature of the health entitlement for seniors would be lost in converting it to some kind of subsidy for private insurance plans. “Capping costs to beneficiaries, closing the traditional fee-for-service program, and forcing seniors to enroll in new private coverage, ends Medicare by eliminating everything that has defined the program for the last 46 years,” one wrote.<sup>122</sup> A *Washington Monthly* article likened the change to taking the metallic badge from a Ferrari and attaching it to a golf cart:

“Where’s my Ferrari?” the owner would ask.

“It’s right here,” I’d respond. “This has four wheels, a steering wheel, and pedals, and it says ‘Ferrari’ right there on the back.”

By PolitiFact’s reasoning, I haven’t actually replaced the car — and if you disagree, you’re a pants-on-fire liar.<sup>123</sup>

This episode is difficult to parse as an analyst. Several observers suggested the question was a matter of opinion, and thus unsuitable for fact-checking.<sup>124</sup> “Does the Republican plan indeed end Medicare? I would argue yes. But it’s obviously a question of interpretation, not fact,” wrote Jonathan Chait.<sup>125</sup> This echoed exactly the argument made one year earlier in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial responding to PolitiFact’s previous “Lie of the Year,” the Republican claim that President Obama’s health-care reform plan amounted to a “government takeover of health

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<sup>122</sup> Igor Volsky, “PolitiFact’s Finalist For 2011 Lie Of The Year Is 100 Percent True,” ThinkProgress (blog), December 2, 2011, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2011/12/02/381180/politifact-finalist-for-2011-lie-of-the-year-is-100-percent-true/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>123</sup> Steve Benen, “PolitiFact Ought to Be Ashamed of Itself,” Political Animal (blog), December 20, 2011, [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal/2011\\_12/politifact\\_ought\\_to\\_be\\_ashamed034211.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal/2011_12/politifact_ought_to_be_ashamed034211.php) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>124</sup> See e.g. Dan Kennedy, “PolitiFact and the Limits of Fact-Checking,” Huffington Post, December 13, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-kennedy/politifact-and-the-limits\\_b\\_1144876.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-kennedy/politifact-and-the-limits_b_1144876.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>125</sup> Jonathan Chait, “The Trouble with PolitiFact,” Daily Intel, December 20, 2011, <http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2011/12/trouble-with-politifact.html> (accessed May 8, 2012).

care.”<sup>126</sup> “PolitiFact’s decree is part of a larger journalistic trend that seeks to recast all political debates as matters of lies, misinformation and ‘facts,’ rather than differences of world view or principles,” the paper declared.

But how to (objectively) distinguish fact-oriented claims — not yet even factual ones, but those whose factualness can be objectively determined — from ideologically constructed ones? Even determining how many millionaires pay no taxes turns out to be potentially controversial. More precisely, it requires statements of qualification and definition — “by this standard, not that one” — which are not in any obvious categorical way different from those made to assess the “end Medicare” claim. Checking only statements which nobody could possibly *object to* as matters of political viewpoint rather than fact would leave a very narrow field indeed.

From the fact-checkers’ point of view, meanwhile, the factual analysis in this case was straightforward and supported by dozens of experts of various backgrounds and affiliations. Consider this formulation: If reducing Medicare coverage by a certain amount at a certain date in the future “ends” the program, what would one say of a plan that *actually* ended it?<sup>127</sup> Crucially, the attack line earned harsh ratings from the fact-checkers, and made it onto their end-of-year lists, at least partly for what might be called textural reasons, having to do with the way they encountered it in the wild. The charge echoed for months no matter how often it was debunked; it appeared in ads that took sources out of context, and showed a wizened grandmother thrown from a cliff; and it clearly seemed to be part of a coordinated national strategy.

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<sup>126</sup> “PolitiFiction,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2010, sec. Opinion.

<sup>127</sup> One liberal dissenter made a version of this argument in PolitiFact’s defense; see Kevin Drum, “Ending Medicare,” *Mother Jones*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2011/12/ending-medicare> (accessed May 8, 2012).

As we have seen over and over, professional fact-checkers do not assess claims in the abstract. They evaluate statements made by actual people in particular ways under specific circumstances, contingencies that necessarily inform their analysis. As one observer noted after the “end Medicare” controversy, their work often verges on “patrolling public discourse,” which involves “judgments not only about truth, but about what attacks are fair, what arguments are reasonable, what language is appropriate.”<sup>128</sup> To many critics this represents an overreach. But in the day-to-day work of fact-checking, the content of a message, the form it takes, and the political context that produced it, are all bound up in its truth-value. As Brooks Jackson has written in a book about political “disinformation,” “Don’t be tempted to dismiss this sort of thing as a mere difference of interpretation ... There is more to it than that. *Both sides are actively working to deceive the public.*”<sup>129</sup>

To fact-checkers, then, the “end Medicare” rhetoric was just one more instance of what journalists and political operatives call “Mediscare” — the time-honored two-party tradition of frightening senior citizens, who are among the most politically engaged and reliable voters in the country. “Readers should simply just turn off the TV or mute the TV whenever there’s any ad involving Medicare, because both sides are going to demagogue that as much as they can,” Kessler argued in a TV interview.<sup>130</sup> All three made knowing references to this long political tradition in their analyses. FactCheck.org reviewed the controversy this way after the claim resurfaced in March of 2012, rallying to the defense of its fellow fact-checkers:

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<sup>128</sup> Greg Marx, “What the Fact-Checkers Get Wrong,” Campaign Desk (blog), *Columbia Journalism Review*, January 5, 2012, [http://www.cjr.org/campaign\\_desk/what\\_the\\_fact-checkers\\_get\\_wro.php](http://www.cjr.org/campaign_desk/what_the_fact-checkers_get_wro.php) (accessed January 5, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *UnSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* (New York: Random House, 2007), ix. Italics added.

<sup>130</sup> *Q&A*, “Q&A with Glenn Kessler.”



Scaring seniors with bogus claims about their retirement benefits is an old tactic, used again and again and again, by both parties. ...

We later called the claim one of the “Whoppers of 2011,” and our friends at Politifact.com and the Washington Post agreed. Politifact called it the “Lie of the Year,” and the Post’s “Fact Checker” columnist Glenn Kessler called it an untruth worthy of four Pinocchios — his worst possible rating — and later one of the “The biggest Pinocchios of 2011.”

Politifact’s “Lie of the Year” rating drew howls from liberal commentators and left-leaning news outlets, including MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, not to mention Democratic operatives, as though they collectively held a trademark on the name “Medicare.”

So, here we go again. But facts are still facts, and we still find these claims to be deceptive, even if Democrats find them to be politically useful.<sup>131</sup>

Like political journalists in general, fact-checkers see political claim-making through the left-right prism of US two-party politics. Constant references to “two sides” or “both sides” are a way for fact-checkers to assert objectivity, but also, even more basically, to organize and make sense of the daily work of contesting public claims. The scorn predictably dispensed by supporters of whichever party has been fact-checked only reinforces the “both sides” reflex.

At a panel discussion I participated in, Bill Adair was asked directly about the controversy over PolitiFact’s “Lie of the Year” selection. He walked through the group’s reasoning, emphasizing how often the lie was repeated and what a common strategy “scaring seniors” has been for both parties. He acknowledged the furious response from readers — more than 90 percent of emails disagreed with the ruling — and from online critics. He stressed that his peers at FactCheck.org and the Fact Checker saw the claim the same way. And then he explained, as fact-checkers almost always do in these situations, that when they don’t get it from one side they get it from the other.

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<sup>131</sup> Lori Robertson, “Democrats’ ‘End Medicare’ Whopper, Again,” FactCheck.org, March 6, 2012, <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/03/democrats-end-medicare-whopper-again/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

This is a gutsy form of journalism, and making these calls ... you're going to face a lot of criticism. That's why not many people get into this business. Because, we're in a business where in a single day, with two ratings, we can alienate both halves of our audience. You know, what kind of a business model is that?<sup>132</sup>

Controversy like this is a basic and recurring feature of the fact-checking world. Fact-checkers attempt to settle controversies, to create “black boxes” — facts all reasonable people can agree should serve as firm pegs for future debates. “Every one of these facts is a brick in the wall of an argument,” I heard at PolitiFact. “If it can't bear the weight of the wall, it doesn't belong there.”<sup>133</sup> But their own analysis is constantly challenged and contested, in ways that threaten to cast the fact-checkers as political actors and to undermine their claim to objectivity. One way to understand fact-checking is as a journalism adapted to the tricky business of political criticism — both to dispensing it, and to managing the responses it provokes. However, as the next chapter will show, the fact-checkers' understanding and practice of objectivity places sharp limits on the critique they offer.

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<sup>132</sup> Bill Adair (comment at “The Facts of Political Life,” panel discussion at the New America Foundation, Washington, DC, February 28, 2012).

<sup>133</sup> Author's field notes, February 16, 2011.

**Figure 4.1:** A typical “backup” sheet issued with a campaign advertisement. In this 2010 ad, called “Not True,” New Mexico Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish cited FactCheck.org to rebut an attack ad from an opponent in the race for governor.

<b>Not True Ad Back-Up</b>		
AUDIO	VISUAL	BACK-UP
Another Martinez attack – first SHE bullied teachers, now MARTINEZ attacks Denish’s family. News organizations call Martinez’s ad false.	Another Martinez Attack  Susana Martinez Attack Ad  False  The New Mexico Independent & FactCheck.org 9/22/10	<b>Susana Martinez Attacked Teacher In Ad For Opposing Vouchers.</b> According to the National Education Association, “The National Education Association of New Mexico stands behind its message and its messenger on a television ad which ran from August 27 to September 3, 2010 in media markets across the state and calls on the Martinez campaign to pull her latest TV ad attacking special education teacher and NEA member, Freda Trujillo, who had the audacity, as a citizen of this state, to express her preference for Governor.” [Press Release, National Education Association, 9/10/10]  <b>Fact-Check.Org Reported Martinez “Falsely Accuses Denish Of ‘Hiding A Scandal.’”</b> According to Factcheck.org, “In New Mexico’s governor’s race, Republican Susana Martinez accuses Democratic Lt. Gov. Diane Denish of giving a \$500 million ‘special tax deal’ to a developer who contributed to her campaign and hired her husband as a lobbyist. But Martinez, a district attorney, uses circumstantial evidence to make her case in an ad that falsely accuses Denish of ‘hiding a scandal.’” [Factcheck.org, /22/10]
And Records show: Denish did what was right!	[Lt. Governor Denish recused from this item.]  Minutes Of The New Mexico State Board Of Finance  Santa Fe, New Mexico  January 16, 2007	<b>Martinez Failed To Prove Denish Misused Her Office.</b> According to Factcheck.org, “The evidence cited by the Martinez campaign fails to prove that Denish misused her office to help the developer get a tax break or that the tax break was connected to her husband’s lobbying job or her campaign contributions.” [Factcheck.org, /22/10]  <b><u>Diane Did Not Participate In Discussions On Mesa Del Sol</u></b>  <b>Denish Recused Herself From A Discussion Of Mesa Del Sol.</b> According to meeting minutes, “14. Mesa del Sol – Presentation Concerning Dedication of New Mexico Gross Receipts Tax Increment. [Lt. Governor Denish and Ms. Cooper Ramo recused themselves from this item.] Dr. Perlman, City of Albuquerque, informed the Board that Albuquerque’s City Council approved the City’s tax increment development district dedication of 67 percent of future tax revenues. He mentioned that the revenue the state is expected to receive from the development is \$1 billion over 25 years.” [Board of Finance Meeting Minutes, 1/16/07]  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Denish Recused Herself From Vote To Give Mesa Del Sol 75 Percent Of State Gross Receipts Tax Increment.</b> According to meeting minutes, “Ms. Sanchez Rael moved approval of Mesa del Sol’s tax request for dedication of 75 percent of State Gross Receipts Tax Increment. Her motion was seconded by Mr. Lewis and passed with Ms. Sanchez Rael and Mr. Lewis voted in favor. [Recused: Lt. Governor Denish and Ms. Cooper Ramo.]” [Board of Finance Meeting Minutes, 1/16/07]</li> </ul>
		<b>Denish Recused Herself From Presentation Of Project Updates Involving Mesa Del Sol.</b> In a December 2006 meeting of the New Mexico Board of Finance, Denish recused herself from the discussion regarding Mesa del Sol. The presentation to the board involved the gross receipts tax increment for the development property. The Director of Finance of Forest City Covington announced that the project would generate almost \$1 billion over 25 years. The project was requesting that the State contributed \$551 million to public infrastructure for the project. [New Mexico Board of Finance, Meeting Minutes, 12/19/06]  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Denish Recused Herself From Presentation Of Project Updates Involving Mesa Del Sol And DFA.</b> Denish recused herself from a “Presentation Concerning Mesa del Sol by Department of Finance &amp; Administration Chief Economist and Written Comments by Taxation and Revenue Department.” She did not participate in the discussion. [New Mexico Board of Finance, Meeting Minutes, 12/19/06]</li> </ul>
The truth?  Republican Martinez and her Texas backers would let corporations run wild	The Truth?  Susana Martinez’s Texas Money  Susana Martinez Campaign Finance Reports and Associated Press 5/29/10  \$603,667.76	<b><u>Texas Swiftboat Donor Gave Martinez \$450,000; She Has Received Over \$600,000 From Texas</u></b>  <b>Big Texas Land Developer Gave Martinez \$450,000 In Contributions.</b> According to the Associated Press in late May 2010, “Martinez collected \$450,000 in campaign contributions during the critical closing weeks of the primary race from wealthy Texas donors who are nationally prominent supporters of conservative causes. The contributions from Bob Perry, a Houston homebuilder, and his wife, Doylene, accounted for \$3 of every \$5 raised by Martinez during the past three weeks...The money helped Martinez finance a blitz of television and radio advertising as New Mexico’s June 1 primary neared.” [Associated Press, 5/29/10]  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bob J. Perry Gave \$4.45 Million In 2004 To The Swift Boat Veterans For Truth.</b> According to the New York Times, “The donor, Bob J. Perry, a Houston home builder, gave \$4.45 million in 2004 to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, an independent organization that attacked Senator John Kerry’s Vietnam War record, damaging his presidential campaign and leading to protests about the tactics used by such outside groups.” [New York Times, 11/1/06]</li> </ul> <b>Martinez Has Received Over \$600,000 In Donations From Texas.</b> Martinez’s big Texas donors include the Swiftboat money from a wealthy land developer, \$40,000 from a Texas investor and several thousand from Texas oil companies. [Susana Martinez’s Campaign Finance Reports]  <b><u>Martinez’s Economic Plan Is Based On Rolling Back Regulations</u></b>  <b>Martinez Said Industries Were Overregulated Including Construction, Oil And Gas And Dairies.</b> Martinez said, “The most important policy is to make sure to roll back the regulations that are taking place right now that are killing our jobs. We have so much regulation in the

**Figure 4.2:** Every Truth-O-Meter item includes a list of sources. This item, written by the author, relied on seven sources; some PolitiFact articles consult two or even three times as many.

## **About this statement:**

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**Published:** Thursday, February 17th, 2011 at 4:59 p.m.

**Subjects:** [Economy](#), [Federal Budget](#)

### **Sources:**

Mitch Daniels, [remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference](#), Feb. 11, 2011

Office of Management and Budget, [the president's budget proposal for fiscal year 2012](#), Feb. 14, 2011

Congressional Budget Office, [Budget and Economic Outlook: Fiscal Years 2011 Through 2021](#), January 2011

*Washington Examiner*, ["Interest payments on national debt set to explode,"](#) by Julie Mason, Nov. 24, 2009

Email interview with Jane Jankowski, press secretary for Gov. Daniels, Feb. 15, 2011

Interview with Joshua Gordon, policy director, Concord Coalition, Feb. 15, 2011

Interview with Craig Jennings, director of the federal fiscal policy program at OMB Watch, Feb. 15, 2011

**Written by:** [Lucas Graves](#)

**Researched by:** [Lucas Graves](#)

**Edited by:** [Bill Adair](#)

**Figure 4.3:** In a Daily Show segment from June 21, 2011, Jon Stewart tallied 21 “False” (or worse) rulings earned by pundits and frequent guests on Fox News; PolitiFact quickly published an “annotated edition” of the segment.



## Chapter 5 – The Elite Fact-Checkers: Making a Difference

Professional fact-checkers practice a form of the “annotative journalism” discussed in the second chapter. They make arguments and draw conclusions. They juxtapose and analyze texts, including other news reports. They do all of this in an explicit way that reveals a great deal of their reporting work to the reader. As in the case of I.F. Stone or Josh Marshall, working critically with published texts produces a journalism that is slightly behind the news, built from the news, and always to some degree about the news.

Every published fact-check is an annotation — an evaluative footnote attached to a public statement, telling the world how to interpret it and whether it should be believed or not. Fact-checkers *criticize*, which sets them apart from their peers at traditional news outlets. As I heard several times, this is what reporters have to get used to if they want to work for one of the new fact-checking operations. “PolitiFact is different. And it can feel awkward at first,” incoming fact-checkers were told at the start of their Truth-O-Meter training. “You have to decide which side is right. And I have to say, the first time I wrote the words, ‘President Obama exaggerated’ ... it made me feel really uncomfortable.”<sup>1</sup>

But certain kinds of evaluations remain too uncomfortable for the elite, professional fact-checkers to make. Theirs is a very narrow political critique in comparison to the work of a muckraker like I.F. Stone, or to that of opinion columnists and editorial writers. Fact-checkers draw conclusions in their articles, but only immediate ones. They focus very deliberately on

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s field notes, May 15, 2011.

discrete claims and individual political actors, carefully avoiding larger conclusions that would assign blame for political controversies or for the state of the public discourse as a whole.

A clear illustration of this came during the tense Washington debate over a US deficit-reduction plan in the summer of 2011, set off when Republican lawmakers refused to raise the congressionally sanctioned federal debt ceiling unless it was offset by trillions of dollars cut from government spending. The elite fact-checkers weighed in more than a dozen times during what was widely described as a political crisis that could, in the worst case, lead to the first-ever US default on its debt obligations.<sup>2</sup> They refuted the Republican argument that the White House had asked for a “blank check” to run up new debt. (Lifting the debt limit was necessary to repay money that had already been spent.) They confirmed that the ceiling had been raised under every modern president, but contradicted Democratic claims that the current showdown was unprecedented. (In fact Democrats had engaged in debt-limit brinksmanship under President George W. Bush.) They offered mostly inconclusive assessments of whether, as the White House had warned, Social Security checks really would stop going out if Congress failed to act by the deadline.<sup>3</sup>

But the fact-checkers did not address the most hotly contested political question: Who was at fault here? Which party was behaving badly? While Democratic and Republican leaders blamed one another, a great deal of analysis in the media focused on the terms being negotiated and the willingness of each side to compromise and to deal in good faith. An establishment consensus

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<sup>2</sup> For overviews of this coverage see Meghan Ashford-Grooms, “Truth-O-Meter Works Hard During Federal Debt Debate,” PolitiFact, July 29, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/texas/article/2011/jul/29/truth-o-meter-works-hard-during-federal-debt-debat/> (accessed May 8, 2012); Lori Robertson, “Debt Limit Debate Roundup,” FactCheck.org, July 29, 2011, <http://www.factcheck.org/2011/07/debt-limit-debate-round-up/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Glenn Kessler, “Can President Obama Keep Paying Social Security Benefits Even If the Debt Ceiling Is Reached?”, Fact Checker, July 13, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/can-president->

emerged that (at least in public negotiations) the White House had given more ground, agreeing to “historic” spending cuts that would anger many Democratic voters.<sup>4</sup> Some moderate conservatives urged Republicans to abandon their categorical opposition to new taxes, accepting a relatively modest increase to secure a large deficit-reduction deal.<sup>5</sup> When a FactCheck.org editor appeared on the radio program *On the Media* to discuss the controversy, her interviewer pressed the question of which party was at fault. The exchange (as transcribed by the show) is worth quoting at length:

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Who’s to blame for the crisis?

LORI ROBERTSON: It takes two to create an impasse. So both parties are to blame here for failing to come to an agreement.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Is it true, though, that most of the compromise has been made by the President?

LORI ROBERTSON: Well, I mean, I think that’s a matter of opinion. And —

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Explain to me how that’s a matter of opinion. Obama has been willing to cut a huge chunk of the money going out for a smaller percentage of money coming in. The only thing that the Republicans have supported is cutting the money going out, right?

LORI ROBERTSON: Yeah, I guess — I guess that that’s [LAUGHS] correct. You know, it’s hard for us to say, oh somebody’s blocking this more than the other. We’re — you know, we’re really — we’re not privy to these meetings, either.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: I didn’t mean to back you against the wall but I have to say if you guys aren’t going to be un-mealymouthed about this, then who will be?

LORI ROBERTSON: Well, it’s not that we’re being mealy-mouthed. [LAUGHS] I mean, we just say constantly in our stories that we don’t take an opinion one way or the other.

You know, a lot of people, particularly during the presidential campaigns will ask us, well, who lies more and can’t you give me a ranking on — you know, who’s the most truthful politician. And first off, we don’t want to look like we’re endorsing someone, so we don’t wanna do that. So we’re gonna tell you what we found, and if

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obama-keep-paying-social-security-benefits-even-if-the-debt-ceiling-is-reached/2011/07/12/gIQA9myRBI\_blog.html (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The behind-the-scenes narrative is always more complex; see Matt Bai, “Obama vs. Boehner: Who Killed the Debt Deal?”, *New York Times*, March 28, 2012, sec. Magazine.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. David Brooks, “The Mother of All No-Brainers,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2011, sec. Opinion; Megan McArdle, “Why Can’t the GOP Get to Yes?”, *Atlantic*, July 5, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/07/why-cant-the-gop-get-to-yes/241437/> (accessed May 8, 2012).



we found it to be horribly misleading, maybe you didn't, but we're gonna lay it there and — readers are gonna have to make those decisions for themselves.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Lori, thank you very much.

LORI ROBERTSON: Thank you.<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see, this is a typical reflex. Questioned about any categorical distinction between the two major US political parties, or any consistent pattern of distortion in American public life, professional fact-checkers invoke the narrowest version of their mission: We provide information, not political commentary. Citizens must “make those decisions for themselves.”

This is not to discredit the defense the fact-checker supplied. Good reasons existed for arguing that to assign blame in the debt-ceiling crisis was a matter of opinion, not fact. People disagree about what constitutes a “historic” concession on spending, or a “modest” tax increase. Depending on their political views people may have interpreted the drama of the unfolding crisis very differently, focusing on particular facts or events and not others. “Facts can be subjective,” the *Post*'s Glenn Kessler told me. “Depending on your opinion, you look at the facts in a different way.”<sup>7</sup> But observers had also disagreed, for similar reasons, about what counted as a “government takeover” of health care, or as “ending” Medicare, both questions FactCheck.org and its peers addressed decisively. As the last chapter showed, critics regularly accuse the elite fact-checkers of straying into the territory of opinion and political ideology, where objective factual analysis does not apply.

The inconsistency itself is less interesting than the question of what makes certain politically controversial judgements *look* like a “matter of opinion” to the professional fact-checkers. Their understanding and practice of objectivity is shaped, I think, by several mutually reinforcing

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<sup>6</sup> WNYC, *On the Media*, “Fact Checking the Debt Ceiling Debate,” July 29, 2011, <http://www.onthemedial.org/2011/jul/29/fact-checking-debt-ceiling-speeches/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

factors: first, a formal commitment to approach questions with an open mind, which in practice defines certain categories of forbidden knowledge; second, a day-to-day work experience that cuts against (and may be incommensurable with) broad, partisan critiques; and finally, a constant attention to their own position in US media-political networks, as manifest in professional status and relationships but also and more immediately in where they are cited, quoted, interviewed, linked to, and talked about.<sup>8</sup> This network position shapes fact-checkers' sense of mattering, their ability to make a difference in the world — though making a difference is itself a controversial question for professional journalists.

### **The impact of fact-checking**

Professional fact-checkers are asked all of the time if the work they do makes a difference.<sup>9</sup> The question comes up in conferences and panel discussions and on-air interviews. Trend pieces about this new brand of journalism wonder whether the fact-checkers really manage to persuade anybody, or to inhibit political lying — and if not, “why bother spending all of this time holding politicians accountable?”<sup>10</sup> As fact-checkers have gained attention, any number of articles by bloggers and journalists and scholars have focused on whether their project “works” and how it might work better.<sup>11</sup> The first sentence of a *USA Today* article on the challenges of checking

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<sup>7</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> One might also say the “media-political field.” I mean to emphasize a shifting, mostly mediated milieu of media and political actors. This is distinct from (but grounded in and partly structured by) the field-theoretic or institutionalist sense of well-defined, autonomous, but mutually influencing professional fields (or institutions) of politics and journalism. Cf. Rodney Benson, “News Media as a Journalistic Field: What Bourdieu Adds to New Institutionalism, and Vice Versa,” *Political Communication* 23, no. 2 (2006): 187–202.

<sup>9</sup> I should emphasize that I asked every fact-checker I spoke to whether and how their work has an impact; this is also the first question people have when they hear I do research on the movement.

<sup>10</sup> Cary Spivak, “The Fact-Checking Explosion,” *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2011.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Brendan Nyhan, “Does Fact-Checking Work? False Statements are Wrong Metric,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 30, 2012, [http://www.cjr.org/swing\\_states\\_project/does\\_fact-checking\\_work\\_false.php](http://www.cjr.org/swing_states_project/does_fact-checking_work_false.php) (accessed March 30, 2012); Paul Waldman, “Does Fact-Checking Work?,” *American Prospect*, November 1, 2011, <http://prospect.org/article/does-fact-checking-work> (accessed May 8, 2012).

facts explained, “For the fact checkers who police political ads, debates and speeches, it’s an article of faith that factually accurate information is something voters want and need ... What they can’t seem to do is get politicians to stop saying things that aren’t true.”<sup>12</sup>

Fact-checking can potentially “work” in three different ways, on three distinct audiences.<sup>13</sup> First, it may provide factual information that disabuses readers of mistaken beliefs or inoculates them against deceptive claims — and, perhaps, changes their thinking about political issues or even leads them to vote a different way. Second, fact-checkers may, either as a direct resource or by way of example, encourage other journalists to challenge falsehoods and adjudicate factual debates, rather than just reporting competing views. And finally fact-checking may, as a consequence, inhibit political lying by make it more costly for public figures to distort the truth.

The fact-checkers, however, make only very modest claims about their impact on the world. When asked, they have a few anecdotal responses which line up with those three models of influence. Fact-checkers often point to the popularity of the genre with readers, as reflected in traffic statistics and encouraging emails from the public. “Readers love this kind of accountability journalism,” PolitiFact’s Bill Adair told one interviewer.<sup>14</sup> They often mention the usefulness of fact-checking as a resource for other reporters. “We do have a lot of impact on other journalists, that’s the beauty of what we do,” a FactCheck.org editor told visiting reporters, pointing a recent newspaper story based almost entirely on the group’s research. “We get cited a

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<sup>12</sup> Martha T. Moore, “Fact Checkers Help Sort Through Political Claims,” *USA Today*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/story/2012-03-21/fact-checkers-politicians/53693798/1> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See discussion in Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer, *The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012: An Overview* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Hanna Vinter, “Bill Adair, Editor of PolitiFact: ‘Readers Love This Kind of Accountability Journalism,’” *Editors Weblog*, World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, August 22, 2011, <http://www.editorsweblog.org/2011/08/22/bill-adair-editor-of-politifact-readers-love-this-kind-of-accountability-journalism> (accessed May 8, 2012).

lot by newspaper reporters. ... They turn to us to say, ‘Well, these are kind of the nonpartisan arbiters of truth.’”<sup>15</sup>

And the fact-checkers can all cite cases in which a public figure seemed to abandon a talking point once it was ruled false — while freely conceding that that political lying continues unabated and always will. During the 2008 presidential campaign, to take an example I heard more than once, Barack Obama often told audiences that he had worked his way through college and graduate school. FactCheck.org challenged a television ad that repeated the line, pointing out that (according to Obama’s book *Dreams From My Father* and to the campaign’s backup materials) the candidate had held a few summer jobs and taken out loans to pay tuition — not the common sense of working one’s way through school.<sup>16</sup> “Afterward Obama, never said that again,” Brooks Jackson recalled.<sup>17</sup> (A subsequent campaign ad softened the language: “Through student loans and hard work, he graduated from college.”)

At the fact-checking conference I helped to organize, the *Post*’s Glenn Kessler told the story of a Senate Republican leader who, before a major floor speech about health care, instructed his staff to read through every relevant Fact Checker column to make sure he wouldn’t earn any Pinocchios. Bill Adair agreed: “I’ve heard the same kinds of things Glenn has about senators who tell their staff, ‘I do not want to get a “Pants on Fire,” I want you to vet everything that I say,’ and so I think it’s a really positive thing.”<sup>18</sup> Other politicians, though, pay no attention. Former New York Mayor (and sometime presidential candidate) Rudy Giuliani is a favorite example of the fact-checkers. Though the three outlets challenged him over and over, Giuliani, a

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<sup>15</sup> Author’s field notes, June 8, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Viveka Novak, “Obama’s Work Claim,” FactCheck.org, July 2, 2008, <http://www.factcheck.org/2008/07/obamas-work-claim/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

prostate cancer survivor, insisted in 2007 on repeating a grossly inflated statistic about mortality rates for the disease under “socialized medicine” in the United Kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

But the question of their impact on politicians, on fellow reporters, and even on readers is a fraught one for these journalists, no less than for their peers at conventional news outlets. It’s one thing to speak in casual terms about the effect fact-checking articles have once they’ve been published. It is quite another to set out to modify the thinking or the behavior of any particular set of people, or even “the public.” Fact-checkers seek to *inform* but not, at least formally, to persuade or to influence. “What excites me is that the information we put out is getting wider dissemination,” Brooks Jackson said in an interview. “In terms of trying to change the conversation, I’m old school. I was always taught that you should report the story, not be a part of the story.”<sup>20</sup> (Advocacy journalism is friendlier to being “part of the story.” Note the contrast to a muckraker such as I.F. Stone, who tried to influence political events and then reported on those efforts to his readers, as discussed in chapter two.)

Fact-checking exposes the tensions implicit in the practice of objective journalism precisely because it flirts so openly with reformist ambitions and rhetoric. The possibility of making a difference — of cleaning up public discourse — leads inevitably to a new set of questions which are attractive to activists and social scientists but very awkward for journalists: Why do politicians heed the fact-checkers in some instances but not others? (Which ones ignore them? Do they come mostly from one party?) How can this kind of journalism be modified for maximum impact? If research shows that fact-checks don’t always convince the reader, how can

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Adair and Glenn Kessler (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News,” meeting hosted by the New America Foundation, Washington, DC, December 14, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Comments at “Fact-Checking in the News”; see also Michael Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, telephone, August 18, 2011.

they be made more persuasive? What would make fact-checking more appealing to other political reporters?

All of these questions came up at the fact-checking conference mentioned above. The meeting included professional fact-checkers (and other journalists) as well as political scientists, communications scholars, and policy advocates from the non-profit world involved in media and political reform. A constant motif was the incompatibility of the journalists' and the other participants' sense of what fact-checking is *for*. When the discussion turned to how journalists might better “shame” politicians into telling the truth, Michael Dobbs, the *Post*'s original Fact Checker, interjected:

Can I respond very briefly to that? You're talking about all these sort of highfaluting missions for journalists. I mean, most journalists are rather more modest in their ambitions. We're not sort of talking about changing the world or changing political discourse. We're talking about, you know, just reporting things honestly and truly. It's a much more — the way you talk is not how journalists actually think.<sup>21</sup>

At another point, the conversation focused on making fact-checks more convincing to readers. Brooks Jackson suggested that journalists have long lived with the fact that some people will believe what they want to believe, no matter how much evidence they are shown to the contrary. He gave the example of doomsday cults whose faith only grows stronger after the prophesied armageddon fails to arrive.<sup>22</sup> “That's the human animal that we're up against,” Jackson said, continuing:

So I have limited expectations of what we can accomplish. I think that it's good what we do, I'm glad to see there's more of it, I take it on faith that doing more of it will

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Dobbs (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News”).

<sup>22</sup> Social psychologist Leon Festinger's research with a 1950's UFO cult is discussed in Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *UnSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* (New York: Random House, 2007), 55-56.

have a positive effect on democracy. I would love some evidence if that's true. If you have any that it's not, I'm not going to pay any attention to it.<sup>23</sup>

Though offered with a dose of humor, that response suggests a sense that journalists only serve democracy by being blind to the particular effects they have on it. Like investigative reporters, fact-checkers participate in an unusually naked way in public discourse. They contradict and endorse political speech, rather than mainly relaying it to the public. Their work makes direct interventions that always have the potential to provoke an immediate response or to alter political dynamics well before an election. But, in formal terms, only the public can render their work of "informing" meaningful.

At a panel discussion I participated in two months after that conference, a journalist in the audience asked PolitiFact's Bill Adair, "There has to be some sort of line where people know they're being watched and they just can't lie any more. Are you seeing any effect from that in terms of the stretching of the truth and the number of outright lies out there?" Adair gave the usual examples of public figures who pay attention to the fact-checkers, and others who don't (including the surprise that Fox News host Bill O'Reilly apologized after being called out by PolitiFact). But then he turned the question around:

My goal is not to get politicians to stop lying. I am a journalist and my goal is to empower democracy. And then you, democracy, can decide what you want to do with the information I provide. You may decide that you agree with it, and that you're going to hold this elected official accountable in ways and not vote for him or her or whatever, or you may decide in some cases you disagree. You might disagree about "Lie of the Year," you may disagree about any particular ruling we make. But my goal isn't to get politicians to stop lying. My goal is to give you the information you need to be a better citizen. And I think that's the role of the journalist. And when we get into this role of, well, we want them to stop lying, I think we sort of get out of the bounds of what is a journalist.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Brooks Jackson (comment at "Fact-Checking in the News").

<sup>24</sup> Bill Adair (comment at "The Facts of Political Life," panel discussion at the New America Foundation, Washington, DC, February 28, 2012).

These responses reflect the fact-checkers' ongoing effort to define their new genre and its mission in a way appropriate to objective journalism. This work of stabilization doesn't take place in a vacuum, but in the face of increasing interest and attention — academic analysis, hostile political criticism, well-meaning advice, etc. — that seeks to define fact-checking in competing ways. But the distancing remarks also belie a powerful countervailing desire among the fact-checkers to be relevant, to matter, to make a difference. More than that, the journalism fact-checkers produce clearly *does* have effects in the world, yielding reactions and interpretations which constantly threaten their claim to objectivity — and their ability to keep being relevant in the same way. This conflict surfaces in the fact-checkers' relationships with readers, with other journalists, and with public figures.

### **Fact-checkers and their public**

Like many journalists working today, fact-checkers experience their audience most immediately in the form of traffic statistics and a daily torrent of emails and comments from readers. It is a long-established trope in both journalism studies and the profession itself that journalists traditionally have known, and have cared to know, surprisingly little about their actual readers and viewers — as opposed to the vague and mostly intuitive “audience-image” they find it useful to imagine.<sup>25</sup> How much the accuracy of that picture has improved remains open to question. But there is no doubt that journalists today, and certainly those working online, have much more routine exposure to both audience feedback and audience “metrics” than was the case

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<sup>25</sup> In a much-cited passage Herb Gans has written of the elite journalists he studied in the 1970s, “I was surprised to find ... that they had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it.” See Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 230. On “audience-image,” see 238-240.



in editorial departments two decades ago.<sup>26</sup> Reporters and editors commonly know both how well their site is “performing” overall and which articles are drawing the most interest. At many news sites, of course, even readers can now see an index of which pieces are being emailed or blogged about the most.

The fact-checking sites are no exception. Top editors at the three elite outlets can easily quote their typical traffic figures, the number of people on their mailing lists (tens of thousands), and the amount of email they receive (hundreds and sometimes thousands of messages every day). At PolitiFact I was shown the daily traffic report (issued by Omniture) which tabulated hour-by-hour traffic to the site as a whole as well as the top 25 articles by page views, unique visitors, and average time spent. The report also showed how well the site was doing in the 25 largest US metro areas, and the top “referring domains” and search keywords bringing traffic in. (On the day I looked, for instance, the main referring sites were Google, Fox News, and Facebook. Top search terms included “obama birth certificate” and “glenn beck.”) At least once a day, office conversation turned to site performance: which fact-checks were being tweeted or blogged about, and by whom; how well the various state PolitiFact sites were doing; and whether it was a “good traffic day” or a “good traffic week” for PolitiFact overall.<sup>27</sup>

Editors and reporters not only have access to this information, they develop a sense for the ebbs and flows of online attention and actively try to shape it in order to attract new readers and to make overall traffic as high and consistent as possible. Only sizable numbers of people can move the needle of traffic statistics at the major fact-checking sites, which receive millions of

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<sup>26</sup> See discussion and literature review in C.W. Anderson, “Between Creative and Quantified Audiences: Web Metrics and Changing Patterns of Newswork in Local US Newsrooms,” *Journalism* 12, no. 5 (July, 2011): 550–566.

<sup>27</sup> Author’s field notes, February 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, and 16, 2011, and June 8 and 15, 2011; Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2010; Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2011; Eugene Kiely, interview by author, Philadelphia, PA, March 17, 2011.

page views and hundreds of thousands of unique visitors per month. But in the so-called “link economy” this traffic is taken to be a function of interest from a much smaller circle, reflected in Twitter traffic, inbound links from well-read blogs and news sites, and mentions on major broadcast networks. (For instance, PolitiFact saw dramatic traffic spikes every time Comedy Central replayed an episode of the Daily Show that showcased the group’s work.) Searches programmed into Twitter and Google show who in the media and political world is talking about which items. Fact-checkers, like online journalists and bloggers generally, have what might be called an analog sensibility about these various indexical signs of digital attention, a feeling for the actual or potential “buzz” around particular stories — which, day to day, is the most convenient proxy for success or impact as a journalist.<sup>28</sup>

Cultivating attention and traffic begins with writing headlines and tags that perform well on search engines. “We write headlines for one reader — Google,” Bill Adair told a class of journalism students. (This acts as brake on cleverness or puns; search engine optimization requires first of all clear and descriptive headlines using mostly proper nouns.) Drawing traffic also means promoting new articles by email and on Facebook and Twitter. At PolitiFact, reporters “tweet” all of their work assiduously and see this as a primary traffic driver. New items go out on the official Twitter account and, usually, under reporters’ individual Twitter handles. If two fact-checks are ready at the same time, one may be posted and tweeted later in the day in order to spread traffic out, giving each item the chance to generate as much buzz as possible. During my fieldwork, an editor lamented that staff had forgotten to tweet a promising fact-check, meaning the site missed out on “four hours of prime traffic time.” Later, the editorial staff

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<sup>28</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 11, 15, and 16, 2011; Gabrielle Gorder, “Just the Facts: An Interview with Bill Adair, Founder and Editor of PolitiFact,” NPF Newsbag, National Press Foundation, October 3, 2011,

convened to develop a consistent strategy for “who is tweeting when,” discussing questions like the best time of day to tweet a new item, how often to re-tweet it, and whether the process could be automated. One editor felt uncomfortable with such online self-promotion. But the consensus was that competition in the fact-checking landscape made Twitter all the more important for PolitiFact, and that in general “social media” were becoming more significant than “SEO” in driving traffic.<sup>29</sup>

This routine promotional labor by journalists might be called *media work*, to distinguish it from the traditional newswork of reporting, writing and editing news stories. Media work figures prominently in the relationship between fact-checkers and other journalists, discussed in the next section; its importance often goes unacknowledged, and its success relies on informal organizational resources and a degree of tacit knowledge.<sup>30</sup> This kind of work may be an increasingly basic part of being a journalist, one that collapses together the distinct audiences for fact-checking, as for other kinds of online journalism. Political actors, fellow journalists, and everyday readers all become potential drivers of attention and interest to the fact-checkers. All become a kind of media. Likewise, the detailed traffic measurements and other statistics afforded by publishing online, at least as they are commonly used and discussed, do little distinguish between these audiences.

Those statistics do not, however, very much color the elite fact-checkers’ sense of who they are writing for. They work with an abstract and somewhat idealized image of their democratic

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<http://nationalpress.org/blogs/newsbag/just-the-facts-an-interview-with-bill-adair-founder-and-editor-of-politifac/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9, 11, 15, and 16, 2011; June 15, 2011; and October 3, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> This is used in the sense Michael Polanyi applied, controversially, to suggest the craft-like aspects of scientific work, whose success often depends skills which are difficult to articulate. See *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 52-3.

public in mind.<sup>31</sup> The ideal reader of the fact-checking sites seeks to stay informed about public issues, but lacks the time or the expertise to sort through all of the competing claims. The ideal reader wants to make well-reasoned choices on election day, but is overwhelmed by a torrent of deliberate political misinformation. Most of all, the ideal reader may have political preferences but will not ignore factual information that cuts against those preferences. The fact-checkers receive hundreds of reader emails every day and often highlight the ones that bear out that image. “What I love are the letters I get from readers — and it comes once, twice, three times a week — from readers that say, you know, ‘I was really thinking this, but you’ve convinced me otherwise,’” the *Post*’s Glenn Kessler said at a fact-checking conference. FactCheck.org’s Brooks Jackson agreed:

I know there are people who are genuinely ... perplexed by all of the political malarkey that they hear, especially when candidates contradict each other. They’re looking for a trusted source of information, and those are the ones we’re here for. And sometimes we even get messages from people, like a guy will say, ‘Well I’m a Democrat, but I appreciate what you do because I want to know when my guys are lying to me. And there are people out there like that.’<sup>32</sup>

This image of an engaged but politically inexperienced public is clearly reflected in the journalism the fact-checkers produce. Though their tone of voice differs somewhat, all three outlets write for a lay public. They strive to cut through technical jargon and political rhetoric, and to present complex issues in terms the everyday reader can understand. “There was a hunger that I noticed from readers for basic information,” Kessler has said. “Because the problem is, politicians speak in code.” The site’s mission statement emphasizes this: “We will seek to explain difficult issues, provide missing context and provide analysis and explanation of various ‘code words’ used by

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<sup>31</sup> In its general contours this mirrors the “audience-image” Gans saw professional journalists subscribing to: sufficiently like the journalists in economic and educational profile to be interested in their work and able to understand and benefit from it (see *Deciding What’s News*, 238-240).

<sup>32</sup> Brooks Jackson and Glenn Kessler (comments at “Fact-Checking in the News”).

politicians, diplomats and others to obscure or shade the truth.”<sup>33</sup> The fact-checkers see themselves as providing the substantive coverage of issues that voters need — even if they don’t always realize it — and which conventional political coverage too often fails to deliver. As PolitiFact’s Bill Adair told an interviewer,

I would say one other flaw [of conventional reporting] is that there’s too much emphasis on the politics, on who’s up and who’s down, who’s winning and who’s losing and not enough on the substance of what the things would really mean for voters. PolitiFact is really a creative way of covering issues and public policy. I think of it like getting people to eat their vegetables. They don’t want to eat their vegetables but if you can make the vegetables tasty they will eat them.<sup>34</sup>

In keeping with this “eat your vegetables” approach, PolitiFact trainees were instructed that the site prizes “fresh, clear, writing.” “And the key word there is clear,” an editor stressed. “We put a lot of emphasis in PolitiFact on clarity. It’s not a place for flowery anecdotal leads.” The fact-checkers do, however, try to inject humor into their work at times. This is especially true at PolitiFact, which, as the Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual” instructs, has a slightly irreverent voice that “doesn’t take this stuff too seriously” and tries to make politics accessible to people who aren’t “political junkies.”<sup>35</sup> (One “birther” fact-check began this way: “With all this health care debate dominating our time for the last few weeks, can we please get back to the issues that matter? Like, what’s up with Obama’s Kenyan birth certificate?”)<sup>36</sup> But the public always gets to be in on the joke. The fact-checking sites studiously avoid the insider language and snarky humor of professional media or political hubs such as Gawker and Politico.

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<sup>33</sup> Glenn Kessler, “About the Fact Checker,” Fact Checker, March 3, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/about-the-fact-checker/2011/12/05/g1QAa0FBYO\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/about-the-fact-checker/2011/12/05/g1QAa0FBYO_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012); comment at “Fact-Checking and the News.”

<sup>34</sup> Vinter, “Bill Adair, Editor of PolitiFact: ‘Readers Love This Kind of Accountability Journalism.’”

<sup>35</sup> Author’s field notes, February 9 and 17, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Farley, “Alleged Obama Birth Certificate From Kenya Is a Hoax,” PolitiFact, August 21, 2009, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/aug/21/orly-taitz/alleged-obama-birth-certificate-kenya-hoax/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

Much or even most of their actual audience does not match the idealized reader-image the fact-checkers cater to, however. Perhaps even more than their peers at traditional news outlets, these journalists are inundated in hostile and sometimes unhinged communication from their readers. This is a theme fact-checkers bring up often in private conversation and at public forums; it is an aspect of the job every new fact-checker has to get used to, and part of the camaraderie that binds them together. On the first day of their training, FactCheck.org interns learned how to respond to the roughly 200 emails the group receives every day. An editor urged them to be respectful no matter how ridiculous the question — everyone in the room tittered at the more outlandish examples — and warned about partisans looking to pick a fight: “Don’t engage in any back and forth. You can just send [the information] along. If they say, ‘You’re full of it,’ or ‘I don’t believe it,’ just let it go. It’s just not worth it.”<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, trainees at PolitiFact learned that they would need a thick skin to do this kind of work. After my PolitiFact item on Glenn Beck began to draw personal email from unhappy readers, I was encouraged to reply to polite objections but not to “hate mail,” and to remember that anything written in an email response might be used against me. I remarked on how unsettling such direct criticism can feel. “That’s the reaction the first thousand times,” I was told; soon one learns to scan the feedback for factual objections and ignore the vitriol. FactCheck.org and PolitiFact regularly publish selections from reader email, including many scathing assessments of their work, often balanced to show that both liberal and conservative readers find fault with them. However, only the Fact Checker allows readers to post comments directly on published articles (a standard feature of the *Washington Post* website). PolitiFact relegates reader comments to its Facebook page, which carries abbreviated versions of every Truth-O-Meter item

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<sup>37</sup> Author’s field notes, June 6, 2011.

with a link back to the main site. One reason for this is that Facebook does not permit anonymity, which may promote more civil discourse. Even so, I was told, partisans dominate the comments and as a result the discussion is not very worthwhile.<sup>38</sup>

Fact-checkers freely admit that only a fraction of their audience comes seeking information, rather than ammunition to bolster existing political convictions. At the fact-checking conference I helped to organize, social scientists emphasized that people who avidly consume political news — the kind of people presumably drawn to fact-checking sites — are precisely those with both the strong convictions and the intellectual resources to rationalize away new information that runs counter to their beliefs.<sup>39</sup> This was no surprise to the fact-checkers present. As Bill Adair responded,

I have a theory of American politics that's basically a pie with three slices: You have the conservative slice of 30 percent, and I think they're going to believe what they want to believe and they're not going to be persuaded by a fact-check; and likewise, there's a slightly smaller slice for the Democrats, for the liberals, and they're not going to be persuaded. And so to me what I'm interested is seeing the research that teases out the "persuadables" and looks at whether the fact-checking works on them.<sup>40</sup>

The problem of making their work more persuasive troubles the fact-checkers' claim to objectivity, however. As noted in the third chapter, social science began to inform fact-checking in the 1990s, when some networks redesigned "adwatch" segments to avoid reinforcing the political advertising they set out to debunk. Fact-checkers don't want to be responsible for amplifying public distortions. But they also don't want to be held responsible for persuading people to adopt a certain view. Fact-checkers emphasize strenuously and constantly that readers

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<sup>38</sup> Author's field notes, February 14 and 19, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> See discussion in Brendan Nyhan and Jason Riefler, *Misinformation and Fact-checking: Research Findings from Social Science* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, February, 2012). Nyhan and Riefler helped to organize the conference and presented their own research there.

may disagree with their work. “We’re not here to change people’s minds, we’re here to give voters the information they need. . . . What we do has intrinsic value,” one PolitiFact reporter told me flatly, echoing a common refrain.<sup>41</sup> Adair acknowledged the trouble with changing minds at a panel discussion: “I guess our goal is we don’t want people to continue having misconceptions about things, but again, I’m not a propagandist, I am a journalist.”<sup>42</sup>

Day in and day out, these patterns of public reaction become routine and predictable. Fact-checkers develop a sense not just for the daily ebb and flow of traffic, but for the charged partisan dynamics of the online political discourse that drives much of their traffic. They anticipate which pieces will produce an unusually furious reaction from readers on the left or the right, especially once a well-known pundit takes note. (At both PolitiFact and FactCheck.org I heard that a few unkind words from liberal MSNBC host Rachel Maddow will precipitate an immediate flood of angry emails from what one editor referred to as the “sheep” who blindly follow her.)<sup>43</sup> Angry letters to journalists are hardly a new phenomenon, of course.<sup>44</sup> However this kind of feedback online is more immediate, more voluminous, and more visible to journalists (no longer shielded by layers of administration) as well as to the rest of their audience (who can see comments, blog posts, and tweets about the fact-checkers). Reader feedback is more public and thus arguably more consequential.

This predictable, patterned hostility only reinforces the fact-checkers’ anchoring conviction that public discourse is distorted by partisan extremism on “both sides” of the spectrum. It also

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<sup>40</sup> Bill Adair (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News). As the social scientists present pointed out, people without party leanings may not be “persuadable” so much as disengaged from politics altogether.

<sup>41</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, interview by author, telephone, February 25, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Bill Adair (comment at “The Facts of Political Life”).

<sup>43</sup> Author’s field notes, March 17, 2011, and June 6, 8, 15, and 16, 2011.



gives them a mixed view of their audience's role as a journalistic resource.<sup>45</sup> All three elite outlets emphasize the value readers offer in suggesting items to be checked, and in critiquing their work. "I get thousands of letters every day from readers loving or hating what I write, and actually I learn a lot from some of those readers who make very thoughtful responses to what I've written, and it informs my thinking," Glenn Kessler said in a radio interview.<sup>46</sup> As noted earlier, PolitiFact reconfigured the Truth-O-Meter (changing "Barely True" to "Mostly False") based on public feedback, and in a handful of cases has altered a ruling after readers objected strenuously: "When enough people tell you you're wrong, sometimes it's not partisan," I heard. Editors have discussed adding a feature that would let readers rate claims themselves, and publishing the result alongside the official Truth-O-Meter ruling. Asked by a visiting journalist whether fact-checking can be "crowd-sourced," a FactCheck.org editor replied that readers sometimes spot factual errors in the group's work, and said a major project for the coming year was to increase public involvement in the site.<sup>47</sup>

Nonetheless, though the elite fact-checkers clearly seek to involve the audience in their work, and though they sometimes gesture toward the rhetoric of crowd-sourcing, in my observation these journalists are skeptical of the degree to which fact-checking can be reliably and neutrally performed by some self-organizing online public. Both Kessler and the *Post's* previous Fact Checker, Michael Dobbs, have spoken of trying to institutionalize the reader's role in journalistic fact-checking. The challenge is to keep the crowd's partisan impulses at bay. In Dobbs' words, "Readers are an extraordinary source of knowledge and good sense, if we can find ways to

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<sup>44</sup> Gans found in the 1970s that elite American journalists had little interest in mail from readers and viewers, due to its "predictability": "Journalists expect to receive mostly critical letters, particularly cultural and political conservatives, and their expectations are usually realized"; *Deciding What's News*, 230-1.

<sup>45</sup> Journalism's vogueish rhetoric of the "productive and generative" audience is discussed in Anderson, "Between Creative and Quantified Audiences."

<sup>46</sup> NPR, *Talk of the Nation*, "Political Fact-Checking Under Fire," January 10, 2012.

showcase real expertise, rather than inciting more partisan mudslinging. By contrast, hundreds of inane comments can be a turn-off to the thoughtful reader.”<sup>48</sup> Or as I heard at PolitiFact, “You need enough of a crowd to overwhelm the partisanship.”<sup>49</sup>

The most ambitious effort in this vein has been NewsTrust’s “Truthsquad,” a pilot program launched in mid-2010 with foundation support. (The initiative lasted roughly a year and a half.) Truthsquad let readers rate public claims on a slider from “True” to “False,” and tabulated the results; it also provided guides to relevant research for each claim, and discussion moderated by professional journalists. The primary goal of the project was to promote news literacy and public engagement, the director emphasized, rather than to devise a more accurate approach to fact-checking.<sup>50</sup> I made a point of asking professional fact-checkers what they thought of the venture. FactCheck.org was an official partner, but Brooks Jackson doubted the effort held promise for large-scale fact-checking: “I wish there were a way to harness crowd-sourcing to do actual fact-checking, but it’s tough. You don’t determine facts by voting on them, and at its heart that’s what crowd-sourcing is.”<sup>51</sup> PolitiFact’s Bill Adair was equally skeptical:

It’s an intriguing idea, and I’m open to it, but so far I haven’t seen that the crowd is willing to do all that homework. ... There are a lot of nuances in this stuff. ... At this point I just think professional journalists do the best fact-checking. And the problem with the crowd in politics is it’s just so polarized, you don’t get neutral people coming to this. The crowd is the extremists.<sup>52</sup>

It is easy to see these responses as boundary-drawing by members of a profession under siege. But the skepticism about crowd-sourcing underscores a much deeper ambivalence regarding new media technologies and their impact on public discourse. At lunch with one of

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<sup>47</sup> Author’s field notes, June 8 and 16, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Fabrice Florin, interview by author, telephone, March 1, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

PolitiFact’s fact-checkers, I asked for an opinion about the recent, fairly meteoric rise of this new kind of journalism — why now? Does the Internet have something to do with it? Yes, came the immediate answer: The network has made it easier than ever for lies and distortions to spread unchecked and unchallenged. This is the default view among professional fact-checkers, who recognize that the Internet makes their work possible but also insist that it makes that work necessary. “That’s the paradox of new media,” Bill Adair told a class of journalism students.<sup>53</sup> “It’s easier than ever to get unbiased facts, but people don’t.”

The fact-checkers do in many contexts celebrate the Internet, and often describe fact-checking an experiment in truly “webby” journalism. They could not do what they do without the information network. “Fact checking was difficult to do before the Internet revolution,” Adair has said. “It was time-consuming and impractical to track down the original documents and reports that are critical to our research. Now they are often just a mouse-click away.”<sup>54</sup> But these journalists also openly lament the decline of journalism’s “gatekeeping” status, so often taken as an unalloyed good bloggers and by media and political reformers. As Adair explained to one interviewer, “In the 1960s in any country there were a few television networks and probably some large newspapers and they were the filters that decided what information people needed to read or to hear.” He continued:

What’s happened in the internet age is that those filters, the legacy media, are not as important any more because you may get information from your newspaper or your television network still, but you probably also get information from blogs and internet news sources and even emails that are forwarded to you by your crazy uncle who has

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<sup>52</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Author’s field notes, October 3, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Craig Silverman, “Conferences Raise Unanswered Questions About Fact Checking,” Poynter.org, <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/regret-the-error/157031/conferences-raise-unanswered-questions-about-fact-checking/> (accessed March 8, 2012).

various conspiracy theories. And so it's important for us as journalists, particularly as fact checkers, to realize the filter is gone.<sup>55</sup>

In a 2007 book about political misinformation, Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson emphasized the harmful impact of media-system changes on public discourse and understanding, pointing to cable news as well as the Internet — a “potent new weapon of deception.”<sup>56</sup> In an interview Jackson gave the example of the controversy over President Obama's birth certificate; two decades ago journalists did not have had to debunk such absurd rumors, which could be denied publicity altogether. He explained,

It used to be that professional reporters and editors served a gatekeeper function ... Those days are gone and now every human being on the planet practically is subjected to all the wild tips, leads, rumors, malicious lies and bullshit that we used to as journalists sort out and keep out of the public discourse. ... There is no gatekeeping function any more because there are no gates, there are no fences. There's just a constant wash of information, and mostly misinformation.<sup>57</sup>

As we saw in chapter one, these concerns sometimes surfaced among the earliest proponents of blogging's challenge to traditional journalism. Unlike the enthusiasts at BloggerCon, though, fact-checkers lack an overarching faith that “the truth catches up a lot better” today — at least not without expert intervention.

### **Fact-checkers and journalism**

“Muffingate” occupied the national news media for more than a week in the fall of 2011. Among other instances of “extravagant spending,” the Justice Department had been billed \$16 for every muffin served to attendees at a law enforcement conference in a Washington hotel, announced a report by the department's Inspector General. Politicians and pundits seized on the damning statistic, as did news outlets across the country. One analysis found that in the eight

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<sup>55</sup> Vinter, “Bill Adair, Editor of PolitiFact: ‘Readers Love This Kind of Accountability Journalism.’”

days after the report came out, 223 stories mentioned “\$16 muffins” or some variation; more than four out of five repeated the figure uncritically, with no effort to challenge or explain it.<sup>58</sup> The overpriced pastries offered an irresistible lead for newspaper reports. A page-one article in the *Washington Post* opened this way:

Where does a muffin cost more than \$16?

At a government conference, it turns out.

They may run just over \$2 at your average coffee shop, but the Justice Department paid seven to eight times as much at a gathering it held at the Capital Hilton in Washington. And on Tuesday, the muffins seemed well on their way to joining the Pentagon’s \$600 toilet seat as symbols of wasteful spending.<sup>59</sup>

The story was, of course, “too good to be true,” as a sharply worded critique by the *Post*’s own ombudsman noted the following week. The IG report did cite the \$16 figure several times, based on the way the hotel itemized expenses. But a closer reading — or “a visit to the Capital Hilton’s restaurant, which is a few hundred feet from The Post” — would have shown the bill covered more than muffins.<sup>60</sup> (In fact the government had spent a fairly thrifty \$15 per person per day on food, which included a continental breakfast of fruit and pastries, an afternoon snack, and coffee and other beverages. Both the hotel chain and the Justice Department corrected the record within a few days.)

In this case newspaper and TV reporters had done at least as much as politicians to popularize the distorted figure, and arguably much more. News critiques quickly appeared in outlets from Media Matters and the Huffington Post to the *Wall Street Journal*, taking journalists

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<sup>56</sup> Jackson and Jamieson, *UnSpun*, x.

<sup>57</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Sam Stein, “Muffingate’s Sad Story: 178 Articles Perpetuate DOJ Myth, 37 Correct It,” Huffington Post, September 30, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/30/muffins-justice-department-muffingate-myth\\_n\\_988928.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/30/muffins-justice-department-muffingate-myth_n_988928.html) (accessed October 4, 2011). The analysis relied on LexisNexis.

<sup>59</sup> Jerry Markon, “A \$16 Muffin? Justice Dept. Audit Finds ‘Wasteful’ and Extravagant Spending,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2011, sec. Politics.

to task for failing to report the story thoroughly, or to correct it prominently once new information came to light.<sup>61</sup> PolitiFact also analyzed the \$16 muffin claim, as repeated by Fox News host Bill O'Reilly on Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*. O'Reilly earned a "Mostly False." The piece linked to stern assessments of journalism's role in the affair, but itself offered only the mildest rebuke: "Media reports summarized the inspector general's overall negative findings, but couldn't resist starting with the \$16 muffin. In fairness, it was a verbatim quote from the report."<sup>62</sup>

Among the elite fact-checking outlets, that counts as an unusually direct bit of media criticism. Professional fact-checkers have a fascinating and conflicted relationship with their fellow journalists. As we have seen, fact-checking is assembled from the news, fills absences in the news, and arguably has its biggest impact through the news. Meanwhile, though, the existence of dedicated fact-checking organizations stands as an indictment of the failures conventional political reporting. A reformist critique of their own profession surfaces constantly in the fact-checker's daily work, and sometimes in broad public remarks. But this mission of reform remains at best implicit in their published journalism.

A common refrain when fact-checkers have to explain what they do, whether in casual conversation or a formal interview, is that it's what every good reporter should be doing. I heard this from nearly every fact-checker I spoke to, but moments of controversy can put a sharper

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<sup>60</sup> Patrick B. Pexton, "Another Look at Justice Dept.'s \$16 Muffin," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2011, sec. Opinions.

<sup>61</sup> Rob Savillo, "Muffin-gate Update: Many Outlets Fail To Correct Half-Baked Allegation," *Media Matters*, November 3, 2011; Stein, "Muffingate's Sad Story"; James Q. Wilson, "Muffingate and the Media's Big Fat Mistake," *Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 2011, sec. Opinion.

<sup>62</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, "\$16 Muffin Included Coffee, Tea, Event Space," PolitiFact, October 4, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/oct/04/bill-oreilly/16-muffin-included-coffee-tea-event-space/> (accessed October 4, 2011).

edge on the critique. In an NPR interview, Bill Adair accounted for the widespread backlash against PolitiFact's 2011 "Lie of the Year" selection this way:

We have disrupted the protocol in a lot of ways. We have come in and said we're not just going to pass along what the politicians are saying anymore ... That has shaken the establishment. I think people are not accustomed to the press doing this, and I think that's a reflection that the press has been, has fallen down on the job. *This is what we should have been doing all along.*<sup>63</sup> [italics added]

As we have seen, fact-checkers often describe their genre as a response to the failures of traditional journalism.<sup>64</sup> Certain professional debacles come up over and over, in particular the failure to challenge White House claims before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.<sup>65</sup> "I think the media really abdicated its role in the early part of this decade, in the run-up to the war in Iraq," ABC News correspondent Jake Tapper told Stephen Colbert, when he appeared on *The Colbert Report* to announce a new fact-checking partnership between PolitiFact and ABC's *This Week*.<sup>66</sup> The elite fact-checkers see themselves, I think, as a kind of reform movement operating from within the precincts of professional journalism, leading by the example of a reporting practice they consider more demanding, more honest, and truer to the profession's founding ideals. As Michael Dobbs has written,

In suggesting a 'Fact Checker' feature to the editors of the *Washington Post* in the summer of 2007, I was motivated in large part by a sense that Washington reporting had strayed away from the truth-seeking tradition. While there is a place for horse race reporting ... I felt that we had been snookered by the political class into ignoring, or at least playing down, larger, more important questions. ... Truth-seeking

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<sup>63</sup> NPR, *All Things Considered*, "With 'Lie of the Year' Controversy, Fact Checking Comes Under Scrutiny," December 22, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Asked this very question at the fact-checking conference I helped to organize, Bill Adair, Michael Dobbs, and Brooks Jackson all agreed; Glenn Kessler was less emphatic in indicting traditional journalism (comments at "Fact-Checking in the News.")

<sup>65</sup> See e.g. Michael Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking*; "Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers," conference at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Washington, DC, November 9, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Comedy Central, *Colbert Report*, "Sunday Morning Fact-Checking," April 14, 2010, <http://www.colbertnation.com/full-episodes/wed-april-14-2010-david-shields> (accessed May 8, 2012). The partnership between PolitiFact and *This Week* was a response to a proposal by Jay Rosen; see Rosen, "My Simple Fix for the Messed Up Sunday Shows," Jay Rosen: Public Notebook (blog), December 27, 2009, <http://jayrosen.posterous.com/my-simple-fix-for-the-messed-up-sunday-shows> (accessed September 10, 2010).

and truth-telling were relegated to the sidelines of journalism, rather than assuming their rightful place, at the center.<sup>67</sup>

This sense of mission was palpable during my visits to FactCheck.org and PolitiFact. I heard criticisms of “he said, she said” reporting and “horse-race” coverage not just from the founders of these organizations, but from almost everyone on staff, even part-time employees. (Fact-checkers see themselves as addressing both of these oft-cited failings of conventional journalism, with stories that adjudicate factual disputes, and which cover substantive issues rather than “process.”) PolitiFact’s small headquarters in Washington brimmed with artifacts attesting to fact-checking as a pioneering form of journalism: various awards the group has received as well as posters and other memorabilia from state partners and even some overseas fact-checking ventures. One series of PolitiFact posters featured famous political lies — “I did not have sex with that woman,” “I am not a crook” — over a “False” on the Truth-O-Meter, and the motto, “Don’t take your politicians at face value. We don’t.” In one corner of the office, a life-sized Obama cutout wore a PolitiFact hat. In another, one could find the original whiteboard where Bill Adair mapped out the tentative design of the PolitiFact website. PolitiFact’s sales pitch to potential franchisees, who pay tens of thousands of dollars to license the group’s methodology, was remarkably bold in inviting these news organizations to embrace a higher journalistic standard than they currently practice. The Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual” echoed this sense of a higher calling:

We practice a gutsy form of reporting that can feel a little awkward at first. After being trained for years not to make sides, you will now have to choose which side is right. Maybe you’ve wanted to do that all along. ... The bar is higher for PolitiFact stories than for many other stories we publish in the newspaper. For a typical newspaper story, we lay out the acts on each side and let readers decide how they

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Dobbs, *The Rise of Political Fact-Checking*, 3.



feel. But for PolitiFact, we dig deeper, examine more sources and draw a conclusion about what's right.<sup>68</sup>

As noted, fact-checkers emphasize constantly that their genre requires more time and effort than the typical campaign story. They sometimes excuse the absence of fact-checking in routine coverage as a matter of meeting tight deadlines and writing for fit. "When I was a political reporter ... doing the day-to-day campaign coverage ... I would try to fact-check," Glenn Kessler has explained. "But often I didn't have enough space or that was cut for space, because ... the details got a little too complicated for the narrative."<sup>69</sup> In an interview, CNN's resident media critic asked Bill Adair why more newspapers don't do fact-checking. "It takes a lot of resources, it takes a real commitment," Adair responded. "They have to be willing to commit reporters and editors to journalism that takes longer, because this is not something that you can do quickly."<sup>70</sup>

Fact-checkers sometimes offer a more critical account, though, which holds that political reporters are afraid to contradict officials for fear of losing "access." "Some reporters favor access over accuracy," FactCheck.org's Brooks Jackson told me bluntly.<sup>71</sup> With this in mind, PolitiFact encourages its state partners to dedicate a number of reporters to fact-checking full time, rather than having a larger pool rotate in from other beats. The fear is that journalists who need to be on good terms with political figures will be afraid to produce hard-hitting Truth-O-Meter items. "Fact-checking journalism is the most liberating journalism because you never care about access," Adair told me. He continued:

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<sup>68</sup> Author's field notes, February 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, and 17, 2011, and June 6, 8, and 15, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Glenn Kessler (comment at "Fact-Checking in the News.")

<sup>70</sup> CNN, *Reliable Sources*, "PolitiFact vs. Rachel Maddow," February 27, 2011; see also W. Gardner Selby, "PolitiFact Fields Fire After Rating False a Rachel Maddow Statement," PolitiFact Texas, February 28, 2011, <http://www.politifact.com/texas/article/2011/feb/28/context-matters-politifact-check-maddow/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, telephone, August 16, 2011.

You hope the beat reporter would have no more reluctance [to challenge an official's facts] than they would to say the mayor got a DUI, or whatever. And yet I just think it's inherent. . . . What an official holds over a beat reporter is that they can cut off that reporter's access if they want. And I never have to worry about that. To the extent there's any resistance to this idea that we should be calling [politicians] out, I think often it comes from beat reporters.<sup>72</sup>

Despite this well-developed internal critique, the elite fact-checking outlets take care not to behave like media critics. As with what FactCheck.org called Haley Barbour's "gross exaggeration" of job-loss statistics, trumpeted in the third paragraph of a *New York Time* story, most of the statements fact-checkers investigate appeared first in a news report. Fact-checkers generally cite those news reports without faulting them for certifying a deceptive claim, other than by implication. This holds even when a falsehood appears to originate in flawed or sensationalistic reporting. In 2010 PolitiFact awarded a "Pants on Fire," its harshest rating, to the Florida Democratic Party, for a press release claiming the state's Republican attorney general said the subprime mortgage crisis was not "a big deal."<sup>73</sup> As the analysis made clear, both of the Democrats' mistakes resulted from accurately quoting a local newspaper report that had mistakenly put someone else's words in the mouth of the attorney general. "The transcript differs with the news account in two critical ways," the item noted mildly, without saying directly that the newspaper got it wrong; "Florida Democrats are being incorrect and misleading," it nevertheless concluded.

Similarly, PolitiFact and FactCheck.org have several times refuted the claim that Arizona is the "number two kidnapping capital of the world," repeated by Arizona Senator John McCain,

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<sup>72</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 17, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Aaron Sharokman, "Florida Dems say Bill McCollum out of touch on subprime mortgage crisis," PolitiFact Florida, May 11, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2010/may/11/florida-democratic-party/florida-dems-bill-mccollum-subprime-mortgage/> (accessed June 16, 2012).

among others.<sup>74</sup> The fact-checkers both traced the origin of the dubious statistic to a 2009 ABC News segment which the network has, despite multiple requests, never substantiated. They noted that the figure had been widely repeated in newspaper and TV reports. But they reserved their criticism for political figures. “Keeping up with this one is a bit like playing Whac-A-Mole. You knock down one politician for saying it, and another one pops up saying it somewhere else,” PolitiFact wrote.<sup>75</sup> As in the “Muffingate” controversy, though, news organizations had done as much as politicians to propagate the sensational statistic. (“The media played a game of Whisper Down The Lane, and it led to this insane distortion that Phoenix was the number-two place in the world to get yourself kidnapped,” argued an observer at the Huffington Post.)<sup>76</sup>

Being seen to stray into the terrain of media criticism clearly makes the fact-checkers uncomfortable. In the summer of 2011, Glenn Kessler weighed in on a debate about whether Vice-President Biden had likened Tea Party activists to “terrorists” during negotiations over raising the US debt ceiling. Kessler noted that the accusation originated in a report on the Washington news site Politico; he seemed to take issue with the reporting in that piece and in others that repeated the claim, which the Vice-President and others present at the closed-door negotiations had denied.<sup>77</sup> Politico responded harshly: “Wait a second. Either he said it, or he didn’t. That’s the fact to check here. The way to check it is to report it out, not to attack the

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<sup>74</sup> Viveca Novak, Lori Robertson, Brooks Jackson, D’Angelo Gore and Melissa Siegel, “Sunday Replay,” FactCheck.org, June 28, 2010, <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/06/sunday-replay-10/> (accessed May 8, 2012); Ciara O’Rourke, “McCain says Phoenix is the second kidnapping capital in the world,” PolitiFact, June 28, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/texas/statements/2010/jun/28/john-mccain/mccain-says-phoenix-second-kidnapping-capital-worl/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Robert Farley, “Beheadings, kidnappings and other immigration distortions,” PolitiFact, September 10, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/sep/10/fact-checking-beheadings-and-other-immigration/> (accessed May 8, 2012). PolitiFact debunked the claim in at least four separate Truth-O-Meter items.

<sup>76</sup> Jason Linkins, “McCain Falsely Claims Phoenix Is ‘Number-Two Kidnapping Capital of the World,’” Huffington Post, June 29, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/28/mccain-falsely-claims-pho\\_n\\_627605.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/28/mccain-falsely-claims-pho_n_627605.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

people who did report it out and label their reporting ‘dubious’ based on nothing more than instinct and the questionable and utterly self-interested word of politicians and their staffers.”<sup>78</sup> In a year-in-review article, Kessler called his own piece a “clunker” and all but apologized to Politico and to his readers: “*We never intended to be journalism critics*, and we will try to keep our focus on the politicians in this election season.”<sup>79</sup>

That response points to one reason for the fact-checkers’ reluctance, in their published work, to criticize other news organizations. Professional journalism draws a bright line between reporting and media criticism, and the fact-checkers see themselves squarely in the former camp. “The point is to get the truth out,” an experienced FactCheck.org intern told me; to tweak other reporters would be “gossipy” and “petty.” At PolitiFact, the case of Florida’s Democrats being led into a “Pants on Fire” by a faulty newspaper article came up during training session. “The paper was incorrect,” an editor said, to make the point that fact-checkers should always go back to the original transcript. And did PolitiFact call out the reporting error, one trainee wanted to know? “No, because we weren’t fact-checking the paper,” came the response:

I don’t even know of the paper is aware of this. And sometimes I wrestle with this. Like, how much do I want to call up my colleagues in the news media and say, “Hey, you screwed this up?” That’s not what I do. I’m not here to correct the news press.<sup>80</sup>

Criticizing their peers in the press is awkward and cuts against the fact-checkers’ sense of their own place at the center of the profession. These news organizations wear their numerous

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<sup>77</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Obama’s denial that Biden called tea party activists ‘terrorists,’” Fact Checker, August 17, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/obamas-denial-that-biden-called-tea-party-activists-terrorists/2011/08/16/gIQAr1g3JJ\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/obamas-denial-that-biden-called-tea-party-activists-terrorists/2011/08/16/gIQAr1g3JJ_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Ben Smith, “The End of Fact-Checking,” Politico, August 17, 2011, [http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0811/The\\_end\\_of\\_factchecking.html](http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0811/The_end_of_factchecking.html) (accessed May 8, 2012))

<sup>79</sup> Glenn Kessler, “One Year of Fact Checking — an Accounting,” Fact Checker, December 30, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/one-year-of-fact-checking--an-accounting/2011/12/27/gIQAR1taOP\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/one-year-of-fact-checking--an-accounting/2011/12/27/gIQAR1taOP_blog.html) (accessed May 8, 2012). Italics added.

<sup>80</sup> Author’s field notes, June 8 and 15, 2011.

reporting honors proudly.<sup>81</sup> The fact-checkers see themselves not as media critics, but as standard-bearers for a more honest journalism that is unafraid to speak truth to power. The three elite fact-checking outlets are led by veteran journalists with long reporting careers and deep professional networks. They are media insiders, who attend exclusive events like the White House Correspondents Dinner and who, if not in the innermost ring of Washington media and political circles, have many friends and contacts who are.

More than that, however, the elite fact-checking outlets operate in a kind of symbiosis with the conventional news organizations who so often promote their work. Both Brooks Jackson and Bill Adair told me that being cited and interviewed by other journalists is not a primary objective.<sup>82</sup> “I’m still a journalist first, my goal is to do great journalism,” Adair said. “It’s nice if it gets picked up and mentioned on network television or in the *New York Times*, and that happens a lot, but I don’t ever think of that as our goal.” Internally, though, “hits” in high-profile media outlets are a vital source of validation that fact-checking matters — as when the *Times*, in a profile of Minnesota Republican Michele Bachmann, dedicated lengthy sidebar to her abysmal performance on the Truth-O-Meter. Trainees were told about how Bachmann’s PolitiFact record became an issue on the campaign trail: “This is valuable. This is important. We accurately captured that she had a real problem with accuracy.”<sup>83</sup> Such cases came up often at both PolitiFact and FactCheck.org, notably when the fact-checkers had to explain themselves to

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<sup>81</sup> As of mid-2012 FactCheck.org had won a Sigma Delta Chi Award from the Society of Professional Journalists, a Clarion Award from the Association for Women in Communications, and numerous Webby awards for online journalism. PolitiFact was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 2009 and has also received a Digital Edge Award from the National Newspaper Association, and a pair of Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism.

<sup>82</sup> Bill Adair, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 2, 2010; Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011; see Monica Davey, “Fact Checker Finds Falsehoods in Remarks,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2009, sec. U.S. / Politics.

outsiders. Both sites sometimes post articles alerting their readers to interviews or citations in prominent media venues.<sup>84</sup>

At an organizational level, substantial work and attention go into the fact-checkers' relationships with other media outlets. Fact-checking as a genre adapts happily to — is arguably a product of — professional journalism's turn toward collaboration and partnership between newsrooms and across media platforms. PolitiFact's unusual franchise model illustrates this dramatically. The licensing contracts with state media partners cover syndication and revenue sharing, but also training in a new journalistic methodology. Remarkably, these partnerships subject reporters in one newsroom to the editorial standards — and during an initial trial period, to the day-to-day oversight — of editors working for another company, in a separate newsroom, in a different city. The unusual lines of authority become evident when PolitiFact has to schedule supplemental training for state partners producing substandard Truth-O-Meter items, or having trouble with the quota of roughly five articles per week.<sup>85</sup>

The dedicated fact-checking sites also strike formal and informal alliances with a shifting array of news outlets in print, broadcast, and online. The appeal of the new genre as a convenient source of political news programming became clear as soon as FactCheck.org went live to cover the 2004 presidential race. Right away, media outlets began citing the group's work and inviting Brooks Jackson on the air to deliver pithy assessments of campaign claims. Jackson gave on-air fact-checks dozens of times during that race, appearing on NPR, CNN, NBC, ABC, and PBS, among other venues. When they launched in 2007, PolitiFact and the *Post's* Fact Checker

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<sup>84</sup> See e.g. Bill Adair, "Colbert: 'Who are these PolitiFact guys?'" PolitiFact, April 15, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/apr/15/colbert-who-are-these-politifact-guys/> (accessed May 8, 2012); Melissa Siegel, "Halter Questioned On Misleading TV Ad," FactCheck.org, June 8, 2010, <http://www.factcheck.org/2010/06/halter-questioned-on-misleading-tv-ad/> (accessed June 8, 2011).

<sup>85</sup> Author's field notes, February 7, 9, 14, 17, and 18, 2011, and June 15-18, 2011.

quickly joined the media circuit; Bill Adair was especially ubiquitous, making more than 200 on-air guest appearances during PolitiFact's first year alone.<sup>86</sup> Journalists lower on the masthead at both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact (including the latter's state franchises) are also called on by newspapers and broadcast outlets, though not as often as the founders.<sup>87</sup>

These ad hoc relationships may yield longer-term distribution agreements, often pegged to an election season. Thus in 2012, for instance, FactCheck.org items appear regularly in *USA Today* and on co-branded pages at the Huffington Post. Glenn Kessler has fact-checked the Republican presidential debates and the president's State of the Union address on PBS's *Newshour*. PolitiFact meanwhile has an election-coverage feature with NPR, called the "Message Machine," and an ongoing agreement to fact-check ABC's *This Week*. (The results appear on Wednesdays, promoted by both sites.) PolitiFact has also at various points had agreements for its work (via on-air interviews with Bill Adair) to appear on a regular basis on CNN and MSNBC. The organization has pursued similar deals with local TV stations around the country; for the 2012 race, for instance, PolitiFact segments will run on 25 Hearst affiliates. "The Truth-O-Meter makes for great television because it is both lively and substantive," Adair told a TV industry reporter.<sup>88</sup>

Fact-checking also makes "great television" because it is timely news programming that, especially when lifted from a fact-checking site, is very inexpensive to produce. Even under more or less formal distribution deals with another news outlet — which may simply be an

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<sup>86</sup> Spivak, "The Fact-Checking Explosion."

<sup>87</sup> A Nexis search finds that between June, 2007, and the end of 2011, Bill Adair was interviewed or mentioned in 265 broadcast transcripts, Glenn Kessler in 90, Brooks Jackson in 70, and Michael Dobbs in 62. The two most common outlets for these broadcast citations were CNN, at 135, and NPR, with 57. (This is only cursory scan; not all references were authoritative citations, or necessarily have to do with fact-checking.)

agreement to appear regularly to discuss recent fact-checks — no money typically changes hands. The fact-checkers gain a wider audience, and the media outlet receives “content” to fill the daily news hole. “Being stolen or plagiarized is fine with us,” Brooks Jackson told me.<sup>89</sup> At a conference, a political reporter for San Francisco’s KGO-TV joked about how his station began running fact-checks during the 2004 presidential race:

What we were doing was ripping off FactCheck.org. ... We got Brooks to go to the ABC bureau and do an interview with us and explain to us what he was doing and get him to agree to let us take his stories, basically, and put them on the air.<sup>90</sup>

The fact-checkers produce a kind of journalism that wedges very neatly into the modular, slotted programming economy of radio and television news, still the primary source of news for most Americans.<sup>91</sup> Published fact-checks assemble easily into three- to five-minute segments for either live broadcasts or edited, magazine-style pieces. These segments have a highly standardized format, dictated by the need to be balanced. Most run about four minutes and include three or four distinct fact-checks, challenging both contenders in an electoral race, or testing claims from several candidates in a primary debate, for instance. The basic narrative and the research to support it have been supplied by the fact-checking site; all that’s needed is to drop in video or audio clips of politicians making claims. An interview with one of the professional fact-checkers provides context, often in live banter with the host that moves the segment from one claim the next. (See figure 5.1.)

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<sup>88</sup> See Diana Marszalek, “PolitiFact Aims To Boost Local TV Presence,” TVNewsCheck, February 28, 2012, <http://www.tvnewscheck.com/article/57723/politifact-aims-to-boost-local-tv-presence/format/print> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, Washington, DC, December 3, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Matthews (comment at “Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers”).

<sup>91</sup> In a national survey by the Pew Research Center in late 2010, two-thirds of respondents named television as their primary news source; another 16 percent named radio. The Internet and newspapers came in at 41 percent and 31 percent, respectively. See *Internet Gains on Television as Public’s Main News Source* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, January 4, 2011).



Observing some of the behind-the-scenes work involved in arranging and executing these media appearances only reinforced how well-adapted the genre is to today's media landscape. PolitiFact has been especially prolific in promoting its work through broadcast news. Bill Adair delivers on-air fact-checks at least once a week, building a resume that runs from *Morning Edition* to *Nightline*. These fact-checking segments come together very quickly. One case I witnessed yielded a five-minute, live interview, pegged to ongoing budget debates in Washington. A brief email exchange just the day before the interview decided the three Truth-O-Meter items to be featured, on statements by President Obama, House Speaker John Boehner, and presidential contender Donald Trump. The TV network produced a simple, one-page outline listing, in the order they would be discussed, the three speakers, the exact wording of their claims, and PolitiFact's ruling in each case. This was shared with PolitiFact, to make sure the details were accurate, and then used to assemble the graphical elements that would be layered on-screen during Adair's appearance. During the segment, text boxes highlighted the statements being questioned, and an animated Truth-O-Meter — accompanied by a loud buzzer for "False" rulings and siren for "Pants on Fire" — registered each verdict as Adair delivered it. "The Truth-O-Meter is nothing if not equal opportunity," a host intoned, marking the transition from the Democratic president to his Republican antagonists.<sup>92</sup>

This kind of media work depends greatly on tacit knowledge and informal resources. Tacit knowledge refers to skills which are required to accomplish some task, and demonstrably acquired by experience, but nevertheless difficult to precisely articulate.<sup>93</sup> Media work by fact-

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<sup>92</sup> Author's field notes, February 7 and 17, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> A classic example is the ability to ride a bike; the controversial insight has been that this kind of knowledge also informs intellectual endeavors, including those, like scientific inquiry, seen to proceed by the formal articulation of method. The concept originates in Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, and has been developed by H.M Collins, who offered the powerful example (among others) of scientists unable to reproduce a laser design without face-to-face

checkers (and other journalists) is tacit in the double sense that its success depends on know-how that defies easy description and, at an organizational level, in that the necessity of this kind of work is not formally acknowledged. No page in the Truth-O-Meter “owner’s manual” deals with giving a good TV interview, or choosing an appropriate media partner, or weathering the outrage over a controversial fact-check. But media-work skills, perhaps always more relevant to journalism than has been acknowledged, become increasingly important in a world characterized by freelancing, by partnerships, by “cross media” promotion, and by story forms, like fact-checking, assembled from other news stories.

Thus knowing one’s way around a television studio, both on-camera and off, is vital for fact-checkers to participate in the daily news discourse. As I observed on a pair of studio visits, frequent guests are recognized by security, and may even have a valid visitor’s badge from their last visit. They can trade private jokes with other guests about which network has the best “green room.” They know how early to leave for the studio — you don’t want a media appearance to eat up the whole morning, but you absolutely can’t be late. (In this sense going on TV is both serious and not. For a veteran, the experience of live television may become quite casual, but the consequences of error are not.) The programming economy of television and radio news today rewards trusted guests who have the studio experience to participate in assembling stories and segments — often live segments — on the fly. Most important of course is on-screen behavior: the ability to feel comfortable in an empty soundstage talking into a camera; to speak clearly and in short, punchy sound bites; to be well-prepared while seeming natural, with a joke or two at the ready; and to take cues from the anchors. “I know how to hit my lines,” Bill Adair told me.<sup>94</sup>

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contact; see discussion in *Changing Order: Replication and Induction in Scientific Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>94</sup> Author’s field notes, October 17, 2010, and February 7 and 14-17, 2011.

Another crucial resource is the elite fact-checkers' network of relationships with journalists and media executives around DC, built up over long careers. They are embedded in professional networks (which are also personal networks) that affirm and reproduce their status as objective journalists, entrusted by other objective journalists to perform the tricky business of adjudicating factual disputes. As noted in chapter three, the fact-checkers assume the role of testifiers in these media appearances — “Jackson says President Obama was born where he says he was.” These scripts take pains to emphasize that the testimony comes from experienced professional journalists without partisan commitments: “That’s Brooks Jackson, a former senior investigative reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and for CNN itself. He now runs FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan outfit associated with the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Center.”<sup>95</sup> Journalists who cite or quote them reflexively attach the label “nonpartisan” to FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, especially on networks, like NPR and CNN, at pains to assert their own impartiality. A few examples will illustrate this consistent journalistic genuflection:

“The nonpartisan FactCheck.org turned up congressional testimony from just two years ago in which the former speaker said he would still support cap and trade for major polluters...”<sup>96</sup>

“Bill Adair is editor of the nonpartisan fact-checking site PolitiFact, and he joins me in the studio to talk about the film.”<sup>97</sup>

“According to [Viveca Novak of] the nonpartisan FactCheck.org, none of Obama’s votes would have raised taxes on families making \$42,000.”<sup>98</sup>

“We are joined now by Angie Drobnic Holan. She is the Florida editor for PolitiFact.com, which is a nonpartisan fact-checking website.”<sup>99</sup>

“But who would have won that bet between Romney and Perry? The nonpartisan group, FactCheck.org says — *Eugene Kiely, FactCheck.org: ‘Rick Perry would have been wrong.’*”<sup>100</sup>

<sup>95</sup> NPR, *Morning Edition*, “Dobbs’ Focus On Obama Birth Draws Fire To CNN,” July 31, 2009. (See chapter three.)

<sup>96</sup> CNN, *Anderson Cooper 360°*, “Republican Race Heating Up,” December 12, 2011.

<sup>97</sup> NPR, *All Things Considered*, “PolitiFact’s Adair Discusses Accuracy Of Romney Film,” January 13, 2012.

<sup>98</sup> CBS, *CBS Evening News*, “Reality Check,” October 3, 2008.

<sup>99</sup> NPR, *Weekend Edition Sunday*, “Fact-Checking The Florida Mudslinging,” January 29, 2012.

<sup>100</sup> CNN, *Situation Room*, “Fact-Checking Romney’s Bet,” December 12, 2011.

“PolitiFact, which is nonpartisan — both sides tend to agree with its nonpartisan analysis — looked at the very issue of interest on the debt, and they said that if the President’s budget passes, annual spending minus interest will equal annual revenue in 2017.”<sup>101</sup>

That final excerpt comes from an episode mentioned in chapter three. President Obama had given a press conference promising that his new budget would, within a few years, stop adding to the national debt; just hours later PolitiFact ran a 1,200-word Truth-O-Meter item ruling the statement “False.”<sup>102</sup> When the new White House press secretary repeated the claim at a briefing the next morning, ABC’s White House correspondent, Jake Tapper, openly contradicted him. Tapper pressed the point, invoking PolitiFact’s nonpartisan status like a talisman:<sup>103</sup>

Right, but when PolitiFact says it’s false for the President to say that he’s not adding to the debt, it doesn’t matter? This White House is still going to continue to make the claim that you’re not adding to the debt, even when nonpartisan people have looked at it and said you actually are?

Tapper was (and is) a declared ally of the fact-checking movement. He staffed ABC’s “Just the Facts” desk during the 2004 election and has run numerous on-air fact-checks featuring Brooks Jackson or Bill Adair; as interim host of ABC’s *This Week*, he instituted that show’s partnership with PolitiFact. (He has also joined the fact-checkers in conferences and panel discussions about the movement.)<sup>104</sup> But it was essential in the moment of confrontation to invoke PolitiFact’s objective status, to insist that “both sides tend to agree with its nonpartisan

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<sup>101</sup> The White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney,” February 16, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/16/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-2162011> (accessed February 20, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Barack Obama Says White House Budget Would Not Add to the Debt Within a Few Years,” PolitiFact, February 15, 2011 (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>103</sup> The simile of course is Gaye Tuchman’s: “Attacked for a controversial presentation of ‘facts,’ newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits.” Tuchman, “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen’s Notions of Objectivity,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 660–679. In this case the official, not the “newsman,” is being attacked; but I would suggest that invoking objectivity is still a *defensive* strategy in the journalistically controversial move of contradicting official facts.

<sup>104</sup> Tapper began doing fact-checks at ABC during the 2004 presidential race, and often featured Brooks Jackson as a guest. Like other fact-checkers he has pointed to the “Swift Boat” attacks on John Kerry as a journalistic turning

analysis.” (More precisely, each “side” agrees with some of its analyses, and rarely the same ones.) It goes without saying that Tapper would not have cited — that no correspondent for an elite news outlet would cite — an openly political source such as Media Matters or the Media Research Council to contradict something the president said.

This was a rare coup, the clearest example I witnessed of fact-checking work being deployed — face-to-face, at the White House no less, in room filled with top Washington reporters — to undercut a public claim at the very moment of utterance. When news of the exchange reached PolitiFact, the office was fairly jubilant. Work broke off for a few moments. Somebody suggested publishing a note about the episode, as both PolitiFact and FactCheck.org have done on similar occasions, but this time the idea was dismissed as too self-congratulatory. A staffer joked that it would sound a little desperate, like declaring, “Look! We matter!” But the professional fact-checkers *do* want to matter, and the most tangible evidence that they do comes in being cited and quoted and interviewed by prominent media outlets.<sup>105</sup>

The ability to matter in this way, to be cited by elite journalists in high-profile contexts, depends on the fact-checkers’ status as objective journalists. This status is reflected in *and shaped by* their media profile, that is, in the network of places and people who cite and link to them. It is a matter of formal declarations and mission statements; of peer recognition in the form of professional awards, media partnerships, and etc.; but also of these countless individual endorsements and affirmations. “The nonpartisan group, FactCheck.org, says...”

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point. See PBS, *Newshour*, “Fact Checking in the 2004 Presidential Debates,” October 21, 2004; “Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers.”

<sup>105</sup> Author’s field notes, February 16, 2011.

The elite fact-checkers cultivate their own media profiles, through conscious choices as well as automatic or unthinking ones. Just as they avoid partisan sources (except certain establishment think tanks) in their own research, the fact-checkers seek exposure in outlets which will burnish their own claim to objectivity. They boast about a “hit” in the *Times* but care little for traffic from Media Matters, which routinely promotes work by the fact-checking sites. They prefer interviews at CNN and the three traditional broadcast networks to Fox News and MSNBC, which have (very deliberate) partisan profiles. One fact-checker told me he will do the “daytime” news shows at the last two networks, but never the evening “political” programs hosted by pundits such as Bill O’Reilly and Rachel Maddow. I also heard that in choosing broadcast partners, concerns about political identification may trump even strong preferences in terms of production values and technical expertise. That is, producing the most professional and best-executed fact-checking segments does not make a network the best campaign partner, if it is generally associated with a liberal or conservative viewpoint.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, it should be stressed that these concerns and preferences — of the fact-checkers as well as the news outlets who cite them — color their *actual* media profiles in dramatic fashion. This is immediately and intuitively clear, I think, to anyone who pays attention to the wider fact-checking milieu: The kinds of media people and places that talk to or about various organizations engaged in some kind of fact-checking differ sharply, and along clearly political lines. Simply put, the elite fact-checkers are mentioned most often by their professional peers, while partisan media venues pay disproportionate attention to partisan fact-checkers — though not only to like-minded ones. These differences showed up unmistakably in a pair of analyses comparing the

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<sup>106</sup> Author’s field notes, February 14 and 16, 2011, and June 6 and 8, 2011.

media footprints of different fact-checkers and media critics on broadcast news outlets, and across the blogosphere.

One content analysis examined the footprint of various fact-checkers and media critics on television and radio news broadcasts.<sup>107</sup> These were not necessarily authoritative citations. The analysis simply tallied the number of broadcast transcripts on networks in the LexisNexis database which, over a four-year period, included at least one reference to one of four organizations: FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, the left-identified Media Matters, and the conservative NewsBusters (or its parent organization, the Media Research Center). References could take any form, from an on-air interview in an adwatch segment to a cursory (or even hostile) reference from a news anchor or guest.

The results confirmed first of all that none of these sites were strangers to the broadcast news universe, and that the elite, objective fact-checkers do not always cut the highest profile. Some 514 shows (or show segments) in the transcript database referred to Media Matters, 457 to PolitiFact, and 247 to FactCheck.org. NewsBusters had a much smaller broadcast footprint in this period, appearing in 69 segments. (See figure 5.2.) But the differences in media profile were striking. FactCheck.org and PolitiFact both received the lion's share of their attention from networks that position themselves as non-partisan, such as CNN and NPR. (About one-fifth of their total mentions occurred on Fox News or MSNBC, self-identified as conservative and liberal, respectively.)

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<sup>107</sup> This analysis was carried out by the author under a research fellowship with the New America Foundation. It relied on sources included in the LexisNexis "news transcripts" category, between January 2008 and November 2011. A version of this discussion, written by the author, appeared in Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer, *The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012: An Overview*.

The pattern was reversed for the two partisan media-criticism sites. The conservative NewsBusters received two-thirds of its attention from the partisan news networks; nearly half of its mentions occurred on Fox News. The effect was even more dramatic for the “progressive” Media Matters, with 70 percent of its mentions on either Fox News or MSNBC. Interestingly, it received even more attention from the conservative network than the liberal one. Fox News accounted for nearly a third of all mentions — assuredly negative ones — of the liberal media critics, who dedicate most of their effort to debunking misinformation presented on Fox News.<sup>108</sup>

A social network analysis of online discourse about fact-checking reached a similar conclusion. This analysis of a “semantic slice” of the blogosphere is complex, and discussed in detail in a separate report.<sup>109</sup> In brief, however, it revealed a conversational network that is both very political and highly polarized — though various fact-checking sites occupy very different positions within it.

The three elite fact-checkers — FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the *Washington Post*’s Fact Checker — are heavily linked to from blog clusters concerned with politics, policy, law, journalism, and etc., including prominent partisan voices on the right and left. (In contrast, the general-interest fact-checker Snopes.com, which mainly debunks chain emails and “urban myths,” receives much more interest from non-political clusters of bloggers.) Despite being involved in highly political conversation, though, the elite fact-checkers appear near the center of the discourse network’s left-right axis. (See figure 5.3.) They enjoy high attention from centrist or nonpartisan political voices online, and relatively balanced attention from progressives and

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<sup>108</sup> Though the analysis did not code for the valence of the citation, a scan of several dozen individual mentions of Media Matters on Fox News found that all were negative.

<sup>109</sup> This analysis was commissioned by the New America Foundation and designed by the author in collaboration with Dr John Kelly of Morningside Analytics, which produced the network maps referred to using a proprietary



conservatives online. FactCheck.org and PolitiFact in particular penetrate deeply into both the liberal and conservative hemispheres, and into the wider blogging world as well.

In contrast, partisan fact-checkers and media critics receive much less balanced attention in the blogosphere, and consequently are located in the extreme left and right of the discourse network. Media Matters is an influential site, comparable to PolitiFact and FactCheck.org in terms of inbound links. However, the lion's share of its attention comes from bloggers on the left of the political spectrum. Meanwhile the Media Research Center and its NewsBusters site emerge clearly as the conservative counterparts to Media Matters. Though they draw less attention overall, an even greater share of that attention comes from the right side of the spectrum.

These results suggest that being objective matters. Measured by their media footprints, the elite, journalistic fact-checkers enjoy broader reach in public discourse both online and off, and far greater influence in elite, establishment media, than their partisan counterparts. (The latter appear to engage mainly their ideological fellow travelers and their opponents; this of course can be considered a different kind of influence.) But “being objective” here must be understood to include more than a set of recognized professional practices, more than newswork. It also includes the media work that goes into shaping media profiles, and into building and maintaining networks that certify and reproduce the fact-checkers claim to objectivity. An open question is how stable is this status — whether the controversies that fact-checking journalism invites can alter the media profile of these journalists in ways beyond their control and which might begin to alter their network position and unwind the relationships that reproduce their status.

## Fact-checkers and politics

Fact-checking is a provocative kind of journalism. Fact-checkers pluck a statement from the news, analyze it, and turn the result into a new news story — one that judges the statement and, at least implicitly, its speaker. These journalists never call anyone a liar. (That would require knowing someone’s heart, fact-checkers say. The word “lie” characterizes a speaker, not just a statement.)<sup>110</sup> But all three sites flirt with the accusation, awarding “Pinocchios” and “Pants on Fire” verdicts, and compiling annual lists of the biggest “whoppers.” “If you give them a ‘Pants on Fire,’ you are essentially saying they are a liar,” I heard at a training session. “It’ll take some getting used to.”<sup>111</sup>

Though playful, these designations underscore the willingness to *criticize* that fact-checking shares with so-called “opinion journalism,” and which sets the genre apart from conventional political reporting. The difference between “objective” reporters and editorialists or opinion columnists is sometimes naively treated as one of subject matter — the former report hard facts while the latter ply a murkier trade, dispensing a substance that is less stable. Everyday usage likens opinion to something conjectural or speculative, the opposite of fact. (This is of course a poor description of the work produced by many opinion journalists, which may involve more factual investigation and “shoe-leather” reporting that everyday dispatches from the campaign trail.)<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Brooks Jackson, interview by author, December 3, 2010; Glenn Kessler interviewed in *Talk of the Nation*, “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire.”

<sup>111</sup> Author’s field notes, June 15, 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Consider for instance the work of *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff, whose 2006 Pulitzer Prize for “commentary” cited “his graphic, deeply reported columns that, at personal risk, focused attention on genocide in Darfur and that gave voice to the voiceless in other parts of the world.” See biography at <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/oped/columnists/nicholasdkristof/index.html> (accessed June 19, 2012).

Members of the profession treat the distinction differently. Opinion in journalism's actual division of labor means something closer to argument or to critique, a factual treatment invoking normative values.<sup>113</sup> Articles on the Op-Ed page may gather facts in service of building a case, evaluating a policy, making an endorsement, or dispensing political criticism. By this professional logic, fact-checking paradoxically qualifies as a kind of opinion journalism. The *New York Times*' public editor, Arthur Brisbane, has asked readers whether the newspaper should become a "truth-vigilante" and start to challenge, in routine news reports, false or misleading statements by politicians.<sup>114</sup> As an example Brisbane pointed to a recent piece of fact-checking by a *Times* columnist (about a claim the fact-checking sites had also firmly debunked):

[O]n the campaign trail, Mitt Romney often says President Obama has made speeches "apologizing for America," a phrase to which Paul Krugman objected in a December 23 column arguing that politics has advanced to the "post-truth" stage.

As an Op-Ed columnist, Mr. Krugman clearly has the freedom to call out what he thinks is a lie. My question for readers is: should news reporters do the same? ... And if so, how can The Times do this in a way that is objective and fair?

Readers responded overwhelmingly in the affirmative. They also called the question ridiculous, and objected to the premise that testing *facts* is the natural province of *opinion* writers.<sup>115</sup> As one wrote: "Mr. Brisbane's view of the job of op-ed columnist vs that of reporters seems skewed. /It is the job of columnist to present opinion and viewpoint, and to persuade. It is the job of reporters to present facts, as best as they can determine them." This is the naive, lay view referred to above: Being objective consists in adjudicating factual debates, in declaring who's right and who isn't. As another respondent wrote, "Objective sometimes isn't fair."

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<sup>113</sup> Thus Michael Schudson has written that the "objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values, and report only the facts." See "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism* 2, no. 2 (2001): 149.

<sup>114</sup> Artur Brisbane, "Should The Times Be a Truth Vigilante?", Public Editor's Journal (blog), *New York Times*, January 12, 2012, <http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/should-the-times-be-a-truth-vigilante/> (accessed January 12, 2012).

But the objectivity norm as practiced by reporters resists making factual challenges to official claims.<sup>116</sup> It resists argument, even factual argument, about controversial issues that are the subject of public debate. Fact-checking troubles journalistic objectivity because it criticizes in a way that can be seen to take sides. Consider then-editor Bill Keller's rationale for refusing to describe water-boarding as torture in the pages of the *Times*, though the paper had routinely called it that before the US took up the practice: "When using a word amounts to taking sides in a political dispute, our general practice is to supply the readers with the information to decide for themselves."<sup>117</sup> Of course, people disagree about whether the label applies; the point is those questions weren't raised when journalists applied it, uncontroversially, to water-boarding by foreign governments. Protestations from Chinese officials don't count as a "political dispute" in the same way. (This may be one reason for the freedom foreign correspondents enjoy to be more interpretive, discussed previously. Quite simply, it is uncontroversial to take sides in another nation's politics.)

In a follow-up article about fact-checking, the *Times*' public editor came out in favor of including more of it in the newspaper, but called for moderation: "Ubiquitous *argument* in straight news articles is not the way to go." He quoted then-executive editor Jill Abramson worrying that if the paper engaged in the practice too reflexively, "our readers would find the

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<sup>115</sup> See discussion in Lucas Graves, "Digging Deeper Into the New York Times' Fact-Checking Faux Pas," Nieman Journalism Lab, January 18, 2012, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2012/01/digging-deeper-into-the-new-york-times-fact-checking-faux-pas/> (accessed January 18, 2012).

<sup>116</sup> A classic example, cited by Gaye Tuchman, is national coverage of a massive 1969 oil spill off of the coast of California. Journalists faithfully relayed President Nixon's on-site declaration that a Santa Barbara beach was clean, though every reporter present could see that it wasn't. Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester, "Accidental News: The Great Oil Spill as Local Occurrence and National Event," *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 2 (1975): 235–260; cited in *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 83.

<sup>117</sup> Then-editor Bill Keller quoted in Brian Stelter, "Study of Waterboarding Coverage Prompts a Debate in the Press," Media Decoder (blog), *New York Times*, July 2, 2010, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/02/study-of-waterboarding-coverage-prompts-a-debate-in-the-press/> (accessed October 15, 2011). See also Graves, "Digging Deeper Into the New York Times' Fact-Checking Faux Pas."

Times was being tendentious” and see it “as a *combatant*, not as an arbiter of what the facts were.”<sup>118</sup> Objectivity here becomes a matter not just of truth, but of neutrality. The objectivity of the noncombatant is defined with respect to the warring parties.

These concerns help to illuminate the tenuous, straddling position occupied by the professional fact-checkers, accused daily of being “combatants” and not neutral arbiters of fact. These journalists insist that theirs is an especially demanding and more truly objective kind of reporting. Fact-checkers see themselves as objective reporters, not editorialists. They are treated that way by many of their peers, while others keep fact-checking at arm’s length. But their work is always contentious, and as a result the material position they occupy in political discourse matches more closely that of a blogger or an Op-Ed columnist.

As we have seen in case after case, fact-checking articles provoke heated reactions from readers, bloggers, journalists, pundits, and sometimes directly from political figures. Some responses take place behind the scenes. (Kessler noted that the White House seemed to have become less cooperative in providing backup information: “Maybe they feel like they’ve gotten burned too many times.”)<sup>119</sup> But to much greater extent than would have been the case one or two decades ago, this media-political discourse takes place in the open. The back-and-forth between fact-checkers and their critics is archived in a tangle of links across news sites and blogs and comments pages.<sup>120</sup> Discussion begets more discussion; alliances form, positions harden,

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<sup>118</sup> Arthur Brisbane, “Keeping Them Honest,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012, sec. Opinion / Sunday Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/opinion/sunday/keeping-them-honest.html> (accessed January 21, 2012). Italics added.

<sup>119</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

<sup>120</sup> For instance, every blow in Rachel Maddow’s “feud” with PolitiFact has been documented in real time by media-and-politics sites such as Politico, Mediaite, Business Insider, the Huffington Post, and even the *Washington Post*; the liberal pundit has her own subsection on PolitiFact’s Wikipedia page. For a review see Dylan Byers, “Why is Maddow Obsessed with PolitiFact?”, Politico, May 11, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2012/05/why-is-maddow-obsessed-with-politifact-123170.html> (accessed June 19, 2012).

new voices are pulled into the fray. These mediated controversies become news facts in their own right, worthy of analysis pieces — “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire” — in elite news outlets such as NPR and the *New York Times*.<sup>121</sup>

To criticize publicly is to invite a critical response, and thus to risk becoming engaged in a political argument. One way to understand fact-checking is as a journalism adapted to taking sides, to dispensing political criticism and weathering the responses it provokes. Many of the specific practices that set these organizations apart from other news outlets, reviewed in chapters three and four, can be read through this lens. Fact-checkers abandon the race to break news, and accept a role always at least a beat behind the news cycle. They try to check “both sides” without succumbing to artificial balance. Fact-checkers give up political access and commit to using only public sources of information. They devote thousands of words to analyzing even simple claims, and show all of their work, insisting that “even if you don’t agree with every call we make, our research and analysis helps you sort out what’s true in political discourse.”<sup>122</sup>

Fact-checkers anticipate criticism and develop reflexes for trying to defuse it. “We’re going to make the best calls we can, in a pretty gutsy form of journalism,” Bill Adair told NPR. “And when we do, I think it’s natural that the people on one side or the other of this very partisan world we live in are going to be unhappy.”<sup>123</sup> One strategy is to responding only minimally or in carefully chosen venues, and always asserting their balance, often by showing the criticism they receive from the other side of the spectrum. “There are people that write ... ‘what is this radical conservative doing writing a fact-check column for the *Washington Post*?’” Glenn Kessler said in

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<sup>121</sup> *Talk of the Nation*, “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire”; *All Things Considered*, “With ‘Lie of the Year’ Controversy, Fact Checking Comes Under Scrutiny.”

<sup>122</sup> Bill Adair quoted in Dylan Byers, “PolitiFact Without the ‘Truth-O-Meter,’” *Politico*, February 16, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2012/02/politifact-without-the-truthometer-114704.html> (accessed May 8, 2012).

TV interview. “And then there are things like Power Line or the *Weekly Standard* that say I’m part of some liberal agenda to dominate the political discourse.”

And yet fact-checkers are unwilling to take sides when that means assigning blame for major political controversies. They see the world through the lens of two political parties which subscribe to incompatible ideologies, and which routinely and equally distort the truth in order to demonize one another. As in the example that opened this chapter, about the debt-ceiling debate, questions about systemic political biases or blame receive a familiar journalistic response: “That’s a matter of opinion.”<sup>124</sup> All of the elite fact-checkers, in interviews or public forums, will follow an example involving one party with an example from the other side, or at least a reflexive disclaimer: “And I should note that both sides do this.”<sup>125</sup>

This balancing frame applies even to the egregious distortions that have become enshrined in fact-checking’s origin narrative. It is impossible not to notice that the signal cases, mentioned over and over in articles and at conferences about fact-checking, come from the Republican side: the “Tank” and “Weekend Passes” (a.k.a. “Willie Horton”) ads against Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis in 1988; the “Swift Boat” attacks against Democrat John Kerry in 2004; Zell Miller’s fiery speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention; and more recent, outlandish claims, like “birther” rumors about President Obama or Sarah Palin’s rhetoric about “death panels.” Miller’s speech came up several times at the fact-checking conference I helped to organize. “I actually went to the editors and said, ‘This is crazy stuff, let me write a big front page story,’” the *Post*’s Glenn Kessler recalled. He continued:

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<sup>123</sup> *All Things Considered*, “With ‘Lie of the Year’ Controversy, Fact Checking Comes Under Scrutiny.”

<sup>124</sup> *On the Media*, “Fact Checking the Debt Ceiling Debate.”

<sup>125</sup> “Q&A with Glenn Kessler,” *Q&A*, C-SPAN, January 15, 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/303324-1> (accessed April 18, 2012).

But then I got like a screaming phone call from the campaign manager for Bush, [who] said, “Why the hell did you assholes [not] do this for Kerry?” Which was a very good question, you know, because *Kerry was just as bad* as the Republicans.<sup>126</sup> [italics added]

The “Swift Boat” campaign has been brought up still more often as an inspiration for fact-checking. “I think the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth is really what caused the rebirth or certainly the explosion of fact-checks that’s now taking place,” one journalist commented after the 2004 race, echoing a now-common sentiment. Attendees at a 2007 conference on fact-checking saw video clips of ABC’s Jake Tapper investigating the “Swift Boat” attacks. In his remarks Tapper discussed his work on the attacks — and then pivoted to an example of an exaggeration by the Kerry campaign.<sup>127</sup>

But did the two parties distort the truth equally during what was called the “Year of the Fact Check”?<sup>128</sup> Was Kerry “just as bad as the Republicans?” One prominent Washington journalist drew sharp criticism that year for an internal memo, leaked to the conservative Drudge Report, arguing that the press should not pretend the Democrats had been as nasty or deceptive as their opponents.<sup>129</sup> Tapper was asked the question directly in an interview just before the 2004 election: “What do you do ... if in fact one side has been much more egregious in its distortions or exaggerations or misstatements than the other? ... [D]o you achieve some sort of balance and, if so, is it an artificial balance?” “Well, that’s a complicated question,” he responded, arguing that if Republican attacks were worse initially, the Democrats had quickly caught up. Tapper continued,

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<sup>126</sup> Glenn Kessler (comment at “Fact-Checking in the News”).

<sup>127</sup> Comments at “Pants on Fire: Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers.”

<sup>128</sup> Lori Robertson, “Campaign Trail Veterans for Truth,” *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2005, <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=3784> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> The journalist was Mark Halperin, then political director for ABC News. See Robertson, “Campaign Trail Veterans for Truth.”



You don't want to be equating a minor misstatement that one candidate says with a huge whopper that another makes, but if both candidates are sayings falsehoods, *which is generally the case*, you try to provide ... a balanced look.<sup>130</sup> [italics added]

These questions came to a head in striking fashion during my fieldwork at PolitiFact. As noted, the fact-checking site places real emphasis on its historical database, which allows readers to look up the overall Truth-O-Meter scorecard for various politicians, pundits, and political groups. As a matter of policy the site does *not* aggregate results by political party — but these calculations are easy for outsiders to make. In early 2011, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota, on his blog, tallied all of the more than 500 Truth-O-Meter rulings issued during the previous 13 months.<sup>131</sup> The analysis found that PolitiFact checked statements by Republicans and Democrats at roughly the same rate. But Republican politicians fared far worse in the results, earning “False” and “Pants on Fire” rulings more than three times as often; 39 percent of Republican statements fell into the two lowest categories, compared to just 12 percent for Democrats. In all, the Grand Old Party accounted for three-quarters of “False” and “Pants on Fire” verdicts issued to current and former officeholders.

The post fairly exploded across the Web, and was the subject of immediate concern in PolitiFact's office. Two possible explanations existed for statistics inclined so dramatically against one party. One interpretation, offered by the political scientist who performed the analysis and quickly taken up by conservative media critics, was that PolitiFact must be biased in choosing claims to check. “These findings beg the central unanswered question, and that is what is the process by which PolitiFact selects the statements that it ultimately grades?” the post asked. It concluded, “By levying 23 Pants on Fire ratings to Republicans over the past year

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<sup>130</sup> *Newshour*, “Fact Checking in the 2004 Presidential Debates.”

compared to just 4 to Democrats, it appears the sport of choice is game hunting — and the game is elephants.” Outlets from the conservative *Weekly Standard* to the *New York Times* have cited the study as evidence of a possible fact-checking tilt against Republicans.<sup>132</sup>

The alternative explanation was that the results revealed an actual bias in political behavior — that members of the two US political parties do not always lie at the same rate, or in the same way. Though the original analysis barely acknowledged this possibility, many observers took the results as clear evidence that Republicans are worse offenders when it comes to political deception and exaggeration. An article in the *Nation* argued, “After all, there is another possibility: the left just might be right more often (or the right, wrong more often), and the fact-checkers simply too competent not to reflect this — at least over long periods.”<sup>133</sup> The author, a well-known liberal observer of the fact-checking scene, conducted a parallel analysis of “Pinocchios” issued by the *Washington Post*’s Fact Checker. He found that Republicans fared worse on average and, notably, that they received “four-Pinocchio” ratings — reserved for the most egregious falsehoods — at twice the rate of Democrats. The piece concluded,

I don’t expect the fact-checkers to stop trying to be bipartisan — or to stop calling out Democrats when they deserve it. Still, the real message of their work may best be captured in a line by Stephen Colbert: “Reality has a well-known liberal bias.”

The fact-checkers themselves have strenuously avoided this interpretation. Glenn Kessler’s own end-of-year analysis of “Pinocchios” awarded in 2011 found Democrats did better by a small margin, and attributed the difference to the Republican presidential primaries. (“We are

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<sup>131</sup> Eric Ostermeier, “Selection Bias? PolitiFact Rates Republican Statements as False at 3 Times the Rate of Democrats,” Smart Politics (blog), February 10, 2011, [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2011/02/selection\\_bias\\_politifact\\_rate.php](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2011/02/selection_bias_politifact_rate.php) (accessed February 11, 2011).

<sup>132</sup> Mark Hemingway, “Lies, Damned Lies, and ‘Fact Checking,’” *Weekly Standard*, December 19, 2011, [http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/lies-damned-lies-and-fact-checking\\_611854.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/lies-damned-lies-and-fact-checking_611854.html) (accessed May 8, 2012); Brisbane, “Keeping Them Honest.”

<sup>133</sup> Chris Mooney, “Reality Bites Republicans,” *Nation*, June 4, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/167930/reality-bites-republicans#> (accessed May 8, 2012).

looking at you, Rep. Bachmann,” he wrote.)<sup>134</sup> But Kessler has stressed repeatedly that he sees no consistent difference based on party: “I pay little attention to whether I am rating Democrats or Republicans, believing the numbers average out over time. My own experience, after three decades of covering Washington politicians, is that both sides will spin the facts if they think it will give them a political advantage.”<sup>135</sup> In an interview Kessler gave me a very precise formulation:

What I believe is that both parties are equal in terms of willingness to manipulate statistics if they believe it will advance their political interests. Now, like I said, *I’m not making a judgement as to whether or not one party does it more than the other* — it’s just a question of, when faced with the decision of whether they should manipulate the statistics or not, they will do it in equal measure. ...

The only difference I see is that the Democrats seem to get more angry when you question their willingness to do this than Republicans, which I attribute to the fact that Democrats kind of believe reporters should be more on their side, and Republicans believe the mainstream media is just against them all the time, so they don’t have that expectation.<sup>136</sup> [italics added]

PolitiFact has been very reluctant to weigh in on the debate over its aggregate results. The political scientist’s analysis caused a real stir in the office the day it was posted. PolitiFact’s basic methodology was being thrown into question, and everybody understood that critics would seize upon the results. Staffers joked that the previous week the site had been under assault from liberals, angered by a series of rulings in favor of Wisconsin’s combative Republican governor; now conservatives would join the fray. PolitiFact’s staff clearly felt confident in their procedures and did not take the analysis to reveal any pervasive selection bias. At the same time, in my observation at least, the fact-checkers did not gravitate to the other interpretation — although it

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<sup>134</sup> Glenn Kessler, “One Year of Fact Checking — an Accounting.”

<sup>135</sup> Mooney, “Reality Bites Republicans”; see also Kessler’s comments in *Talk of the Nation*, “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire.”

<sup>136</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

validated their work.<sup>137</sup> Adair has frankly acknowledged the stark choice framed by the debate as it played out online:

That prompted a really interesting discussion in the blogosphere: Either we're biased or Republicans lie more, *depending on your point of view*. But I want, as much as possible, to stay out of that analysis business and focus on giving others the data points that they can use to make those sort of sweeping interpretations.<sup>138</sup> [italics added]

The controversy over PolitiFact's statistics has continued to surface, and was revived with the outraged response to the site's 2011 "Lie of the Year" selection, discussed in chapter four. A related question is why PolitiFact itself refuses to sort Truth-O-Meter statistics by party, though the site aggregates data for readers in other ways — by speaker, by topic, etc. The responses to these questions inevitably invoke the group's role as an objective observer. "People crunch our data various ways. They find what they want to find," Bill Adair told a class of journalism students, arguing that PolitiFact, as umpire, should stay out of those debates: "You don't ask an umpire for commentary on the Rays-Yankees game. ... You want the umpire focused on making calls." He developed that metaphor further at the 2011 fact-checking conference:

*The question of trends is tricky for us. ... People will ask, you know, who lies more, Republicans or Democrats, and I say, that's like asking an umpire who's out at home more, the Yankees or the Red Sox — well, you know, it just depends on the play. So I think as fact-checkers, as journalists, I think our fundamental role is to make the determination on an individual claim — is it true, is it false, is it somewhere in between — and so we don't engage too much in that sort of speculation.*<sup>139</sup> [italics added]

It has been easy for critics to read the fact-checkers' tentative approach to the question of systemic bias in the US political arena as simply another case of artificial balance and misplaced

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<sup>137</sup> Author's field notes, February 10-11, 2011, and June 15, 2011.

<sup>138</sup> Bill Adair (comment at "Fact-Checking in the News").

<sup>139</sup> Bill Adair (comment at "Fact-Checking in the News").

objectivity among professional journalists.<sup>140</sup> (One liberal observer coined the term “He Lied/She Lied” to describe “false equivalence” in fact-checking.)<sup>141</sup> That is a crude analysis but not an altogether incorrect one, in this sense: The same concerns that generally inhibit political argument and criticism in traditional news reports, restrain *particular* arguments and *certain* kinds of critique by fact-checkers. That this is true despite their deliberate and, I think, very sincere commitment to a journalism that rejects a false practice of objectivity tells us something important. It should prompt a more probing analysis, one that understands the fact-checkers’ practice of objectivity as a function of their novel position in relation to their peers and to the political sphere they operate in. This sort of analysis in turn may cast new light on the traditional practice of objectivity.

Fact-checking groups have developed and gradually refined both a professional discourse and a set of concrete journalistic practices adapted to the task of adjudicating politically contested facts. They dispense political critique in every article they publish. Nevertheless they resist, to the point of awkwardness, what might be called “meta” critique, even when that emerges from their own work: *The question of trends is tricky for us*. As suggested at the outset of this chapter, the fact-checkers’ practice of objectivity is shaped and constrained by three factors which the intervening discussion has hopefully clarified.

The first factor is a formal commitment to approach factual questions with an open mind, which creates certain categories of what might be called forbidden knowledge. Fact-checkers take seriously the need to treat each statement they investigate in isolation, following the same

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<sup>140</sup> See e.g. Dylan Otto Krider, “A Fact Not Even PolitiFact Can Spin: Conservatives More Wrong, More Often,” Intersection (blog), May 23, 2012, <http://scienceprogressaction.org/intersection/2012/05/a-fact-not-even-politifact-can-spin-conservatives-more-wrong-more-often/> (accessed June 29, 2012).

<sup>141</sup> Paul Waldman, “He Lied/She Lied,” *American Prospect*, <http://prospect.org/article/he-liedshe-lied/> (accessed May 8, 2012).

procedures regardless of who the speaker is and what his or her record looks like. Even student interns at FactCheck.org are told they must “be able to think independently and set aside any partisan biases.” Fact-checkers are as we have seen a species of practical epistemologists, whose work runs up continually against the bounds of objective analysis of political questions. Even as they claim formally to make decisive factual determinations, they are forced to acknowledge that “the truth is not black and white,” that “facts can be subjective,” and that people can reasonably disagree with their factual conclusions. They see daily how political framing shapes factual interpretation. This day-to-day work only reinforces their sensitivity to staking general positions which may color their analysis of individual claims.

This is one way the “question of trends” is tricky. If Republicans (or Democrats) mislead more often or more egregiously, over some period of time or in general, fact-checkers would prefer not to know that, not to think about it, and certainly not to make tracking the party differential their primary mission, which might affect not only the way they are perceived but the way they approach their work. “We don’t keep score by party because we want our selection to be based on what’s timely and relevant to our readers — not on false balance that tries to make sure each side gets an equal number of Pants on Fire ratings,” Bill Adair has said.<sup>142</sup> As stressed in chapter four, fact-checkers admit that their work is not truly scientific. But they nevertheless adopt the language of experimental method and try to model it roughly in their work. This includes the notion that certain knowledge can corrupt, that certain positionality is out of bounds for the neutral observer. Glenn Kessler told me,

In the position I’m in, I don’t feel comfortable trying to make a judgment there. ... I *just can’t be in a position to say* one side or the other is more keenly willing to ignore

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<sup>142</sup> Brisbane, “Keeping Them Honest.”

facts, particularly when I'm confronted with many examples of both sides being willing to ignore facts.<sup>143</sup>

That response also hints at a second factor: how their day-to-day participation in a contentious media-political discourse shapes the fact-checkers practice of objectivity. Professional fact-checkers have abundant, real-world models of what they consider to be politically framed fact-checking. Being objective means, in one sense, behaving differently than people or groups with obvious agendas. Every day brings examples of the tendentious, one-sided analysis that their professional identification tells them to avoid. Their aversion to ideological framing is only reinforced by the vehement reactions their own work provokes among readers or pundits who refuse to accept arguments that cut against their politics.

More than that, the immediate experience of fact-checking work may defy the observation that one party lies more or more egregiously. Trends are tricky because fact-checkers encounter absurd claims day in and day out, from well-known politicians and unknown ones, in presidential contests and state primary races. As shown in chapter four, statements are assessed not in arid isolation but in their actual, mediated political context — as vulgar, fear-mongering television advertisements, or bald stump-speech distortions repeated over and over until they no longer yield political advantage. At this textural level, the more meaningful observation to professional fact-checkers is not that Republicans average more “Pinocchios,” but that politicians as a rule lie and distort grossly. (“No-one is pure as [the] driven snow here,” Kessler said in a radio interview.)<sup>144</sup> As we have seen, fact-checkers cultivate a familiar journalistic cynicism and have low expectations for political behavior and for their own impact on it.

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<sup>143</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.

<sup>144</sup> *Talk of the Nation*, “Political Fact-Checking Under Fire.”

Finally, fact-checkers' practice of objectivity reflects a constant, reflexive attention to their own position in US media-political networks. Though they are accused daily — as they always point out — of being partisans for the left or the right, these novel news outlets enjoy, for now, real purchase in public discourse. They have the attention of national politicians in the White House and on Capitol Hill. Their work appears in newspapers and news broadcasts around the country, including the most elite national news sources. They win top professional honors for leading what is often called a new movement in journalism, one that directly challenges their own peers. The “question of trends” is tricky because the fact-checkers' purchase in public discourse depends on protecting their nonpartisan status. Fact-checking organizations resist systemic political critiques — assigning blame to one party, or simply characterizing discourse on the left and the right as significantly different — in part because such critiques can erode the status that allows them to issue individual factual judgments. They acknowledge this more or less directly; as Glenn Kessler told me,

If I were to suddenly make a judgement and say, ‘Aha, this side is just totally off their rocker,’ then it completely undercuts my credibility in terms of being what I try to be, which is a really neutral arbiter.<sup>145</sup>

What a journalist describes as a question of credibility with readers can also be seen in terms of network position, where that is understood in the broadest sense: as the fabric of individual and institutional relationships, involved in daily routines of newswork and media work, which manifest and reproduce professional status. The notion that journalists' practices of objectivity are embedded in real-world relations — business, political, professional, etc. — is not new. Observers of journalism have pointed out that what counts as objective reporting varies in practice with the status or power of the subject; thus for instance the unusually strict rule,

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<sup>145</sup> Glenn Kessler, interview by author, telephone, April 18, 2012.



famously applied during the *Washington Post*'s reporting on Watergate, that required two independent sources confirming every asserted fact.<sup>146</sup>

The Watergate example also highlights the essentially *defensive* nature of the claim to objectivity and the specific practices that constitute it. The objectivity norm as it developed in American journalism during the twentieth century has been seen as defensive in two ways: in a historical-cultural register, where journalistic objectivity is a kind of epistemological fall-back position, a professional accommodation to a rising distrust of public reason; and in the specific sense that the routines of objective journalism reflect the potential threats to journalists and the organizations they work for.<sup>147</sup> That is, what journalists do to establish facts, and the kinds of things that qualify as reportable fact, depend greatly on what external actors — especially political actors — can do to them in response.<sup>148</sup>

This defensive frame applies to fact-checkers' practice of objectivity, but with differences that reflect the unusual kind of journalism they produce and, relatedly, broader changes in the media system. Fact-checkers matter in public life, to the extent they do, in a very particular way. They affect the political realm not through Watergate-style exposes but via thousands of small factual interventions that percolate across a news environment increasingly characterized by intermedia ties and effects. Their journalism propagates by partnerships and interviews and countless individual acts of appropriation and promotion. Like many of their peers today, fact-

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<sup>146</sup> Tuchman, *Making News*, 85.

<sup>147</sup> Michael Schudson makes the historical-cultural argument in *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (Basic Books, 1978).

<sup>148</sup> This defensive view has been advanced most fully by Gaye Tuchman, who pointed to journalists' institutional fear of drawing criticism or even lawsuits from the subjects of their stories; "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity"; see also *Making News*. Herb Gans found the threat of libel suits to be less significant in the news organizations he studied, but also saw potential criticism as a primary factor in the application of the objectivity norm. In *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 185-6.

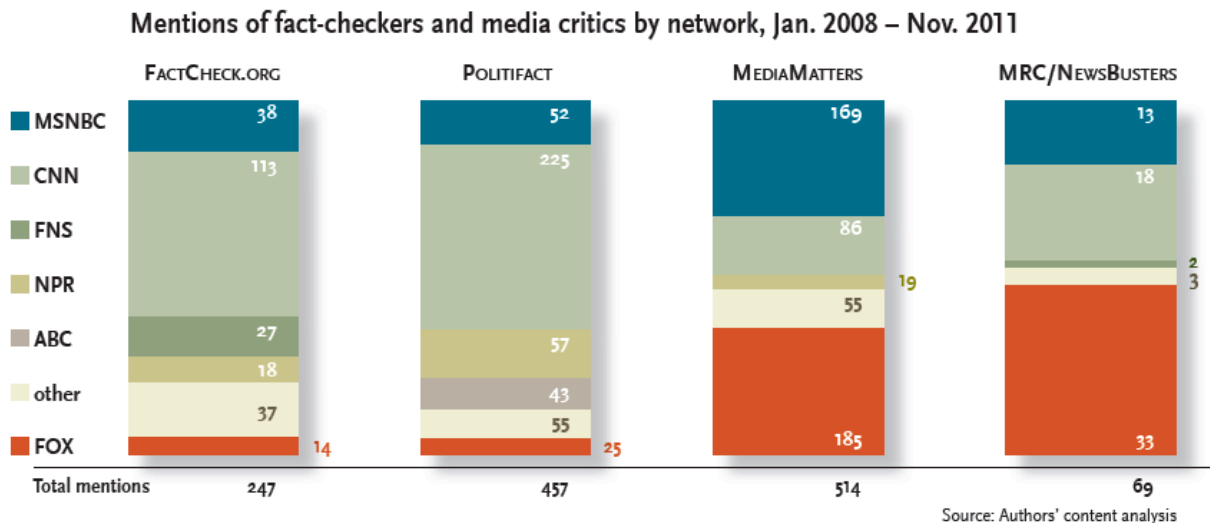
checkers' status is reflected in the network traces their work leaves — traces they and others observe on a daily basis.

In this politically charged, intermedia environment, fact-checkers manifest their objectivity in the sources and methods they use in their own work but also in the news outlets they link to, the interviews they give, the partnerships they form, the attacks they choose to respond to. One way to understand the threat that objective practice contends with in such an intermedia environment is as a loss of purchase in elite media and political networks. Journalists in general but especially fact-checkers, engaged in the most contentious arenas of public discourse, must negotiate the risk that some controversy will finally prove too great — that it will unwind their status-affirming relationships, alter their media profile, and push them into a new network equilibrium, into a role that mirrors the partisan political and media critics they define themselves against.

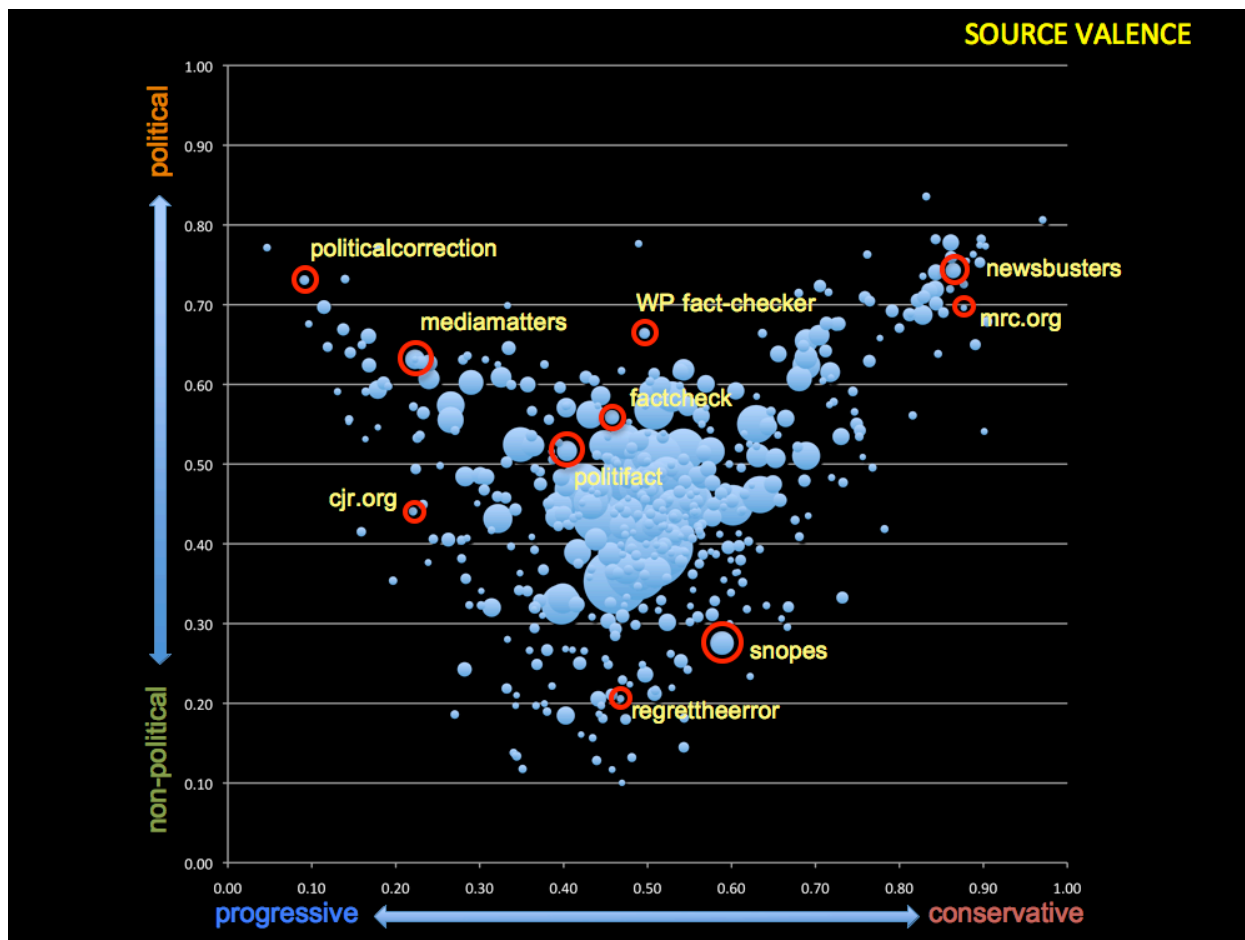
**Figure 5.1:** Fact-checking articles translate easily for broadcast. Here PolitiFact's Bill Adair visits CNN to check several claims from a 2011 primary debate; video clips and animated Truth-O-Meter graphics enliven the segment.



**Figure 5.2:** A content analysis reveals differences in the media footprint of fact-checkers according to political profile. Partisan fact-checkers are cited mainly by partisan news outlets. This chart appeared originally in Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer, *The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012*, a report from the New America Foundation.



**Figure 5.3:** This politicization chart, derived from social network analysis, arrays various fact-checkers and media critics according to the bloggers who pay attention to them. Non-partisan fact-checkers enjoy balanced attention from bloggers on the left and the right. This chart appeared originally in Graves and Glaisyer, *The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012*.



## Conclusion

Fact-checking means something different today than it did even a decade ago. Professional fact-checkers did not exist until the 2004 US presidential election; the real “explosion” in journalistic fact-checking began even more recently, with the 2008 race. The practices and discourses studied in these pages mark a genuinely new phenomenon, though, as we have seen, one with precursors in journalism and beyond it. Like other forms of news that have emerged over the last 15 years, fact-checking crosses and complicates any number of established boundaries: between the news and editorial pages; between reporting and press criticism; between professionals and non-professionals; and between the journalistic and political fields. Fact-checking remains unsettled, in the language of science studies. We do not yet know if or more importantly *how* this phenomenon will prove durable — where, in hindsight, its boundaries and its history will be drawn. One way to say this is that we don’t know what the questions are that fact-checking will, ten or twenty years from now, be seen as an answer to.

The peril of studying an emergent, unsettled phenomenon lies in how little can be excluded. Fact-checking invites scrutiny under any number of perspectives — as a technical practice, as a form of political speech, as a professional movement, and so on. The actors in this milieu sort out very differently depending on the criteria used; in certain respects the elite fact-checkers have more in common with their partisan counterparts than with journalists who publish occasional fact-checks at conventional news outlets. This embryonic, unformed quality also makes fact-checking an unusually rich research site. Everything is up in the air. Participants are uncommonly reflective about their own work. Even minor details become significant for what they reveal about a changing world. New organizations and practices are not only unstable but

destabilizing, exposing the seams in categories that were previously taken for granted. This dissertation has tried to take an ecumenical approach to its subject, focusing on professional fact-checking as a new form of journalism while also tracing the boundaries of a wider, contested discourse that involves many different kinds of fact-checkers.

As a result, much of the work of the preceding chapters has been descriptive, perhaps taxonomical: to identify a new species in the media ecosystem, charting its habits and its terrain. I have tried more than anything to show how fact-checking *coheres* as a kind of journalism, from the inside — how fact-checkers do their work and how they talk about that work. At the same time, I argue that the practices and the discourse of these new journalistic actors offer an exceptionally clear view of systemic changes in the news media. Professional fact-checkers are a product of the same systemic shifts whose perceived consequences they seek to remedy: a rising fragmentation and politicization of the news that began a decade or more before the Internet emerged as a popular medium, and that has echoes in much earlier journalistic eras, but which has come into flower on the global computer network.

One way to understand this emergent, unsettled phenomenon in American news, then, is as professional journalism's response to the challenges and opportunities posed by the Internet — and in particular by blogging. This is true in at least two respects. As a format or genre of news fact-checking exploits the same affordances of the Web that blogging does. A published fact-check is more than a news story with a few links added in. Like bloggers, fact-checkers use annotation and linking to make arguments, and to structure a critical reading of media texts. At the same time, they put a professional stamp on this kind of newswork, publishing in a highly constrained format that sets their new genre off from free-form blogging, and observing journalistic norms meant to routinize and professionalize the process of checking and contesting

facts. Also like bloggers, the new fact-checkers operate in intermedia mode, taking as a basic assumption that sharing their work promiscuously will help to build traffic, interest, and influence. Fact-checking as a genre of news is designed to propagate across media networks. Again, though, elite fact-checkers leave a professional stamp on this media work, cultivating a distinctive media profile via formal and informal relationships with professional news outlets in print, broadcast, and online.

Fact-checking also responds to blogging in another register: It responds to the critique of objective journalism which has helped to define blogging as a genre. Fact-checkers can be seen as the profession's answer to the charge that journalists aren't transparent, that they don't reveal their sources, that they are unable to challenge claims made by the political figures they write about. I have argued that the elite fact-checkers practice a kind of intertextual, annotative journalism that has historically been most comfortable within the framework of a larger political critique. They self-consciously embrace a truth-telling ethic while rejecting the orienting political narratives within which truth-telling journalism usually coheres. Fact-checkers disavow false balance and commit to reporting the facts no matter whom they offend. But they interpret this mission narrowly. The criticism they face on a daily basis, and their reluctance to draw larger conclusions from their own work, speak to a basic tension between the practices of objectivity and of critique.

Finally, this dissertation has argued for what might be called a *consequentialist* view of objectivity in practice.<sup>1</sup> This is true first of all in that reporters, like the rest of us, apply their principles pragmatically, with an eye to maintaining the status that lets them do their work. This



may be the result of deliberate calculation in some instances, but it need not be; in practice reporters *understand* as objective that reporting which doesn't appear to take sides in political disputes — even disputes over fact — and which won't expose them to charges of bias. That this applies in specific cases to fact-checkers, who set out very deliberately to take sides and who expect to be charged with bias, only reinforces the broader point. All three of the elite fact-checkers see certain kinds of characterizations as, by definition, beyond the scope of objective fact-checking. They argue that the two major US political parties are, in general, equally prone to lie and distort; that in any event it is not the fact-checker's job to decide which party is more dishonest; and that to do so would undermine their authority and interfere with the work of adjudicating individual, factual disputes. These are not of course a single argument, but they push in one direction — they push away from a critique that, I argue, would threaten to define the fact-checkers, to become in effect the only thing that they could say.

In this way I have hinted at a second, stronger sense in which we might understand objective practice as consequentialist. I have tried to suggest that the fact-checkers (like other participants in public discourse) are meaningfully *constituted* as more or less objective, more or less partisan, by their shifting position in media-political networks — where network position means more than, but is revealed increasingly by, patterns of intermedia citation and linking. This is not to say there is no difference between being objective and being called objective. We can construct scenarios in which objective analysis points one way, regardless of which or how many observers claim otherwise. It is simply to acknowledge that such scenarios eliminate the uncertainty that attends fact-checking work in practice. In the face of uncertainty, being objective

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<sup>1</sup> This usage is a little bit glib in that consequentialism in moral philosophy is a *normative* stance: the position, best illustrated by utilitarianism, that the rightness or wrongness of an action should be judged according to outcomes (rather than in terms of adherence to duty, for instance).

consists in more than applying flawless reasoning to unquestioned facts. It also consists in using sources and methods that by consensus are seen as reliable, and rejecting those that aren't; and it consists in becoming a source that can be taken for granted in this way, and all of the kinds of work that entails.

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