

3. Logan Smith is a private individual who runs a Twitter site. Should the Raleigh newspaper have given his decision to publish photos of bystanders in the Charlottesville crowd a larger audience through an article in their pages? Does their article imply endorsement of what he did?

## Macro Issues

1. The Charlottesville protest was one of the biggest news stories of 2017. After you look up this incident online, critique the “blame on both sides” statement by President Trump.
2. The author of the *Wired* quote says that the two sides of the racial divide use “different logic” to justify their use of the tactic. What, exactly, are the two sides, and what would be the logic that each would use in reaching a decision to use doxxing as a tactic?

## CASE 6-C

### THE TRUTH ABOUT THE FACTS: POLITIFACT.COM

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You would think journalists—the folks who write the “first draft of history”—would have better memories about accepting political claims at face value. However, early in 1950 when Wisconsin Republican Senator Eugene McCarthy stood at a podium in Wheeling, West Virginia, and claimed to have a list of 205 State Department employees who were members of the Communist Party, news organizations reprinted the statement without further corroboration. The news coverage destroyed lives and reputations, despite the fact that McCarthy had no such list nor was he ever able to produce one. Journalists learned that facts, what people say, and truth are not always closely connected. From that point forward, political journalists emphatically did not want to repeat the mistake.

*Tampa Bay Times* Washington, DC, bureau chief Bill Adair, who came to the nation’s capitol in 1997 during the era when acid political rhetoric and partisan shilling were gaining a national platform on cable

television and becoming more and more common in Congress, did have a journalist's instinct for truth. More than that, he felt professionally compelled to help his readers distinguish among political claims, no matter who was making them, and discoverable facts. It was in this context that he developed the website Politifact.com, which was initially supported by his newspaper *Tampa Bay Times* (formerly the *St. Petersburg Times*) and produced in conjunction with *Congressional Quarterly*.

Fact checking itself is not new. The *New Yorker* magazine earned much of its journalistic reputation for its fact checking: a not-always perfect process where a separate group of journalists checked the facts in *New Yorker* stories before they were printed. What made Politifact distinct—and memorable and marketable, according to Adair (personal communication 2012)—was the invention of the Truth-O-Meter, a visual representation of whether a statement was completely true to “pants-on-fire,” a reference to the chant many Americans grow up with: “liar, liar, pants on fire.”

When Politifact.com researched the truth behind political statements, it ranked them, from truthful, to mostly true, to mostly false, to whoppers. Adair believes it was the Truth-O-Meter that separated his fact checking site from many others. His own research shows that most readers look at the Truth-O-Meter first; many do not investigate further into the actual reporting and analysis that fuels the individual ranking.

Other elements also separated Politifact.com from its competitors. Beginning in 2009, the site awarded the “Lie of the Year” which, that year, went to former Alaska governor Sarah Palin for her utterly mendacious statement that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act would lead to death panels deciding whether elderly Americans would live or die. In 2011, the “Lie of the Year” went to the Democratic National Committee for its statement—carried in political ads as well as new stories—that the Republican budget approved by the US House of Representatives would repeal Medicare. The website has fact-checked sketch comedy (“Saturday Night Live”) and Jon Stewart—himself a fact checker of some repute. Adair says that he does not pay attention to whether one political party or the other is found to be lying more often (as some studies have shown) but that the site is even-handed in selecting claims to be checked. Politifact.com is potent enough that those who are accused of lying—or even not telling the complete truth—contest its claims in the media, often vociferously.

And, in an era when website hits matter in terms of revenue, Adair is also forthright about the impact of the Truth-O-Meter on the site's popularity and hence profitability.

The *St. Petersburg Times* and Politifact.com were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for national reporting in 2009, for "its fact-checking initiative during the 2008 presidential campaign that used probing reporters and the power of the World Wide Web to examine more than 750 political claims, separating rhetoric from truth to enlighten voters."

### Micro Issues

1. Is what Politifact.com does reporting? Is it objective reporting?
2. How would you evaluate the truthfulness of the Truth-O-Meter?
3. Why is the truthfulness of a statement examined in a separate news story instead of becoming part of continuing coverage? Is this approach ethically defensible?

### Midrange Issues

1. Should individual journalists be responsible for checking the political claims of public officials, or is that job best left to "fact checkers" and websites such as Politifact.com?
2. Should there be a parallel website to check the claims of commercial messages? What would be the ethical rationale for such a site?
3. Adair has said that he believes the site would not be as successful without the Truth-O-Meter, even though he acknowledges that truth is often subtler than a simple rating would indicate. Do such sites need a gimmick to cut through the clutter of political speech today? Can such gimmicks be ethically justified?

### Macro Issues

1. Based on the theories of truth outlined in chapter 2, what is the standard of truth Politifact.com employs? What are the dangers and benefits of employing this standard as opposed to others?
2. Evaluate this James W. Carey statement in light of the efforts of Politifact.com: "There is no such thing as a fact without context."
3. Provide an ethical rationale for fact checking "Saturday Night Live" or "The Daily Show."