

Fact checking Websites: The Struggle over Their Credibility

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Third-party fact checkers have proliferated. Since the election of 2000, trust in established news media has declined. (Swift, 2016). Anand (2017) attributes this distrust in part to the business models that govern media. To survive in a competitive environment, the media must value attention over accuracy. Fact checking services such as PolitiFact, OpenSecrets, FactCheck, and Snopes have promised to offset this effect. How have critics and proponents of these sites strived to attack or defend the validity of these sites as sources of impartial guidance for voters? Fact checking is defended as a means of restoring trust and trustworthiness in the media.

Large organizations involved in this debate often support fact checkers. To counteract fake news, some universities recommend fact checkers to student researchers. For instance, UC Berkeley Library (2020) recommends sites such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and OpenSecrets for confirming the legitimacy of their student's writings. UCF libraries (n.d.) have also produced online resources for finding fact checkers, suggesting the platforms PolitiFact, Facts First, and FactChecker. Big tech companies such as Twitter and Facebook sponsor fact checking. According to Culliford & Paul (2020), social media sites are “under fierce scrutiny over how they police rapidly spreading false information and other types of abusive content since Russia exploited the networks to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.” In response, Twitter recently implemented “fact checking labels” for tweets (Culliford & Paul, 2020). But Twitter is already caught between some critics who accuse it of permitting too much disinformation to proliferate and others who accuse it of censorship.

Most criticisms of fact checking websites are from conservative sources. A community on the social media platform Reddit known as “r/conservative” often includes allegations of such biases. For example, Reddit user and member “jazzbuh” (2020) claims “fact checkers are a joke” and that they “were made to silence conservatives.” Candace Owens, an American conservative author and political activist, sued Facebook, claiming that because of its fact checkers, “opinions are getting censored” (RealCandaceO, 2020). Owens contends that such fact checking abridges freedom of speech in this ongoing court case. J.P. Sears (2020), through his popular YouTube channel AwakenWithJP, has made similar allegations in an online comedy sketch, specifically noting that the “safety” modern-day fact checkers may provide, are not worth the unavoidable censorship.

To the defenders of fact checking websites, fact checkers are a valuable check on the proliferation of misinformation. To their critics, however, fact checking websites interfere with the free exchange of information and ideas, and disproportionately reinforce liberal biases in the media.

Review of Research

Andrew Tompkins (2020), a writer for Akademie, suggests fact checkers should “avoid confusing labels like ‘mostly false’,” creating a more clear and effective fact checker. The “truth scales” cause some groups to view the fact checker as bias and partisan (Tompkins 2020). Fact checkers that are less complex are more effective, even for the highly educated (Tompkins 2020). According to Ceci and Williams (2020), fact checking articles written by just one or two people increases the risk of problematic bias.

They propose “adversarial fact checking” by “teams of individuals with diverse sociopolitical views” as a corrective (Ceci & Williams, 2020).

Michael Hameleers (2019), a researcher for Studies in Communication and Media, found that “fact checkers can correct misperceptions on immigration, and lowers the credibility of misinformation” within the U.S. and the Netherlands. The results showed a better impact for fact checkers in the Netherlands (Hameleers 2019). A result that may stem from different Hameleer findings. Hameleer (2019) points out that “public opinion [is] less polarized in the Netherlands, which could indicate that people are more open to corrective information presented in fact checkers.” The idea of a more partisan U.S. causes more distrust because “misinformation can be hard to refute when it supports people’s ideological leanings or issue positions” (Hameleers 2019). Hameleers (2019) also finds “Misinformation that avoids empirical evidence and experts ... is perceived as significantly less credible in the U.S. compared to the Netherlands,” naturally furthering increasing distrust in fact checkers.

Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, researchers for Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, discovered a crowd-sourced approach to fighting misinformation. Their findings showed that “laypeople—on average—are quite good at distinguishing between lower- and higher-quality sources” (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). They further suggest that user rankings on media reliability affecting social media algorithms “may prove an effective intervention against misinformation, fake news, and news content with heavy political bias” (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). An approach that could also save time and money for the social media companies themselves.

Free Exchange of Information And Ideas vs Censorship

The 2016 US election may have caused this push towards fact checker censorship. Data collected by BuzzFeed News show that near the election, the top 10 fake news stories had more likes than the top 10 mainstream news websites on various social media platforms (Silverman, 2016). This shows how much value comes from headlines alone as opposed to actual information. It again shows the growing shift towards click-based media over facts. In response to this fake news, 65% of registered voters thought the news media needed to play a major role in tackling false information (Barthel, Jeffrey & Lu, 2016). This led to Facebook starting their “Third-Party Fact Checking Program” (Facebook, n.d.). The program removes content or ads that are “hate speech, fake accounts, and terrorist content” and provides warnings to misinformation (Facebook, n.d.). Attempts such as these to moderate “fake news” bring up the question as to whether or not the power of censorship is legitimate as Facebook becomes the arbiter of what they deem real versus fake.

Conservatives tend to question or oppose efforts to limit the circulation of fake news (Barthel, Jeffrey & Lu, 2016). This may be because of the censorship of conservative ideas. For example, Donald Trump’s Twitter account was recently removed due to his tweets “being received and interpreted on and off Twitter” (Twitter, 2021). Trump’s suspension limited his reach, effectively being censored by the social media company. John Matze decided to create the social media app, Parler, due to the increase in demand for less censorship. However, in January 2021, Amazon denied Parler access to their AWS servers, shutting down the application (Greene, Lerman & Romm, 2021).

Parler replaced AWS with another backed service and was soon back online. Jack Shafer (2020), a senior media writer for Politico, notes “We stand on dangerous ground when we allow governments to intervene to ‘protect’ us from bad and dangerous words and thought. The only thing worse would be to encourage social media companies to do the same.” This is even more prevalent in US politics due to the high amount of influence corporations are able to wield through lobbyists and donations to government leaders.

Guo (2021) defended Trump’s suspension from Twitter, citing the recent attack on the Capitol. In regards to Trump, Guo (2021) states “that losing access to the mainstream platforms will reduce his audience and dilute the reach of his statements, as the deplatforming of far-right figures like Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopoulos shows.” Guo (2021) believes that this action will prevent falsehoods and conspiracy theories from spreading. Social media, as private corporations, are free to censor or fact check speech on their platforms. Renee DiResta (2020) argues that the actions of these social media companies are “preserving free expression, not suppressing it.” The explanation being “what we see is often whatever is getting the most likes. And since sensationalism and outrage drive clicks and views, wild claims regularly trend” and that “this type of viral, sensational misinformation can be deeply harmful” (DiResta, 2020). By removing these erroneous and malicious new stories, the intended usage of these social media applications become more prevalent. DiResta (2020) also notes that using a “pop-up or interstitial to alert the public that certain content has been disputed” is a viable option. The use of these pop-ups are more widely accepted than outright removal.

Facebook does not fact check politicians, despite heavy third party fact checking use. Mark Zuckerberg (2020) told CNBC he does not think “that Facebook or internet

platforms in general should be arbiters of truth” and that “political speech is one of the most sensitive parts in a democracy, and people should be able to see what politicians say.” Zuckerberg (2020) clarifies that “there are clear lines that map to specific harms and damage that can be done where we take down the content, but overall, including compared to some of the other companies, we try to be more on the side of giving people a voice and free expression.”

Fact Checker’s Biases

Bias is a complicated idea to assess. A study from the Stanford Law Review claims that “subjects of opposing cultural outlooks who were assigned to the same experimental condition ... disagreed sharply on key ‘facts’” (Kahan, Hoffman, Braman, Evans & Rachlinski, 2020). The human tendency to alter the facts based on their own political and ideological values results in a psychologist’s term known as selective perception (Ceci & Williams, 2020). This suggests that bias is inescapable amongst various social groups. From this, it can be inferred that attempting to eliminate bias is an extremely difficult task.

The polarized political landscape in the United States has different views on bias in the media. A poll from the Pew Research Center states that 70% of Republicans will argue fact checkers tend to favor one side, in comparison to 29% of Democrats saying the same (Walker & Gottfried, 2020). To claim no bias may be a bias in and of itself.

Nicholas Kristof (2020), a writer for the New York Times, likes to point out the idea of the “liberal blind spot.” Kristof (2020) states many on the left do not like to converse or reason with conservatives. This could be a reason for the discrepancy in the Pew

Research poll. The other 69% of Democrats surveyed claims that fact checkers are “dealing fairly with both sides” (Walker & Gottfried, 2020). Fact checkers may fall victim to bias at times, but many find them to serve as a valuable third-party mediator. The Center for Information Technology and Society states, “FactCheck.org doesn't rate politicians’ statements by true or false, but rather provides detailed evidence for or against the statements and lets you decide whether they are true or false” (CITS, n.d.). The idea suggests that by only reviewing smaller contentions to an argument, fact checkers are able to avoid more problematic biases. Fact checkers tend to claim that they are unbiased and that they serve the sole purpose of determining the validity of political claims. PolitiFact (2020) claims it is “a nonpartisan fact checking website to sort out the truth in American politics.” FactCheck (n.d.) claims “When selecting material to write about, we seek to devote an equal amount of time reviewing claims by Republicans and Democrats. We do that by reviewing statements they make in the same venues.”

Selectively choosing which facts to check is a bias fact checkers may have. Mark Hemingway (2012), a guest on Conan’s NPR podcast, notices that out of 98 proven false statements made by PolitiFact, 74 were about Republicans, even though total statements were about equal to both parties. A result that may stem from democrat favoritism or republican inadequacies. Peter Roff, from US News, notices the discrepancy but claims the reason “has more to do with how the statements were picked and the subjective bias of the fact checker involved than anything remotely empirical” or “has more to do with spinning stories than it does with evaluating statements.” The example Roff (2013) provides, has to do with what former president Obama saying what happened in Benghazi was “terrorism.” Roff (2013) argues that the Washington Post “four Pinocchios” or false

rating was a misleading conclusion. A clear example of media spin to Roff (2013), because while Obama did not say terrorism, he did call it an act of terror. Fact checking is problematic because facts themselves are problematic. For instance, in September 2020, when claims that Vice President Joe Biden had disparaged U.S. troops as “stupid bastards” surfaced, Snopes judged these claims as “mostly false” (Evon, 2020). Biden had indeed said these words to troops, but Snopes concluded that he had said them “in jest.” Snopes (Evon, 2020) concluded that the significant fact in question was not Biden’s words, which were accurately quoted, but whether Biden had disparaged the troops he was addressing. Such judgments of significance are inevitable opportunities for bias.

Efficiency of Fact Checkers

A big question from many critics of fact checkers is “who fact checks the fact checkers?” J.P. Sears (2020) asks and answers in his parody video “Does anyone fact check the fact checkers? Yes, but we censor them.” This question prompted Investor’s Business Daily to release an editorial on the matter. Here, IBD (2018) notes that “In the past, fact checkers tended to focus mainly on debunking urban myths or clearly false claims made by political leaders. But lately, fact checkers have appointed themselves as arbiters of the credibility of news outlets.” A clear reason for more checks on mainstream media fact checkers themselves. An example of incorrect fact checking was the 2012 PolitiFact “Lie of The Year” states “the Romney campaign's ad on Jeeps made in China” is factually incorrect (Holan, 2012). Mark Hemingway (2013), a well known fact checker critic, writes out to PolitiFact for their checked fact. PolitiFact response being “that Jeep was moving its entire operations to China.” was the inaccuracy (Hemingway, 2013).

Hemingway (2013) points out that the Romney ad only states “the Obama administration played a hand in selling Chrysler to ‘Italians who are going to build Jeeps in China.’,” with both parts being true. Jeep had plans to move only the car assembly to China (Hemingway, 2013). IBD (2018) concludes “that that fact checkers themselves can be unreliable sources for what's true or not.” An investigation on Snopes fact checking showed “in July [2018], 90% of Snopes fact checks used other media sources” (IBD 2018). A worrying trend for Investor’s Business Daily, but not everyone. The value in fact checkers pulling from various sources to give a brief correction on an issue can not be dismissed. In an attempt to fight misinformation on social media, Ohio University has an official guide on fact checking. They say there is a lot of misinformation that the platform users may not be aware of and share regardless (Ohio University, n.d.). The use availability and ease fact-checkers provide can be of great use for the multiple claims a day people may see. They also suggest not trusting every fact checker out there, but instead avoid “content doubtful, derivative, and repetitive” or “content riddled with technical errors,” amongst many more (Ohio University, n.d.).

Lee Drutman (2020), from FiveThirtyEight, suggests that effective fact checkers are those that “are from highly credible sources,” specifically “Republicans contradicting other Republicans or Democrats contradicting other Democrats.” The shock value and trust from these kinds of statements are apparent. Drutman (2020) also says fact checkers that “happen early, before a false narrative gains traction” are effective at stopping the spread of false information. Quicker release can result in more inaccuracies. To counteract this one could recommend fact checkers be more open on their errors. Some would like to argue that the damage is already done during the time period of the error

being available, but Tompkins (2020) argues that “the effects of fact-checking on beliefs are quite weak and even negligible in many real-world scenarios.” According to Africa Check, Chequeado, & Full Fact (2019), this concludes that “The idea that fact checking can work by correcting the public’s inaccurate beliefs on a mass scale alone doesn’t stack up.” While harm may exist in anticipated errors, the damage done may be minimal.

Tompkins (2020) concludes that “one should therefore not expect fact-checking by itself to bring polarized audiences together or force partisan voters to compromise.” This may prove vital to the efficiency of fact checkers, as they do work towards guiding people away from misinformation, but does not change core beliefs in people.

Conclusion

Fact checking services and fact checkers themselves have proven to be a controversial issue in recent years. Many criticisms and concerns have risen due to the issues that their proliferation has caused. The research above has shown that there is a certain group of critiques and approvals that have been made. Firstly, the free exchange of information and the possibility of censorship has been raised. There appears to be a growing concern and argument over whether or not fact checkers have become tools of censorship for information, giving them a great amount of power when deciding if the information is credible, or if the censorship itself promotes the idea of free speech. Secondly, questions have been raised over how much fact checkers are influenced by bias. When it comes to politics, the research shows that there is a belief that fact checking services lean to the left and are more likely to fact check right leaning statements and find them illegitimate, while left leaning claims are less likely to be publicly fact checked.

Many are saying this stems from fact checkers trying to fact check opinions rather than simple ideas to be proven true or false. Thirdly, the overall efficiency and benefit of fact checking services has also been called into question. There have been instances where the fact checking services themselves have spread false information or have made a mistake in their fact checking. Despite some errors, many seem content with the overall ability of fact checkers to release accurate information and their effectiveness in combating blatantly false information. These issues together show that Americans worry most about fact checker's biases, to Free Exchange of Information And Ideas vs Censorship, to Efficiency of Fact checkers, in that order. As the demand and use for fact checkers inevitably continues to grow, prioritizing these ideas may be the best route to keep Americans informed in the best way. Doing so is vital to improving the democracy in the U.S.

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