Fact Checking After Truth (Paper)

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Abstract or Résumé:

The rise of "fake news" (misinformation presented in the format of news reports) and a claimed breakdown in a social consensus behind the reliability of experts and mainstream reporting as information sources (leading to a "post-truth" society) have raised hard choices for journalistic fact checkers. Should they focus on nuanced evaluations of specific claims by politicians, or shift to debunking misinformation more generally? An analysis of fact checking reports at the Washington Post around the 2016 and 2020 elections suggests little change in practice, in contrast to the 2014 Ukrainian initiative Stop Fake which attempted to debunk fake reporting.

1. Introduction

In recent years, "fact checking" has become an increasingly common feature of journalistic information practice (Graves, 2016). Pioneered by the PolitiFact project which began in 2007 as an initiative of the *Tampa Bay Times*, fact checking involved reporters making detailed evaluations of specific claims made by political actors such as elected officials, candidates, and lobbying groups. Fact checkers cross-referenced claims with apparently objective sources such as government statistics, the testimony of academic experts, and the reporting of trusted news outlets. Fact checkers usually classify claims as true, false, or some mixture of two. The practice spread rapidly to other US newspapers, and to media outlets around the world.

Traditional fact checking evolved the exploration a reported claim by a politician, taken from a news report. Fact checkers assumed that the reporting was accurate, but did not assume that the politician was truthful and well informed. Fact checkers also assumed that truth could be determined objectively, or at least approximated. This, in turn, rested on the historically recent journalist concept of objectivity (Schudson, 2001), and a broader trust in academic experts, official statistics, and other mainstream authorities such that readers would change their opinion of the trustworthiness of a politician based on the extent to which their claim could be reconciled with these information sources.

The rise of "fake news" (Haigh & Haigh, 2020; Levi, 2017; Wardle, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) challenged all those assumptions. The phrase first became prominent in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in parts of Eastern Ukraine. Following

the Russian doctrine of "hybrid war" (Mitrokhin, 2015; Pomerantsev, 2014; Thomas, 2014) these operations were accompanied by official denials, propaganda campaigns, and a blizzard of crude and sometimes surreal fake news stories planted on websites and disseminated via Kremlin-allied media and social media accounts. Stop Fake, a group set up by Ukrainian journalists to combat these fake news stories, was inspired by Western fact checking practices (Bonch-Osmolovskaya, 2015; Cottiero, Kucharski, Olimpieva, & Orttung, 2015; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). But an investigation of its work practices suggested that the group's approach was quite different (Haigh, Haigh, & Kozak, 2018). Whereas traditional fact checking assumes reporting is accurate and evaluates specific political claims, Stop Fake was evaluating the credibility of reporting. The methods it used to assess stories as fake were often simple. Among the most common were showing that an image in the fake story had been manipulated or mislabeled compared to an earlier appearance (for example, that it showed dead civilians in Syria rather than Donbas), that the information it claimed to be repeating from a trusted source did not appear in the original source, or that a quotation has been manipulated or misattributed (for example a quotation from a rabbi on the local rise of antisemitic violence was actually from the rabbi of Russian-occupied Simferopol rather than the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv). Given the clear-cut nature of these manipulations, Stop Fake rarely parsed expert testimony or government statistics. Its analysts were far more likely to look at image metadata.

Two years later, in 2016, further events including the Brexit referendum in the UK and the presidential election in the US directly challenged the assumptions behind traditional fact checking. Fact checkers called out the unprecedented reliance of the Trump campaign on blatant lies, and the habitual dishonesty of Boris Johnson, but neither seemed to lose support as a result. While evaluating claims made by traditional political actors, the fact checkers ignored a wave of fake news, much of it spread by Russian trolls (Kahn, 2018), such as the now famous "pizza gate" conspiracy theory (Tuters, Jokubauskaitė, & Bach, 2018) that accused senior Democratic politicians of child abuse and sex trafficking. As such claims were normalized throughout the Trump administration, culminating in Trump's evidence-free insistence that a massive bipartisan conspiracy of voter fraud had cost him relection (a position now shared by a majority of Republican voters, according to opinion polls) many analysts claimed that a new mood of populism and distrust of conventional information sources signaled the dawn of a "post-truth" society (Keyes, 2004; McIntyre, 2018). Meanwhile, Trump dealt with reports exposing the role of fake news in his election by repurposing the term "fake news" to describe information sources such as the *New York Times* and BBC that are conventionally seen as trustworthy and objective (Reuters, 2018). Experts have called for changes in fact checking, and journalistic practice more generally, in response to fake news (Juneström, 2021; Sippitt & Moy, 2020; Tandoc, Jenkins, & Craft, 2019). In particular, a study of 57 fact checking groups found that checks of political statements had fallen by 20% from 2016 to mid-2019, while checks of viral reports had risen by 15% (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020).

In this research, we explore what that impact these challenges had on fact output at the Washington Post, one of the best known and most prolific US fact checking services. Looking at its output in comparable periods immediately before the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, we were interested in how, and if, the types of claims investigated had changed in response to the challenges of fake news and the perceived collapse of a broadly shared consensus reality. Were the fact checkers still focused on isolated claims by politicians, or were they shifting their efforts

towards the debunking of widely shared myths and conspiracy theories? Had the kinds of information source drawn on by Washington Post fact checkers shifted closer to those of Stop Fake from 2016 to 2020?

2. Method

For each election cycle, we coded every *Washington Post* "Fact Checker" report published over a three-month period, beginning two months before election day and ending one month after. This yielded 97 reports for 2016 and 69 reports for 2020. We coded two aspects of each story, corresponding to the nature of the claim being evaluated and to the information sources used to evaluate it.

We chose the *Post* because of its leading role in U.S. fact checking work and because its reports were written by an experienced team that was largely stable from 2016 to 2020 (in particular the chief fact checker Glenn Kessler). Any changes observed were thus less unlikely to be a result of the individual styles of different writers.

3. What did fact checkers check?

Type of claim	**2016**	**2020**	**Increase**
Factual claim made by a poltician, concerning…			
...his/her own position, actions, or statements	22%	29%	7%
...an ally's position, actions, or statements	8%	16%	8%
...an opponent's position, actions, or statements	30%	65%	35%
...a number or percentage	43%	46%	3%
… cause and effect (X happened because of Y).	19%	35%	16%
… something else.	16%	7%	-9%
Evaluation of a possible "flip flop" by a politician.	9%	6%	-3%
Determine whether a report is accurate rather than a political claim.	0%	1%	1%
Summarize /explain facts on a controversial issue (rather than one specific claim).	12%	7%	-5%
Number of "Fact Checker" stories published.	97	69	

Table 1: What were the fact checkers investigating the truth of?[1]

The Washington Post's Fact Checker department maintained its focus on the evaluation of claims by politicians rather than pivoting to address misinformation and disinformation more generally. In this they remained distinct from Stop Fake, which focused almost all of its energy on evaluating the reliability of reporting. Within the general category of claims made by

[1] As some reports evaluated more than one kind of claim and most used more than one kind of information source, the totals in both tables add to more than 100%.

politicians, the most noticeable shift was a more than doubling, to 65%, of the proportion of fact checks that evaluated a claim made by a politician about an opponent. This may have been a response to the increasingly vitriolic tone of political discourse during the 2020 campaign. Also, more of the reports were attempting to evaluate causal claims.

4. What information sources did they use?

Information source	2016	2020	Increase
Government statistics.	38%	38%	0%
Independent expert opinion, newly solicited.	26%	19%	-7%
Original context of a source quoted in the claim.	10%	29%	19%
An existing evaluation of the claim by a third party.	23%	25%	2%
Record of previous statements by same politician.	12%	16%	4%
Record of previous statements by other politicians referenced in the claim.	12%	25%	12%
Facts found in credible news sources.	57%	51%	-6%
Existing analysis by think tank or nonprofit group.	31%	28%	-3%
Laws or government regulations.	10%	9%	-2%
Number of "Fact Checker" stories published.	97	69	

Table 2: What kinds of information did fact checkers draw on to reach their conclusions?

With respect the information sources cited to justify their determinations, we also discovered a general continuity from 2016 to 2020. The Washington Post fact checks inched slightly closer to the Stop Fake model by looking at claims whose truthfulness hinged on whether they were taking quotes out of context, or whether inaccurate claims were being made about the records of other politicians. The decreased reliance on newly solicited expert evaluations perhaps reflects an awareness of fact checkers that the authority of experts is in decline.

These comparisons apply only to the “Fact Checker” department of the Washington Post. We should also note that in 2020, unlike 2016, readers of the Post could also access an ongoing database of false or misleading claims made by Donald Trump while in office. This eventually held 30,573 untruthful statements, averaging 21 for each day in office, a number far exceeding the traditional fact checking output of the Post. According to the Post, the rate rose rapidly as the election approached, with 503 false claims made on November 3, 2020 alone (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2021). While these items did not come with the detailed narrative evaluations used both by Stop Fake and by traditional fact checkers, in this new initiative the Post mirrored one aspect of Stop Fake practice. Unlike traditional fact checking, Stop Fake cataloged only fake new stories. If a story could not be quickly and unequivocally categorized as fake then nothing was posted. Likewise, the Post’s new initiative cataloged only unequivocally false claims made by the president. Yet like traditional fact checking, the Post’s project focused on individual claims made by a specific politician.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the Washington Post's core "Fact Checker" activity appeared little changed from 2016 to 2020 in terms of the kinds of claims investigated and the information sources used to evaluate them. Despite the prevalence of fake news in Western media discourse, it did not shift focus to evaluating general claims or debunking partisan myths and conspiracy theories. Instead it continued to evaluate specific political claims, to assume that they had been accurately reported, and to evaluate truth based on an implicit faith of a consensus in the reliability of news reports, government statistics

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