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Fact-Checking as Idea and Practice in Journalism

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Summary and Keywords

Fact-checking has a traditional meaning in journalism that relates to internal procedures for verifying facts prior to publication, as well as a newer sense denoting stories that publicly evaluate the truth of statements from politicians, journalists, or other public figures. Internal fact-checking first emerged as a distinct role in U.S. newsmagazines in the 1920s and 1930s, decades in which the objectivity norm became established among American journalists. While newspapers have not typically employed dedicated fact-checkers, the term also refers more broadly to verification routines and the professional concern with factual accuracy. Both scholars and journalists have been concerned with a decline of internal fact-checking resources and routines in the face of accelerated publishing cycles and the economic crisis faced by news organizations in many parts of the world.

External fact-checking consists of publishing an evidence-based analysis of the accuracy of a political claim, news report, or other public text. Organizations specializing in such “political” fact-checking have been established in scores of countries around the world since the first sites appeared in the United States in the early 2000s. These outlets may be based in established news organizations but also “good government” groups, universities, and other areas of civil society; practitioners generally share the broad goals of helping people become better informed and promoting fact-based public discourse. A burgeoning area of research has tried to measure the effectiveness of various kinds of external fact-checking interventions in countering misinformation and promoting accurate beliefs. This literature generally finds that fact-checking can be effective in experimental settings, though the influence of corrections is limited by the familiar mechanisms of motivated reasoning.

Keywords: objectivity norm, verification, accuracy, truth-squadding, adwatch reporting, political journalism, political knowledge, journalism studies

A Range of Meanings

Few ideas play as central a role in the understanding and practice of journalism as fact-checking. What defines news reporting as an occupation, and supplies the most basic standard by which to judge it, is the claim to present accurate accounts of recent events. Reporting accurately means checking facts; the "essence" of journalism, explains a popular handbook, "is a discipline of verification" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 79). The terms "fact-checker" and "fact-checking" entered the English language in the 1930s to describe a new role, one that both reflected and helped to cement the modern, professional understanding of journalism as bound by an ethical commitment to report objectively.

Despite this centrality, fact-checking has a range of meanings in journalism and among scholars who study journalism. Three related senses can be identified in current usage, each of which speaks to the commitment to accuracy in a slightly different way. First, fact-checking can denote a specific role or stage in the production process, focused on confirming the details in a news report or other work of nonfiction prior to publication. It is this occupational sense—as in a fact-checking department at a magazine—that first brought the term into common usage.

The term may also refer in a general way to the function or process of verification, rather than a discrete operation carried out by specialists. Fact-checking in this sense is a vital part of every reporter's work of assembling information from multiple, sometimes conflicting sources into a trustworthy account. Choosing to publicize an unconfirmed report—for instance, during a breaking news event—may be described as a fact-checking error even if the item is correctly attributed.

Last, in contrast to such "internal" fact-checking designed to identify and correct errors before publication, a more recent usage describes an emerging genre of journalism: a public report on the accuracy of a claim or a text that is already in circulation. This "external" sense of fact-checking has become prevalent over the past two decades with the growing number and visibility of websites dedicated to debunking falsehoods circulating online or repeated by politicians and other public figures. The work of these outlets is sometimes described as *post hoc* or "political" fact-checking, although some fact-checkers address areas like popular culture and science.

This article considers each of these meanings and the questions they raise for scholars of journalism and communication. In particular, the most recent understanding of fact-checking as an effort to combat public misinformation has been the subject of a growing literature investigating the origins, practices, and effects of these interventions. However, it is important to note that practitioners do not always distinguish clearly between different senses of fact-checking, and this elision itself may do important cultural work in journalism.

Internal Fact-Checking

Editorial norms vary markedly across different styles and formats of news and between different national traditions of journalism. However, the concern with factual accuracy is basic to journalism as a "fact-centered discipline"—a distinct occupational field organized to produce something called news through information-gathering practices such as reporting and interviewing (Chalaby, 1996; Waisbord, 2013). Codes of ethics and press guidelines around the world emphasize the need to verify information carefully and correct errors promptly; as one analysis notes, "No tenet of journalism is as widely accepted as the obligation to report the facts accurately" (Porlezza & Russ-Mohl, 2012, p. 45).

The emergence of fact-checking as a distinct editorial operation performed by specialists reflected the growing importance of that obligation to accuracy in journalists' professional horizons in the wake of the Progressive Era. The first dedicated fact-checking departments appeared at *Time* magazine and *The New Yorker* in the 1920s; the practice gradually spread to other national magazines, which increasingly competed with newspapers, and with each other, on the basis of their claim to provide a trustworthy and comprehensive picture of the world (Angeletti & Oliva, 2010; Silverman, 2007; Sivek & Bloyd-Peshkin, 2018). For decades the role was occupied mainly by young women—in the now-jarring words of one much-quoted 1964 essay, "usually a girl in her twenties, usually from some Eastern college, pleasant looking but not a *femme fatale*" (Friedrich, 1964, p. 60). A formal fact-checking stage had become standard practice across the magazine industry in North America before newsroom cuts began at the close of the century; one study estimated that major newsweeklies in the 1980s employed one fact-checker (often called a researcher or associate editor) for every three or four correspondents (Shapiro, 1990; Sivek & Bloyd-Peshkin, 2018).

Fact-checking as a specialized occupation has remained mostly invisible to the public outside of occasional controversies when the process breaks down (perhaps most famously, the discovery that *New Republic* writer Stephen Glass fabricated dozens of stories in the mid-1990s, recounted in the 2003 film *Shattered Glass*). However, a small professional literature has commented on the peculiarities of the role and on the relationship between writers and fact-checkers (e.g., Blow & Posner, 1988; Friedrich, 1964; McPhee, 2009). One recurring theme of these essays, echoed by ethnographic research (Shapiro, 1990), is that the larger truth of a story often rests on subjective characterizations as well as narrowly verifiable claims. Another is that the line between reporting facts and checking them is difficult to draw. Magazines have routinely counted on their fact-checkers to do original research and fill in missing details (often flagged by the writer with the abbreviation "TK").

Daily newspapers produce more news under tighter deadlines and typically have not employed dedicated fact-checking staff, relying instead on copy editors with a range of other duties. (The closest equivalent was the proofreaders who pored over "galleys" of each page before an edition went to press, made redundant by new publishing systems in

the 1970s and 1980s; Silverman, 2007). However, the wider problem of verifying facts and corroborating sources is a central one in journalistic discourse—most famously, in Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's Watergate investigation as recounted in *All the President's Men*—and in research about newsroom practices. Studies of news production have found, for instance, that rules for factual verification are more exacting when the subject is powerful (Tuchman, 1978); that verification by beat reporters is enmeshed in bureaucratic routines and assumptions (Fishman, 1980); and that investigative reporting, because it questions those routines and assumptions, also challenges taken-for-granted ideas about factual verification (Ettema & Glasser, 1998).

Internal fact-checking procedures have been newly challenged by sharper deadline pressures and shrinking newsroom resources associated with the shift to digital media. U.S. newsmagazines began to scale back dedicated fact-checking resources in the mid-1990s (*Time* and *Newsweek* shuttered their departments in 1996) and increasingly rely on an abbreviated process led by editors or authors themselves; online stories receive less scrutiny than print and may not be checked at all (Silverman, 2007; Sivek & Bloyd-Peshkin, 2018). Verification routines face similar constraints across the field, raising widespread concern about inaccuracy among both journalists and scholars. The digital media environment also raises new questions for journalists about whether to report, and how to corroborate, online rumors or reports from citizens during breaking news events—concerns reflected in a growing catalog of high-profile reporting errors during events such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. As both a practice and an ideal, verification has adapted to an environment in which news outlets no longer act as gatekeepers in public discourse; even more than in the past, it is "a norm of compromise" (Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé, & Mychajlowycz, 2013, p. 668; see also Hermida, 2015).

External Fact-Checking

Fact-checking has an additional and increasingly common sense referring to an evaluation of a claim or a text that is already public, rather than something one intends to make public. Such external or "political" fact-checking thus entails not only verification but also, potentially, confrontation: the fact-checker here publicly endorses or challenges the truthfulness of another individual or organization. While practitioners of the new genre describe their missions in different ways, their goal broadly speaking is to combat misinformation, for instance by persuading the reader not to believe a false rumor or inducing politicians to speak more carefully.

This style of fact-checking has roots in professional journalism. However, as with the original uptake of the term in the 1930s, the newest usage is closely attached to a new role: the fact-checking outlets that specialize in evaluating claims from politicians, journalists, or other public sources and that have proliferated online in the new millennium. According to an annual census of such groups, as of February 2018, 149 nonpartisan fact-checking operations were active in 53 different countries—a more than

threefold increase over the global count just four years earlier (Stencel & Griffin, 2018). Many of these outlets are run by news organizations, but globally more than one-third are not (the tally excludes fact-checkers tied to a political party or cause). Since 2014, fact-checking groups from around the world have met at an annual conference dedicated to the practice; the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), an umbrella organization based at the nonprofit Poynter Institute, was established in 2015.

External fact-checking has become a staple of public political discourse in the United States and many European countries, especially during elections. This fairly sudden rise to prominence has prompted questions about its origins and institutional development, about the methods and claim to objectivity of its practitioners, and about its effectiveness as a tool to fight misinformation.

Origins

The phenomenon of external fact-checking is associated primarily with the Internet and emerged first in the United States. The idea that the World Wide Web made it possible for everyday citizens to hold both politicians and journalists accountable in new ways was common in new media rhetoric of the late 1990s and early 2000s; among the first wave of political bloggers, this attitude was reflected in a popular slogan, “We can Fact-Check your ass!” (Lemann, 2006; Matheson, 2004). Amateur fact-checking sites such as Snopes.com and Spinsanity, launched in 1995 and 2001, respectively, exploited the affordances of the new medium to produce carefully annotated analyses of online rumors and political rhetoric.

These early ventures were followed by three journalist-run outlets that gained national profiles and helped to establish the new genre as a legitimate form of political reporting: FactCheck.org in 2003 and PolitiFact and *The Washington Post’s* Fact Checker in 2007. During the 2004 election, perhaps influenced by FactCheck.org, journalists increasingly adopted the term “fact-checking” to describe stories that debunked campaign claims. Each subsequent presidential election has featured more political fact-checking by major national news organizations, such as *The New York Times*, CNN, and NPR, as well as state and local newsrooms around the country.

The influence also quickly spread overseas, beginning with news outlets in the United Kingdom and France. Over the past decade waves of fact-checking sites have been launched by both journalists and civil society groups around the world; Europe and South America emerged as early hubs, while Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have seen more growth in the past several years (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Stencel & Griffin, 2018). Many of these operations are attached to established news organizations such as the BBC, France’s *Le Monde*, Brazil’s *O Globo*, the television network JTBC in South Korea, and others. However, outside of the United States a majority of fact-checking ventures have no direct newsroom ties, operating either as independent sites or as projects of a university (like South Africa’s *Africa Check*) or a civil society organization (such as Bosnia’s *Istinomjer* and Serbia’s *Istinomer*, both run by good-government groups and

whose name generally translates to “truth” or “true”). Some have an activist ethic; for instance, Ukraine’s StopFake exists mainly to fight Russian propaganda (Haigh, Haigh, & Kozak, 2018).

External fact-checking has antecedents in American journalism that predate the Internet. (It may have such resonances in other traditions as well, but little research exists on this point; see Graves, 2018A). The muckrakers of the Progressive Era (e.g., Samuel Hopkins Adams, Upton Sinclair) were early challengers of misinformation promoted by the patent-medicine, media, and other industries (Amazeen, 2017). A more recent precursor is the genre of “adwatch” stories analyzing and debunking campaign commercials that gained prominence in the 1990s, in part as a deliberate response by journalists to deceptive attack ads seen to dominate the 1988 U.S. presidential race (Kaid, Tedesco, & McKinnon, 1996). Isolated examples of political fact-checking by professional reporters can be found earlier, for instance in coverage of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign and subsequent presidency. Among journalists the practice of debunking statements by politicians was sometimes called “truth-squadding,” a term borrowed from the world of opposition research. (On this history, see Amazeen, 2013; Graves, 2016; Poulsen & Young, 2018.)

Given this history, how should one understand the fairly sudden rise and rapid spread of fact-checking over the past decade? One approach has been to see it as an emerging institutional domain that exhibits a tendency toward isomorphism—that is, fact-checkers face similar pressures and converge on similar solutions—even as it reflects the competing “institutional logics” of the worlds of journalism and new media (Lowrey, 2017). This tension is even more clear internationally: Fact-checkers have overlapping methods and common ethical commitments, but sites with journalistic backgrounds understand their mission differently than those tied to academia or civil society, which are often concerned with building basic democratic institutions or responding to political crises (Amazeen, 2017; Graves, 2018A).

At the same time, external fact-checking fits in different ways into various journalistic traditions. In the United States, where this global phenomenon incubated, the growing embrace of fact-checking fits into a longer, gradual turn toward more critical and analytical journalism, a response in part to critiques of “stenographic” reporting produced by journalists who are too close to the politicians they report on. Leading national fact-checking organizations form part of a self-described movement explicitly promoting the genre as a legitimate form of objective reporting and an alternative to “false balance” in the news (Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016).

Methods

Another question that has drawn close attention is how exactly fact-checkers arrive at their conclusions and whether they can do this in a reliable and consistent way. Determining the accuracy of public political claims often requires judgment and nuance in selecting authoritative sources and interpreting the relevant evidence. The nature of their work leaves fact-checkers open to charges of error and bias and raises the question

of whether political debates that turn on framing and interpretation can be treated as questions of fact.

Independent fact-checking organizations take a broadly similar approach to investigating claims by public figures. A number of common steps appear in the published methodologies of many individual fact-checking organizations and are reflected in the "Code of Principles" of the IFCN. These include, for instance, investigating claims from across the political spectrum; focusing on discrete factual statements rather than expressions of opinion; relying on data and analysis from recognized, independent authorities, which in practice often means official or academic sources; and, crucially, making all evidence and analysis transparent to the reader. In general, approaches embody a broadly scientific ethic by which any reasonable observer should be able to reproduce the analysis and understand how fact-checkers arrived at their verdicts.

Specific techniques often differ, however, in ways that reflect the particular background or mission of these organizations as well as the political and media context in which they operate. One area of difference concerns the use of outside experts, for instance; fact-checkers with journalistic roots tend to quote outside experts in their work, while those attached to civil society organizations or universities often highlight in-house expertise. The most contentious divide is over the use of ratings systems like PolitiFact's iconic Truth-O-Meter. A majority of fact-checking outlets globally employ some sort of scale to rate the accuracy of claims, but others reject the practice as simplistic and reductive (see Amazeen, 2013; Graves, 2018A).

Predictably, outlets engaged in external fact-checking often come under attack from political actors (Stencel, 2015) and from members of the general public, especially during highly polarized debates. (For instance, Brazilian fact-checking sites weathered a populist backlash in 2018.) Academic researchers have also raised questions about the reliability of fact-checking. One important question is whether different fact-checkers consistently reach the same conclusion when assessing a given claim; scholars investigating this have themselves reached very different conclusions depending on the claims examined and the method for harmonizing different ratings systems (see, e.g., Amazeen, 2015; Marietta, Barker, & Bowser, 2015). More broadly, some academic critics (e.g., Uscinski, 2015; Uscinski & Butler, 2013) argue that fact-checkers rely on unscientific methods and exhibit a "naive epistemology" that treats matters of interpretation and opinion as straightforward factual questions (but see Amazeen, 2015; Graves, 2016).

Efforts to develop automated fact-checking systems that can correct online misinformation at scale have drawn new attention to the methods and sources used by professional fact-checkers. Working with artificial intelligence researchers, since 2016 fact-checking organizations have developed software tools that can help them find interesting claims to check and, in some cases, automatically check rhetoric that repeats false claims or invokes frequently cited statistics (see Babakar & Moy, 2016; Graves, 2018B). Hubs for these experiments include Argentina's Chequeado, the U.K. site Full Fact, and the Duke Reporter's Lab at Duke University in the United States.

Effects

The most important question about external fact-checking is how effective such efforts are, or can be, as a tool to fight misinformation. Fact-checking has become an established feature of political discourse in the United States and parts of western Europe; since 2016, widening international partnerships with platforms such as Google and Facebook have increased the visibility of professional fact-checkers around the world. U.S. surveys suggest members of the public like the genre and have come to expect it in political coverage (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015A). At the same time, the rise of external fact-checking has coincided with new fears about the dawn of a supposed "post-fact" or "post-truth" era (e.g., D'Ancona, 2017) and with growing international concern about the democratic impacts of commercial or state-backed online misinformation. In 2018 the European Commission concluded a major inquiry into so-called "fake news"; laws to address the phenomenon have been enacted or considered in more than 20 countries (Funke, 2018).

Against this backdrop, a host of academic studies have sought to establish whether or under what conditions fact-checking is effective. The bulk of this research consists of experiments that define "effects" narrowly as updated beliefs, finding on the whole that fact-checking can have a modest corrective influence under certain conditions (see meta-analysis in Walter & Murphy, 2018). However, it is useful to consider the potential impact of fact-checking across three dimensions: influencing individual attitudes, affecting the behavior of public officials, and changing journalistic practice.

As a means to inform individuals, evidence of the efficacy of fact-checking is mixed. Most research designs have tried to measure whether exposure to a correction changes pre-existing attitudes or perceptions. While numerous studies indicate that fact-checks increase the likelihood of correctly updating attitudes (e.g., Weeks, 2015; Young, Jamieson, Poulsen, & Goldring, 2018), others have found no significant attitude change (e.g., Garrett, Nisbet, & Lynch, 2013) or even "backfire effects" where the initial misperception is reinforced by the correction (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). (Subsequent work has failed to replicate the backfire effect; see, e.g., Wood & Porter, 2018.) This line of research generally supports the idea that motivated reasoning—the tendency to prefer attitude-consistent information or resist that which is attitude-inconsistent (see Taber & Lodge, 2006)—moderates the influence of fact-checking, for instance when a misperception aligns with pre-existing political attitudes.

Even in cases when a fact-check is successful in getting people to update their beliefs about the accuracy of factual statements, this does not necessarily translate to behavior change. Research indicates that people may continue to rely, even partially, on information they know to be false (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). Such "belief echoes" have been shown to persist in affecting attitudes (Thorson, 2016). For instance, a study of the 2016 election found that even when corrections persuaded Trump supporters of the inaccuracy of many of his claims, this had minimal impact on candidate evaluations and voting intentions (Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). Ultimately, of

course, voters make their decisions based on a range of factors beyond the perceived truthfulness of political rhetoric or of the candidates themselves.

Although attitude and belief change are the effects most often studied by scholars, they are not the only potential outcomes of fact-checking. Consistent with the persuasion literature (Miller, 1980/2013), fact-checking can also serve to reinforce existing attitudes or beliefs. Indeed, confirmation bias leads individuals to consider information that reinforces existing attitudes as more persuasive than information that is counterattitudinal (Lazer et al., 2018). Research has shown that people are more likely to share fact-checks on social media for the purpose of reinforcing their own beliefs or to denigrate the opposition (Shin & Thorson, 2017); at the same time, fact-checks shared by friends appear to be most persuasive (Margolin, Hannak, & Weber, 2018). More research is warranted to explore how and when fact-checking may be beneficial in reinforcing accurate beliefs.

Beyond changing or reinforcing an individual's existing attitudes, fact-checking can also serve to shape new attitudes. For instance, some studies have demonstrated fact-checks to be effective in helping people form accurate understandings of unfamiliar or fictitious political candidates (Amazeen, Thorson, Muddiman, & Graves, 2018; Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015), fictitious business people or companies (Pingree, Broussard, & McLeod, 2014), and emerging health issues such as the Zika virus (Vraga & Bode, 2018). Thus defining attitude change as the only successful effect of fact-checking overlooks important evidence of other circumstances under which fact-checking may have meaningful impact.

The effects of fact-checking can also be considered in terms of influencing the behavior of public officials and other political actors. Much of the evidence in this area remains anecdotal: For instance, references in the U.S. Congressional Record to misleading claims about "voting to end Medicare" during the 112th Congress were reduced by nearly half after the claim became PolitiFact's "Lie of the Year" (Amazeen, 2013). Fact-checks have also yielded retractions from then-Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom (Rutter, 2016), an Irish defense minister (MaGuill, 2016), and a French Green Party candidate (Mantzarlis, 2016B). One large-scale field experiment in the United States provides more generalizable evidence of influence on political actors, finding that state lawmakers who were reminded of the reputational risks of being called out by a fact-checker were subsequently less likely than those not so warned to make claims that drew scrutiny by fact-checkers (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015B). Encouraging politicians to be more cautious in their rhetoric, and to acknowledge errors, is a primary goal for some fact-checking organizations; the U.K. site Full Fact, for instance, seeks explicit corrections from people it checks. More systematic research is needed to understand the direct political impacts of fact-checking and the range of factors that shape them.

Finally, despite a proliferation of experimental studies on the potential individual effects of external fact-checking, relatively little is known about the real-world dissemination of these interventions. In order for fact-checks to dispel misinformation, they must first

reach their primary audience. However, notwithstanding impressive traffic spikes to some U.S. outlets in the 2016 election (Mantzarlis, 2016A), independent fact-checking sites around the world generally have small audiences and rely on outside coverage to amplify their work (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Sippitt, 2018). Fact-checkers attached to major newspapers, and especially to broadcast outlets such as the BBC, enjoy greater reach. But given the competitive and often politically polarized nature of national media markets, there is good reason to question how often people holding a given misperception are exposed to fact-checking that addresses it.

What evidence exists on this point is not encouraging. Even in the United States, where they are arguably most well-established, fact-checking sites generally have a small footprint in day-to-day news coverage (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). A large online tracking study conducted during the 2016 U.S. election, one of the few to examine exposure to misinformation at the article level, found no instances in which people who saw a given item of "fake news" also saw the relevant fact-check (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). This is consistent with research generally showing that online misinformation spreads faster and farther than subsequent corrections (e.g., Friggeri, Adamic, Eckles, & Cheng, 2014). Thus the structure of media systems may reduce the potential beneficial effects of fact-checking.

Links to Digital Materials

A Guide to Effective Fact-Checking On-Air and Online.

Africa Check.

Chequeado.

Duke Reporters' Lab.

FactCheck.org.

Full Fact.

International Fact-Checking Network.

PolitiFact.

StopFake.org.

The Washington Post Fact Checker.

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