

FACT CHECKERS IN DEMOCRACY: PERCEPTION OF INDEPENDENT FACT CHECKERS AND NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study compares U.S. adults' perception about the performance of news organizations and independent fact checkers. Drawing upon a survey of 1,652 respondents, this study finds that perceptions of objectivity of news organizations is significantly higher than those of fact checkers. Fact checkers, however, are thought to be more objective and give more contextual information about current topics than news organizations. In terms of media trust and transparency of the information collection process, no significant difference is found between news organizations and fact checkers. The analysis also finds that perceptions about objectivity, transparency, contextualization, and trust have a positive association with fact checking use. The results suggest that fact checkers play a substantial role in relation to journalism, possibly showing a new form of journalism.

KEYWORDS

Fact Checkers, News Organizations, Objectivity, Transparency, Media Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the practice of checking facts has long been an essential part of journalism, the establishment of dedicated independent fact-checking organizations is only a recent phenomenon. To some extent, fact checking has been fueled by the abundance of misleading information circulating on social media, and by populist politicians promoting “alternative facts” and denouncing anything they do not like as “fake news.” Fact checking’s main goal is to provide accurate information by objectively evaluating the veracity of any claim and calling out misinformation, lies, and deception (Graves, 2018). This goal is well reflected in the mission statements of leading fact checkers, which note that their purpose is to “reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics” (factcheck.org, 2022), and to help citizens “find truth in politics” (politifact.com, 2022).

The increase of independent fact checkers also stems from the disappointment in the inability of conventional journalism to challenge untruthful claims (Graves, 2016), which could account, in part, for the steady decline of public trust in the institution of news (Jones, 2018). As fact checking plays an increasing role in truth in information, it is imperative to evaluate how news consumers perceive and evaluate the roles and performance of independent fact checkers, who strive to set the record straight for as many news consumers, opinion leaders, politicians, and even mainstream news outlets as possible.

This paper examines news consumers’ perceptions of the role of independent fact checkers in relation to major news organizations. Specifically, this study compares audience perceptions of news organizations and fact-checking sites on major tenets of solid journalism (objectivity, contextualization, and transparency), as well as trust in fact checkers and news organizations. The results are from a survey of 1,240 U.S. adults conducted in 2020.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Fact Checkers as a New Form of Journalism

The emergence of contemporary fact checkers can be attributed to the perceptions of biased media reports (Graves, 2016). Fact checking may be seen as an outcome of the declining trust in journalism organizations. With diminishing trust, fact-checking organizations are becoming a “new journalistic institution” seeking to “revitalize the ‘truth seeking’ tradition in journalism” (Graves, 2016, p. 6).

In the last decade, a new class of dedicated fact-checking organizations has emerged using trained staff to objectively assess the truth of controversial, polarizing, and contentious issues and public claims. These fact-checking organizations bridge the media and political spheres. The goal that most fact-checkers share is the promotion of truth in public discourse. Although some fact-checking outlets are subunits of established news organizations, about two-thirds of all fact checkers across the world are independent or run by civil society organizations, such as PolitiFact and MediaWise.

A primary mission of independent fact checkers is to examine and evaluate the accuracy of information and then publicize corrections (Graves, 2016). Fact-checking organizations also take on the role of watchdogs of the government, analyzing and evaluating whether declarations delivered by politicians and reported by journalists are truthful. Fact checking adds context and truth to journalism by fearlessly and objectively setting the record straight.

Fact checkers differ from news media in several ways. Fact checks integrate original sources and, “stand out for the richness and diversity in the use of verification mechanisms” (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019, p. 4). Fact checkers aim to provide the most accurate account of an issue by means of thorough verification. Fact checking has developed as a form of accountability journalism. In its current form, fact checkers mainly scrutinize data gathered or produced by others. For instance, they seek credible sources and scrutinize claims, utterances, and data. Fact checkers do not generate data or perform many of the news-gathering activities that are a central part of news journalists’ work, such as on-the-spot reporting. Rather than initiating stories, fact checkers react to and focus on verifying reports that have already been published. Fact checkers are experts at uncovering the truth. They know how to break out statistics and explain complex issues, and they know how to use software for geo-location, detecting manipulated videos, and for conducting other types of research.

2.2 Tenets of Journalism and Perceptions about Fact Checkers

The practice of American journalism has been challenged by the fact-checking movement. In 2009, PolitiFact received a Pulitzer Prize, American journalism’s highest honor, for its coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign. Within the profession the award was taken as validation of a claim often made by PolitiFact itself: fact checking constitutes “a new form of journalism,” reinventing the watchdog tradition for a digital age (Amazeen, 2015). To the degree that fact checking is perceived as an alternative form of journalism, its diffusion can be construed as improving the profession of journalism.

Most communication scholars see ideal journalism in terms of normative democratic viewpoints, and assert argue that news media should contribute to a vibrant and informed democratic society and serve as watchdogs for the public’s interests. Investigation and analysis of important public matters are also crucial part of journalists’ work. Other principal journalism traits include acting with autonomy, accuracy, and objectivity and providing impartial and reliable facts to the public. These functions are held as universal standards of the journalism profession (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2013).

The standards that normatively comprise good journalism may differ among scholars and media practitioners. The three core features of good journalism that are consistent across diverse journalism studies are objectivity, contextualization, and transparency (Iyengar, 1991; Revers, 2014).

Objectivity is a long-standing journalistic principle, as well as a key element in the journalistic code of ethics (Mindich, 1998). The central principle of objectivity in American journalism is the notion that facts can and should be separated from values or opinions, with journalists reporting only the facts. In the 1920s, the objectivity norm was formally articulated as part of a journalistic code of ethics, and it cemented the contemporary notion of the press as a neutral observer of happenings (Schudson, 2001). Professional journalism has continued to embrace objectivity since then.

RQ1: Is there a difference in the way objectivity, transparency, and contextualization of news organizations is perceived compared with independent fact checkers?

2.3 Media Trust

Media trust is “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). Trust in media organizations plays a role in the way news reports are perceived. Individuals who are skeptical of mainstream media are less likely to regard news stories reported in mainstream media as the most salient problem affecting society, and those with low media trust are less tolerant of factual errors made by the mainstream press. Trustworthiness is key for both journalists and fact checkers to maintain a central role in information dissemination and in American democracy, thus the next research question asks:

RQ4: Are news organizations or fact checkers deemed more trustworthy?

2.4 Reliance on Fact Checkers and Perceptions

In general, people who regularly consume media of any type are more likely to have positive perceptions of particular medium they use most often. News consumers value several features of journalism, including being watchdogs for the public, acting with objectivity, and providing context and explanation of the news. Individual belief that a particular medium or journalist is ‘good’ depends on whether the audience member’s expectations are met.

H1: Positive public perceptions about objectivity, transparency, and contextualization predicts frequent use of fact checking.

H2: A high level of trust in fact checkers is positively associated with frequent fact checker use.

3. METHOD

A survey was conducted in March 2020, using MTurk (www.mturk.com), an online marketplace for work, an Amazon crowdsourcing platform. Each participant was given 50 cents as an incentive. It took about seven minutes to complete the survey. This study allowed only those who indicated that they use the mainstream media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, ABC, NBC or CBS network news, CNN, and Fox News, and independent fact checkers such as PolitiFact and Snopes.com. In total, 1,652 responses were used for the final analysis.

3.1 Measures

Political efficacy is measured with three items on a 5-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree): (1) People like me can influence government; (2) I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics; and (3) I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues the U.S. is facing ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.56$). Political interest is assessed by the question, “Would you say that you are: (1) not at all interested, (2) barely interested, (3) somewhat interested, (4), interested, and (5) very much interested?” ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.75$).

Respondents’ opinions of the tenets of good journalism, objectivity, transparency, diversity, contextualization, and media trust are assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Respondents were asked how much thought news media and fact-checking organizations live up to the three standards of good journalism. Multiple items for each statement were added into a single index.

Objectivity: “clearly distinguish between facts and opinions”; “focus on arguments over emotions”; “report based on evidence.” (Objectivity index of news media Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$, $M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.33$; objectivity index of fact checking organizations Spearman Brown coefficient = .68, $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.67$)

Transparency: “present news sources transparently”; “use verified sources”; “give people a chance to express their views.” (Transparency index of news media $\alpha = .89$, $M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.64$; transparency index of fact checking sites Spearman Brown coefficient = .62, $M = 4.07$, $SD = 2.55$)

Contextualization: “provides analyses and interpretation of complex problems”; “gives enough background information”; “places occurrences within a wider context”; “presents substantial background information about current topics.” (Contextualization index of news media $\alpha = .81$, $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.48$; contextualization index of fact checking organizations Spearman Brown coefficient = .62, $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.77$)

Trust was operationalized by the question, “How much do you trust news media (or fact checking organizations)?” (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) (news media $M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.38$; fact checking organizations $M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.40$).

Fact checker use was measured with a question about how often respondents access fact checking sites run by independent non-journalist organizations, such as Snopes.com, Politifact.com (a 7-point scale ranging from “never” to “all the time”). ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 2.06$).

Traditional news media use was obtained by asking respondents how often they use the following news media to get information about current events, public affairs, and politics (a 7-point scale ranging from “never” to “every day”): (1) local television news; (2) national network news such as ABC, NBC; (3) cable news such as CNN, Fox News; (4) national newspapers in print or online; and (5) local newspapers in print or online. An index was constructed by averaging the scores ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.87$).

3.2 Statistical Analysis

To test the gap between news consumers’ views of the performance of fact checkers and news organizations, independent sample t-tests were also performed, as well as two sets of ordinary least squares (OLS) hierarchical regressions, one for each dependent variable to test whether public perceptions about the main features of good journalism were associated with media use.

4. RESULTS

Regarding the first research question about objectivity, the t-test is significant, $t(1,238) = 2.43$, $p = .02$. Respondents perceive the objectivity of news organizations ($M = 3.30$) significantly lower than that of fact checking organizations ($M = 3.66$). The results of the second research question about transparency, are not significant, $t(1,238) = 1.65$, $p = .263$. Respondents do not believe news organizations ($M = 3.98$) are more transparent than fact checking organizations ($M = 4.07$). For the third research question about contextualization, the t-test is significant, $t(1,238) = 2.50$, $p < .01$. Respondents think fact-checking organizations provide significantly more context ($M = 3.47$) than mainstream media ($M = 3.15$). The fourth research question pertaining to trust shows there is no statistical difference $t(1,238) = .28$, $p = .842$ between the trustworthiness of mainstream media ($M = 3.19$) compared to fact-checking organizations ($M = 3.22$).

Regarding the four hypotheses linking the features of good journalism to use of fact checking, there a positive and statistically significant relationship with respect to perceptions about *objectivity* and fact checker use ($\beta = .106$, $p < .05$), and between perception about *transparency* and fact checker use ($\beta = .173$, $p < .01$), and between perception about *contextualization* and fact checker use ($\beta = .244$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. The analysis also found a significant association between perception about trust and fact checker use ($\beta = .208$, $p < .001$), supporting H2 (Table 1). This finding underscores that trustworthiness is key to the continuation of fact checking. [Table 1 and 2].

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting fact checker use and traditional news use

	Fact Checker Use	Traditional News Use
Block 1: Demographics		
Age	.054	.127*
Gender (male = 0)	-.015	-.009
Education	.113*	.166**
Income	.082	.086
Race (white = 0)	-.064	-.058
Inc. R ² (%)	5.2***	6.9***
Block 2: Political Antecedents		
Political Affiliation (Democrat = 0)	.104*	.067
Political Efficacy	.284***	.351***
Political Trust	.210***	.277***
Inc. R ² (%)	8.8***	9.5***
Block 3: Journalism Traits		
Objectivity	.106*	.149**
Transparency	.173**	.126*
Contextualization	.244***	.081
Trust	.208***	.133*
Inc. R ² (%)	15.8***	13.9***
Total R ² (%)	29.8***	30.3***

Note: N = 1,240. Cell entries are final entry OLS standardized beta (β) coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Difference between news consumers' views on fact checkers and news organizations

	Views on Fact Checkers		Views on News Organizations		Mean Difference	<i>t</i> -test <i>p</i> values
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Objectivity	3.30	1.67	3.56	1.33	-.26	< .001
Transparency	4.07	2.55	3.98	2.64	.09	.263
Contextualization	3.47	1.77	3.15	1.48	.32	< .001
Trust	3.22	1.40	3.19	1.38	.03	.842

Note: Independent sample *t*-test with N = 1,240.

5. DISCUSSION

Drawing upon the tenets of good journalism, this study compared U.S. news consumers' perception of independent fact checkers with news organizations on objectivity, transparency, contextualization, and trust. The study found some notable theoretical outcomes. First, the respondents believe that professional news media are more *objective* than independent fact checkers. This result can be explicated by looking into the background in which the fact-checking movement originally began and spread. In their mission statements, fact checkers assert that their goal is to verify facts and determine whether the facts are supported by evidence (Graves, 2018) by sifting facts from opinion and rating pieces of information as fake, misleading, twisted, or recontextualized. Independent fact checkers not only tackle viral rumors, conspiracies, trolls, lies, or hoaxes by counteracting them, but they also balance public narratives with 'empiricism.' Thus, the result about objectivity suggests that fact checkers are not necessarily bound by the long-standing norms of journalistic objectivity, usually considered as balance, but are dedicated to evaluating the accuracy of any claims and determining its truth.

The second notable finding is that respondents believe that fact checkers are doing a better job than news organizations in terms of *contextualization* of information, and they appreciate that fact checkers add context and scrutinize various perspectives. Respondents believe that fact checkers deliver not just a 'fact' but the context and background surrounding the 'fact' as well as evidence that either supports or refutes the 'fact.' The result indicates that respondents might rely on fact checkers to reduce the likelihood that misinformation or

disinformation influences civic discourse, and to reduce the likelihood that politicians' inaccurate claims will make the headlines (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

The above finding reflects news audiences' expectation about a 'better' form of journalism. News media often fail to contextualize news events, and report on claims of misinformation without explicitly rebutting them or providing a more factual context (Pingree et al., 2014). This practice makes news consumers vulnerable to false claims that are unaccompanied by clear corrective information, and leaving many news readers wishing that journalists would actively clarify factual questions (Stroud et al., 2016). By not providing interpretations and contextualization mainstream media compel news consumers to turn to fact checkers, which increases favorable perceptions and cements fact checkers as reputable entities.

Although respondents deem fact checkers as more objective and as providing more context than journalists, they do not see a significant difference between news organizations and fact checkers regarding *transparency* - both fact checkers and news organizations are rated moderately high in transparency. Respondents thus believe that both traditional journalists and fact checkers satisfy the criterion of letting them decide for themselves what information or who they should trust or distrust (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Transparency possibly gives respondents a sense of participation in the fact checking and journalism process.

This study's respondents also deem fact-checking entities and news organizations as equally trustworthy. The mean of trust in both organizations is moderate at best ($M = 3.19$ out of 5 for news organizations, and $M = 3.22$ for fact checkers). This result may reflect the public's declining trust in journalism in general because journalists are failing to adequately practice core journalism values (Gil de Zúñiga & Hinsley, 2012).

Although fact checkers are perceived as more objective and as providing more contextualization than journalists, positive perceptions of objectivity, contextualization, and trust are associated with frequent use of fact checking (H1 and H2). These findings deserve attention because they expand the understanding about the role of fact checkers in relation to journalism, and show that use of fact checking is influenced by public perceptions of whether fact checkers adhere to the tenets of good journalism.

The public's appreciation of journalistic performance facilitates increased media consumption, which has a host of positive implications for a healthy democracy. As political persuasion and propaganda efforts continue to grow around the world, the increase of fact checkers equipped with journalistic traits will help citizens have a more accurate and educated understanding of important social and political matters and make informed decisions for a healthy democracy. Fact checkers can improve the social power of journalism, by assessing the authenticity of public claims and placing them in the right context particularly during troubled times. Journalists and fact checkers need not be adversaries in competition for followers, but could work together to build audience trust by presenting the news objectively, by explaining the news gathering process, and by providing context to increase news consumers' understanding of the world.

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