VERAfied: A DIY guide to fact-checking and fighting misinformation and disinformation

2021 Edition

VERA Files
TRUTH IS OUR BUSINESS
WHAT IS FACT-CHECKING?

Simply put, fact-checking is the act of determining if statements in a nonfictional text are true and correct. It may be done before (ante hoc) or after (post hoc) the text is published or aired.

IS IT NEW?

Newsrooms have long employed fact checkers who verify the statements before they are printed or broadcast.

In the last decade, however, fact-checking done after the statements are made has been gaining adherents, including from the ranks of journalists, across the world. It’s a response to false, misleading, or incorrect statements or claims some public officials and public figures make, intentionally or not.

IS FACT-CHECKING RELATED TO ACCOUNTABILITY JOURNALISM?

The American Press Institute defines fact-checking as a relatively new form of accountability journalism in politics where news organizations produce “content that is branded under a special title and rate or judge the accuracy of claims by politicians or government officials.” It’s journalism in the public interest.

WHAT HAS VERA FILES GOT TO DO WITH FACT-CHECKING?

Like the journalists of old, we have long been fact-checking statements of sources before they get published.
In the 2016 national elections, VERA Files, like a number of newsrooms, fact-checked statements made by national candidates – presidential, vice presidential and senatorial – post hoc. The initiative, done with the help of journalism students of the University of the Philippines, was called “Is that so?”

We have kept this up after the elections, expanding the scope of our work to include public figures in an initiative now called “VERA Files Fact Check.” VERA Files Fact Check tracks the false claims, flip-flops, and misleading statements of public officials and figures and debunks them with factual evidence. It also debunks misinformation and disinformation spread on the internet through websites and social media.

VERA Files is a third-party fact-checking partner of Facebook.

WHAT DOES VERA FILES FACT CHECK?

One, we check false or misleading statements and debunk them with factual evidence.

Two, we monitor flip-flops and call out public figures.

Three, we produce fact sheets and backstories.

Four, we debunk fake news on the Web. Or, more accurately, online misinformation and disinformation.

CAN ANYONE BECOME A FACT CHECKER?

Yes! Fact-checking is a process comprising of steps that can be replicated. We’re sharing our experience through this DIY guide.
Any remark or statement made by a public figure or government agency that contradicts official documents and figures, national and international laws, and/or scientific studies.

**FALSE CLAIM**

STEP 1.
**MONITOR** press conferences, speeches, events, statements, interviews for fact-check-worthy or verifiable statements. A statement is considered verifiable if its truthfulness and accuracy can be checked using official documents and statistics. (See list of primary sources.) For example, in a June 2020 press briefing, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque wrongly disagreed with World Health Organization data that showed the Philippines has the “fastest” rising COVID-19 cases in the Western Pacific region.

“In you’re going to divide the cases per million population, this is what we’ll get -- the highest in the Western Pacific: India - 549,197; followed by Pakistan - 202,955; Bangladesh - 137,787; Indonesia - 54,010; Singapore - 43,459; then the Philippines with 35,455. So, if you divide cases per million population...it is clear -- data won’t lie. We don’t have the fastest rising cases in the Western Pacific Region. We’ll just let these data respond to the WHO report.”

In this statement, there were two things worthy of fact-checking and found to have been false.

| CLAIM #1 | The Philippines does not have the fastest-rising cases in the region. |
| CLAIM #2 | India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia are classified by the WHO as part of the Western Pacific region. |

STEP 2.
**VERIFY THE SOURCE** of the claim. Rely on firsthand sources so that the statement can be easily attributed to its source.

STEP 3.
**RETRIEVE** the original source of the statement, preferably in video format. For example, President Duterte’s speeches as uploaded in the RTVM website. Watch the video in full to provide proper context and avoid misquoting the person. Identify the exact time code the claim was uttered.

STEP 4.
If the video is not available in government websites and other reliable video sources, **REFER TO THE OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT** of the event or a copy of the speech or statement. But be careful. The transcript may not correspond to the video. The public figure may have ad-libbed and deviated from the prepared speech or statement.

STEP 5.
If both the video and transcript are not available, your last recourse would be news reports. But they need to be corroborated.

**FIND AT LEAST THREE ARTICLES** containing the exact quote or reporting the statement or claim, under the same context. Cross-check the reports against one another to ensure consistency.

STEP 6.
If the source of the statement is an online post — say, a government website or the individual’s social media account — **MAKE A SCREEN GRAB AND PRESERVE THE EVIDENCE** in case the original post is taken down.

A good example is the report of the state-run Philippine News Agency falsely claiming that 95 nations in the 27th Universal Period Review of the UN Human Rights Council found no evidence of extrajudicial killings in the country. The post was taken down five days later after the UPR called out the PNA, which simply replaced the erroneous story with another story using the same URL.

STEP 7.
**CHECK THE CLAIM**

**CONDUCT ONLINE RESEARCH ON:**

i. Existing laws and jurisprudence, national and international.

ii. Studies published in academic journals.

**CHECK OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS.**

Examples are statements of assets, liabilities and net worth or SALNs; financial statements; election records; school records, and studies from government agencies.

**RUN A DATA ANALYSIS.**

Most fact checks involving figures will require you to request the disaggregated numerical data from the concerned agency since not all of these are available online.

**INTERVIEW EXPERTS**

Cite other related literature and previous media reports.
A primary source is a direct or firsthand document, speech, or any other evidence written, created, or otherwise produced during the time under study. Examples:

- Speeches, press conferences, interviews
- Press releases
- Court records
- Existing laws and jurisprudence, national and international
- Legislative documents such as House/Senate bills, committee hearing reports
- Government records, reports and statistics
- Annual reports and financial records
- Historical documents, including maps
- Academic journals
- Personal records, including school records and photographs
- Official government websites
- Official social media accounts of public figures

While many academic institutions classify news reports as a primary source, VERA Files considers them only as secondary material. They are useful jump-off points for possible fact check entries, but a fact checker must always strive to find the original source of the claims and their evidence, especially for proper context and accuracy.
FLIP-FLOP

A sudden shift of a government official or public figure’s stand on a specific policy or opinion on a certain issue.

**STEP 1.** IDENTIFY discussions and debates on current issues.

**STEP 2.** MONITOR a public official or public figure’s stand on the matter through live news coverage, news reports, press releases, and his or her social media accounts.

**STEP 3.** COMPARE your monitoring results to official documents.

**STEP 4.** If the person who flip-flopped is a government official, REVIEW THE OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT or any available documentation. Taped and uncut coverage can also serve as your official source.

**STEP 5.** If you can’t do Step 4, LOOK FOR AT LEAST THREE news reports that used exactly the same statement from the official being fact-checked.

**STEP 6.** If the statement was expressed through a SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT, make sure that it is the public figure’s official account.

**STEP 7.** COMPARE the public figure’s previous stand by using the same sources cited in Step 3.

**STEP 8.** If you see inconsistencies in his or her stand, IT’S A FLIP-FLOP! Start writing your piece.

**EXAMPLES**

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Lorenzana contradicts military statement on China gun-pointing incident in West PH Sea

VERA FILES FACT SHEET: The evolving statements on the Recto Bank allision: a visual timeline

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Palace changes tune on Tagle’s Vatican appointment

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Bong Go goes back and forth on how to treat drug addictscrisis

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Robredo contradicts LP spox; accepts offer to lead efforts vs. illegal drugs

### #VERAfied: NTC backpedals on ABS-CBN franchise

The NTC has directed ABS-CBN to stop operating its various TV and radio broadcasting stations nationwide ‘absent a valid Congressional Franchise as required by law.’

Two months earlier, NTC Commissioner Gamaliel Cordova said they agency will “follow” the advice of the Department of Justice and allow ABS-CBN to operate beyond May 4 while its application for renewal remains pending in Congress.

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: National Telecommunications Commission, March 31, 2020
A simple enumeration of facts about a particular issue, for the public's information. Statements are neither disputed nor corroborated in a fact sheet, only expounded on through basic information presented as is. This is a means of clarifying subject matters for the reader.

**FACT SHEET**

**STEP 1.**
**IDENTIFY** statements or issues that can be explained or contextualized by laying out important facts.

**STEP 2.**
**RESEARCH AND GATHER** information from various primary sources such as documents or interviews.

**STEP 3.**
**OUTLINE** the basic facts in a structural manner and write it in question-and-answer format. Questions in a fact sheet are usually limited to the five Ws (who, what when, where, why) and one H (how).

**STEP 4.**
**LIMIT** the number of questions to not more than six items.

**EXAMPLES**

VERA FILES FACT SHEET: COVID-19 numbers used in measuring success of gov’t response explained

VERA FILES FACT SHEET: Understanding the updates on the ICC’s preliminary examination into Duterte’s drug war

VERA FILES FACT SHEET: Three things you need to know about crimes committed by minors

VERA FILES FACT SHEET: What you need to know about the Senate’s anti-terrorism bill

VERA FILES FACT SHEET: The new way of measuring poverty in PH explained

**BACKSTORY**

A backstory is a brief history or background of the issue at hand.

**ADDITIONAL FEATURE OR AN ADDENDUM**
to our post debunking a claim or calling out a flip-flop. It seeks to provide a broader and more comprehensive context to the subject being discussed.

**CONSEQUENCE OF THOROUGH RESEARCH:**
In the process of disputing or corroborating a claim, the reporter will have gathered more than enough documentation to use as evidence of fact or flip-flop.

The materials are compiled and turned into a narrative so that the reader can **TRACE THE EVENTS LEADING TO THE STATEMENT** and how that statement is either false or a total contradiction or modification to the original statement of the one who uttered it.

**EXAMPLES**

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Post on ‘talking newborn’ saying hard-boiled eggs a cure for COVID-19 NOT TRUE

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Dela Rosa misleads in citing old news report on death penalty

VERA FILES FACT CHECK: School textbooks enshrine Jose Rizal as national hero needs context
FAKE NEWS

is falsified information disguised as news spread through one or several platforms, including social media, to deliberately deceive the audience and advance political, ideological, social, or economic interests. By nature, news is not fake or falsified, so we’re moving away from this term. More accurately, false and misleading information is misinformation or disinformation, with the latter intentionally spread. Knowing how to spot it is essential to debunking it. Here are some TELLTALE SIGNS:

OUTRAGEOUS OR CLICKBAIT HEADLINES
Be cautious! Many fake reports are designed to draw emotions. Watch out for ALL-CAPS HEADLINES and the use of excessive punctuations. If a “news report” you saw on your Facebook or Twitter feed makes you angry, it’s probably designed that way. Don’t share it straight away without verifying.

SUSPICIOUS URLS
Go beyond headline and check the the URL. Does it read like the URL of your trusted news organization? Take a second look! Impostor sites steal brands by changing one character and adding words like .channel or –tv in the domain. Examples of bogus websites: aljazeera-tv.com, gma-tv.com, and theguardian.com.

NO “ABOUT” PAGES
Many websites peddling false information aggregate content from other websites. Check their “About” pages. Legitimate news sites provide information about their organization; bogus news sites mostly don’t.

NO BYLINES
If there’s no name attached to a report circulating online, it could be fake. Byline equals accountability, a core principle in journalism.

BAD GRAMMAR
Look out for misspellings and bad grammar. Many fake reports are badly written.

Disinformation is a global problem. But its spread can be contained, and its nefarious impacts curtailed, with these simple hacks. It also helps to follow fact-checking media organizations who have a dedicated team of journalists actively seeking out and debunking fake news. Here are a handful: VERA Files Fact Check, Politifact and FactCheck.org.

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TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO FACT-CHECK

VERA Files Fact Check asked educators for creative ways to introduce fact-checking in the classroom. Here are some of their responses:

Simulate a GAME SHOW where students would be asked to distinguish fact from opinion
Give a QUIZ where students will determine which part of a statement can be fact-checked
Conduct a DEBATE where students would check the accuracy of arguments presented
Ask students to verify claims in the essays they are PROOFREADING
Assign groups to compile WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES that spread fake news and identify why certain stories are fake
Ask students to write ESSAYS on how disinformation affects their daily lives and how they can fight it
DOs AND DON’Ts

The statement being fact-checked has to be FIRSTHAND.
You have to get the:

- VIDEO
- AUDIO

and compare it with the

- GOVERNMENT TRANSCRIPTS if available

Sometimes the official transcript won’t match the video, so make sure to match these.

TRIANGULATE if statements can’t be found except in news reports. Use at least three media reports using the same quote.

For example,

“What is catching the attention, not only of the countries bordering the South China Sea, is practically the continuing tension in the South China Sea. The posturing of the naval might of the United States, of China, or other countries. That did not exist during the Arroyo administration. There was relative quiet and peace.”
- CNN Philippines

“During her (Arroyo) term there was peace and quiet in the South China Sea. One principal point is that there was no such island building factories as we experienced during the Aquino administration in the South China Sea.”
- Malaya Business Insight

“Mendoza said there was relative quiet and peace‘ in the South China Sea during the Arroyo administration.”
- Inquirer.net

USE PRIMARY SOURCES to provide evidence.

“Assume nothing is true. Go directly to the source.”
- The Protess Method of Verification

Primary source is direct evidence of an event or topic such as historical and legal documents, audio and video recordings, speeches, and interviews.

But, remember, EVEN DOCUMENTS LIE. So corroborate what the documents say with interviews.

BE TRANSPARENT with your sources.

Always provide a list of sources with links, or upload the documents or screen grabs you used.

In “VERA FILES FACT SHEET: The ‘new’ coronavirus strain, explained,” VERA Files used no less than 28 sources, including the following:

- World Health Organization Statement on the outbreak of novel coronavirus, Jan. 30, 2020
- Philippine Genome Center, Bulletin No. 1, Aug. 13, 2020
- medRxiv, Analysis of SARS-COV-2 Genome Sequences from the Philippines: Genetics Surveillance and Transmission Dynamics, Aug. 25, 2020
- Nature, We shouldn’t worry when a virus mutates during disease outbreaks, Feb. 18, 2020
- ScienceDirect, A genetic barcode of SARS-CoV-2 for monitoring global distribution of different clades during the COVID-19 pandemic, Aug. 22, 2020
- Cell, Making Sense of Mutation, July 2, 2020

This way, the readers can do their own fact-checking.

DO NOT EDITORIALIZE.
Let the facts speak for themselves.

A writer’s opinion belongs in editorials and columns, not in news. Stick to the facts.

GO OVER SOURCES again before publishing your fact check.

Have another fact checker go through your sources. This is to ensure that the list is complete and all the links are working.
VERA Files is the first Philippine media organization to become a verified signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles. The IFCN is a global alliance of fact checkers committed to advancing accountability journalism.

A COMMITMENT TO NONPARTISANSHIP AND FAIRNESS

We fact-check claims using the same standard at every instance. We do not concentrate our fact-checking on any one side. We follow the same process for every fact check and let the evidence dictate our conclusions. We do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues we fact-check.

A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY OF SOURCES

We want our readers themselves to be able to verify our findings. We provide all sources in detail so that readers can replicate our work, except in cases where a source's personal security may be compromised. In such cases, we provide as much information as possible.

A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY OF FUNDING AND ORGANIZATION

We are transparent about our funding sources. If we accept funding from other organizations, we ensure that funders have no influence over the conclusions we reach in our reports. We detail the professional background of all key figures in our organization and explain our organizational structure and legal status. We clearly indicate a way for readers to communicate with us.

A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY OF METHODOLOGY

We explain the methodology we use to select, research, write, edit, publish, and correct our fact checks. We encourage readers to send us claims to fact-check and are transparent on why and how we fact-check.

A COMMITMENT TO OPEN AND HONEST CORRECTIONS

We publish our corrections policy and follow it scrupulously. We correct clearly and transparently in line with our corrections policy, seeking so far as possible to ensure that readers see the corrected version.

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Types of sources and where to find them: Primary sources (28 Nov 2012). Retrieved from http://www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/primary-sources/

What you want to know about "VERA FILES FACT CHECK" (Updated: 5 Oct 2020) Retrieved from https://verafiles.org/articles/what-you-want-know-about-vera-files-fact-check


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VERA Files is a nonstock, nonprofit independent media organization published by dedicated Filipino journalists taking a deeper look into current Philippine issues. Vera is Latin for “true.”