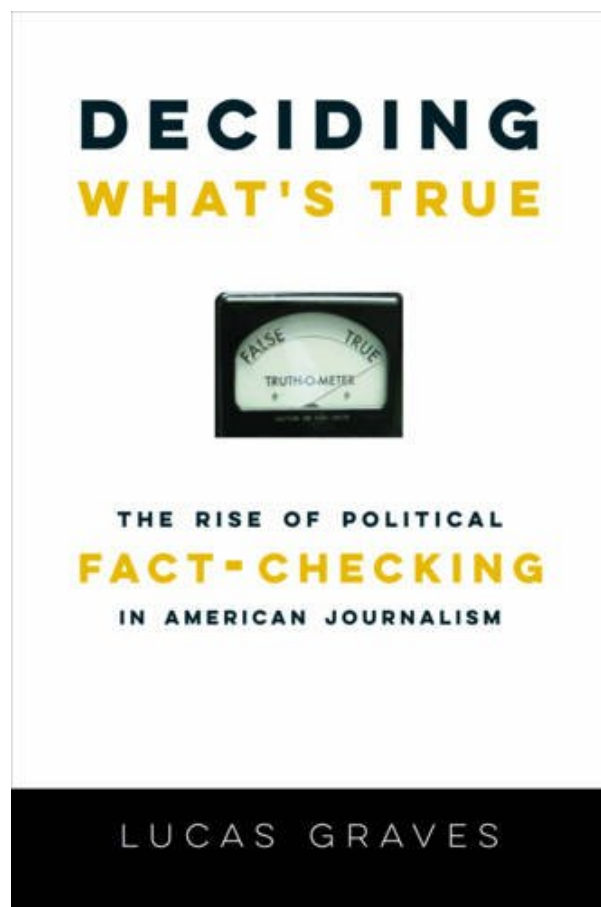


**DECIDING WHAT'S TRUE: THE RISE OF
POLITICAL FACT-CHECKING IN
AMERICAN JOURNALISM BY LUCAS
GRAVES**



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Review

A lively page-turner about political fact-checking that also digs deep into the very foundations of public knowledge. What do we really know, and how do we know it? Graves provides thought-provoking answers. In an age of partisan warfare, this urgently needed book reveals the transformations, tensions, and continuing virtues of journalistic objectivity.

(Rodney Benson, New York University)

In **Deciding What's True**, Lucas Graves provides a thoughtful, empirically grounded analysis of the major fact-checking organizations, studying their evolution and importance in the rapidly changing world of journalism. It is absolutely essential reading for journalists, news executives, and their audiences.

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A timely, compelling, and important account of the rise of political fact-checking, a development?indeed, a movement?aimed at not only improving the quality of public discourse but also invigorating the practice of journalism. This book amounts to nothing less than a genuinely new chapter in the history of modern American journalism.

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A keenly observed visit to a new world whose geography we can now better comprehend.

(Kirkus Reviews)

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Over the past decade, American outlets such as PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and the Washington Post's Fact Checker have shaken up the political world by holding public figures accountable for what they say. Cited across social and national news media, these verdicts can rattle a political campaign and send the White House press corps scrambling. Yet fact-checking is a fraught kind of journalism, one that challenges reporters' traditional roles as objective observers and places them at the center of white-hot, real-time debates. As these journalists are the first to admit, in a hyperpartisan world, facts can easily slip into fiction, and decisions about which claims to investigate and how to judge them are frequently denounced as unfair play.

Deciding What's True draws on Lucas Graves's unique access to the members of the newsrooms leading this movement. Graves vividly recounts the routines of journalists at three of these hyperconnected, technologically innovative organizations and what informs their approach to a story. Graves also plots a compelling, personality-driven history of the fact-checking movement and its recent evolution from the blogosphere, reflecting on its revolutionary remaking of journalistic ethics and practice. His book demonstrates the ways these rising organizations depend on professional networks and media partnerships yet have also made inroads with the academic and philanthropic worlds. These networks have become a vital source of influence as fact-checking spreads around the world.

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Most helpful customer reviews

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Good

By Autamme_dot_com

Fact-checking has entered the everyday lexicon in the United States, primarily due to political campaigning, whereby many individuals and groups are “stress testing” claims and promises being made for terminological inexactitude (lies, mistruths and plain errors in other words). Add in the power of the Internet, growing political polarisation and mistrust of the media and you can see why fact-checking is becoming an ever-present activity. This book looks at the world of fact-checking, who is doing it and why!

It is not just a case of interpretation and genuine errors being made in the rush to publish. Some media outlets and their contributors may be partisan or even been sold a pup by a source with a vested interest. What about

statements and information from government? They should be neutral but in the rush to polish public perception and get their narrative clearly stated there is a risk that facts may be moveable, interpretable fixtures. Candidates, of course, deliver their statements on oath, don't they...

The author looked behind the scenes at several media outlets, examining how they conducted their activities and considered how individual components in the machine functioned. How facts are managed, massaged and checked are also considered, looking at the whole situation from different sides. It is far from clear, one-sided and idealistic; a claim that can often be placed both on media organisations and on the fact-checkers.

Fact-checking should not be under-appreciated. In this ever-connected, hyper-speed world any incorrect facts, whether present by accident or intention, can be spread around the world in seconds. Social media storms can blow up and reputations be damaged. Once the genie is out of the bottle, putting it back in again can be difficult. Even if corrections are made, who remembers the small three-line expression of regret, compared to the front page main story that set the world alight with rank indignation, shock and alarm! Then "misremembering" something can be dangerous, since old memories can be dredged up, refreshed and corrected by fact-checkers.

Yet is all fact-checking based on an altruistic purpose? Many use it as a means to hold politicians to account for what they say and do. Yet is every politician held to the same level of scrutiny or is there an arms race with both sides of the political divide having their own fact-checkers. In the "good old days" the media was the fact-checker, yet did they deserve to have that power and did they really do a good job with what they had? In this book the activities of FactCheck.org, PolitiFact and the Washington Post's Fact Checker are subjected to close scrutiny, although much of the book's general findings and observations can be equally relevant to others.

It was a fascinating, engaging and informative read. If you are not inside the media or political "bubble" there is still a lot of great material awaiting your reading pleasure. For those who are inside, maybe it can be a bit too close for comfort or a bit too much of an eye-opener, for often those who are too close to a subject fail to really note what is going on under their noses.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

An excellent book that should be of interest to anyone interested ...

By L.Bruno

I would give this book a 4.7. I received a free copy of this book in exchange for a fair review, and found it extremely enlightening. The primary topic (fact checking) is very well covered, both historically and with insights as to how they work.

Even more interesting is the understanding as to why the news so seldom seems to be more than questions and answers. It appears that a major part of the problem is (ironically) journalistic ethics., the primary one appearing to be a self-imposed limitation on attacking only wrong facts, but not opinions. I happened to checkout President George W. Bush's rating, and was shocked to see only one question showed, and had nothing to do with WMD, apparently due to the potential for the issue to be one of opinion. Another example was when Newt Gingrich was arguing the danger of rising crime, being shown that the statistics show that crime is going down, and his defending his position on the basis of opinion!

An excellent book that should be of interest to anyone interested in understanding why the news is as it is, especially if they want to be able to try to change it.

1 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Truth is hard to find

By David Wineberg

It is a strange turn of events that media outlets have abandoned their internal fact-checkers, and stories get written, published and reprinted from elsewhere with no vetting. Instead, third party organizations that do nothing but cherry pick news items for checking are doing that job. The job has not changed, but fewer items undergo the treatment. I guess we should be thankful anyone does it at all.

Lucas Graves' *Deciding What's True* is a survey of this pop-up industry. As in any sector, there are the big, highly visible players at the top (Graves calls them elite), and an uncollected mass of smaller players below. They pick from among the new releases, political events, Congressional nonsense and just plain lies, misquotes and fabricated stories that appear in the media daily. Sometimes they rate them with cute meters, but mostly they seek out the actual source of the data, if it exists.

Graves underwent the training and performed the duties of a fact-checker, giving insight into the tightrope walk the job requires all day, every day. They do the grunt work regular reporters don't seem to do much of any more. They are harassed, threatened and vilified by politicians, media personalities and bloggers daily, which means they must be doing something right.

Added to the burden of political malfeasance, there is the new plague of internet facts. Before the web, they would circulate in e-mails. Now these made up facts give heft to all kinds of blogs, websites and social media. If you've seen one of these facts several times during a week, you tend to believe it must be true. Ironically, the internet is the first place fact-checkers turn to for verification. And then there's the problem of people continuing to tout the lies long after they've been proven wrong. Or, as a Romney pollster said in 2012: "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers."

The book is very stilted. It uses the tiresome, academic, tell-them-what-you're-going-to-say (etc.) format, plus the usual interminable (21 page) introduction doing the same. Chapters can take a page and a half to review what has come before and what the current chapter covers. This gives the reader no credit whatsoever, slows the read, and pads the book. Ironically, it could have had much more impact had Graves simply employed journalistic styles. Had he started each chapter with a dramatic case, or followed the fallout from some process, or showed how even the fact checking failed to stop the falsehood spreading, the book would have been gripping. Instead, it is a gentle survey. For a book dealing with such controversial hardhitting and significant events, it is disappointingly dry and flat.

David Wineberg

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