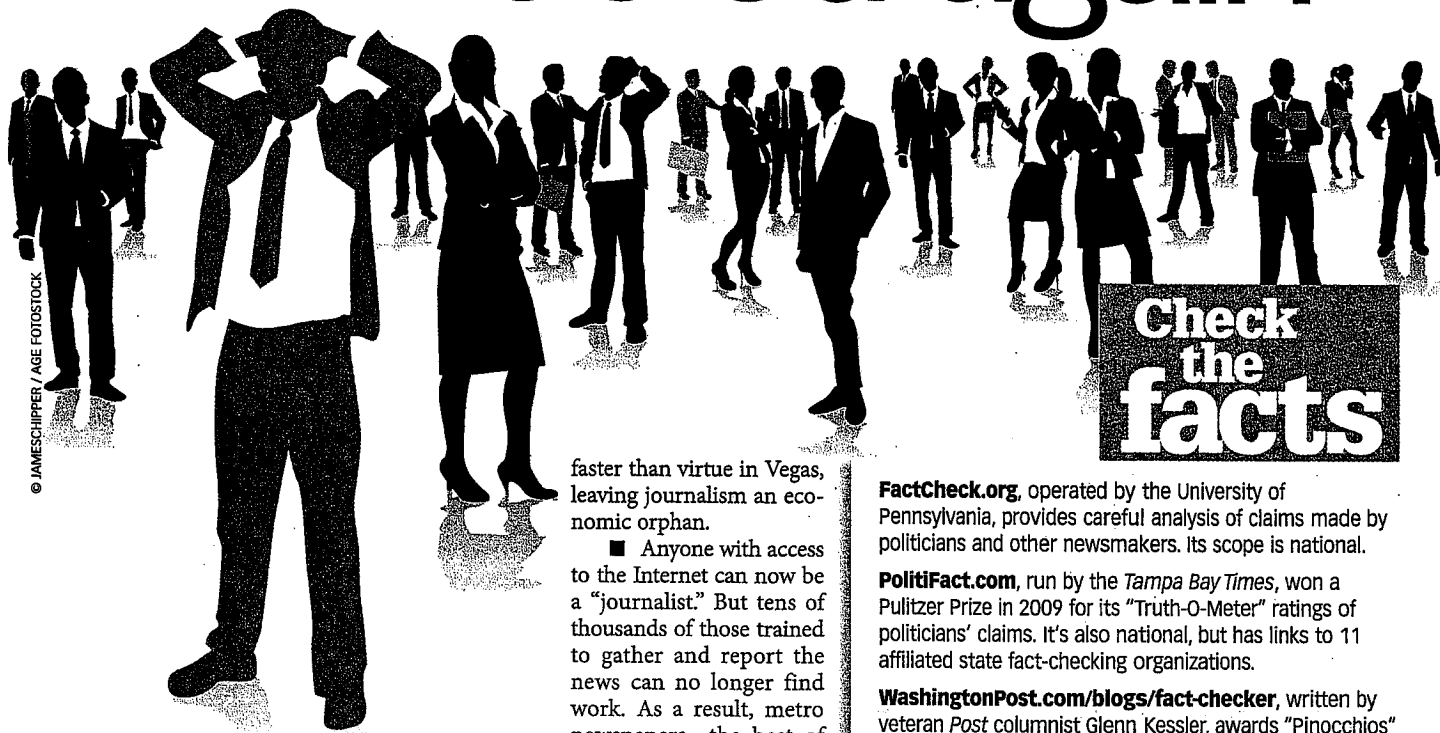


# Seeking truth in journalism ? Won't get fooled again



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By John McManus

**W**E DEPEND ON reliable news to make sense of the world. But professional journalism is imploding. Newspapers and newscasts have never been thinner. With around-the-clock cable news and around-the-world websites, we're drowning in content purporting to be factual, yet we are parched for relevant, reliable reports of current issues and events, especially those closest to home. The signal is becoming lost in the noise.

It's now up to us to construct our own truth filters in the face of a communication revolution that has created profound paradoxes:

■ On broadcast networks, cable and the Web, Americans can now construct their own news diets for the first time. Drawing on parallel but polarized universes of news and views, political parties can't agree on what's real. Although the nation faces enormous challenges, Congress can no more plot a safe course than a squirrel in traffic can.

■ The Internet, with its immediacy, interactivity and ability to marry text and video, has given journalists the best vehicle ever for news. But it also provides advertisers a more direct route to customers. Advertising support for news has vanished

faster than virtue in Vegas, leaving journalism an economic orphan.

■ Anyone with access to the Internet can now be a "journalist." But tens of thousands of those trained to gather and report the news can no longer find work. As a result, metro newspapers—the best of which were trusted referees of political disputes, honesty-inspiring investigators of public fraud and courts of last resort for the powerless—no longer possess the resources to guard or guide their communities.

## All is not lost

But there is a silver lining in the digital cloud. For those who know how to search and filter it, the explosion of news and information can be empowering. Fact-checking websites are popping up like mushrooms after a spring rain (see "Check the facts," right). The Web provides a vast reference library where we can seek answers to our questions 24/7. We can find expanded and alternative news and points of view that exceed the best-stocked newsstand in the world. We've never had so much information at our fingertips. Nor so much misinformation.

To help you tell the difference, here's how to construct your own truth filter. It can be applied to

**Check  
the  
facts**

**FactCheck.org**, operated by the University of Pennsylvania, provides careful analysis of claims made by politicians and other newsmakers. Its scope is national.

**PolitiFact.com**, run by the *Tampa Bay Times*, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for its "Truth-O-Meter" ratings of politicians' claims. It's also national, but has links to 11 affiliated state fact-checking organizations.

**WashingtonPost.com/blogs/fact-checker**, written by veteran *Post* columnist Glenn Kessler, awards "Pinocchios" for political falsehoods. It's national in scope.

**UrbanLegends.about.com**, operated by *The New York Times*, debunks political and other misleading claims, photos and videos nationally.

**Snopes.com** debunks all sorts of myths, including those spread by viral emails.

**VoteSmart.org** features an interactive website where you enter your address and the issues most important to you and it responds with an array of the candidates for national offices you are eligible to elect with their photos on campaign posters. The larger the poster, the closer that candidate's positions are to your own.

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## WON'T GET FOOLED AGAIN

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any message in any medium.

When faced with information claiming to be factual, employ the **SMELL** test. First, consider the *source*. Who is behind the message? Then, their *motivation*—is it really informational, or an attempt to sell something, someone or a point of view? Next, examine the *evidence* for any conclusions drawn. Is that evidence *logical*? Finally, is anything *left out*—a missing, but relevant, fact or necessary context?

**Source** can be evaluated on three criteria. Construct a mental PIE chart. Is the source *proximate* to the information—gathering it firsthand, or from trustworthy informants? Is the source *independent*—free of conflicts of interest? Is the source *expert* or *experienced* in regard to the topic?

Apply the PIE criteria to the information providers and the sources they quote in their reports. The higher the PIE quotient, to borrow a metaphor from a former president, the more trust you should repose in the message. If the message isn't transparent enough to allow you to evaluate its PIE quotient, it may be a lie.

**Motivation** matters. If the tone is unemotional, and the content informative and carefully attributed to reliable sources, you can be more trusting than if the purpose

is persuasion. Persuaders, such as lawyers, publicists and stumping politicians, tend to cherry-pick the information useful to make their case. They may omit equally relevant contrary information. Persuasion demands skepticism. The more you feel urged toward a particular point of view, the more you should dig in your heels. Here's how.

Examine the **evidence** for each generalization. Does it come from direct observa-

tion? If not, do the sources cited do well on the PIE chart? Think like a journalist: Every claim of fact beyond common knowledge or direct observation should be supported by a trustworthy source. The more consequential the claim, the more evidence is required.

Does the evidence **logically** support the claims made? Don't magnify a heart-tugging anecdote by taking it for anything more than what it is: a single data point. Don't mistake correlation (two things happening at the same time) for causation (one thing is responsible for the other). Suspect simple solutions. Few, if any, important developments or issues have a single cause or remedy. Always ask if there are alternate explanations of the same evidence that are just as compelling.

Finally, ask what's **left out**. Are all stakeholders—groups affected by the information—given a chance to make their case? Are any inconvenient truths missing? How about

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context that might change the meaning? The best way to find out is to scan how other sources have covered the same issue or event. As NPR media critic Brooke Gladstone warns, "The responsibility is now on the news consumer. This is a caveat emptor world." ■

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*Costco member John McManus, a communication professor and longtime journalist, is the author of Don't Be Fooled: A Citizen's Guide to News and Information in the Digital Age (www.DontBeFooled.info).*