EVERYONE HATES THE REFEREE: HOW FACT-CHECKERS MITIGATE A PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF BIAS

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ANALYSIS

Introduction

A year has passed since the 2016 presidential election. Social media companies are still grappling with how to stop fake news. The president is calling real news fake. And fact-checkers are being accused of bias by the public, politicians and conservative media.

How are fact-checkers grappling with this chaotic landscape? In interviews, eight journalists from different fact-checking organizations discuss the dynamics between politics, media cynicism and fact-checking. The journalists interviewed are:

• Alexandre Pouchard, a reporter at Le Monde, one of France’s leading newspapers. He has worked on the paper’s fact-checking team, called Les Décodeurs, since 2014.

• Alexios Mantzarlis, the director of Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Network. He has previously worked as the managing editor at Pagella Politica and was the co-founder of FactCheckEU.

• Angie Holan, the editor of PolitiFact. She helped launch the fact-checking website in 2007. Prior to this, she worked at newspapers in several different states.

• Eugene Kiely, a director at FactCheck.org. He previously worked for USA Today, The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Record.

• Jim Drinkard, former editor at the Associated Press’ Washington, D.C., bureau. He previously worked as a reporter for *USA Today* and the Associated Press and retired from his role as editor in June 2017.

• Linda Qiu, the *New York Times*’ fact-checker. Prior to joining the *Times* in early 2017, she worked as a reporter for PolitiFact.

• Mike Jenner, professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism and interim executive editor at the *Columbia Missourian*. From August 2015 to May 2017, he led PolitiFact’s Missouri bureau.

It should be noted that “fact-checking” in this project refers to a form of reporting in which the journalist analyzes a claim, breaks down the merits of that claim and, in some cases, assigns a rating. This kind of journalism has its roots in fact-checks in the 1980s and early 1990s by broadcast organizations such as CBS and CNN and by the *Washington Post* (Dobbs, 2012; Graves, 2016). These early fact-checks took a closer look at claims made in political campaign ads and campaign speeches. In 2008, PolitiFact and the *Washington Post* began full-time fact-checking operations, and dozens of organizations across the United States and around the world have followed suit. In the context of this project, “fact-checking” does not refer to the process of verifying each piece of information that goes into a news report, which all news organizations employ, though the process is more rigorous at magazines and with investigative pieces (McPhee, 2009; “Investigations – Guidance in Full,” 2015).

The bind

Just more than a decade ago, politicians and other public figures could speak without the worry of having their names published next to a Pinocchio face or an image engulfed in flames with the words, “Pants On Fire!”

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Fact-checking operations, some inspired in part by *The Washington Post*’s fact-checker and PolitiFact, have expanded nationally and internationally. Their purpose is two-fold: Fact-checkers provide context for complicated current events and issues, and they serve as political referees, adjudicating the extent to which a claim is true or false. The latter purpose tends to displease politicians and, most importantly, the readers/citizens whom fact-checkers aim to enlighten.

A Google search of “fact-checking bias” produces about 1.7 million results. Myriad opinion articles, academic studies and online blogs have been predicated on the idea that fact-checkers conceal their political beliefs behind a false presentation of journalistic detachment.

These accusations are, arguably, unsurprising; referees are never the popular people on the field. But the difference between a political and a sports referee is that a fact-checker’s job security depends on public support of the practice. A referee is as essential to a football game as the athletes and coaches are, but most fact-checking operations rely on funding from citizens who think fact-checking is essential to politics.

Fact-checkers are in a bind. How can they hold public officials accountable without alienating their audiences?

In interviews with eight journalists from leading fact-checking organizations, it became clear that fact-checkers take accusations of bias very seriously, but they haven’t quite figured out the best way to respond. The approaches they each take to fact-checking vary only slightly; the most significant difference is in whether they use rating systems. Furthermore, their communications with frustrated readers tend to be more reflective of the political climate than of the news organization. Attempts by journalists to change the minds of readers who believe fact-checking is biased only has a limited effect, if any effect at all.
The critics

Criticism of fact-checking in the United States has been particularly harsh on the conservative end of the political spectrum, at least in the past few years. A June 2017 analysis of responses to fact-checks from political websites during the 2016 presidential election found that 77 percent of the criticism of fact-checks came from conservative-leaning sites (Iannucci & Adair, 2017). Survey research by Graves, Nyhan and Reifler (2015) found that Democrats favor fact-checking more than Republicans do.

“This particular issue doesn’t replicate well around the world,” said Alexios Mantzarlis, the director of Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Network. “In a lot of countries, the systems aren't bipolar, but multipolar. So it's hard to attack a fact-checker for being sold to one side when there are maybe four or five sides.”

At one of France’s largest newspapers, Le Monde, the criticisms come from both ends of the spectrum in a political system with several different major political parties. Alexandre Pouchard, a journalist with Le Monde’s fact-checking team, Les Décodeurs, said claims of bias tend to come from readers who strongly identify with left-leaning political parties as well as right-leaning political parties. This, he said, is a sign that they’re doing a good job.

The cause of the perception in the United States that fact-checkers favor Democrats might also be explained by the influence of conservative media outlets on their readers and viewers. Mantzarlis said these outlets’ efforts to discredit mainstream media has possibly primed people to distrust fact-checkers.

“Now I will say, PolitiFact and the Washington Post fact-checker, two of the major political fact-checking operations, both excellent, both committed to nonpartisanship, are both hosted in liberal-leaning papers,” Mantzarlis said. “I think that's where part of the perception
may come from. But when I see FactCheck.org being attacked as well, then I kind of think that there's something more malicious in operation.”

In a move to assuage conservative criticism of fact-checker bias, Facebook, which has launched partnerships with PolitiFact, Snopes and the Associated Press to help the social media company identify and debunk fake news, has reportedly brought on a conservative fact-checker at The Weekly Standard (Timmons, 2017). Mantzarlis said any fact-checker working with Facebook has to be a signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network’s code of principles, meaning they must abide by certain standards of nonpartisanship and transparency. He also said he believes there is no such thing as a partisan fact-checker.

The idea that a “conservative” fact-checker would add balance to a supposedly liberal-leaning genre of journalism relies heavily on an idea disputed by fact-checkers — that their personal politics impedes their ability to challenge Democrats and to be fair to Republicans.

In fact, when asked if they were aware of the public perception, several fact-checkers said they had heard of it or read about it in surveys. Their own experience with readers, they said, was somewhat more bipartisan in terms of criticism. When they fact-check Democrats, they get criticism from Democrats. The same goes for Republicans.

Sometimes the criticism draws on assumptions about the way fact-checkers and the news media in general treat conservatives. Linda Qiu, the fact-checker for The New York Times, said she’s noticed that when she fact-checks Democrats, liberal readers think she’s being too harsh. They assume that the so-called “liberal media” doesn’t hold the same fairness standards for both major political parties, she said.
“There's a sense that you're supposed to be on their side,” Qiu said. “And I'm like no, no, no, I'm not on anyone's side. I'm not the opposition to anyone. I'm just trying to lay out a clear picture.”

PolitiFact Editor Angie Holan said reader criticism depends largely on whether the reader agrees with a fact-check’s rating.

“We get more complaints from conservatives about being part of the liberal media,” Holan said. “I don't think that's particularly because we're fact-checkers or what we choose to fact-check. I just think that is the rap that a lot of conservative readers make on media that are not overtly conservative.”

A blog, PolitiFactBias.com, devotes itself to finding specific instances of PolitiFact being unfair to conservatives. The blog does not provide analysis or opinion about fact-checks that give Republicans positive ratings. Rather, it mostly focuses on instances of PolitiFact being too hard on conservatives.

“What I find is it's hard for me to take critics seriously when they never say we do anything right,” Holan said. “Sometimes we can do things right, and you'll never see it on that site.”

**Politics’ effect on the public perception of fact-checkers**

Each fact-checker interviewed attributed much of the public perception of bias to the current state of politics, which largely determines which claims they choose to fact-check. The people who are in the news the most are the ones making the most on-the-record claims and sharing the most information, or misinformation, with the public. In recent years, Republican-control of Congress has meant that Republicans are more often the ones speaking publicly and
making factual claims to help bolster their proposed legislation or political agenda. Now, the problem is exacerbated by Republican-control of the White House.

In the presidential primaries, 17 Republicans ran for office. Only two Democrats faced off in the primaries. This meant that, on any given day during the primaries, the total number of claims from all presidential hopefuls tended to skew Republican.

And then there’s President Donald Trump, who has a history of making outlandish claims in speeches and interviews that even members of his own party struggle to defend. As of Dec. 5, 69 percent of the almost 500 Trump claims that PolitiFact has fact-checked were rated either Mostly False, False or Pants on Fire. His frequent tweets, which he claims are not reviewed by White House communications staff, add even more fact-checkable claims to the mix.

“Until Trump came along, Obama was the most fact-checked president in history,” said Jim Drinkard, who worked as an editor at the Associated Press’ Washington, D.C., bureau until he retired in June. He oversaw the expansion of the organization’s fact-checking initiative over the past decade.

“And it's because whoever is the president is important,” Drinkard said. “We pay the most attention to what's important. Right now we have a president who is factually challenged to a remarkable and perhaps unprecedented degree. And he happens to be the president, so he's getting fact-checked.”

In his last few months working at the Associated Press, Drinkard ended up spending most of his time fact-checking Trump due to the volume of inaccurate or misleading statements made by the president.
Glenn Kessler, *Washington Post* fact-checker, said the current state of politics in Washington presents a huge hurdle for him in trying to even the scorecard between the two parties.

“The best possible situation for the fact-checker is when you have a divided government,” Kessler said. “When you had a Democratic president and a Republican Congress, it was equal. There were days, weeks, we’d go like 14-straight fact-checks of Democrats. And then 14-straight fact-checks of Republicans.”

Now his coverage is dominated by Trump and other Republican leaders.

“I don’t know what to do,” Kessler said. “We really just like to focus on what’s in the news and who’s saying things that are interesting and worthy of fact-checking. But this year is really bad.”

**Responding to accusations of bias**

Every fact-checker expressed appreciation for reader interaction. Readers often point fact-checkers to useful information that might have been omitted. The journalists then update their fact-checks with the new information, which makes the reporting richer and more accurate. Readers also contact fact-checkers with questions about whether something someone said was true. Kessler said about half his fact-checks are prompted by ideas and questions from readers.

When readers accuse fact-checkers of bias, fact-checkers take it seriously. Eugene Kiely, a director at FactCheck.org, has a team of students who respond to readers. But whenever the organization receives complaints of bias, Kiely responds personally. He wants to know exactly what the reader thinks is biased and whether a correction, update or clarification is in order.

Other fact-checking organizations find it difficult to keep up with the volume of reader emails. Due to limited resources, many fact-checking organizations do not have people purely
devoted to responding to readers. However, they do try to respond to all questions and complaints.

There are a few similarities among how fact-checkers respond to bias complaints. One, they explain their reporting process. This means explaining why they chose a particular claim to check, which sources they used and what the logic was in their framing of the fact-check. Two, the fact-checkers always ask for specifics: What, exactly, about the fact-check leads the reader to the conclusion of bias? What information included in the fact-check is incorrect? Was any information omitted?

Sometimes readers are persuaded and placated. Other times readers continue asserting the organization is biased.

Kessler said he always tells readers to read The Washington Post fact-checker for a month and then decide if he is still biased. He’s had some success with this. Readers sometimes get back to him and say they realize he’s equal opportunity when it comes to fact-checking politicians.

Pouchard has used a similar strategy. Les Décodeurs will often respond to readers who claim they favor one party or another by sending them fact-checks of politicians from other parties. Again, this doesn’t always work.

A possible reason some people cling to their ideological beliefs in the face of factual information that contradicts those beliefs is a phenomenon called the backfire effect, in which misperceptions are increased upon seeing counter-factual information. But recent research has debunked the theory. Porter and Wood (2016) tested more than 8,000 research participants on 36 different topics and found a backfire effect for only one issue: the misperception that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq. Another study found that Trump supporters corrected their
misperceptions of claims Trump has made after being presented with factual evidence that counters those claims (Swire et. al., 2017). This, however, did not make participants less likely to vote for Trump.

“In most cases people will, on average, change their mind towards the more accurate information,” Mantzarlis said. “Now, people are fact-resistant but not fact-immune. We do have confirmation bias. We do have motivated reasoning. We do have all kinds of things that make it less likely to accept things that go against our opinions.” But just because the human mind finds ways to protect its beliefs, doesn’t mean it is impossible for people to change their minds in the face of evidence that challenges their beliefs, he said.

Several fact-checkers perceived many of the complaints of bias they receive to be coming from a small percentage of the population that has particularly strong ideological views. Activists were much more likely to complain.

In some cases, the complaints devolve into abuse. Readers sometimes attack fact-checkers on a personal level.

“I've gotten a lot of gender-based attacks,” Holan said. “I mean for some reason some of the readers who dislike us like to go to the insult of ‘whore.’ That seems to be super popular.”

Qiu said she receives sexist comments along with racist attacks because her last name is Asian. The online abuse tends to increase when a partisan website writes about or criticizes something she wrote.

In one instance, when Qiu was still working at PolitiFact, Breitbart published a piece criticizing a fact-check she wrote on a claim made in the novel, Clinton Cash. She was subjected to a barrage of hate on social media and in email.
“A lot of those were very rude memes, like pictures and my face superimposed in very compromising positions,” Qiu said. “That was not fun.”

Qiu and Holan said they don’t bother responding to abusive comments and complaints from readers. Especially when they receive hundreds of emails in a given day, they don’t find it productive.

Do ratings make it more difficult to defend against bias complaints?

Critics of rating systems believe ratings introduce opinion into articles that are meant to be objective.

PolitiFact created its rating system because it wanted to be able to sort statements by relative accuracy, Holan said. This allowed the organization to look at particular subjects and see how accurate politicians and pundits have been on the issues, for example.

“Now I think some people take the ratings too far in what they think we're trying to say, because we don't fact-check a random sample of what any one person says or a random sample on any one topic,” Holan said. “So some of our audience sees this as an opportunity for us to have biases and bring our biases in, but that's not what we're intending.”

The ratings tend to occasionally stump fact-checkers. Holan sometimes has trouble deciding between a Half True and a Mostly True because Half True is often perceived by readers to mean the speaker is being shady. Half True is actually intended to convey that the statement is partially accurate but leaves out important information.

Another benefit of rating systems is that they help fact-checkers apply their judgment consistently.

“The Major League umpires, they work really hard to be consistent so that you know depending on the umpire you have, you know the strike zone doesn't change in size by 25
percent based on who stands behind the plate,” said Mike Jenner, a professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. He taught the school’s fact-checking class, which publishes through PolitiFact’s Missouri bureau, from 2015-2017.

Jenner said he struggles in deciding on a rating for a claim that is literally true but has a lot of nuances.

At The Washington Post, Kessler has trouble deciding between two Pinocchios, which is similar to PolitiFact’s Half True rating, and three Pinocchios, which is like a Mostly False.

“These ratings, frankly, are subjective,” Kessler said. “So my three might be someone else’s two.”

But the ratings do help him with consistency, he said. One time he had trouble deciding on whether to give a claim that Hillary Clinton had made a two or a three, and he settled on a three. After he published, a reader sent him a link and pointed out that he had already fact-checked that same talking point a couple a few years prior.

“With great trepidation, I clicked on the link to see what was my rating, and it was three Pinocchios,” Kessler said. “And I had exactly the same analysis as to why it was three Pinocchios. So that was a relief.”

In response to reader demand to have input on the ratings, The Washington Post created a rating tool for people to vote on how many Pinocchios they think the fact-check should have. Regardless of how true or nuanced a claim is, readers most often either choose a Geppetto Checkmark, denoting the claim is true, or four Pinocchios. In other words, reader ratings fall along the same extremes as partisan lines in a deeply divided country.
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“People take it very seriously,” Kessler said. “You wouldn’t believe how many emails I get from people who apologize profusely for having accidentally hit the wrong rating, and could we fix it so it didn’t mess up the score. It happens at least once a day.”
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Readers do care a lot about ratings. Holan said the majority of complaints she receives take issue with the ratings, not so much with the reporting.

But ratings also force reporters to analyze their logic. All fact-checking organizations adjudicate in some way or another. The Associated Press explains why a claim is wrong in the first few paragraphs of its fact-checks. FactCheck.org uses phrases such as “misleading” or “lacks context” to summarize claims. With a rating system, reporters and editors take a look at the reporting, analyze it and discuss why they think a claim should have one rating or another.

“I think the risk (of not using rating systems), and sometimes we do see it, is that if you don't have to come to an actual conclusion, you sort of throw all that facts that you know on the page, and you're not really adjudicating.” Mantzarlis said. “Then you're not delivering the service that fact-checking was launched and born to deliver.”

And, Jenner argued, if those ratings do end up driving readers to criticize, that might not be such a bad thing.

“We have to invite scrutiny,” Jenner said. “We're scrutinizing what others say and what they do. We need to be able to provide the same accountability that we're asking of public officials.”

\textbf{Some solutions}

That said, there are many things journalists can do to help combat the perception of bias. The first step is to follow organizational policies. The seven different organizations represented in this paper express a commitment to transparency in their policies. In general,
readers should know where and when information was found or sources were contacted. Whenever possible, sources should include hyperlinks.

Each organization lists their corrections policy online along with a commitment to correcting misinformation in a swift manner. Fact-checkers who work for a newspaper follow the paper’s corrections policy. PolitiFact’s corrections policy states that, whenever a correction or clarification is made, the organization evaluates whether the change affects the fact-check’s rating. If the correction or clarification affects the final ruling, the rating will be changed as well.

The aim for transparency in fact-checking even extends beyond the reporting and editing processes. The International Fact-Checking Network specifically asks fact-checking organizations to be transparent in how their operations are funded (“Code of Principles,” 2016). “If we accept funding from other organizations, we ensure that funders have no influence over the conclusions we reach in our reports,” the network’s code of principles says. “We detail the professional background of all key figures in our organization and explain our organizational structure and legal status.” In addition, the network says fact-checkers should create an accessible communication channel between the organization and the readers.

Fact-checkers must apply to be signatories of the network’s code and pass a vetting process. As of December 2017, at least 40 organizations in the United States and abroad had passed the process and signed on to the code. The list includes the Associated Press, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, Le Monde and The Washington Post. Facebook requires the fact-checking organizations it works with to be signatories of the code.

These policies are meant to help ensure journalistic integrity and build or keep public trust, but fact-checkers have come up with more ways to address their public perception problem.
Qiu, for instance, said she tries to consult experts who fall along an ideological spectrum. She described it as doing a “mini survey,” where she reaches out to several different experts who represent different viewpoints, and she tries to find some consensus among them. If every expert can agree on one point, that point can be considered factual. If she talks to six experts and only five of them agree, Qiu can say “most of the experts believe such and such” and then present the other side.

Whenever possible, Qiu tries to rely on data rather than experts. “You can't slant numbers,” Qiu said.

Mantzarlis said one way to help bring ideological diversity into a fact-check is to find the surprising source, someone who would arguably counter his or her own interests by weighing in on the fact-check. For instance, when reporting on a claim made about the military, the journalist could reach out to a pro-military group in addition to finding expert sources who don’t have a stake in the outcome of the fact-check.

Another way journalists can cut down on the possibility of slant in their fact-checks is by paying close attention to the report’s language.

Holan said she edits out certain snarky phrases that occasionally creep into reporters’ work. She sometimes sees reporters write things that imply some sort of expectation of how a politician or other public figure speaks. She has seen this happen especially when reporters write about claims made by Trump, since he has a history of making inaccurate statements.

“Every now and then, one of our reporters files a piece that has something like, ‘Well here he goes again,’” Holan said. “And I always delete out that because it's like Trump, he… yes, he has a lot of negative ratings on our site. But I live in hope that one day he will gradually learn to speak more accurately, and our fact checks should give him the benefit of the doubt… and
maybe one day soon he'll reduce the number of things that he says that are not accurate.” She added that not everything Trump says is false.

Drinkard and Qiu both stressed the importance of being dispassionate in the writing of fact-checks. The tone should remain neutral, they said. This can be difficult when the purpose of fact-checking is to point out inaccuracies. The format lends itself to condescension, Qiu said, which is why she thinks it’s important for the writing to be dry.

On the other hand, Drinkard said there are occasional opportunities when fact-checkers can have some fun with the writing. One of his favorite leads on a fact-check was about the claim that Obama was the least popular president in modern American history. The first sentence of the story restated the claim. “And the second sentence was, ‘That's true, if you leave out Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy, George W. Bush…’ And we listed 17 presidents,” Drinkard said. However, he said the livelier writing should be reserved for particularly outlandish claims.

One subject on which fact-checkers vehemently agreed was the debate over whether to use the word “lie.” Out of six fact-checkers who were asked about the use of the word, each said it should be avoided. Their main gripe was that it implied the speaker intended to deceive.

“Did they believe what they said when they were passing this information along?” Kiely said. “Were they given some bad information from someone when they passed it along? That wouldn’t be intentional either. You just don’t know.”

Qiu, Kiely and Pouchard tried to imagine a situation in which the word would be used but found it difficult to come up with exact circumstances. There would have to be definitive proof, they said. If, for example, some emails existed that showed the speaker knew what he or she was saying was wrong, and those emails were made public, could a case then be made for using the word.
“It also has an emotional freight with it,” Drinkard said. “It's a word that is very emotionally tinged. And we see ourselves more in the role of a referee or a judge. We're not blaming them for (an inaccurate statement). We're just pointing out that it's wrong.”

**Conclusion**

Fact-checking, when done well, can help people find the truth in the garbage heap of fake news and political spin online and in media. It can also hold public officials accountable.

But it can’t do any of that without reader trust.

Journalists interviewed said they didn’t really have a surefire solution to winning over readers who accuse them of bias. Sometimes responding to them produces productive and helpful conversations. Other times it does not.

I see one common thread with each experience these journalists shared with me, and I’m surprised not one person interviewed brought it up. What’s clear is this public perception problem stems from an overall lack of media literacy among readers.

Here’s my long-winded reasoning:

Fact-checking is perhaps the most transparent form of journalism. Information is corroborated with multiple sources, given scrutiny and proper context and, when possible, hyperlinked. In some cases, as is common practice at PolitiFact, fact-checkers spell out the dates on which they communicated with their sources and say whether interviews were conducted over email or over the phone. Fact-checkers walk readers through their reporting process; they explicitly say how they arrived at their conclusions, including why certain pieces of information carry more weight than others. I went into my research assuming I would find practices and processes vary widely among fact-checkers, but instead found consensus in the ways fact-checkers report, write and edit. Furthermore, they are held up to their standards by
These journalists do not care about the political affiliations of the people they fact-check, and they actively challenge their own political assumptions. They know every word they write will be pored over by readers looking for holes in the reporting and evidence of bias, so they pay close attention to where their reporting and writing are potentially failing readers.

My own experience gives me no reason to doubt that a system of checks and balances within each fact-checking organization pushes reporters back in line when they stumble outside a mindset of impartiality.

The first fact-check I wrote for PolitiFact’s Missouri bureau required me to take a deep dive into some frequently cited crime statistics. The state’s governor, Eric Greitens, made his case for increased police funding in part by saying Missouri’s three largest cities were among the top 11 most violent cities in the United States. When I analyzed the FBI data, it became clear how easy it was to cherry pick by simply choosing to only look at cities within a certain population range, but that wasn’t enough for me to rate the claim anything but true. Then experts told me I should take the statistic with a grain of salt. Some cities, St. Louis especially, are deeply segregated by race and income, they said. When a metropolitan area has a pronounced history of white and middle-class flight from urban centers to the suburbs, that city’s crime rates, which are measured by the number of crimes per 100,000 residents, tend to be worse than those of more integrated cities. The statistic might give someone the impression that Missouri’s cities are incredibly unsafe, but it most likely means that the crime is just concentrated to the areas that are represented in the FBI’s yearly report, which separates city centers from their surrounding metropolitan areas. It was clear to me that the statistic needed some context.

When it came time to edit and discuss my fact-check, I had it in my mind that the claim was mostly false. It’s not that I wanted Greitens to be wrong — I didn’t have much of an opinion
of him at the time, nor was I a registered voter in the state — but a part of me did not want Missouri’s cities to suffer from a poor and arguably unfair reputation. My editors were surprised I had said the claim was mostly false, given that the statistic itself was, at least on the surface, accurate. One editor thought the claim should be rated mostly true. Another thought half true. Other reporters weighed in and said they didn’t see how it could possibly be mostly false. I had a moment of clarity and realized I was letting my feelings shape my analysis. Since PolitiFact defines what each rating means, we compared my reporting to the definitions and settled on half true, which means the statement is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context.

I call this a system of checks and balances because each fact-check is discussed and deliberated by multiple people who are hired in part to poke holes in the reporting and writing. Every fact-check I have written has gone through multiple layers of editing. Sometimes I write a fact-check and my editor thinks I am missing a crucial piece of information that I need to include. Other times my editor takes out nonessential information. When the first layer of editing is finally finished, at least two other editors read through the fact-check. Then all three editors debate what the final rating should be and whether they agree with the rating I gave it, and I ultimately have no say in what they decide.

So where does the bias come from?

It can’t possibly come from the reporter, as the reporter’s final work is rarely the same as it was when it was first shown to an editor. It also can’t come from the sources, since the reader can see those sources for his or herself.

Perhaps it comes from everyone at fact-checking organizations everywhere working together toward the common goal of crushing one particular ideology. Some might find this idea
laughable. But to someone who lacks the understanding of how news organizations operate, this explanation might make sense.

I see evidence of readers’ weak media literacy in the fact that they continue to assert the fact-checkers are biased. As was described to me by the journalists I interviewed, the readers can’t often pinpoint exactly what screams bias to them.

Even though responding to reader complaints sometimes ends up in a productive conversation, fact-checkers haven’t figured out how to help that one strong-headed sect of readers understand how journalism is done. Until we see a cultural shift toward media literacy, the fact-checkers aren’t likely to have any luck.

But I’m an optimist. The public perception of bias could resolve itself over time. Every fact-checker I spoke to who covers politics in the United States attributed the perception of bias among conservative readers to the fact that Republicans have been the ones making headlines and gaining seats in Congress over the past few years. With more Republicans speaking publicly, more Republicans are getting fact-checked. That problem is compounded by Trump, who tends to stray from facts, holding the highest office in the nation.

“Facts are facts. That fairness element is all we have,” Drinkard told me. “Hopefully over the long-haul, when presidents come and presidents go, they'll be treated the same. And so, people will understand that.”

Engaging with readers does sometimes work. And if it works sometimes, then journalists should continue trying to get readers to understand their logic and should devote more resources to reader engagement.

In the end, though, the practice of fact-checking will just have to speak for itself.
When I asked Qiu whether it worries her knowing that sometimes a person’s natural reaction is to write off a source of information that contradicts his or her beliefs, she said it’s something she asks herself about a lot.

“How does fact-checking sway public opinion one way or another?” Qiu said. “Maybe it doesn't. But I think the purpose of it isn't necessarily to change hearts and minds, but it's to say these are the facts.”

Sources


