

Why fact checking is a crucial skill

Yesterday, I was watching local news coverage of the Inaugural events, and a reporter stated that Barack Obama took the oath of office using Lincoln's bible. Except he didn't. He used Michele Obama's family bible. Then, one of the anchors on this newscast said it was symbolic that the Inauguration taking place today (Monday, January 21) on Martin Luther King's birthday. Except that today is the day we OBSERVE MLK's birthday. His actual date of birth was January 15th.

These may seem like small mix-ups, but it points to a much larger problem. Journalists are not checking their facts, but rather parroting what they hear or repeating something they think they know. And then viewers repeat this information, and thus, misinformation is spread.

Most people think that what they hear on TV or read in a newspaper is vetted, and therefore true. And yet, I have seen countless examples beyond those above, of news outlets simply failing to fact-check. Add to this the increasingly sloppy use of grammar and spelling and you have a news media that is less trustworthy and less accurate than ever.

Bloggers, Tweeters and journalists need to be very careful with what they present as fact. It is pretty simple to fact check when MLK's birthday was (just Google it!). It is good to double-check information. If you can't find another source, then perhaps you should wait before you publish anything (and by publish, I mean making anything public).

Thoughts? Good examples? Share please!