

An aerial night view of a busy city intersection, likely in Japan, featuring a large digital billboard and numerous pedestrians and vehicles. The scene is overlaid with several thick, orange, curved lines that sweep across the right side of the image. The billboard in the upper center is a large, white rectangular screen displaying a cloudy sky. The surrounding buildings are illuminated with various colors, and the streets are filled with cars, buses, and a large crowd of people crossing the street.

response source

Fact-checking and fast news

Expert lessons for
journalists and the media

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Introduction

Speaking at a media briefing on 8 February 2020 on the coronavirus outbreak, The World Health Organisation's Director General stated: 'To fight the flood of misinformation, we are building a band of truth-tellers that disperse fact and debunk myths', referencing a Guardian headline, 'Misinformation on the coronavirus might be the most contagious thing about it.'

While WHO is using its own networks to track the spread of misinformation and recruiting social media influencers to spread factual messages to their followers, it is also addressing rumours with 'myth busters' and interviews with experts in the media – showing that journalists remain key to spreading accurate information.

In 2019, the Ofcom report 'News Consumption in the UK' found that, while the internet is the most-used platform for news consumption among 16-24s, broadcast and print media far outrank social networks for overall audience perception of quality, accuracy, trustworthiness and impartiality.

Journalists in the ResponseSource network have told us that in 2020 and beyond, the spread of misinformation, accusations of fake news and rebuilding trust in the mainstream media are among their biggest concerns.

Our webinar Facts, fakes and fast news in January 2019 addressed some of these issues and offered advice and encouragement, with panellists from academic and journalistic backgrounds. In this whitepaper we hear in more detail from

our panellists and other media experts who share additional resources to improve your fact-checking skills.

Professor Charlie Beckett, former journalist and director of Polis, the journalism think-tank at the LSE's Department of Media and Communications told us: 'Apart from asking 'how do I know this to be true?' about every source, journalists should also pause before they share disinformation, even if it's with a correction or health warning.

'If you see something that's blatantly, deliberately, outrageously, provocatively fake – will sharing the false content or link actually amplify the malicious source? Sometimes it is better not to give fake news the oxygen of publicity.'

We hope the expert insight and resources that follow will help journalists take that pause and decide what steps are needed to keep rebuilding trust in the media.



The industry view

Testing the claims of people in power

Patrick Worrall, senior producer at Channel 4 News FactCheck

The FactCheck blog works with the Channel 4 News in a two-way process. We solicit ideas on what to fact-check from around the newsroom, and our work feeds back into the programme. For example, we might be asked to prepare a briefing for one of the presenters ahead of a broadcast interview. Or the presenter might come to us afterwards to follow up on some kind of factual dispute that crops up in the interview.

The level of trust the fact-checking blog lends Channel 4's news coverage is ultimately something for our viewers to judge, but of course we hope that the FactCheck service adds to our credibility in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates our commitment to getting to the truth, rather than simply giving politicians and others a platform to talk without subjecting them to critical scrutiny. This is something viewers are increasingly demanding from broadcast journalists. Second, the blog gives us an archive of written material which provides objective evidence of our policy of editorial impartiality. Third, the FactCheck team has a limited role in checking material published and broadcast by Channel 4 News, which hopefully improves accuracy. Fourth, team members are often found online answering people's factual questions, which adds to the sense of community, conversation and accountability around our offering.

Top tips

My number one tip for people at home is to familiarise themselves with the extraordinary resources that are already out there and freely available to the public: the work of the Office for National Statistics, the UK Statistics Authority, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, House of Commons



Library, Science Media Centre and many others. My experience is that many members of the public are not aware of the quality of the work that is done day-in and day-out by people whose job is to aid public understanding. Another piece of advice would be for people to learn a few slightly advanced Google search techniques that save time when looking for information online. Google publishes a lot of tutorials on this.

Very often, we employ simple search techniques that anyone can use at home. Google can get you a long way, particularly if you learn a little bit of advanced search. We use a lot of open-source software like Google Earth Pro for geo-location and TinEye for image search. We often use Factiva's newspaper archive, the Companies House website and the Electoral Commission database. The old-fashioned journalistic skills are more important than software: tracking people down, getting interviews with the right experts, asking the right questions, handling sources and cross-checking information.

Very often, we are acting as conduits for experts in various fields, rather than relying on our own expertise. One of the joys of being a fact-checker is discovering the eagerness with which world-leading academics, scientists and other experts are ready to discuss their work. My rule of thumb is: the smarter the person, the keener they are to help public understanding by sharing their knowledge.

Fact-checking examples

The Washington Post's Fact Checker (one of the originals and still one of the best) has been keeping tabs on falsehoods uttered by the current US president. It's a good example of the important, painstaking, insightful work that dedicated fact-checkers can achieve.

This gives you a flavour of the kind of work done by the citizen journalist organisation Bellingcat and other verification specialists.

Groups like Bellingcat are very effective at shutting down conspiracy theories that spring up around big news stories. The work they do is of international significance: I think you can see a 'fact-check effect' in the Iranian regime's recent (eventual) admission of responsibility for downing a passenger plane.

The proliferation of top-quality open-source verification in recent years has made it harder for governments to plausibly deny involvement in incidents like this if there is good evidence of their involvement.

Some of the most important work in debunking false stories and deliberate propaganda is done outside the US and Western Europe, in countries where it is dangerous for journalists to operate. Check out the work of the Ukrainian site StopFake to see how fact-checkers fight organised, weaponised misinformation inside a live warzone.

Patrick Worrall has been senior producer at Channel 4 News since 2016 and is part of the FactCheck blog team. He has previously worked as a local newspaper and court reporter and can be reached on Twitter @paddyworrall. Read the FactCheck blog here: <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck> or follow updates on @factcheck.

Misinformation in climate stories

Leo Hickman, director and editor of Carbon Brief

We actually publish fewer articles *labelled* as fact-checks on Carbon Brief than when we first launched, nearly a decade ago. That reflects a number of issues; we obviously specialise in climate science and climate policy, and these days the UK media itself probably publishes fewer pieces that are just flat out false or require a form of rebuttal or fact-checking.

The decade or so ago before this there were far more out and out attacks - attempts to undermine climate science with a range of misinformation and false claims. That has reduced quite a lot over that period, and our own fact-checking has reduced to reflect that.

Political issues

However, there are other topical current day issues like Brexit where a big tense debate means there's a lot of misinformation, false claims and counterclaims. As a specialist climate change website, what we have noticed is that the need for fact-checking tends to now be less about the science and more about the policy issues relating to climate science, for example the effects of an energy bill or a certain form of taxation over recent years.

People trying to score points politically, whether they are either pro or anti a certain climate policy, will make various claims and use various statistics so we find that when we do deploy fact-checking journalistically, it's normally to highlight where possible which of these uses are flatly wrong. Because we cover this area a lot, those kinds of fact-checks can be fairly straightforward and quite fast to do because we can see the classic statistics that get rolled around and misshapen over time.



The harder ones are where you have more of a half-truth, a statistic or claim with an element of truth but lacking fuller context so we find that some of our fact-checking now turns in to something more like context setting, and scene setting – providing a wider sense of how that statistic or claim should be interpreted – [this feature](#) on the impact of the Climate Change Act is an example.

The 24-7 news cycle with social media and 24-hour news channels mean soundbites fly around, politicians and journalists and others make all sorts of claims and throw factoids into the mix. We see this often on shows like Question Time where it's a very heated forum for exchanging views and people make all sorts of claims to try to score points. Then very quickly the show moves on and that issue just hangs there unaddressed.

We have to decide when we would deploy a fact-check because it takes time and resources and some of them, we just have to let go.

Rapid rebuttal, semi-live fact-checking is a very difficult thing to do so we tend to only do it when we feel there's really a need to set the record straight and have something online that people can link and say 'here's someone who's looked at this in great detail' and that the claim is false or half-true or correct or whatever.

Reputation

We've built up a reputation as a trusted and authoritative specialist website, we're aggressively policy neutral so we don't have a position on very heated topics, like nuclear energy or fracking and hopefully we calmly lay out what the issue, what the facts and figures are. The whole nature of political discourse is that people always are using and abusing data and it can help if we can show that wider context, go back to the original data source and explain where it's from, how it was put together, how it's been quoted.

There's always the issue that people who don't want to know will avoid listening to that data if they want to rigidly believe in that statistic, but we do get a lot of feedback that people appreciate our fact-checks and actually we found that the fewer that we deploy and publish, the more impact they have.

Sometimes the more subtle claims are more interesting because they're harder to fact-check so people get away with claims for longer which means we have to roll up our sleeves and spend days or even weeks putting together a fact-check which is better than a quick 300 word 'this fact on this radio station today was wrong' because that can just get lost amid the noise.

For example our [work on electric vehicles](#) – it was such a big talking point and there remains such a big contested claim about whether electric vehicles are better or worse than combustion engines for tackling climate change.

On the surface it makes obvious sense that they are better, but lots of people with a vested interest in not moving away from current car technology are constantly trying to attack electric vehicles with different arguments like electricity being generated with coal; we carried out a detailed fact-check that took a long time to produce and publish and has generated enormous traffic for us both in the US and the UK.

People are just brazenly realising they can make big claims, and they can get away with it, but journalists such as myself and my colleagues at Carbon Brief, we're trying to sort of swim within that ocean, it's a stormy old ride, sometimes you're successful, sometimes people get away with false claims.

One of the biggest challenges to journalism now is the speed at which everything is operating - how do good decent honest journalists fight against that through all the other technological and business model pressures that are facing journalism? It's a big, big question but there's a market and a need for fact-checks and when you fact-check a perennial issue (like [wildfires and climate change](#)) they have a long tail and people will turn to them, share them and quote them for a long time.

I use social media as a search tool to see what people are saying about a topic. Climate change is journalistically fascinating on Twitter – it sucks in lots of the experts – scientists, NGOs, academics, policymakers - and can be good for just getting a sense check of whether something is realistic or not. You do need to break out of your bubble, following people who you might not necessarily want to follow, so your information flow is as rounded and as wide as possible and building a sense of who the characters are with a history of misinformation.

Carbon Brief is a UK-based website covering the latest developments in climate science, climate policy and energy policy, through science explainers, interviews, analysis and factchecks. Director and editor Leo Hickman is a former Guardian journalist and the author of three factual books on environmental matters. He can be found on Twitter [@LeoHickman](#).

Skills for fact-checking

Alan Meban, director of FactCheckNI

Expect the truth to be complex and more slippery to grasp than the simple claim someone makes. Over and over again, we've picked up claims that seem to be straightforward – either plainly false or believably true – only to discover that the facts are more complicated whenever we try to find the source data (often from national statistical agencies) or find an agreed definition for what they're talking about. For journalists, while it may take extra time to unearth, it can create a richer story to share with readers, listeners and viewers that educates about the context as well as informs.

Fact-checking in practice

When an elected representative stated that '105,486 people were waiting over a year for a consultant-led outpatient appointment [in Northern Ireland]. Our waiting lists are 100 times bigger than a country [England] with a population 30 times ours' we had to look at [the figures behind this extraordinary claim](#).

The ministerial target in NI is that by March 2020 'at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than nine weeks for a first (consultant-led) outpatient appointment, with no patient waiting longer than a year'. Was the politician comparing like with like? Was it credible that the waiting lists in Northern Ireland could dwarf those in England when our population is so much smaller?

The answer to those questions turned out to be yes, and yes. The NHS statistics for England and Northern Ireland are very accessible, and they track the same comparable metrics.



The claim was accurate, and while as fact-checkers we don't provide commentary on what a claim or a statistic means for society, this politician's claim was widely reported in the media to highlight the crisis in the health service in Northern Ireland.

Working with the media

FactCheckNI is always happy to work with the media: talk to us. After all, media outlets, alongside social media and press releases, are the main sources of claims that we investigate. And we hope that the claims we check – whether we find them accurate, inaccurate or unsubstantiated – add interesting context to what can often otherwise be throwaway lines by the claimants.

As a verified signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network's code of principles, we place non-partisanship and fairness, transparency and accuracy at the heart of what we do.

In the context of Northern Ireland, impartiality means that we cover claims across the political spectrum, across all communities, without fear or favour.

Bearing that in mind, if we did agree to be commissioned to research specific claims around an issue, we're a non-profit organisation, but there is a cost to carrying out the research and the editorial process that checks the sources and conclusions. Though it's common for media outlets to work together (often across print and radio where there is no direct competition) and share the costs of polls and special reports.

Training

From its inception, FactCheckNI has offered training in dealing with misinformation and disinformation, as well as developing fact-checking and critical thinking skills, in addition to our work of researching and publishing fact-checked claim articles.

We've trained members of the public, worked with school groups, further and higher education institutions, community/voluntary groups and public organisations, and partnered with BBC School Report for an event in Derry~Londonderry.

Off-the-shelf packages are available as well as bespoke training programmes for particular sectors. The material often includes an introduction to fact-checking and the FactCheckNI project; practical social media and fact-checking skills (including image verification); online critical thinking techniques; and a primer on free and open source fact-checking tools.

Alan Meban is a director of [FactCheckNI](#), Northern Ireland's first and only dedicated fact-checking service, launched in 2016. He blogs about politics on [Sluggor O'Toole](#) and reviews theatre and cinema on his own blog, [Alan in Belfast](#). Alan is a member of the Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland.

Care about accuracy

John Murphy, lecturer in journalism at the University of Hertfordshire

It has become very fashionable for journalists to fact-check the statements of politicians. However, in order to hold the required high ground, journalists need to get used to checking their own. When training journalists we need to educate them about what is a verifiable fact as opposed to a point of view or an interpretation. What is a reliable source against which to check? 'He/she told me that' is not enough. Do they even know what a reference book is? Are peer reviewed academic sources unimpeachable?

It is a matter of regret that so few young journalists cover court cases. Watching police and prosecutors making a case to a jury under the scrutiny of leading defence counsel is very instructive. Rushing in at sentence time does not cover that.

The rise of social media has led to everyone having greater access to inaccurate information. People find bad information because they are looking for it. If you believe vaccinations are a dangerous conspiracy, then you will look for supporting evidence online and not question its veracity because you agree with it.

Yes, journalists can be the fact police. But they need to know what a fact is and how to counter factual inaccuracy.



One mistake of fact can undermine months of painstaking research, allowing those who have guilty secrets to cry 'fake news'.

It is not journalists' fault collectively that people will vote for someone who clearly and habitually lies to them, because they like what the politician is saying at an emotional level. Actually, in my experience most politicians believe that what they are saying is true because they want it to be true.

When did a media outlet lose readers, and consequently lose money because they did not check their facts? As many times as a politician has lost an election because they withheld the truth? We cannot make people care about factual accuracy but as journalists we ought to care and that is what raises us above the primordial slime of the online world.

John Murphy, BSc, MA, FHEA, is a lecturer in Journalism at the University of Hertfordshire. A former journalist, he has worked for national newspapers in the UK and Australia, as a trainer for major UK magazine publishers, and a freelance journalist for consumer and trade magazines. His research interests include social media in news journalism, cultural literacy in journalism education, and journalism practices. [Find out more about his research.](#)

Training for fact-checking journalists

Alastair Brian, fact-checker and trainer for the Ferret Fact Service

Advice for journalists

When possible, question statistical information that is mentioned without a source. Head for the original information rather than a news report to avoid repeated errors or distortions. We often find that political parties/pressure groups etc are extrapolating from data in a way that the original statisticians would not support, and the limitation of data is often mentioned in the notes attached to a statistical release.

Best practice examples

This is my go-to example of what verification work can do at its very best. [BBC Africa Eye checking a video of women and children being killed](#). (Warning: It is fairly grim).

From the Ferret, I get most pleasure from the checks that require a bit of digging into [reports that no-one else will do](#). It really highlights how useful we can be.

Open to collaborations

We are always open to collaborating with media organisations as long as they come in with an open mind and are happy to get results which might challenge their editorial line.



Training is a massive part of what we do. We offer media literacy training for non-journalists, teacher training on fake news, verification and media literacy, and training for journalists on our work and fact-checking as part of the job.

The Ferret is the Scottish online investigative journalism cooperative that launched The Ferret Fact Service (FFS) in 2017 and is IFCN registered. Journalist Alastair Brian leads workshops on factchecking on behalf of FFS for journalists, students, information professionals and the public. Find out more about [The Ferret Fact Service](#) or connect with Alastair on Twitter [@alastairbrian](#).



Fact-checking resources

Fact-checking resources

Bellingcat

Bellingcat is one of the most highly respected fact-checking services working in the media today. It occasionally runs in-depth [workshops](#) but it also offers several free tutorials and tools for journalists including [Better Twitter research with TweetDeck](#), [verifying images with Reverse Image Search](#), an [Investigative Guide to LinkedIn](#) and a comprehensive [Online Investigation Toolkit](#).

Datajournalism.com

This resource from the European Journalism Centre doesn't just cover finding and analysing data stories (though it does so in-depth with two online [handbooks](#), a series of video courses and a forum, all free).

The EJC is also a partner behind the [Verification Handbook](#) and offers an introductory [video covering verification in the digital age](#), with a particular focus on checking User Generated Content.

EUFACHECK

The fact-checking project of the [European Journalism Training Association](#) offers its own current affairs fact-checks from across Europe, alongside a [fact-checking flowchart](#) which is offered free for use by journalism students and teachers.

First Draft News

Supporting its aim 'to address challenges relating to trust and truth in the digital age' First Draft News offers guides, courses, self-test challenges and an extensive verification toolkit via its [training page](#).

Full Fact

The UK's independent fact-checking charity offers a [fact-checking toolkit](#), a data library, 'Finder', and [research and briefings](#) on fact-checking issues. It is also inviting journalists and news organisations

to try its [automated fact-checking tools](#). And when you've got a fact-checking exercise you want to share with your audience there's a [guide to communicating fact-checks](#).

Google News Initiative

Google News Initiative aims to 'work with the news industry to help journalism thrive in the digital age' – [Verification](#), demonstrating how to use Google tools to confirm stories from social media, is one of several free courses.

Poynter Institute

This Florida journalism school is the founder of the [International Fact-Checking Network](#) which provides a code of principles for fact-checking organisations. It's also behind the annual [International Fact-Checking Day](#) which aims to 'celebrate facts', draw attention to the work going on to fight misinformation and to provide journalists, teachers and the public with relevant tools.

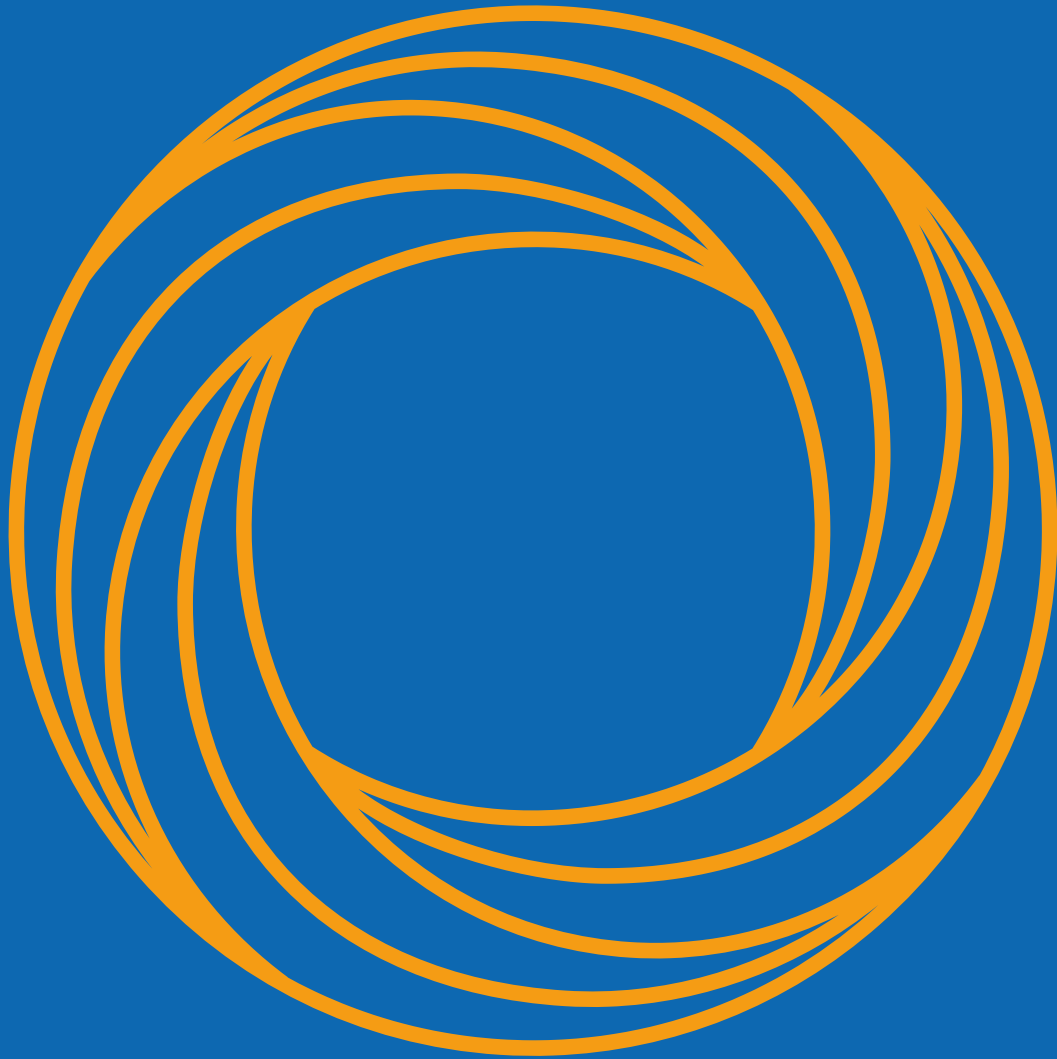
The Institute also offers free and paid-for online courses and webinars including [Fact-Check It!](#) and [Hooked on Junk News](#) which tackles rebuilding trust in the media and a dedicated newsletter, [Factually](#).

Reuters

[Manipulated Media](#), a short course in partnership with Facebook, uses real life experiences of Reuters News Agency alongside hypothetical cases to demonstrate how video, picture and audio misinformation is created and how to detect and deal with them.

Unesco

[Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation](#) is a free handbook aimed at 'all those who practice or teach journalism in this Digital Age', with chapters contributed by journalists, academics and fact-checking experts.



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