The Lifespan of a FACT

A Dramaturgical Casebook

Dramaturg: Liv Fassanella
Director: Matt Pfieffer

April 15th-May 3rd 2026

PLAYHOUSE ON PARK

Index

Production History

Based on the book of the same name by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, The Lifespan of a Fact was written by playwrights Jeremy Kareken, David Murrell, and Gordon Farrell. The book surrounds the true disagreements between the fact checker (Fingal) and the essayist (D'Agata), surrounding D'Agata's essay "What Happens There".

Kareken and Murrell started writing the adaptation in 2012, and later brought in Farrell and dramaturg John Dias before the play premiered on Broadway in 2018.

Directed by Leigh Silverman, the Broadway premiere opened at the Studio 54 Theatre on October 8th, 2018, and starred Daniel Radcliffe as Fingal, Cherry Jones as Emily Penrose, and Bobby Cannavale as D'Agata. The show closed on January 13th, 2019.

Since the Broadway run, the play has been performed at regional theaters across the united states, and in countries like Singapore, France, Australia, and Germany.

Daniel Radcliffe as Fingal, Cherry Jones as Emily Penrose and Bobby Cannavale as D'Agata in The Lifespan of a Fact.

Doubling Down: an interview with John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

By Weston Cutter

I've spent plenty of time and energy here already praising The Lifespan of a Fact, the strange and mesmerizing book by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, and tempting as it is to keep shouting about the thing, I'll back off and let the authors speak about the thing, the process, and what they discovered and how they changed in the process of getting this thing to life. Code for clarity: the original questions are italicized, John D'Agata is JD, and Jim Fingal is JLF. Questions have been interspersed merely for joy, not any clever or aesthetic reason.

Did either of you have any fears or reservations about letting your voices, and the sometimes serious snarkiness and righteousness in the emails, come through in this book? I'd like to note that while it sure seems like a ballsy move to me, it's also the move that ends up making the book feel so much, like such a thing to give a damn about, exactly because the stakes are made so stark + clear.

JLF: Well, I think before answering that, I must clarify that you should consider the "Jim" and "John" of the essay to be characters enacting a parallel process / discussion from the one John and I actually had during the factchecking process. What we did — taking the relatively dry factchecking document and dramatizing it a bit — might be seen as a parallel gesture to what John does in his original essay, albeit one that (at least from Jim's point of view) is ambivalent about its own form.

That said, we did go back and forth a lot about how raw the exchange should be, since I at least didn't want the work to be dismissed or not taken seriously if it got too snarky or sophomoric. I think we struck a nice balance though, and ended up with something that probably does resemble some of the inner questions and reactions we had to each other during the process.

JD: The short answer is no, because we both knowingly amped up the hostility of our comments. I think of the form of the exchange between Jim and me as an exaggerated farce. At its core is a real argument, a debate that we really had and that continued throughout our real-life fact-checking process. But at some point during that process we also decided to do a book about the process, at which point we revisited the basic scaffolding of our discussions and turned the volume up on how we discussed these issues. Why did we do this? Because as fascinating as Jim and I are, we are also pretty mild-mannered guys, and we knew that most readers would probably not be fascinated by two dudes having a sober discussion about the very nerdy issue of veracity in nonfiction. Even though I occasionally would sling some heartache Jim's way during the fact-checking process, I was never as assholey as the writer's persona is in the book. But it's that writer's snarkiness—and the fact-checker's eventual

willingness to bite back—that makes the book kind of funny, I think. So we were trying to find a way to make a serious but rather dry issue (veracity) feel relevant and entertaining (dick jokes).

*And at what point did either of you even realize there was a book there? And if it wasn't you: what did you think the exchanges were? This is a weird question. I guess here's the thing: now it's obviously this cool book, and it's great, but this is a long window of work on a single essay. I guess maybe: how did you keep going on this for so long if it was *not* a book?*

JLF: The original factchecking process with the Believer took about ~6 months to a year of part-time work (I was an unpaid intern working on multiple projects and with a part-time job), after which we looked at the artifact that was produced out of it and realized that it was compelling in its own right, and raised a lot of questions that we thought were interesting. The rest of the "7 years" were really the conversation that arose out of that decision, as we elaborated on the material and started having/composing the out-and-out debate that we never really were able to have within the confines of the pseudo-professional relationship we had during the stint at the magazine.

JD: My original essay for the Believer was about 20 pages long in manuscript. After Jim completed his fact-checking, he produced a document detailing the inaccuracies in the essay for our editor at the magazine, Heidi Julavits. I had some sense of what Jim had discovered during his fact-checking because I was receiving periodic queries from him. But I really didn't have a full sense of what Jim was up to until I asked Heidi if I could see this document that Jim had produced. It was over 100 pages long. A hundred pages! In response to just 20 pages of text. It was horrifying, humiliating, and also a pretty glorious piece of work. I mean, as embarrassed as I was by what Jim had revealed, I was dazzled by his thoroughness and precision. He was as obsessed with nailing down the facts in the essay as I was with rhythm and imagery and whatnot. And I think everyone recognized how awesome this thing was that Jim had produced. But I didn't really think about doing a book until Heidi, the editor, suggested that the Believer try running my woefully inaccurate essay along with links to Jim's document that detailed those inaccuracies as well as the proper facts. That idea at the magazine eventually evaporated, but I held on to it because I thought it was brilliant. So at some point I wrote to Jim and asked if he'd be interested in trying to combine our two texts into a book. He said yeah. I said cool. And then we met at my home in Iowa City to sketch out how we might accomplish this.

Did you end up appreciating the back-and-forth of the book? This might be an insanely dumb question to ask, but there's something about this particular back-and-forth, and the form it takes, that seems among the very best suited to let you try to articulate some of the things you're doing with your work. Is that fair? You and Jim get, through conversation, at these huge issues at the heart of what you're doing with essays, yet it seems overwhelmingly unfun through parts of the book—you saying you're done with the process, Jim's snark (questioning your mom's arts/crafts), etc. And I guess we can swing for the fences a bit here: do you feel like, through this book, you've clearly articulated something about essays and essaying that you haven't been able to elsewhere?

JD: I can answer the fences question, which is "almost yes." I think the gist of the argument in the book is about as clear as I've been able to be about my thoughts concerning this issue, even though the point of view that's expressed in the book is certainly more strident than I am on the particulars. That doesn't really matter though. I believe in his claim that no one—not readers, critics, other writers, or cultural institutions—has the right to say what can or can't be done in an art form, no matter the medium. So even if I don't believe in the specifics of what he chooses to fight over, I'm with him. I defend his right to fudge whatever he wants, because I want the right to do whatever I need to in order to create the best possible reading experience.

I do think there are limitations to this book, though, as far as that reading process goes. For instance, even though this debate we're having is a bit of a reconstructed performance, we were nevertheless still limited by the conceit of the book. So the longer our individual diatribes got, the less believable they started to feel, less naturally possible in an realistic exchange. So we had to find a balance and compensate some clarity for the sake of the narrative.

I think of the anthologies I've done as a forum for some of these issues too, but strangely enough the anthologies are even more limited formally than Lifespan is, because the introductions in the anthologies need to maintain an argument over a few hundred pages, in between dozens of other essays, and across a projected three volumes. So there's only so much freestyling that one can do in that structure.

The book's packaged/designed to offer something like a revelation on your part—this wrestling that you and John've been doing for seven years and 100+ pages (one can only imagine what was cut—was there much cut?) gives way to this new reckoning on your part with the fact of Levi's death, and that neither art nor facts were going to really do anything in the face of that. My apologies if that's too quick+dirty a read. I guess my question is: is that shift or reveal at the end real? This seems weird to ask, but it really is because of the way the thing's presented. There seems to be this real reckoning, on your part, at story's end, and I'm curious how much of that was real, and felt, and because of the exchange with John.

JLF: The moment of doubt that happens at the end of the book, while not literally and temporally happening at the end of our exchange, was a real thing I went through during the factchecking process. I was spending hundreds of hours factchecking this piece, producing a document that I thought was basically destined to live in a filing cabinet somewhere, and the feeling that I was at least uncovering some truths about the world and the essay helped keep me going through that process. The realization at some point that a lot of the ground that the factchecking was based on was ultimately shaky was somewhat vertigo-inducing and caused me to really question the purpose of what I was doing. The New Yorker was right that it was something of a "Nihilistic Sigh." I don't think it should be read as a capitulation, the final word on my position, or yielding to John's points; rather more of a depiction of an internal struggle / quick zoom-out from looking at the text at a micro level to try to get a glimpse at what is actually being discussed, and a dramaticized epistemological question about how much one can in fact factcheck something.

And just for my own edification and stupidity: how posed and thought-through was the author photo on the book's back? I've spent more time now wondering about that specific picture than I have about just about any other author photo ever. It seems loaded, as a picture.

JLF: It was taken by a friend of John's, and selected from a few hours worth of shots. I personally liked that one the best because it seemed to depict our personae quite nicely.

*This gets weird—you know I like your stuff, and I'll happily read what you write, yet part of me wonders about some of your argument regarding essays. If this is false or stupid of me, I apologize, but here's my question: is there a difference, at the level of artistry, between what you and John McPhee do? Because I get hit in the same pleasure centers by each of your writing, yet I think I'd honestly be pretty hurt and sad if I were to find out McPhee'd been tweaking stuff all this time. Then again: you're clearly *not* arguing against factual accuracy, just that there can/should be more compelling metrics behind how we value and evaluate essays + other nonfiction. I'm sure this gets dicey. I guess ultimately my question has to do with the space between artistry and fact as it relates to nonfiction, and while I don't think you're arguing that they're on a spectrum and have a basic inverse relationship in nonfiction, you use art as an argument *against* accuracy in the book, which makes me ask questions. I know this is hairy, and if it comes across as anything other than respectful and hugely interested, I apologize.*

There is absolutely no difference between McPhee and me—other than that McPhee is about ten thousand times more talented. The other difference of course is that McPhee often chooses one set of artistic restraints, and I often choose others. Peter Matthiessen once said that in the way that fiction has to contend with structure (or sometimes the lack of structure) and poetry has to contend with meter (or sometimes the lack of meter), what nonfiction must contend with is the restriction of the truth. And he's right. But I would argue that he's not completely right. Because what Mattheissen also has in his toolbox are a lot more tools than that. And ditto for McPhee. Ditto for me, for all of us. So far, in my own work, I've chosen to restrict myself with a few different tools. In About a Mountain I played with the conventions and expectations of journalism (intentionally abandoning that approach over the course of the book) while in my first book I played intentionally with a lot mythmaking and with flamboyantly experimental formal stuff. Those were the restraints I purposely chose to challenge myself with. But I was the one who chose them, and that's the point. I decided the terms of the work. The uproar that this books has apparently stirred up is a little perplexing because it seems to be trying to pit a triangle against a circle in an effort to fit one inside the other. No one in this genre is a lesser writer for choosing one set of restraints over another. Yet the screaming match that has ensued recently seems to only have room for one "winner." It's ludicrous. Why can't we all just do our work, the way we want to, without accusing each other of being "hacks" for not writing exactly the same way? The only judgment any of us really ought to make about one another's work is whether or not it's good, whether or not it affects us, whether or not we are transported by it emotionally, intellectually, or perhaps even just technically.

Just because I'm interested: what sort of software design are you at present doing? And why? And was that the obvious path for you, regardless of doing fact checking work for the Believer? If this is too far from the topic at hand and you don't want to answer, don't, but I'm just curious.

JLF: After college, when I went to work part-time for the Believer, I also worked part-time as a

Music Analyst for a start-up (MediaUnbound) that developed software that modeled people's tastein music and provided a platform for developing different Recommendation applications. After being an unpaid intern for the Believer for a year and a half, without a clear path to a paid position, I ended up working full time for the startup, which later got acquired. In college I studied English, and was the lit-nerd who was into computers, and now I flipped a bit to be the computer-nerd who is into literature. There's not clear or logical progression I think, and as someone who is interested in everything and not particularly singularly focused in one thing I've mostly took different interesting opportunities as they've presented themselves — I imagine my path will continue to wind somewhere amongst different disciplines.

*I'm curious how you *teach* some of this stuff—you're at Iowa, and I'm sure you must have some systemic way of addressing how a writer should make decisions regarding fidelity to fact. I apologize if this seems again like I'm trying to get you just to say something specific and codified regarding how you approach this stuff—that's not the intent. If you at all want to address teaching, that'd be great, but if it seems not super fertile, that's fine, too.*

JD: It's definitely a case-by-case issue. And by no means do all of my students agree with my rather lefty approach to this issue. In any given year, we have students in our program at Iowa who identify themselves as literary journalists, memoirists, lyric essayists, and everything else in between. And none of them has a predictable opinion about facts in "nonfiction." However, no matter where these students fall on the "veracity" spectrum, I can guarantee that every single one of them identifies him or herself as an artist, first and foremost. None of them see themselves as "reporters." They may occasionally employ reporters' research techniques, but they'd insist that you call them an artist and that you allow them the same rights and privileges as an artist.

Actually, I take that back. I do have one current student who is struggling with the term "artist." He genuinely doesn't like it. And he's also kind of unhappy in the program, unfortunately, because I think he feels out of place and misunderstood. So I just lied. I apologize.

Has John's stuff made you ultimately look differently at nonfiction? I apologize if that's the obvious and sort of dumb question an interviewer'd have to ask you on reading this book. For what it's worth: I'm not remotely clear about how I feel regarding the issues raised in the book—I like John's stuff, but I think I'd be pretty messed up if I suddenly discovered, say, McPhee had been lying about the Merchant Marines, or birch bark canoes, or whatever. If this question's too thorny just given that you were a fact checker and so can't escape the pull of that habit while reading nonfiction, that makes total sense.

JLF: I think what it mainly made me think more about is genre in general, and the meaning and validity of the categories that our culture labels art literature. "Fiction," "Nonfiction," "Poetry," "The Essay" — all of these are man-made categories that by no means were inevitable. Because they are so broad, they necessarily have fuzzy dividing lines — as one might say, "another example of the porousness of certain borders." It's also made me think a lot (and this is illustrated in the book) about why people get upset when you violate the implicit contract they see as existing with these categories, even if you as an artist make no claims to a given form, or even explicitly label your

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work with some other label. Who owns the definition of these categories? The Academy? The Media? The Critical Establishment? What happens if your definition of one of these words differs from the culturally-accepted one, or if you question or reject the authority of these loosely-defined institutions? Is it a noble act of defiance and re-appropriation to make different claims about the borders of these genres than the mainstream, or is it an act of irresponsibility if you knowingly call something by a label that you have a personal definition for / that the world will interpret in a different manner? What if, as John thinks he is about the Essay, your conception is more historically accurate, and the world's current conception of a genre itself deviates from it's "true" form? Are you morally obligated to call your work something different?

To me it does seem like the top-level categories that we label things with are in fact often useful, and that there is a critically important place for real-world-truth-seeking/facticity/authenticity in our writing and journalism and history-writing, but I also think the small number of generally accepted literary genres are not particularly nuanced and insufficient to describe the varieties of literary experience.

*I was really, really struck by the real brief audio interview I caught with you and Jim recently—you said two things about art tricking us or fooling us, and, in so doing, present opportunities for wonder or, as you said, "terrains we hadn't considered" (you also said something along the lines of that we have to be fooled in order to be able to wonder). The big obvious question is: do you love Lewis Hyde, and did Trickster Makes This World do a lot for you? Or, if not Hyde, what sort of art's helped you build such a worldview of art? I feel like I know I interviewed you before, and I asked about influences and stuff, but this seems different—more specifically about stuff which ultimately *taught you* stuff in terms of theory. If that's possible to address.*

JD: I do indeed love and know Lewis Hyde. He is the essayist's dream. But as far as other folks who've influenced me or taught me theory: I don't really seek out theory. I've never formally studied it. My feelings and beliefs about the essay are rooted in and inspired by the history of the genre itself. I think you can't really read the deep history of the essay and not come out from the other side of it convinced that this is a literary form, and that it is and has always been propelled by the same motor that powers all of literature—the imagination.

Here's How the First Fact-Checkers Were Able to Do Their Jobs Before the Internet

by Merrill Fabry for TIME Magazine

At TIME Magazine's 20th anniversary dinner, in 1943, the magazine's co-founder Henry Luce explained to those gathered that, while "the word 'researcher' is now a nation-wide symbol of a serious endeavor," he and co-founder Briton Hadden had first started using the title as part of an inside joke for a drinking club. "Little did we realize that in our private jest we were inaugurating a modern female priesthood — the veritable vestal virgins whom levitous writers cajole in vain," he said, "and managing editors learn humbly to appease."

Luce's audience nearly 75 years ago is not the only group to wonder about the origins of fact-checking in journalism, though the casual sexism of the 1940s would no longer fly. Today, especially amid concern over so-called "fake news" and at a time when it may seem inconceivable that checking an article would be possible without the Internet, it remains a natural question: How did this journalistic practice begin?

And, as it turns out, that story is closely linked to TIME's past.

First Facts

In the years between 1923, when TIME's first issue was published, and Luce's speech, journalistic fact-checking had gone from a virtually unknown idea to standard practice at many American magazines. (These days, journalistic practices aren't necessarily country-specific — Der Spiegel, for example, is known for having one of the world's biggest fact-checking departments — but that wasn't the case a century ago, and this particular kind of checking was an especially American phenomenon.)

Of course, well before any separate job of "fact-checker" existed, editors and reporters would have had their eyes out for errors — but it was around the turn of the 20th century, between the sensational yellow journalism of the 1890s and muckraking in the early 1900s, that the American journalism industry began to really focus on facts. The professionalization of the business included codifying ethics and creating professional organizations. And, as objective journalism caught on, ideals of accuracy and impartiality began to matter more than ever.

Publications in the first two decades of the 1900s did have operations intended to make them more accurate, like the "Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play" that was started by Ralph Pulitzer, son of Joseph Pulitzer, and Isaac White at the New York World in 1913. The bureau was focused on complaints, looking "to correct carelessness and to stamp out fakes and fakers." They would keep track of who was making errors, to catch repeat offenders. At the time, the idea was termed a "novel departure" by an industry publication, but it still concentrated on reprimands and apologies rather than preventing those errors from making it to print.

So, while it's always difficult to say what the absolute first instance of something was, especially given that fact-checking is an internal function that doesn't get much publicity when it's done well, TIME emerged as a leader when the magazine began hiring people specifically to check articles for accuracy before publication. They weren't called fact-checkers at first. (Though, appropriately enough, there was a period during which Luce and Hadden had considered calling their new magazine Facts.) The New Yorker — long renowned for its checking process — only started publishing in 1925, and didn't start rigorous checking until 1927, according to Ben Yagoda's About Town, following the publication of an egregiously inaccurate profile of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. Newsweek started in 1933.

Perhaps the earliest published use of the phrase "fact-checker" can be found in an ad for TIME in a 1938 issue of Colliers, which mentions the expansion of "its researchers and fact-checkers from ten to twenty-two."

TIME's first fact-checker was Nancy Ford. She'd worked at Woman's Home Companion and in early 1923 was hired as a secretarial assistant as Luce and Hadden got their new publication started. Her job at first was to mark and clip interesting articles from newspapers for the magazine's writers, but soon the task expanded to verifying basic dates, names and facts in completed TIME articles. Ford and her colleagues — all women — were encouraged to challenge the initially all-male staff of editors and writers, a must for the process to work. "The fun was that you could say what you thought," she recalled in an oral history interview conducted in the 1950s, "and didn't have to be respectful."

Ford left after several grueling months of work, but the job didn't end with her. At the end of the year there were three researchers.

Getting the Job Done

At first, the New York Public Library was Ford's main source of information. She would call the Public Library's Information Desk for "almost anything," and was regularly there until it closed. And when it was time for the magazine to go to the printer each week, she and other necessary staff would pile into a taxi with their checking materials to head over to the press, on 11th Avenue ("Death Avenue" to the TIME staff). In the early days that meant lugging a copy of Who's Who and the World Almanac, some of Hadden's own books, a dictionary, a thesaurus and a Bible, along with relevant newspaper clippings. They stayed at the printer's late into the night, hashing out rewrites, filling in holes and checking the last details. Ford "learned all the tricks of checking by phone from Eleventh Avenue," and while the "girls," as they were called, were usually dismissed earlier than the men, that often meant a 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 am departure.

Another of the fascinating resources on the early fact-checking process comes in an unusual format: poetry.

In the late 1920s, a Time Inc. employee named Edward D. Kennedy began to poke fun, in verse form, at the company's inner workings. Many of his writings are still preserved in the company's archives. For all their jabs, they also capture some of the difficult nature of the work, especially for the checkers, as well as the prevailing sexism of the time. Kennedy's poem "The Genii" lampoons the particularities of TIME writers, who were known for their wordplay and boisterous style (Kennedy mimics it for the poem, opening with: "Who writes for TIME a genius is") and

includes a few nods to the female checkers tidying up after reckless writers: "If substance fails, if fact eludes, / Out of the air he picks it— / If obviously foolish, why / The girls will probably fix it."

Another Kennedy poem parodies the extreme demands of TIME's first managing editor, imagining him asking the researchers to "Call up God and ask if we can get a picture."

An August 1927 memo from Hadden further reveals the details of the editorial workflow of the time, including the process of checking, who was responsible for what and when it should happen. The checker would put a dot over each word once she'd confirmed its accuracy — first red ones for facts checked from authoritative sources like reference books, then black dots when a fact was sourced to a newspaper and finally green dots for uncheckable words or ones that a checker accepted on the author's authority. Facts were to be "red-checked" whenever possible. Anything that couldn't be verified meant querying the author to hammer out the way a sentence should read, though later official guidelines mandated a demure or ladylike tone when doing so. "Carbons," files containing copies of each version of the story and all the material used to check it, would be kept on file and handy for 13 weeks then filed away for at least a year. That terminology is still used at the magazine to this day.

Women's Work

By the 1930s, becoming what was then simply called a "checker" was a relatively well-established next step for young women graduating from college. For example, Content Peckham (pronounced, as she would say, "like an adjective") applied to TIME to be a researcher after graduating Bryn Mawr. "It was just the thing to do—everybody applied at TIME and Vogue," she later recalled. She started as a science and medicine researcher in 1934, later becoming chief of research and the third woman to be on the masthead as a "senior editor."

The women's jobs were twofold. In the first part of the week they would do background research, finding interesting details and supporting material for articles that someone else would write. Peckham called it "the process of surrounding a story." Once the article was written and edited, the researcher would circle back around and make sure every detail that made to the final version was correct. (Peckham noted, however, that training could be a matter of trial and error: when first she arrived, she was told about the dots system, but not how to actually check the words she was sorting.)

But, though the checkers' jobs still centered on minute facts, the meaning of what it meant to be correct was shifting. According to Peckham, it was Patricia Divver — head of the TIME research department in the early 1940s — who made TIME's fact-checking a more holistic, thorough process. "She was the first who taught her staff to worry not only about the correctness of the separate facts but whether what the facts said in aggregate added up to sense," said Peckham.

That broad view meant increased responsibility and authority for the checkers. In addition, the coming of World War II put immense pressure on them to get breaking news right. For example, Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, a Friday, leaving the staff with nearly two dozen pages of text to check by that Monday. And if things went wrong, no matter where the error had come from, the checker was on the line. Weekly errors reports detailed the mistakes

made, excoriating the (lower-paid) woman doing the checking rather than the male writer on the piece.

It was not until 1971, after the women at Newsweek filed a complaint with the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission over the sex-segregation of the magazine's jobs, that TIME's research manual was re-written and researchers were renamed reporter-researchers. The job of fact-checking was subsequently opened to men, and by 1973 TIME had managed to hire and keep four men on the job.

Future Facts

In the decades that followed, for a variety of reasons, not least of which were the economic ones, the job shifted again. At some publications, the responsibility for accuracy began to shift primarily to the writers, as the number of jobs for people who were solely researchers or fact-checkers shrank. (TIME kept its fact-checking operation. Since the mid-1990s writers have been asked to take on checking responsibilities and checkers have been asked to do more reporting.)

But recently, a new sort of fact-checking has been the object of public attention, as articles and websites devoted to analyzing the factual accuracy of politicians' statements have become their own genre. "What's different is the mission," says Lucas Graves, senior research fellow at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and author of a book on the subject, Deciding What's True. The point of magazine checking is to prevent embarrassment and eliminate errors before a piece goes live, whereas the new political fact-checking usually devotes its attention to careful analysis of an error someone else has made.

"The emergence of political fact-checking is gradual, it has its roots in the 1980s but the genre has become much more codified and standardized over the last decade," says Graves. In the wake of the deceptive ads that populated 1988's presidential race, "a lot of journalists felt they hadn't done a very good job of covering that race, because they mostly let those claims go unchallenged," he says. By the mid-2000s, hindsight on coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War compounded the feeling that it was necessary to check what politicians said.

The Internet became an important medium for news and non-journalists started using it to do their own public fact-checking. Fact-checking sites like Snopes (which originally focused on urban legends) and Smoking Gun started in the 1990s, and in 2003 the full-time political checking site FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, started its operation. Soon others would follow them into the political fact-checking arena.

The new fact-checking is its own task, but it shares some of the essential beliefs that led the original "girls" of the 1920s and '30s to make journalistic history.

"We don't trust ourselves at all," Leah Shanks Gordon, then head of TIME's research staff, told the Chicago Tribune in 1983. "We must not assume that we know anything." By the 1980s, the TIME staff were checking about 2.5 million words a year with only about 250 errors a year, mainly details like titles or dates.

Still, the idea that human error could be entirely eliminated wouldn't pass muster with a good fact-checker, anyway.

On the occasion of TIME's 25th anniversary in 1948, the editors wrote on the constantly moving target of fact-checking, and its impossibility: "All the facts relevant to more complex events, such as the devaluation of the franc, are infinite; they can't be assembled and could not be understood if they were. The shortest or the longest news story is the result of selection. The selection is not, and cannot be 'scientific' or 'objective.' It is made by human beings who bring to the job their own personal experience and education, their own values. They make statements about facts. Those statements, invariably involve ideas."

"All journalists (even the women at the well) select facts," the editors continued. "The myth, or fad, of 'objectivity' tends to conceal the selection to kid the reader into a belief that he is being informed by an agency above human frailty or human interest."

Female TIME magazine editorial staffers at work, 1933.The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images

The History of The New Yorker's Vaunted Fact-Checking Department

By Zach Helfand

I turned in this piece with seventy-nine errors. Anna, the fact checker who fixed them, has been a member of The New Yorker's checking department for six years. I enjoy working with Anna, which is good, because being checked by Anna involves maybe a dozen hours on the phone. We talk mainly about facts, and occasionally about foraging for chanterelles, which is her passion. People sometimes ask Anna if she finds many errors. In the eighties, one checker found that an unedited issue of the magazine contained a thousand of them. (This figure itself wouldn't survive a fact-check, but never mind.) My contribution to the trash heap, in this piece alone, included misspelling several proper nouns (Colombia, alas, is not Columbia), inventing, it seems, a long-ago interaction between a fact checker and the deputy Prime Minister of Israel, and writing about a bird's kidney when I should have been writing about its liver. I'm sure no errors remain, but I won't declare it categorically. That kind of thing makes a checker squirm.

I've never encountered a complete description of what the magazine wants its checkers to check. A managing editor took a stab in 1936: "Points which in the judgment of the head checker need verification." New checkers, upon receiving their first assignment, are instructed to print out the galleys of the piece and underline all the facts. Lines go under almost every word. Names and figures are facts; commas can be, too. Cartoons, poems, photographs, cover art—full of facts. Opinions aren't facts, but they rely on many. Colors are facts. Recently, a short story by Clare Sestanovich made a passing reference to yellow bird poop. The checker consulted ornithological sources. Would a bird poop yellow? Maybe, if it had a liver problem.

Fiction is full of facts—sometimes too many. Dates are facts, clothes are facts, actions are facts. Quotes are facts, and they contain them; facts can be nesting, like a Russian doll. A decade ago, Calvin Tomkins wrote about an artist who said he was getting married on June 21st, the summer solstice. The checker, David Kortava, called the artist, congratulated him, and alerted him that the solstice would be on the twentieth that year. The artist moved the wedding date.

It's difficult to check facts, or to talk about fact checking, without coming off as a know-it-all, a fussbudget, or a snob. But knowing things is hard. Checking is a practice. It's not omniscience. Two years ago, Amanda Petrusich wrote a piece on the band the National in which she described two of its members, Bryce and Aaron Dessner, as identical twins. The brothers look identical, but to be safe the checker checked with Bryce. Confirmed. Story went out. Complaint came in: Aaron said sorry, but they are not identical. Could the sentence be corrected to read "fraternal twins"? The checker convened the brothers in a group text:

Bryce: We were never tested but our mom thinks we are identical :)
Aaron (seconds later): Our mom says we are fraternal but truth be told we have never been tested!

In the face of uncertainty, you say what you know. A correction ran describing the Dessners as, simply, "twins."

When I joined the department, I assumed that you'd be fired for an error. I had one on the first long piece that I checked solo—a misidentified art donor. I got to my cubicle the following morning ready to pack up my belongings. I told the checkers sitting near me what had happened. Everyone nodded and went back to work.

I'd interviewed for the job three times. Midway through, three checkers administered what is known as the checking quiz—trivia questions, essentially, on current events, art, politics. What did the case Marbury v. Madison establish? Who wrote the short story on which "Drive My Car" is based? Can you name the state and non-state actors fighting in the Syrian war? In the sixties, there was a written exam. One section presented the candidate with a sample Talk of the Town passage about an art collector: He is a member of the Yale Club, Racquet and Tennis and the exclusive Union League. He is an ardent Democrat.

Q: "What do you find in it that is questionable or wrong?"
A: "He would not belong to the Union League Club because he is a Democrat, and it is not exclusive at all."

The quiz's function remains ambiguous. I assume it's to assess general knowledge and the ability to think under pressure. But it might just be for kicks. For years, candidates were asked, "What is the best movie of all time?" A reasonable person says: uncheckable, no answer. But there was an answer: "Sunset Boulevard." Martin Baron, a longtime head of the department, loved "Sunset Boulevard." The belief among the rank and file was that you want to do very well on the quiz but not ace it; a know-it-all is susceptible to overconfidence.

A checker named Shireen Khaled recently said to me, "Nobody ever grows up wanting to be a fact checker." Most arrive hoping to be writers or editors. For me, joining the department felt like an initiation—there were secret histories, late nights, and weird customs, though fewer than there used to be. A former checker once visited the office and asked, "Do you still have Friday-afternoon theatricals?" This was the most diverse group of anal-retentive people I'd ever been around, if you forget about political persuasion and age. Checkers had grown up poor and grown up with billions. They came from New Orleans and Nanjing. The heterogeneity surprises people. Tucker Carlson asked a checker, Sean Lavery, which high school he'd attended, Andover or Exeter. "I said, 'I went to public school in Wisconsin,' " Lavery recalled. Checkers of my era—their number grew from twenty to twenty-five during my three-year tenure—collectively spoke fifteen languages, including Urdu, Cantonese, Japanese, Arabic, Greek, Russian, and Twi, with a working knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin. They wore cool clothes. They'd read all of Proust. They'd married young and divorced. They threw fun parties; Salman Rushdie had once shown up. I had never felt so conventional. The joke in the department was that my foreign language was sports.

The head of the department, and Baron's successor, was Peter Canby. He'd come to the magazine by accident. He had previously spent a while in Maine, working as a clammer and a tree surgeon As a boss, Canby was exceptionally kind and protective, a joyful curmudgeon.

He once brought a live rooster to the office of Robert Gottlieb, the magazine's editor. He liked to tell discursive stories—about being chased up a tree by a herd of wild peccaries in Guatemala, or lowering a homemade boat out of a friend's window downtown and sailing it together up the East River, through Hell Gate. Under his leadership, the department cultivated a sense of independence that could be combative. Shortly before Canby retired, in 2020, someone wrote to him suggesting that the checkers might like to use a new application called Slack. He responded, "The collective opinion is that we'd rather have a root canal."

A joy of the job was that you became an expert for two weeks on some subject you'd never thought much about—rocket science, foreskin, sand. ("Suddenly, the writer gets this paid friend to care about the same thing they care about," Rachel Aviv observed.) We'd send around e-mails with subject lines like "Anybody ever been a competitive rower?," "Anybody well versed in the history of young, heavily scrutinized female celebrities?," "Anyone happen to have an in with the Gabonese President?"

The focal point of the department was the checking library, which contained reference books such as Who's Who in the People's Republic of China, Debrett's Peerage & Baronetage, and the Physicians' Desk Reference for Herbal Medicines. (New checkers are advised that you can't trust books—they tend not to be fact-checked. But reference works help, and endnotes are a gold mine.) The library had another relic—a metal Rolodex that Calvin Trillin has said belongs in the Smithsonian. (Under "C": "Chomsky," "Cher (actress)," "Congo," "Cold Fusion.") Every Friday, the department held a meeting in the library, where checkers discussed thorny stories and bitched about difficult writers and editors.

There was a smaller library, for even more books; checkers, on especially tight deadlines, would spend the night on a cushion on the floor. Colleagues would talk for hours with the powerful and the secretive; a conversation with Julian Assange required technological methods that we were not permitted to discuss, to discourage eavesdropping. Yasmine AlSayyad got propositioned by Islamic militants. Fergus McIntosh, the department's current head, got book recommendations from a Supreme Court Justice. Danyoung Kim would come to work in an astronaut costume, sit down, and call up Harry Reid. We probably took our jobs too seriously. This was the first Trump Administration, and the work felt urgent but doable. We talked to Cabinet members and to neo-Nazis. We'd sometimes get threatened, and that only inflated our self-importance. We were, as the writer and former checker David Kirkpatrick has put it, "intoxicated by our own busyness." The writer had already engaged in the charm and betrayal inherent in reporting. We were in the harm-reduction business.

The checking origin story goes like this: In 1927, The New Yorker published a Profile of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay that was, to a large extent, made up. Millay's mother stormed into the office, threatening a lawsuit. Harold Ross, the magazine's founder, dispatched the editor Katharine Angell to pacify her. Millay's mother was "a rather small, angry woman," Angell recalled, and left only after being promised that a detailed correction would be issued. Ross, embarrassed, and worried about libel exposure, decided that what he needed were fact checkers. This creation myth has been repeated through the years in books, news stories, and the magazine itself. Alas, it is one of those slippery facts. Who knows what made Ross do anything.

If it weren't Millay, it would've been something else. Ross had a literal mind. He once complained to E. B. White that Stuart Little should have been adopted by the Littles, rather than born to them, since, obviously, humans can't conceive mouse-boys. He revered facts. He'd been gathering them and checking them long before there was a checking department. John Cheever recalled that Ross made two small but brilliant suggestions on the story "The Enormous Radio." Cheever added, "Then there were twenty-nine other suggestions like, 'This story has gone on for twenty-four hours and no one has eaten anything.' "

Fact checking, as a formal concept, was a product of nineteen-twenties New York, with all its energy and hubris. There was a sense that, with enough attention, you could get the world down accurately on the page. In 1923, two years before The New Yorker's founding, Henry Luce began to employ checkers at Time, a magazine he'd almost named Facts. Ross despised and envied Luce. Perhaps checking was an area in which he could outdo him.

Ross was a high-school dropout and an itinerant newspaperman, who liked shouting things like "By God!" and "You can't win!" Facts gave him something to lord over the Ivy boys. When a fact roused his suspicion, he'd write up a memo with comments like "bushwah," "nuts," or "transcends credulence." A favored note was "Given facts will fix." According to the writer Brendan Gill, "The impression conveyed by these words was, and was intended to be, that a sorely tired man of superior skills was consenting to improve the work of someone who was at best lazy and at worst an imbecile." Ross wrote to a writer who'd committed a minor fact error, "I regard this as a personal slight." (The writer had mixed up the geography of some locks in the Panama Canal.) While preparing John Hersey's "Hiroshima," Ross couldn't get past Hersey's description of a man using a "slender bamboo pole" to row a boat. "By God, if it's very slender he couldn't have rowed this boat with it," Ross wrote. "Seems kind of ridiculous." The line ran as "thick bamboo pole," and Ross moved on to other facts, such as the name Hiroshima itself, "which I can now pronounce in a new and fancy way," he wrote ecstatically to White.

The early magazine was riddled with mistakes. The New Yorker was known for its newsbreaks, which mocked other publications' errors and oddities. In 1929, Ross concluded, "We are running misprints and clumsy wordings from other publications, and otherwise being Godlike, so WE MUST BE DAMN NEAR PURE OURSELF." Soon, there were several full-time checkers. When the magazine profiled Luce, and wanted to confirm the number of rooms in his mansion, a checker was sent there to pose as a prospective renter.
Ross was delighted by the new arrangement. He began firing off memos:

"Can moles see? And do they ever come above ground of their own volition?"
"Can you find out whether or not there is a Podunk River in Connecticut?"
"Do the catalogues of Sears and Montgomery Ward still list farm and stock whips, drovers' whips and quirts?"

What Ross gave to the checkers was the idea that it mattered to understand the world in all its weirdness. Also: a willingness to admit ignorance. He once popped his head into the checkers' room and asked, "Is Moby Dick the whale or the man?"

Ross was never satisfied with his creation. "He must have set up a dozen different systems, during my years with him, for keeping track of manuscripts and verifying facts," James Thurber

wrote. Ross studied the New York Telephone Company's system of checking names and phone numbers and concluded that, despite its best efforts, it never managed to put out a directory with fewer than three mistakes. Thurber continued, "If the slightest thing went wrong, he would bawl, 'The system's fallen down!' "

How do you confirm a fact? You ask, over and over, "How do we know?" Years ago, John McPhee wrote about a Japanese incendiary balloon that, during the Second World War, floated across the Pacific and struck an electrical cable serving a top-secret nuclear site; a reactor that enriched plutonium for the atomic bomb bound for Nagasaki was temporarily disabled. How did McPhee know? Someone had told him. How did that person know? He'd heard about it—secondhand. The checker, Sara Lippincott, spent weeks trying to track down an original source. Just before the magazine went to the printer, she got a lead. She called the source at home, in Florida. He was at the mall. How to locate him in time? She called the police. They found him and put him in a phone booth. Did he know about the incident? He did. How? He was the reactor's site manager; he saw it happen. The detail made it in.

Sometimes one source is enough. Sometimes ten aren't. Checking is a forced humility. The longer you check, the more you doubt what you think you know. We are constantly misunderstanding one another, often literally. In the nineties, the former Secretary of Education William Bennett, a family-values Republican and the editor of an anthology called "The Book of Virtues," uttered the phrase "a real us-and-them kind of thing." It was misheard as "a real S & M kind of thing." The magazine had to issue a correction. People also lie, regret, renounce. One subject of a Raffi Khatchadourian piece complained that multiple details about his life were made up and demanded to know what idiot had given Khatchadourian the erroneous details. The idiot was the man himself; the details came from his book. A disputatious source is actually more helpful than the opposite. The checking system, like the justice system, requires something to push against. When Parker Henry checked Patrick Radden Keefe's Profile of Anthony Bourdain, Bourdain wasn't able to get on the phone, so Henry sent him a memo containing a hundred or so facts about some of the most sensitive parts of his life, including his heroin use and the collapse of a romantic relationship. He responded, "Looks good."

Checkers talk to virtually all sources in a piece, named and unnamed. They also contact people who are mentioned, even glancingly, whom the writer didn't already speak to, and many people not mentioned in the piece at all. Checkers don't read out quotes or seek approval. Sources can't make changes. They can flag errors, provide context and evidence. The checker then discusses the points of contention with the writer and the editor. It's an intentionally adversarial process, like a court proceeding. You want to see every side's best case. The editor makes the final call. In a sense, the checker is re-reporting a piece, probing for weak spots, reaching a hand across the gulf of misunderstanding. The checker also asks questions that, in any other situation, might prompt the respondent to wonder if she was experiencing a brain aneurysm. "Does the Swedish Chef have a unibrow?" "He actually has two separate eyebrows that come close together above his nose." Could a peccary chase a human up a tree? Certainly if it's a white-lipped peccary, which is the size of a small bear and prone to stampede. Zadie Smith once received a call regarding whether, years earlier, at Ian McEwan's birthday party, a butterfly landed on her knee. When a Talk piece by Tad Friend described the singer Art

Garfunkel waving his arms around, the checker asked Garfunkel to confirm that he had two arms.

Anne (Dusty) Mortimer-Maddox, a former longtime checker, used to say, "The way you fact-check is like reading them a bedtime story." She went on, "You tell people facts rather than asking them. When fact checkers say, 'Is it true that . . .,' they come off sounding like district attorneys." But sometimes, no matter how much you coo, a subject wants to yell. This also serves a purpose. Nick Paumgarten likes to note that checkers are in the fact business and the customer-service business. It helps if everyone comes away feeling heard. Peter Canby's philosophy was that it's better for a subject to scream before a piece is published than after—a controlled explosion. Screamers still provide useful information. They're better than ignorers or trolls. Elon Musk once sent back an imagined Mad Libs-style story, riffing on all the details to be checked. Steve Bannon responded to a checking question with a blank e-mail.

Usually, checkers are pretty successful at getting people to respond. Checkers are not exactly neutral arbiters, but they're as close as you're going to get—a last chance to argue your case. The Taliban typically plays ball. So does the C.I.A. The F.B.I. does not. One checker spoke by phone with Osama bin Laden's former Sharia adviser; he asked her to dress for the conversation "in accordance with Islamic principles of modesty." Different cultures have different relationships with facts. The French position is that, if the author says something happened, it happened. One veteran Chinese journalist quoted in an Evan Osnos piece, who had never before experienced fact checking, said, "I felt like I was in the middle of an ancient ritual." People can be surprisingly honest. Nicolas Niarchos, checking a piece by Ben Taub, called up one of the most powerful smugglers in the Sahel, who cheerfully confirmed every detail, including his trafficking of humans. At the end of the call, he said, "I have one request."

Niarchos said, "What is that?"

He replied, "I want you to call me something else."

"What would you like us to call you?"

"I'd like to be called Alber the Gorilla."

The request was denied.

The real thrill is in having a license to ask, as directly as possible, about the thing you really want to know. Did Harvey Weinstein commit rape? Did the government know about the massacre? A checker named Camila Osorio once spent months on the phone with a former guerrilla commander who, it turned out, was implicated in a bombing in Colombia that almost killed Osorio's mother.

A long checking call can be a weirdly intimate space. You ask about mass murders, traumas, state secrets, often with little preamble. A government official, after a call, once accused a checker of being "creepily obsessed" with him.

So far, Anna has found errors of counting, errors of framing ("One quibble with the framing, if you'll allow me, is that you never mention how checkers quibble with the framing"), and errors of the too-good-to-check variety. For example, it turns out that Zadie Smith was asked not about a butterfly on her knee but about a slug on a wineglass. However, it's one thing to know the facts, and another to persuade the author. Most writers appreciate having been checked but resent being checked. Checking makes evident how badly you've misinterpreted the world. It upsets your confidence in your own eyes and ears. Checking is invasive. In the eighties, Janet

Malcolm was sued for defamation in a drawn-out case that involved the parsing of her reporting notes. She'd been accused of fabricating quotes; she maintained that she merely stitched quotes together, a journalistic transgression but, ultimately, not a legal one. (A court ruled in Malcolm's favor.) From then on, the checking department required authors to turn over notes, recordings, and transcripts. "It's like someone going through your underwear drawer," Lawrence Wright told me. Checkers can see your shortcuts, your reportorial wheedling, your blind spots. Ben McGrath, another checker turned writer, said, "It's really interesting to realize that, these people you've been reading and admiring, there's six errors on every page. And it's not that they're full of shit. It's that this is what every person is like." As a general rule, the better the reporter, the better she gets along with checkers. Jay McInerney, a former checker, once wrote, of authors, "They resent you to the degree that they depend on you." McInerney, who wrote "Bright Lights, Big City," about a fact checker at a lightly fictionalized New Yorker, is probably the most famous former checker. He will admit he was not a great one; he got fired after about a year, when his claim that he could speak French was disproved by a litany of errors he let through in a piece reported from France. "I've written that I'm the first fact checker to get fired," he told me. I pointed out that checkers hate claims like "the first." "Nobody's ever fact-checked me out of it," he said. "Why don't you just write it and see what the fact-checking department says?" (The department ransacked the archives and searched for checking rosters, and concluded that his assertion is nearly impossible to confidently confirm.)

Like customer-service bots, or H.R. directors, checkers and writers talk around things. They perform a delicate linguistic dance. At an exhausting stalemate on a minor point, the writer might say, "I think it's O.K.," which means "I know it's not exactly correct, but you're being a prig." The checker might respond, "It won't keep me up at night," which means "You're a barbarian, but it's your name on the piece." Deft checkers position themselves as collaborators. In a closing meeting—where the writer, editor, checker, and copy editor go over a piece—they come not just with errors but with solutions. Writers hate to be embarrassed by their own ignorance. Anna has a good ear for rhythm, and tends to cringe when left with no choice but to scramble it. Her negotiation style is disarming bluntness. It helps that she's funny. (Anna: "Do you have a fix here?" Zach: "I had one, didn't I?" Anna: "It wasn't very good.") The nuclear option is to invoke "on author," which signifies something impossible to verify but witnessed or experienced by the author, and therefore grudgingly allowed by the checker, who renounces all culpability. Julian Barnes once explained, "If, for example, the fact checkers are trying to confirm that dream about hamsters which your grandfather had on the night Hitler invaded Poland—a dream never written down but conveyed personally to you on the old boy's knee, a dream of which, since your grandfather's death, you are the sole repository—and if the fact checkers, having had all your grandfather's living associates up against a wall and having scoured dictionaries of the unconscious without success, finally admit they are stumped, then you murmur soothingly down the transatlantic phone, 'I think you can put that on author.' "

One compromise is the hedge, phrases such as "likely," or "around," or "something like," which turn the game of dictional darts into a round of horseshoes. Writers resent the "maybe"s and "at least"s and "almost"s that pock their prose like pimples—but perhaps not as much as they'd resent losing the material. Years ago, the magazine excerpted Ian Frazier's book

"Travels in Siberia," which was supposed to begin, "There is no such place as Siberia." The checker insisted upon "Officially, there is no such place as Siberia." "I ended up not totally happy with it, but not regretting it," Frazier said. "This kind of fact checking wasn't nitpicking and wasn't just a bureaucratic thing. It was an artistic advance of the twentieth century. It just clicked with modernism." He went on, "Modernism is goodbye to self-expression, hello to what's right in front of you," and that means you better get the thing right. The hedge is an acceptance that the world is impossible to know accurately. It imparts to the writing a humbleness, an understatedness, and, perhaps, a smug fussiness: in other words, what people think of as The New Yorker's voice. Still, the hedges irritate. One checker, upon leaving the magazine, wrote a goodbye e-mail saying, "After five years, I'm still fully in awe of the magazine that comes out every week." Tad Friend replied-all, "As the magazine comes out 46 times a year, can we say 'almost every week'?" (Friend was almost right; the actual number was forty-seven.)

Certain genres accommodate checking better than others. Investigatory works rely on it. Personal history does, too, though this often creates complications. One checker called checking a memoir "the full colonoscopy." A colleague had to call up Emily Gould, whose husband, Keith Gessen, had written an essay about the birth of their first child. He described a geyser of blood effusing from his wife during labor. The checker asked Gould about the purported effluence. Gould ended the conversation.

Humor can short-circuit the checking machinery. When a humorist and a checker click, they stick together. Anne Stringfield used to check Steve Martin's Shouts & Murmurs. They ended up married. Usually, things go the other way. I once took part in a closing meeting during which we debated, for ten minutes, whether Michael Schulman's use of the phrase "assless chaps" was redundant and meaningless; technically speaking, all chaps are assless.

"I find that often a fact checker forces you to tie a knot in the sentence unnecessarily," David Sedaris told me. One of his essays describes a trip to a small-town Costco, where he bought "a gross of condoms." The checker said that, actually, he hadn't: Costco doesn't sell a gross, which is a hundred and forty-four. "So I made it 'a mess' of condoms, which just made them sound used," he said. "If the essay was about how many condoms Costco sells, definitely, have the exact number. But this was about my experience being gay in a small Southern town. Can you let me have this?" Humorists can infuriate the checkers, who recognize that even funny nonfiction has to be completely real; it's held to the same standard as anything else. Last year, Jane Bua checked a Sedaris essay about meeting the Pope. She checked a detail about the color of the buttons on a cardinal's cassock so assiduously (the department's perception), or maddeningly (Sedaris's), that he e-mailed his editor, "Can you slip her a sedative?" Sedaris has complained, "Checking is like being fucked in the ass by a hot thermos." Bua mentioned this to the checker on Sedaris's next piece, Yinuo Shi. Shi considered the analogy and said, "If a thermos works, the outside wouldn't be hot."

Like darkness retreats, or ayahuasca, checking tends to alter the way you think; it's also usually enjoyed for a limited time. A few make a career of it. One of the first hires Harold Ross made for the checking department, in 1929, was a man named Freddie Packard. Packard initially worked under Rogers Whitaker. After Packard had missed a "boner," as an error was called, Whitaker forced Packard to memorize and recite the galley page. Ross esteemed Packard and relied on him; he also started him on a salary equivalent to about twenty-nine thousand dollars today.

(Checking salaries remained borderline unlivable until the magazine's staff unionized, in 2018.) Packard left for Europe during the war. Ross begged him to return. "JOB WIDE OPEN STOP," Ross wired. "ARE YOU AVAILABLE STOP CAN PAY MORE THAN FORMERLY STOP." Packard became the first real head of fact checking, a position he held until shortly before his death, in 1974. That's a long time checking facts. There are many checkers today in the Packard mold. He spoke multiple languages. He commanded a vast sphere of knowledge. He lived in fear that around every corner loomed catastrophe. One week, a colleague noticed Packard moping around the office and asked what was wrong. Packard said he had two colds.

Perhaps the most revered of all checkers was Martin Baron, who put in thirty-six years. Baron was gentle, fatherly, and prim. Alex Ross once wrote a piece mentioning a minor Mozart canon titled "Leck mich im Arsch." Baron stayed up late combing through Mozart biographies so he wouldn't have to call a Mozart scholar and repeat the phrase "lick me in the ass." He was almost pathologically punctilious. The checkers loved Baron. He'd bestow upon them honorifics, as in Professor Seligman or Dr. Kelley. He felt that, as a checker, he should avoid errors at all times. John McPhee said, "Somebody told me, 'The thing you've got to know about Martin Baron, he is always right. And take that literally.' If a Shakespeare play was mentioned in a piece, he would have to go and check the author's name." By the end, he'd spent so much time checking that he had difficulty making any assertions at all. He would phrase statements as questions: Wouldn't you say it's a nice day? After Baron's death, Ian Frazier recalled, "Gesturing to the water below the window, he once said to me, 'I think that's the Hudson River.' "

The job wears on people in different ways. Some checkers find it difficult to sleep. The novelist Susan Choi, a onetime checker, recalled colleagues vomiting out of stress. In the nineties, everyone smoked cigarettes by the gross. (Anna is letting me have this "gross": "King Zog of Albania reportedly smoked a hundred and fifty cigarettes daily.") It's a job for the anxious. The next boner is always lurking out there, in the dark. I was once assigned a piece by Ben Taub that mentioned Lake Victoria's four thousand miles of shoreline. Thirty seconds of Googling confirmed the fact, but the exact circumference varied, slightly, between sources. Why? I contacted Stuart E. Hamilton, a professor of geography and geosciences at Salisbury University. "It is a horribly confusing answer and involves physics and fractals," he told me. This is called the coastline paradox, an offshoot of Zeno's paradox. "Do not go down that rabbit hole," Hamilton warned. "Everything is infinity long if you have a small enough ruler." This is the checker's paradox, too. The more you know, the more you know that there is more you don't know. The facts of the universe are infinity long. You either let this drive you crazy or you adjust your ruler size. Taub's detail ran as "more than four thousand miles of jagged shoreline," and I never lost sleep over checking again.

Some people greet a New Yorker correction as they would an eclipse. In 1994, several errors appeared in a Talk of the Town piece. The magazine issued a correction, which several publications reported as if it were a seminal event. Hendrik Hertzberg went to the library to investigate. "This was not the first correction in the magazine's history, it was roughly the three hundredth," he reported. He added, "Every great journalistic enterprise occasionally makes errors." I can confirm. Since that first correction, I let through some more. I will not name the figure, to avoid startling Anna.

People like finding errors in the magazine, probably because the magazine is so smug about

its fact checking. Checking does contain an element of theatre—a performance of over-the-top diligence that burnishes a myth but doesn't always correlate with accuracy. Checking isn't a marketing ploy, exactly, but it is good marketing. To some, it's just artifice. In the eighties, the writer Alastair Reid admitted to devising composite characters and scenes: combining multiple real details into one fake one. Shouldn't checking have caught that? Afterward, Michael Kinsley, the editor of The New Republic, wrote of meeting a New Yorker fact checker at a party: "This fellow—a real individual, not a composite—regaled the gathering with tales of chartering airplanes to measure the distance between obscure Asian capitals, sending battalions of Sarah Lawrence girls to count the grains of sand on a particular beach referred to in an Ann Beattie story, and suchlike tales of heroic valor in the pursuit of perfect accuracy." Kinsley went on:

After several hours of this (actually, one hour, 17 minutes, and 53 seconds), he turned to me with a polite smile and said, "Tell us about your fact-checking system at The New Republic."

. . . I replied, "You're looking at it."

He turned pale. Actually, he didn't turn pale. I embroider. But he did say, "That's odd, because if I'm checking a story in The New Yorker and find the fact I need in The New Republic, I consider it checked."

Complaints reach us in any number of ways. After Lawrence Wright's twenty-four-thousand-word indictment of the Church of Scientology, the Scientologists published a parody magazine, complete with sinister sketches of the fact checkers and a by-the-numbers analysis of the checking process. ("Of the 971 statements, assertions and questions that were sent for 'fact checking,' 572 are utterly false.")

Usually, though, errors surface via reader mail:

1947: "I was somewhat taken aback to find Mr. Hellman, in his article on the Stuart Collection, announcing the death of my father. To kill off a retired director of the New York Public Library is no doubt as insignificant a misdemeanor as one can commit. But I wonder if it was necessary."
2019: "The chicken is NOT wearing overalls (which you mention twice). He is wearing lederhosen."

It's the lederhosen that keeps checkers up at night. How, short of a childhood in Bavaria, do you catch that? A corollary is whether it's worth devoting so many resources to trying. Choi told me, "Who cares, in the end? Does it really matter? I think we can safely say no. But, especially right now, we're in this catastrophic moment where so many people assume they know things that either they don't know or that aren't even forms of knowledge. There's this strange disappearance of humility before the incredible complexity of the world. It's sort of an epidemic. The deep value in checking is just as a confirmation of how hard it is to know stuff."

The checking department tends to be described with a single adjective, especially after it has committed an error: "vaunted." As in this letter: "I was disappointed to see the New Yorker's vaunted fact checkers let slip Zach Helfand's bogus etymology for the word 'tip.' " "Vaunted" has been attached to the department, and to basically no other entity, since its founding. It's the way to give the know-it-alls their due. Often, a correspondent will add a sarcastic modifier —"once vaunted," "much vaunted," "incredibly vaunted"—which actually isn't necessary.

"Vaunted," from the Latin vanitas, meaning "emptiness" or "nullity," is already pejorative. The know-it-alls snigger.

The other thing you get a lot is "William Shawn would be turning over in his grave." As a literal fact, this is uncheckable, though the implication that the magazine reached peak truth under Shawn, its second editor, transcends credulence. Shawn was a perfectionist, but, given the choice between prose and accuracy, he didn't always side with accuracy. The writer Ben Yagoda dug up the checking proofs of Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" and found that, beside a section that narrated the actions of a person who was alone and immediately thereafter murdered, Shawn scribbled, "How know?" Yagoda explained, "There was in fact no way to know, but the passage stayed."

Meanwhile, Tina Brown's editorship is subject to the opposite impression: she, some critics like to say, was the corrupting influence who let the standards slip. But, in many ways, Brown's tenure created the modern checking department. All of a sudden, the magazine was publishing pieces with immediacy and wading into controversial waters; it needed to get the facts right, if only for legal reasons. (Millay's mother might yell; Mike Ovitz might sue.) Peter Canby and Brown's deputy, Pam McCarthy, were the ones to finally make authors turn over their notes and reveal their sources. Shawn's writers had to adjust. Janet Malcolm, fresh off the trial that probed her combining quotes from different interviews, tried the same thing in a passage in her Profile of David Salle. McCarthy insisted that she change it. "She's right that it may not matter in the world, that it's more efficient and more pleasing for the reader," McCarthy told me. "But my feeling was it's impossible to draw those lines."

Impressions are difficult to dislodge, probably because they're difficult to check. But checkers come to recognize some category errors. For example, a common fallacy is the belief that things were better in some imagined past. Someone is always spinning in his grave. When Shawn was the editor, he got letters asserting as much about Ross. Ross had no past to contend with. He still got letters. In 1945, a fellow-journalist wrote to him, "Now a gentle jab for you and your vaunted editorial check-up department—which I admit, however, is pretty damn good and thorough. In the piece, 'The Atlas Moth,' there is a reference to a 'lunar moth.' Of course, the writer means the familiar Luna moth." Ross asked Packard how this could have happened. The checker, in fact, had called a moth expert at the American Museum of Natural History—and had misheard. (In one way or another, checking is always an S & M kind of thing.) Ross was despondent. "I think it is a terribly bad error," he wrote back. The system is always falling down. The trick is in believing that, next time, it won't. ♦

Selections from

The Refs Are Working Us:

Fact-checking used to be how journalists policed themselves. Now it's how they police everyone else.

by M. Anthony Mills

"Not true, Governor Romney."

President Barack Obama, widely considered to have lost his first debate against Mitt Romney thirteen days previously, was eager to defend his record. But Romney, having returned to familiar territory, was unwilling to concede the point.

"In the last four years," Romney had said, "you cut permits and licenses on federal land and federal waters in half." Unsatisfied with Obama's denial of this point, Romney kept pressing.

"So how much did you cut them by?"

"It's not true," Obama said again.

"How much did you cut them by, then?"

"Governor, we have actually produced more oil on — "

"No, no, how much — "

The crossfire eventually yielded to a brief substantive exchange on the president's energy policies before the debate continued on to other topics. Within a few hours, all the major outlets — the Washington Post, the New York Times, CNN — were ready with "fact checks" assessing the validity of both candidates' claims. (The verdict was mixed.)

Nothing about this exchange or the media coverage it generated will strike the reader as out of the ordinary — aside perhaps from the fact that the 2012 contest could still feature such arcane policy debates, unlike what passes for political debate today. The ritual of fact-checking politicians' statements is now so routine as to be hardly worth pointing out. But political fact-checking wasn't always so commonplace. Even in 2012, it was still such a new and burgeoning subgenre of journalism that it was the subject of its own coverage and commentary.

Since then, political fact-checking has exploded into a global industry. In addition to legacy media outlets like the Post and stalwarts of the field such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, startup media companies and new organizations wholly devoted to the practice have cropped up around the world, adding up to more than 400 fact-checking websites in total as of last year. No longer limited to traditional media, fact-checking has developed into an integral aspect of online content moderation, used by Internet platforms such as Meta.

Defenders of the new style of fact-checking insist that it preserves the best of the old traditions of factual accuracy and adversarial journalism for a new, radically different media and political environment. Critics, by contrast — often though not always on the political Right — argue that because fact-checking now means checking not just politicians' speech but online discourse in general, it looks less like a benign public service than manipulation of public opinion.

Yet both the harshest critics and the most vocal proponents of the new fact-checking often misunderstand its significance — the extent to which its rise represents a shift in the ways the norms and practices of modern journalism get deployed.

Understandably concerned about the crisis of public knowledge, political commentators today often blame the Right for what they call "working the refs." The idea is that, like athletes who try to win games by hassling the umpires, conservative troublemakers complain about unfair treatment from media platforms to get what they want. The Right, meanwhile, argues that, rather than impartial arbiters of fact, the refs are systematically biased against them, and so they must be "worked" to gain a level playing field to begin with. But the ultimate problem today is not so much that people have started "working the refs" (although of course they sometimes do) or that the refs are biased (although of course they often are). The problem, rather, is that media outlets — along with the scientific, medical, academic, and governmental institutions that together comprise the institutional infrastructure of our public epistemology— started thinking of themselves as refs in the first place.

In recent decades, journalistic institutions have shifted from preoccupation with ensuring their own credibility in the eyes of the public to concern about the credulousness of the public. In this way, the traditional practice of journalistic fact-checking has effectively been repurposed. Where once fact-checking was for internal quality control, a tool for journalists to police themselves, it has instead become a tool for policing public discourse. This shift from informing the public to policing it has not only invited the inevitable accusation of bias — that the "refs" are making bad calls; it has also hampered journalism's ability to fulfill its role as an indispensable resource for democratic debate.

The Debunking Shift

The kind of fact-checking on display during the Obama–Romney presidential debates was, on one level, continuous with the existing practices and norms of American journalism, in both its stenographic and adversarial forms. By 2012, we had almost come to expect that journalists would not simply report on presidential or other political debates but also, where necessary, set the record straight on matters of fact. Journalists were no longer simply reliable and trusted sources of information; they spoke truth to power.

In one particularly controversial moment during the second debate, the moderator, CNN news anchor Candy Crowley, interrupted the argument. Romney was pressuring Obama about his reluctance to characterize an attack that killed American diplomats in Benghazi, Libya, as an "act of terror." Crowley wanted to set the record straight: Obama had "in fact" called the attack an act of terror in public remarks delivered from the Rose Garden, she said — to which Obama responded, "can you say that a little louder, Candy?"

Predictably, Crowley's intervention was met with outrage by Republicans who not only disputed her factual assertion but also accused her of violating the journalistic norm of impartiality. Then-Rep. Jason Chaffetz told Crowley the day after the debate that "it's not the role of the moderator to say, 'Mr. President, you're right' or 'Gov. Romney, you're right,'" while Rush Limbaugh wryly derided the move as an "act of journalistic terror."

The critics had a point. President Obama's language was, in fact, more ambiguous

than Crowley implied. In saying that "no acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation," Obama had strongly suggested that the Benghazi attack was an "act of terror" while at the same time not saying so directly. This at a moment when Republicans had been hammering the president for failing to do just that — frustration that got channeled into Romney's adversarial questioning.

More importantly, Crowley's interruption did go beyond the traditional norm of impartiality, regardless of whether she got the facts right. By taking sides in a dispute over Obama's semantics, and by extension their foreign policy stakes, she was not simply reporting the facts as she saw them, but actively intervening in a political argument. She was acting less like a reporter and more like a referee. This invited the accusation that she was not acting impartially, in just the same way that sports referees often get accused, rightly or not, of making bad calls.

To be sure, debate moderators have always had a referee-like function distinct from that of a typical beat reporter. But the fact that the Crowley episode generated as much controversy as it did helps to illustrate that the role the press was assuming during the 2012 presidential election was the leading edge of something quite different than mid-century stenographic or Nixon-era adversarial journalism. In hindsight, we can see the emergence of a new and distinctive public role for journalism — one that has since come into its own as a fixture of our common life.

Not only has political fact-checking grown into a global industry since that time, but it has also expanded beyond assessing the accuracy of politicians' claims to combating digital misinformation and fake news. In effect, fact-checking has now become at least as preoccupied with policing the public's discourse as politicians'. Lucas Graves and his coauthors have recently described this as a "shift from holding political actors accountable to policing anonymous, outlandish, and often trivial social media misinformation" — a shift from "political fact-checking" to "debunking."
This trend has been accelerated by non-journalistic institutions — in particular, social media companies — seeking to outsource anti-misinformation efforts, effectively transforming fact-checking into online content moderation. Meta, for example, has a third-party fact-checking program in which participating organizations, certified by the International Fact-Checking Network, investigate claims that have been "surfaced" as "potential misinformation." We are a long way from the days of in-house departments at news organizations simply vetting facts in reporters' stories.

The Rise of Discourse Policing

The practice of fact-checking as it emerged in the twentieth century — long with norms such as objectivity and balance — originally evolved to serve two distinct but interrelated functions. The first and most obvious was to improve the reliability of journalistic products, news stories, political coverage, and so on. That is to say, fact-checking was a form of quality control within journalism. The second function, however, was to shore up public trust, which is only partly a matter of producing good products. It is also a matter of being trustworthy — which is as much about character as it is about competence.

In effect, internal fact-checking norms demonstrated to the public that journalists held themselves to high standards, rather than simply trying to advance their own interests. They did not always live up to those standards, of course. But even, and perhaps especially, when individual journalists erred, the maintenance of these standards — for instance, through public corrections or even

disciplinary action — showed that, as members of a profession, journalists were not just competent but also tried to exhibit characteristics that rendered them worthy of the public's trust.

With the advent of adversarial journalism, traditional fact-checking came to serve, or at least support, yet a third function: that of holding those in power to account, by scrupulously investigating and reporting on the activities of government and other powerful institutions. Yet today's external fact-checking serves almost the opposite of these three functions.

First, it is concerned with the quality not of journalistic products but of public discourse. Most legacy outlets still adhere to some version of the traditional journalistic norms, and a few of them still do the time- and resource-intensive work of good journalism — fairly reported, thoroughly checked, and reliably informative — exceptionally well. But they are exceptions. And in today's digital media environment, incentives that hadn't existed in earlier eras — the pressure to chase clicks, say, or the unprecedented ease of correcting articles after they're published, even by stealth — have combined to pull journalism away from its erstwhile preoccupation with internal quality control. The result is that very few media institutions now produce high-quality journalism.

Second, external fact-checking does little to shore up public trust, and much to undermine it. Rather than demonstrating to the public that journalistic institutions hold themselves to high standards, external fact-checking seeks to demonstrate that others have failed to uphold them. Traditional journalistic norms are no longer focused inward, which builds trust, but are projected outward, which erodes it. In this way, what was once a form of quality control internal to the practice and profession of journalism has become a tool that journalistic institutions can wield for the purpose of policing public discourse.

And this runs counter to — or at least is in tension with — the third function of traditional fact-checking, the adversarial ethos of speaking truth to power.

Of course, political figures remain important sources of false and misleading claims, and should thus be subject to the judgment of journalists. But digital disinformation can come from anywhere: a news outlet, the government, a Hollywood celebrity, a "bot," a foreign agent, a random social media influencer, or an ordinary citizen. All of this content then becomes so much grist for the debunking mill, sometimes distracting today's external fact-checkers from the behavior of powerful figures and institutions.

To be sure, advocates of political fact-checking defend the practice precisely because they think it does keep the powerful in check. In our brave new digital world, the argument goes, we need impartial referees to separate factual information from its counterfeit to prevent public debate from being manipulated by the powerful for their own ends. In support, this interpretation can point to the fact that digital disinformation really is a big problem — and a novel one in a lot of ways — made all the more troubling by deep political polarization and ideological sorting. Moreover, various partisan, special, or even nefarious interests can and do manipulate information flows for their own purposes. But what this interpretation overlooks, by focusing on public discourse in general, is that one of the interests that seeks to manipulate information flows for its own purposes is the state — sometimes working closely with

corporations, as we saw during the Covid-19 pandemic. (The recent Supreme Court case Murthy v. Missouri centered on whether the Biden administration's pressure on social media companies to make certain Covid-related content moderation decisions amounted to coercion that violated the First Amendment. In June, the court ruled that the plaintiffs lacked standing to sue, leaving the substantive legal questions unresolved.)

The posture journalists must assume when engaging in the kind of discourse policing that external fact-checking has evolved into leaves them at best ill-suited to hold powerful expert institutions to account, and at worst vulnerable to being manipulated by their sources.

Checking Whom?

Consider, for instance, the role that media coverage played in reporting on the confusing and often misleading public statements about the effectiveness of masks during the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially, media coverage, accurately reflecting official U.S. policy, reported that there was little evidence that masks worked, despite the fact that they were advocated by some experts and were already being used in several countries. Only a few weeks later, official U.S. policy notoriously changed, and media coverage flip-flopped, reporting instead that there was a consensus that masks did work after all, despite the fact that some experts continued to demur.

Public views that differed from or even simply questioned aspects of U.S. masking policies were denounced as "misinformation." Vox was soon "explaining" that "performative masculinity" and sexism were the reasons why many Americans distrusted the science of masks. (Ironically enough, that same story regurgitated the now generally discredited claim that wearing "gaiter" style face coverings, popular with athletes during the pandemic, was "worse than not wearing a mask." The claim was based on a single, controversial study.)

A conventional explanation for the policy change on masks, given by prominent experts such as Anthony Fauci, was that the science itself had changed: we had come to learn through the ordinary process of scientific inquiry that masks — including cloth masks — did, in fact, work.

This rationale was dutifully reported by media outlets, and was implicit in the "information vs. disinformation" framing that mainstream media outlets used to present the issue. But this rationale was always implausible, not least because three months is an awfully short amount of time for a scientific consensus to form. In reality, the underlying science of masks had not really changed in any fundamental way between winter and spring 2020 — something a good journalist could have discerned (and a few actually did).

What really changed was not so much the science of masks but the official expert recommendation about what policy was called for in light of the science. Based on a host of factors, including a recognition of the role of asymptomatic spread, experts decided that masks, including even low-quality cloth ones, were a worthwhile intervention after all. This was a policy recommendation — a prudential judgment about whether the benefits of an intervention outweighed the costs — not a scientific fact, though it was of course informed by facts. And prudential judgments can and should change in light of circumstances, which rightly happens much more quickly than the process of consensus formation in science.

A similar and perhaps even more demoralizing series of events played out in the debate over Covid origins. In this case, almost immediately after the emergence of Covid-19, prominent

experts and expert institutions began to promote the implausible idea that there was no real uncertainty over the origins of the novel pathogen. In February 2020, some twenty scientists wrote a now infamous letter published in the Lancet "to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin." By March, a letter published in Nature Medicine claimed to show that Covid-19 "is not a laboratory construct or purposefully manipulated virus" but instead had a natural origin. This idea was then promoted by traditional and social media outlets, with dissenting viewpoints castigated as anti-scientific and conspiratorial — and even racist — misinformation. There was a scientific consensus, the claim went, about where the virus came from.

It soon became clear — in part through old-fashioned investigative journalism — that there was, in fact, no scientific consensus here at all, nor has there been one since. A White House investigation initiated by President Biden in 2023 failed to resolve the matter. Some intelligence agencies have assessed that the virus likely had a natural origin, while the FBI, as well as the Department of Energy, have voiced support for the lab-leak theory. Even worse, it was revealed — once again through investigative journalism — that some experts, including two of the authors of the Nature Medicine paper, may have conspired to create the false appearance of consensus, despite the fact that even some of those very experts had privately questioned whether the pandemic had a natural origin.

Today, media coverage of both issues — Covid origins and masks — though far from perfect, is considerably more balanced. News stories will often acknowledge that, while the majority of scientific and governmental institutions remain persuaded that a natural origin is the most likely explanation of the pandemic and that high-quality face coverings are effective public health tools, not all experts agree, and the issues are complex. In the case of Covid origins, it is openly admitted that the question may never be resolved. (So much for the consensus!) On these issues, at least, we are a long way from pandemic-era accusations of sexist and racist misinformation reinforced by media coverage and external fact-checking.

What changed? And why did it take so long? Why did the public have to endure years of not only confusing and bewildering explanations for shifting expert opinion on matters of great public concern but also media characterizations of divergent viewpoints as false, pernicious, and ill-motivated — rather than, say, unsubstantiated, minoritarian, merely conjectural, or even misguided? The explanation is not that we now know more, and so media coverage can draw on deeper and better-established reservoirs of expert knowledge. On the contrary, media coverage today is more balanced on these issues precisely because it is more accurate about what we don't know — and in many cases never really knew.

A better explanation is that, during the pandemic, media outlets — with some notable and telling exceptions — were more preoccupied with policing public discourse than with ensuring that they were accurate and discriminating in their own reporting. This allowed them to be, in effect, taken in by their expert sources, when they should have themselves striven to be reliable sources of information for the public. To do so effectively, however, would have required not only more rigorous fact-checking of the old variety but also assuming a more adversarial posture toward public experts and governmental authorities.

Far from being uniquely bad instances of mistakes or misbehavior, these pandemic examples

illustrate how important in the current media and political environment the traditional goal of adversarial journalism is, when buttressed with scrupulous fact-checking. It also shows why the new discourse policing can undermine both.