Matter of Facts
Season 2 Episode 6
Dr. Young – Fact Checking
December 18, 2020

[INTRODUCTION - BYRNE] Facebook Twitter 24/7 News Talk Radio citizen journalism fake News Real News audiences are drowning in an overwhelming overload of information. Clearly a guidepost is needed to identify what is trustworthy and a reliable source of both news and information. Season 2 of the Delaware Humanities podcast "A Matter of Facts" delves into the topic, this year examining more closely popular sources of news and information. The "A Matter of Facts" podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming.

We thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its generous support of this initiative and the Pulitzer prizes for its partnership. A Matter of Facts is produced by Delaware Public Media, Delaware's source for NPR news.

[BYRNE] Thanks for joining us on the "A Matter of Facts" podcast. I'm your host Tom Byrne. In this episode, we turn to an area that has garnered, I think it's fair to say, a little more interest in recent years, and that is fact checking. Now, there are a variety of fact-checking websites available such as Snopes and PolitiFact as well as fact-checking done by various media outlets both print and broadcast, but how did fact-checking get started and what role does it play in helping people navigate the information they see daily in the news and on social media. To help us better understand fact-checking, we are joined on the podcast by Dr. Dannagal Young, Associate Professor of Communication and Political Science at the University of Delaware and Distinguish Research Fellow at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. She studies political satire, political media affects, the psychology of political humor, and the intersection of entertainment and information. She has also spent time specifically examining fact-checking. Dr. Young thanks for being with us on the A Matter of Facts podcast.

[YOUNG] Thank you, Tom.

[BYRNE] Well, I feel like a discussion about fact-checking would have been one kind of conversation, let's say 4 or 5 years ago and now is something completely different. Is it possible to quantify the impact that the Trump presidency and in this increased polarization and our country has had on fact checking?

[YOUNG] That is a great observation and I would say that there are a couple of factors at play that have shifted sort of the job of fact checkers in the nature of the pursuit of fact-checking. One is the Trump presidency. However, you know, many of us as in political communication see Trump style of rhetoric as more of a symptom then as a causal agent in itself. There are other factors that are larger in terms of shaping public discourse as you mention political polarization, which has been on the rise since, especially since the 90s. Now political

polarization we can talk about two different things. One is the notion that the average position, platform position, of Democrats has moved slightly left, while the average position of Republicans has moved to the right. What is more consequential in terms of our information space is the accompanying affective polarization, which means that starting at the level of elites and more now the level at the level of the citizenry, Democrats do not like Republicans and Republicans do not like Democrats. So there's this affective or emotional Dimension to it that really shapes how people respond to anything that comes out of the mouth or the fingertips of someone on the other side of the aisle. I will add to that the changing media landscape where decentralized control over our information space through the internet and social media where there are not those same sort of gatekeepers and professionalized individuals who determine, you know, what they play, the role of arbiter of truth, right? What is true and what is not, that role has shifted so much, that now in with the internet everyone becomes their own gatekeeper. So all of these situations have sort of come together including a lack of trust in government institutions, lack of trust in media, all of which contribute to this larger of sort of info-demic as you might call it.

[BYRNE] So I want to delve into a number of those things that you mentioned but before we do that I do want to take a step back and just talk a little bit about one thing that you did look at in your research in the fact checking that is its history and just tell us a little bit, if you can just thumbnail sketch, perhaps of how fact-checking got started and what did it initially look like in its kind of original form.

[YOUNG] Yes. So really when we were thinking about fact checking as a sort of separate industry right like as a pursuit 'cuz journalism in and of itself is fact check, right? So journalist should be in their kind of culling out what is true and what is not, but through the 1980s there was the sense that we were in this sea of he said she said journalism that was coming about where you would have two competing claims that were being made by politicians and a lot of reports in the news would sort of give air time to both views. So there was this perception that we need to be able to engage in some kind of check on what is empirically true and what is empirically false. This was especially true coming out of the 1988 presidential campaign between George Bush Senior and Michael Dukakis where a lot of the Republican ads were sort of pushing the envelope in terms of advancing falsehoods and information that you might not call a lie, but that was deliberately misleading. And so some of the folks were at the helm here looking at this were Kathleen Hall Jamieson from the Annenberg Public Policy Center who had been studying political ads at the time and she advocated putting together something that was like an ad watch where perhaps television news journalist could talk about the claims that were being made in political ads, but do so in a way that didn't reinforce the false claim themselves. And that's still today is the biggest conundrums with dealing with lies from elites is how do you cover those claims, correct them without reinforcing them in the process. So Jamieson had suggested this visual trick where you put a little television within the television to basically show that we are currently examining a political ad that you may have seen on TV. We're not re-broadcasting it in its entirety. We're just putting it here to be able to pull it apart and check the claims within it. Some of her pursuits later morphed into a project that she launched with Brooks Jackson that is factcheck.org, which still is in the business today along with many other non-partisan fact-checking organizations and their work has become very challenging.

[BYRNE] I was going to say, I mean, before we kind of get into the challenges that have arisen, how effective was that model back then in the in the late 80s into the 90s before we kind of reach what we'll talk about next is this more digital, internet age?

[YOUNG] So the sense was that it did it did provide viewers with an opportunity to have the corrected information as we call it. And what was, what we find challenging, because there's so much research on this, I'm trying to boil it down, where we find that there are benefits to citizens is with specific empirical claims. If you show someone corrected information and you make sure that you tell what is true, then say "here's the full thing", and then once again tell what is true, and if you're doing it in the context of something that is tangible and specific—policy details, statistics, numbers, things like that—you really do find a little bit of movement on those underlying belief in the knowledge.

[BYRNE] So it's kind of like what people have called the sandwich model, right, where you do truth, falsehood, truth, and you kind of put it together in a sandwich for people.

[YOUNG] Exactly. J Rosen at NYU has been doing a great job of sort of talking about this as a really easy straight forward tactic that avoids the pitfalls of other methods which you might have great intentions, and you might be trying to fact-check something, but you could inadvertently reinforce the false claim just by virtue of the fact that you're not adequately sandwiching it between the two-truth pieces of bread. When we're talking about those really tangible claims you can understand how yeah someone could correct that and say "No, the tax is not this amount, it's this amount. It doesn't go to this destination, it goes to that destination." Where we do not find a lot of movement is in how those directed facts or those now updated beliefs then go on to update our overall evaluation of candidates. That's something that we have just been wracking our brains about because you can correct information, but that's not necessarily going to change how people think about candidates or about you know, global policy. So where a lot of this research is heading is to this idea that perhaps what we really need to be thinking about is about our social identity, that people do not process the world like computers where they get information and then they update their algorithm based on that information, and now they have a changed the world. We are not hyper-rational like that. instead, we are incentivized to be social animals to think of ourselves as members of groups. Now because polarization is so strong and because partisan identity is so strong, those groups right now are largely democrat-republican. So what happens is you might find that you are able to update someone's tangible information about an issue. And you're like oh great ok, now they're going to have a corrected attitude towards the candidate. No they won't. They'll just say "well, ok, so this one thing isn't true, but it might as well be true". We find that a lot, the idea that like okay now an individual has, they recognize the information is false, but they then discount that and they continue to do either love their guy or hate the other guys, or girls, and now that has been a real stumbling block.

[BYRNE] I was going to say, I guess that kind of brings us to some of the challenges you're talking about, specifically the challenges of this digital era, the internet, social media. I imagine that that kind of plays into that social piece, right? They tribalization piece of this that the

people are in their little groups and it's very easy on the internet on social media to stay in that group, right?

[YOUNG] 100%. Now what you're talking about here is a concept of echo chambers, right, the notion that people seek out information that supports what they already believe and they avoid formation that you know challenges their beliefs. What we have found is that—and when I say "we" I mean my discipline, I'm not doing all of this, in fact there are a lot of people that are doing this—echo chambers do not exist to the extent that we thought they would. So even in online spaces, even in social media people are actually consuming some pieces of information that contradict their own viewpoint. Now that being said, there are individuals for whom like Facebook groups, like-minded groups of people on issues, like I don't know these anti-vaccination movements, if you go into a Facebook group, that's an anti-vaccination Facebook group where everyone there shares your view, you are going to have a cultivated information ecosystem that is never going to challenge you. It's going to constantly reinforce your beliefs on that issue and more importantly it's going to give you a group of friends a social group of people that you like and that you respect and you want to share views with and share behaviors with so in certain enclaves we cannot rule out the possibility that these dynamics are problematic. But for the majority of the public, right, for the big sort of group of us kind of in the middle, we still no matter what we still are exposed to information that contradicts our own pre-existing view.

[BYRNE] So is there a way for fact-checkers/fact-checking sites to attack that? Obviously probably not very easily, but is it is there any opening for them to making inroads in those type of situations?

[YOUNG] If what we're talking about is really more about the social dynamic, the wanting to be part of a group and wanting to sort of feel respected and liked and have status, it's a whole different calculus in terms of how we would engage in correcting those misconceptions, because now it's not like if we just educate people on the factual matters of the day, they will update their views. It doesn't work like that. Instead, this is why social psychologist are, I want to see they're excited by this work, and I don't mean that they think it's a good thing, I mean that there's opportunities here to integrate a lot of very cool social psychological theory because it's not just about the information, it's about people, about relationships. So in terms of where this research is going, it's going into this direction of understanding that we need individuals with competing views to be able to create inroads, relationship, trusting relationship, to be able to garner the trust of individuals and ask questions about what you know, "Why is it that you want to think that this is true when it seems that this evidence suggests it's not? Are there reasons why? Does it feel good to have that?" I understand because there are some things that I hold that are untrue and but it makes me feel good to believe they might be true, you know, so vulnerability and empathy and inroads and, most of all, the recognition that corrections really do need to come from trusted loved friends, family, and, network members, not from a clip on the Internet or on television.

[BYRNE] There's one of their challenge against in this digital age as I wanted to bring up, and that is just the sheer volume of up information. including disinformation, disinformation

alternative facts fixes, whatever you want to call it. Is it difficult for fact-checking just to keep up anymore and do people just become kind of numb to fact-checking when there's just this much of it needing to be done because there was this much information out there?

[YOUNG] Yes, and yes. I don't know if you want more to that [laughs].

[BYRNE] [laughs] Well, if you want to elaborate a little bit.

[YOUNG] Well there is so much. It's just a firehose of noise. And so, if you start thinking about it like "okay fact-checkers, we need to police every claim on the internet", that's never going to happen, that's never going to work. One thing that I think that we've recognized over the last few years is that the role of mainstream journalists in calling out things that are false and reminding people of things that are true is paramount. Because while people do go on the internet and read all kinds of stuff, in terms of trusted sources when you're talking about the legacy newspapers and you're talking about major networks, there's still a lot more trust in those media outlets. So there's a role to be played there in amplifying truth and calling out lies, or simply misinformation, right? There's also a possibility when you think about, when you talk about, are people just sort of getting numb to this. I think that's absolutely true. And that is where that social dimension then becomes paramount because if they're really just, if it's this fire hose of misinformation out there, we're not consuming everything, and we're not we're not engaging with everything, not everything is landing on our radar. So if we can find ways to encourage people to augment and amplify the information that is true within their trusted social networks, there could be inroads there that would combat that sort of sense that we're drowning in chaos.

[BYRNE] I do want to pick up one thing you talked about in that, is what we call these things when we were doing the fact checking, does it matter if we call them lies or misleading or false claims or unsubstantiated claims because we've heard a lot of discussion about that where, "why doesn't the media just call that a lie?" Does that make a difference, do you think?

[YOUNG] Yes, and I heard this frustration as a citizen, as someone who studies this I do understand why journalists are reluctant to call things lies. Because as a citizen you're looking at this and you're like, "OK, here's this politician or elite who has said something that is untrue and we know that they've done the political calculus and that is why they're saying this thing that is not true and we know that they know it's not true. Well do I really know? As a citizen I'm assuming this, right, but if you are a journalist and you have to really stand by your words, are you ever going to be able to get in Donald Trump's mind to understand whether or not he believes the things he says. right? Like I would not want to make that wager. I wouldn't want to try to be a psychotherapist in elite individuals to try to understand if they truly believe the things they're saying. If they believe it, technically it does not constitute a lie, it constitutes a falsehood. And that's when we talk about misinformation.   Disinformation is information that has been deliberately designed to deceive. So if you cannot prove that the source of that information is doing it deliberately and strategically to deceive you can't call it disinformation you call it misinformation and that's, those are sort of the semantics surrounding the issue.

[BYRNE] Which of course can be very frustrating for, as you said, the average person. I'm also curious, I guess we've talked a little bit about this, but I guess I want to just ask you in a little more focused way, how much do you feel that fact checking in some ways almost plays into our polarized nation? Does the potential for someone to take a fact check and say "ah, ha you're lying" right, serve as fuel perhaps for even for that polarization?

[YOUNG] Yeah, that is a great point. There are several scholars who have studied this, sort of the question about is polarization really enhanced when people fact check other people, and who is doing that who, who is sending someone that email that says, "hey just so you know, this has been shown to be untrue and here's the link to factcheck.org". Well what, where it gets really tricky, is especially if you're in a public space, like online, if you're on Facebook, somebody posts something and you say something in reply publicly, and say "hey, this is not true, see here". Well now what you've done is you have violated that person's ability to sort of safe space because you called him out publicly, and now the inclination of a threatened animals, that threatened animal individual, is to double down and be angry. So you've got to think, what is your long game here. Is your long game to actually get the person to update their belief system and to see the issue accurately, or is your, are you just playing a status game where you're trying to prove that you're better than that person. If you're just trying to prove you're better than them and you don't care that they get mad and double down, okay, go ahead probably call them out, right. But that's not going to help us in terms of the health of democracy. What might help is a private text message to that person, a private email, that says "hey, loved catching up with you on Facebook. I just wanted to talk to you a little bit about this thing you shared. Don't want to put it out there publicly if, you know, but here's some information that you might want to take a look at." Now is that going to update their view? It has a higher likely of getting them to reconsider their beliefs than calling them out and shaming them and embarrassing them.

[BYRNE] We like to end this podcast by asking each of our guests the same question, that is where do you get your news on a daily basis? What are your favorite news sources, where do you go to get the facts that you're looking for?

[YOUNG] Yeah, well I am the boring person who is, I stick with my Legacy Media. So I have subscription to The Washington Post and the New York Times and I'm a supporting member of my NPR station on I'm up outside of Philly. So I'm a WHYY supporter and those are my go-to all the time. I'm also on Twitter where I follow a lot of journalist and I enjoyed that because they are not just sharing the stories they've written, but also the sort of behind-the-scenes thoughts about those stories. I think that it can be really overwhelming for folks to think about how, where they should be consuming news. I would encourage people to find sources that they really enjoy and that they can look forward to. I also will listen to the New York Times Daily podcast on my morning walk with my dog and, you know, find those sources that are trustworthy and credible sources. The Legacy Outlets are great and those that you can really look forward to.

[BYRNE] Dr. Dannagal Young, Associate Professor of Communication and Political Science at the University of Delaware and Distinguish Research Fellow at the Annenberg Public Policy Center

at the University of Pennsylvania, thank you so much for joining us on this edition of the A Matter of Facts podcast.

[YOUNG] Thank you so much, Tom.