

Commentary:

Fact checkers twist the facts

Michael Costello/Lewiston Tribune

This year's Journalism Kosmos are dominated by the "fact checkers."

A few years ago, the news media suffered an infestation of so-called fact checkers. This trend struck yours truly as a bit ironic because journalism was supposedly all about the discovery and dissemination of the truth. However, the mainstream news media has suffered a well-deserved loss of credibility in the last 40 years or so, and concluded that they needed to take steps that would restore that credibility.

Those of us with a few score tree rings suspected all along that these fact checkers would adopt the New York Times' fact checking standard of "fake but accurate." After the media learned that they could depose a president (Richard Nixon) and defeat the United States military (Vietnam), most decided that they would no longer be satisfied with authoring history's first draft and made shaping history their primary goal.

As a consequence, news consumers have learned to doubt the motives and therefore the reliability of those who present the "news."

Hence, the rise of the fact checkers.

But as one would expect, in the fake but accurate world of modern journalism, it's not facts that are judged. It's the interpretation of the facts that matter. In the New York Times' famous fake-but-accurate front page news story, the Times confessed that the memos used in Dan Rather's disastrous attempt to portray former president George W. Bush as frequently AWOL from his Air National Guard duties were forgeries, but judged that Rather's final conclusions about Bush's record were accurate.

They wanted it to be true. And that was all the evidence they needed.

And so even though this election year provided numerous nominees for the New York Times Memorial Kozmo, the judges chose to narrow the field down to fact checkers.

The ironically misnamed Politifact provided us with a fine example of the news media's fact-checking fakery. Politifact was offended by a Mitt Romney claim that the unemployment rate at the conclusion of his one term as governor was 4.7 percent.

This would seem to qualify as an easily verified or debunked fact. But not to Politifact. So even though Romney's claim was precisely accurate, Politifact ranked this fact as only "half true."

It was either factual or it wasn't. But Politifact called it half true because, in their opinion, Gov. Romney was not wholly responsible for Massachusetts' healthy economy.

Politifact wasn't fact checking. Politifact wasn't disputing the facts. Politifact was actually telling you what conclusion they wanted you to draw from the data.

A major issue in the 2010 midterm election was the extravagance of then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act revealed that she frequently used military aircraft for travel and that she and her guests consumed prodigious quantities of high-priced alcoholic beverages and luxurious hors d'oeuvres at the taxpayers' expense.

Her replacement as speaker, John Boehner, promised that once he gained the gavel, he would limit his travel to commercial flights. After two years, Politifact decided to check up on Boehner's promise. And every piece of evidence Politifact could find proved that he had kept his promise.

Politifact's judgment? "In the works."

Politifact is hoping that Boehner will someday slip up so that they can call him a liar. Until then, it's "in the works."

Glenn Kessler is the Washington Post's fact checker.

After the terrorist attack that killed our Libyan ambassador, Post columnist Marc Thiessen cited a Government Accountability Institute report that President Obama skipped most of his Presidential Daily Briefings in 2012, including the last eight prior to the Benghazi attack. This data came from Obama's own calendar.

Nevertheless, Kessler denounced the claim as "bogus." He claimed that Obama might have received the same information from other sources, but provided no evidence.

A few weeks earlier, Kessler was called upon to challenge "facts" presented by his paper's reporters that recycled a previously debunked Obama claim that as president of Bain Capital, Romney pioneered outsourcing jobs to China. Kessler recused himself, saying that it was not his job to fact check his own paper.

That treatment is reserved for his paper's token conservative.

According to a Gallup poll taken in September, a sizable majority (60 percent) of Americans have little or no confidence in the news media's ability or willingness to report news accurately, honestly or fairly.

The people know fake, and not necessarily accurate, when they see it.

Costello is a research technician at Washington State University. His email address is kozmocostello@hotmail.com.