

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115
Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641
August 5, 2022

Mr. Neil Brown
President
The Poynter Institute
801 Third Street, South
St. Petersburg, FL33701

Dear Mr. Brown:

We write today with concerns about the lack of impartiality and clear bias of several of your certified “fact checkers.” There is also an apparent conflict of interest between The Poynter Institute’s (Poynter) self-appointed role as the clearinghouse for fact checkers and your financial interest in one of the worst offenders of biased fact-checking, PolitiFact. Given the use of Poynter’s International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) by traditional and social media to decide which fact-checkers they use to combat “misinformation” it is essential that Poynter be transparent and accountable in its process and address any potential conflicts of interest.

Over the past several years, there have been numerous instances of high profile “fact checks” that have manipulated the facts or outright disregarded the truth with the intent of benefiting the political Left. For instance, during the 2020 election, multiple “fact checking” organizations discounted the revelations from Hunter Biden’s laptop as “Russian disinformation” despite zero evidence. This resulted in social media platforms censoring the article in the New York Post that recounted the contents of the laptop and would have been damaging to the Biden presidential campaign. Several fact checkers, including Snopes, PolitiFact, and Factcheck.org also labeled an article by the Washington Free Beacon detailing the use of federal funds to purchase crackpipes as part of “safe smoking kits” as “mostly false” or “misinformation.” This article was proved to be entirely accurate when the Free Beacon subsequently acquired “safe smoking kits” that included crack pipes, from organizations receiving federal funding.

More recently, PolitiFact incorrectly labeled third-party content that challenges the Biden administration’s definition of a recession as “false information.”¹ Traditionally, a “recession” is

¹ See, <https://reason.com/2022/07/29/recession-facebook-fact-check-biden-politifact/>

considered to be two consecutive quarters of a decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).² Even former President Bill Clinton defined a recession this way.³ Yet last week, the White House published a blog describing its own, different view of a recession to support the claim that our country is not in a recession.⁴ Many economists challenged that viewpoint on Facebook and Instagram, and PolitiFact labeled contrasting views as “false information.”⁵

Your core principles state that “nonpartisan and transparent fact checking can be a powerful instrument in accountability journalism,”⁶ yet PolitiFact and other of your certified fact checkers’ actions run contrary to this statement. Our country is founded on the battle of ideas and having a robust discussion about the state of our nation. Holding our government accountable through fact-based journalism, including by questioning claims from the White House, is foundational to our democracy. Yet fact checkers weighing in on active debate by labeling views contrary to the Biden administration or that would be actively damaging to the Democrats’ electoral goals as “false information” blindly accepts claims made by the administration as truth and harms the credibility of any dissenting voices. Not only does this seem to violate Poynter’s core principles, but it creates an echo chamber of misleading information to participants in active debate, the opposite of Poynter’s and fact checkers’ stated purpose.

The acquisition of PolitiFact by Poynter in 2018 raises even more troubling questions about the ability of Poynter to act as an impartial arbiter of the accuracy, transparency, and non-partisanship of PolitiFact.

Big Tech platforms rely on fact-checking partners that are certified by Poynter, and this censorship mission—intended or unintended—calls into question the standards that Poynter uses to certify its fact-checkers. To better understand Poynter’s process for certifying its fact-checkers, we ask that you respond to the following questions no later than August 19, 2022.

1. Who develops the standards that Poynter uses to certify its fact-checkers?
2. What process does Poynter use to certify its fact-checkers?
3. Has Poynter or any of its certified fact checkers communicated with any officials in the Biden administration regarding the definition of a recession? Has Poynter provided

² See, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/recession.asp>

³ See, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?161385-1/president-elect-bush-photo-opportunity-president-clinton>

⁴ See, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2022/07/21/how-do-economists-determine-whether-the-economy-is-in-a-recession/>

⁵ Incidentally, the Government Accountability Office defined “recession” as:

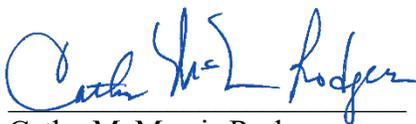
A pervasive, substantial decline in overall business activity that is of at least several months’ duration. The National Bureau of Economic Research identifies recessions on the basis of several indicators. As a rule of thumb, recessions are commonly identified by a decline in real GDP for at least two consecutive quarters.

⁶ See, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-fact-checkers-code-of-principles/>

guidance to its fact checkers regarding statements by Biden administration officials on the definition of a recession?

4. How does Poynter define misinformation, and does Poynter enforce its fact-checkers that moderate misinformation to ensure the same definition is used by each fact-checker certified by Poynter?
5. How does Poynter conduct quality control for its certification of fact-checkers to ensure Poynter-certified fact checkers uphold the Poynter code of principles?
6. How does Poynter ensure impartiality when assessing the accuracy and non-partisanship of PolitiFact, given the financial interest Poynter has in PolitiFact?
7. If a Poynter-certified fact-checker is determined to be flagging content inaccurately, is there a process that a user can challenge their accreditation by Poynter?
8. Has Poynter or any of its certified fact checkers communicated with Big Tech platforms regarding the definition of a recession? Has Poynter provided any guidance to Big Tech Platforms regarding the definition of a recession?

Sincerely,



Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Republican Leader
Committee on Energy and
Commerce



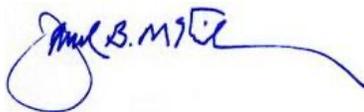
Fred Upton
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Energy



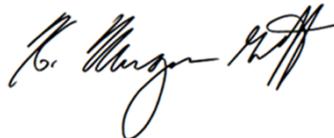
Robert E. Latta
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Communications
and Technology



Brett Guthrie
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Health



David B. McKinley
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Environment
and Climate Change



H. Morgan Griffith
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigation

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Gus M. Bilirakis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath it.

Gus M. Bilirakis
Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Consumer
Protection and Commerce