

# All We Want are the Facts, Ma'am

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Has anyone ever muttered, “Just the facts” to you and explained that it was a catch-phrase used by Jack Webb < <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0916131/> > in his character as Sergeant Joe Friday in the 1950s television series, “Dragnet?” < <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043194/> >

## Snopes

You may know that a good source for checking such a claim is Snopes < <http://www.snopes.com> >, which publishes careful analysis of all manner of information circulating in the popular culture, including through chain e-mail letters. Authors Barbara and David Mikkelson write < <http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/dragnet.asp> > that Joe Friday *never* said “Just the facts:” he used to say “All we want are the facts, ma'am” or “All we know are the facts, ma'am.” The truncated version was invented by satirist Stan Freburg in a spoof called “Little Blue Riding Hood” recorded in 1953. The question of why he would say this primarily to women is left as a discussion for sociologists and historians interested in sexism of the 1950s.

## Urban Myths

The Urban Myths < <http://www.urbanmyths.com/> > Web site differs from Snopes in appearance and focus, with bizarre photos and rude headlines such as “Americans Are Becoming Even Bigger Jerks Than Ever Before” and “How a Really Dumbass Publicity Stunt Broke Casey Affleck and May Still Destroy Joaquin Phoenix's Career.” The contributors seem to be fascinated by bizarre and disgusting hoaxes and by true and horrifying bizarre stories. If you can stand being offended, the site may prove useful, but be prepared for insulting attacks on specific politicians using language suitable for a movie about teenaged prison inmates.

## Vmyths

For information debunking “computer security hysteria,” the Vmyths < <http://vmyths.com/> > site edited by Rob Rosenberger < <http://vmyths.com/about/> > and George C. Smith, PhD, who have steadfastly countered advertising hyperbole and misinformation about antimalware products for more than two decades. They and their colleagues dissect news stories that misrepresent the role of malware and make unsubstantiated claims and predictions about cyber warfare and the end of the world through attacks on computers. These are intelligent contrarians who challenge accepted wisdom by demanding clear reasoning and factual support in all writing but especially in alarming writing.

## What about Politics?

All right then: Snopes and Urban Myths help us debunk fairy stories circulated by uncritical correspondents who forward anything scandalous or outrageous without bothering to check the facts and Vmyths fights hoaxes about malware. But where do we look for thorough, professional, unbiased analysis of recent statements from our politicians and political candidates?

## Politifacts

In the United States (US), the PolitiFact< <http://www.politifact.com/> > is the Snopes of politics. In her description of the origin and management of Politifact, Angie Drobnic Holan explains that “PolitiFact is a project of the St. Petersburg Times and its partner news organizations to help you find the truth in American politics.” Strictly non-partisan, the 2009 Pulitzer Prize Winner< [http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2009/04/politifact\\_wins.html](http://www.boston.com/news/politics/politicalintelligence/2009/04/politifact_wins.html) > has expanded its resources by partnering with other news organizations across the US. The group has “received money from the Knight Foundation, Craigslist Charitable Fund, and the Collins Center for Public Policy.”

Politifact published an amusing analysis< <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2011/nov/23/politifacts-guide-thanksgiving-dinner/> > of politically oriented chain letters circulating through e-mail in recent months. The story< <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/23/142670549/for-thanksgiving-debunk-your-familys-chain-emails> > was picked up by US National Public Radio on the Morning Edition show for Nov 23, 2011; the transcript includes a podcast of the six minute report.

## FactCheck

Another helpful resource for checking on political e-mail messages in the US is FactCheck< <http://www.factcheck.org/> >, which is “A Project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.”< <http://factcheck.org/about/> > The organization describes itself as “a nonpartisan, nonprofit “consumer advocate” for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. We monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding.” It is funded through grants from foundations and public donations but states that “We do not seek and have never accepted, directly or indirectly, any funds from corporations, unions, partisan organizations or advocacy groups.”

In the United Kingdom, The FactCheck Blog< <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/> > from Channel 4 News “goes behind the spin to dig out the truth and separate political fact from fiction;” it has archives dating back to June 2008. The “about” page< <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/welcome-to-the-new-factcheck-blog/18> > states that the group has “won an award for statistical excellence in journalism, been cited in parliament and received a sack of email correspondence from readers, some very complimentary, some less so.”

On the day I visited the FactCheck site (Nov 23. 2011), topics included

- How generous is Danny Alexander’s pensions deal?
- Can Labour save the economy?
- Where are the real job opportunities?
- Are Britain’s young people paying for the euro crisis?

- Who's lying about the border scandal?
- Is the Eurozone crisis strangling Britain's recovery?
- Are there any jobs out there?
- How much did James Murdoch know about phone hacking?
- Broken Britain and broken promises – Clegg's riot payback collapses
- How dodgy stats could decide our children's future.

## Advice for Family and Friends

Finally, here is some of the text of a macro I have used since the late 1990s when responding to hoaxes that friends and relatives have forwarded to me:

**\*\*\* A FRIENDLY MESSAGE ABOUT THE WARNING YOU JUST SENT ME \*\*\***

The warning you have forwarded is a hoax. The danger is imaginary and the problem is non-existent.

Security experts request that no one circulate unverified warnings of vague, alarming dangers.

Key indicators that a message is a hoax:

- Use of exclamation marks and in particular, multiple exclamation marks (no official warning uses them)!!!!;
- Use of lots of UPPERCASE TEXT (typical of youngsters trying to EMPHASIZE points);
- Misspellings and bad grammar (typical of non-English speaking foreign phishers);
- No date of origination or expiration;
- Use of "yesterday," "last week," and "recently" with no way to tell what period these descriptions refer to;
- References to official-sounding sources or Web sites (e.g., MICROSOFT, CIAC, CERT) but no specific URL for details (nobody can legitimately cite < <http://www.microsoft.com> > as the source for a warning that hard disks will explode unless you give the sender your credit-card number);
- No valid digital signature from a known security organization;
- Requests to circulate widely (no such request is made in official documents).

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