

Who Fact-Checks

Fact-checking is one of those invisible jobs the public doesn't usually think about. In fact, this anonymity was the inspiration of *Invisibles: The Power of Anonymous Work in an Age of Relentless Self-Promotion* by David Zweig, a former fact-checker at *Vogue* and research head at *Radar*, a short-lived print magazine. In the introduction to Zweig's book, he says of fact-checking: "I worked meticulously for long hours, under hard deadlines, yet never received notice for my work...unless I made an error."

Despite this lack of notice, fact-checking is a necessary and important job in journalism. Even a small error can ruin a piece—readers may wonder why they should trust the journalist at all, if such an obvious mistake could sneak into a published story. Well-trained, careful fact-checkers can protect a publication's reputation by bailing out writers and editors who have far more experience in the field. As journalists, it's our job to provide readers with facts. When we make mistakes, not only do we fail at this fundamental task, we also damage our reputations. That goes not just for individual journalists or publications, but for media as a whole. Each mistake chips away at our collective credibility, which is already in the crosshairs in the modern political era.

Zweig is right: No one notices the fact-checker unless errors go to print. There are many well-known journalistic failures where this work has come into sharp public view. In one of the most famous cases, Stephen Glass, a writer at the *New Republic*, fabricated an entire story. (The journalist who caught him, Adam Penenberg, then an editor at *Forbes.com*, is now a professor at NYU, and the case became the basis for the movie "Shattered Glass.") A later investigation revealed that Glass had fabricated in whole or in part dozens of stories for *The New Republic*, as well as articles in *Harper's* and *Rolling Stone*, both of which employed fact-checkers. To cover his journalistic fraud, Glass concocted fake source materials, including voicemail messages, business cards, and, perhaps most infamously, a website for a mythical company.

More recently, in November 2014, *Rolling Stone* published a story by journalist Sabrina Erdely titled "A Rape on Campus"—[an astonishing account](#) of a violent group sexual assault at a University of Virginia fraternity party. The story was shocking, punishing in its detail and riveting to read, tackling the widespread and thorny problem of how universities treat victims of sexual assault. It quickly went viral, hitting more than 2.7 million views, and kicked off both university and police investigations.

But the story was wrong. While UVA [had other cases of sexual assault](#), no rape like the one Erdely portrayed appears to have occurred, nor was there a fraternity party on the date when

it allegedly happened. The main assailant didn't even exist. Within weeks, after intense public criticism and skepticism, *Rolling Stone* issued an apology regarding discrepancies in the story. *Rolling Stone* then invited Steve Coll, the dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, to write a report, which was **published on April 5, 2015** along with a full retraction and an apology. The story also drew lawsuits; juries awarded a reported **\$3 million** and **\$1.65 million** in damages to a former UVA associate dean and the fraternity Phi Kappa Psi, respectively.

It's not as if the journalists, editors and fact-checkers at the *New Republic* and *Rolling Stone* didn't know how to do their jobs. So what went wrong? And who, exactly, is responsible for the facts in a story?

First, some definitions: Editorial fact-checking is a process that takes place at a media outlet before a story publishes. Think of it as quality control. In this style of fact-checking, a person employed by a media outlet assesses an unpublished story and its sources, and recommends clarifications or corrections. Ideally, the fact-checker won't be part of the initial reporting and writing process. In other words, the journalist and the assigning editor shouldn't also be the fact-checker. After all, the people who produced the story will have put weeks, months, or even longer into planning the piece and shaping its narrative, and may be blinded to holes in their argument or reporting. The fact-checker brings a fresh view to the story, to help spot possible problems.

Editorial fact-checking is unique from political fact-checking. The latter has grown popular in recent years, particularly surrounding the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Political fact-checking acts as a watchdog. Here, a third party checks published articles or public statements such as in speeches or debates. Examples include PolitiFact, Factcheck.org, Snopes, and fact-checking teams at newspapers including the *Washington Post*. Usually, political fact-checkers focus on politicians and pundits, though some have expanded to other topics including science and health. In contrast to editorial fact-checking, which occurs before an article sees the light of published day, political fact-checking comes after the fact.

While political fact-checking is an important journalistic practice, the rest of this module will focus solely on editorial fact-checking.

Fact-checking is most common in magazines, in part because they have the luxury of longer deadlines. It also takes a relatively long time to run a correction in a magazine—maybe two months or more, by the time someone spots an error and is able to provide the update in a subsequent issue. In recent years, fact-checking has grown more popular in other media, too, including long-form podcasts and some documentaries. Perhaps surprisingly, fact-checking is rare in book publishing. Publishers don't typically pay for it, so it's up to authors to figure it out

on their own. In some cases they pay for fact-checkers out of their own pockets. Usually, however, they don't.

All this isn't to say that no one in other media double-checks facts. Rather, the process is different. Newspaper and online editors, for example, expect reporters to confirm every fact in a story. A second line of defense are copy editors, who not only clean up grammar and punctuation, and ensure that articles hew to the publication's style, they check facts such as names and dates. If anyone makes a mistake, even a small one, the publication runs a correction. It isn't always possible to run a story through a third-party at outlets like these, particularly if they cover breaking news or they have tight budgets. Still, understanding how editorial fact-checking works can help any journalist reframe how she considers her sourcing, organizes materials, and double-checks her work.

At most publications that employ fact-checkers, the job is unique from that of the reporter, editor, or copy editor, although some responsibilities may overlap. Reporters find original facts, while the fact-checker works with a story and sources that already exist—in a way, fact-checking is reporting in reverse. Unlike an editor, a fact-checker's job isn't to shape the story—but like an editor, a fact-checker should push back on lapses in reporting or reasoning that weaken the story's thesis or make it downright wrong. While both copy editors and fact-checkers look for misspellings and other basic errors, a copy editor's main role is to correct grammar and style, while a fact-checker is concerned with all of the facts, both simple and complex. Still, some publications can't afford a large staff; here, the copy editor or editor may take on some fact-checking duties.

Despite these differences and overlaps, the entire editorial team is collectively responsible for the facts. So what happened at the *New Republic* and *Rolling Stone*?

The *New Republic* employed fact-checkers, but Glass knew exactly how to trick them. Earlier in his career, he headed the magazine's fact-checking department. So, while Glass's stories may have gone through a typical fact-checking process, he manipulated the checkers into trusting his fabricated sources. (Today, this would be a little harder because the Internet is a far more robust research tool than it was in the 1990s; still, this is a good lesson to keep a gimlet eye even on the sources that come from well-known or experienced journalists.)

As for *Rolling Stone*, it also has a fact-checking department, and every article in the magazine ostensibly goes through this process. But for "A Rape on Campus," the editorial team sidestepped or ignored key elements, **according to the Columbia account**. Erdely relied heavily on a single source—a woman she called Jackie, the alleged rape victim. The Columbia report goes on to show that the *Rolling Stone* editor allowed the story to go forward despite Jackie's refusal to name her accuser and Erdely's inability to prove his existence. He also didn't confront other red flags that arose during the reporting phase. The magazine didn't

give the fact-checker the authority to make decisions, and ignored the checker's concerns throughout the process.

In the following module sections, you will learn how to fact-check—and how to avoid publishing a story by someone like Glass and Erdely. As of this writing, neither has worked in journalism again.