

# NEWS INVESTIGATION – New video - “Fact Checking the Fact Checkers...” - shows FactCheck/PolitiFact transcripts, a basis for claims that AG Jeff Sessions lied at his confirmation hearing, are factually wrong; FactCheck.org says: “We stand behind our story”



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**Minneapolis 3/24/17** – Widespread media reports that Attorney General Jeff Sessions may have lied at his confirmation hearing are factually wrong. Unfortunately, these reports now appear to have “gelled” – or somehow condensed themselves – into a widespread “Conventional Wisdom” that Sessions lied – the “may have” part seems to have slipped away from many memories. Here is a link to the new video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATgZcOztY0I>

This distilled but zero proof “Conventional Wisdom” appears attributable at least partially to a major error by both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, who render Sessions’ testimony with identical words in their transcripts of Sessions’ answers to Sen. Al Franken. The key phrase rendered by both transcripts is (with some bold font words in the PolitiFact.org version):

“and I didn’t have – did not have communications with the Russians.”.

The above rendering is logically consistent, and is consistent with a pattern that often appears when speaking without a script: a phrase is repeated, or restated with a slight variation, for emphasis.

However, as the video reports, people speaking without a script sometimes misstate something – a “slip of the tongue” if you will. And people also sometimes start to say one thing – then start over and say something else. In both cases, the meaning of two adjacent phrases can be different, or opposite.

Based on a painstaking, good-faith effort to determine the exact words by their sound, with consideration also given to the above tendencies in unscripted, speech, bobagain has concluded that a correct transcript of the

exact words that Sessions spoke is:

“and I didn’t have – and I have communications with the Russians.”

Unlike the FactCheck and PolitiFact renderings, bobagain’s rendering may trigger a kind of cognitive dissonance reaction, or effect, since the first two phrases are opposite in meaning. On the one hand, when people correct a “slip of the tongue” – or start over to say something different – an internal conflict in meaning is always possible, and it’s inevitable in the case of a correction. But when the exact words of a misstatement and correction situation are rendered in written language, the words quoted can appear strange and jarring to readers -- even though they are, in fact, what the speaker said. The same may be true for situations where a speaker abandons one line of thought and “starts over”.



The “Fact Checking the Fact Checkers...” video relies on enhancement techniques – in particular, the videotape is first recorded from a laptop with speakers, then loaded into video editing software and enhanced at half speed, with a pitch adjustment to keep the voice from dropping one octave. Pauses are also inserted between individual words – however, it is admittedly difficult to find a clean break between the two disputed words.

As seen in the “screen scrape” above, only two words of the FactCheck/PolitiFact transcript are challenged in the video. Both a “Weak Claim” and a “Strong Claim” are advanced. The Weak Claim is simply that the FactCheck/PolitiFact transcript can’t possibly be correct for either of the two challenged words. Based on the Weak Claim, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.org (and the Washington Post) must -- as matter of basic journalistic integrity -- retract and correct their statements. One possible way of doing this would be to render Sessions’ statement with a [disrupted words] or [unclear words] bracket. Here’s the fundamental, underlying issue: since the words Sessions spoke are not the ones rendered by the current FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.org transcripts, appropriate retractions and corrections would remove a major element of the foundation for the “Conventional Wisdom” that “Sessions Lied”.

The Strong Claim is that the bobagain.com transcript rendering is correct.

Bobagain is calling on reporters and others involved with the “Mainstream Media” to work with him -- to get to the bottom of this story, and to bring about the necessary retractions and corrections. In addition, bobagain will be contacting Attorney General Sessions’ office, and the offices of everyone on the U.S. Senate Fact Checking the Fact Checkers...

Judiciary Committee – to bring to their attention his challenge of the FactCheck/PolitiFact transcript.

One question that has frequently been posed to bobagain is along this line, rendered as a kind of composted paraphrase: “If you’re right, why has Sessions not aggressively challenged what can only be seen as a major factual error in the reporting on this story?” This will be investigated in Part Two of the “Fact Checking the Fact Checkers...” series. “However, there’s a kind of ‘blame the victim’ aspect to this approach,” – bobagain noted, and added “an equally if not more important aspect to the investigation is the question: what did the Fact Checkers do to verify that their transcript is accurate?, and the follow-up particular: did they present Sessions with any draft of what they believed to be an accurate transcript before reporting it as a fact?”

## **FactCheck.org responds: “We stand behind our story”**

After producing an earlier, one minute version of Part One of this series, bobagain called FactCheck.org, and after a brief discussion supplied them by e-mail with some initial information, including a link to the one minute version of Part One; that link is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vgbw6wEaTIY>

Although it is widely recognized as authoritative, and has won many awards, FactCheck.org appears to be a relatively small organization, with a relatively modest budget. It appears that various staff for FactCheck.org take turns answering the phone number for incoming calls. In any case, when making a subsequent followup call, bobagain found himself speaking to Mr. Robert Farley, who wrote the March 2, 2017 FactCheck.org story titled “Did Sessions ‘Lie’” – with “Lie” in single quotes. After a brief conversation, bobagain e-mailed Mr. Farley some additional information, including a link to a preliminary “Rough Cut” version of the just-released video. Mr. Farley responded by e-mail:

“Hi Bob,

Got your email.

Our response: We stand behind our story.

Thanks. – Rob”

Mr. Farley is now on bobagain’s e-mail list for news releases.

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