

Fact Checking Made Easy

Lesson 11: Danger Zones

I'd like to warn you now about certain situations where you need to take special care to get things right, where the stakes might be high.

First, know what might count as defamation. I'm not a lawyer, and the laws regarding defamation are significantly different in different countries, so take what I'm saying here as a practical warning rather than legal advice. The danger zone is where you are accusing someone of having committed a crime or of some moral or professional depravity. Understand the difference between expressing a critical opinion and accusing someone of something horrible in a factual way that could injure their reputation.

For example, if you say a certain filmmaker is "hopelessly amateur," that is an opinion. It's something that can't be proved one way or the other. On the other hand, if you say a plumber is "incompetent," that an accountant is "dishonest" or that a company "steals from customers," be aware that you are getting into the danger zone.

If what you're saying is a provable fact, don't worry. But if you're passing along a malicious and damaging rumor or have misstated what you read elsewhere, beware.

The second danger zone involves potentially dangerous information. If you are describing or recommending a procedure and don't include an important warning, or pass along unfounded information about something that should be warned against, you might be in for unpleasant consequences. Think about this as you are fact checking (or not fact checking!) content that has an aspect of health, safety or risks.

The third danger zone concerns highly emotional or urgent information. If a story or statistic is especially heartrending, upsetting, amazing or burning up social media, pause before passing it along. Check it out first. Sometimes tear-jerker tales, hoaxes and rumors have been going around the Internet for years without any foundation. For example, it's definitely not true that if you leave a tooth in a glass of Coca-Cola at night it will have dissolved by morning, or that a certain floral company is a major funder of Hamas. For countless examples of urban legends that are half-truths or complete fakes, go to Snopes.com.

To prevent doing harm to yourself and others, be especially careful in these three situations. Let's go on now to some general perspectives on treating information responsibly.