

PolitiFact’s “1984” Take on “Open and Honest” Corrections

I trust the International Fact-Checking Network understands that [its set of standards](#) calls for its stable of verified signatories to scrupulously sustain an open and honest corrections policy.

The IFCN says it expects signatories to alert their readers to the existence of the corrected version.

Poynter-owned PolitiFact has long failed to scrupulously adhere to its corrections policy, even while tweaking that policy to permit itself greater latitude in covering up its mistakes.

In this letter I will identify an apparently intentional loophole PolitiFact designed for itself in its corrections policy and show how the application of its own principle on corrections allows it to circumvent the IFCN’s requirement that it should scrupulously follow an open and honest corrections policy.

PolitiFact’s Policy Loophole

PolitiFact Editor-in-Chief Angie Drobnic Holan extolled PolitiFact’s corrections policy in 2018, calling it “one of the most robust and detailed corrections policies in American fact-checking.” But the devil is in the details. Note PolitiFact’s policy on “errors of fact”:

Errors of fact – Errors of fact that do not impact the rating or do not change the general outlook of the fact-check receive a mark of correction at the bottom of the fact-check.

The text of the fact-check is updated with the new information. The correction states the correct information that has been added to the report. If necessary for clarity, it repeats the incorrect information. Corrected fact-checks receive a tag of "Corrections and updates."

What is a “mark of correction”? I presume Holan describes the nature of her “mark of correction” in her latter paragraph. The “mark of correction” updates the article with new information and “if necessary for clarity” will repeat the incorrect information.

If PolitiFact judges that telling its readers what mistake was made is not necessary for clarity then PolitiFact’s policy permits it to keep that information from its readers.

And that’s how the policy works in practice.

PolitiFact's mistake on Biden and Fossil Fuels

PolitiFact published an Oct. 7, 2020 article fact-checking selected parts of the vice presidential debate between Republican Mike Pence and Democrat Kamala Harris. Part of that collection declared it "False" that Biden and Harris want to get rid of fossil fuels and fracking. Further, PolitiFact falsely said "Biden has never said that he wants to abolish fossil fuels." On Oct. 13, 2020 I reported to PolitiFact information contradicting its claim and asked for a correction.

Here's that section of the article as of [Oct. 8, 2020](#):

Pence: Joe Biden and Kamala Harris "want to abolish fossil fuels and ban fracking."

Rating: [False](#)

Biden has not called for banning fracking outright. He wants to block the federal government from [issuing new permits for drilling](#) on public land. Biden says that he won't shut down existing fracking operations on public land, and that he'll allow fracking to continue on private lands, where most of it takes place.

Biden appeared to say that he supports a ban on "new fracking" during a debate with Bernie Sanders. However, he walked back those remarks the same day and has consistently said that he doesn't support a ban on fracking.

Biden has never said that he wants to abolish fossil fuels. The Biden climate plan proposes a gradual shift toward clean energy with the goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

And here is that same section of the article on [Oct. 20, 2020](#):

Pence: Joe Biden and Kamala Harris "want to abolish fossil fuels and ban fracking."

Rating: [False](#)

Biden has not called for banning fracking outright. He wants to block the federal government from [issuing new permits for drilling](#) on public land. Biden says that he won't shut down existing fracking operations on public land, and that he'll allow fracking to continue on private lands, where most of it takes place.

Biden appeared to say that he supports a ban on "new fracking" during a debate with Bernie Sanders. However, he walked back those remarks the same day and has consistently said that he doesn't support a ban on fracking.

The claim that Biden and Harris want to "abolish fossil fuels" is based on partial quotes that reference Biden's climate change plan, which seeks to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. In [September 2019](#), Biden told a supporter, "I guarantee you we're going to end fossil fuel." He then said: "Before 2050, God willing. No, it can't be done by 2030. No. There is not one single person that's argued it can be done by then. But it can be done by 2050, it may be 2045." At another [town hall](#) in February 2020, Biden told a heckler in the crowd, "We are going to get rid of fossil fuels." Then Biden said, "We're going to phase out fossil fuels."

If you ask me, PolitiFact's final paragraph contains enough examples of Biden wanting to get rid of fossil fuels to the point where PolitiFact should reconsider whether its "false" conclusion fits the evidence. But even assuming the new evidence does not warrant any change to that conclusion, PolitiFact's procedure makes no good-faith effort to make its readers aware of the substantive change to its story.

PolitiFact's "Correction" on Biden and Fossil Fuels

PolitiFact updated its story more than once. Here's the first version of the correction as it appeared on Oct. 8, 2020:

CORRECTION: *This report has been corrected to note that Trump made his hoax comments in South Carolina, not North Carolina; and that Roger Tanney's birth year was 1864, not 1984.*

(This story was last updated 8:48 a.m. Oct. 8.)

The Oct. 8 version of the story has the "Corrections and Updates" tag applied, which makes it appear, albeit not very clearly ("Latest Articles"), [on PolitiFact's page of corrections and updates](#).

Here's the correction as it appeared on [Oct. 20, 2020](#):

CORRECTION: *This report has been corrected to note that Trump made his hoax comments in South Carolina, not North Carolina; and that Roger Taney's birth year was 1864, not 1984. We also updated this story to include two of Biden's statements on ending or phasing out fossil fuels during the campaign, with added context.*

(This story was last updated 7:45 p.m., Oct. 13.)

Note that PolitiFact presents the correction notice as including two corrections and an update ("We also updated ..."). The "updated" part consists of material contradicting PolitiFact's first

version of its fact check and includes no clear admission of any error. First-time readers would never know that PolitiFact had originally made a flatly false report. And how would those who read and believed that false report know that PolitiFact no longer stands behind its claim? There's no effort at all to help PolitiFact's misinformed readers correct the false idea they may have received from PolitiFact's reporting.

Unfortunately, the flexibility in PolitiFact's policy that allows it to follow policy and also hide its failure to report accurately was likely an intended feature.

PolitiFact's policy contrasts markedly with the one published at FactCheck.org, for example (bold emphasis added):

Correction Policy

If any new information comes to light after we publish a story that materially changes that story, we will clarify, correct or update our story and provide a note to readers that **explains the change, why it was made and the date it was made.**

PolitiFact, unlike FactCheck.org, makes no commitment to informing readers why it makes its corrections.

PolitiFact does claim it uses "appropriate transparency" but in practice that seems to mean that PolitiFact's is upfront about the policy that it ends up using to keep the full story from its readers.

Truly appropriate transparency in this case would include admitting the specific mistake and making a palpable effort to ensure that readers who saw the original version would understand they had been exposed to false reporting. Lacking that, it cannot be truly said that PolitiFact scrupulously adheres to an open and honest policy on corrections.

When will the International Fact-Checking Network stop co-enabling this phony-baloney adherence to "open and honest" corrections?

[Side-by-side highlighted comparison of early and late versions of PolitiFact's fact check](#), thanks to the Internet Archive's new comparison tool.

Thanks for your attention to this matter.

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