



Editorial: Use Michigan Truth Squad to check candidates' claims

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The advertising-driven nature of modern campaigns makes for confusing claims and counter-claims — all with questionable value.

In that muddled message soup, it's good to have a taster. Or maybe a strainer.

That's what the Center for Michigan is trying to provide. The Center has launched something called **the Michigan Truth Squad**, which will take apart many of the advertisements voters will see this summer and fall.

The Center seeks to provide context and promises to blow the whistle on claims that are blatantly untrue. True to its name, the center is a middle-of-the-road policy group that doesn't approach state issues with a particular ideological edge. It seeks pragmatic solutions to state problems.

The Truth Squad is one of the most recent versions of an old concept. Usually, it's packaged as an "ad watch" in which a trusted organization or person takes apart campaign claims for the public good. The Michigan Associated Press will continue to do that this year, providing to member papers its dissection of the ads that, because of new media, are more plentiful than ever. Some appear exclusively online, sparing the sponsors the cost of going up on television or radio.

The Center for Michigan's Truth Squad is staffed by journalists Rick Haglund and Susan Demas, both longtime watchers of state politics and both familiar with the truth shading that occurs in campaigns. "Truth" may be a lofty term. Election-year claims are sometimes accurate but incomplete. Context and additional

information can be helpful there, and both the Truth Squad and the Associated Press promise to provide it.

As of yesterday, the Truth Squad had reviewed 13 claims by different campaigns and organizations, most involving the governor's race. Five were found to be "fouls." One was a "flagrant foul." Three were dubbed "technical fouls." Two were given "warning" signs and two were scored "no foul."

More instructive than these labels are the notes that accompany each ad. There, you can find the history and context campaigns conveniently gloss over. The Center will delve into other races this fall, including the races for attorney general, secretary of state and state House and Senate. The Center promises to post a ruling most every day. The Associated Press' Ad Watch will cover similar territory, in addition to the state's hard-fought congressional races.

Yesterday's posting on the Michigan Truth Squad website, for instance, looked at a recent television advertisement from Republican gubernatorial candidate Rick Snyder in which Mr. Snyder, former computer company executive, claims to be "the only businessman running."

Not true, points out the Truth Squad. Other GOP candidates have business experience, including U.S. Rep. Peter Hoekstra (a former furniture company executive), Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard (owner of an ice cream shop and a consulting firm) and state Sen. Tom George (who founded a pain clinic). House Speaker Andy Dillon, a Democratic candidate for governor, is also a former executive.

In addition, the truth squad points out that Mr. Snyder's claim to that he is "not a politician" deserves at least an asterisk. In 1999, Gov. John Engler appointed Mr. Snyder to be first chair of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation — not an elected position, but certainly a political one. Other ads, many far nastier, are similarly examined.

In an age when social media and Internet outlets give campaigns more access than ever to voters — and more opportunity to shape attitudes for good and ill — context is crucial. This is as important an election year as Michigan has seen in decades, because of the many open offices from governor down and because of the state's crippled economy and broken political culture.

With the stakes so high, Michigan voters can't afford to passively accept everything that's thrown their way. The Truth Squad is one more way to dig into what politicians are telling you, and what they're not.

E-mail a letter to the editor for publication online and in print: pulse@grpress.com Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your full name, home address and phone number.

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