

## Ways & Means Transcript—S1E1—Pants on Fire

Emily Hanford (EH): From Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. We feature some of the brightest new ideas for how to improve human society. I'm Emily Hanford. Well, we're not the Daily Show, but we're talking about something that helped make that show successful, and it's not the comedians, or the writers, or the host. We're talking about the fact-checker.

Adam Chodikoff (AC): I always say, "On my gravestone, I want it written, you know, 'Without Credibility, the Jokes Mean Nothing'."

EH: Adam Chodikoff is the Daily Show's secret weapon. If he gets a feeling something's not quite right in the news, it's his job to track down the truth. Take this example: back in 2014, a Malaysian Airlines flight went down in mysterious circumstances in Ukraine. President Obama was aware of the situation, and he took a "wait-and-see" approach. He stayed on his regular schedule, he even attended a fundraiser. Some conservative commentators gave him flak for that. Pretty soon, they brought out their old favorite, Ronald Reagan, as an example of what Obama should have been doing. In 1983, Reagan was president when the Soviet Union shot down a Korean passenger plane.

Reporter 1: Reagan was at the ranch in California. He immediately came back.

Reporter 2: Rushed home from Santa Barbara vacation.

Reporter 3: He immediately came home, immediately be briefed, immediately get moving forward and condemn the Soviet Union in the strongest terms possible.

EH: Chodikoff heard this comparison between how Reagan reacted when the Soviet Union shot down that Korean passenger plane, and how Obama reacted when the Malaysian Airlines flight went down. And Chodikoff thought he'd check it out. Reagan was on the West Coast when he got the news about that Korean passenger plane. Did he return immediately, as the commentators were suggesting? Was he happy about it? Chodikoff knew Ronald Reagan's Diaries had been published, so he decided to take a look.

AC: And, of course, he was angry about his vacation being cut short, and so that was, like, an instinct that paid off. So, when I came into work, I was able to access them on my computer on Monday. It worked out, and we went in went out, bought the actual book that Jon could read from, and it worked out perfectly.

Jon Stewart (JS): Friday, September 2nd. The Soviets shot down a Korean airliner with 269 passengers, 53 of them Americans, including congressman Larry McDonald. We were due to return to Washington on Labor Day, but realized we couldn't wait. We left on Friday. It was heartbreaking - I had really looked forward to those last three days.

EH: Coming up on this episode of Ways and Means, the growing need for fact-checking in the media, and a new movement of reporters going to great lengths to ensure we the people know the truth, especially when it comes to politics. We've got Republicans, Democrats, and an upstart fact-checker from Iran, a country that has jailed numerous reporters. There's a real need to focus on fact-checking what politicians and others say. We are in the age of social media, and fake news sites and memes, all meant to spin the audience. There's incredible pressure on reporters to get the news out quickly, and less time to actually check its truthfulness. It's especially troubling for political news.

Bill Adair (BA): You know, I know a lot of journalists who get very comfortable in the back-and-forth of political coverage.

EH: This is Bill Adair. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his work checking out statements by American politicians. He won it for a website he started called PolitiFact, which is a project of the Tampa Bay Times. Adair is a professor at Duke, and still works as a contributing editor for PolitiFact, and he's helped start an organization to bring together the world's fact-checkers.

BA: It's not really that hard to cover the "he-said/she-said" of politics. You know, Republicans say this, Democrats say that. You know, I'm not saying that that's easy, but fact-checking takes a real level of depth and policy analysis that goes beyond the soundbites.

EH: So, there's this kind of worldwide, grassroots, ragtag movement happening, and it works like this: Adair identifies reporters who really care about getting to the truth. He not only teaches them the tricks of the trade, but he connects them to each other, and it seems to be working. A year ago, there were 44 fact-checking sites around the world. Now, there are 64- Germany, Bosnia,

BA: And South Africa, and Argentina, and Australia, Spain, France, Italy,

EH: There are new fact-checkers starting in Russia, Nepal, Northern Ireland. In some of these locations, simply being a journalist can put someone in danger.

BA: It's really extraordinary, what's happening.

Lou Jacobson (LJ): I am Lou Jacobson. I'm the deputy editor of the website PolitiFact, which does fact-checking of statements in politics.

EH: What's it take to be a good fact checker? Meet Lou Jacobson. Jacobson's job is to catch politicians and others mangling the truth, and call them on it, and it's not just "black-and-white", "true-or-false". PolitiFact has a whole rating system for the kinds of lies politicians tell. There's "true", "mostly true", "half-true", "mostly false", "false", and then, the king of them all, "pants on fire". Sometimes, Lou's more like a private investigator than a newspaper editor. Take the story of the Boomerang Kids.

LJ: Yeah, I mean, this is not one that I entered thinking that that it would turn out this way.

EH: There was a political advertisement by the conservative group, American Crossroads.

LJ: It cited a news report saying that 85% of college grads have gone home to live instead of moving out on their own.

EH: The ad blamed President Obama for this "boomerang effect", implying that due to Obama's policies, the economy was so bad a huge percentage of college grads couldn't afford to leave mom and dad- 85% of them.

LJ: So this struck us as sort of odd, we didn't expect it would be that high.

EH: Jacobson checked the source- a news story- and found the ad had cited the news correctly, but something-

LJ: Something seemed fishy about it.

EH: So he started to dig around. That 85% number in the news story- the percentage of young people supposedly moving home- turns out it came from a poll conducted by a Philadelphia company 20-Something Inc. Jacobson had some questions.

LJ: You know, was it a telephone poll? When-when did the poll questioning take place?

EH: Were there geographic limitations? How old were the people surveyed? Really basic stuff, but 20-Something's website didn't provide any of this information.

LJ: So, I thought to myself, "Well, I should call them. Maybe they just forgot to put that poll up, or whatever." So, I called up and the phone was disconnected. So, I thought, "Hmm, that's strange."

EH: Not only that- the company's website seemed odd. It didn't even have a current email for the founder. So, Jacobson looked for the bios of the staff members. There were staff members listed, and there were photos of them on the website, but since the company's phone was disconnected, Jacobson couldn't reach them. And so, he thought, maybe he could use a site like LinkedIn to find out more about those staff members, find someone who might remember the poll, but no luck. So, he stopped searching by name and searched by picture instead, and this- this is where he landed in nerdy, fact-checking heaven.

LJ: We did a reverse-image search in Google, and found that two of the people on the staff list had photographs there were stock photos, and they had appeared in, like, in a payday loan ads and stuff.

EH: And these were all people who were listed on the website as staff members.

LJ: One person, it turned out, had died several years earlier So, finally, somehow I got a message through to the founder. He called me back from the Bahamas and said he had left that behind-like, that firm had, like, closed down. He had now switched to selling real-estate in the Bahamas.

EH: The more he dug, the stranger it became. The website had several branch offices listed.

LJ: It said, "London, Mexico City, Munich, Paris, Sao Paulo, Seoul, Sydney, and Tokyo." Yeah, our gut is telling me, based on what I found so far, I don't think that these offices actually exist.

EH: And, what about the thing that brought Jacobson down this rabbit hole in the first place? The fact he was trying to check- for 85% of young people moving back in with their parents. The president of the company, David A. Morrison- he's the guy who'd relocated to the Bahamas- he told Jacobson he couldn't give out any information. He asked not to be contacted again, and hung up. PolitiFact never found any evidence that anyone had done a poll in the first place. So here we have what seems to be a fake company, promoting a made-up statistic, and that statistic was used by reputable outfits like CNN Money, the New York Post, and Time Magazine's website. The number was also used by Republicans to try and skew public perception of President Obama's economic policies.

Of course, the need for a watch-dog doesn't only apply to the Republicans. In 2011, PolitiFact gave their "Lie of the Year" to Democratic statements that Republicans had voted to end Medicare. The statements revolved around a budget plan by Republican Congressman Paul Ryan, which included some big changes to Medicare. Well, Democrats saw an opportunity. They made a short campaign video featuring an actor who looks an awful lot like Paul Ryan- tall, slim, with suit and skinny tie- and he's pushing an elderly grandmother through a park in a wheelchair. As the woman looks up at the Paul Ryan character, the text on the screen says, "Medicare provides health insurance for 46 million Americans. Now, Republicans want to privatize Medicare." The path gets bumpy, and the woman looks scared. Suddenly, she's being pushed onto a rocky outcropping over a lake. They get to the edge, the man tips the wheelchair forward, and the granny falls straight down. Bill Adair, the Duke professor who started PolitiFact, he says fact-checkers jumped into action on this one. The Democrats, he says, wanted to scare seniors by claiming that Ryan's plan would end Medicare.

LJ: And this is a tried-and-true strategy in American politics, used by both parties. Both parties love to scare senior-citizens, because that equates with votes. Senior-citizens vote at higher rates than other ages, and they can also be scared more easily than people of other ages, particularly about Social Security and Medicare.

EH: Adair and his colleagues looked into the claim. Would the Republican plan end Medicare? They talked to people on both sides. Turns out, Medicare would end for some people, but not anyone over the age of 55, and definitely not anyone as old as that grandmother. The ad was clearly false.

LJ: And, you know, don't take our word for it- the Democrats clearly agreed with us because they stopped using the line.

EH: You might say, "Isn't this what reporters are supposed to do, check their facts?", but holding government officials accountable is hard.

LJ: It's the kind of journalism where you can pretty much make someone mad every day you go to work, and that's a challenging job. That's not for the faint-of-heart. It's a job that takes a lot of courage.

EH: Especially for reporters in societies where doing their job can put their lives at risk.

Farhad Souzanchi (FS): Yeah, I mean, if I if I'm scared- which sometimes I am, to be honest- because we also report the good steps the government is taking. I hope they take note of that.

EH: Farhad Souzanchi is from Iran. He could be the poster-child for what Bill Adair and others hope their fact-checking movement will produce. Souzanchi has been fact-checking the promises his country's President, Rouhani, has made, and he's doing this work in a climate in which dozens of journalists are in jail at any time on charges of "endangering the nation's security" or "spreading propaganda." Souzanchi felt like he was all alone doing the fact-checking of what his president had promised. He was following his gut, his principles, he didn't know there was a global community of fact-checkers.

FS: No, for the first year, I did not know, none of us knew, about this growing trend of fact-checking websites and, so, we were just going on as what we felt is right. And then, but, as we went along, we found out that this is a practice that a lot of websites in a lot of countries are doing.

EH: Souzanchi left Iran, and now works from Canada, fact-checking his home country from afar. He was inspired by the Morsi Meter, something created by young Egyptians to review the actions of then-president, Mohammed Morsi. Souzanchi knows that the Rouhani administration in Iran is aware of his activities.

FS: They hard-line publications in the country, the more conservative ones have mentioned us and accused us of trying to overthrow the government or start a coup just like Morsi, so I don't know if I ever go back to Iran, what will happen but, yes, it's a very risky thing to do.

EH: Thanks to the courage of Farhad Souzanchi and others, fact-checking is growing around the world, but we, the general public, it's up to us to care about this fact-checking.

LJ: You know, when we fact-checked something of Donald Trump's recently, I- check this out- we got good feedback. Three or four thousand Facebook Likes.

EH: Here's Lou Jacobson, the PolitiFact editor.

LJ: But then I saw a tweet, a fairly mundane tweet, by Trump around the same time, which got, like, six hundred thousand re-tweets. So, you know, all we can do is basically just keep providing good information, and there's a small, but devoted, base of people who like what we do and who sometimes even tell us that.

EH: This episode of Ways and Means was produced by Carol Jackson, with Allison Jones and Karen Kemp. We're a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Our theme music was composed by David Schulman, and this is our very first episode. Thank you for listening, and thanks to our friends at Comedy Central. You can check out an extended conversation with chief fact-checker Adam Chodikoff in their archives. We'll have a link at our website. We'll also have a link to the Duke Reporters Lab. It's run by Bill Adair. You can find us at [waysandmeansshow.org](http://waysandmeansshow.org) and we hope you'll send us feedback. That's [waysandmeansshow.org](http://waysandmeansshow.org). If you like what you hear, we hope you'll tell your friends. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

Oh- one more thing. Just in the weeks we've been putting this first show together for you, 11 more factchecking sites have popped up around the world. There are now 75. Okay, that's really it. Thanks for listening.