

Pants on Fire

Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers

Factchecking by media a hit, new studies reveal

Washington (Nov. 9) -- More newspapers and television stations are fact-checking the claims of politicians, and the public seems to love it, according to factchecking practitioners and two new studies released today at a conference sponsored by FactCheck.org and the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

"You get 100 e-mails saying thank-you for doing this," said Colin Benedict, news managing editor of WISC-TV in Madison, WI. "It puts us in a great position. Why wouldn't we want to be providing a service that our viewers want?"

Another conference participant, Mark Matthews, a political reporter at San Francisco's KGO-TV, said viewers in a survey rated his station's factchecking features as third out of 16 possible "most compelling reasons" to watch local news.

The conference in Washington, D.C., "**Pants on Fire, Political Mendacity and the Rise of Media Fact-Checkers**," also included Bill Adair, Washington bureau chief, *St. Petersburg Times* ("PolitiFact.com"); Michael Dobbs, *Washington Post* ("The Fact Checker"); and Jake Tapper, senior national correspondent, ABC News, all of whom were on the media panel. Another panel included two political consultants: Ladonna Lee, a Republican political strategist with Foley & Lardner, LLP, and Anita Dunn, a Democratic media strategist with Squier Knapp Dunn Communications.



Media panelists at FactCheck.org's Pants on Fire conference (l-r): Bob Papper, Hofstra University; Colin Benedict (partially obscured), managing editor, WISC-TV; Brooks Jackson (standing), director of FactCheck.org; Bill Adair, Washington Bureau Chief of St. Petersburg Times and editor of PolitiFact.com; Michael Dobbs, Washington Post's Fact Checker; Mark Matthews, political reporter KGO-TV, and Jake Tapper, senior political correspondent ABC News.

Among the findings of the two studies, one an analysis of stories published by 34 of the largest US newspapers and the other a survey of all U.S. television stations that originate news programming:

- The number of "adwatch"-type newspaper stories run in the 2005/2006 election cycle was more than 3-1/2 times larger than the number run in the 1999/2000 election cycle.
- In the 2006 election cycle, 38.8 percent of television news directors responding to the survey ran at least one "adwatch" or "fact-check" story.
- The trend is continuing: 45.6 percent of TV stations who responded said they plan to run such stories during the 2008 campaign. An additional 34.2 percent say they are unsure.



(l-r) Brooks Jackson, Ladonna Lee, Anita Dunn.

Both Bill Adair, who runs the *St. Petersburg Times*' new PolitiFact.com website, and Michael Dobbs, who writes the *Washington Post*'s The Fact Checker, which also began this fall, said they were inspired in part by what they believe to be an excess of "on the one hand, on the other hand" stories on the political beat. "We need to have the guts to say 'That's false,'" said Adair.

Dobbs cited attacks on the military record of John Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate, by a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, as an example. The media coverage of the group's ads, he said "treated everyone the same – one side said something, then the other side." He also said that "journalists failed in the run-up to the Iraqi war" by not looking more closely at claims being made by the White House and others.

The impact of the factchecking on politicians is uncertain, though. Ladonna Lee said she believed it was negligible, and that "I'm not sure it's really what voters care about when election day comes." Anita Dunn disagreed – but also said that she has "a concern about factchecking becoming a substitute for looking at the issues" more broadly.

ABC's Jake Tapper said that even if the politicians aren't paying much heed, the public may be. "I don't think we're having a demonstrable effect on what politicians are saying," he said. "But we may be having an effect on how they're being heard."

Online copies of the two reports are available at the Annenberg Public Policy Center's Web site at

<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/>.

The newspaper analysis was conducted by Justin Bank of FactCheck.org.

The TV survey was conducted for Annenberg by Bob Papper, professor and associate chair of journalism, media studies and public relations at Hofstra University.

A written transcript of the event will be posted on the Annenberg Public Policy Center's Web site on Monday, Nov. 12.



Jake Tapper, senior political correspondent for ABC News, addressing FactCheck.org's Pants on Fire conference.