

# **REVIEW**

THE PROBLEM WITH FACEBOOK'S FACT-CHECKER

**HOW THE JOURNAL RE-WROTE  
IT'S FINDINGS IN THE ABORTION  
REFERENDUM**

## SUMMARY

The Journal.ie is an online Irish media platform which is used by Facebook to examine news stories, reports and/or claims appearing on the social media platform in order to ascertain if they are factual. It is listed by Facebook as the only “third-party, fact-checking partner” working with the social media giant in Ireland.

This review of The Journal’s fact-checking in the abortion referendum, however, shows that they cannot be taken seriously as an independent fact-checker.

- In the 2018 referendum on the 8th amendment, The Journal rewrote and altered its own previously published fact-checks and made new findings which were beneficial to the Yes campaign.
- The Journal changed the result of its original fact-check findings – even though the facts had not changed.
- It amended its original fact-check finding, but did not signpost all of the changes in the article.

These actions show that The Journal cannot be considered an unbiased, independent and credible fact-checker.

Given the power granted to these partners to impact on debate and information sharing, Facebook needs to engage a fact-checker which is impartial and genuinely independent. Otherwise, Facebook will also lose all credibility.

## INTRODUCTION

The 2018 abortion referendum was a hard-fought and divisive campaign. The Yes campaign enjoyed the support of the establishment media, almost all the political parties, trade unions and more.

The Journal is an online media platform which has become the only “third-party, fact-checking partner” used by social media giant, Facebook, in Ireland. These fact-checkers have significant power over the ability of citizens and civil society to impact on debate. If a post is found to be untrue or disputed by the fact-checker, the page or person who made the post is restricted by Facebook. Further, other pages or people who shared the post are also targeted.

### ***Facebook says:***

“If a fact-checker rates content as false, it will appear lower in News Feed. This significantly reduces the number of people who see it.”

“Taking action against repeat offenders: Pages and websites that repeatedly share false news will have some restrictions, including having their distribution reduced. They may also have their ability to monetize and advertise removed, and their ability to register as a news Page removed.”

Given the power enjoyed by fact-checkers, and their ability to impact on a free and fair debate, it is crucial that Facebook engages a fact-checker which can act without bias, and which is shown to be independent and fair-minded.

**Our review shows that is not the case for The Journal.ie**

## THE ABORTION REFERENDUM – THE JOURNAL REWRITES ITS OWN FACT-CHECKS

On November 6th 2016, the Journal carried out a comprehensive fact-check of a Life Institute canvass booklet ‘Yes to Life’.

You can see the original fact-check from The Journal in the internet archive Wayback.

You need to check it here because during the abortion referendum in 2018 The Journal changed its article fact-checking the booklet on its website.

*<https://web.archive.org/web/20180412021352/www.thejournal.ie/yes-to-life-life-institute-8th-amendment-abortion-leaflet-facts-3058066-Nov2016>*

The Journal changed FOUR of its findings in total in the original fact-check article of the pro-life booklet. They noted 3 of these changes in a footnote to the updated article, but did not highlight the most important of the changes, which goes against standard practice.

## CASE 1: DOWN SYNDROME AND ABORTION

In 2016, The Journal fact-checked a Life Institute booklet which said that 90% of babies with Down Syndrome were aborted in Britain. They found that claim to be **MOSTLY TRUE** - noting that for full clarity the booklet might have said that this percentage applied to known outcomes i.e. 90% of babies diagnosed with Down Syndrome were aborted.

This is a screenshot from The Journal's original fact-check

### 12. "90% of babies with Down Syndrome aborted"

This was the subject of a fact check article in June, and you can find full details there.

These are the basic facts, from the [2013 report](#) of the National Down Syndrome Cytogenic Register for England and Wales:

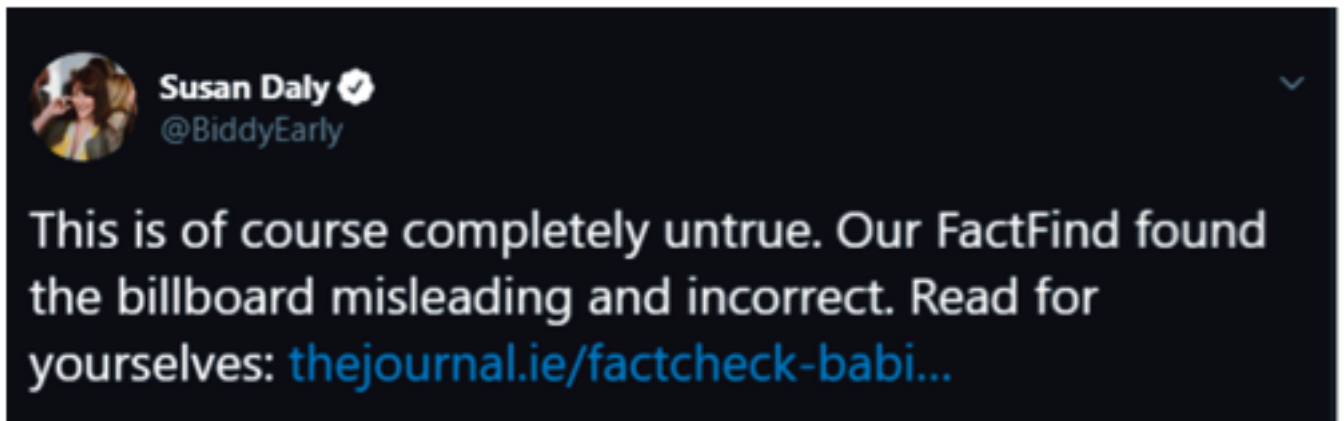
- There were 1,232 pre-birth Down Syndrome diagnoses in 2013
- 75% (925) ended in termination; 6.7% (82) ended in live birth; 1.6% (20) ended in foetal death; the outcome was unknown in 16.6% of cases (205)
- Of the cases whose outcome was known, **90% ended in termination.**

Evidence was not available for Scotland. Given this gap in our knowledge, and the fact that the 90% figure refers to known outcomes, rather than all outcomes, the claim is **Mostly TRUE**.

The fact that 90% of preborn babies diagnosed with Down syndrome are aborted in Britain has been reported by most major British news outlets including the BBC.

Then came the Irish abortion referendum of 2018. This issue was getting a lot of attention in the debate, and the Save the 8th campaign noted that the Journal had previously found the 90% claim to be true.





Astonishingly, the Journal's editor denied that was the case. The Journal had **changed** the result of its original fact-check finding – even though the facts had not changed.

The amended fact-check can be found on the Journal's website, though no reference is made in the amended article to the changes that had been made to the original fact-check.

*<https://www.thejournal.ie/yes-to-life-life-institute-8th-amendment-abortion-leaflet-facts-3058066-Nov2016/>*

The fact-check article now reads:

## 12. "90% of babies with Down Syndrome aborted"

These are the basic facts, from the [2013 report](#) of the National Down Syndrome Cytogenic Register for England and Wales:

- There were 1,232 pre-birth Down Syndrome diagnoses in 2013
- 75% (925) ended in termination; 6.7% (82) ended in live birth; 1.6% (20) ended in foetal death; the outcome was unknown in 16.6% of cases (205)
- **Of the cases whose outcome was known, 90% ended in termination.**

Evidence was not available for Scotland. Given this gap in our knowledge, and the fact that the 90% figure refers only to known outcomes – where there is a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome, rather than all outcomes, the claim is **FALSE**.

The leaflet did not contain the context that 90% is the figure in the case where a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome has been made. The percentage of pregnancies with the potential to result in a baby being born with Down Syndrome in England and Wales would be 57%.



It's abundantly clear that the facts had not changed – but the Journal's motivation had. Their new 'FALSE' finding was shared by Yes campaigners on social media to try to discredit pro-life messages.

In fact, in its haste, the Journal had not amended **another fact-check from 2016\*** which looked at the same issue and the same facts and found that the statement that 90% of babies with Down Syndrome were aborted in England to be 'MOSTLY TRUE'.

## FactCheck: Who got it right in this abortion debate between Ruth Coppinger and Cora Sherlock?

TheJournal.ie's FactCheck attempts to resolve an argument over abortion facts on Tonight with Vince last night.

### Conclusion



Source: [TV3.ie](https://www.tv3.ie)

Both Coppinger and Sherlock misstated their own claims on Tonight with Vincent Browne.

Sherlock said "England", when the data she was citing actually related to "England and Wales", and did not specify she was talking about pre-birth diagnoses.

However, allowing for that as a simple misstatement, the 90% figure she presented was large accurate, and her claim is **Mostly TRUE**.

The Journal says that it rates claims as Mostly TRUE when “The claim is close to accurate, but is missing significant details or context. Or, the best available evidence weighs in favour of the claim.”

That would be a credible and fair-minded justification of their MOSTLY TRUE finding for both fact-checks in 2016.

The Journal says that a claim is FALSE where ‘the claim is inaccurate’ – but there is no disputing the central claim the Save the 8th and Yes to Life campaigns were making: 90% of babies diagnosed with Down Syndrome are aborted.

The Journal’s re-writing of their previous fact-check in this instance is without justification, fatally undermines their credibility, and leaves Facebook’s own credibility seriously damaged.

*\* <https://www.thejournal.ie/abortion-down-syndrome-fatal-foetal-abnormality-cora-sherlock-ruth-coppinger-eighth-amendment-vincent-browne-2842048-Jun2016/>*



## CASE 2: 1 IN 5 BABIES ABORTED IN BRITAIN

During the 2018 abortion referendum, the No campaign said that 1 in 5 babies were aborted in Britain. The Journal had found this to be MOSTLY TRUE in its 2016 fact-check of the Yes to Life booklet.

The Journal retrospectively changed its 2016 finding from MOSTLY TRUE to UNPROVEN during the referendum.

The Journal originally made this finding:

### 3. "In Britain, 20% of all babies have their lives ended by abortion"

In 2015, there were 697,852 live births in England and Wales, 3,147 still births, and 191,014 abortions (pg 23).

This means there were 892,013 pregnancies in total, 21.4% of which ended in abortion.

In Scotland, there were 55,098 live births, 211 still births, and 12,082 abortions (pg 6). So out of a total of 67,391 pregnancies, 17.9% ended in abortion.

In Great Britain as a whole (England, Wales and Scotland), there were 203,096 abortions out of 959,404 pregnancies – a rate of 21.1%.

The claim is **Mostly TRUE**.

During the abortion referendum, this finding was changed from Mostly True to Unproven by adding this text:

‘However, miscarriages are not taken into account in these figures. The NHS and the HSE both estimate that 1 in 6 pregnancies end in miscarriage but as this can only be an estimate, it is impossible to definitively calculate the percentage of overall pregnancies that end in abortion’.

This is not a credible argument. The Journal did not raise this issue in its 2016 finding, but it was raised as an argument by the Yes campaign during the 2018 referendum. The Journal’s decision to change its findings seem mostly likely to have been prompted by the needs of the Yes campaign. No new facts had emerged.

### 3. ABORTION RATE IN SPAIN

Similarly, the Journal had previously found that the booklet's statement on the abortion rate in Spain was Mostly True.

#### 16. "In Spain the abortion rate is also at 20%"

In 2014, the most recent year we have data for, there were 94,796 abortions in Spain, according to the country's [Department of Health](#).

According to the [national statistics agency INE](#), there were 426,303 births that year, and there were 1,347 [still births](#).

That's a total of 522,446 pregnancies, 18.1% of which ended in abortion.

The claim is **Mostly TRUE**.

This was changed from Mostly True to Unproven by adding the claim: 'BUT again the 'total' number of pregnancies does not include those which end in miscarriage'.

This is not a credible argument. The Journal did not raise this issue in its 2016 finding, but it was raised as an argument by the Yes campaign during the 2018 referendum. The Journal's decision to change its findings seem mostly likely to have been prompted by the needs of the Yes campaign. No new facts had emerged.

### 4. ABORTION RATE IN FRANCE

The Journal had also previously found that the booklet's statement on the abortion rate in France was Mostly True.

#### 17. "In France it was 21% in 2013"

In 2013, there were [229,000 abortions](#) in France, [811,510 births](#), and [7,281 still births](#).

That's a total of [1,047,791 pregnancies](#), [21.9%](#) of which ended in abortion.

The claim is **Mostly TRUE**.

This was changed from Mostly True to Unproven by again adding the claim: 'BUT again the 'total' number of pregnancies does not include those which end in miscarriage'.

This is not a credible argument. The Journal did not raise this issue in its 2016 finding, but it was raised as an argument by the Yes campaign during the 2018 referendum. The Journal's decision to change its findings seem mostly likely to have been prompted by the needs of the Yes campaign. No new facts had emerged.

## LACK OF SIGNPOSTING OF CHANGES

The Journal has a **listing** of every fact-check it has amended or updated. The very significant amendments to the fact-check under discussion is not included on that list, even though other fact-checks from November 2016 are included.

This is the only fact-check we were able to find in the Journal that did not note, along the top of the article, that it had been edited. All other fact-checks, at least those noted as having been amended by the Journal, contain either 'Updated: x date' or 'Correction: x date' along the top of the article, with a fuller explanation titled 'Update: x reason' or 'Correction: x reason' below the article. The fact-check in question has certain claims within itself marked with an \* with an '\* explainer' at the bottom of the article.

The Journals 'Reader's Guide to FaceCheck' describes what each rating means. MOSTLY TRUE is defined as 'The claim is close to accurate, but is missing significant details or context. Or, the best available evidence weighs in favour of the claim' with MOSTLY FALSE being defined as 'There is an element of truth in the claim, but it is missing critical details or context. Or, the best available evidence weighs against the claim', and 'FALSE' being defined as, 'The claim is inaccurate'. Given the definitions here, it is difficult to see how the Journal could legitimately stand over their claim that the Down Syndrome and Abortion claim, in particular, was FALSE rather than MOSTLY TRUE, as mostly true notes that context or details may be imperfect.

All of these changes together combine to make it much more difficult for a reader to tell the Journal fact-check has been changed and, in the case of the change relating to abortions for reasons of disability, the changes are effectively entirely hidden.

## CONCLUSION

Given the context of the changes, and that fact-checks relating to a campaign messages of the NO campaign in the referendum were substantially edited without note, we believe it is justifiable to conclude that the changes were made to further an editorial position rather than to increase the accuracy of the original fact-check.

In the 2018 referendum on the 8th amendment, The Journal rewrote and altered its own previously published fact-checks and made new findings which were beneficial to the Yes campaign.

The Journal changed the result of its original fact-check findings – even though the facts had not changed.

In one instance, it amended its original fact-check finding, but did not make any reference to that amendment in the article.

These actions show that The Journal cannot be considered an unbiased, independent and credible fact-checker.

Given the power granted to these partners to impact on debate and information sharing, Facebook needs to engage a fact-checker which is impartial and genuinely independent. Otherwise, Facebook will also lose all credibility.

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