DON’T GET FOOLED
How to spot bad information and fake news

Presented by Gerri Berendzen, University of Kansas
What I’ll cover:

• Why should you be a skeptical editor
• Should you check every fact in a story
• What facts most frequently raise red flags
• How can you determine if a source is credible
• How can you train yourself to be a more critical editor
Why be a skeptical editor?

- There’s a growing “alternative fact” culture.
- Readers don’t remember who got something first, but they do remember who got it wrong.
- A dose of skepticism helps ensure accuracy.
Writers and editors need to ask:

- How do we know this?
- Who said this and how do they know?
- What is the source of this information?
Should you check everything?

Most editors and writers don’t have the luxury of that much time.

- Know what type of information is most often wrong.
- Know the problems areas — your own and those of the people you deal with (sources, writers).
What to check?

Check anything that raises a red flag.

• If something seems too good to be true (or too big or too unusual), it probably is. Question it.

• If a question immediately pops in your mind when you read something, don’t ignore it.

• If it seems like a coincidence, check it out.
What types of information should raise red flags?

- Numbers — including dollar amounts.
- Data and polls, especially data that seems to be cherry picked.
- Information or visuals that do not ring true. Build and trust your BS detector.
- Inconsistency and repetition.
- Hearsay.
- Out-of-context examples and references.
- Visuals that are meant to distract or misrepresent or seemingly are selected to prove a particular point.
- Innuendo.
- Biased sources.
- Absolutes. Look for “the only,” “the best,” “the number one,” “highest,” “worst” statements.

You need to develop a BS detector. If something sounds hinky to you, check it out.
If you can’t come up with a quick answer, do more research. Be especially skeptical about crowd counts. Often there is an agenda behind citing a high or low crowd count.)
NUMBERS: Always ask ...

1. How could someone count (or determine) that?
2. Where did that number come from?
Always trace it back to it’s source … don’t rely on the person telling it to you. Ask the source and then double check.
This is from a blog by John Kroll: http://johnkrolldigital.com/2013/11/five-ws-applying-individual-fact/
“Often, as a number gets passed from one telling to another, the original source is replaced with whichever repeater sounds most believable. Thanks to the Internet, it’s relatively easy today to track back. Only by getting to the original source can you reliably find answers to the other questions.”
NUMBERS: Always ask ...

1. How could someone count (or determine) that?
2. Where did the number come from?
3. What was the original source?
4. What was the original context?

Was it serious or was it a joke? Was it off the cuff or part of research? You should even look at things like “did this number originate on a parody news site.”
NUMBERS: Always ask ...

1. How could someone count (or determine) that?
2. Where did the number come from?
3. What was the original source?
4. What was the original context?
5. Is the number still true?

It may be true that 3 percent of something was true in 2000, but is that still true in 2017.
Knowing that can help you determine if the figure is really accurate.

A poll has to be done in a scientific way for it to be reliable. How how the research was done. Be aware of push polls ... an ostensible opinion poll in which the true objective is to sway voters using loaded or manipulative questions. Also beware of using numbers from internet polls as positives ... many website have polls, but the fact that 85% of the people who answered hate chocolate doesn’t mean 85% of the population hates chocolate. It only means 85% of the people who went on that website and took the time to answer the poll hate chocolate.
For instance, the people who want to ban plastic bags have an agenda and are only going to use numbers that support their side. Look for all research on that topic.

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6. How was the figure calculated. Was the study, poll or survey scientific?
7. Was the source biased?
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7. Was the source biased?
8. If the number checks out, is the context correct?
An example

Let’s check one statement from the president’s joint address on Feb. 28:

“Ninety-four million Americans are out of the labor force.”

As an editor, what’s your initial reaction to this statement?
How do you check this number for accuracy?
How does context factor into its use?
Initial reactions

Quentin Kidd
@QuentinKidd

That 94 million number has to include all retired people, don't know how it could be accurate any other way. #JointAddress

8:33 PM - 26 Feb 2017
Some things probably can’t be explained in one tweet.
If you Google “what is the current U.S. Labor Force,” BLS comes up high in the search and this page will give you lots of PDFs to check. Click on Labor Force to find this.
How do you check the number?

This chart shows the pop/labor force and subtracting them gives the number of people out of the labor force: 94 million. So the number is correct, right?
Here’s where context is important

From AP fact check:

**TRUMP:** “Ninety-four million Americans are out of the labor force.”

**THE FACTS:** That’s true, but for the vast majority of them, it’s because they choose to be. That 94 million figure includes everyone aged 16 and older who doesn’t have a job and isn’t looking for one. So it includes retirees, parents who are staying home to raise children, and high school and college students who are studying rather than working.

They are unlikely to work regardless of the state of the economy. With the huge baby boomer generation reaching retirement age and many of them retiring, the population of those out of the labor force is increasing and will continue to do so, most economists forecast.

It’s true that some of those out of the workforce are of working age and have given up looking for work. But that number is probably a small fraction of the 94 million Trump cited.
Here’s where context is important

From Washington Post’s annotated Joint Address:

Tonight, as I outline the next steps we must take as a country, we must honestly acknowledge the circumstances we inherited.

Ninety-four million Americans face the labor force.

Over 43 million people are now living in poverty, and over 43 million Americans are on food stamps.

More than 1 in 5 people in their prime working years are not working.

We have the worst financial recovery in 65 years.

In the last eight years, the past administration has put on more new debt than nearly all other presidents combined.

We’ve lost more than one-fourth of our manufacturing jobs since NAFTA was
Too big to be true?

Pigs float down

Flood has devastated piggery’s livestock

By DANIEL BURDIN

MORE than 30,000 pigs have been floating down the Logan River since last weekend, with a piggery at Burleigh<br>
that was swept away by flood waters, killing much of its livestock. Burleigh Rocketeer’s<br>
3rd Everingham owned and runs the piggery near Burleigh. “We’re just about<br>
30,000 pigs in the floods, we tried to get<br>
clue reimbursements for floods. “I’m a pig farmer, and I spent years breeding these pigs, and building the piggery, but these pigs I’ve lost. I’ll never get<br>
back again. “The government offers this assistance, but a pig farmer is nothing without its stock, and what am I supposed to do about getting more stock now?”<br>
He said at least 800,000 euros of damage had been caused to the property, including livestock losses, but<br>
“How am I meant to provide a special for pigs I’ve lost and killed? It’s not like I bought them at the supermarket.”<br>
Mr Everingham said the piggery was turned off to Burleigh for 12 hours as well, meaning<br>
over Christmas one of the busiest times of the year for both – he lost all his substantial meat<br>
holdings in the store. He said “Hopefully I can get some reimbursements for the meat I’ve lost, but as long as I have a bit of support,”
Too big to be true?

Questioning a big number and checking it out could have prevented an error.

This is actually easy to check, too.
Too big to be true?

A Bloody Mary recipe, which accompanied an Off Duty article in some editions on June 8 about the herb lovage, called for 12 ounces of vodka and 36 ounces of tomato juice. The recipe as printed incorrectly reversed the amounts, calling for 36 ounces of vodka and 12 ounces of tomato juice.
Superlatives and absolutes

- An editor should question any time that something is called the best, top ranked, highest earning, first.

- Check rankings — and demand the source. There are lots of ranking organizations out there and they don’t always agree. And many have agendas.

- In many cases, superlatives and absolutes are not necessary to the understanding of the information being presented. So the best way to deal with them is to delete them.

Always cite the source of rankings.

If you read that something is the oldest, use references to check that out. You can go to your community’s business abstracts to find out things like that. Or ask the Chamber of Commerce. And look in your own publication’s archives. Many do lists of 100-year-old businesses.
Would you question this information if you saw it in copy?

St. Louis is ranked the 6th or 7th most racially segregated city in the the U.S., said Rigel Oliveri, MU associate dean for faculty research and development and associate professor of law. Oliveri said said that housing policies are to blame for the city's segregation, and advocated for changes to those policies.
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Don’t let people throw around rankings; demand the source. There are lots of ranking organizations out there and they don’t always agree.

One red flag: the ranking wouldn’t be 6th or 7th. That’s a tipoff that the person doesn’t really know the information.

Check it out; quote the correct number; then link to a reliable source for transparency.

This was a statement made at a symposium. The reporter took it at face value, but the copy editor checked and couldn’t find any reliable sources that agreed with this. The Census Bureau listed the ranking as 9th. Other studies said 8th and 11th.
Verifying red flag information

Develop a list of trusted resources

- How do you evaluate a resource?
  - Who runs the site? Do they have an agenda?
  - Make friends with the “About” page.

I mention the Daily Current because it’s fooled some heavy hitters. For instance a New York Times reporter once quoted it.
About

The Daily Currant is an English language online satirical newspaper that covers global politics, business, technology, entertainment, science, health and media. It is accessible from over 190 countries worldwide - now including South Sudan.

Our mission is to ridicule the timid ignorance which obstructs our progress, and promote intelligence - which presses forward.

Q. Are your news stories real?

A. No. Our stories are purely fictional. However they are meant to address real-world issues through satire and often refer and link to real events happening in the world.
Snopes, BuzzFeed, NPR have all done guides to fake news. One big point: “if the site says Trust Me,” don’t.
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But it’s not all about fake news sites. Some sites aren’t malicious, but they’re not done by experts either.
Treat online quotes with suspicion

THE PROBLEM WITH QUOTES FOUND ON THE INTERNET IS THAT THEY ARE OFTEN NOT TRUE.

-ABRAHAM LINCOLN
An example:

ACES member and book editor Christine Ma found the following quote attributed to Leonardo da Vinci in copy she was editing:

"When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return."
Christine queried the New York Public Library. The answer:

Librarian 1: Hello, Christine:

Yes, you are correct: the internet "quotations" resources are — quite frequently — completely inaccurate, not properly sourced and also copied without fact checking of any kind - from other internet quotation sources.

I did check the following resources that we most often consult with respect to quotations and the above quotation attributed to Leonardo da Vinci was not in any one of them:


Although Da Vinci wrote and thought on many topics, I did not find any support for the quotation you found on the internet.
This photo ran in the Feb. 15, 2015, Houston Chronicle. It was submitted by Christ for All Nations and the caption said that the evangelist was speaking in front of a crowd of 1.6 million.
What’s the first thing you would ask about this photo and the information?
Visuals that misrepresent or distract

CORRECTION

• A photograph appearing with a story on page A1 about Reinhard Bonnke on Monday was digitally manipulated by the evangelist’s organization to superimpose the preacher’s image on a crowd of about 1.6 million gathered for a 2000 crusade in Lagos, Nigeria. Mary-Kathryn Manuel, U.S. director for Bonnke’s Christ for All Nations, said the photo was a combined shot of the crowd during daylight hours and Bonnke preaching after nightfall. The photo, provided to the newspaper by Bonnke’s crusade, was not represented to the newspaper as a digitally altered image. The Houston Chronicle apologizes for this error.
Visuals that misrepresent or distract

The orientation of the crowd /// where they are looking /// seem right for where the speaker’s orientation?
I’m not saying I wouldn’t have been fooled and the Chronicle was. What I’m saying is that any submitted photo has to have extra scrutiny because by nature you don’t know where or how it was taken or what was done to it.
If a person talks about remembering World War II, but the person is in their 60s, that’s a problem.

Look for things that set off alarms:

Internal inconsistencies. Check dates and ages especially.

Would having a college student say he was born in 2002 set off alarms?
Look for things that set off alarms:

Things that seem unlikely to you are probably unlikely.

*If a story says a tea party representative is in favor of gun control, check it out. Even if it’s right, there’s probably a bigger story there.*
What about a story that mentioned a witness to an early morning fire in a rural area and the witness lived two states away? It’s possible, but it raises a red flag.

Look for things that set off alarms:

Improbable geography.

*Would you check if a story mentioned a snow storm in San Diego. Yes. But there can be subtler geography red flags.*
Other red flags to check

Copy in which the lead or nut graph is not supported by the rest of the story.
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Partial quotes: Would all of the words said by the person change the meaning of the excerpt.
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Generalizations and unnamed sources.
When you read, read from all types of places and viewpoints, but read with a critical eye as well, and always check the veracity of things you read.
Thanks for coming to ACES

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