

Fact-checking for a better life? How fact-checkers are redefining notions of objectivity

As a response to the proliferation of disinformation and ‘disrupted’ (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018) public spheres, fact-checking units have emerged worldwide. Currently, 417 organizations are active in 100 countries (Duke Reporters’ LAB). The primary work of these organizations consists of a) verifying (political) statements made by public figures (fact-checking) or b) exposing online falsehood by anonymous sources on the Internet (debunking). However, several studies identified a new trend toward debunking (Graves et al., 2023, AUTHOR). To secure a better life, this global movement expects to promote democracy, ameliorate the quality of public debate, promote an informed and empowered citizenry, and improve journalism (Amazeen, 2017; Graves, 2016). Unlike other journalistic practices, however, fact-checking articles provide verdicts (Bélaïr-Gagnon et al., 2023). Thus, the praxis is comprehended as an “interpretative turn” against the ‘he said/she said’ style of journalism. Instead of procedural/ritualized objectivity (Gaye Tuchman, 1972; Lawrence & Schafer, 2012), fact-checkers are oriented by scientific methods in which conclusions are drawn based on empirical justification and “weight of evidence” (Dunwoody, 2005). They are encouraged to pursue ‘scientific objectivity’ through methodological transparency and reproducibility (Graves, 2016). Hence, evaluating whether fact-checkers use valid evidence to reach their conclusions in different media systems is crucial.

Summarized Methods: To analyze evidence provided by fact-checkers, we manually coded 1.423 verification articles from 14 organizations (independents and linked to media) in Argentina, Chile, Germany, the UK, and Venezuela. We draw a 25% stratified sample of all articles published in 2022 by each organization (n-4th). The links were collected using the Feeder Extension. Countries were selected according to different democracy levels and trust in media and governments. Data from Brazil, Portugal, and Spain will also be available by the time of the conference. Types of evidence were categorized as a) data documentation, b) statements, c) digital forensics, and combinations of ‘a+b’/’ a+c’/’ b + c.’ Furthermore, targets of verification, topics, types of falsehoods (fabrication, manipulation, imposter, decontextualization, misleading, false connections, satire), and types of documents (national, transnational, international, civil society, business, research centers, and media reports) were coded. Krippendorff’s coefficients were measured within language groups.

Among the main results, one notices that different from established mainstream journalism, articles providing only (expert) statements and interviews in the tradition of procedural objectivity are rare, ranging from 0% (Argentina and Chile) to 1,3% (Germany). Fact-checkers do not rely solely on statements. Pronouncements and interviews are usually complemented with evidence-based documentation (links to documents, media reports, and statistics) to underpin their conclusion (scientific objectivity). When zooming into the specific type of documentation, one notices that Venezuela – an autocratic country– relies more on international/transnational documents and media reports than on national documents, probably due to the lack of accessible and reliable data provided by the Venezuelan government. Because most of the verification articles are debunking – from 78% (the UK) to 95% (Chile), targets of verifications are primarily anonymous sources. However, where the sources of falsehoods are identifiable, one notes that Argentina (2,80%) and Germany (3,20%) are the countries that less scrutinized their own established media. Germany has the highest media trust among all countries, which could explain it. In Argentina, the cooperation between established media and independent organizations might be responsible for these results. National governments and politicians are also less scrutinized in Germany, an indicator that the German public sphere might not be so disrupted compared to other nations. Finally, it is interesting that countries

marked by strong right or left-oriented populism (Germany, the UK, and Venezuela) are more inclined to have 100% fabrications circulating in their online media environment, among other falsehoods. Although one observes some common trends among fact-checkers and their 'scientific objectivity' (probably due to professionalization and institutionalization promoted by organizations such as the International Fact-Checking Network), regional differences (verified topics and types of evidence) are noticeable, partially counterpointing the homogenization thesis.

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