

DONALD TRUMP AND THE SHORTCOMINGS OF FACT-CHECKING

by

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ABSTRACT

This project looks at the relationship between Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump and fact-checking journalism. Despite widespread fact-checking amidst the 2016 presidential election, Trump continues to dominate at the polls. He dishes out lie after lie with no noticeable drops in support. Why is this the case? Fact-checking journalism, a niche in the industry dedicated to checking the statements of politicians for validity, is as popular as ever. In my research, I looked at the history of fact-checking, the public's declining trust in the media, and how the public reacts to corrective information to try and grasp Trump's immunity to fact-checkers.

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Donald Trump and the shortcomings of fact-checking

The 2016 presidential election is in full swing, and fact-checkers are everywhere: *The Tampa Bay Times*' PolitiFact; the Washington Post Fact Checker; and POLITICO's Wrong-O-Meter are just a few of the many fact-checking projects dominating political coverage. Many news organizations have dedicated entire teams to fact-checking, which seeks to analyze statements and claims of politicians and influential figures. The goal is to determine whether or not the things these people say are true – and how true they are. While many of these fact-checking efforts are revered, such as Pulitzer Prize-winning PolitiFact, a product of *The Tampa Bay Times*, research suggests there are limits to these types of efforts. Fact-checking does not seem to keep politicians from lying; there is no proof that it is helping the public's perception of the news media; and some argue that, as an attempt to present objective truth to the public, fact-checking has fallen into the same trap of "balance" as journalism as a whole. We can see these limits on display as businessman Donald Trump leads the Republican presidential field, it has become clear that fact-checking has had its impact reduced. However, we can use the limits of fact-checking to understand how Trump is seemingly on track to secure the Republican presidential nomination, despite his propensity to spew lies.

HISTORY OF FACT-CHECKING AND ITS ROLE IN JOURNALISM

Fact-checking took off during the presidential election of 2012, which David Carr, media writer at *The New York Times*, called “the most fact-checked election in history.”¹ Fact-check pieces are often some of a news organization’s most viewed pieces. During election seasons, Politifact’s web traffic sometimes tops one million visitors in a single day.² Paul Colford, a spokesman for the Associated Press, said the AP’s fact-check stories “more frequently make online popularity lists.” But while the concept has taken off in recent years, fact-checking has been around since David Broder, a political writer for *The Washington Post*, called for journalists to more actively fact-check the information they were reporting.³ That is, Broder said it was not enough to just report the facts. But Tommy Burr, a Washington correspondent for *The Salt Lake Tribune*, said in a *St. Louis Tribune* piece by Tim Fitzpatrick that fact-checking is the same thing as reporting. Burr argues that fact-checking is part of the job a reporter does, but this is not always the case.⁴

Arthur Brisbane, public editor for *The New York Times*, asked readers about their opinion on the matter in a January 2012 column. “I’m looking for reader input on whether and when New York Times news reporters should challenge “facts” that are asserted by newsmakers they write about,” Brisbane wrote.⁵ Readers left plenty of comments, most assuring Brisbane that reporters should already be fact-checking in the first place.

¹ Fridkin, Kim, Patrick Kenney, and Amanda Wintersieck. "Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire: How Fact-Checking Influences Citizens' Reactions to Negative Advertising." *Political Communication* 32, no. 1 (2015): 127-51. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2014.914613>

² Fridkin, et. all. “Liar, Liar.”

³ Fridkin, et. all. “Liar, Liar.”

⁴ Fitzpatrick, Tim. "Editor Column: At The Tribune, We Check Facts, but We Also Check Acts." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 10, 2012. Accessed March 10, 2015. <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/54855103-78/function.mysql-connect>.

⁵ Brisbane, Arthur. "Should The Times Be a Truth Vigilante?" *The New York Times*, January 12, 2012. Accessed March 30, 2015. http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/should-the-times-be-a-truth-vigilante/?_r=1.

“If the Times is not going to be a truth vigilante then I certainly do not need to be a Times subscriber.”

“Much of what is wrong with what passes for journalism these days is the mandatory inclusion of "false equivalencies" in new stories - the ridiculous impulse (or directive) to present both sides of any conflict, regardless of the truth or falsity of the matter asserted by one side or another.”

“You need to look in the mirror. If you truly have to ask this question, then you seriously need to think about a job change.”

THE PUBLIC’S (LACK OF) TRUST IN THE MEDIA

The responses to Brisbane’s questions suggest there is a gap in what news reporters believe their jobs are and what audiences expect reporters’ jobs to be. But could this gap be the result of the trust people place in news organizations to present the truth?

Pew Research Center suggests that this amount of trust isn’t very high, although, according to Pew, the public trusts news organizations more than any other entity.⁶ Sixty-nine percent of people say they trust “a lot/some” of the information they get from local news organizations, the highest mark on the list (59 percent say they trust national news organizations). Comparatively, only 29 percent of people say they trust “a lot/some” of the information presented by candidates for office. In that category, 68 percent say they trust “not much/none” of what political candidates say.⁷

Pew’s research into the public’s reactions to the BP oil spill support the claim that the public puts the most trust in the media. After the spill, 67 percent of people said they had full or

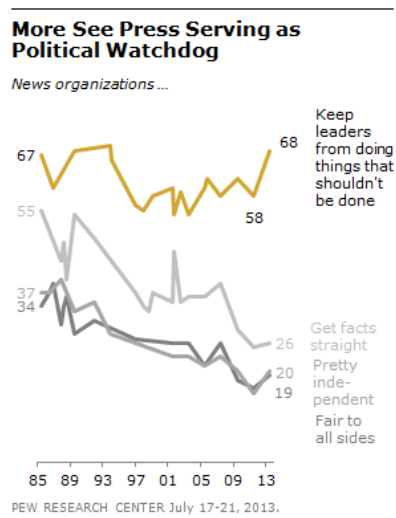
⁶ "Press Widely Criticized, But Trusted More than Other Information Sources." *Pew Research Center*, September 22, 2011. Accessed April 7, 2015. <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions/>.

⁷ “Press Widely Criticized.”

some trust in news organizations when it came to information on the oil spill. Only 51 percent said they trusted information from the federal government.⁸

PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA BIAS

More Pew research suggests that many people don't believe news organizations do a good job of presenting the truth. In 2013, only 26 percent of people said news organizations got their facts straight, and only 19 percent said the media deals fairly with all sides.⁹ But while the public is critical of the press, 68 percent say the press acts as a watchdog and keeps influential and powerful people in line. This would suggest an acknowledgement of the press's shortcomings, but an acceptance of its role as a critical player in democracy.



Robert Kiener, in a report for CQ Researcher, references Pew's research. According to Pew, 76 percent of people say media reports tend to favor one side or another.¹⁰ Kiener says that

⁸ "News Media Trusted For Information On Oil Leak." *Pew Research Center*, June 9, 2010. Accessed April 7, 2015. <http://www.people-press.org/2010/06/09/news-media-trusted-for-information-on-oil-leak/>.

⁹ "Amid Criticism, Support for Media's 'Watchdog' Role Stands Out." *Pew Research Center*, August 8, 2013. Accessed April 7, 2015. <http://www.people-press.org/2013/08/08/amid-criticism-support-for-medias-watchdog-role-stands-out/>.

¹⁰ "Amid Criticism."

number is growing from both sides of the political spectrum.¹¹ But David D'Alessio, an assistant professor of communications sciences at the University of Connecticut, Stamford, writes in the report that “while some individuals may produce biased reporting, over time both sides tend to balance one another.”¹² But others disagree, Kiener writes. Many critics of fact-checkers “say the groups have crossed the line from unbiased critics to political partisans.” The fact-checkers are not viewed as separate from mainstream reporting and are passed over as players in politics.

More See News Stories as Inaccurate, News Media as Favoring One Side

	1985	1988	1992	1997	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
<i>News organizations ...</i>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Get the facts straight	55	44	49	37	35	36	36	39	29	25
Stories are often inaccurate	34	48	44	56	57	56	56	53	63	66
Don't know	11	8	7	7	8	8	8	8	8	9
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Are pretty independent	37	40	35	--	23	23	21	23	20	15
Often influenced by powerful people and organizations	53	49	58	--	71	70	73	69	74	80
Don't know	10	11	7	--	6	7	6	8	6	5
	100	100	100		100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>On political and social issues, news organizations ...</i>										
Deal fairly with all sides	34	30	31	27	26	26	21	26	18	16
Tend to favor one side	53	59	63	67	67	66	72	66	74	77
Don't know	13	11	6	6	7	8	7	8	8	7
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 20-24, 2011. Q38-40. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. 1988 figures from January; 2001 figures from early September.

But while the concept of fact-checking presents itself as an unbiased avenue to the truth, some call out the practice for failing to distinguish itself from the bias of news media. Andrew Ferguson, in a piece for *Commentary*, calls out fact-checkers for manipulating the process they claim to clean up. Ferguson claims that fact-checkers were biased in favor of liberals. Fact-checkers, Ferguson argues, only check Democrats when they need a way to continue preaching their stance of “disinterested observer.” Once they have criticized the Democrats, fact-checkers can use that as a means to say they “were staying safely on their side of the iron divide.”¹³

¹¹ Kiener, Robert. "Media Bias." *CQ Researcher* 23, no. 17 (May 3, 2013): 401-24.

<http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre2013050300>.

¹² Kiener, “Media Bias.”

¹³ Ferguson, Andrew. "Is That a Fact-check?" *Commentary*, October 1, 2012. Accessed April 14, 2015.

<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/AcademicJournalsDetailsPage/AcademicJournalsDetailsWindow?failOverType=&q>

Ferguson claimed these fact-checkers were merely using the term as a phrase to shield their biases and their attempts at influencing readers and voters.

Ferguson's claims are consistent with one idea: the term "fact-checking," since the practice's rise in the last two political campaigns, has become loose. In a piece for "Media Decoder," a column for *The New York Times*, David Carr said while the 2012 election was the "most fact-checked" election ever, it didn't seem to affect the candidates or the outcome of the election.¹⁴ In his search for an explanation, Carr discussed what the term "fact-check" actually means. Brendan Nyhan, an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College, told Carr, "The term 'fact check' can easily be devalued, as people throw it onto any sort of an opinion that they have." Many portrayed fact-checking as the end-all of news stories with unprecedented power in the public eye, but "perhaps the biggest lie of all is that fact-checking can act as some sort of short-cut to the truth," Dan Kennedy, Northeastern University journalism professor, said in Carr's piece.¹⁵ Kennedy said there was no substitute for the process of forming judgments based on consuming various sources of information. Michael Cooper, in another piece for *The New York Times*, writes that people who don't like the subjects of fact-checks can fire back with fact-checks of their own.¹⁶ This raises the question: how far can the "fire, return fire" process go before it's no longer viewed as "fact-checking"? Cooper also points out that even political campaigns have begun to use the word "fact-check" to refer to some of their news releases. This

[query=&prodId=OVIC&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Journals&limiter=&u=txshracd2573&currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&source=&search_within_results=&p=OVIC&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALEIA304537019.](#)

¹⁴ Carr, David. "A Last Fact Check: It Didn't Work." *The New York Times*, November 6, 2012. Accessed April 6, 2015. http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/a-last-fact-check-it-didnt-work/?_r=0.

¹⁵ Carr, "A Last Fact Check."

¹⁶ Cooper, Michael. "Campaigns Play Loose With Truth in a Fact-Check Age." *The New York Times*, August 31, 2012. Accessed April 25, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/01/us/politics/fact-checkers-howl-but-both-sides-cling-to-false-ads.html?_r=1.

all contributes to the devaluation of the concept and its influence. If fact-checks have been devalued, then their influence has sunk with their credibility.

HOW THE PUBLIC RESPONDS TO CORRECTIONS

The research of Brendan Nyhan, previously at the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan, and Jason Reifler, in the Department of Political Science at Georgia State University, supports this claim. Corrections, admittedly, are not fact checks; however, comparisons can be drawn between the two based on how the human brain works. The two published a study in 2010 analyzing people's reactions after being exposed to corrections of news stories. While their study did not involve what we have come to think of as "fact-checks" – they presented news articles to participants, while some were also presented "corrections" to the news articles – the analysis of people's perceptions and reactions to corrective information is important. The two analyzed whether or not people's perceptions about a subject changed after they were exposed to a correction. Not only did they find that the corrections failed to reduce misperceptions about a certain topic, but "they actually *strengthen* misperceptions among ideological subgroups in several cases."¹⁷ Political perspective plays a large role in the phenomenon, they discovered. When certain people receive unwanted information, it can reinforce previously held perspectives. Nyhan and Reifler saw this occur in conservatives during the experiment; when they received information about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (the lack of them, specifically), many of the participants with conservative ideals more firmly believed that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The researchers argue that the results could not simply be attributed to mistrust; if these people did not trust the media, they would ignore the corrective information. This process more closely resembles "goal-directed

¹⁷ Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303-30. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2>.

information processing,” which says people selectively process information to reinforce their own ideals.¹⁸ This raises the question of whether or not fact-checking can work across partisan lines. Theoretically, it can reaffirm already existing beliefs.

Republicans More Critical of News Media than Democrats

	Rep	Dem	Ind	R-D
	%	%	%	diff
Not professional	41	18	32	+23
Hurt democracy	46	27	38	+19
Stories often inaccurate	75	59	71	+16
Too much time on unimportant stories	73	57	67	+16
Don't care about people they report on	66	52	62	+14
Politically biased in reporting	65	51	60	+14
Often influenced by powerful people/orgs	82	70	76	+12
Tend to favor one side	81	69	79	+12
Try to cover up mistakes	76	67	72	+9
Don't care about how good a job they do	28	19	30	+9
Press criticism keeps political leaders from doing their job	20	24	21	-4

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q49-Q58.

TRUMP IS IMMUNE TO FACT-CHECKING

In a December 2015 POLITICO story, Jack Shafer argues that the rise of Donald Trump, “one of the biggest documented liars in modern political times,” proves that voters don’t care about fact-checking¹⁹. It’s not that Trump supporters are unaware of the fact-checking of their presidential candidate; Shafer believes they just don’t care. Neither does Trump:

“Trump walks headlong into the fact-checkers’ band-saw knowing full well that they’ll use Nexis, digitized/searchable books, indexed news-video archives, social media and other

¹⁸ Nyhan and Reifler, “When Corrections Fail.”

¹⁹ Shafer, Jack. "The Limits of Fact-Checking." POLITICO. December 24, 2015. Accessed January 4, 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/12/the-limits-of-the-fact-checker-213461#ixzz41D5yhJfX>

resources to correct his false record,” Shafer writes. “He doesn’t care because he knows his supporters understand the ritual and symbolic thrust of what he says.”

Princeton University’s Harry Frankfurt distinguishes between lies and bullshit. Every political candidate learns to embrace bullshit, Frankfurt writes. Candidates don’t “reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does;” they just don’t pay attention to it, he writes.²⁰ “By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” From these assertions and the Donald’s strong poll numbers, questions are raised about how much fact-checking’s influence has dwindled.

In a 2015 study called “Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire: How Fact-Checking Influences Citizens’ Reactions to Negative Advertising,” Kim Fridkin, professor of political science at Arizona State University, et=al, took a closer look at the influence of fact-checking on readers. The group looked closely at fact-checks’ effects on viewers of political television advertisements, focusing on negative political ads. They found that “fact-checks influence people’s assessments of the accuracy, usefulness, and tone of negative political ads.”²¹ In a sense, the researchers suggest, people’s perceptions of the negative advertisements were more complete after watching the ad and then being exposed to the fact-check. In addition, “the fact-checks also sway citizens’ likelihood of accepting the claims made in the advertisements.”²² It is unclear how the “goal-directed information processing” discussed by Nyhan and Reifler plays into this opinion-forming process, but it is clear that these findings complicate the picture painted by Nyhan and Reifler’s results. Finally, the group found that fact-checks challenging claims made in

²⁰ Frankfurt, Harry. "On Bullshit." Accessed January 4, 2016.

http://www.csudh.edu/ccauthen/576f12/frankfurt_harry_-_on_bullshit.pdf

²¹ Fridkin, et. all. “Liar, Liar.”

²² Fridkin, et. all. “Liar, Liar.”

negative advertisements were more influential than fact-checks that just affirm the claims made in an advertisement. Fact-checks challenging the truthfulness of the claims of the negative commercial are more powerful than fact-checks authenticating the assertions made in the negative advertisement.²³ How candidates rebut fact-checks can also play a role in perceptions. When fact-checks challenge candidates, they often respond that they are “misleading, taken out of context, disingenuous, or bald-faced lies.”²⁴ But this is the nature of the back-and-forth of politics, the authors claim, and voters and citizens have come to accept that.

FACT-CHECKING DOESN'T CHANGE POLITICIANS' BEHAVIOR

Fitzpatrick writes that it is pointless for politicians and journalists to dabble over “relative truths” because “truth is complicated.” Just because a politician doesn’t tell the whole truth doesn’t mean he or she is lying. In the article, Robert Gehrke, a reporter for *The Salt Lake Tribune*, said reporters could devote all their time and effort to fact-checking politicians, but “at some point it loses its value.”²⁵ It is ultimately in voters’ hands, Fitzpatrick says, to take responsibility and separate fact from fiction. But while journalists tend to believe they are putting readers in the best position to do that, especially with the emergence of fact-checks, the current approach doesn’t seem to be working.

Trump isn’t the first Republican front-runner to thrive on lies. Mitt Romney’s presidential bid in 2012 could give us some insight into Trump’s immunity to fact-checking. Michael Cohen, in an article for *The Guardian*, analyzed Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign in 2012. Cohen argues that the United States has “never been witness to a presidential candidate, in modern American history, who lies as frequently, as flagrantly and as brazenly as Mitt

²³ Fridkin, et. all. “Liar, Liar.”

²⁴ Fridkin, et. all. “Liar, Liar.”

²⁵ Fitzpatrick, Tim. "Editor Column: At The Tribune, We Check Facts, but We Also Check Acts." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 10, 2012. Accessed March 10, 2015. <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/54855103-78/function.mysql-connect>.

Romney.”²⁶ While Cohen acknowledges that “it’s endemic to the business” of politics, Romney’s lying was so blatant and incessant that it was essentially part of his platform, even at a time when fact-checking operations were growing across the country. In fact, Cohen said it “has little impact on the presumptive GOP nominee’s behavior. Even when corrected, Romney continued to lie.”²⁷ If Romney was corrected on something he said, he would deny ever saying it: “a lie on top of a lie,” Cohen writes. Essentially, Romney found a loophole that made him immune to fact-checking: lie enough to make it “part of the political narrative.” Many of these same concepts are true for Trump in 2016.

Neil Brown mirrored this tone on Romney for *The Huffington Post*. Brown highlighted Romney’s pollster saying in response to questions about the candidate’s truthfulness, “We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers.” Brown argues that fact-checking makes “partisans very uncomfortable.”²⁸ He does, however, agree with Cohen on one thing: he believes that when politicians say something strongly and repeat it enough, people might accept it. Brown acknowledges that fact-checking doesn’t always make an impact in candidates or voters. Brown quotes Reuters’ Jack Shafer, who said, “I suppose fact-checking would matter more to voters if they expected honesty from their politicians.”²⁹ If voters don’t expect political candidates to be honest, then political candidates may not feel any pressure to be honest, even with fact-checkers breathing down their necks. Interestingly, Brown notes that it’s not the media’s job to demand honesty; it is only journalists’ job to report the lack of it. The public will do all the demanding for honesty.

²⁶ Cohen, Michael. "Mendacious Mitt: Romney's Bid to Become Liar-in-chief." *Theguardian*, June 21, 2012. Accessed March 10, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/21/mendacious-mitt-romney-bid-liar-in-chief>.

²⁷ Cohen, “Mendacious Mitt.”

²⁸ Brown, Neil. "You Can Handle the Truth." *The Tampa Bay Times*, September 8, 2012. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.tampabay.com/news/perspective/you-can-handle-the-truth/1250373>.

²⁹ Brown, “You Can.”

Michael Cooper, a political writer for *The New York Times*, wrote about how political campaigners are unfazed by fact-checkers in 2012. Even when sites like Politifact rate advertisements or statements as “Pants on Fire,” the things politicians say create the reactions they are meant to; they stir up conversations among voters, even if the conversations are based on incorrect facts.³⁰ Cooper also acknowledged that Romney’s campaign “seemed dismissive of fact-checkers.” That is, Romney didn’t think twice about saying anything just because of fact-checkers (and neither does Trump). In the piece, Brooks Jackson, director of Factcheck.org, pins the blame on the “increasingly disaggregated media ecosystem, the diminished trust in traditional news organizations and the rise of social media,” which open the door for politicians to play the system and “inject questionable assertions directly into the media bloodstream — and... rebut them.”³¹ Cooper writes that, even when fact-checkers call out falsehoods in political rhetoric, the candidates’ supporters drown out the criticisms. Many of these people “take it upon themselves to check the checkers,” which results in the back-and-forth that journalism has come to know well.

FACT-CHECKS CLAIM TO BE UNBIASED

Fact-checks claim to be unbiased presentations of the truth, but many argue that there are flaws with this claim. Burr believes fact-checking should be part of the “regular reporting process.”³² Reporters, he says, should not declare whether or not they believe something is true or false; but they should present “relevant facts that the reader can then use to determine the veracity – or lack thereof – of the claims.” Cohen says the problem with this balanced view of reporting in fact-checking is “there is natural tendency for nominally objective reporters, in

³⁰ Cooper, Michael. "Campaigns Play Loose With Truth in a Fact-Check Age." *The New York Times*, August 31, 2012. Accessed April 25, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/01/us/politics/fact-checkers-howl-but-both-sides-cling-to-false-ads.html?_r=1.

³¹ Cooper, “Campaigns.”

³² Fitzpatrick, “Editor Column.”

particular, to stay away from loaded terms such as lying.”³³ But fact-checking is grounded almost entirely in calling out the lies of politicians. If that is the case, how can a reporter say someone is lying, and where do fact-checks derive the power to do it if they are supposed to be unbiased?

Good journalists “insist at least theoretically on the iron divide between observer and participant,” Ferguson writes.³⁴ Whenever their biases are called out, they defend themselves with a “claim of strict neutrality.” But he points out that many of the biases of journalists shine through in their work. Whenever a headline reads “questions continue to be raised,” or an anchor says “this story just refuses to go away,” journalists are the ones who keep asking questions and who won’t let the story go away. “Reporters create more news than anybody, just by pretending they’re watching it unfold,” Ferguson writes.³⁵ Again, the word “pretend” suggests that journalists are required to act like they can suspend their biases in order to report objectively. This bias extends to fact-checkers as well, Ferguson argued, in whom which “conservatives unsurprisingly found an ideological bias at work.”³⁶ In a 2014 article, *Daily News Egypt* reported on the rise of fact-checking journalism. In the report, Paul Krugman, nobel laureate economist and critic of fact-checking, says Politifact “is terrified of being considered partisan if they acknowledge the clear fact that there's a lot more lying on one side of the political divide than on the other.”³⁷

Ken Silverstein, in a piece for Harper’s, looks back on an experience covering an election scandal in Missouri in 2004. Silverstein said he drafted a 2,500 word story analyzing the situation and attempting to debunk GOP accusations of voter fraud, but when it was printed, it

³³ Cohen, “Mendacious Mitt.”

³⁴ Ferguson, “Is That a Fact-Check?”

³⁵ Ferguson, “Is That a Fact-Check?”

³⁶ Ferguson, “Is That a Fact-Check?”

³⁷ “Fact-checking Journalism Gains Momentum.” *Daily News Egypt*, April 13, 2014.

<http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/04/13/fact-checking-journalism-gains-momentum/>.

was reduced to a story that was “perfectly balanced, perfectly neutral and perfectly useless.” It was a “classic of ‘he said, she said’ journalism,” Silverstein writes.³⁸ He argued that basing reporting on balance is “spineless,” and does not help readers understand the truth. Reporters should be able to “fairly assess what we see with our own eyes,” Silverstein argues, rather than trying to present both sides in an equal and balanced way. He says taking a “balanced” approach is just “an easy way of avoiding real reporting and shirking our responsibility to inform readers.”³⁹ Newspapers want to avoid taking a certain side, especially during campaigns, but presenting the most accurate picture of the truth, whether it favors one side or not, does not have to be associated with taking sides. Choosing to stay in the middle, however, leads to important stories that have been “edited into meaninglessness.”⁴⁰

PEOPLE CALL MEDIA BIASED WHEN IT CONTRADICTS THEIR VIEWS

When people call out a news organization as biased, they do so because it clashes with their own biases. Watchdog groups are increasingly calling out the media for being biased, making claims such as “the media is lying to you.”⁴¹ But these watchdog groups usually have ideals and biases opposite those of the biases they tend to call out, so it makes sense that they would call out news organizations when their views are challenged. According to Pew’s Aaron Smith, 34 percent of online political users in 2010 said they got online political news from sources that share their point of view.⁴² Thirty percent say they get their online political news from sites with no point of view, and 21 percent say they get their news from sites that don’t share their point of view. “Both Republicans and Democrats were more likely than political

³⁸ Silverstein, Ken. "The Question of Balance: Revisiting the Missouri Election Scandal of 2004." *Harper's Magazine*, May 8, 2007. Accessed March 14, 2015. <http://harpers.org/blog/2007/05/the-question-of-balance-revisiting-the-missouri-election-scandal-of-2004/>.

³⁹ Silverstein, “The Question.”

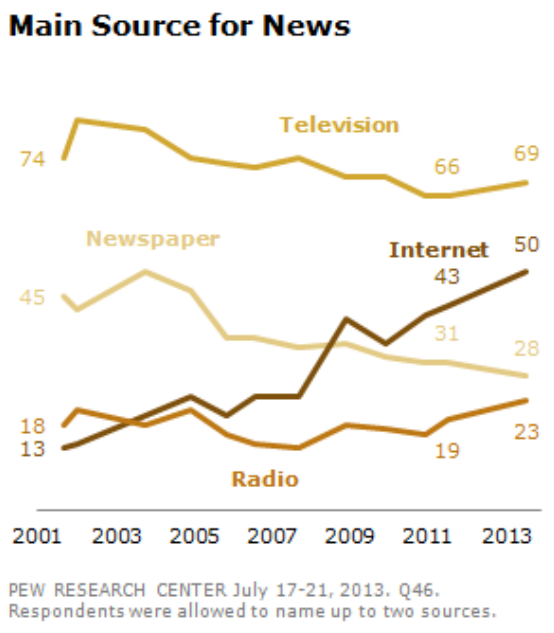
⁴⁰ Silverstein, “The Question.”

⁴¹ Kiener, “Media Bias.”

⁴² Smith, Aaron. "The Internet and Campaign 2010." *Pew Research Center*, March 17, 2011. Accessed April 7, 2015. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/03/17/the-internet-and-campaign-2010/>.

independents to say that they typically get online political news from sources that share their political point of view.”⁴³

This information, when combined with data about consumers’ main sources of news, suggests that the number of people who get news from sites sharing their viewpoint could increase. Television continues to dominate as people’s main source of political news. In 2013, 69 percent of people said they relied on TV as their main sources of news. The number of people who said newspapers were their main source of news is down to 28 percent. And, most importantly, the number of people who said their main source of news was the Internet reached 50 percent in 2013.⁴⁴



This data is not specific to people seeking out political news, however. In 2010, 67 percent of people cited television as their main source of campaign news, while 24 percent of people said the Internet was their main source of campaign news. But 56 percent of the people who relied on the Internet said they had trouble disseminating what was true and what wasn’t.⁴⁵

⁴³ Smith, “The Internet.”

⁴⁴ “Amid Criticism.”

⁴⁵ Smith, “The Internet.”

As more and more people switch to the Web for political news, the number of people who find outlets that share in their point of view and their biases should continue to increase as well. It's possible, with the Internet's increasing popularity, that the number of people who claim they get news from sources that share their viewpoints could start to push 50 percent.

Main sources of campaign news, 2002-2010

Based on all adults

	<u>2002</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2010</u>
Television	66%	69%	67%
Newspapers	33	34	27
Internet	7	15	24
Radio	13	17	14
Magazines	1	2	2

Source: The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, November 3-24, 2010 Post-Election Tracking Survey. n=2,257 national adults ages 18 and older, including 755 cell phone interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Note: totals may exceed 100% due to multiple responses.

THE LIMITATIONS OF FACT-CHECKING AND DONALD TRUMP

We are seeing the manifestation of fact-checking's limitations in the midst of the 2016 election. The style of journalism is now easily dismissed as partisan and biased, for the same reasons that readers already find it hard to trust the media: a clash of views. This is why Trump leads the Republican presidential candidates, despite the fact that PolitiFact has rated nearly 80 percent of his statements completely or mostly false. It is clear that we shouldn't expect the fact-checkers to dethrone Trump any time soon.

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