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Fact-Checking Misinformation: Eight Notes on Consensus Reality

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Abstract

In this study we review the literature on fact-checking and the empirical evidence contending that it can correct prior knowledge and successfully debunk misinformation. We caution against the oversized expectation of policymakers that fact-checks can ward off misinformation and outline eight fundamental problems revolving around epistemology, implementation, bias, efficacy, ambiguity, objectivity, ephemerality, and criticism. We discuss these shortcomings in relation to the reorganization of the fact-checking industry as the linchpin in the fight against misinformation in the United Kingdom, United States, Malaysia, Turkey, and Brazil. The article concludes with a discussion on the extent to which fact-checking may be effective in countering the current misinformation landscape in a context where consensus reality has been super-imposed by individual reality.

Keywords

Fact-checking; Disinformation; Trust; Social media; Bias; Uncertainty

Fact-Checking Misinformation: Eight Notes on Consensus Reality

Introduction

Considerable efforts and resources have been allocated to the fact-checking industry as a potential solution to correcting prior knowledge and offsetting the upsurge in hyperpartisanship that nurtures misinformation (Marietta & Barker, 2019b). The expansion of this industry is associated with a political context marked by the spread of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012) where trust in government and institutions, including news organizations, have markedly decreased (Amazeen, 2020; Zuckerman, 2017). Fact-checking organizations blossomed in the wake of the United States 2016 presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, electoral events marked by raised skepticism towards mainstream media and the journalism practice, which was regularly derided with the contested and ideologically inflected notion of ‘fake news’ (Lazer et al., 2018).

The main tenet of fact-checking consists of verifying and correcting false claims based on authoritative sources, a seemingly uncontroversial task critical to well-functioning public media. The practice is regularly posited as the diametrical opposite of misinformation, as it provides evidence to rebut the inaccuracies advanced to mislead individuals. Yet, the rampant distribution of false content and the epistemic effects of its spreadability across social networks poses fundamental questions about fact-checking limitations in addressing problems that do not occur in isolation, but stem from broader social tensions, technological affordances, and partisan and sectarian fault lines (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This array of forces is brought to bear on contexts of information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and ephemerality (Bastos, 2021), where narratives can be exaggerated and non-factual information introduced.

In such contentious contexts, fact-checking appeared as a promising tool in helping ameliorate polarization and disputed realities (Marietta et al., 2015). Emerging organizations envisioned an expansion of journalistic practices devoted not only to selecting information, but actively classifying information that is deemed to be true and therefore trustworthy, and information that is false and therefore harmful to the public debate (Graves, 2016). According to the Duke Reporter's Lab, the number of fact-checking organizations have been growing remarkably since 2016, reaching 341 organizations in 102 different countries worldwide (Stencel & Luther, 2021). While fact-checking was originally devised as a tool to evaluate political claims and hold politicians to account, it gradually became the cornerstone in the fight against false and deceiving content on social media (see Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020). As the industry evolves to mitigate informational uncertainty and institutional distrust, the strengths and limitations of fact-checking warrant a review. In the remainder of this article, we review the literature and case studies detailing the perils of placing an oversized expectation that fact-checking alone can correct misinformation.

Fact-checking: premises and objectives

Fact-checking consists of publishing regular assessments about the validity of questionable claims made by a wide array of sources, including governments, politicians, institutions, news organizations, and social media users. It relies on models to identify whether a claim is true or false (Jiang & Wilson, 2018; Walter et al., 2020) and enforces scientific methods and rigorous journalistic practices to assess if the information is reliable (Graves, 2016).

According to Duke Reporters' Lab, fact-checking experienced a significant expansion of recent when the industry established a foothold in every continent (Stencel & Luther, 2021).

Conceived as a response to the ongoing crisis in journalism (Graves, 2016; Graves & Konieczna, 2015) and the growing distrust in democratic institutions, particularly the

government and mainstream media (Amazeen, 2020; Zuckerman, 2017), political fact-checking evolved to take centerstage in the fight against misinformation (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020) and the growing epistemic crisis manifested in reports about information disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Observers have noted that fact-checking may be classified as a superior form of journalism (Graves, 2017) that empowers civic participation (Amazeen, 2020). Fact-checkers follow various operational and methodological processes in choosing what should be verified, how to correct it, and which strategy to adopt in informing the public (Amazeen et al., 2015). These differences speak to two distinct models of fact-checking organizations: the newsroom, which sees the practice as complementary to journalism, and the NGO model, where fact-checking is not typically carried out by journalists and arguably offers an alternative to conventional journalism (Graves et al., 2016; Humprecht, 2019). While the newsroom standard is predominant in the US, the NGO model is reportedly more popular in Europe, where independent organizations often partner with news outlets (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Common to both models is the emphasis on educating the public, holding power to account, and improving journalism itself (Amazeen, 2020). Fact-checking mission has thus evolved in two directions: to provide high quality and accessible information to the public, and to effectively offset the spread of misinformation (Lowrey, 2015; Walter et al., 2020). It is the latter mission that we review in this study.

Fact-checking has been commonly conceived as a natural antidote to mis- and disinformation by providing evidence to rebut the inaccuracies advanced to mislead individuals (Jiang & Wilson, 2018). Meta-analyses (Walter et al., 2020) and extensive literature reviews (Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019) pointed that while fact-checking increases the accuracy of the public debate and exerts an overall beneficial influence on beliefs, its potential to correct attitudes based on false claims showed limited results. While recent

research has downplayed the incidence of backfire or boomerang effects (Haglin, 2017; Wood & Porter, 2019), or have come to consider it anomalous (Nyhan, 2020; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), the conflicting evidence leaves many open questions, particularly in non-Western contexts (Badrinathan, 2021). In most cases, counter-attitudinal fact-checking continuously falls short because the general public struggles to distinguish facts from opinion-based statements (Walter & Salovich, 2021). This is a recurring inflexion in the literature about dissuasive propaganda (Bastos & Farkas, 2019), affective politics (Young, 2021), and contemporary conservative political thought (Tripodi, 2018).

The expectations placed by policymakers on fact-checks have exerted considerable pressure on social media companies to allocate resources for content moderation and community policies addressing the circulation of harmful content in their networks (Wakefield, 2021). In the United States and Europe, reports indicate that policymakers expect fact-checking to perform a primary role in the fight against misinformation, potentially closing the gap between platforms and the public interest (Caplan et al., 2018; European Commission, 2018). To meet such high expectations, social platforms like Facebook and Twitter have developed partnerships with fact-checking organizations to promote media literacy initiatives and equip users with the necessary skills to handle misleading information (Facebook, 2018a, 2018b; Twitter, 2019). These efforts are supported by global initiatives coordinating the work of several fact-checking organizations with social media platforms (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020) and effectively turning fact-checkers into unwitting arbiters of online content (Paul, 2021; Wakefield, 2021). While fact-checking has made considerable strides offsetting the relentless flow of harmful content, and continues to play a vital role in verifying credible information, the incentive structure supporting misinformation is unlikely to be resolved by determining whether information is factually true or false individually and sequentially.

More troublingly, the opposition between factual versus non-factual events is misplaced because social facts are not ontologically objective. While facts are verifiable, they are dependent on human practices and the production of traces and silences (Trouillot, 1995). The production of history is necessarily embedded with bias, as known facts in history are subjected to myriad interpretations contingent on political decisions, chief of which is the practice of silence itself (Fasolt, 2004). A more nuanced account of facts is encapsulated in Marcel Mauss' notion of 'total social facts,' a collective ritual beyond factuality that put to test the validity of social fictions. Total social facts are rituals of lived experience that weave together strands of social and psychological life with implications that are simultaneously social, economic, legal, political, and religious (Mauss, 2002). But fact-checking has no aspiration to be a society-wide event; at best, it is a rigorous form of editorial practice that cannot uphold or transform society's affective and cognitive assumptions about the world.

In the remainder of this article, we argue that fact-checking cannot meet the misplaced expectation of policymakers, namely, that it alone can counter misinformation in the public debate. We outline eight fundamental problems with fact-checking revolving around epistemology, methodology, implementation, polarization, bias, efficacy, ambiguity, ephemerality, objectivity, and criticism. We discuss these problems in relation to recent developments, including the establishment of fact-checking agencies across the world and national elections, both in Western countries and in the Global South, that led to greater uncertainty despite intense fact-checking. The article concludes with a discussion on the extent to which fact-checking may be effective against false information in a context where consensus reality has been super-imposed by individual reality. In the following, we develop eight critical limitations of fact-checking in anchoring our consensus reality.

1. Epistemology: facts are political and subject to interpretation

Fact-checking is epistemologically prone to contention due to the implicit supposition that facts are ultimately observable, verifiable information. Upon subjecting facts to verification following principles of neutrality, accuracy, and transparency, facts would be presented to trusting audiences stripped from extant political dispute (Humprecht, 2019). An extreme rendering of this thesis presents facts as inherently unambiguous and not subject to interpretation, selection, confirmation bias, or ideological inflection, a stance that observers have deemed epistemologically naïve (Uscinski & Butler, 2013) and that speaks to the epistemic problems in fact-checking (Amazeen, 2015). This is particularly the case when the truthfulness of a statement is subjected to true/false distinctions that lack the necessary nuance to address controversial cases and are unsuitable to disentangling subjective interpretations (Uscinski, 2015). In such cases, fact-checks effectively reduce controversial debates to monological statements that neglect the dialogic nature of truth (Coleman, 2018).

Lim (2018) explored this tension by showing how the subjective and interpretive framework of fact-checking deviates from its own truth-seeking ideals. Evaluating the performance of fact-checkers, the author concluded that they rarely verify the same claims and tend to often disagree in their assessments, especially when verifying complex cases and in contexts where the language is ambiguous by design. Undoubtedly, verifying preemptive facts, scrutinizing official sources, and consulting experts to provide a broader context to facts are laudable and necessary devices to public deliberation. But the results presented by Lim (2018) indicate that combining different pieces of information into standalone statements does not account for the inherently political dimensions of facts, a shortcoming that is particularly severe when organizations resort to ‘truth-scales.’

Likewise, the acknowledgment of counter-discourses and oppositional interpretations, including those that merge fictional and fabricated content with truthful information, plays an

important role in the public debate (Andersen & S oe, 2019). This is particularly the case for content circulating on social media, where facts may be interpreted and perceived atomistically across different groups and communities, and where news, verifications, and supporting information appears removed from their original contexts of production (Ekstr om & Westlund, 2019). This epistemological crisis extends to literature dedicated to detecting false news, a framework where facts are ultimately opposed to misinformation. More nuanced frameworks, however, have contended that both can coexist and that influence operations expertly employs layers of factual and false information to fabricate convincing if misleading narratives (Starbird, 2019).

2. Implementation: fact-checks are labor-intensive and time-consuming

At the limit, it is not possible for fact-checking to scale up to the speed and breadth of information produced online, nor can fact-checking be deployed to a point where every piece of relevant content circulating online is checked. Burel et al. (2020) cautioned that even when fact-checks successfully correct false claims, their efficacy is reduced due to the short-term spread of fact-checking information compared with misinformation. Similarly, Hameleers (2020) presented evidence showing that fact-checkers are likely to struggle to offset existing schemata and established opinions if the correction is delayed. Journalists are keenly aware of this imbalance and have adapted an ‘engage earlier, correct more’ approach to reject false rumors (Starbird et al., 2018). Such efforts seek to address misinformation from a vector-oriented perspective, with fact-checking representing the antidote to malign infections. Alternative approaches to addressing the large-scale production of problematic content need to consider the social media supply chain and system of digital virality that are embedded in the disinformation ecosystem (Venturini, 2019).

Fact-checking is remarkably labor-intensive and time-consuming and consequently published with significant delay from the information it is verifying. Social media platforms have sought to offset this disadvantage by outsourcing large teams of fact-checkers, which nonetheless continue to be deemed inadequate by policymakers despite the continuous expansion of such operations (Facebook, 2020). These efforts are regrettably shadowed by the frantic scale of influence operations (Benkler et al., 2018), marked by the industrial production of disinformation that prevents attempts of correcting false information as a reasonable and measured response (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). As fact-checking requires an evidence-based implementation, it is not only expected, but also desirable that verification procedures attend rigorous and time-consuming standards (Brandtzaeg et al., 2015; Graves et al., 2016). For this reason alone, fact-checks are unlikely to offset the hazards of misinformation where considerable damage may occur before the fact-checks can even begin.

One proposal to keep up with the enormous and fast-paced volume of potentially harmful content consists of incorporating unsupervised computer approaches to the fact-checking process. Ciampaglia et al. (2015) leveraged network analysis to design a model that generates fact-checks automatically. By measuring the extent to which potential false statements find semantic correspondence with information stored in large-scale knowledge repositories, the authors argue that the model may eventually be capable of mitigating misinformation at scale. Fact-checking organizations, including Full Fact in the UK and Chequeado in Argentina, have been developing computational tools not only to meet the labor-intensive and the time-consuming nature of fact-checking, but also to address the relative lack of transparency typical of automated methods (Babakar & Moy, 2016). Notwithstanding the tangible benefits these tools may provide, particularly in monitoring viral content and identifying doctored images, researchers and fact-checkers remain unconvinced that unsupervised solutions can ward off online misinformation at scale (Graves,

2018). Regional and international collaborations remain the main line of defense across fact-checking organizations, even when falsehoods are broadcast rapidly, repetitively, and continuously over multiple channels (Poynter, 2020).

3. Bias: facts are in the eye of the partisan beholder

Marietta and Barker (2019b) found that fact-checking failed to ameliorate polarization because the partisan divide in trusting fact-checks is particularly pronounced in those with strong commitment to their values. There is also evidence that fact-checks may be used as a platform to enhance partisan-selected messages (Shin & Thorson, 2017). Hameleers and van der Meer (2020), on the other hand, offered some validation with their study on exposure to attitudinal-congruent or incongruent political news followed by a fact-check article debunking that information. While the study found that fact-checkers can be successful at lowering agreement with attitudinally congruent political misinformation, fact-checks were more likely to be selected when they confirmed prior attitudes. Fact-checks are conceivably susceptible to polarized affective evaluations due to its inherent vulnerability to partisan allegiance, with the purported objectivity of facts being intrinsically selective and political (Hameleers & Brosius, 2021).

In addition to facts being imperiled to intrinsic partisan bias, there are psychological constraints to the reliability of memory recall and reasoning postulated by the fuzzy-trace theory (Reyna & Brainerd, 1995). Indeed, the relationship between fact and source memory is a bedrock of the literature on misconstruction of memory manipulation and recall (Nebenzahl, 1987). Events accounted from memory may vary substantively between individuals and at times across large groups of people, a phenomenon of shared false memories where events are remembered in ways that differ in fundamental ways from the records of how it unfolded. There is also evidence that inconsistent patterns of recall are

heightened in contexts of partisan identification, with recollections corresponding poorly to previously expressed attitudes (MacDermid, 1989).

Literature on misinformation effects from the mid-1970s tested extensively the process of retroactively interfering with the memory of past events by presenting information that alters one's ability to retain previously encoded information (Loftus, 2005). Memory manipulation relies on activation of associated information, dissociation, misattribution, and suggestibility. It is a key target in misinformation campaigns exploiting implicit psychological bias and the priming of audiences. In line with the construction hypothesis, factual information may alter one's account of the events, as may false information. As such, new frames may be disregarded or actively rejected if they conflict with one's treasured beliefs, making it improbable for novel knowledge to persist genuinely (Baden & Lecheler, 2012). Whether by confusion or design, intrinsic psychological bias and the struggle for narrative hegemony over the interpretation of facts may create opposing groups with completely different memories of the same event. Similarly, experiments presented by Thorson (2016) have shown that even after a false statement is corrected and discredited, it continues to shape attitudes. These findings suggest that even when the gold standard of fact-checking on social media is achieved, misinformation can be resilient in inoculating targeted individuals, especially when it reinforces partisan allegiances (Jennings & Stroud, 2021).

4. Efficacy: fact-checking cannot moderate the public debate

Observers have noted that fact-checking appears to fit an old communication model into a different era, with its most salient appeal directed precisely to those who do not need it (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). In other quarters, Amazeen (2020) argued that fact-checks can be employed to moderate the public debate against the backdrop of declining trust in democratic institutions. This expectation is however highly dependent on forms of building

social trust. Pew Research reported that 70 percent of Republicans believe that fact-checking is biased, a statement that is deemed true by 29 percent of Democrats. Despite the partisan divide, voters from both parties are skeptical of journalists and professionals dedicated to building trust even in national contexts where fact-checking is a well-established component of the informational ecosystem. Unsurprisingly, empirical evidence from Margolin et al. (2018) shows that when the public confidence in democratic institutions declines, attempts to correct political information with fact-checks depend on the underlying social structure connecting individuals to those who correct them.

The assumption that misinformation is fundamentally tied to individual action has also been rejected, with recent studies describing misinformation in terms of information ecosystems where user activity intersects with platform and community practices (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Carlson, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). This literature is at odds with the individual and reader-centric framework of fact-checking that is reportedly ineffective at correcting misleading information beyond relatively narrow partisan fault lines (Shin & Thorson, 2017). User-centric perspectives, and the pursuit of greater certainty through improved media literacy and journalistic practices, are unlikely to appeal to large swathes of the electorate feeling unrepresented in democratic institutions. This institutional disbelief is entangled with structural economic malaise such as rising wealth inequality and marginalization conducive to motivated reasoning and emotional truths (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

5. Ambiguity: no parameters for ideal speech

One of the tenets supporting the detection and correction of false or misleading information draws from a framework in which facts are opposed to misinformation (Jiang & Wilson, 2018), a framework that risks overlooking instances where facts and misinformation coexist in narratives that combine verified events with false information (Starbird, 2019). It is

precisely this layered narrative of facts and fabrications that constitutes the gold standard of successful influence operations. The successful deployment of such campaigns depends on finding and offering enough factual information to maximize different interpretations, superinterpretations, and oftentimes manipulation of otherwise objective facts.

There is much ambiguity in narratives describing events to which one cannot eye-witness, including the vast array of national and international news to which one's primary if not sole source of information consists of reports circulating in the media (Luhmann, 2000). The absence of firsthand experience about one's social reality leaves much to be selected from the multiple, overlapping, and often conflicting accounts, which is to say, it entails a process of selecting information to reduce ambiguity and resolve conflicting narratives about unfolding events. This uncontroversial principle is however mostly absent from the opposition between facts and misinformation. Underpinning this framework lies the assumption of cooperation between individuals based upon mutual deliberation and argumentation, directed towards emancipatory communication, and foregrounding language as the foundational component of society (Habermas, 1984).

In other words, fact-checking advocates for communicative rationality as the force driving our discursively configured reality, an assumption susceptible to ignoring how communication can be conflicting, ambiguous or many-sided, and leading to unforeseen developments. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that fact-checking articles are recurrently framed as misleading, biased, or false across different veracity groups (Jiang & Wilson, 2018). Establishing a consensual narrative about events requires a tacit agreement about said events, an agreement that ceases to be valid when social groups start to experience a breakdown in the language used to describe their reality. This is particularly prominent in marginalized and disadvantaged social groups, whose skepticism towards the epistemic value of consensual narratives are rooted in the perception that they are inherently attached to

hegemonic projects (Budarick, 2020). The expectation of congruent narratives about facts is therefore incompatible with contexts where social cohesion is contested, nonexistent, unverifiable, or broadly assumed to be illegitimate.

6. Ephemerality: no commitment to consistency or accuracy

Fact-checking is operationally challenging because it focuses on popular content rather than the high volume of transitory information that constantly emerges and disappears from social media platforms. In doing so, it invariably ignores a wealth of viral, click-bait, and often deleted or modified content that constitutes the long tail of misinformation. This is often the case for contentious and false messages that spread faster (Vosoughi et al., 2018) and are more likely to disappear from the public debate (Bastos, 2021). The circulation of ephemeral content also triggers important externalities that saturate the public debate and distracts the citizenry from important matters.

Fact-checking requires extensive editorial work aimed at producing content that is designed for permanence in the public records. Influence operations, on the other hand, can daisy chain multiple misinformation campaigns that are phased out and disappear as soon as rectifying information or alternative frames starts to emerge (Bastos et al., 2021). This is particularly the case for influence operations that leverage the firehouse of falsehood model (Paul & Matthews, 2016), where a large number of messages are broadcast rapidly, repetitively, and continuously over multiple channels without commitment to consistency or accuracy (Bertolin, 2015). The high-volume posting of social media messages can be effective because individuals are more likely to be persuaded if a story, however confusing, appears to have been reported repetitively and by multiple sources. Fact-checks are particularly ineffective against this technique; indeed, fact-checking social media posts that

have disappeared is not technically possible (Twitter, 2018) and perhaps not desirable either (Bayer et al., 2016).

Even before fact-checks may become a point of contention (Farkas & Schou, 2018), news organizations and fact-checkers have to compete with ephemeral, user-generated content that leverages partisan traits and deviate from the standards of mainstream journalism. The decentralized topology of online social networks not only facilitate the distribution of unverified information, but may likewise hinder the distribution of fact-checks which depend on the activity of users for its circulation (Giglietto et al., 2019). By supporting information infrastructures that bypass editorial gatekeepers, social media platforms simultaneously provide exposure to opinions that have been traditionally suppressed and allow for large-scale, inexpensive, and horizontal distribution of misinformation.

7. Objectivity: normative reasoning is not value free

Principled fact-checking operates under the assumption of normative boundaries to objective facts guiding political decision-making. By rooting news coverage in fact-based reporting, practitioners offload intrinsic judgments to their sources as a way to reinforce objectivity and avoid criticism (Carlson, 2018). Even if the notion of objectivity has long been challenged in journalism practice (Zelizer, 2004), the separation between facts and values remains critical to many approaches that filter out falsehoods (De Maeyer, 2019). Factual objectivity is relatively diverse and dependent on the processes through which evidence is gathered from, and how the results are communicated to the public. Seasoned fact-checkers seek to offset these problems by avoiding one-sided versions of facts and building factual coherence from multiple pieces of evidence (Graves, 2017), but accounting for different sides of the story and applying impersonal logic or principled argument to facts do not render them universals (Jasanoff, 2012). Ultimately, grounding factual objectivity through normative reasoning is

not only impractical in the current information ecosystem, but may further exacerbate the informational disorder reported in journalism (Waisbord, 2018).

This problem was explored by Sarewitz (2004) who contended that scientific inquiries become inherently subjective in disputed controversies. In such cases, the support of scientific advice in establishing a single, universal, and normative statement about reality may in fact further exacerbate uncertainties. Sarewitz (2004) posited that this unintended consequence of pursuing objectivity stems from three factors: a) an ‘excess of objectivity,’ whereby a fact cannot be agreed upon by various scientific groups due to the number of legitimate ways of observing the problem; b) an inevitable dispute of values between disciplines, wherewith different points of view become articulated within value-based political positions; and c) a lack of measures to assemble certainties and the challenges in establishing a coherent narrative across competing scientific explanations. This leads to the conclusion that legitimate science is inherently value-based, to the point where “*all* uses of facts are selective” (Sarewitz, 2004, p. 390) and therefore subject to political—and not only scientific—deliberation to determine which facts should be considered in particular.

Similarly, Yarrow (2021) contends that the premise undergirding fact-checking is that factual, objective information is ultimately detachable from social values. This assumption leads to the precarious perception that certain types of knowledge are value-free and is particularly unsuitable to the challenges posed by today’s high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Without disputing that fact-checks are critical to a healthy public debate, Yarrow (2021) argues for a complementary approach directed towards identifying both politicians’ normative positions and expert’s subjective background, thereby providing a measure of clarity as to how different bodies of knowledge are constrained by their own epistemic assumptions. This is epitomized in the notion of ‘value checking’ to foster

epistemic transparency and to contribute to the public debate without resorting to normative reasoning (Yarrow, 2021).

8. Criticism: nothing is credible in the battle of narratives

One important component of the fact-checking agenda is building critical media literacy skills that support resilient media engagement and the ability to identify unverified information (Boyd, 2017). Media literacy entails a set of skills and knowledge to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate effectively in the constant flow of media messages (Potter, 2013). Fact-checkers have integrated their day-to-day practices with media literacy programs designed to boost critical skills for individuals dealing with false and misleading information. Factcheck.org in the US organized a media literacy game that taught players how to detect and disregard disinformation and misinformation in today's chaotic environment. In Africa and Brazil, organizations such as Full Fact, Agência Lupa, and Africa Check run workshops in schools and community centers. These initiatives are informed by reports that media literacy abilities are unevenly distributed and wholly inadequate to spot misinformation (Jones-Jang, Mortensen, & Liu, 2019). A central component of the media literacy agenda, particularly to critical media literacy, is helping individuals to develop the capability to critically analyze messages (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

Kincheloe (2000) argued that the political dimension of criticality grounded in critical social theory is “the ability of individuals to disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations” (Kincheloe, 2000, p. 24). Critical social theory's objection to positivism, and therefore verified evidence (positive facts), offers support to a radicalization of critique leveraged by climate skeptics to raise doubts about the facticity of anthropogenic climate change (Latour, 2004). Critical thinking was also absorbed by antivaxxer groups, another cautionary example where the consensual view in the scientific

community is rendered suspect due to its ideological and hegemonic positioning. Observers have raised concerns about the potential of media literacy and fact-checking practices to focus on the interpretive responsibilities of individuals as a solution against misinformation (Boyd, 2017). Similarly, Vraga et al. (2021) argued that the ability to critically engage with content is subject to social norms and peer pressure that take center stage when interacting with harmful information. As such, the critical thinking toolset underlying the media literacy program is not free from being used by far-right groups to support conservative bias (Tripodi, 2018) or galvanize hyperpartisan groups committed to disinformation (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

This extreme rendering of critical thinking is of course the exact opposite of the stated mission of media literacy and fact-checking, but such extreme applications abound in QAnon communities. Marwick and Partin (2020) suggested that the appeal of media literacy to individual critical thinking may foster general doubt on democratic institutions, enabling the construction of online communities guided by their own alternative facts. The gamified ‘do your own research’ mantra adopted by the QAnon base competes against the consensual reality experienced by the general public, policymakers, and experts, turning QAnon members into devoted, if self-centered, truth seekers engaging in ‘I-pistemology’ (Van Zoonen, 2012). Due to the unbounded pluralism extant in technologically advanced societies, finding convergence among dissenting groups may be formally unattainable whenever the very principle of equivalence is the object of conflict. In such cases, radical criticism may emerge to transform the contact between different views in a competition between two different worlds. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) argue that a legitimate if difficult possibility is to find a higher-level principle capable of providing a compromise among two or more different realities.

Fact-checking and dissensus reality

Case study #1: Pizzagate and alternative facts

The body of work reviewed above details the shortcomings of resorting to fact-checks against misinformation and foregrounds the challenges of fostering a consensus reality in contexts driven by mistrust and division. Fact-checkers build institutional authority through an explicit commitment to transparency, adopting clear-cut measures to justify their practices and claims to the public (Graves, 2017). This commitment, however, is better suited for a coherent body of facts that are increasingly rare in polarized politics, where facts themselves become tools for partisan entrenchment. It is therefore unsurprising that the partisan contention around fact claims may fuel entrenched polarization, conspiracy-theorizing, and fantastical critical reasoning. This is encapsulated in the Pizzagate story, a conspiracy theory that touted the narrative that high-ranking Democratic Party officials managed a human trafficking and child sex ring in the basement of restaurants in Washington, DC. The story was expertly distributed by the alt-right and conservative media and culminated with one individual firing a rifle inside of a Pizza restaurant (Garrahan, 2016).

Pizzagate was extensively fact-checked, but instead of moderating a narrative remarkably absent of verifiable facts, it contributed to advancing the notion of ‘fake news’ to account for the extraordinary and bizarre events surrounding the Pizzagate story. Fact-checks, however, came short of correcting the narrative; the very term ‘fake news’ was subjected to partisan contention and fact-checks themselves became ideologically inflected, a turn of events epitomized in President Donald J. Trump’s use of the term ‘fake news’ to address mainstream media coverage that was negative to his administration. Fake news quickly became a contested concept (Farkas & Schou, 2018), and the process of fact-checking Pizzagate did not prevent the development of this alternative narrative or the birth of the ensuing notion of ‘alternative facts.’ Despite the efforts to correct such alternative facts and

replace them with ‘real facts,’ the narrative around Pizzagate unfolded into the influential QAnon conspiracy theory, which is not only a more extreme version of Pizzagate, but was indeed born from the ground zero of alternative facts known as Pizzagate. Notwithstanding the intense fact-checking applied to these narratives, they flourished in corners of the internet where fact-checking is ineffective or ignored. Observers noted that the intense fact-checking may have actually served as ammunition for the construction of alternative facts, as conspiracy-theorizing thrives on rejecting knowledge sanctioned by mainstream institutions (Marietta & Barker, 2019a). In such cases, fact-checking is countered by hyperpartisanship, as conspiracy believers are eager to advocate for deliberately false and implausible claims when feeling confronted by authorities or experts (Douglas et al., 2019).

Case study #2: Fact-Checking Turkey & Fact Check UK

At the limit, a wholly independent fact-checking agency is a moving target comparable to the pursuit of objectivity in journalism (Brewin, 2013). The fact-checking industry in Turkey is particularly telling: the independent website devoted to fact-checking online material, Teyit.org, competes with Fact-Checking Turkey, a project of the Bosphorus Center for Global Affairs that also claims to be an independent and non-governmental organization verifying news, but is reportedly run by pro-government news outlets (Lowen, 2016). Instead of independently authenticating sources or photographs, Fact-Checking Turkey supports the government line and seeks to discredit perceived criticism of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Non-partisan, independent fact-checking is also a challenge in the United States, where the CO2 Coalition, a partisan fact-checking group dedicated to advocating that the rise in carbon dioxide is not alarming, disputed Facebook’s labelling of a Washington Examiner editorial as partisan and managed to successfully remove the label (Rotter, 2019).

Notwithstanding their political biases, these organizations were arguably created to strengthen practices that ensure correct and informative coverage similarly to independent fact-checkers. A less nuanced rendering of this problem took place during the 2019 United Kingdom General Election when the British Conservative Party rebranded a party Twitter account as @factcheckUK without having ever supported or operated any substantive fact-checking organization. While Twitter criticized the Conservative Party's decision, it did not block nor banned the account. Indeed, the account remained with its blue 'verified' tick signaling that the account is who it says it is (Perrigo, 2019). A more extreme if predictable rendering of this problem is the emergence of meta-fact-checking websites such as RealClearPolitics. Such fact-checking review websites aspire to offer quaternary-level critiquing of such tertiary-level efforts offered by standard fact-checking websites, or put it simply, to check the fact-checkers.

Case study #3: The stabbing of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

Another contentious event that strained the limit of consensus reality was the stabbing of Brazil's presidential front-runner, Jair Bolsonaro, in the run up to the Presidential Elections in 2018. Adélio Bispo, a self-identified far-left supporter attacked the then-presidential candidate during a campaign rally. Press reports covering the case triggered conflicting narratives on social media platforms where conspiracy narratives questioned the motives of the attacker, the amount of blood lost by the candidate, the position of the stabbing, and several minutiae rendering versions of the story where the attack was confirmed, staged, or entirely fabricated. The contentious context of the election and the polarized public debate favored narratives that not only discussed the political agenda behind the stabbing, but that indeed questioned whether the event occurred in reality.

The multitude of fragmented accounts and conspiracy theories denying the very occurrence of the event gave way to two separate narratives: the first posited that the stabbing was an assassination attempt organized by mainstream leftist parties. The second suggested that the event was staged by Mr. Bolsonaro's campaign as a publicity stunt that paved the way to his election. While the right-wing narrative accepted that the stabbing had in fact occurred, the left-wing narrative denied that any genuine attack had taken place. The self-validated opposing narratives shared an understanding that some form of attack against Mr. Bolsonaro had indeed occurred, but their rendering of the events differed so fundamentally that it was not possible to assert any facticity to it. The absence of a consensus reality remained notwithstanding the abundance of press reports and independent fact-checkers confirming the stabbing and that the attacker acted alone motivated by religious fervor. The factuality assigned to the event by fact-checkers and the press made little difference on social media interactions, largely organized around the two relational and polarized narratives that simultaneously validated and denied each other (Vinhas, 2019).

Case study #4: Securitization and counter-securitization in Malaysia

The 2018 general election in Malaysia foregrounded how trust and facts are defined collectively along partisan fault lines. In the run-up to the election, the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak from the Barisan Nasional Party introduced the 'Anti-Fake News Act (AFNA)' intent on combating fake news as a threat to national security. The AFNA bill was vague, and the definition of fake news lacked any measure of intent or evidence of harm. By framing fake news as a national threat, the bill intimidated journalists and citizens critical to the government, prescribing penalties for non-compliance and imprisonment. Lim (2020) described the enforcement of state-promoted censorship as 'securitization,' which triggered a 'counter-securitization' coalition between the opposition party and members of the civil

society. In the dissuasive context of the election, the government sought to control the public debate with the AFNA bill, while also operating state-sponsored disinformation, including its own fact-checking agency, with the opposition resorting to social media to counter state-sanctioned narratives and to underscore institutional corruption that led to the enforcement of censorship.

In the end, the opposition defeated the government in the election by creating its own alternative communicative ecosystem to inform the citizenry and identify instances of disinformation. Lim (2020) argued that it was the social media ecosystem that allowed Malaysians to ultimately define the prevailing narrative in a context where facts were not scrutinized from neutral and objective points of view, but politically agreed upon and communicated through processes in which reality often became an object of dispute. This contentious dynamic is epitomized in the strategies of ‘securitization’ and ‘counter-securitization’ that echo antagonistic disputes around hegemony in Laclau and Mouffe (2001), where the constitution of a group emerges from the negation of the other. The election outcome was notable because the government-controlled disinformation culminated in the first alternation of power since Malaysia independence in 1957. The Malaysian election also shows that a top-down discrimination between facts and ‘fake news’ may be strategically entangled in hegemonic projects (Farkas & Schou, 2018), whether established by laws, information censorship, or government-sponsored fact-checking agencies.

Discussion

The case studies discussed above unpack many of the problems discussed in this study that result from that expectation that fact-checks can ward off misinformation. Without disputing the important role of fact-checks to a well-functioning public sphere, the case studies showcase the limits of consensus reasoning during contentious political and electoral events

in the Global South and in Western industrialized countries. Firstly, Pizzagate shows how difficult it is, if at all possible, for fact-checkers to correct narratives that have become central to the identify of social groups defined through political antagonism. The case studies also show the limits of fact-checking misinformation when such narratives are broadcast rapidly but also ephemerally, as the posts are often deleted or edited shortly after being published (Bastos et al., 2021). Their relatively short lifespan on social media is however sufficient to forging dissensus realities, subsequently moved to alternative social networks where no fact-checking or editorial gatekeeping can be performed, and from where the seed message may continue to reappear in the public debate. For a typical unit of misinformation such as this one, the normative framework of fact-checking is not only ineffective at countering fantastical forms of critical reasoning and the long tail of ephemeral misinformation, but it may further exacerbate the disconnect between fringe groups and the consensual discourse in the public body (Bruns, 2019).

Secondly, the presence of government-sponsored and partisan fact-checkers operating as influential actors in the public debate reinforces contention across ideological fault lines and jeopardizes cross-partisan efforts to lessen political antagonism. Even genuine attempts of reasoning over facts may quickly depart from disinterested deliberation and fall prey to the antagonism between social narratives that support hegemonic discourse and those that attempt to legitimize subversive and oppositional speech. Whether to denounce totalitarian governments, to advocate for activist movements, or to influence elections, observers have noted that partisanship and tangible measures of excellence in fact-checking, including neutrality and truthfulness, can co-exist and may fluctuate along partisan and ideological fault lines (Feng et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the case study on the stabbing of Brazil's presidential front-runner, Jair Bolsonaro, shows how difficult it is for fact-checkers and news outlets to keep up with the

high volume and fast pace of misinformation and conspiracy theorizing during contentious political events. It also shows that dissensus reality and conspiracy-theorizing are not prerogatives of the far-right (Benkler et al., 2018), even if conservatives are reportedly more hostile towards fact-checkers in many linguistic and national contexts (Lyons et al., 2020). This is compounded by political antagonism set against the backdrop of a high-choice media environment and predicated on the relative absence of ideologically free information, so that both sides of the political divide perceive the adversarial side as potential source of misinformation (Hameleers & Brosius, 2021). This combination of high-choice media environment and the relative absence of consensual discourse has undoubtedly undermined the capacity of fact-checkers to effectively moderate the public debate in a timely manner.

Notwithstanding the many shortcomings in leveraging fact-checks to ward off misinformation, particularly those brought to the fore in the case studies reviewed in this study, it is imperative to highlight that fact-checking remains an indispensable tool for informing the citizenry, reducing false beliefs in the public, and maintaining a healthy public debate (Walter et al., 2020). There is little doubt that fact-checking can rebut falsehoods, even if researchers remain cautious about the extent to which fact-checking alone can be effective at offsetting misinformation (Porter & Wood, 2021). More importantly, this is a sentiment shared by many fact-checkers themselves. Indeed, the oversized expectations set by policymakers on fact-checkers (Caplan et al., 2018; European Commission, 2018) is at odds with how fact-checkers perceive the normative scope of their own work (Singer, 2020). Problematic as these solutions may be, the current policy implementation of platforms providing funding to third-party fact-checkers is nonetheless preferable to calls for handing over verification to the ‘wisdom of the crowds,’ an alternative approach that can add further layers of superimposed idiosyncrasies to a myriad of already disputed facts in the public debate (Allen et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In this article we argued that fact-checking falls short of the expectations set by policymakers and the public and cannot meet the gargantuan task of purging misinformation. We considered the backdrop of public pressure driving social platforms to offload accountability onto fact-checkers and posited that these initiatives are ill positioned to attenuate political polarization. This assessment is couched in the literature showing that false information cannot be offset with more information, and that facts are not always events broadly agreed upon. We outlined eight fundamental problems in leveraging fact-checking against misinformation, namely: epistemology, methodology, implementation, polarization, bias, efficacy, ambiguity, ephemerality, objectivity, and criticism.

The case studies discussed in this study foreground the shortcomings of fact-checking misinformation in contexts where contentious politics took precedence over consensual reasoning. They also caution against normative parameters of valid speech, particularly in contexts of institutional crisis of trust where hegemonic narratives are fraught and disputed by actors disengaged from consensus reasoning. The allegiances that underpin the misinformation ecosystem may be detached from ideological fault lines, feeding instead off epistemological cleavages where the establishment of facts is contingent on political and value-based perspectives. With social media communication allowing social groups to insulate themselves from dissonant information, an information ecosystem at odds with Karl Popper's thoughtful definition of 'Open Society,' it may not be possible for individuals to rely on fact-checks based on the trust and authority of the original source if the latter sits in opposition to their own modes of justification (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

Although social media communication offers unfettered grounds for the exchange of ideas in the public arena, it also provides opportunities for contentious interaction that

exacerbate political differences and social asymmetries. The pragmatic-normative role ascribed to fact-checks, along with the expectation of consensus building under the aegis of rational agreement, are ill-suited to account for disputes between groups that reject consensus reality (Budarick, 2020). In other words, as fact-checkers become increasingly more involved in the fight against online misinformation, and depart from the original agenda of holding politicians to account or serving as a helpful resource for individuals, they find themselves facing the Sisyphean task of continuously purging misinformation, only to watch it reappear faster and stronger. Given the shortcomings with this project detailed herewith, we would hope that policymakers could recalibrate their expectations about fact-checking and that social media platforms would address the problem head-on instead of outsourcing it to third-party fact-checkers.

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