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## IFCN Accountability

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Bryan White <zebrafactcheck@gmail.com>  
To: Neil Brown <nbrown@poynter.org>

Mon, Apr 1, 2024 at 8:00 AM

Dear Neil Brown,

I'm writing this in advance of your scheduled return to Poynter on March 25, 2024. I would be very surprised indeed if the IFCN director will make any attempt at all to back up the various attacks she aimed at me last week.

It's understandable. Holan took over an IFCN that built a backlog of assessments, to the point she had to decide to freeze new applications. The IFCN is snowed, it seems. I'm not insensitive to her plight. But it's eye-opening to note that Holan offered no support for any of her charges. When I was in journalism school at USF St Petersburg--in all my writing classes, really--concrete examples were always emphasized. I predict she'll come up with none. If she comes up with anything I'll be able to counter it with a better argument rich in concrete detail.

You've had Holan as an associate to one degree or another for years. You're likely to trust her, and she's got a pretty good resume.

But you've also got enough information right now to see that there's a big problem with accountability at the IFCN. When the IFCN revamped its application process a couple of years ago, the changes placed considerable emphasis on the IFCN's formal complaint process. Every verified signatory is expected to inform readers that they can report code violations to the IFCN. There's no fine print about an exception for Bryan W. White, and there's no mention of a limit two per customer. Is that accurate? Is it transparent? Does Poynter not expect the IFCN to abide by Poynter's core values that include both of those values?

Holan says nothing will satisfy me. That's true in that I'm likely to always think of ways fact-checking can improve, but it's false in that I have repeatedly written to IFCN employees since the Mantzarlis days emphasizing that the IFCN should not promise more to the public than it can deliver. If the Code of Principles is aspirational, make that clear to the public. But it's neither accurate nor transparent when signatories simply won't bother to make sensible corrections and the IFCN does nothing *including burying the report*. Meta and the IFCN tell the public that signatories "must" abide by the Code of Principles. That's not true as things stand. Either enforce the Code or refrain from encouraging the public to believe the Code is enforced. Either can serve as a satisfactory state.

As I said, you've already got what you need to see the IFCN's failure on accountability. In my response to Holan I happened to choose for an example a complaint I filed to the IFCN about PolitiFact Virginia. Gov. Youngkin said he won cities no Republican had won before. PolitiFact said all 14 Virginia cities Youngkin won had voted for a Republican before.

Well, the number of cities in Virginia, 35 or 38 (PolitiFact reported both figures), seemed low to me. Doesn't it to you? How many cities would we find in Nebraska, a state with a much smaller population than Virginia? [Nebraska has 581 cities](#). Obviously there's something unusual about this case, right?

When I dug into it, I found that cities in Virginia are uniformly "[independent cities](#)" where the city is not located within a county or parish. That's the only arrangement recognized as a city in Virginia. Virginia has 38 independent cities and the United States has 41, including the 38 in Virginia. And the upshot is this: There are many municipalities in Virginia that people in most of the United States would think of as cities.

PolitiFact Virginia didn't inform readers of this, and it surely must factor in when giving Youngkin a "False" for claiming to a New York audience he won cities no Republican had won before. His audience was unlikely to think he was limiting his claim to 38 municipalities.

[The "False" rating was based on a technicality](#). I sent [a correction request](#) to PolitiFact Virginia and PolitiFact Virginia did nothing to explain how Virginia's count of cities is very different from that of any other state. So that's when I filed the complaint. And, judging from Holan's email, the complaint was dismissed automatically simply because it came from me, a person who allegedly consistently argues in bad faith. That means the outside assessor never sees it, so

Poynter-employed staff circumvented the feature of the IFCN system that's supposed to ensure that Poynter-owned IFCN doesn't do little favors for Poynter-owned PolitiFact (conflict of interest).

You just can't let that go on. Not if Poynter's core principles are supposed to mean something.

You should meet with me for a half hour or so sometime. I can point out a bunch of little problems at Poynter that are hurting its reputation (such as [the effective disappearance of your corrections policy--archives only](#)). You will find I am oriented toward finding solutions to these problems.

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Sincerely,

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