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The New York Times

Public Editor's Journal

ARTHUR S. BRISBANE



January 12, 2012, 10:29 am

Should The Times Be a Truth Vigilante?

By [ARTHUR S. BRISBANE](#)

[Readers Point the Way](#)

Readers provide advice for future public editor columns.

I'm looking for reader input on whether and when New York Times news reporters should challenge "facts" that are asserted by newsmakers they write about.

One example mentioned recently by a reader: As cited in an Adam Liptak article on the Supreme Court, a court spokeswoman said Clarence Thomas had "misunderstood" a financial disclosure form when he failed to report his wife's earnings from the Heritage Foundation. The reader thought it not likely that Mr. Thomas "misunderstood," and instead that he simply chose not to report the information.

Another example: on the campaign trail, Mitt Romney often says President Obama has made speeches "apologizing for America," a phrase to which Paul Krugman objected [in a December 23 column](#) arguing that politics has advanced to the "post-truth" stage.

As an Op-Ed columnist, Mr. Krugman clearly has the freedom to call out what he thinks is a lie. My question for readers is: should news reporters do the same?

If so, then perhaps the next time Mr. Romney says the president has a habit of apologizing for his country, the reporter should insert a paragraph saying, more or less:

"The president has never used the word 'apologize' in a speech about U.S. policy or history. Any assertion that he has apologized for U.S. actions rests on a misleading interpretation of the president's words."

That approach is what one reader was getting at in a recent message to the public editor. He wrote:

"My question is what role the paper's hard-news coverage should play with regard to false statements – by candidates or by others. In general, the Times sets its documentation of falsehoods in articles apart from its primary coverage. If the newspaper's overarching goal is truth, oughtn't the truth be embedded in its principal stories? In other words, if a candidate repeatedly utters an outright falsehood (I leave aside ambiguous implications), shouldn't the Times's coverage nail it right at the point where the article quotes it?"

This message was typical of mail from some readers who, fed up with the distortions and evasions that are common in public life, look to The Times to set the record straight. They worry less about reporters imposing their judgment on what is false and what is true.

Is that the prevailing view? And if so, how can The Times do this in a way that is objective and fair? Is it possible to be objective and fair when the reporter is choosing to correct one fact over another? Are there other problems that The Times would face that I haven't mentioned here?

Throughout the 2012 presidential campaign debates, The Times has employed a separate fact-check sidebar to assess the validity of the candidates' statements. Do you like this feature, or would you rather it be incorporated into regular reporting? How should The Times continue a function like this when we move to the general campaign and there's less time spent in debates and more time on the road?

Please feel free to leave a comment below or send me an e-mail at public@nytimes.com with the subject line: Readers Point the Way: Correcting Untruths. Please adhere to [my comment moderation policy](#) when posting.

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1. 
 - [Jon Gallagher](#)
 - San Diego

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I believe the many comments here that have an exasperated tone come from the fact that we live in an age where raw data is spewing forth in torrents, and tools to manage, interpret, and learn from that data are popping up all over the place.

Yet a major news outlet such as the New York Times does not use the simplest of these tools (searching the online versions of the president's speeches for the word apologize or its synonyms) to check Mitt Romney's major (sole?) criticism of Barack Obama's foreign policy and find it invalid at best and fraudulent at worse.

The worst part is the opinion makers such as the Times are letting ignorance dominate the discussion. There is no valid argument against Evolution, nor is there anything but consensus among scientists about Global Climate Change. But doubt about both is beginning to dominate public opinion because there is an impression that "Both sides disagree" or "Opinions vary". No, the truth is that the opinions of cranks and shills disagree with those of experts, and should be portrayed that way.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend347](#)
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2. 

- o luckybet
- o California

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I'll join the chorus here: it's stunning that the New York Times would ask this question. And do it in a slightly negative way: vigilantes are people who take justice into their own hands, often with very unjust results. Reporters don't need to be vigilantes -- they need to be journalists. I've been around a long time, and remember when a reporter's job was to find and present facts, not talking points, and certainly not his or her own opinions or attitude. Is there now a class in journalism school to fine hone snarkiness? I find the debased state of journalism these days to be deeply depressing and dangerous, and the fact that this is even a question at one of the world's better newspapers is a sign of a deeper debasement than I thought. No wonder candidates aren't afraid of lying. And newspapers wonder why people are flocking to the internet?

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3.

- o Benjamin Ragheb
- o New York, N.Y.

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You have 100 commenters, all saying pretty much the same thing. So: Are you going to listen? Are you going to do it?

- o [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
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4.

- o Brian
- o Washington, DC

Flag

Is this a joke?

THIS IS YOUR JOB.

Journalism in general is in decline because reporters too often act as nothing more than a megaphone for public figures - for a variety of reasons (fear of losing valuable access to sources, because some get lazy, whatever).

It goes without saying that public statements must be researched and fact-checked. Consumers expect the truth, and they expect misleading statements to be challenged in interviews and on the written page.

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5.

- Sally
- Idaho

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Your headline could just as well be found at the Onion. If a newspaper doesn't give a damn about the truth, then I don't pay for it's services. Free markets and all that. Why would I pay to be insulted on a daily basis. Obviously, you think I'm stupid.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend149](#)
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6.

- A Brown
- Providence, RI

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If the purpose of the NYT is to be an inoffensive container for ad copy, then by all means continue to do nothing more than paraphrase those press releases. (Though I'll spend less and less of my time reading it.) If you have ambitions to be a newspaper that practices journalism, then practice journalism - even if that's harder. You might find there's an audience for an actual functional news organization.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
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7.

- [Vince Panone](#)
- Michigan

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That this is even a question, at our so called paper of record is a disgrace, and a sorry example of the sad state of "journalism" in our country today. I suggest Mr. Brisbane and his staff of sten...er reporters watch "The Daily Show", and "The Colbert Report" on a regular basis, and learn how to expose someone who is distorting the facts, by presenting evidence of those distortions.

Where is Edward R. Murrow when we need him.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:05 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend140](#)
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- 8.
- [Brian Donohue](#)
 - Brooklyn, NY

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I hope you can help me, Mr. Brisbane, because I'm an editor, currently unemployed: is fecklessness now a job requirement?

I mean, is that how you got this gig? By branding anyone exposing falsehood in public figures as a "truth vigilante"? That you should have to ask such a question, and in such terms, is a deplorable comment on the state of our media. And, by the way, on yourself.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 5:37 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend139](#)
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- 9.
- dan meyer
 - chicago

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I understand the difference between being an impartial observer reporting what is happening and being a "truth vigilante". We certainly don't expect reporters to make up events that didn't happen. However, there's another level of reporting - which isn't merely being a mouthpiece for anyone you choose to cover, but being responsible to your readership.

As a news organization, you daily filter out information that isn't "newsworthy". One can choose to cover important events and happenings or cover celebrities.

Would it be irresponsible for the Times to put on the front page the opinions of someone who thinks the world is going to end tomorrow? Of course it would. This is a damaging lie.

I believe the Times and every other news organization has an obligation to verify facts that are being presented to them. When Rick Santorum says that he has gay friends that support his stance on family values, we need the press to verify this assertion... or it shouldn't be published - or it shouldn't be published without caveats.

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10.

- Richard
- Ruskin, FL

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I concur with all the other commenters who wonder why this is even a question.

With the proliferation of real time videos, I don't need a stenographer regurgitating the words I have already seen. However, it would be a wonder if reporters actually got back to calling BS when the spin being presented as fact is a lie.

When one side states a fact and the other side responds with a lie, it is not "fair and balanced" to present them as equal statements.

I rather like the analogy used by Lee above "Shape of the earth? Views differ"

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11.

- spatula
- San Jose

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How can you even wonder about this? At the risk of quoting Star Trek, a journalist's first duty is to the *truth*. The public relies on the news media to keep them informed about what's really happening, not just what someone claims is happening.

If one "side" claims the earth is flat, and the other "side" claims the earth is round, is it not the responsibility of a reputable journalist to point out the fact that indeed, the earth is round, rather than to portray this as some controversial "difference of opinion"?

Otherwise, what's the point of you?

Otherwise, you're not journalists, you're just regurgitating press releases without any critical analysis.


- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend106](#)
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12. 
- Sarah
 - Boston, MA

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Um...is this a joke? Are you actually asking your readers if you should do your job?

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:02 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend100](#)
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13. 
- [alphaleah](#)
 - The World

[Flag](#)

Please tell me this column is a joke.

OF COURSE ASSERTIONS SHOULD BE FACT CHECKED!

Otherwise you are simply serving as another vehicle of propaganda dissemination and do not deserve to consider yourself to be a journalistic enterprise.

This includes assertions made within opinion-editorials where distortions and outright lies are not infrequently published as though they contain same level of weight and fact as news pieces.

shaking head in disbelief that this is even a question

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend97](#)
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14. 
- [sapphirestar1](#)
 - Champaign, IL

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As so many others have pointed out, it is beyond my comprehension how journalism has reached the state that reporters have to ask if the public expects them to question the veracity of claims made by public figures. Of course. That is exactly what we expect of you!

Our culture seems to have made taking claims for facts to a new low level, and I, for one, have been waiting for the check on government--the press--to come forward to do its duty in that regard. Simply reporting "he said, she said" isn't journalism. It's parrots disguised as "discerning" people. One reason I respect the Times has to do with its willingness to be more comprehensive than other news sources. And I expect even more, though I often do not get it.

Please consider not merely fact-checking but challenging the claims made. It's high time.

- o [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:05 p.m.](#)
- o [Recommend95](#)
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- 15.
- o [Matt Talbot](#)
 - o California

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That this should even be an open question is a sign that our supposedly independent press is a cowed and timid shadow of its former self.

The press's job ought to be to report *objectively and impartially* (note my non-mention of "balance"), wherever it leads and whoever it hurts.

- o [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- o [Recommend90](#)
- o
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- 16.
- o red shoes
 - o boston

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This reader's input: Yes -- it's your job. Or at least it used to be what journalism was about, and it's never too late to get back to it.

- o [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- o [Recommend83](#)
- o
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- 17.
- o [Steelmen](#)
 - o Long Island

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Yes. Lets not nitpick but when they flat out lie? For heaven's sake why is this even a question. And while we're at it, stop spreading lies with "some people say". If you've got enough people to justify saying "some people" then at least one of them should be willing to go on the record.

So yes--Romney created jobs with Bain? True? False? Your vaunted economics team ought to know and be able to write it, if not in the first story then later. The McCains have a black baby? Christ, address that for the proper context, and nail the liars who were trying to smear him by suggesting he'd fathered a black child out of wedlock.

If not you, who?

- o [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
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18.

- o tr sirmons
- o riverside ct

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That you feel the need to pose the question at all is stark evidence that it is already too late, as it goes to heart of what is "real" journalism. If the answer is not obvious to you, how do you expect to be taken seriously?

Why not just ask the question truthfully? "Is it ok with you if we just continue to print the lies of politicians, without trying to determine, and report, whether they are factual or not?"

- o [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
- o [Recommend81](#)
- o
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19.

- o Blue Stater
- o Heath, Massachusetts

Flag

I'll add my voice to the (apparently) unanimous opinion of readers. That the New York Times -- the *New* *York* *Times*, the newspaper of Times v. Sullivan, the Pentagon Papers, and Watergate -- has to even ask this question shows its readers how far it has sunk. I used to be a newspaper reporter -- for an excellent paper, the Providence Journal -- and I learned from the git-go that self-serving statements by politicians have to be pursued and shown up if they are false. The Journal did that all the time.

The analogy, surely, is to burden-of-proof stories. If Politician A says that Politician B was embezzling from his business, and the paper publishes that statement, then in law the paper is responsible for the truth of the statement and can be sued for disseminating it. Here, if Politician R says that Obama is apologizing, and the paper publishes that assertion without more, the paper is likewise standing behind the truth of the statement.

It should, instead, say something like "The Times was able to find no instance of the President's ever having used "apologize," or similar expressions, in any of his public statements."

This is newspapering 101. For at least the last 10 years, the Times has failed to serve its readers adequately, and because of the Times's standing in the profession, other papers have followed suit. Shame on the New York Times.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
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20.

- Tara
- Anchorage, AK

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This is like a bad joke, except it's not funny. Are you seriously asking whether a journalist should point out when, for example, a candidate for president is lying to the American public? The answer is unequivocally yes. I also find it very disappointing that this piece assumes that pointing out a falsehood would be considered biased or unfair.

I also think referring to the people on whom you report as "newsmakers" is misleading and problematic. The image is that the politician, whoever it may be, is the only active participant in the process, and that a journalist must simply passively report whatever the politician does or says.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:05 p.m.](#)
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21.

- [Susan Madrak](#)
- Philadelphia

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It's an indicator as to just how bad journalism has gotten that you're even asking the question. If you're not going to point out the facts of the story (as opposed to a self-serving narrative), what is the useful purpose of newspapers? What does a journalist do that can't be done by a stenographer? Perhaps your staff should meditate on the alleged difference.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 5:36 p.m.](#)
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- 22.
- Brett
 - Houston

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I think that the answer to this question is obvious. If the politician or person of high office is definitely lying, and you can do a Nexis database search and discover that in fact this person is lying (say by searching Obama's speeches to see if he's apologizing for America), it's only appropriate to call him out on his fabrication.

He/she can always dispute it and send you the supposed evidence for his/her assertion, and if it is valid then you can do a correction. But often it won't be, because people in positions of power like to lie all the time, and if the media doesn't call them out on it then they'll continue to do so as there are no repercussions for lying.

The reason this is important is that consumers of news don't have the time to necessarily look up and figure out if the person was being truthful or not. The journalist, by comparison, has all the time and resources in the world to figure this out. And since they are supposed to be informing the public, then it only makes sense that they perform this service when it is feasible.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 4:58 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend68](#)
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- 23.
- [Nitpicker](#)
 - Washington, DC

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If you aren't actually weighing the claims of "newsmakers" against reality, then why can't I get everything you provide from politicians' press releases and Twitter feeds? Hmmm?

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
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- 24.
- Donald Quixote
 - NY, NY

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I agree with the vast majority of commenters who are shocked this is even a question. Of course the times should callout falsehood. A person should be able to read a news article and come out knowing more about the subject than before they read it. If a falsehood is quoted and unchallenged someone can read an article and emerge more ignorant than if they had just looked at lol cats.

To be blunt a large part of the lousy condition the country is in right now is because the news media has not imposed any fact checking discipline on the public dialogue. If there is no penalty for saying false things, people will say false things that are to their benefit. So to the question, "should we do our job and try to clean up the mess we've made of things?" Yes you darn well should.

- [Jan. 12, 2012 at 6:50 p.m.](#)
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25.

- slappy magoo
- nyc-ish

[Flag](#)

That the New York Times sees fit to ask such a question is a perfect example to how low journalism has sunk. Should news reporters say that they "think" someone is lying? No. Should they do their job and research what the subject of their article has said, especially if it's inflammatory, confirm whether or not the person is lying and then, you know, "report" on it? I'd assume that was part of their job description. Shows you what I know.

Mitt Romney has made statements in speeches saying Obama has apologized for America? A real reporter might try to find those speeches. A real reporter might request that the Romney campaign provide examples of times where Obama has apologized for America, and then report on whether such examples exist or were provided. To do otherwise is to not be a reporter, period. May as well tell you I'm the reincarnation of Groucho Marx, maybe I'll get a Vegas gig.

Put it this way: The Nixon Administration once said it had nothing to do with the Watergate break-in. Would any reporter worth his or her salt say now, with the benefit of hindsight, it wasn't Woodward & Bernstein's job to uncover the truth?

At the risk of provoking the godless heathens that Fox News insists run the New York Times, Jesus wept...

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About The Public Editor



[Arthur S. Brisbane](#) is the readers' representative. He responds to complaints and comments from the public and monitors the paper's journalistic practices. His opinions and conclusions are his own. His column appears at least twice monthly on the Sunday Op-Ed pages. He started his term August 2010.

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About Arthur S. Brisbane

Mr. Brisbane, the fourth public editor for The Times, got his first job in journalism in 1976 as a reporter at the Glen Cove Guardian on Long Island. A year later he joined the Kansas City Times as a reporter and, in 1979, became a columnist. In 1984, he moved to the Washington Post before becoming an assistant city editor and then a National reporter. Mr. Brisbane returned to Kansas City in 1990 to write a column for The Kansas City Star. He was appointed editor of the newspaper in 1992 and, five years later, became its publisher. In 2005, Knight Ridder named him senior vice president with responsibility for overseeing the operations of its papers in Philadelphia, Kansas City, Fort Worth, Charlotte and others. He is a graduate of Harvard College.

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