

Verifying Information in the News

Many topics can be reported differently by various media outlets. For example, President Barack Obama has been labeled the “Deporter-in-Chief” for reportedly deporting more immigrants than previous presidents, as reported by various news sources. Here are some articles about this from 2016 and 2017:

- <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obamas-deportation-policy-numbers/story?id=41715661>
- <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/02/trump-deportation-policy-obama-legal-illegal-immigration/>
- <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article122715474.html>

But it was also reported in 2014 that the way the government recorded the statistics of deportations changed during President Obama’s administration:

<https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-obama-deportations-20140402-story.html>

So, if the numbers increased under Obama but the measurement was also changed, then who is right? President Obama did remove a lot of immigrants, but his administration focused on removing convicted criminals and those who had just recently crossed the border. Before Obama, those who had just crossed the Mexican border and were immediately returned were not counted as an official deportation statistic. But under Obama, those incidents were being counted and added to the official deportation statistic. From the *L.A. Times* article linked above:

Until recent years, most people caught illegally crossing the southern border were simply bused back into Mexico in what officials called “voluntary returns,” but which critics derisively termed “catch and release.” Those removals, which during the 1990s reached more 1 million a year, were not counted in Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s deportation statistics.

It is always up to you to decide what the truth is in news reporting, and investigating how statistics and claims are presented in the news is an essential part of this process. The steps to do this are analyzing the information you find on a particular topic, verifying the information you find, and reflecting on the information you find in order to contextualize it.

Assignment for Verifying News Information

For this assignment, you are being asked to research the claim that the use of vaccines have an impact on the rate of autism in humans.

Verify Information

1. Find two sources: one that supports the claim that vaccines have an impact on the rate of autism, and one that denies that claim.

2. Briefly list both sources' specific evidence for supporting or denying the claim.
3. What are these two sources' authority for this claim? Do they have experience, training, or education in this field?
4. Research to find out how this claim (that the use of vaccines have an impact on the rate of autism in humans) gained traction. Who or what promoted it? Pay attention to dates: try to find the earliest arguments and proponents of this claim.
5. Without providing any information to them in advance, ask 5 people you know if they have heard of the claim and what they think about the claim. How many have heard of it before? How many support it? What did everyone think? What was the evidence they had to support their thoughts and beliefs about this claim?
6. Based on what you found, what do you think about this claim? If you can't decide and you need more information, what more information do you need on this topic in order to make an informed decision?

Reflect

7. Why might the information you found in support of the claim be believable? What about the information denying the claim — why would that be believable?
8. Who might be more likely to believe the information you found supporting the claim? Who might be more likely to believe the information you found denying the claim? For example, think about believers or non-believers experiences with the topic or characteristics when it comes to socioeconomic status or other belief systems — income, education, religion, political affiliation, related beliefs.
9. What about the people working directly in public health? What do health practitioners who provide vaccines believe? What is their evidence for their beliefs?
10. Who could stand to benefit from supporting this claim? From denying it? What might be their motivation for gaining supporters or deniers of this claim?
11. Why do you think this claim has become so popular?