

Who is checking the checkers ?

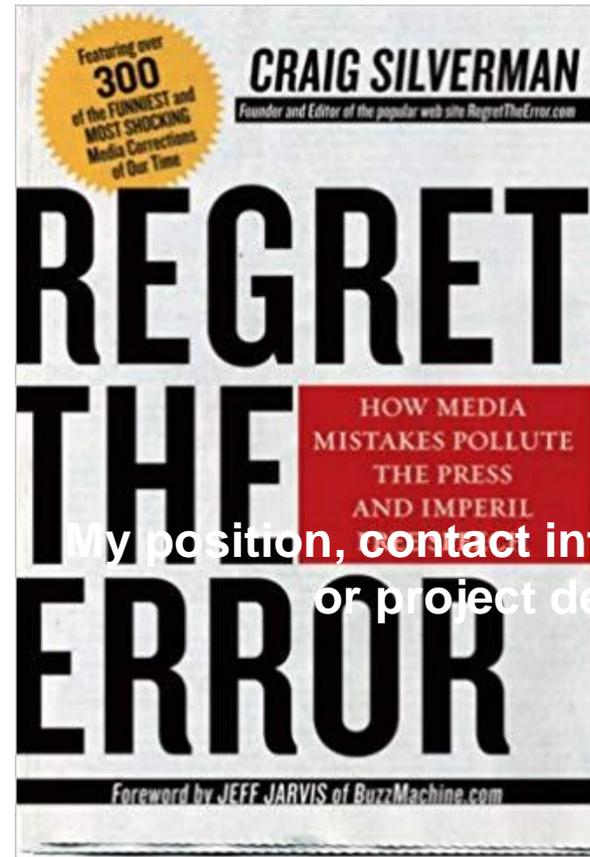
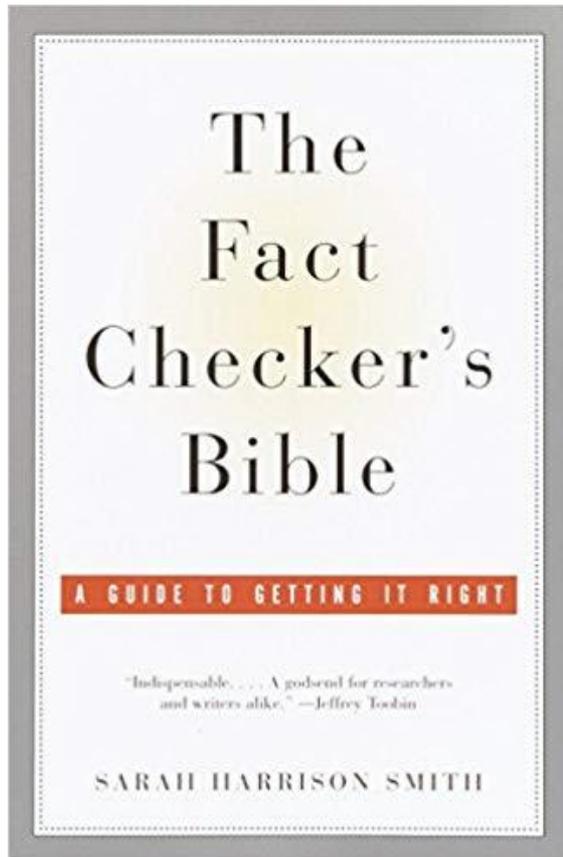
A comparative study of attitudes to pre-publication
fact checking in the US and UK news media

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Contents

- Acknowledgements
- What do we mean by pre-publication fact checking and what do we not mean
- US fact checking culture- the veneration of fact at the New Yorker and others
- Review of US fact checking processes – including some downsides
- USA fact checking disasters
- Review of UK fact checking attitudes and processes
- Some notorious failures in the UK
- Attitudes compared
- Conclusions and call for action

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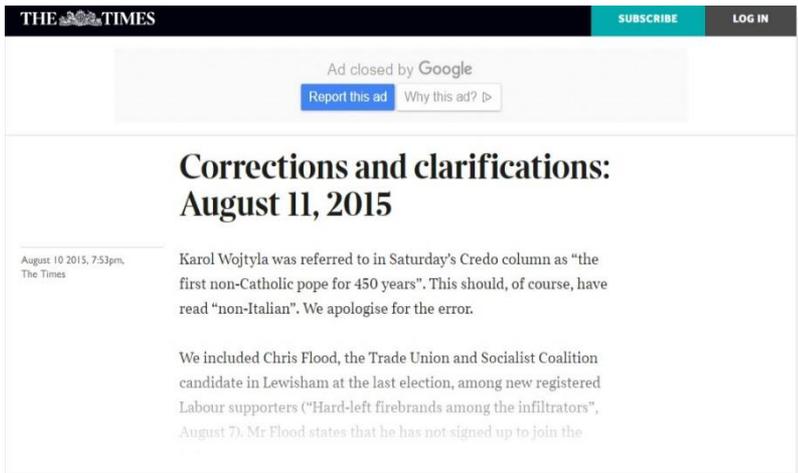


My position, contact info
or project details

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- Philip Cowan
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- And others who preferred not to be named

What is a fact checker?



Someone who phones the Vatican to check the religious affiliation of the Pontiff? (from poynter.org/regrettheerror)

If your mother says she loves you - check it out. - Arnold A. Dornfield, Chicago City News Bureau (allegedly)

MATT



'BORIS??? RUNNING FOR TORY LEADER???'

Someone who calls the Smithsonian to check the scatological routines of bears?

Some interesting statistics relating to facts

- Extrapolating from figures quoted in the New York Times it can be surmised that probably 10 percent of stories that appear in mainstream newspapers contain factual errors that could result in complaints that lead to corrections.
- Scott Maier using Charnley methodology suggests that 61% of local news and feature stories contain errors (Maier 2005)
- (The NYT is probably more fastidious about facts than some others and more likely to correct errors following complaints. Not every error results in a complaint)
- According to filings with the UK Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) it can be surmised that about 85 percent of complaints about stories in newspapers are about factual inaccuracy.
- Accuracy/inaccuracy can often be in the eye of the beholder, often the complaint is really about perceived bias
- The New Yorker magazine employs about 16 fact checkers, (P. Canby cited in Navasky and Cornog (2012)) the NYT about 10, mostly on the Magazine and OpEd (allegedly). At its peak the NYT is estimated to have employed about 1200 journalists

The Process of pre-publication fact checking in the US

- Probably began in the 1920 with the founding of Time Magazine
- It is primarily a magazine discipline and in particular is applied to the narrative long form of journalism practiced at the highest level in the US
- News reporters obviously check their facts, as do the editors they serve but this is done at speed and is a different craft
- Libel laws in the US require proof of malice by public figures claiming to have been defamed. Due diligence is clearly a defence to an allegation of malice.
- A similar legal principle based on common law privilege is known in the UK as the Reynolds Defence

The Process of pre-publication fact checking in the US

- Writers subject to fact checking are required to hand over their notes, tapes of their interviews and details of all their contacts
- Professional fact checkers go through their copy and highlight anything that is a checkable fact
- Contacts are called to check the validity of quotes, both that they said it and that the interpretation is correct. They check quotes again recordings of interviews
- Sometimes they carry out “additional reporting” without credit
- This process goes on in parallel with the editing process
- Editors decide what eventually ends up being published but fact checkers can raise concerns and put forward alternative versions cited by sources
- The relationship between the write and the fact checker is very important, Fact checkers are dealing in facts. Good writers are grateful
- Trust and mutual respect, backed by the editors judgment make the system work

(Smith 2004)

Reaction from a UK reporter

- Handing over notes!
- Handing over contacts!
- Checking quotes against tapes!
- Stone the crows



Possible downsides

- Not very efficient – time can be spent checking facts that are not going into the finished version
- Abdication of personal responsibility – why do the reporting properly if a fact checker is going to clean it up
- Most of what will generate complaints is subjective, editors still need to exercise judgment
- Cost v benefit? Times are hard, deadlines are much tighter in the online world (however fact checkers are typically not that well paid)

Notorious cases where it all went wrong

- Stephen Glass, himself a former fact checker, wrote a series of pieces for New Republic many of which turned out to be fabrications. Reports suggest he used his knowledge of fact checking to deceive colleagues.
- Janet Cooke wrote a piece for the Washington Post called Jimmy's World (Cooke 1980) Purportedly about an 8 year old drug addict, it turned out to be a fabrication (described as a composite) resulted in the first case of a reporter sending back a Pulitzer Prize. If the Editors had insisted on seeing notes or tapes.
- Other scandals involve Jayson Blair at the NYT and Patricia Smith at the Boston Globe
- Rolling Stone magazine ran a story about a rape at UVA in 2014. Managing editor, Will Dana, apologized for not fact-checking the story. However an investigation by the dean of the Columbia School of Journalism revealed that it was a failure of journalism, not fact checking, nobody got the bothered with the other side of the story.(Coronel, Coll et al. 2015)

- Gabriel Garcia Marquez reportedly said that "it was unfair that she won the Pulitzer prize, but also unfair that she didn't win the Nobel Prize in Literature." - Fair Point. Her mistake was in withholding the fact that her character was a composite.
- (G. García Márquez, "¿Quién cree a Janet Cooke?", en *El País*, 29 de abril de 1981, p. 11.)



JIMMY'S WORLD

8-Year-Old Heroin Addict Lives for a Fix

By Janet Cooke

Washington Post Staff Writer

Jimmy is 8 years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precocious little boy with sandy hair, silvery brown eyes and needle marks freckling the fatty smooth skin of his thin brown arms.

He needles in a large, beige reclining chair in the living room of his comfortably furnished home in Southeast Washington. There is an almost cherubic expression on his small, round face as he talks about life—drugs, money, the Baltimore Orioles and heroin. He has been an addict since the age of 4.

His hands are clasped behind his head, fancy running shoes above his feet and a striped hood T-shirt hangs over his thin frame. "Bad, ain't it," he boasts to a reporter visiting regularly. "I got the six of these."

Jimmy's is a world of hard drugs, fast money and the good life he believes both can bring. Every day, his father casually buys heroin from his mother's heroin lover, in the dining room of Jimmy's home. They "cook" it in the kitchen and "fix up" in the bedroom. And every day, Mom or someone else fixes up Jimmy, plunging a needle into his body and, sending the fourth grader into a hypnotic nod.

Jimmy prefers this atmosphere to school, where only one subject seems relevant to furnishing his dreams: "I want to have me a hot car and drive good and also have me a good place to live," he says. "Do. I pretty much pay attention in math because I know I got to keep up when I finally get me something to sell."

Jimmy wants to sell drugs, maybe even on the District's busiest street, Columbia Terrace SE, and some day deal heroin, he says. "Just like my dad does."

Two, 27, and recently up from the South, was the one who first turned Jimmy on. "Had to beggin' me all the time about what the streets were and what people was doing and one day he said, 'When can I get off?'" Mom says, leaning against a wall in a car-cup lane, his eyes half closed, yet piercing. "I said, 'Well, s---, you can have some now.' I let him shoot a little and, damn, the little dude really did get off."

Six months later, Jimmy was hooked. "I felt like I was part of what was going down," he says. "I can't really tell you how it felt. You never done you' best of like them rides at King's Dominion . . . like if you was to go on all of them in one day."

"It is real different from herb (marijuana). That's baby s---. Don't nobody love hardly ever smoke no herb. You can't hardly get none right now, anyway."

Jimmy's mother Andrea accepts her son's habit as a fact of life, although she will not inject the child herself and does not like to let others do it.

"I don't really like to see him fix up," she says. "But, you know, I think he would have got into it one day, anyway. Everybody does. When you live in the ghetto, it's all a matter of survival. If he wants to get away from it when he's older, that's his thing. But right now, things are better for us than they've ever been . . . Drugs and black folk been together for a very long time."

See ADDICT, A1, Col. 1



By Michael Ochs Jr. for The Washington Post

UK attitudes to fact checking

- The UK has the toughest libels laws in the liberal western world, favouring the claimant (reformed slightly in the Defamation Act 2013)
- Claimants can secure huge damages settlements with lawyers on a no-win-no-fee arrangement; costs far outstrip damages
- No evidence of people specifically employed as “fact checkers”
- Section editors and sub editors act as gatekeepers but reporters are expected to take responsibility for their copy, even freelancers usually have to sign an agreement stating that everything they submit is factually accurate
- Newspapers employ “night lawyers” who are barristers (courtroom advocates) who are supposed to read every word and tell the editor about possible libels. The editor, of course, has the final word
- Some magazines have lawyers on standby, often linked to libel insurance policies
- If reporters are responsible for self checking one would assume that lots of reporters get fired for making mistakes?

UK attitudes continued

- An editor at a UK satirical magazine:
- “When I started I believe there were 27 outstanding libels working through the system and they told me my job was to stop them. "How would you do that?" I said I'd ring up the people mentioned. So I started to do that. The first one was a man accused of having sex with his secretary on his desk. He denied and threatened to sue. I reported back. And of course, if you proceed in the face of a flat denial it makes everything worse. After a while they told me not to do that but to stick to checking verifiable things. We got a Nexis-Lexis account which helped but they balked at paying for it after about six months.”
- Another senior journalist: “I have never heard of anyone being sacked for a factual error, plenty of people are sacked because their face didn't fit or because they did not get the story.”
- Privacy is the big concern and is provoking more litigation (phone hacking etc) Privacy Law can only apply to information that is correct.

Notorious cases in the UK

- A young trainee at The Times called Boris Johnson fabricated a quote and compounded the error. He was fired but according to reports it was more because of his lack of remorse than the error.(Gimson 2012)
- Do not know what happened to him after this.
- The Sun carried a story naming Rock Star Elton John as being involved in a sex scandal with under age rent boys.
- The story was correct except that Elton John was not involved
- The story was compounded with allegations about John having the voice boxes on his guard dogs cut to stop them barking (completely untrue, the editor did not pull the story once the error was discovered)
- The subsequent libel claim was settled for a mere £1million
- One author of the report was the editor's brother, who he had to fire
- A reporter for Private Eye Magazine subsequently asked the editor what their mother thought of his actions

Some others (nobody fired here)

THE Sun THE TRUTH

Wednesday, April 13, 2017 28p

Tycoon Adnan thrown in jail

GATES OF HELL

- Some fans picked pockets of victims
- Some fans urinated on the brave cops
- Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life

DI GRIEVES FOR LEE, AGED 14: Pages 2 and 3



Daily Mail EURO 2016 8-PAGE PULLOUT

MONDAY, JUNE 13, 2016 www.dailymail.co.uk DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR 65p

The dazzling Queen

After that brilliant birthday weekend, a glorious picture pullout of her life in jewellery

FURY OVER PLOT TO LET 1.5M TURKS INTO BRITAIN

No.10 accused of cover-up before Brexit vote

PLUS

FREE PEARL AND WHITE SAPPHIRE EARRINGS

... LIKE HERS

SEE PAGE 42



In 2004 Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan was fired after pictures of UK soldiers allegedly abusing Iraqi prisoners were published and subsequently proved to be fabricated. The fabrication was exposed after some old school fact checking by the Special Investigations Branch of the Royal Military Police. They proved that a vehicle used in the pictures could not have been in Iraq.



A strange twist on the fact checking divide

- Nina Burleigh, wrote an article entitled "The Mystery of Melania" which ran as a UK Telegraph Magazine cover story on 19 January 2019 based largely on reporting from Golden Handcuffs: The Secret History of Trump's Women by Ms Burleigh and published in the US by Gallery Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster in October 2018
- Ms Burleigh is a regular writer for Newsweek and as best as can be determined the book and the subsequent article were professionally fact checked to a high standard (allegedly anyway)
- A week later, without Ms Burleigh's knowledge or consent (allegedly), The Telegraph published a swift and prominent apology and retraction of multiple statements said to be contained in Ms Burleigh's Article. This was in response to threats made by US lawyers representing the Trump Family, (allegedly) Charles Harder aka The Gawker Slayer.
- Ms Burleigh is now suing the Telegraph for defamation over statements made in the apology. Her lawyers say that counsel's opinion was favourable
- It appears that the article itself was fact checked but that the apology was not?



Attitudes compared

- The very existence of fact checking as a part of professional journalism indicates that the journalism business cares about factual accuracy
- However it is reserved to a small proportion of the “top level” magazines
- Perceived “failures of fact checking” result in wide public discourse, self reflection
- Does the reaction to fact checking failure amount to moral panic(Cohen 2002) amongst the chattering classes of the US? Or is there more to it?
- Most UK journalists care about accuracy and accept the concept of personal responsibility.
- The public discourse is more about media ownership and the privacy of elite people
- The public reaction to scandals involving fabrication or inaccuracy pass quickly and are dwarfed by the concerns mentioned above
- Media proprietors care more about the getting caught than prevention
- No evidence that the audience cares about accuracy, rather than they are healthily skeptical about whatever they read.

Attitudes compared – getting fired

Avoiding getting fired for a mistake in the US (Source Craig Silverman)

Avoiding getting fired in the UK for a mistake

- The mistake in question was not a willful attempt to mislead, a significant conflict of interest that was deliberately concealed, or a breach of ethical standards related to plagiarism and fabrication.
 - The reporter has been with the organization for a long time, is not a contractor, and previously avoided other major mistakes.
 - The reporter is well respected by colleagues internally and externally.
 - The organization is not sued as a result of the error.
 - The error doesn't get too much media attention.
- The mistake in question was not a willful attempt to mislead, a significant conflict of interest that was deliberately concealed, or a breach of ethical standards related to plagiarism and fabrication **and you did not get caught.** (see point 5 below)
 - The reporter occupies a high status in the organisation or is sleeping with someone who is subject to point 5 below.
 - The reporter is well connected to external high status individuals, or is a leading member of a political party in favour with the proprietor, subject to point 5 below.
 - The organization is not sued as a result of the error for too much money.
 - The error doesn't get too much media attention. Subject to “Dog does not eat Dog” (*Farlex Dictionary of Idioms*. (2015). Retrieved May 17 2019 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/dog+does+not+eat+dog>) and the “10/11 day rule” (Lawson, 2002)

Online fact checking

- It goes without saying that online journalism needs to be quicker to publication therefore the time spent fact checking is reduced. (There, I said it)
- But equally it can be quickly corrected
- Jeff Jarvis and others have suggested that in the online world the community of readers should contribute as fact checkers themselves (foreword to (Silverman and Jarvis 2009))
- Sadly major news outlets have started switching off the forums and opportunities for readers to respond because of trolling ((Brodeur, 2015; Ellis, 2015; Gross, 2014; Labarre, 2013) cited in Liu and McLeod (2019))
- Are we not abdicating our roles as Professional journalists if we are just publishing any old c*** and letting the audience tell us what is correct and what is not?
- Should we let the audience correct our grammar and spelling also?
- The accuracy of the copy is what gives magazines, or at least certain magazines, their elevated status, they are quality products that maybe advertisers want to associate with and readers want to be proud to be part of their communities.
- It requires effort and for publishers to spend money on it

Some observations

→ If an incorrect verifiable fact is published it can be corrected and stand corrected, the publisher's reputation is damaged

→ Maybe no harm means no foul?

→ When do you remember seeing a politician losing votes because they made an incorrect statement about a verifiable fact? What does this tell us?

→ Is it possible that the great mass of the public out there do not even care about facts?

→ Do people believe what they read in Newspapers, on tv or online?(Banning and Sweetser 2007). Is this a problem?



Conclusions and call for action

- How many of YOU teach and assess fact checking and verification?
- Do your students really understand what “a verifiable fact” means, let alone how to authoritatively confirm it?
- There is much attention to checking the veracity of statements by politicians, what about statements from journalists? Should they not be checked?
- If we do not check our own work how can we check others?
- Fact checking is at the heart of Quality, but are we sure that the market wants quality?
- If we do not integrate this into journalism education how will standard ever rise

Conclusions and call for action

- The fact that fact checking exists as a discipline in the US, albeit restricted to certain high profile magazines and a few other places, shows that in the US journalism culture factual accuracy is important.
- It is part of the very culture, as evidenced by the inclusion of fact checking in cultural artifacts such as Movies, tv novels and even Broadway shows
- Why are there no fact checkers in UK journalism?
- The lack of any interest from UK publishers in establishing a distinct function of pre-publication fact checking shows that the emphasis is on risk management rather than quality. How can UK journalism expect to rise above the beasts in the fields and on the Internet?
- Maybe it is up to us and our students to lead the reform of these attitudes?
- Fact Checking and Verification must be taught **and assessed** at every stage in journalism education



Useful check list for checking before publication

Courtesy of IPSO filings by Associated Newspapers UK

- 1. Is your story supported by an on-the-record quote or bone fide document?
- 2. Does the quote or document you are relying upon describe the activities of another person or organisation? Then its accuracy needs to be checked and the person or organisation given an opportunity to comment.
- 3. What if the person or organisation refuses to comment? If you are sure they have received your request for comment,
- 4. What if it is not possible to contact the person or organisation concerned? You need to keep a note of all the steps you have taken to reach them
- 5. Are you relying on an off-the-record briefing? An off-the-record source who can't be named is unlikely to be strong enough evidence to defend an accuracy complaint to IPSO.
- 6. Are you relying on an off-the-record briefing concerning the activities of a person or organisation other than the one giving you the briefing? Then any claims need to be put to the person or organisation as in steps 2-4.
- 7. What if I have two independent off-the-record sources? It is helpful, but not sufficient to ensure verification. You still need to go through the processes in step 2-4.
- 8. Check the legal warnings basket before you approach anyone for comment, and before you file your story. If the facts in your story have been the subject of legal warnings or corrections in the past,
- 9. Public interest justification. Before you engage in any activity which might give rise to a possible breach of the Editors' Code,
- **And then totally ignore the above if the editor says so or it's a good enough story?**

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