

‘Fact Checkers’ Become Rent Seekers

The decline of journalism may have hit rock bottom with the end of Meta’s censorship regime.

By [James Taranto](#)

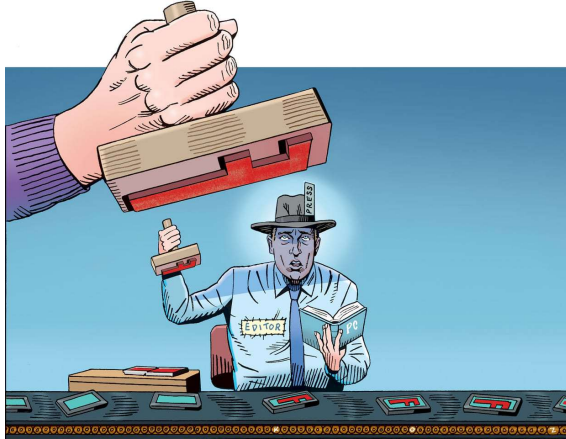


Illustration: Martin Kozlowski

Someone at the [New York Times](#) had a little fun writing a [headline](#) last week: “Meta Says Fact-Checkers Were the Problem. Fact-Checkers Rule That False.” The allusion was to an [Onion story](#) from 1997: “Supreme Court Rules Supreme Court Rules.”

The Onion headline was funny because it was true. Article III of the Constitution establishes that the Supreme Court rules, as the Supreme Court ruled in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803). The Times headline was an inside joke. Readers wouldn’t get it unless they were deeply familiar with a baneful 21st-century journalistic convention.

The term “fact checking” has two distinct meanings in journalism—one venerable, the other recent and corrupt. The former refers to a process of self-correction in which an editorial staffer retraces a writer’s reportorial steps, inspecting and reinterviewing sources to make sure everything in the story is accurate. The *New Yorker* and *Reader’s Digest* were renowned in the industry for their rigorous fact-checking departments.

When you hear the term today, though, it usually refers to something completely different—what the *Washington Post*’s Glenn Kessler [calls](#) “political fact-checking.” This isn’t a behind-the-scenes quality-control practice but a subgenre of news, whose emergence Mr. Kessler dates to the founding of FactCheck.org in 2003. Political fact-checkers don’t seek to ensure that journalists tell the truth but to demonstrate that other people—principally but not only politicians—are liars.

Political fact-checks aren’t simply about accuracy. They delve into more complicated questions of interpretation, emphasis and opinion. A fact-check article typically consists of a politician’s or other target’s statement to be evaluated, an analysis citing facts and authorities, and a conclusion about the statement’s veracity, such as “false” or “mostly true.” Some political fact-checkers employ cheeky ratings for statements they deem to be jiggery-pokery or pure applesauce: Mr. Kessler assigns them as many as four “Pinocchios,” while PolitiFact slaps them with a “pants on fire” label.

The form imitates that of a judicial ruling, which sets forth a matter in dispute, analyzes the underlying facts and applicable law, and then delivers a conclusion resolving the dispute. When the Supreme Court publishes such a document, every page carries the header “Opinion of the Court.” But whereas a court’s opinion carries the authority of law, a journalist’s opinion binds nobody. A political fact-checker is a journalist pretending to be a judge—a counterfeit authority.

What we now call the “legacy media” and used to call “mainstream” adopted this form in reaction to the weakening of the real, if informal, authority it enjoyed in the decades after World War II. That authority had two

components: public respect, which the media earned through an ethos of impartiality and accuracy; and the power to act as a gatekeeper by ignoring, and thereby suppressing, information or viewpoints that were outside the mainstream.

The commercialization of the internet diminished that authority in several ways. It dramatically lowered the cost of disseminating information and ideas to a large audience, which no longer required access to a printing press or a radio transmitter and license. That made it possible for anyone to evade the media's gates, including those who swam outside the mainstream as well as critics who embarrassed media organizations by spotlighting their failures to live up to their professed standards of impartiality and accuracy.

The internet also created more-efficient advertising markets, which rendered a business model based on selling expensive ads unviable. The news organizations that successfully adapted were the ones that were able to move to models that relied on subscription revenue. For some that meant pandering to a self-segmented audience by becoming more biased and partisan, which ate away further at broader public respect.

As coverage became more opinionated and the ethos of impartiality disintegrated, political fact-checking blurred the line between news and opinion in an alluring way. Its practitioners produced opinion pieces, but the "fact-check" designation implied that the work was somehow suprafactual—straighter-than-straight news. "If fact-checking dies—or fades away—the idea of capital 'T' Truth dies with it," Substack blogger Chris Cillizza, who once worked in mainstream media, [wrote](#) last week with no evident irony.

The deceptive labeling—often self-deceptive, as Mr. Cillizza evidences—is what makes political fact-checking corrupt. Opinion journalism is a respectable craft, provided it is honestly presented as such, as this article is at the top of the page. Political fact-checkers could satisfy this objection by simply marking their work as "opinion." But that would shatter the pretense of authoritativeness.

It would also invite readers to judge the work by the standards of opinion journalism, by which it is uniformly inferior. I've spent my career as a writer and editor of opinion, and I've cast a critical eye on political fact-checking [since 2008](#). I have never read a fact-check article that impressed me with its enterprise, originality, passion, boldness, depth, flair or wit—the qualities that make for good opinion writing. "Pinocchios" and "pants on fire" were amusing at first, but the joke wore thin within a few years.

One reason this degraded form of journalism has persisted for so long is that a demand for it emerged after [Donald Trump](#)'s first election. The president-elect's opponents blamed his victory on what they called "fake news," disseminated via social media. (The epithet switched to "misinformation" when Mr. Trump flipped the script and appropriated "fake news" to insult the legacy media.)

Unlike the internet of a quarter-century ago, social media was dominated by a few big companies, Facebook (now Meta) foremost among them. That gave aspiring gatekeepers a new locus of control. In December 2016, Facebook [announced](#) that it would contract with political fact-checkers—FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, ABC News, the Associated Press and others—to help it suppress disfavored content. Based on their opinions, Facebook labeled posts as "disputed" or "false," prevented their authors from advertising or monetizing them and reduced their visibility in other users' feeds.

This censorship intensified after [Joe Biden](#) was elected, sometimes at the government's direction. The targets included news organizations. In 2021 Facebook [suppressed](#) at least two Journal articles for scientific heterodoxy—an [op-ed](#) on Covid by Johns Hopkins surgeon Marty Makary (now Mr. Trump's nominee to lead the Food and Drug Administration) and a [review](#) of a book on climate by physicist Steven Koonin, who served in the Obama administration.

When Meta finally ended its speech-suppression program last week, political fact-checkers were anxious to soft-pedal their role in it. "To blame fact-checkers is a disappointing cop-out," Neil Brown of the Poynter Institute, which owns PolitiFact, [told](#) Wired magazine. "Facts are not censorship. Fact-checkers never censored anything. And Meta always held the cards." The Onion could improve on the Times's headline by recasting it as a corollary of the liar's paradox: Fact-Checkers Rule Fact-Checkers Don't Rule.

There was another source of anxiety: Some of the “fact-checking partners,” Wired reports, “say they are now scrambling to figure out if they can survive the hole this leaves in their funding.” One anonymous editor from an unspecified organization, “who was not authorized to speak on the record,” told the magazine that the cutoff of Meta money “is going to eventually drain us out.”

So the fact-checkers became rent-seekers, paid functionaries of a corporate censorship regime that came to operate in concert with the government. A sclerotic media cartel, seeking to defend its economic and intellectual market power, wound up repudiating the ideals of free expression and press independence. At the end of it all, standing exposed in reality’s cold light, it surrendered even that pretense of authority: “Meta always held the cards.”

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