

Local media need to fact-check gas stories that are full of hot air

Perhaps you've seen the sticker on a gas pump. Or maybe you saw a photograph on social media. The sticker is a cartoon of President Joe Biden with the words "I did that!" It is positioned so he is pointing at the gas price.

Biden is not responsible for rising consumer gas prices, but the theory is nonetheless being widely shared in conversation and on social media, particularly in conservative circles. When gas prices went up under President Trump—and they did, the first year he was in office, he was blamed, too. Likewise, when gas prices dropped under President Obama, he got credit he didn't deserve.



Photo by Tyra Ingram

We love to talk gas in America, even when our theories are full of hot air.

But the fact is that while administrative policies could eventually impact gasoline prices over the long-term, presidents have limited ability to impact gas prices short-

term. Joe Biden is not the reason the national retail price for gas is at its highest level since 2104 heading into the start of the holiday season. The reason is textbook economics.

Gas prices are about supply and demand. Demand was down during the pandemic. As more people are getting vaccinated and COVID-19 infections are holding steady, or at least not spiking to the levels they were a year ago, demand is up again. We are traveling more. We are driving to work. We are filling our tanks with gas. Prices have gone up because demand is up. US oil production and refineries have not kept up.

It's not just in the US, there are shortages across the globe. Gas prices are also high in Britain, France, Spain, Italy and Greece. Biden isn't being blamed for the increases there; Russia is.

It's easy enough to find stories in national media outlets that explain all of this. Forbes. USA Today. ABC News. These stories all detail the economics of gas. But it's hard to get that message through the polarized din, especially when political leaders themselves falsely blame or credit each other when consumer prices rise or fall.

There is a role for community news in helping our readers navigate this story, and I don't know why more local news outlets aren't fact-checking the rumors at the pump. I've said this before, and I will say it again. We cannot leave the fact-checking of major stories to the national news outlets that our readers either aren't paying attention to or are dismissing as "big media."

Many of us are not big media. We are little media, and while we still have to deal with the allegations of "false news" and eroding faith in journalism itself, we are still much better positioned to counter claims like this one. We need to do a better job of speaking frankly to our readers on these topics. Will some people dismiss us? Of course. Like many of you, I

have people in my life who would ignore a fact if I smothered it with cheese and served it on a plate even without garnish.

We need to be careful and precise with our explanation so that we show our readers we are not coming from any particular political point of view. This isn't about Biden. This is about the economics of gas. This is why gas prices are higher. This is why your local diner is out of styrofoam to-go containers. This is why there is a run on canned pumpkin. Or why the LOL Surprise OMG House is in short supply, which incidentally I know because I listen to NPR's Marketwatch.

But why can't we tell our readers as well? Even if we have long axed the business page or buried it inside the sports section, our readers are talking about gas prices and pie and hard-to-find toys. We have an obligation to explain the reason, free of political conspiracy theories, which unfortunately are not in short supply.

As long as that holds true, we are also in demand. That is textbook journalism.

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