

Open and Honest? Try 'Misleading and Corrupt'

If the International Fact-Checking Network is doing its job, then PolitiFact has known for years that it is receiving formal complaints about its adherence to the IFCN's requirement that it scrupulously adhere to an "open and honest" policy on corrections. I've been lodging formal complaints about PolitiFact's corrections process for three years, and the IFCN has pledged that it sends a copy of those complaints to PolitiFact. PolitiFact cannot be unaware that it is under somebody's microscope on its compliance with that policy.

With PolitiFact apparently in an extended period between the expiration of its IFCN verification on June 20, 2020 and the renewal of its verification ([still pending after five months](#)), it nonetheless appears perfectly comfortable continuing its pattern of incomplete adherence to an ethical, open and honest policy on corrections.

It's as though PolitiFact feels the IFCN is either impotent or in its back pocket.

Two Examples from November 2020

I have two examples from November 2020 showing PolitiFact publishing false information, correcting that misinformation without admitting error in either case, and then making absolutely no discernible effort to ensure the audience seeing the misinformation then saw the corrected information.

Reminder (bold emphasis added):

6.3 Where credible evidence is provided that the applicant has made a mistake worthy of correction, the applicant makes a correction openly and transparently, **seeking as far as possible to ensure that users of the original see the correction and the corrected version.**

Example 1: Two Recall Elections in Georgia?

On [Nov. 10, 2020](#), PolitiFact published an article stating that Georgia's two Republican senators had been forced into "tough recall elections." That was false. The senators both faced runoff elections. A runoff is not the same thing as a recall, and one is not a mere misspelling of the other.

But PolitiFact admitted no error. [It changed its story](#) to say the senators were facing "tough runoff elections" with no correction or update notice. PolitiFact's corrections policy has a

loophole allowing that to happen. PolitiFact simply defines its misinforming sentence as containing a misspelling or “minor error” and applies this section of policy from [its statement on corrections](#):

Typos, grammatical errors, misspellings – We correct typos, grammatical errors, misspellings, transpositions and other small errors without a mark of correction or tag and as soon as they are brought to our attention.

Who would think that a high-quality journalistic organization would publish the above and then use it to justify not running a correction after using “recall” instead of “runoff”? Shouldn’t it be unthinkable?

With no correction or update notice attached to the story, how would any persons falsely informed about the “recall” elections find out they were misinformed?

They wouldn’t. PolitiFact apparently does not want them to know they were misinformed, otherwise it would attach a correction and do something to make sure its audience saw the correction. PolitiFact apparently wants a wide definition of “small error” that allows it to hide its mistakes from the public and encourage the false notion that its substantive mistakes are far and few between.

Example 2: Clarifying a Quotation by Changing a Quotation

On [Nov. 13, 2020](#), PolitiFact published an explainer piece explaining to their audience its confidence that Democrat Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election. PolitiFact included in that story a brushoff of would-be comparisons to the 2020 election. That part of the story featured a quotation containing a falsehood (bold emphasis added):

"The punch card machines had registered no votes at all for about 170,000 Floridians, **so Al Gore was requesting hand counts of those ballots**. It’s very different from what’s happening now," he said. "There’s not hundreds of thousands of missing votes like in 2000."

Anybody who knows anything about the 2000 election issues in Florida knows that Gore, in fact, selected for his election protest only four counties among many that had overvotes or undervotes. While the Florida Supreme Court eventually sought a recount of the undervotes (a portion of the 170,000 estimate from the quotation), that was never the relief the Gore team sought from the Court.

PolitiFact again communicated false information to its audience.

I wrote to the expert in question, Robert Speel, to point out the problem and find out whether some missing context might clarify the quotation PolitiFact used.

Speel told me wasn't sure he had been quoted correctly (!) and said he would look into making sure the reporting was accurate.

[PolitiFact changed the story](#), with a "Corrections and Updates" tag added, altering the quotation and adding the following note:

CLARIFICATION, Nov. 23, 2020: Robert Speel's quote was revised after initial publication to clarify his comments about the 2000 election.

The first thing to note about this "clarification" is the absence of any admission of error. PolitiFact published false information and may have misquoted Speel (who knows, as to the latter, with this kind of transparency?).

But there's no need to admit any mistake at all?

The "corrections and updates" tag does next to nothing to help ensure that readers get to see the corrected version, for this is one of those corrections obscured under the heading "Latest Articles" on PolitiFact's page of corrected or updated stories. And there's no admission of error nor any description of a mistake, so unless the reader knows what to look for, this clarification serves to *hide* PolitiFact's mistake instead of admitting it.

With three editors reviewing the story none of them apparently noticed the problem with the Speel quotation before PolitiFact published its story. Isn't that comforting?

The second problem with the "clarification" is its failure to tell us what was clarified and tell us whether Speel said something wrong or was misquoted. The change to the quotation is a correction, not a clarification, for it replaces a false and misleading clause with a true clause.

Is this the gold standard the IFCN seeks to promote? Or could it stand a little improvement?

For substantive corrections, Zebra Fact Check [publishes a correction announcement in the normal story stream](#). High quality publishers should adopt a standard along those lines. There's likely no better way to alert readers to the existence of a correction. The correction announcement explains the correction and links to the story (which will also feature a correction notice explaining the correction).

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Thanks for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
Bryan W. White
Editor & publisher, Zebra Fact Check