

The British Medical Journal Story That Exposed Politicized “Fact-Checking”

The fact-checkers who flagged Paul Thacker's British Medical Journal article about a Pfizer subcontractor for Facebook admitted they police narrative, not fact

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In February of 2010, the New York Times released a front page story entitled, “[Research Ties Diabetes Drug to Heart Woes](#).” The lede read:

Hundreds of people taking Avandia, a controversial diabetes medicine, needlessly suffer heart attacks and heart failure each month, according to confidential government reports that recommend the drug be removed from the market.

The *Times* piece quoted an internal F.D.A. report that said the GlaxoSmithKline diabetes drug Avandia, also known as Rosiglitazone, was “linked” to 304 deaths in 2009, adding the conclusion of the two doctors who authored the report: “Rosiglitazone should be removed from the market.” The story was released in advance of a [Senate Finance Committee study](#) that produced a series of damning internal documents, including one in which an FDA safety officer expressed concern that Avandia presented such serious cardiovascular risks that “the safety of the study itself cannot be assured, and is not acceptable.”

One of the chief investigators on that study was **Paul Thacker**, at the time a committee aide under Iowa Republican Chuck Grassley. Multi-year document hauls like the Avandia report were Thacker’s stock in trade. I first met him around then because his committee frequently dealt with financial crisis issues I covered. Thacker, who went on to contribute to a number of commercial and academic journals, was trained in a tradition of bipartisan committee reporting that relies heavily on documents and on-the-record testimony, i.e. the indisputable stuff both sides are comfortable backing.

Thacker has an in-your-face style and a dark sense of humor, and talking to him can feel like being lost in a Bill Hicks routine, but his information is good. In his years in the Senate, his job was publicizing damaging information about the world's most litigious companies. Certain Washington jobs require a healthy fear of the \$1000-an-hour lawyers that every *Fortune 500* company has on speed dial, and Thacker has always retained the Beltway investigator's usefully paranoid approach to publishing.

"I know how to do these things," he says. "I know how to work with whistleblowers."

It was more than a little surprising, then, when Thacker's name appeared in the middle of a bizarre international fact-checking controversy. In an [article](#) for one of the world's oldest academic outlets, the *British Medical Journal*, Thacker wrote a piece entitled, "Covid-19: Researcher blows the whistle on data integrity issues in Pfizer's vaccine trial."

He did what he'd done countless times, shepherding into print the tale of an apparent whistleblower with an unsettling story. Brook Jackson worked for a Texas firm called Ventavia that conducted a portion of the research trials for Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine. This is the same vaccine that Thacker himself, who now lives in Spain and is married to a physician, had taken.

After going through both legal and peer review, but without contacting Ventavia — apparently, they feared an injunction — the *BMJ* published Thacker's piece on November 2nd, 2021. The money passage read:

A regional director who was employed at the research organization Ventavia Research Group has told The *BMJ* that the company falsified data, unblinded patients, employed inadequately trained vaccinators, and was slow to follow up on adverse events reported in Pfizer's pivotal phase III trial.

Beginning on November 10th, 2021, the editors began receiving complaints from readers, who said they were having difficulty sharing it. As editors Fiona Godlee and Kamran Abbassi later wrote in an [open letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg](#):

Some reported being unable to share it. Many others reported having their posts flagged with a warning about "Missing context ... Independent fact-checkers say this information could mislead people." Those trying to post the article were informed by Facebook that people who repeatedly share "false information" might have their posts moved lower in Facebook's News Feed. Group administrators where the article was shared received messages from Facebook informing them that such posts were "partly false."

Facebook has yet to respond to queries about this piece. Meanwhile, the site that conducted Facebook's "fact check," *Lead Stories*, ran a [piece](#) dated November 10th whose URL used the term "hoax alert" (*Lead Stories* denies they called the *BMJ* piece a hoax). Moreover, they deployed a rhetorical device that such "checking" sites now use with regularity, repeatedly correcting assertions Thacker and the *British Medical Journal* never made. This began with the title: "*The British Medical Journal Did NOT Reveal Disqualifying And Ignored Reports Of Flaws In Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine Trials.*"

The *British Medical Journal* never said Jackson's story revealed "disqualifying flaws" in the vaccine. Nor did it claim the negative information "calls into question the results of the

Pfizer clinical trial.” It also didn’t claim that the story is “serious enough to discredit data from the clinical trials.” The *BMJ*’s [actual language](#) said Jackson’s story could “raise questions about data integrity and regulatory oversight,” which is true.

The real issue with Thacker’s piece is that it went viral and was retweeted by the wrong people. As *Lead Stories* noted with marked disapproval, some of those sharers included the likes of Dr. Robert Malone and Robert F. Kennedy. To them, this clearly showed that the article was bad somehow, but the problem was, there was nothing to say the story was untrue.

In a remarkable correspondence with *BMJ* editors, *Lead Stories* editor Alan Duke explained that the term “missing context” was invented by Facebook:

To deal with content that could mislead without additional context but which was otherwise true or real... Sometimes Facebook’s messaging about the fact checking labels can sound overly aggressive and scary. If you have an issue with their messaging you should indeed take it up with them as we are unable to change any of it.

“Missing context” has become a term to disparage reporting that is true but inconvenient. As Thacker notes in the Q&A below, “They’re checking narrative, not fact.”

The significance of the *British Medical Journal* story is that it showed how easily reporting that is true can be made to look untrue or conspiratorial. The growing bureaucracy of “fact-checking” sites that help platforms like Facebook decide what to flag is now taking into account issues like: the political beliefs of your sources, the presence of people of ill repute among your readers, and the tendency of audiences to draw unwanted inferences from the reported facts. All of this can now become part of how authorities do or do not define reporting as factual.

“But that’s not a fact check,” says Thacker. “You just don’t like the story.”

The *BMJ* story is about a woman, Jackson, who was fired shortly after complaining of sloppy practices to the F.D.A. and also to Pfizer. Ventavia claims her firing was unconnected to her official complaint — “Ventavia was not aware of a complaint made to the FDA until we saw it on Twitter in early November of 2021,” they told me. They also contest other aspects of her story:

These same accusations were made a year ago, at which time Ventavia notified the appropriate parties. The allegations were investigated and determined to be unsubstantiated.

I asked Ventavia who these “appropriate parties” were, and who conducted the investigation. At this, they brought in an outside PR consultant who asked for more time to answer, but ultimately decided not to answer further.

It’s not easy to see how the firm can claim the allegations were “unsubstantiated,” since Jackson supplied the *BMJ* with documents, photos, and recordings. Also, a number of the article’s claims were backed up, directly or indirectly, by other former employees. One, admittedly unnamed, told Thacker about the Pfizer trial, “I don’t think it was good clean data... It’s a crazy mess.”

The *British Medical Journal* didn't publish all of the potentially damaging information. In one recorded meeting, to which I was allowed to listen, a senior Ventavia executive tells Jackson he knows the trial situation is a "cleanup on aisle five. And we know that it's significant."

In that same meeting, in which Jackson seems to be quizzed by two of the company's top executives about whether or not she might have shared her concerns outside the company ("What have you done?" she's asked), there's another bizarre exchange.

"We haven't even finished quantifying the number of errors, and categorizing the types of errors that we're seeing. In my mind, it looks like it's something new every day," one of the executives says to her.

Obviously, Jackson's story by itself doesn't suggest the Pfizer vaccine didn't work, or contain proof of damaging side effects. However, her story does suggest that the subcontractors hired by Pfizer to conduct its trials were and are, at best, incautious. In one meeting, an executive talks about seeing "exposed, used needles thrown into biohazard bags" instead of sharps containers as required. There is also information about breaking protocol on blinding, failing to follow up properly with subjects experiencing adverse reactions, mislabeling specimens, and other problems.

Whether about [maintenance issues at American Airlines](#) or a bank employee's [reports about the pooling and marketing of defective mortgages](#), such "bad practices" reporting has long been a staple of investigative journalism. Previously, the idea of spiking or flagging such reports on the grounds that they might have convinced some people not to fly or use banks would have been laughable. Having done many of [thesestories](#) myself, I'm familiar with demands for "missing context," but always from a corporate defense lawyer or a political spokesperson. That it's coming from media gatekeepers now is crazy.

Lead Stories eventually wrote a second piece [entitled](#), "Why Lead Stories Fact Checked the BMJ," which complained that a variety of sites ranging from the *Conservative Beaver* to *Natural News* to *The Free Thought Project* had written fake or misleading stories based upon the *BMJ* piece. This second article also complained Robert F. Kennedy's site, *The Defender*, republished the piece.

Worse, they wrote, Kennedy had republished three other Thacker stories, with titles like "[New WHO Group to Look Into Pandemic Origins Dogged by Alleged Conflicts of Interest](#)" and "[The covid-19 lab leak hypothesis: did the media fall victim to a misinformation campaign?](#)" This is how *Lead Stories* phrased their complaint:

This was not the first BMJ piece from Thacker copied by the Defender this way. The site has an entire author profile page for him with the oldest article listed dating back to July 2021.

Were there factual issues with any of those other pieces? If so, *Lead Stories* didn't indicate any. The mere fact that Robert F. Kennedy liked previous Thacker stories was the apparent issue. *Lead Stories* also took issue with the fact that Thacker thanked Dr. Robert Malone on Twitter for highlighting the *BMJ* response to their fact check. You can't see the whole exchange, because of course Twitter has since zapped Malone's account:

I am the reporter who wrote that investigation for The BMJ about the whistleblower on Pfizer's clinical trial.

That fact check was nonsense and incompetent.

Thank you for sending this around.

— Paul D. Thacker (@thackerpd) [December 25, 2021](#)

I asked Duke if he believes who reads or retweets an article bears upon its factuality. “Who does or does not retweet or read something has no bearing on the factuality,” he conceded. “But it can reveal important clues about how it is received or understood.”

Another apparent source of “clues” about a piece of factual reporting? The political views of the sources. These passages are from the first *Lead Stories* “fact check”:

“On Twitter, Jackson does not express unreserved support for COVID vaccines...”

Elsewhere on Twitter, the Brook Jackson account [wrote that vaccination makes sense if a person is in a high-risk category](#) and called a 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling against the Biden Administration’s vaccine mandates [“HUGE!”](#)

I asked Duke if Jackson’s failure to express “unreserved support” for vaccines, or if her agreement with the roughly [half](#) of Americans who opposed Biden’s mandate plan, had bearing on the factuality of the story. If they didn’t, why was this information in the piece? Was the suggestion that she fabricated documents and photographs because she doesn’t like mandates? *Lead Stories* has not yet responded, but I’ll update the piece as they do.

It goes without saying that in this environment, any negative information about Pfizer, or any report of issues with the company’s trials, is likely to be upheld as meaningful by people suspicious of the vaccine. That does not mean one gets to exonerate companies based upon audience reaction. Are we now saying that anything Robert Kennedy Jr. or Robert Malone finds newsworthy is suspect? By this method, we’re taking stories that aren’t “anti-vax” by any rational standard, and making them anti-vax by association.

This new “fact-checking” standard bastardizes the whole idea of reporting. It’s also highly convenient for corporations like Pfizer, which incidentally have extensive records of [regulatory violations](#). As Thacker details below, firms have successfully manipulated reporters and Internet platforms into seeing a binary reality in which all critics are conspiracy theorists.

“We don’t have main and minor [points of view] anymore,” he says. “What we have is truth, and conspiracy.”

After the *BMJ* episode, a “Missing context” flag should be understood for what it is: an intellectual warning label for true but politically troublesome information.

Thacker has written for, and been a source for, both conservative and mainstream outlets. A year ago he was writing an [article in *The Daily Beast*](#) that was widely shared by center-left audiences because it suggested Pharma companies had undue influence on Donald Trump’s “Operation Warp Speed.” He now has his own site on Substack, the [Disinformation Chronicle](#), that continues his career-long focus on malfeasance involving companies that produce pharmaceuticals, genetically modified food, and other products. I talked to him about the *BMJ* mess:

Matt Taibbi: How much experience with this type of story do you have?

Paul Thacker: I've done investigations for about 15 years involving corruption in science. I did investigations of the pharmaceutical industry for about three years in the Senate Finance Committee. These were big investigations. Avandia was the best-selling drug for diabetes on the planet then, a \$3 billion a year product. When the final report came out, the Swiss bank UBS said GlaxoSmithKline [faced \\$6 billion in litigation exposure](#). So, I know how to do these things, and I know how to work with whistleblowers.

Taibbi: Is part of the story about how easy it is to get into the business of doing clinical trials, and how little oversight there is in this world?

Thacker: There's a lot of money in this type of research. If you can get a doctor to sign on and say that he's going to be the physician for your research company, you can basically start one of these research groups in America. That's how it works.

Jackson realizes the place is just kind of a mess. She thinks, "I'm going to fix this." But then she realizes also, you're not supposed to say there are problems. But their own internal emails speak to this.

One internal email that went out essentially said, "We can't keep up." She started taking pictures. One of the things she found was that they were putting sharps in a plastic bag. You're supposed to put them in what's called a sharps container.

What the fact-checker sites came back with was, "Well that doesn't mean anything about data." Which is true. But it tells you something. I worked in a lab before I went into journalism, doing research at Emory University, and I knew how to handle sharps. I looked at it sort of like that old trick that restaurant reviewers will use, checking out the bathroom. If the bathroom is fucking dirty, what do you think the kitchen is like?

She got scared and started making recordings. In one, they brought her into a room to counsel her for doing her job and finding problems. In this conversation, one of the guys, he says in the interview, "Look, we know it's a cleanup on aisle five. And we know it's significant." He called it a *cleanup on aisle five!* Fucking ridiculous. They didn't put that in the *BMJ* because that's an American saying. So I had it in the story but they took out the idiom because it's a very American thing.

Taibbi: How unusual would a lack of a response from the FDA be, and did that happen here? [Note: the FDA has not responded to queries]

Thacker: She realizes, "No one's listening to me." So she files a complaint with the FDA, lays out like 12 different problems she's encountered there. Later that afternoon Ventavia calls her up and fires her, and says that it's not a good fit. She notified Pfizer, so Pfizer knew. Pfizer turns back around, and if you look them up, they hired Ventavia to do other clinical [trials](#) for them. The FDA never goes and inspects.

Now, there's no regulatory response, but the company was expecting one. I'll read from an email that Ventavia sent out about a week before she was fired. It says:

I'll say it again here, it's not a matter of IF the FDA is coming, it's a matter of when the FDA is coming. And they are coming soon. This is the biggest clinical trial in the entire world and we are a top enroller.

And then here it's like all bold, underlines, all caps.

THE FDA IS COMING SOON, in a matter of days, if I had to make a guess.

They were in a fucking panic, man. [The original documents are on Thacker's [Disinformation Chronicle](#) site].

Taibbi: When did you first hear about a potential problem with the “fact check”?

Thacker: I was ignoring it at first. I thought, “How are they going to fact check this?” I've dealt with this before. The smartest people in terms of finding error are the fucking lawyers working for the drug companies. There's an army of those people who will go through and find anything that's out of order and throw it up in the air. And *they* couldn't find anything here. So what issue could there possibly be?

Then I went to the “fact check,” and it was just insane. It looked like it'd been written by high school students. It describes the *British Medical Journal* as a “blog.” I was joking with my editors about how they work. They pick some proposition out of the blue and then they debunk it, and it's like, “Aha, win!” Bullshit. It's like, “Did the BMJ prove that the vaccine kills Martians? No! Fact check: wrong.” And you're thinking, “Wait, what?”

Here's what they do. They're not fact checking facts. What they're doing is checking narratives. They can't say that your facts are wrong, so it's like, “Aha, there's no context.” Or, “It's misleading.” But that's not a fact check. You just don't like the story.

Taibbi: How new is this phenomenon? If there was one, when did the change happen?

Thacker: Here's what always happened in America previously. You got a big, broad look. In science and in the media, we would always have a main narrative or a main theory. And then around that, within science, there would be other minor theories, other alternative viewpoints. The *New York Times* would have something. On the left, the *New Republic* had a view, and on the right you'd get the *National Review*. They're reexamining it, but they don't change the facts.

Well, we don't have main and minor anymore. What we have is truth, and conspiracy. Or vax, and anti-vax. There are only two possibilities you can go through. Do you know where you find that kind of black-white thinking? In people who have major personality disorders. And psychopaths. Psychopaths and people with narcissistic personality disorder engage in black-white thinking. America right now is in this weird situation in which it's a country that to the outside looks psychopathic or disordered.

Taibbi: Have you seen this phenomenon in other big news stories?

Thacker: What's happened with this pandemic is the same shit that happened with the 2008 meltdown. People were like, “Well, how the fuck did this happen? We didn't see it coming.” And then you find out later: maybe it's because all these fucking reporters are in bed with these guys in Wall Street and see them as the masters of the universe, and don't cover them very effectively, because they think they're fucking awesome.

Taibbi: It's similar also in the respect that the safety and compliance procedures are flawed inside these companies, yet the reporters don't want to go near those

stories, because they're afraid of upsetting sources.

Thacker: The people we have, I don't call reporters. I call them science writers. The people who write for [Science](#), [Nature](#), [Scientific American](#), these are people who write *for* science, not on science. They see their job as telling you how fucking awesome science is. That's what they do for a living.

That's in part what's going on with this story about Pfizer. It's the same shit that has been going on with these goddamn vaccines. Because if you watch and see what happened when these vaccines rolled out, you would see there'd be a story [in The New York Times](#) about, "Pfizer announces," or "Pfizer Expected To Ask for Authorization," blah, blah, blah. And then about four or five paragraphs, you go down and you realize: "Wait, this is just a Pfizer press release." This isn't a study or anything. This is a Pfizer press release. You just reported a fucking press release as a news story.

They do press release journalism. You can argue that's good or bad, but what that does — and no one talks about this — is it creates all this social pressure on the FDA for approval. It creates all this expectancy amongst the public that the product is coming. So, by the time you go in front of an FDA panel for authorization, it's already been churned up in the media, they've got a month of positive press.

They've been running this game from the beginning. They're just much better at it now.

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