

Fact-checking, the Truth-O-Meter, and the Courage to Innovate

McGill Lecture, University of Georgia

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(Show video.)

It's an honor to be here to give the McGill Lecture, which salutes the courage that Ralph McGill practiced every day with his columns about segregation. This is special for me because the inaugural lecture was delivered by Eugene Patterson, who followed in McGill's footsteps with his own relentless editorials in the Atlanta Constitution.

Gene became the editor and guiding force of my newspaper, the St. Petersburg Times, now the Tampa Bay Times, where he fostered the culture of great journalism that continues today.

I need to start with a personal confession about Gene -- actually, about his army helmet.

Before he went to work in journalism, Gene was a tank platoon leader in World War II under Gen. George S. Patton. Today, Gene's helmet is kept in a closet at the Poynter Institute in St. Pete. The closet is a mini-museum to him, with bound volumes of his editorials and assorted Patterson memorabilia. It doubles as a radio studio, so I occasionally go there to do interviews.

The helmet is the standard-issue one that soldiers wore in World War II -- heavy and green. My confession is that a couple of times, after making sure the closet door was closed so no one would see me, I've tried on Gene's helmet and worn it while I did radio interviews.

It was really cool to wear it. It felt solid, a symbol of courage.

Today, I want to talk about a different kind of courage -- the courage to innovate.

First, I need to put this in perspective. We are not talking about the same great courage that Gene showed in World War II or that the winner of this year's McGill Medal, Rukmini Callimachi, shows in her coverage of West Africa.

But still, at this turbulent moment in the history of the news media, it takes guts to do something different because we're working in an era of retreat and consolidation.

As we all know, the business models that for decades provided generous profit margins have been turned upside down by the Internet. Newspaper ad revenue is down more than 50 percent since 2003.

The newsroom in a typical American newspaper has shrunk by 30 percent since 2008 -- and the shrinkage probably hasn't ended. No one is sure where the media business will be in 20 years -- or even just 2.

So if you're a media executive, this is a great time to be cautious. It's a time when many top editors are focused more on cutting than building.

They ask, "Can we get rid of this feature?" or "Do we really need this section?"

At a time like this, the status quo is always an easy option. There are plenty of people in journalism who have had long and happy careers by sticking with the status quo. So it's probably no coincidence that some of the coolest things in the news business have been created by startups rather than established media companies.

For the past nine years, J-Lab at American University honored the best ideas with the Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism. The winners were ground-breaking projects such as Adrian Holovaty's Chicago crime mapping and the Texas Tribune.

The pattern is especially pronounced since the recession began. Of the 31 projects honored with Knight Batten awards since 2008, only 9 were from legacy media companies. The bulk of the awards went to startups and non-profits.

I think that reflects the cautious times for media companies. How can you take a risk on a new venture when you're trying to keep the ship from sinking?

So with this as a backdrop, I'd like to tell you about my newspaper and how it was possible to create PolitiFact in the middle of a deep recession. It's the tale of an idea that eventually grew into national network that has produced more than 6,000 fact-checking articles. We now have partners in 11 states that employ 36 reporters and editors dedicated to our unique form of journalism.

We've inspired similar fact-checking sites in Sweden, Norway, France, Spain and many other countries. We've even inspired a campaign promise website in Egypt that is modeled after our Obameter.

Think about that for a minute: In Egypt, a country that has often been near the bottom in the world rankings for press freedom, journalists are now holding the new president accountable for his promises -- all because of what they saw us do on PolitiFact.

All of this is possible because I'm fortunate to work for a media company that is willing to try something new. Indeed, if you ask any reporter at the Tampa Bay Times about the slogan of the newsroom, they will say, "Get the dog's name."

It's a slogan that embodies our commitment to narrative journalism, our attention to detail and our passion for telling interesting stories.

So a quick history:

The idea for PolitiFact came from my own guilt of not having done enough fact-checking when I covered the White House and my desire to try something in new media. I liked the work that had been done by FactCheck.org, which started in 2003, but I thought we might do it differently, with a rating device that would show the relative accuracy of the statement. I also thought we could create a new form of journalism that truly harnessed the power of the Web to collect, sort and tally.

Now, some of the best tales about new businesses involve a cocktail napkin. The founders of a new company -- usually down on their luck, with hardly any money to their names -- gather in a bar to drown their sorrows and end up devising a new way of doing things. And sure

enough, somebody grabs a cocktail napkin and sketches how the business will work.

But alas, for PolitiFact, there was no cocktail napkin -- and our origins aren't particularly romantic. I sketched how the site would look on a Microsoft Word document. Since I didn't have a drawing program on my computer, I used the primitive drawing tools of MS Word to draw the Truth-O-Meter, which in the first draft went from True to "Wrong."

In the spring of 2007, I called my bosses Scott Montgomery and Neil Brown and explained the idea of a fact-checking website. I followed it up with a memo spelling out how the site would work. The memo said fact-checks by other news organizations "tend to be wordy and formulaic. Often, they are too cautious, afraid to say when it's clear a candidate is telling a lie."

In the memo, I said we should create "a simple way to see at a glance how true a statement is. We could have icons -- maybe of a referee or a fact-o-meter..."

For Neil, the Editor of the Times, this came at a difficult time. Florida was one of the first states to feel the economic downturn and he was already facing some difficult decisions about scaling back state and local coverage. If he committed to this new fact-checking site, he'd have to give up a couple of reporters who would do something else. He'd also have to give up his Washington bureau chief and the White House and campaign coverage that the bureau chief had traditionally done.

Also, this project represented something of a risk for the Times. It was a new form of journalism, it was web-first and it was sure to anger political partisans. The wiser, more cautious strategy -- particularly

because we were just beginning to see the signs of an economic downturn -- might have been to keep doing what we had always done -- covering the campaign in a traditional way.

Now, the story of PolitiFact would also be much better if I had encountered lots of resistance from my bosses and had to keep fighting to persuade them to take a risk on the new venture. But from the start, Neil was behind it. He pulled together the senior editors for a couple of key meetings and he made it clear this was going to be priority. The project had something crucial: support from the top.

I was freed from my duties as Washington bureau chief to write some prototype items. The first one was on a Mitt Romney claim that defense spending had declined under President Clinton. I found the claim was a classic case of cherry-picking. Romney was attributing the decline in spending to Clinton when in fact it had begun under his predecessor, President George H.W. Bush. I said it deserved a Half True.

After I finished the Romney fact-check, I told Scott and Neil: This is going to work.

The technical side of PolitiFact was as big a leap as the journalistic side. We had to create a new website from scratch. We all knew that was possible, but our content management system -- the engine that powers the Times website -- was not flexible enough to build something like this.

So Matt Waite, a talented reporter who was skilled with databases and was beginning to learn how to build websites, offered to try. He began tinkering and soon had a rough framework for how the site would work.

Neil directed our IT department to let Matt try and pretty soon his architecture was installed on our servers. We looked outside the paper to hire a graphic artist and couldn't find one, so we enlisted a talented artist from the paper, Martin Frobisher, who gave PolitiFact its wonderfully simple look and feel.

We had lots of meetings. I usually dread meetings, but these brought together the most talented people at the paper. I remember two things from these meetings: laughter and great ideas. We knew we were creating something new and we were having a blast doing it.

We tackled the key questions about the website:

What would we call it? I liked "the Political Referee," but editors above me did not. We considered dozens of possibilities -- Truth Detector, the Truth Booth, the St. Pete Times Truth Squad, even PantsonFire.com (it was taken) -- before settling on an idea from Neil -- PolitiFact. It combined two words that concisely explained our mission. And because it was a mashup word, we avoided trademark problems and could more easily build a brand.

What would the rating device be? From the start, the Truth-O-Meter was pretty much the obvious choice. We were less sure about the rating levels. Just days before we launched, we were still tinkering with the name for the Mostly False level (we ended up calling it Barely True for the first three years).

Pants on Fire, the lowest rating on the meter, was an idea suggested by Kevin McGeever, one of our Web editors. We originally used it for light-hearted items such as Joe Biden's claim that President Bush "was brain-dead." But we soon found that we liked Pants on Fire so

much -- and so did our readers -- that we started using it for serious claims that were not just false, they were ridiculously false.

PolitiFact launched on Aug. 22, 2007. It got off to a slow start. Some days, our traffic was so low that I tried to click a lot from my home computer, hoping to boost our numbers!

The Obama and McCain campaigns didn't know what to think of us. We had to keep explaining who and what we were. The Obama campaign initially didn't have a high regard for fact-checking and assigned a staffer to work with us who used to routinely call me up and shout obscenities.

Traffic to the website was pretty anemic in the early days, but Neil stuck with it, adding a reporter to our staff even when it meant one less reporter for the local staff. As our revenue has grown, Neil has pumped it back into PolitiFact to add reporters and editors.

Since 2009, we have expanded in many ways. We have licensed our brand to 13 newspapers in 11 states that use the Truth-O-Meter to fact-check their mayors, city council members, state legislators, governors and congressional delegations.

We have created the Obameter, our campaign promise feature, and tracked more than 500 of Barack Obama's promises from the 2008 campaign. Our state sites have their own features that track the promises of governors and mayors.

We've expanded our fact-checking to include members of Congress, pundits, talk show hosts, political parties, super PACs -- any person or group that speaks up in the political discourse. We have two mobile apps, PolitiFact Mobile and Settle It! PolitiFact's Argument Ender, that

make it easy to get our content on your iPhone, iPad or Android device. We have partnerships with NPR, Hearst Television, CNN International and MTV.

So what are the lessons of all this? If you're interested in starting a business -- or even just trying to innovate from inside an established organization -- I think the creation of PolitiFact offers some good ones:

Foster a culture of creativity. The spirit of my newspaper was critical at every turn. It was a license to be creative.

Be willing to take a risk. We were in uncharted territory from both a journalistic and business perspective, but the senior editors never hesitated. They wanted to give it a try.

Don't worry about turf. It took some pushing, but our IT department allowed Matt to build the site on our servers.

Be open to other people's ideas. This was the biggest one for me -- to go into a meeting and realize that my idea may not be the best one and be willing to do it someone else's way. Some of my favorite things about PolitiFact -- Pants on Fire, the webby structure of the site, the sharp graphic design -- came from my colleagues.

The time to innovate is now. Remember the difficult circumstances as we were starting: the recession was getting worse every month and we were having to cut many jobs in the newsroom. And yet Neil protected PolitiFact, gave us the staff we needed and was willing to use our revenue to keep trying to grow.

Indeed, we bring in substantial revenue from our partnerships and licensing agreements, but that still doesn't cover all of our expenses.

At a more cautious company, the bosses would have pulled the plug long ago.

But at the Times, the support from the top for PolitiFact has never wavered. Our top editors see it as an important part of our commitment to public service.

Today, the 36 journalists who work for PolitiFact show tremendous courage, calling out the falsehoods from our polarized discourse. Our work is scrutinized closely and often criticized by partisans.

You know what we call it when we manage to anger conservatives AND liberals at the same time?

Tuesday.

And Wednesday. And Thursday. And Friday.

Our journalists practice a gutsy form of journalism. Many days, I wish I was wearing Gene's combat helmet.

