FACT-CHECKING 101

WHAT IS FACT-CHECKING?

A fact is anything that is known to be true: the colour of a house, the balance of a bank account, a historical date, and so on. Therefore, fact checking is the act of confirming the accuracy of a presented fact. The practice of fact-checking in the print media generally is associated with North American consumer magazines, and usually said to have begun at Time, in the 1920s, under Henry Luce and Briton Hadden. (*The New Yorker*, under founder Harold Ross, also is frequently given credit for helping popularize it.)

WHY DO WE FACT-CHECK?

Fact-checking is both a point of pride, and a way to avoid being sued. If you're reporting real-life events, it's your duty to ensure the information you're presenting to your readers is accurate. Relaying false information does a disservice to the reader who has paid to read your story, and to the sources who have trusted you to tell it accurately. Plus, mistakes tarnish the reputation of both writer and publication. At the same time, while getting someone's height wrong by an inch or two probably won't be noticed by too many people, getting more serious facts incorrect—facts that may end up libeling a source—can land a publication in court, and potentially put it out of business.

WHO FACT-CHECKS?

Who have you got? Ideally fact-checking is undertaken by a trained professional: someone with one or more university degrees, a few languages at their disposal, and wide-ranging world knowledge. That ideal, sadly, is not often achievable on the budget of most magazines in the 21st century. Today, checking often is undertaken (if at all) by junior staffers or interns, but the basics still stand: in theory, a fact checker should be a blank slate (checkers never assume to *know* facts, they *check* them). But in reality, a checker needs to be knowledgeable, worldly, curious, sharp, and attentive, with an eye for detail. The more knowledge a checker has, the better they'll be at their job.

HOW TO FACT-CHECK

Checking usually takes place once a story has been edited, but before the copy editing process begins. In short, a checker should start by reading the story to be checked two or three times, highlighting every fact. Before beginning the checking process, they should discuss their approach with the editor, in the event there are any touchy sources or other potential pitfalls involved. Authors should provide checkers with all of their source material: notes, documents, interview recordings, photos, and source contact information, though a checker may still end up having to do some digging on their own.

Each fact should be checked with a primary source. A primary source is the most authoritative source for a given fact: asking a source their age is consulting a primary source. Checking that fact with the source's friend is consulting a secondary source. Checking a company's financials via its annual report is consulting a primary source. Checking those same numbers via a newspaper article is consulting (at best) a secondary source.

Once checking is completed, any potential changes should be discussed with the writer and editor. (If necessary, a legal team may be brought in to vet the piece for libel.) Just like every story is different, every checking process is different. There is no definitive norm.

WHAT TO CHECK?

Ideally, everything. But if you're short on time and resources, be especially sure to check proper names, numbers, and consistency of story. Quotations from a source should be checked for the facts they contain, but never read quotes back to a source directly—they may regret something they said and try to take it back. Remember that letters to the editor, opinion pieces, reviews, and fiction contain checkable facts too.

Finally, don't stop at the story itself: check headlines, decks, bylines, author bios, and captions. Even photos and illustrations need to be checked to ensure they accurately portray their story.

RESOURCES

This hotsheet barely scratches the surface of how to fact-check. To learn more, the most complete resource available is probably *The Fact Checker's Bible*, by Sarah Harrison Smith. Another resource worth owning is *After the Fact: A Guide to Fact-Checking for Magazines and Other Media*, by Cynthia Brouse. Craig Silverman's Hotsheet **"Cutting Through the Noise: Digital Accuracy"** is a perfect companion to this one. And for instruction on checking fiction, in my opinion it's a fact that there's no reason to look beyond *The Taddle Creek Guide To Fact-Checking Fiction*.