

Fact Check, What is It?

True: Fact checkers tend to agree on validity of news claims, researchers say

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By Mary Fetzner

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — The use of fact-checking services spikes during major news events. Fortunately, the fact checkers have generally agreed in their assessments of whether news claims are true or false, according to researchers from the Penn State [College of Information Sciences and Technology](#) (IST).

In their work, which appeared in the [Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review](#) in October, the researchers studied the practices used by fact-checking organizations to assess the validity of news claims. They measured the consistency of legitimacy ratings across four popular fact-checking platforms: Snopes, PolitiFact, Logically and the Australian Associated Press FactCheck.

“Half of U.S. adults regularly get their news from social media like X, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok,” said [Sian Lee](#), doctoral student in the College of IST and first author of the research article. “But social media platforms generally do not check the legitimacy of headlines and content the way traditional news outlets do, and this can result in the spread of misinformation — fake news — that misleads and harms people and society.”

But social media sites appear to be addressing this lack of vetting, according to the researchers. During newsworthy events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election, they increasingly turn to fact checkers to assess the validity of the news in their feeds and mitigate the spread of fake news online. “Fact checking is complex and multifaceted and involves numerous variables,” said [Aiping Xiong](#), assistant professor in the College of IST and co-principal investigator on the project. “Currently, fact-checking is often done by humans. As fact checkers aim to get closer to the truth, they may select and verify different events or see different things when looking at the same event.”

When multiple fact-checking organizations consistently agree on the accuracy of a statement, the public is more likely to trust their assessments, said [Dongwon Lee](#), professor in the College of IST and principal investigator on the research project.

“As the next U.S. presidential election approaches, we wanted to understand how fact checkers operate and if, when or why they differed,” he said. “However, so far, there has not been a large-scale data-driven study to answer such a question.”

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The researchers examined more than 24,000 fact-checking articles from Jan. 1, 2016, to Aug. 31, 2022. They developed automatic methods to collect articles from the fact-checking platforms and to compare the similarity between the claims in these articles. Using this approach, they identified 749 potentially matching claims – meaning the

same information was examined –between Snopes and PolitiFact. For these matching claims, 228 received differing ratings from Snopes and PolitiFact for how true the information was.

To investigate the reasons for these discrepancies, they manually examined the 228 cases, and found that some of the diverging ratings resulted from minute differences in the granularity of rating systems. Snopes uses a **five-point scale** – True, Mostly True, Mixture, Mostly False and False – along with additional categories of ratings such as Outdated, Miscalcaptioned and Satire, among others. PolitiFact uses its **six-point "Truth-O-Meter"** that includes True, Mostly True, Half True, Mostly False, False and Pants On Fire.

Other divergent ratings resulted from the timing of the fact checking or the specifics of claim being assessed. For example, Snopes rated the claim “Five people died during the Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot” as True, while PolitiFact rated the claim “Only one person died on that day during the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol riot” as False. The algorithm used by the researchers identified these as matching claims. But the detailed numbers – “five” versus “only one” – differed, resulting in disagreement between the fact checkers’ conclusions.

When the researchers adjusted the 228 disagreed matching claims for these differences, they found only one instance where Snopes and PolitiFact did not agree: Whether 2016 presidential candidate Ben Carson said, “Anyone caught involved in voter fraud should be immediately deported and have his citizenship revoked.”

According to the researchers, Snopes interpreted “anyone” to mean “illegal immigrants,” and rated the claim that Carson made the statement Mostly True. PolitiFact, however, interpreted “anyone” to mean “any American” and rated the claim Mostly False.

“In the end, we found only one case of a conflicting rating, which suggests that, by and large, Snopes and PolitiFact have established consistent and reliable fact-checking practices,” Sian Lee said. “We believe this enhances the credibility of fact checkers in the eyes of the public.”

[Haeseung Seo](#), doctoral student in the College of IST and contributing author, said that the findings of this study validate the fact-checking practices of social media platforms.

“Ultimately, this work contributes to the promotion of truth and the prevention of the spread of misinformation on social media,” Seo said.

The Penn State [Social Science Research Institute](#) and the National Science Foundation partially supported this research.

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From Fact Check’s Web Page

Mission

FactCheck.org is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The APCC was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels.

Process

At FactCheck.org, we follow a process when we select, research, write, edit and, if necessary, correct our articles.

Topics

Our topics vary slightly depending on the election cycle.

In all years, we closely monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by the president and top administration officials, as well as congressional and party leaders. However, we primarily focus on presidential candidates in presidential election years, and on the top Senate races in midterm elections. In off-election years, our primary focus is on the action in Congress.

Selection

When selecting material to write about, we seek to devote an equal amount of time reviewing claims by Republicans and Democrats. We do that by reviewing statements they make in the same venues.

Our sources include:

Sunday talk shows. We review transcripts of the Sunday talk shows on the major networks and cable stations. (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News and CNN.)

TV ads. A paid service provides us with TV ads for all federal elections (president, Senate and House). We review most if not all of the TV ads in the presidential campaigns, but limit our review for other federal races to those that are identified by nonpartisan sources as “competitive” – which, for example, were [eight Senate races](#) in 2014.

C-SPAN. During presidential election years, we review C-SPAN videos of campaign rallies and events on its campaign page, if transcripts of the events are not available. We also monitor C-SPAN during floor debates on major legislation and committee hearings on major issues.

Presidential remarks. We review virtually all remarks given by the president, including every speech and press conference. The president’s remarks are available on the White House website, and they are emailed to us from the White House press office.

CQ Transcripts and Rev.com. These services provide us with transcripts of network and cable news shows and/or other events, such as speeches, committee hearings and press conferences. We review transcripts that include the remarks of major U.S. politicians, party leaders, candidates and top administration officials on a daily basis. We also monitor comments made by major political figures to the news media, which will lead us to search for transcripts or videos of the remarks.

Campaign and official websites, press releases and similar materials. We monitor what politicians and candidates say on their websites or in social media posts, such as on Facebook and X, the platform formerly known as Twitter.

Readers. We answer questions from readers in features we call [Ask FactCheck](#) and [Ask SciCheck](#) on our website and [Reply All](#) in our weekly newsletter.

For more information, please see our video, “[Selecting claims to review.](#)”

Research

We systematically go through transcripts and videos looking for statements based on facts. Once we find a statement that we suspect may be inaccurate or misleading, we will engage – or attempt to engage – with the person or organization that is being fact-checked. The burden is on the person or organization making the claim to provide the evidence to support it.

If the supporting material shows that statement is accurate, we will drop it and move on to something else. Our mission is to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics, so we focus on claims that are false or misleading.

If the supporting material does not support the claim or if no evidence is provided, then we will conduct research of our own.

We rely on primary sources of information. Our sources include: the Library of Congress for congressional testimony; the House Clerk and Senate Secretary’s office for roll call votes; the Bureau of Labor Statistics for employment data; the Securities and Exchange Commission for corporate records; the IRS for tax data; the Bureau of Economic Analysis for economic data; and the Energy Information Administration for energy data – to name a few.

We rely on nonpartisan government agencies for expertise, analyses and reports, including the Congressional Budget Office, the Joint Committee on Taxation, the Government Accountability Office, the Congressional Research Service, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, and the federal inspectors general.

We also rely on a few respected and trustworthy outside experts, such as the Kaiser Family Foundation on health care data, the Tax Policy Center for tax data and the National Conference of State Legislatures. We also interview experts on other topics as needed – for instance, in researching issues on foreign countries, we would contact experts on those areas. When quoting experts, we disclose relevant biographical information, such as their previous work in government or campaigns — if applicable.

Our goal is to use the best evidence.

For more information, see our video, “[Sources for fact-checking.](#)”

Editing

After a story is written, it goes through several layers of editing and review:

Line editing. A line editor reviews the story for content. Is context missing? Is the writing clear? Is the word choice accurate?

Copy editing. A copy editor reviews the story for proper style and grammar.

Fact-checking. A fact-checker goes through the story line by line, word by word, to make sure that every fact is correct and every statement we make and

conclusion we draw is accurate and based on the evidence. All of our stories contain hyperlinks to source material, so that readers can check our facts. By the time we publish, the story will have been reviewed in most cases by four people who were not involved in the writing and the reporting of that story: a line editor, copy editor, fact-checker and by the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a former dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved June 20, 2024 from [FactCheck.org - A Project of The Annenberg Public Policy Center](#)

Checking The Fact Checkers

Heritage Foundation

Sometimes life comes at you fast. Such was the case this week for Glenn Kessler, the so-called fact-checker for Jeff Bezos' publication, The Washington Post. Kessler himself was inadvertently fact-checked by the U.S. Department of Justice, and yet this reporter who spends his career allegedly seeking the truth and correcting others was unwilling to admit his own mistake.

Kessler's full-time job is to perform public relations work for the Biden regime by often issuing fake "fact checks" of conservatives when they make points that run counter to the regime's narrative. More often than not, these fact checks require some serious spinning, or even inventing of "facts," in order to find objectionable grounds.

The incident that led to the fact check of Kessler actually began in March of last year, when Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., pointed out that people in prison would receive COVID-19 relief checks. On March 6, 2021, the senator [tweeted](#):

Senate Democrats just voted to give stimulus checks to criminals in prison. They haven't lost their jobs, they aren't worried about paying rent or buying groceries. Another example of the unrelated spending in the Democrats' partisan slush fund.

Later that afternoon, he followed up with another [tweet](#):

Dylann Roof murdered nine people. He's on federal death row. He'll be getting a \$1,400 stimulus check as part of the Democrats' 'COVID relief' bill.

This was in reference to an amendment that was offered by Sens. Cotton, Ted Cruz, and Bill Cassidy that would have prevented checks from going to prisoners. Democrats blocked that amendment.

Getting caught sending taxpayer money in the form of COVID-19 relief to prisoners, including mass murderers, is not a good look for the left. It's a bit of what we'd call a "public relations problem." Well, public relations problems call for public relations professionals. Enter Glenn Kessler.

The wielder of Pinocchios himself decided that of all things deserving of a fact check, Cotton's comments reigned supreme. [Here](#) is Kessler's two-Pinocchio verdict:

Cotton and [Sen. John] Barrasso claim Democrats are actively trying to give stimulus checks to murderers and undocumented immigrants. Not only is that wrong, but both voted for previous stimulus bills that did not have narrowed criteria.

Kessler does a few things here. First, he adds the word “actively” where it never appeared before in an attempt to absolve Democrats for their vote having an unintended or unforeseen consequence. This is patently false, as they had just voted down an amendment that would have explicitly prevented this exact thing from happening. So even the straw man insertion of “actively” doesn’t apply.

Second, Kessler claims that the senator had voted for the same thing in a prior bill. This is also patently false, as the senator had thoroughly [explained](#). The previous iteration of COVID-19 stimulus checks only went to prisoners after a liberal judge mandated that they did, over the government’s objection. This straw man also doesn’t apply.

Kessler does these two things for one reason: He wants to draw attention away from the real issue at hand—that Democrats intentionally blocked an amendment that would have prevented COVID-19 relief checks from going to prisoners. In pulling these tricks, he took his fake fact-checking to extremes that not even PolitiFact would do when it [rated](#) Cotton’s comment as “mostly true.” It appears that while most fact-checkers are shameless, some are more shameless than others.

There was only one problem for Kessler: The senator would be proved right in dramatic fashion. In a Jan. 5 [court filing](#), the Department of Justice said that the imprisoned Boston Marathon bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (a radical Islamic extremist who received asylum in the United States, by the way), received a \$1,400 COVID-19 relief payment. A spokesperson for Cotton duly updated Kessler.

At this point, journalistic ethics would require a full retraction. Honesty and honor would require an apology. But instead, with the tables fully turned, Kessler did what liberal fact-checkers do best: obfuscate and mislead for political purposes. He would use his public relations platform this time not to defend the regime narrative, but to defend himself.

Kessler announced that he would only downgrade the rating of Cotton’s statement from two Pinocchios to one. His reasoning for doing so:

Cotton primarily received the Two-Pinocchio rating because his comments lacked context. He suggested this problem was the result of something Democrats did, when he had previously voted for legislation with the same language that allowed for checks to be issued to prisoners. He also made it clear that he intended [to] weaponize this debate for campaign ads.

Note that his reasons for downgrading the rating are the same exact reasons he gave for awarding two Pinocchios in the first place. If you are looking for consistency, reasoning, or logic with liberal fact checks, then you will be looking for a long time.

This sequence of events proved to be a few things all at once: embarrassing for Kessler, entirely predictable, and illustrative of the liberal fact-checker industry.

It is also a terrific encapsulation of why Americans shouldn’t trust left-wing regime public relations professionals as arbiters of truth. They exist to serve a function, and that’s to defend leftist interests. Sometimes, it’s nuanced, sneaky, and spun so much that it’s hard to keep up. Other times, it’s just pushing the envelope so far that they get caught red-handed. The latter is what happened here.

This piece originally appeared in [The Daily Signal](#)

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We are headquartered in San Francisco with a building in Washington, DC, [conference centers](#) in both offices, and staff members in almost every state. [Dr. Drew Altman](#), KFF’s president and chief executive officer, founded the modern-day organization in 1991. You can read more about the organization’s history, mission, focus, and key programs in a [president’s message](#) by Dr. Altman. KFF is governed by a [Board of Trustees](#), which is chaired by former Senator Olympia Snowe.

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Credibility crisis: Media ‘fact-checkers’ were eager to debunk COVID lab leak theory, had to issue corrections

PolitiFact was forced to remove a fact-check that declared one scientist's lab-leak theory 'Pants on Fire'

The fact-checking industry helped mislead Americans by confidently dismissing the [COVID lab leak theory](#) in 2020, as several prominent outlets have since been forced to issue embarrassing corrections.

The theory that COVID originated from a lab leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology has now been embraced by FBI Director Christopher Wray and a bombshell report recently indicated that the U.S. Energy Department believes the virus likely started at the lab.

Back on March 21, 2020, USA Today published a fact-check titled, "Did the coronavirus originate in a Chinese laboratory?" which confidently stated that the lab leak theory was "false information" that was pushed by right-leaning outlets. It also called the notion that COVID began in a lab a "conspiracy" and insisted credible researchers believe the virus originated in nature.

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