

THE VAUNTED WAPO FACT-CHECKING PROCESS

I've mostly stayed away from beating up George Will for his propaganda denying global warming. There was not much way I could improve on ThinkProgress' and Media Matters' multi-part response to Will.

But I'm fascinated by WaPo Ombud Andrew Alexander's column on the controversy. It's a vast improvement over Debbie Howell's columns as Ombud, not just for his willingness to rethink his own early defensiveness, but because he names names of those who screwed up.

First, the editing process. My inquiry shows that there was fact-checking at multiple levels.

It began with Will's own research assistant, Greg Reed. When the column was submitted on Feb. 12 to The Washington Post Writers Group, which edits and syndicates it, Reed sent an accompanying e-mail that provided roughly 20 Internet reference links in support of key assertions in the column. Richard Aldacushion, editorial production manager at the Writers Group, said he reviewed every link. The column was then edited by editorial director Alan Shearer and managing editor James Hill.

Next, it went to The Post's op-ed editor, Autumn Brewington, who said she also reviewed the sources.

The editors who checked the Arctic Research Climate Center **Web site** believe it did not, on balance, run counter to Will's assertion that global sea ice levels "now equal those of 1979." I reviewed the same Web citation and

reached a different conclusion.

It said that while global sea ice areas are "near or slightly lower than those observed in late 1979," sea ice area in the Northern Hemisphere is "almost one million sq. km below" the levels of late 1979. That's roughly the size of Texas and California combined. In my mind, it should have triggered a call for clarification to the center.

But according to Bill Chapman, a climate scientist with the center, there was no call from Will or Post editors before the column appeared. He added that it wasn't until last Tuesday – nine days after The Post began receiving demands for a correction – that he heard from an editor at the newspaper. It was Brewington who finally e-mailed, offering Chapman the opportunity to write something that might help clear the air.

Here's a snapshot of the editorial process that—journalists would tell you—makes newspapers infinitely superior to blogs. Greg Reed sends a bunch of links. Richard Aldacushion "reviews" every link. Autumn Brewington "reviews the sources." And two more people—Alan Shearer and James Hill—"edit" the column. And these five people, plus Alexander, make up a chunk of the overhead that makes newspapers so much more costly to run than blogs and purportedly guarantee newspapers' superior quality.

Look at the language used to describe this fact-checking process. First, Greg Reed seems to have simply collected the links that he and Will used to put together the column. Aldacushion "reviews" every link—does this include more than assuring that the exact language used in the column appears in the source, regardless of the context from which that exact language was culled? And then Brewington "reviews the sources"—does that mean she checks to make sure

they're credible, or does she actually go back in and make sure the exact language taken from the source reflects the context and meaning in which it originally appeared?

Alexander doesn't say—but his correction suggests a recognition that Will and Reed deliberately pulled a sound bite—global sea ice is "near or slightly lower" than 1979—out of an immediate context that also revealed that Northern Hemisphere sea ice was significantly below where it had been in 1979 and a larger context that explains why global sea ice isn't the measure we should be panicking over. Though Alexander doesn't really detail what goes on in the "fact-checking" process at the WaPo, he seems to suggest that it involves checking whether the exact language used in the column appears without, at the same time, checking whether that exact language was replicated with any fidelity to its meaning.

In other words, the entire "fact-checking" process seems to operate without any critical thinking.

And it's that definition of "fact"—exact language ripped out of context with no critical thinking added in—that gets George Will and his ilk on the pages of the Villager press, treated as credible pundits. It's a process that—by design—is easily abused by people like Will to create propaganda.

Which is, I guess, an appropriate time to thank my readers. I don't know that I'm any smarter than George Will, but I've surely got better fact-checkers.