

ELECTION 2024

## Why are 'fact checks' vouching for Trump's lies?

Losing the framing battle



"Fact check" journalism appears to be broken. Can it be fixed? (photo via Shutterstock)

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Let's hope 2024 will be the year that “both sides” fact-checking as a journalistic genre grows up.

The comically bad “fact-checking” that came out of the Democratic National Convention should be a wake-up call for anyone who cares about the truth.

Example: Kamala Harris received a “Mostly False” when she said that, through Project 2025, Donald Trump “plans to create a national anti-abortion coordinator and force states to report on women's miscarriages and abortions.” Politifact explained that “Project 2025 doesn't mention a ‘national anti-abortion coordinator.’ The document calls for a ‘pro-life politically appointed Senior Coordinator of the Office of Women, Children, and Families.’”

That's like saying it's untrue to suggest a diner serves ketchup when it merely offers catsup.

## Trump's Firehose of Falsehoods

These attempts to parse “tomato” from “tomah-to” might make some sense in a reality that didn't include Donald Trump, whose complete rejection of the truth thrives when the press falls into the trap of suggesting “both sides” as equally flawed. The perennial GOP nominee lies about everything from hurricane warnings to his historically bad jobs record.

His lies – including his flood of falsehoods about the 2020 election that led to the end of America's tradition of a peaceful transfer of power – define him.

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Even the idea that Trump can be fact-checked helps Trump. It falsely suggests there are times when he might be constrained by the truth when he, like all authoritarians, is “cognitively irresponsible,” says rhetoric scholar Jennifer Mercieca. He uses his words almost solely to reject the idea that he’s accountable to anyone or democracy itself.

The combination of Trump's firehose of falsehoods and the media’s agenda to appear even-handed has always yielded toxic slop. But “fact checkers” do accidentally reveal two truths:

- 1. As Dr. George Lakoff has explained for years, accepting someone else’s framing spreads that framing, even if you’re debunking it.**

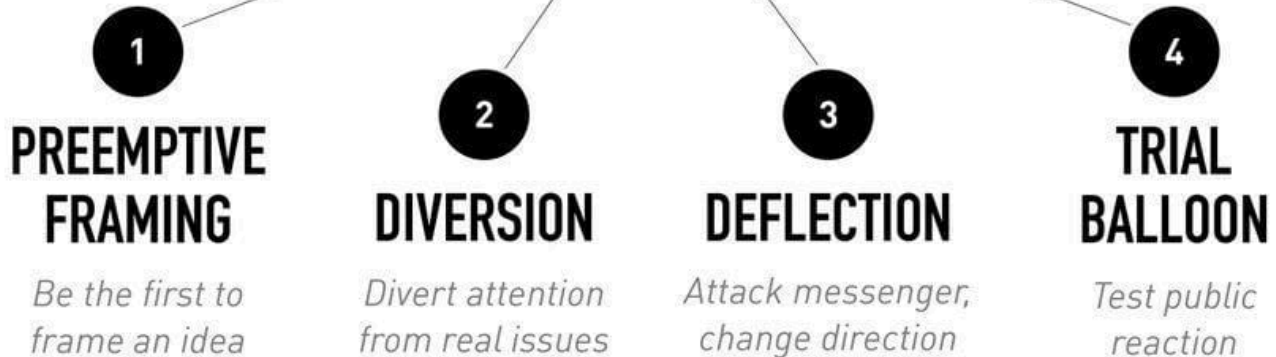
The whole fact-check genre could be called “Don’t Think of this Thing I Think is Wrong.” Whether it’s Richard Nixon saying, “I am not a crook,” or the AP telling us that JD Vance didn’t technically mate with furniture, the idea you’re trying to dispel is spread far more than it can ever be debunked. A fact check tends to be the opposite of a truth sandwich, which Dr. Lakoff proposed to minimize the spread of blatant lies.

- 2. The press still has no idea how to treat Trump, one of the worst liars in American history.**

Many of the worst fact checks – like the suggestion Trump doesn’t want to repeal Obamacare – rely on Trump’s constant contradictions of himself, often in the same sentence. This loads in the presumption that Trump uses language the way typical politicians do instead of as a super salesman/demagogue.

Lakoff categorized Trump’s tweets to make it easier to analyze Trump’s linguistic vandalism:

# A Taxonomy of TRUMP TWEETS



**EXAMPLE:** The hacking of the DNC was the DNC's fault and Democrats lost by a wide margin. (when in fact it was one of the narrowest margins in US history).

**EXAMPLE:** Divert attention away from real issues around conflicts of interest and Russian hacking and toward Meryl Streep's speech at Golden Globe Awards.

**EXAMPLE:** Attack media in an attempt to erode public trust. Reframe story as "fake news" and establish Trump administration as source of truth.

**EXAMPLE:** Test public reaction to nuclear arms escalation.

JAN 7

@realDonaldTrump  
Only reason the hacking of the poorly defended DNC is discussed is that the loss by the Dems was so big that they are totally embarrassed!

JAN 9

@realDonaldTrump  
Meryl Streep, one of the most over-rated actresses in Hollywood, doesn't know me but attacked last night at the Golden Globes. She is a.....

JAN 11

@realDonaldTrump  
Intelligence agencies should never have allowed this fake news to "leak" into the public. One last shot at me. Are we living in Nazi Germany?

DEC 22

@realDonaldTrump  
The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes

Created by @gibilisco

Based on 'A Taxonomy of Trump Tweets' by George Lakoff.  
First aired January 13, 2017 on WNYC's On the Media.  
<http://www.wnyc.org/story/taxonomy-trump-tweets>

Trump is also an expert in paralipsis, which Mercieca describes as his way of asserting something without taking responsibility for saying it himself. It's his game of "I'm not saying/I'm just saying." He does this by retweeting particular noxious notions or images he's trying to spread or framing his assertions with "many people are saying." It's a repulsive hack that renders fact-checks useless.

Fact checks in the Trump era have begun to operate a bit like the "Community Notes" scam on Elon Musk's version of Twitter. Sure, you occasionally get a gem that exposes an obvious scam – like a faked Trump rally photo or a Republican bragging about an infrastructure program he opposed. But think about where those notes don't appear. They're never on Elon's tweets, which are saturated with right-wing propaganda, AI-generated disinformation, and neo-Nazi conspiracy theorizing. So, in essence, they're vouching for every lie he spreads.

## Can Fact Checks be fixed?

Donald Trump depends on journalism's failed conventions to continue to normalize his unprecedented attack on American freedoms. That's why editors must pursue multiple strategies to ensure they don't mislead anyone into thinking Trump's dishonesty is comparable to his opponent's or any relevant American political figure.

We need information to debunk lies, yet there should be a greater sense of responsibility when dealing with blatant untruths. That starts with recognizing that lies change brains, even when debunked. They are like toxic spilloff or nuclear waste that must be tracked, contained and cleaned up as much as possible. The best way to do that is to lead with the truth whenever possible, the exact thing Trump is trying to bury with his lies.

Readers also need a sense of Trump's lies' unprecedented scope, recurrence and purpose. One strategy is to annotate a typical rally speech with facts and reality checks. Then, compare it to a typical Harris speech. Another is to track his most-repeated lies. And, as Dr. Lakoff has suggested for decades, journalists should also analyze the rhetoric's frames to give voters a sense of the information war being waged for their brains.

The problem with all of these strategies is that the press would be required to do something that they seem to do their best to avoid: Call out Trump's lies directly. The best we can hope for is a "falsely claims" in a headline or two, which is better than nothing.

Fact checkers should stop pretending they are the be-all and end-all of determining a fact's value. Since their jobs do not seem to depend on their reputations or track records, they should bring in experts whose careers depend on accuracy to take on Trump's most repeated lies.

Publications that care about the truth need to show they understand the seriousness of this moment. Democracy and journalism face an unprecedented attack from Trump and MAGA that threatens the future of these two pillars of a free society.

Cowering to Trump will, at best, buy you more opportunities to cower to Trump, who will never be satisfied – not until he can imprison anyone who displeases him by suggesting he alone isn't in charge of deciding what is true.

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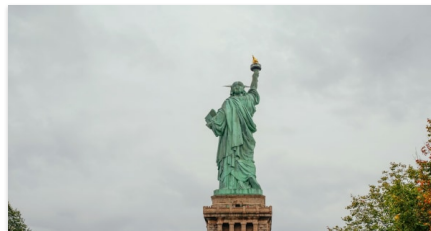


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