

POLITICS

Campaign fact checking has ‘jumped the shark’

9 HOURS AGO



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“Yentitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.” (Commonly attributed to the late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.)

The 2016 presidential election is easily the most fact-checked contest in American history. A combination of extremely “truth-challenged” candidates and a bandwagon mentality among news organizations has caused it. But, just weeks away from November 8, has fact-checking “jumped the shark?”

If you are not familiar with millennial-era lingo, “[Jumping the Shark](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvGopsM1G9g)” is a pop-culture term for something that has outlived its usefulness, and has become a sad parody of itself. The term originated after a 1977 episode of the sitcom “Happy Days” which featured The Fonz literally jumping over a shark, while water-skiing in his trademarked leather jacket. Fans saw that as a cheap way to keep viewer interest in a show that, by season five, had run out of original ideas.

Much like “The Fonz,” fact-checking started out as something new, novel, and never-before-seen. While newspaper and TV networks occasionally did segments looking into claims made in candidates’ TV ads or speeches, it wasn’t until the Internet made research and publication easier that fact-checking took off.

The modern era of fact-checking can be traced back to 2003. That’s when reporter Brooks Jackson took the “ad watch” segments he had been doing at CNN since 1992 to the non-profit Annenberg Public Policy Center, and founded [factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org/) (<http://www.factcheck.org/>). Its success spawned imitators, most prominently politifact.com (<http://politifact.com/>), run by the Tampa Bay Times. That site went online in 2007 and won a Pulitzer Prize two years later for its work on the 2008 presidential election.

Today, Politifact, with its cartoon-like rating system ranging from “true” to “pants on fire,” is the most well-known site – ranked as the 1,278th busiest website in the U.S., according to website tracker Alexa.com. But it is hardly alone. Fact-checking has become so pervasive, it is difficult to find a national news site that doesn’t fact-check at least some claims made by the candidates, either in their speeches or the debates.

The [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/>), for example, has its own fact-checking team, which uses a “Pinocchio Scale” of truthfulness. [Politico](http://www.politico.com/) (<http://www.politico.com/>) has the cynically-named “wrong-o-meter.” The site [snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com/) (<http://www.snopes.com/>), which started out busting urban legends like “did little Mikey from Life cereal fame really die after mixing pop rocks with soda?” now does serious political fact-checking. Sites like [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com/) (<http://www.cnn.com/>), [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/) (<http://www.nytimes.com/>) and [NPR.org](http://www.npr.org/) (<http://www.npr.org/>) have dedicated teams of fact-checkers who live-blog and tweet fact-checks during the presidential debates. Conservative political sites like [Breitbart.com](http://www.breitbart.com/) (<http://www.breitbart.com/>) have also started fact-checking the presidential debates. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Donald Trump lines it investigated turned out to be “true” or “mostly true.” Hillary Clinton’s statements were mostly “false.”

Speaking of Clinton, she is also getting into the fact-checking act. Within the first 30 minutes of the first presidential debate, she told viewers, “we have taken the homepage of my website... and we’ve turned it into a fact-checker. So if you want to see in real-time what the facts are, please go and take a look.” During the second debate, she pitched her site again, saying, “Last time... we had millions of people fact checking, so I expect we’ll have millions more fact checking [this time.]”

But even before the debates started, Clinton’s campaign demanded the moderators fact-check Trump’s statements live during the debate, like CNN’s Candy Crowley famously did during the second Obama-Romney debate in 2010. When the debate commission rejected that idea, Clinton staffers then asked networks provide live-fact checking during the debates themselves. Most refused, instead directing viewers to their websites.

So what do viewers find when they go online during the debates? They see the fact-checks front-and-center on the breaking news pages. That placement implies the actual news of the day (in this case, what the candidates said) is less important and the analysis of those words.

This subordination of “just the facts” reporting is, however, just part of the problem. As news sites vie for viewers and clicks, the fact checks begin to veer from the important issues, to things that make you think, “really?” For instance, in a potential “Jump the Shark” moment, on August 25, Politifact investigated Trump’s claim that Clinton’s celebrity supporters “aren’t very hot anymore (<http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/aug/25/donald-trump/donald-trump-clintons-celebrity-backers-arent-very/>).” The site declared that “mostly false,” saying that while some had faded, “Many prolific Clinton-backing stars remain popular.”

Not to be outdone by that, NBC News (https://twitter.com/NBCNews/status/785299709342654465/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) fact-checked Trump’s (apparently metaphorical) second debate statement that Clinton “acid washed” her email server. The network’s fact-checkers declared that “untrue,” reasoning, “Clinton’s team used an app called “Bleachbit; she did not use a corrosive chemical.” That prompted the conservative site MichelleMalkin.com (<http://michellemalkin.com/>) to suggest other fact-checks NBC might be interested in, such as “The claim: Hillary Clinton’s ‘crooked.’ The truth: NOPE – Clinton stood up perfectly straight for the entirety of the debate.”

But perhaps the clearest indicator that fact-checking has “jumped the shark” comes from news viewers and readers themselves. Rasmussen Reports

(http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/september_2016/voters_don_t_trust_media_fact_checking) released a poll late last month that found only 29 percent of likely voters trust media fact-checking of candidate’s statements. Even worse, fully 62 percent say those fact-checks are skewed for partisan purposes. So far, however, no news organization has fact-checked that poll.

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(<https://www.qu.edu/academics/colleges-schools-and-departments/school-of-communications/>)

