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# THE RISE OF POLITICAL FACT-CHECKING

## How Reagan Inspired a Journalistic Movement: A Reporter's Eye View

MICHAEL DOBBS



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# The Rise of Political Fact-checking

## How Reagan Inspired a Journalistic Movement: A Reporter's Eye View

MICHAEL DOBBS\*

### Summary

This report uses the *Washington Post* as a case study to trace the rise of modern political fact-checking. It considers fact-checking as a symptom of the larger, centuries-old struggle between the political establishment and the Fourth Estate to shape the narrative that will be presented to the voters. Through devices such as “Pinocchios” and “Pants-on-Fire” verdicts, journalists have formally asserted their right to adjudicate the truth or falsehood of the carefully-constructed campaign narratives of political candidates. This represents a shift of power back to the media following a low point during the run-up to the war in Iraq when *The Post* and other leading newspapers failed to seriously challenge the White House line on “weapons of mass destruction.”

The modern-day fact checking movement can be dated back to the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who attracted widespread ridicule for his claim that trees cause four times more pollution than automobiles. The ascent of political bloggers during the 2004 campaign put additional pressure on *The Post* and other mainstream news outlets to upgrade their fact checking operations. The Internet has democratized the fact-checking process by making information that was previously available only through expensive news databases such as Lexis-Nexis easily accessible to bloggers without any research budget.

Politicians initially reacted to the rise of the fact-checkers with suspicion and hostility, but now accept them as a permanent part of the media culture. The audience for political fact checking is closely tied to the campaign season. *The Washington Post* Fact Checker blog run by Glenn Kessler now receives about one million page views a month, with the audience for individual posts ranging from 25,000 to 400,000 views. Judging from the experience of 2008 presidential campaign, the audience is likely to grow significantly as the campaign approaches.

The fact checking movement has provided journalists with an additional tool for exposing political spin and increasingly sophisticated media manipulation techniques. In order to make the most effective use of this tool, however, fact checkers need to ally themselves more closely with readers, a source of invaluable expertise. Future directions for fact-checking include “crowd sourcing,” “audience integration,” and the creation of networks of authoritative experts.

\* A long-time reporter and foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*, Michael Dobbs founded the newspaper's fact checker column in 2007

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## Introduction

Soon after my appointment as *The Washington Post's* first official Fact Checker in the 2007-8 presidential election cycle, I got into a shouting match with an aide to former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani. Actually, as I recall, the aide was doing most of the screaming, while I was attempting to defend myself from allegations that I had committed grave violations of journalistic ethics. It is worth recounting the argument in some detail as it reflects the dismay felt by many politicians over the appearance of self-styled “fact checkers” and “truth squadders.” The political class was voicing its discontent over perceived attempts by the media to change the rules of engagement. Political candidates were still not accustomed to reporters—as opposed to rival candidates—sitting in judgment over their carefully-crafted campaign narratives.

First some background. In October 2007, the Giuliani campaign ran a radio ad slamming Democratic plans to introduce “socialized medicine” into the United States. The Republican candidate drew on his own experience battling prostate cancer to describe the nightmarish future that awaited his fellow Americans if the Democrats got their way. “I had prostate cancer, five, six years ago,” the former mayor told radio listeners. “My chances of surviving prostate cancer and thank God I was cured of it, in the United States 82 per cent. My chances of surviving prostate cancer in England, only 44 per cent under socialized medicine.” The following day, *The Washington Post* reported the Giuliani claim in a news story, refraining from any comment about its accuracy. Instead, political reporters Chris Cillizza and Shailagh Murray dealt with the horse race aspects of the Giuliani ad, noting that his “appeal to personal freedom on health care” was aimed at New Hampshire voters “who believe firmly in the mantra of less government and lower taxes.”<sup>1</sup>

After the Cillizza-Murray story was published, I got a series of calls from readers, including medical doctors, questioning Giuliani’s statistics. Researchers from the National Cancer Institute, the National Institutes of Health, and various leading urology departments pointed to data showing little difference in mortality rates from prostate cancer between the United States and the United Kingdom. The Giuliani campaign explained that the mayor had based his claim on an article that appeared in a conservative public policy journal. After interviewing as many experts as I could, I had no hesitation in concluding that the mayor—and his Manhattan Institute guru—had gotten it wrong. I awarded Giuliani the maximum “four Pinocchios,” signifying that the candidate had committed a “whopper.”<sup>2</sup>

“You can’t do that,” his aide protested, after my “fact check” appeared. “As a journalist, you are ethically obliged to give both sides of the argument, without expressing your own opinion. You have to remain objective. Your article lacked balance.”

“That’s not how I see my job at all,” I countered. “A reporter has a right to reach conclusions, as long as he can support the conclusions with evidence.”

A couple of days later, Giuliani repeated his prostate cancer claim using almost identical language to the radio ad. I awarded him an extra four Pinocchios “for recidivism,” provoking another explosion from his outraged aide. The mayor eventually dropped the prostate cancer line from his stump speech after being rapped over the knuckles by other fact checkers. He never admitted to error, but his silence was concession enough. Candidates rarely admit that they have made a mistake or told an untruth. The most that they are usually willing to do is stop repeating

the falsehood which, in my experience, happened in perhaps 20-30 per cent of the cases I fact checked, depending on the level of embarrassment.

The incident is revealing because it illustrates two quite different approaches to journalism that have been competing against each other for decades. One school of journalism demands that the reporter avoid inserting his “subjective” opinions into the story, and report only what he is told by third parties. To preserve his “objectivity” and “fairness,” he is obliged to tell “both sides of the story” in a flat “he said, she said” manner. It is up to the readers—not the reporter—to determine who, if anybody, is telling the truth. The “fair and balanced” approach to journalism is encapsulated by the Fox News slogan, “we report, you decide.” (Let’s leave aside the question of whether Fox News in fact lives up to its own slogans.) The campaign aide mentioned above would have been content had I quoted the views of Giuliani supporters and critics on the prostate cancer issue, leaving it to readers to decide who was right and who was wrong. That would have been “fair and balanced.” My crime, according to him, was that I came down firmly on one side of the argument. Through my use of the Pinocchio device, I signaled that the cancer experts were right and the mayor was talking baloney. I was injecting myself—a supposedly neutral observer—into the story.

The rival school of journalism sees the reporter as a “truth seeker.” The journalist’s primary obligation, according to this approach, is to tell the truth as best as he or she can determine it. Of course, that is not always easy, given the morass of conflicting opinions, murky, ambiguous evidence, and deliberate attempts to twist and conceal the truth. While the journalist has the duty to quote all sides accurately, he is not required to lend equal credibility to all the competing voices. He uses his judgment, and experience, to sift through the hubbub of different opinions, discarding some and highlighting others. “Fairness” is preserved not by treating all sides of the argument equally, but through an independent, open-minded approach to the evidence. Like a scientist attempting to make sense of a natural phenomenon, the journalist is constantly inventing, discarding, and refining theories to explain the confusion of the contemporary world. He is obliged

to report all the relevant facts, including the facts that undermine his own theories, but he also has a duty to make sense of them. He is not a mindless stenographer: he uses his brain to reach conclusions that can be contested by others.

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 of the kind practiced by journalists like Cillizza, I felt that we had been snookered by the political class into ignoring, or at least playing down, larger, more important questions. By focusing on the “he said, she said,” aspect of reporting, we were permitting presidential candidates and others to get away with sometimes outrageous falsehoods. Truth-seeking and truth-telling were relegated to the sidelines of journalism, rather than assuming their rightful place, at the center.

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The problem was particularly acute in coverage of the run-up to the war in Iraq in 2002-2003. The front page of the *Post*, and most other mainstream American newspapers, was dominated for weeks by the escalating drumbeat of Bush administration allegations against the regime of Saddam Hussein. It was difficult to question the rush to war—unless a reporter could find an internal dissident or someone in a prominent position, such as a leading member of

Congress, to challenge the administration line. By the conventions of “he said, she said” reporting, journalists were discouraged from exercising their own judgment. Since the Democratic party had largely been co-opted or bullied to support the administration case against Iraq, the other side of the argument did not get much of a hearing. Of course, there were articles, in the *Post* and elsewhere, challenging certain administration claims, such as the allegation that Iraq had imported high-strength aluminum tubes suitable only for centrifuges. But such articles were usually relegated to the inside pages, and were overwhelmed by a much larger number of articles echoing administration talking points with little qualification or analysis. As a member of the *Post*’s national security team during this period, I felt that we failed as a newspaper (and I include myself in this collective *mea culpa*) in our basic, truth-seeking function.

My proposal for a fact-checking column was also motivated by my experience covering the 2004 presidential election. When a group of right-wing veterans accused Democratic candidate John Kerry of inflating his war record in Vietnam, I was determined to avoid the mistakes we had committed during the run-up to the Iraq war. We should not be content with merely repeating the charges and the outraged denials from the Kerry camp. We should focus our attention instead on a more important, interesting question. What actually happened on the Bay Hap river in the jungles of Vietnam on March 16, 1969, on the climactic day of Kerry’s military career? I spent a long time investigating this matter, before concluding that the senator’s critics had “failed to come up with sufficient evidence to prove him a liar.”<sup>3</sup> I also looked into charges made against George W. Bush by Dan Rather, eventually determining that the CBS anchor had relied on fabricated documents for key points in his reporting on the president’s service with the Texas Air National Guard.<sup>4</sup> My experience covering these controversies convinced me of the need to institutionalize the fact-checking aspect of reporting as central to everything we do, rather than treating it as a journalistic afterthought.

In this report, I will attempt to trace the origins of the modern fact checking movement, using the *Washington Post* as a case study. The debate over the proper role of fact checkers is inseparably inter-

twined with a much larger debate about the rights and responsibilities of reporters—which is in turn a reflection of the age-old struggle between the political and media establishments. Journalists have been tussling with politicians for centuries over who gets to shape “the first rough draft of history.” At times (World War II, and the period immediately after 9/11 come to mind), politicians have gained the upper hand and succeeded in getting reporters to accept their version of events. At other times (Vietnam and Watergate are obvious examples), the media beast has struck back, biting the hand that feeds it. Power has shifted back and forth along with the broader tides of public opinion. Political fact-checking—in which reporters hand out Pinocchios and pants-on-fire verdicts to erring politicians—is but one phase of the never-ending battle for control over the political narrative.

## Fact Checking Reagan

More than any other single politician, Ronald Reagan launched the modern fact-check industry. In journalistic terminology, he was “the gift that keeps on giving.” As a presidential candidate in 1979-80, he was given to making startling assertions that turned out to be completely erroneous. During the 1980 campaign, he was ridiculed for his claim that trees caused four times more pollution as automobiles and factory chimneys put together. At a campaign event in California, he was greeted by a banner hanging from a tree that read: “Cut me down before I kill again.”<sup>5</sup> A California newspaper suggested a scientific test: lock a volunteer up in a room with a tree and lock Reagan up with a car with the exhaust running, and see who dies first. Reagan himself was unapologetic. He cheerfully repeated the “trees as a threat to the environment” line throughout the campaign.

After Reagan became president, reporters began checking his press conferences and television statements for factual inaccuracies. But according to Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*, they quickly gave up. Here is what Pincus told PBS commentator Bill Moyers in April 2007, in the aftermath of the controversy over the media’s failure to challenge Bush administration claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq:

**Pincus:** More and more the media become common carriers of administration statements—and critics of administration. We have given up being independent on our own. We used to do at *The Post* something called truth-squadding. The president would make a speech, we used to do it with Ronald Reagan for 4-5 months because he would make so many factual errors in his press conferences. After two or three weeks of it, the public at large said ‘why don’t you leave the man alone, he is trying to be honest, he makes mistakes, so what.’ And then we stopped doing it. We stopped truth-squadding every press conference. We left it then to the Democrats. In other words, it is up to the Democrats to catch people not us. We would quote both sides.

**Moyers:** That’s called objectivity by many people, isn’t it?

**Pincus:** It’s objectivity if you think there are only two sides and if you are not interested in the facts. The facts are separate from what one side says about the other.<sup>6</sup>

Other *Post* editors and reporters remember the Ronald Reagan experience differently. “Truth squadding was our bread-and-butter,” recalled David Hoffman, who covered the Reagan White House for the *Post*.<sup>7</sup> “We lived day in and day out with the idea that we should call him on these facts.” Hoffman said he was hired by the *Post* in 1982 in part because of his experience fact-checking Reagan during the campaign for the *San Jose Mercury News*. At the end of long campaign days, he would laboriously transcribe portions of Reagan’s stump speech from tapes, and truth-squad claims such as the one-liner that “there was more oil in Alaska than in Saudi Arabia.” When the Iran-Contra affair blew up in the fall of 1986, Hoffman was quick to point out erroneous statements by the president, including the claim that all the arms delivered to Iran could have fitted into a single cargo plane.

Former *Post* executive editor Len Downie supports Hoffman. “Reagan was the first time I remember us engaging in a regular fact-checking mode. Questions were raised about how accurate Reagan was in some

of the anecdotes he told, the facts he used. I thought it was important for readers to know when he was inaccurate. I remember we did this as a regular thing. I do not know why Pincus said it was dropped after a few weeks.”<sup>8</sup>

So whose memory is more accurate? A fact-check is clearly in order here. During his eight years as president, Reagan held a total of 46 news conferences. *The Washington Post* ran sidebars checking statements that he had made in eight of those appearances. The president came under closest scrutiny from fact checkers in 1982, his second year in office, when four of his eight news conferences were fact checked in separate sidebars. After 1982, the number of fact check sidebars following press conferences declined sharply. There were none in 1983, one in 1984, one in 1985, one in 1986 (during Iran-Contra), one in 1987, and none in 1988. Leaving aside the Iran-Contra affair, when Reagan statements were closely scrutinized by Hoffman and others, the president largely escaped aggressive, modern-style fact-checking after 1982.

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“It’s objectivity if you think there are only two sides and if you are not interested in the facts. The facts are separate from what one side says about the other”.

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As the Reagan era drew to a close, some influential media voices bemoaned the failure of reporters to deconstruct, and if necessary, challenge political rhetoric. The *Post*’s political columnist, David Broder, complained that the press had failed to expose Republican campaign smears against Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis. Journalists, Broder wrote, had a responsibility to check the facts. “The consultants have become increasingly sophisticated about insinuating—visually or verbally—charges that they avoid making in literal terms,” Broder wrote at the end of the 1988 campaign. “We have to counter that sophistication by becoming increasingly

blunt when we are exposing such falsities.” Founders of Factcheck.org and Politifact both cite Broder as the inspiration for their fact checking sites.<sup>9</sup>

## Weapons of Factual Destruction

Attempts to fact check presidential candidates gathered pace during the 1990s. Several prominent modern-day fact checkers cut their teeth on the 1992 and 1996 campaigns. Brooks Jackson, the founder of Fact-check.org, pioneered “ad watch” and “fact check” stories for CNN during the presidential election of 1992 that pitted George H.W. Bush against Bill Clinton. Glenn Kessler, who now runs the *Post*’s Fact Checker column, convinced *Newsday* editors to let him monitor political campaign rhetoric during the 1996 election. Associated Press fact checker Cal Woodward traces AP’s experiments with the genre back to the “ad watches” of the 1992 campaign. “We became more methodical in 1996, when we fact checked the Dole-Clinton presidential debate. By 2000, we were fact checking pretty much all the primary debates and presidential debates.”<sup>10</sup>

It is now widely accepted that the mainstream media failed to adequately fact check claims by the Bush administration about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war. While some journalists (including Walter Pincus of the *Post* and reporters from the Washington bureau of Knight-Ridder) wrote critical stories, the press as a whole did not seriously challenge the White House line. Some journalists, notably Judy Miller of the *New York Times* and the editorial board of the *Washington Post*, actively helped the administration build the case for toppling Saddam Hussein.

“We just messed up,” says Robert Kaiser, former managing editor of the *Post*. He blames the failure on what he calls “9-11 syndrome.”<sup>11</sup> “The country was traumatized by 9-11 in a very profound way. Journalists joined in the revenge-seeking spirit of the moment. Traditional journalistic instincts were overwhelmed by the emotion of that time, with a lot of help from the White House...Knight-Ridder did it right, and we didn’t. I don’t think it had anything to do with journalistic conventions and practices. We simply didn’t do our job. Being fair does not mean neutering yourself. It means being

fair. Everybody in the debate should be able to recognize the version of their position that you include in your story.”

Just as the Vietnam war destroyed the cozy relationship between presidents and the White House press corps, the WMD fiasco caused many mainstream journalists to become much more cautious about accepting uncorroborated claims by politicians of all stripes. Several present day fact checkers look back on the episode as “a missed opportunity,” in the phrase of *New York Times* political editor Richard Stevenson.<sup>12</sup> “For many journalists that episode was a wake-up call on the need to be more vigorous,” said Stevenson, who now coordinates political fact checking at the *Times*. “There are very few reporters who can say they did everything they could have done to fully challenge, examine, scrub the allegations made by the Bush administration about WMD.” The feeling that they were taken for a ride in 2003 fueled the determination of the fact-checkers not to be caught napping a second time. (“Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.”)

“There were truth-squadding efforts by individual reporters, but the editors would not put them on the front page,” said Kessler, speaking about the *Washington Post*.<sup>13</sup> “The top editors were overburdened and did not want to be in the position of arguing with the administration. There was a feeling that the president should get his due. Someone should have said, ‘let’s take everything we know about this intelligence and vet it.’ But they didn’t.”

The WMD episode helped discredit the idea that reporters are merely messengers or stenographers. Judy Miller was roundly criticized for her attempt to blame the errors in her WMD reporting on her official sources. “My job was not to collect information and analyze it independently,” she told a New York radio station. “My job was to tell readers of the *New York Times* as best I could figure out, what people inside the government...were saying to one another about what they thought Iraq had and did not have in the area of weapons of mass destruction.” “Where did Miller learn the art of journalism?” asked Slate’s then magazine media critic Jack Shafer. “The job of a good reporter—investigative or otherwise—is more like that of an intelligence

analyst than a stenographer. A good reporter is supposed to dig for the truth.”<sup>14</sup>

“I don’t agree with [Miller’s] philosophy,” said Downie, the former *Washington Post* executive editor. “Objective journalism is a non-existent thing. I see journalists as truth seekers. Accountability journalism has been my entire focus as a reporter. Our job is to get as close to the truth as we can, and hold everybody accountable.”

Looking back on *The Post*’s handling of the Bush administration WMD claims, Downie acknowledges he was “overwhelmed” by various reporting challenges in the 2002-03 period. “I was not focused enough on the relative paucity of evidence for the administration statements...Pincus and the people at Knight-Ridder were among the few people who raised questions about what the administration was saying. We did put these things in the paper, but we did not put them on the front page. The stories were often not very strong, because the sourcing was not very strong.” “I wish that we had the kind of institutionalized fact checking that we have now,” he adds. “Everything is fair game now.”

Downie’s explanation for why critical stories failed to make the front page—the “sourcing” was not “very strong”—points to part of the problem. We now know that administration relied on highly dubious sources, such as the serial fabricator codenamed “Curveball”, for its WMD intelligence. Nevertheless, claims based on these sources were legitimized based on the fact that they were repeated by senior administration officials, often under the cloak of anonymity. Such claims routinely made the front page, despite their flimsy sourcing: in conventional journalistic terms, they were “well-sourced.” Experienced reporters such as Walter Pincus were not allowed to challenge such stories on the basis of their own authority and expertise. In order to legitimize the response, they were required to find some other source, preferably from within the administration, to pick holes in the official version. There was a fundamental disbalance between the burden of proof required on the opposing sides of the argument. We have to ask ourselves why “poorly sourced” Knight-Ridder reporters did a better job covering the WMD story than “superbly sourced” Washington insiders like Judy Miller.

## Pinocchios and Pants-on-Fire

When I proposed a “Fact Checker” column to the *Washington Post* in the summer of 2007, I braced myself for long, agonized discussions on the journalistic process. Was it the place of a *Post* reporter to referee campaign debates, and rap erring politicians over the knuckles? Would we be sacrificing our cherished “non-partisan” status and “balance” if we came down on one side or the other in factual arguments? Who does Dobbs think he is, anyway? To my surprise, editors embraced my idea immediately. There were no metaphysical debates about the role of journalists in modern society. The only significant objection to my proposal came from an editor who questioned my original idea for Pinocchio-style noses that would grow with the scale of the offense. He thought this might offend some readers (presumably readers with long noses.) So we settled instead for a sliding scale of one Pinocchio (for a “shading” of the truth) to four Pinocchios, for “whoppers.”

The lack of resistance can be explained in several ways. Criticism of our poor performance checking the bogus WMD claims still rankled with many editors, whether they expressed it openly or not. Equally, if not more, important was the sense that someone else would do the job for us if we failed to monitor campaign rhetoric more aggressively. The 2003-04 campaign had marked “the dawn of the blog,” in the phrase of AP fact-checker Woodward. Many of these blogs were partisan in nature, dedicated to “setting the record straight,” usually at the expense of political opponents. The left found fault with the right, and vice-versa. Everybody found fault with the media. In some cases, including the Swift Boat story and “Rathergate,” the mainstream media sometimes found itself playing catch up with the blogs. This time round, we would take the lead.

The truth was that fact checking political debates was an idea whose time had arrived by the start of the 2008 presidential campaign. Politicians were already getting used to the reporting of Factcheck.org, the monitoring project set up by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. Soon after I made my proposal, the *St. Petersburg Times* launched a fact-checking group called Politifact, with a snazzy website and a “truth-

o-meter” for testing the veracity of campaign claims. Their “Pants on Fire” verdict was the rough equivalent of my “Four Pinocchios.” Media organizations like the Associated Press and ABC News were also ramping up their fact-checking efforts.

Initial reaction to the launch of the *Washington Post* Fact Checker column was almost uniformly positive, except for the candidates who were suddenly being confronted by a new sheriff. My favorite comment came from the *Economist*, which described the one-to-four Pinocchio scale as “a kind of Michelin guide to political lies.” *New York Times* public editor Clark Hoyt complained that the Old Grey Lady did not have a similar system for checking political rhetoric. He cited the example of a spat between Giuliani and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney over their respective crime records. “If you were like me, you wondered, impatiently, why the newspaper didn’t answer a simple question: who is telling the truth? I wanted the facts, and, not for the first time, The *Times* let me down.” He lamented that the *Times* was “falling behind major competitors,” including the *Washington Post* and the *St. Petersburg Times*.<sup>15</sup>

Partly in response to such criticism, the *Times* soon introduced a feature known as “Check Point” that monitored campaign statements for accuracy. Unlike the *Post* and Politifact, the *Times* did not appoint a specialized “fact checker” or “fact checkers.” Instead it drew on the expertise of its many beat reporters, whose work was coordinated by the political editor. Instead of a flashy “truth-o-meter” device like the Pinocchios, the *Times* preferred to reach sober conclusions, in the manner of the Associated Press.

Stevenson says that he and other *Times* editors have debated the question whether to appoint a designated fact checker or to rely on beat reporters. He sees pros and cons to both approaches. By drawing on the expertise of many different reporters, he argues, the *Times* is able to authoritatively fact check political debates in real time, generating instant responses to questions from readers. During a typical Republican presidential debate, the *Times* has “four or five reporters standing by with background in subjects like national security, the economy, the environment” ready to contribute to a live blog. Fact checking cam-

paigned rhetoric is often “more than one person can do,” says Stevenson. On the other hand, he concedes that “you don’t get the same continuity of coverage” without a designated Fact Checker. “We do not have anybody who has ownership of this, really bearing down on the candidates. There are times when I can argue that the other approach is better.”

He is similarly conflicted on the “truth-o-meter” question. “I understand the appeal of the Pinocchio approach. It is accessible, it has some fun attached to it, it brings it down to a kind of binary decision about things. On the other hand, many things that candidates say fall into a gray area. If you lock yourselves into Pinocchio noses or Pants on Fire meters, you sometimes risk steering away from the nuances that you want to get across to readers. We have never really found the right way to present judgments without oversimplifying.”

The issues raised by Stevenson are ones that I also thought about as *Washington Post* Fact Checker, and remain a concern of my successor, Glenn Kessler. Both of us recognized that much political rhetoric falls into a grey area, from a fact checker’s point of view. Exaggeration, spin, and artful insinuation are much more common political sins than outright falsehoods. As David Broder suggested in his critique of media coverage of the 1988 election, it took the press a long time to catch up with the increasingly subtle media manipulation techniques of modern-day political campaigns, which were lifted from the public relations/commercial advertising world. Pinocchios and Pants on Fire verdicts are a somewhat blunt instrument for combatting routine political spin. Fact checkers have dealt with this challenge in part by devising intermediate categories, such as Politifact’s “Half True” (equivalent to Two Pinocchios), “Mostly True” (One Pinocchio), “Half Flip”, and “Full flop.” I experimented with a “True but False” category, which was designed to draw attention to political claims that are true in every particular but nevertheless leave a highly misleading impression because of their selective approach to the truth. Sometimes, I dispensed with labels completely.

Kessler defends the Pinocchio device as a way to whet the interest of readers and attract the attention

of the candidates, some of whom are “obsessed with Pinocchios.” He has received calls from senior politicians wanting to know what they need to do in order to avoid receiving more Pinocchios. “I have learned my lesson,” said one errant member of the House of Representatives. “I am not going to utter another word on this subject without having my staff check it over.” He acknowledges that decisions about how many Pinocchios to award are “subjective” to some extent, but strives for consistency. As he told a reader in a recent on-line chat:

The hardest part of the job is assigning the Pinocchios. I weigh such factors as whether they make a big deal about [a particular claim], whether they based it on a reliable source, how much they took out of context, and so forth. Intent is very difficult to determine. But yes, it appears some statements are so extreme that it must have been done deliberately. That certainly gets it into the 4 Pinocchio realm! <sup>16</sup>

A more significant problem in my view is the sheer amount of ground the *Washington Post* Fact Checker is expected to cover. Politifact and Factcheck.org employ half a dozen reporters, but I was an army of one, assisted only by a part-time researcher. (Kessler now has a full-time assistant.) I often felt overwhelmed by the deluge of misinformation on the campaign trail. While I was well versed in some topics, such as foreign affairs and history, I was a neophyte on others, including the complexities of the federal budget and the environment. In order to adjudicate factual disputes, I had to become an instant expert on a wide range of issues. There were times when I felt I was the only reporter researching the policy proposals of the candidates, rather than their day-to-day maneuvering and their standing in the opinion polls. Producing my unofficial quota of one fact check a day was sometimes a struggle. Looking back, I feel that I did more distinguished work during the 2004 campaign, when I was able to focus on a few issues, such as the Swift Boat controversy, than in 2008, when I was spread very thinly.

To make up for these deficiencies, I attempted to draw on the more specialized knowledge of other *Post* reporters and the Washington think-tank com-

munity. I was also assisted by my readers, who were quick to correct my mistakes in the comments section of the blog, a humbling experience for a self-styled “fact checker.” But I could certainly have benefitted from “support networks”, such as the recently established “Public Insight Network” which aims to connect reporters with knowledgeable sources trusted by other journalists.

When I attempted to live fact check political debates, I was always part of a team that included two or three beat reporters. On such occasions, we never issued instant Pinocchios as we wanted to avoid snap judgments that might come back to haunt us. Kessler has dispensed with live fact checks all together, preferring to compile a quick roundup at the end of each debate.

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Much political rhetoric falls into a grey area, from a fact checker’s point of view. Exaggeration, spin, and artful insinuation are much more common political sins than outright falsehoods.

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The ideal solution might be a combination of the *Post* and *New York Times* approaches, with beat reporters working much more closely and formally with a designated fact checker. Getting reporters to cooperate with each other in more than an ad hoc way can be extremely difficult, however, as it involves breaking down traditional newsroom barriers. Such an approach is also likely to demand extra resources at a time when the number of beat reporters at major newspapers is declining precipitously. The *Post* has eliminated many specialized reporting slots, covering subjects ranging from science to education, in order to save money. Political reporters tend to focus on the horse race aspect of elections, rather than delve into the policy positions of the different candidates.

## “Working the refs”

Political fact checking has become “part of the culture,” says Woodward of the AP. The politicians may not like it, but they have gotten used to it. “Back in 2000 and 2004, they could be quite snarky about it, but now they expect to be fact-checked. They watch what we say very closely.” Readers have also become accustomed to the fact check phenomenon. According to Woodward, AP fact checks routinely make the Yahoo News “most read” list.

Mainstream news organizations report similarly large audiences for fact check items and columns. According to Kessler, the online *Washington Post* Fact Checker blog now gets “about 1 million page views a month, and it keeps growing. My average post gets about 25,000 to 50,000 views, some have gone as high as 400,000. And then the posts never die, but live on. I get about 7-10,000 page views a day just from people reading old posts.”<sup>17</sup> Judging from my experience last time round, these audiences are likely to increase substantially as Election Day approaches and people focus on the campaign. The *New York Times* declined to issue traffic statistics for their live fact checks, but Stevenson also noted that “the fact-checking we do during debates draws readership long after the debate is over.”<sup>18</sup>

According to both Stevenson and Kessler, the audience for fact check items is very similar to the audience for political news in general. The *Times* aims its debate fact checks at “engaged readers who want help separating fact from fiction.” From my own experience, I can say that providing a useful service to readers is a higher priority—and more realistic—goal for fact checkers than changing the behavior of politicians, particularly in the short term. If voters penalize candidates who routinely falsify, mislead, and exaggerate, the politicians will eventually get the message.

Politicians have adopted a variety of tactics for dealing with the fact checkers. Some brush them aside, like annoying gnats buzzing around their ankles. Others engage with the fact checkers, appointing aides armed with in-depth research to “work with” their tormentors. (Some of these aides have gone onto greater things. Tommy Vietor, who was designated by the Obama campaign to respond to my

queries back in 2008, is now spokesman for the National Security Council.) The more professional, better funded campaigns—such as the Obama and Romney campaigns—tend to have the best “fact checking the fact checker” operations. On the evening of a major political debate, reporters’ Blackberries light up with blizzards of documentation supporting the positions of individual candidates and denigrating their rivals. It is the political equivalent of “working the refs” before they issue one of their dreaded Pants-on-Fire decisions.

While they are quick to ridicule fact checks aimed against them, campaigns often gleefully jump on fact checks aimed at their opponents. “Four, count ‘em, Four Pinocchios,” the Obama campaign crowed when I exposed Hillary Clinton’s Walter Mittyish fantasy about “coming under fire” at Tuzla airport

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I suspect, but cannot prove, that MacDougald was operating on behalf of political operatives in the White House, who had been allowed to inspect the documents prior to the CBS broadcast.

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while on a visit to Bosnia. I knew that “Pinocchios” had entered the political lexicon when I tuned into a Republican presidential debate in late 2007 and heard Mitt Romney berate one of his Republican rivals: “You earned three Pinocchios for that.” (He did not feel the need to explain exactly what a ‘Pinocchio’ was.) To this day, the Romney campaign routinely trumpets fact checks of rival candidates as if they were edicts handed down from Mount Olympus. “Perry ads against Romney earn ‘three Pinocchios’ from The *Washington Post*,” ran the headline at “Romney Central” following a debate spat over the content of Romney’s book.<sup>19</sup>

The embrace of fact checking by the mainstream media has coincided with the rise of partisan fact check operations aimed at exposing the lies and

hypocrisies of political rivals. Just because these blogs and websites are highly selective in their choice of targets does not mean that their reporting should be dismissed out of hand. Partisan bloggers are often the first to notice discrepancies or contradictions in a political opponent's story. The right-wing website News Busters (motto: "Exposing and Combating Liberal Media Bias") was the first to raise questions about Hillary Clinton's sniper fire story in March 2008. Nevertheless, it took my fact check four days later to "legitimize" the story in the eyes of other media outlets and attract widespread reader interest.<sup>20</sup>

A similar dynamic was in play during the "Rathergate" controversy of 2004. The first questions about the authenticity of the documents aired by CBS were raised by a conservative blogger named "Buckhead," who later turned out to be a pseudonym for Harry W. MacDougald, an Atlanta attorney with close ties to conservative groups. His critique of the documents on the right-wing website Freerepublic.com appeared within a few hours of the CBS broadcast accusing Bush of receiving preferential treatment from the National Guard. He refused to explain how he was able to identify the problems with the CBS documents so swiftly.<sup>21</sup> I suspect, but cannot prove, that MacDougald was operating on behalf of political operatives in the White House, who had been allowed to inspect the documents prior to the CBS broadcast.

As a national reporter for *The Post*, I had written a front-page story quoting from the documents obtained by Dan Rather for the CBS broadcast. The "Buckhead" post caused me to ask my own questions about the CBS documents, and publish an article the very next day raising doubts about their authenticity. Having reported the allegations made by CBS, it seemed to me that we had a responsibility to provide our readers with all the pertinent facts as quickly as possible. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is untrue that conservative bloggers did the major legwork on Rathergate, following the initial "Buckhead" post. Many significant developments, including tracing the forged documents to a CBS source named Bill Burkett, were broken by *The Washington Post*.<sup>22</sup>

The problem with partisan websites is that they lack credibility. Facts and claims published by such websites and blogs must be independently verified in order to resonate with the broader public. As the *Post*'s Fact Checker, I occasionally came across interesting leads from websites such as "Media Matters" or "News Busters," but I never trusted anything they said without extensive cross-checks. My successor, Glenn Kessler, says he "tries to avoid looking" at the partisan sites but sometimes finds them "useful for tracking down different sources of information." Richard Stevenson of the *New York Times* takes a similar position. "I don't pay a whole lot of attention to ideologically based sites," he told me, "but if we see something there or anywhere else that points to an assertion in need of examination, we'll do our best to jump on it."

## Conclusions vs. Opinions

Fact checks can be most damaging to a politician when they feed into an existing story line against the candidate, such as Al Gore's tendency to inflate his own achievements. (He was frequently accused of claiming to have "invented" the Internet. His actual words were "During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet."<sup>23</sup>) Covering the 2000 campaign for the *Washington Post*, Glenn Kessler received anguished calls from Gore aides eager to check out Gore claims for factual accuracy before he went public with them in a debate. If he raised objections, they would change the wording. By contrast, George W. Bush felt little need to apologize or back track. "The Gore campaign was freaked out by the whole fact checking thing," recalled Kessler. "He was under all these attacks for being a phony, for making things up. If the *Washington Post* said that his stuff was not right, it fed into the conventional narrative against him. Bush was not encumbered by that problem."

More than anything else, the Internet (Al Gore's "invention"!) has changed the balance of power between the politicians and would-be fact checkers. In the old days, compiling a record of a politician's statements and interviews required laborious, time-consuming research. On-line databases such as Lexis-Nexis made all this material readily available to reporters with a few keystrokes. "Bush (senior)

was constantly irritated at me for checking things on Lexis-Nexis, comparing what he said during the campaign with what he said before.” said Hoffman, a former White House reporter for the *Post*. “He hated the ‘Nexis thing.’” The Internet further democratized the fact-checking process, making the same material easily accessible to bloggers without any research budget. As soon as a candidate makes a questionable claim or inaccurate statement, an imperishable record is made of the moment. “Our entire fact-checking archive is up on the web, always available,” said Kessler. “I like to think that campaign reporters no longer have to repeat the latest lie from the candidates, because it has already been vetted for them.”

Inevitably, opinions are divided within the journalistic community about the rise of the fact-checkers. One particularly acerbic critic is Ben Smith of *Politico*, who penned an “End of Fact Checking” blog item in August 2011. “The new professional ‘fact-checking’ class is, at its best, doing good, regular journalism under the pseudo-scientific banner, complete with made-up measurements,” Smith wrote. “At their worst, they’re doing opinion journalism under pseudo-scientific banners, something that’s really corrosive to actual journalism, which if it’s any good is about reported fact in the first place.”<sup>24</sup> He later e-mailed me, as the “inventor” of the Pinocchio system, to question the point of “that objective-looking rating at the bottom.” I replied as follows:

I see fact-checking as a move away from the “he said, she said” journalism that never takes a position on anything, even if one side is telling the truth, and the other side is spouting lies. While I agree that reporters should not be partisan, I see no reason why we should not draw on our experience and plain commonsense to sort out the truth from fiction. Reporters should be allowed to sift the evidence and reach conclusions. I see nothing wrong with that, as long as the conclusions are based on the evidence, rather than reflecting some knee-jerk political position. A Pinocchio is just that, a conclusion, expressed in a colorful way. It is the evidence-based opinion of a reporter who

has examined the facts, and tried to determine the truth as best he can. Readers, and politicians, are free to agree or disagree.

On balance, I think the fact-checking phenomenon has been positive, although we should not exaggerate our influence. Politicians will continue to stretch the truth, and tell outright lies, to get elected, because that is the nature of politics. But I do think it helps if they have to look over their shoulder occasionally, and see that someone is watching them. The very fact that they find fact-checkers annoying as hell suggests that it is doing some good--or at least, doing no harm.

## Best Practices

If Smith is right in arguing that fact checkers have turned into a “professional class,” or at least a journalistic sub-class, we clearly need a code of best practices. In that spirit, I have come up with a short list of “dos” and “don’ts” for this burgeoning cottage industry. They have been culled from my conversations with half a dozen fact checkers and their editors, as well as my own experience covering the last presidential campaign.

- **Double-check everything.** Even more than other reporters, a fact checker risks exposing himself to ridicule if he gets his own facts wrong. “You have to be very careful,” notes the AP’s Woodward. “You don’t want to make a mistake of any kind in journalism, but particularly not when you are fact checking.” If you do make a mistake (as you inevitably will), correct it as quickly and transparently as possible. Do not fall into the Dan Rather trap (during “Rather-gate”) of defending the indefensible.
- **Take on both sides.** “You need to be consistently tough on everyone, as you lose credibility if you only focus on one party,” says Kessler. 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.
- **Beware false equivalence.** Just because all politicians exaggerate their accomplishments and

twist the facts to their own advantage to get elected does not mean that they all sin equally. Some candidates have longer noses than others. Avoid the temptation of finding a pretext to award Candidate Z four Pinocchios because you have handed out four Pinocchios to his rival, Candidate Y.

- **Check facts, not ideology.** Many political claims are by their nature uncheckable because they represent a candidate's political philosophy, and are not empirically based. Most Republicans believe that cutting taxes is inherently beneficial to the economy. Democrats are much more likely to favor stimulus spending. Fact checkers can help to clarify this debate by examining the data used by the rival political parties, but they will never be able to resolve it.
- **Do not take yourself too seriously.** Ben Smith makes a valid point. There is nothing inherently "scientific" about Pinocchios and Pants-on-Fire rulings. They should be understood as the personal opinion of a single (hopefully independent, diligent, and well-informed) reporter. In order to be convincing, they must be buttressed by the evidence and a well-reasoned argument. Readers are free to agree or disagree. The rulings are a starting point for an informed discussion, not an edict written in stone.
- **Seek help from your readers.** As I suggested above, it is difficult for even the most energetic fact checker to be expert on everything. Readers are an extraordinary source of knowledge and good sense, if we can find ways to showcase real expertise, rather than inciting more partisan mud-slinging. By contrast, hundreds of inane comments can be a turn-offs to thoughtful readers. *The New York Times* recently took steps to encourage reasoned debate by permitting "trusted commenters" to publish comments directly to the site without advance moderation.

There is general consensus that Wikipedia-style "crowd sourcing" will loom large in the future of fact checking. The *Times* has tried to integrate "reader questions and suggestions for fact-checking targets" into its live coverage of political debates. Over at the *Washington Post*, Glenn Kessler sees "audience

integration, in which readers help contribute to fact checks with their own facts and information," as the wave of the future. "I get very thoughtful notes from readers who sometimes point me in a different direction, and I have posted some of these notes and comments. I want to institutionalize that, so fact checking—or at least the search for sources of information—becomes more crowd-sourced."

What are the qualities needed in a good fact checker? Len Downie lists "stubbornness," "meticulousness," "a thick skin," "a determination to get to the bottom of things." Says Richard Stevenson, "You have to be very independent-minded, and have the strength of character to call balls and strikes, to stand up to the inevitable pushback and criticism...You have to be willing to say that one side is right, and the other is wrong." Glenn Kessler believes that experience covering politics and government institutions is essential. "You need to have spent a few years listening to spin to get your BS detector in shape." Turning to stylistics, he adds: "You need to be able to write very clearly—and with a bit of an edge. You don't want to be boring. You want politicians to feel your sting so that they are more careful the next time."

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There is general consensus that Wikipedia-style "crowd sourcing" will loom large in the future of fact checking.

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As for me, my journalistic model and inspiration has long been the little boy in the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." By blurting out the obvious—"the emperor is not wearing anything at all"—at a time when everybody else was praising the beautiful apparel of their ruler, the boy in the fairy tale was displaying the instincts of a true reporter. He relied on the evidence of his own eyes to reject the lie embraced by his supposedly more knowledgeable elders. He told truth to power, as simply as he knew how. He was unafraid to reach conclusions. He was a "fact checker."

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