

Rachel Slay: Hello and welcome to the ACES Student Newsroom Podcast where we provide exclusive coverage of all things ACES conference, and more specifically this year's Refine and Refresh: ACES 2021 Online Conference. My name is Rachel Slay and I'll be your host for this episode. And in this episode, I sat down with the lovely Gerri Berendzen to talk about fact checking, news literacy, and related topics. Stick around until the end when Gerri plays a game that I like to call "Fact or Fiction." Gerri has been in the copy editing business for over three decades and does freelance editing for textbooks, proposals, and other projects. She currently teaches at the University of Kansas School of Journalism and Mass Communication. And since 2014, she has been focused on fact checking research alongside teaching editing. She hosted a session called "Fact Checking Beyond the News" for this year's conference in which she talked about fact checking best practices, how to overcome certain obstacles, and more. For those listening who did not attend the ACES 2021 Online Conference, don't worry, we won't be discussing material from her presentation exclusively, so you're not behind the learning curve today. However, if you did attend the conference and did not get a chance to see this session, I highly recommend going back through the archives and giving it a listen, it was very informative, and you don't want to miss it. So with that, I invite you to sit back and listen in.

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Rachel: Gerri, thank you for joining me.

Gerri: Thanks for having me. And thanks for saying such nice things about my session.

Rachel: Of course! In the student newsroom, we actually got to hand-pick which ones we wanted to be responsible for covering and when I saw this one on the schedule, I snagged it as fast as possible.

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Rachel: So whether you meant to or not something that you said early on in your presentation, I thought was very profound and very quotable. It was a little one liner, and I'll read it for you. It was "Accuracy is the currency of the word business." Talk a little bit about that and why you feel that way.

Gerri: So I'm trying to remember when I said that, whether that's something I made up myself or if that's something I read, because I certainly don't want to plagiarize someone. And that really is a pithy statement, isn't it? But it's 100% true. And here's why. Why should anyone read what I've written? Or what my client's written? Or what my coworker has written, since I don't usually write? Why should they read that if they don't have any trust in it? And even things like novels, which, okay, what does accuracy mean and novels? Well, I think I pointed out at one point during my presentation that I was reading a book one day, and it was around 2002, something like that, and they mentioned baseball. The main character liked baseball. And this was just your typical beach book. But they were talking about the 1998 Home Run Race. Well, I'm a Cardinals fan, and so I was really invested in that, and I knew everyone was involved. And I

knew that the name of the, the player that was in that book was not the player involved. And so right away, I'm like, I don't care if you're writing fiction, if there are real things, you need to get 'em right. And I have to say, that particular writer, I had bought a lot of her books, and I didn't buy many after that point, because I didn't really trust her anymore. But as you know, in news, that's true. If what you write is incredible, then why should people pay attention to you? And in academic writing, if it's not credible? Why should people pay attention to you? And so that's why accuracy is the currency of the word business because for anyone to want to read your words, you have to be credible and credibility starts with accuracy.

Rachel: So nowadays, we have access to what seems like an infinite amount of information. So for, for the non writers out there, how would you rate the importance of developing your own personal fact checking criteria so that you can make sure you're consuming things that are accurate?

Gerri: So you want to look at things like who is the publisher, who is the author, you know, journalism authors, most of them you can go to muckrack.com and look up information about them and find out like, what kind of media have they written for? What kind of stories have they written about? Because, for instance, if I see a journalist who seems to be credible in every way, but they're working for a publication that maybe I'm iffy on. And I find out that all of their career they've written about government and, and politics and transportation, but this story I'm checking out is a really detailed story about something in the science field, I'm not quite as sure that they're credible on that, because it doesn't seem to be their field of expertise. This doesn't mean that that reporter isn't credible, but it means that that's like a little negative checkmark. That one negative won't mean that the story is incredible. But if you look through about 12 cues, and you get too many minuses, then you say to yourself, this source isn't very credible. So there are all kinds of checkmarks, you can go down the list, and determine whether your sources are credible. And that's, that's really how you start and anyone can do that, even, you know, even people sitting at home just wondering, well, I found this on the internet, I wonder if it's true or not, you know?

Rachel: I didn't think about the idea of looking into who actually wrote a news story, which, but it makes so much sense because I'm a big sports fan, so if I see news that Adam Schefter broke, I'm not gonna question it just because he's been right for so many years.

Gerri: Yes! And you have experience of who he is, so he's built up credibility in your mind. Here's a good example of this. I have a story from a website that I would consider... iffy. I'm not gonna say this is a bad website but I think this website is known for surface stories. It's a kind of an entertainment website. But this story said something about a celebrity, an author, and how much that author made a year. And so I had my students, you know, I'm like, do you think it's credible? If you needed to write something about how much this author made would you just use this number? And a lot of them said, Yeah, because I read the site. And I said, do me a favor, look up a couple of things. Look up about the publisher, you know, see how credible they are but in particular, look at who the author is. And I had them do that. And one of the students said to me, "This is really interesting, because this author is fairly well known. And she wrote a

book. But at this point in her career, everything she's written, has been about dating and sex." She wrote a book about dating and sex, but this particular story was about an author who writes kind of serious historical things. And so I said, "Does that bother you?" And she said, "Yeah, because why is she, I mean, if she wrote everything, then I wouldn't question it. But she's only written on this one topic. And now she's just switching over to this other one." And I said, "that's, that's a good reason to say maybe you don't trust this. It's telling you, I can't take it at face value, I better look it up. I better check it against a source that I think is credible when it comes to authors of this kind of work, you know?"

Rachel: I feel like sometimes editors can develop a trusting relationship with a writer. So what would you say about the importance of not falling into a comfortable assumption that information is accurate?

Gerri: As you edit, the more you edit, you kind of develop this sixth sense about things. So you get to the point where you can look at things and you can say, Well, I'm positive about this, but this looks hanky, you know, so I better check it out. But then sometimes I say to myself, yeah, I'm just gonna spot check things I'm sure I'm positive about because the number of times I've told students like, they'll say, what's the AP style on x? And I'll tell them the answer. And then I'll step back and I'll say, let me look that up to make sure I'm right, you know? And sometimes I've been wrong because I started memorizing AP style back in 1980 and it's changed a lot, you know?

Rachel: So you mentioned in your session, the idea of approaching the task of editing for authors, when you're editing books or fact checking books, excuse me. You said to approach that with the utmost diplomacy, not necessarily walking on eggshells, but trying to just be very diplomatic. Was that something that you learned over time? Or is that something that you just kind of understood from the start?

Gerri: I can't say that I was that diplomatic when I started. And I remember once being in the newsroom, and someone made a ridiculous mistake, that was hilariously funny. And I've got a voice that carries and I just piped up and said, "You guys won't believe have done this mistake is," which was this stupid thing to say because you know what? The person who wrote that story thought it was a funny mistake too but to do it the way I did it was just embarrassing to that person. It's hard enough for editors and writers to not have an adversarial relationship because writers, those words are their babies, you know, and we're attacking their babies. So, you know, you shouldn't do anything else that makes people hate copy editors because really good writers know that a copy editor is a wonderful thing and can only make them better.

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Rachel: [in an echoed voice] Folks, it is time to play Fact or Fiction. In this game, I will read three sentences that contain bizarre facts, but which ones are true? That is up to our guest to decide. Today's game is a special edition as Gerri Berendzen will explain how she'd go about fact checking the statements before she makes her guess: Fact or Fiction.

[voice returns to normal] All right, here's the first sentence: The largest padlock in the world was 916 pounds.

Gerri: Anytime you see something in a sentence, like "largest," "biggest," "oldest," "newest," "most expensive," you better check it out because people have a tendency to think their thing is the biggest in the world when it isn't. And there's disputes about some things. So if you told me, the highest building in the world was x, I might say, but what about this building? What are we measuring? Are we measuring Like the CN Tower and Toronto, where it's the tallest building if you measure up to the antennas, but if you don't, it's not. So um, I guess just to make a guess I'll make a guess. But I would say I wouldn't even have to guess in that sentence. Even if I thought it was right, I would check it out. Because when you see superlatives, you should always check it out. But I'll say, okay, I'll say it's correct.

Rachel: It is. [Quick giggle]

Gerri: [Burst of laughter] Well, I'm thinking, hey, they've got big plants they've got to put big padlocks on but I would have checked it out. If I wasn't talking to you, I would be on Google right now, Googling to try to find out who keeps padlock records. I wouldn't just say what's the biggest padlock in the world and go with that. I want to know who keeps the records of padlock size.

Rachel: All right, second sentence: For 20 years a fish served as an Alaskan town's mayor.

Gerri: Well, that seems rather unlikely, doesn't it? Uh, I would say this. Weird things happen in life. But that seems unlikely enough that I would have to check it out because I suspect that long before 20 years had come about someone from the state would have stepped in and said you have to have a real human being be your mayor. I can see a fish or dog or dead person winning one election, but I don't think they make it past the second. So that would be a big reason why I would check it out. But anything that's weird, you should check out anyway. And lots of them are true, but it's worth checking them out. And I'm gonna say that's false.

Rachel: You are correct. That is false.

Gerri: [Chuckle] This is a fun game so far.

Rachel: However, a cat did serve as the mayor of an Alaskan town.

Gerri: But for 20 years?

Rachel: For 20 years.

Gerri: Well, that's interesting. That is interesting. Okay.

Rachel: Last one, you're two-for-two so far. Hopefully you can keep it perfect. All right. The inventor of the Pringles can named Frederick, I'm gonna say Bauer for his last name. The inventor of the Pringles can, is now buried in one.

Gerri: Well, here's what I'm going to say. Once again, weird things, always check them out. That's your sixth sense right there. It's weird? I'm going to check it out. Now, I'm also saying, I have no idea whether this Bauer person actually invented the Pringles can. So that would be the very first thing I would want to check out. Did somebody, do they really acknowledge that someone invented it? And is that the right person? But let's say that all checks out. Yeah, I can see somebody saying it was my intention. I want to be buried in one. So I'm going to say it's true.

Rachel: It is true.

Gerri: [Cackling laughter] Yeah, yeah, it was fun. And yeah, I'm glad I guessed right every time because every single one of them was a guess. I think the important thing here is to know that every one of those things had something about it that cries out: "Check me out. I might be right, but check me out." The weight of the thing, the fish, you know, that wasn't a living person... Like I said, I'm surprised a cat because I can't see a cat winning an election. But I would think after a couple elections, the state would jump in and say you can't do that. But then some of those Alaskan towns, they're really small and nobody pays attention to them. And then right away when you said the Pringles thing, I thought, 'Well, sure if you really invented it. Yeah, that sounds, that makes complete sense.'

Rachel: What I would like to know is if anyone ran against this Alaskan cat, and if they lost, how do they feel?

Gerri: Maybe a fish did, maybe it was a cat against the fish. [fading laughter]

Rachel: Gerri, thank you. This has been an absolute blast.

Gerri: It was fun, it was, I have to say it was more fun than a regular interview, which is what I was expecting.

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Rachel: I hope you enjoyed this episode with Gerri Berendzen, copy editor and fact checker. I'd like to thank Gerri again for joining me on this episode of the podcast. You can follow Gerri on Twitter @GerrriB with three R's. That's @GerrriB. You can follow me on twitter @racheljslay.

This has been the ACES Student Newsroom Podcast. I've been your host Rachel Slay. Thank you for listening.