



Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>

Accountability at International Fact-Checking Network?

1 message

Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>
To: info@poynter.org

Tue, Nov 19, 2019 at 2:56 PM

Dear Poynter Institute,

For over a year, I have acted as an independent journalist testing the accountability system at the Poynter-hosted International Fact-Checking Network.

Most of the time, the IFCN has graciously responded to my requests for information. That appears to have changed recently, and it represents a big problem for the integrity of the IFCN and the Poynter Institute.

Background

Over its history, I have documented numerous times that (Poynter-owned) PolitiFact fails to follow its policy on corrections, often even ignoring the need for an obvious correction. The IFCN uses ("scrupulous") adherence to a corrections policy as one of its criteria for verifying fact-checking organizations. Consequently, I have used examples from PolitiFact to test the IFCN's complaint process.

When the IFCN published the annual review for PolitiFact in 2019, it lacked any mention of complaints I had logged. I learned from Director Baybars Orsek that a technical error prevented the outside reviewer, Michael Wagner, from receiving the complaints. Orsek assured me the reviewer would receive the complaints and decide whether action was warranted regarding PolitiFact.

Weeks later I learned the reviewer had received the complaints and decided no action was warranted. The IFCN did not publish that information. I learned it through inquiry. But the IFCN offered no rationale to back the decision. Fortunately, the reviewer acted in the interests of transparency and shared the rationale he used.

Unfortunately, the reviewer relied on a false assumption in making his decision. This hinged on PolitiFact's interpretation of the estimated costs for the Sanders Medicare For All plan, in particular whether estimates of the cost represented the total national cost of health care (regardless of who pays) or the added cost to the federal government. PolitiFact erred in implicitly representing an estimate from Kenneth Thorpe as total national cost, allowing Sen. Sanders to defray that cost using existing government health-care spending. But Thorpe's estimate was of the added costs to the federal government, rendering that explanation completely untenable (added federal health care costs cannot be defrayed by existing federal health care costs).

Mr. Wagner mistakenly assumed the Thorpe estimate was total program cost and made his decision about the series of complaints apparently solely on the basis of that mistaken assumption (Orsek confirmed for me that the explanation I received from Wagner was the same rationale the IFCN received).

Since discovering this problem I have pressed the IFCN for information about how it plans to address this situation and another (an IFCN review of a differing complaint involving Science Feedback). Though Orsek weeks ago expressed a willingness to meet in person, neither Orsek nor the IFCN have responded to my email messages since that time reiterating the importance of resolving this issue. The behavior perfectly resembles stonewalling.

Where we stand

The IFCN has two public complaint situations from the past year and botched at least one of them (involving Science Feedback). And the IFCN has stayed publicly silent about another set of valid complaints involving PolitiFact.

Poynter and the IFCN cannot earn a reputation for public trust by making decisions based on false information.

The public deserves an explanation for what occurred regarding PolitiFact. If Wagner is right and I am wrong, then please publicly disgrace me and my complaint. If I am right, on the other hand, I expect the IFCN to make a statement for publication about what it intends to do to rectify the situation.

Thanks for your attention to this matter. **I would greatly appreciate some type of response acknowledging Poynter's receipt of this message along with the name(s) of the person or persons initially assigned look into this situation.**

3/11/2020

Gmail - Accountability at International Fact-Checking Network?

Of course I'll be happy to offer more specific details on request, including the specific means used to show the Thorpe estimate of \$25 trillion over 10 years unquestionably addressed added federal costs.

--

Sincerely,

Bryan W. White
editor
zebrafactcheck.com