

# The Danger of Taking Official Claims at Face Value

Skepticism about official claims should always be the watchword for journalists and analysts.

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*The Associated Press has [fired](#) the reporter behind an [erroneous report](#) that claimed that the missile that struck Poland last week had been fired by Russian forces. The original [report](#) relied on the word of a single anonymous U.S. intelligence official. An investigation into the erroneous report shows that a willingness to take official sources at their word seems to have been part of the larger problem:*

Internal AP communications viewed by The Post show some confusion and misunderstanding during the preparations of the erroneous report.

LaPorta shared the U.S. official's tip in an electronic message around 1:30 p.m. Eastern time. An editor immediately asked if AP should issue an alert on his tip, "or would we need confirmation from another source and/or Poland?"

After further discussion, a second editor said she "would vote" for publishing an alert, adding, "I can't imagine a U.S. intelligence official would be wrong on this." [bold mine-DL]

Skepticism about official claims should always be the watchword for journalists and analysts. These are claims that need more scrutiny than usual rather than less. If you can't imagine that an intelligence official could get something important wrong, whether by accident or on purpose, you are taking far too many things for granted that need to be questioned and checked out first.

Intelligence officials of many governments feed information to journalists and have done so practically ever since there was a popular press to feed information to, and that information certainly should not be trusted just because an official source hands it over. It is also always possible for intelligence officials to just get things wrong, whether it is because they are relying on faulty information or because they were too hasty in reaching conclusions about

what they think they know.

Whether the AP's source was feeding them a line or was simply mistaken, a claim as provocative and serious as this one should have been checked out much more thoroughly before it got anywhere near publication. The AP report in this case seems to have been a combination of a story that was "too good to check" and a culture of deference to official sources in which the editors didn't feel compelled to make the effort to check. The desire for a quick, eye-grabbing headline probably also contributed to the mistake. The incentives for news outlets to be first rather than right are strong and can have distorting effects on what gets published.

Fortunately, both the Polish and the U.S. governments reacted responsibly and carefully to the missile incident and the bad reporting about it, but we can see how easy it would be for them to have acted otherwise when there are too many journalists and analysts ready to believe whatever comes through official channels. There will be other situations where official sources will want to push a certain story out to manipulate public opinion, and there are not enough safeguards against media outlets reproducing and amplifying propaganda. I don't know how that gets fixed or even if it can be fixed, but the first step is to treat official claims with much more skepticism until they can be confirmed by other sources.

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