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Abstract

The 2016 presidential race was unprecedented in many ways and brought to the center of public discussion the role the news media must play in correcting information provided by political figures. Unfortunately, the campaign season made Americans too familiar with slanted campaign statements, false claims made by both presidential candidates, and the rise of fake news (Patterson, 2016). The slew of misleading information has highlighted the importance of a specific type of journalism meant to weed out the truth—namely, fact-checking. Looking back at the 2016 presidential campaign, some media critics have questioned how well the media performed, and some even blamed the media for the election outcome (Benton, 2016). In light of these criticisms, the goal of our study is to take a systematic look at the media's attempt to fact-check the presidential candidates during the final stretch of the 2016 race for the Oval Office. We examine how the news media performed their watchdog role by looking at several established criteria for fact-checking in the aftermath of the three presidential debates.

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Fact-Checking and the 2016 Presidential Election: News Media's Attempts to Correct Misleading Information from the Debates

Daniela V. Dimitrova and Kimberly Nelson

The 2016 presidential race was unprecedented in many ways and brought to the center of public discussion the role the news media must play in correcting information provided by political figures. Unfortunately, the campaign season made Americans too familiar with slanted campaign statements, false claims made by both presidential candidates, and the rise of fake news (Patterson, 2016). The slew of misleading information has highlighted the importance of a specific type of journalism meant to weed out the truth—namely, fact-checking. Looking back at the 2016 presidential campaign, some media critics have questioned how well the media performed, and some even blamed the media for the election outcome (Benton, 2016). In light of these criticisms, the goal of our study is to take a systematic look at the media's attempt to fact-check the presidential candidates during the final stretch of the 2016 race for the Oval Office. We examine how the news media performed their watchdog

role by looking at several established criteria for fact-checking in the aftermath of the three presidential debates.

Rationale and Theoretical Foundations

The 2016 presidential campaign was long, heated, and often unmatched in negativity (Patterson, 2016). Both major political party candidates—Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton—were found to be dodging the truth, slightly changing the truth, or even telling flat out lies (Bendery, 2016; “Comparing Hillary,” 2016). The media’s response to both candidates’ misleading statements was to make sure the public was given a chance to learn the truth in order to make informed decisions when presented with a ballot on Election Day. Fact-checking journalism has been used in such media outlets as PolitiFact and FactCheck.org since the early 2000s, but a major spike in the amount of fact-checking sources occurred during the 2012 presidential election cycle (Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2015). Besides media outlets that are dedicated sources of fact-checking, many mainstream media organizations also have adopted the new wave of political fact-checking, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the Associated Press, NPR, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC (Graves et al., 2015).

According to the results of a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, consumers of news also are interested in fact-checking. About 59% of respondents surveyed preferred to read facts presented “as is,” instead of having journalists interpret the facts (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016). An interesting result reveals that roughly 80% percent of respondents who identified as either Clinton or Trump supporters “not only disagree over plans and policies, but also disagree on basic facts,” showing that despite the rise in fact-checking journalism, there is still a dispute over what information is considered a solid fact (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016, para. 3).

A number of reasons could explain this survey outcome. For example, the Pew survey does not mention how many respondents read fact-checking articles on a regular basis. We are also unsure where respondents are receiving their news. Also, the dispute over misinformation could come from media organizations presenting the facts differently. Marietta, Barker, and Bowser (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study that looked into how consistent media outlets’ fact-checking articles were with each other when covering the same event. Their findings suggested that the media disagreed about what information should be examined, and the researchers were left with mixed results on how media outlets answer questionable claims (Marietta et al., 2015). In other words, the journalists were asking different questions based on their own biases, which caused the disagreements in fact-checking the same event.

The finding of the lack of consistency among media organizations in the way they approach fact-checking is worth exploring further. It might not be

so surprising that different media organizations would focus on different attributes of a selected speech, debate, campaign ad, or claim, as gatekeeping theory, discussed later, would suggest. The important question to ask refers to the idea of a “gold standard” of presenting fact-checking information to the public (Marietta et al., 2015). In other words, before considering the consistency of fact-checking coverage between media organizations, it might be important to examine how the news media apply best practices of covering misinformation. One of the goals of this study is to examine whether traditional media organizations are applying suggested approaches for correcting misinformation to their fact-checking coverage.

Gatekeeping Theory

To better understand how a media organization chooses what information makes it to their audiences and how that information is processed, we must acknowledge the basic concepts laid out in gatekeeping theory. In essence, the information that is selected to be turned into a story by a media organization goes through a selection process within that organization (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). The underlying “winnowing down” process is similar among different media organizations, but each organization carries its own characteristics that determine what information makes it through the gate and how that information is shaped and packaged for the public (Shoemaker & Vos, 2008).

Kurt Lewin’s gatekeeping model (as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2008) is often referenced when explaining the process of news making. Information first makes its way to media organizations, often called channels in Lewin’s model. These channels push the information through to different sections, where information is either abandoned or chosen to move forward to the next gate, where another section with gatekeepers—the decision makers who come in the form of a reporter or editor—will decide if the information makes it to the next gate. Another important attribute of Lewin’s model are forces, which can aid or work against a piece of information moving through the channels. All forces do not carry the same weight of power to positively or negatively affect the information during selection processes (Shoemaker & Vos, 2008). For instance, if claims about the sexual assault allegations against Trump were being processed through a tabloid channel, “scandal” would be considered a positive force that would assist claims through the next gates.

The gatekeeping process becomes even more intricate with the hierarchy of influences proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1991). There are five levels that interact with one another in different ways, including suppressing the influence that one level can have over the other on an object becoming news. The five levels are individual, routine, organizational, social institutions or extra-media, and societal influences. Each level in Shoemaker and Reese’s (1991) hierarchy is important and can affect one another without having to

follow the order of the hierarchy, where individuals (e.g., journalists) are at the micro level and societal institutions are at the opposite macro level.

According to Preston and Metykova (2009), almost all media work in institutionalized organizations. Thus, the organizational level has the power to overrun the individual and routine levels, taking away some of the autonomy from the micro levels of the hierarchy. Therefore, it is important to understand how media organizations influence the selection and the formation of fact-checking topics. Analyzing the process of how information is selected or discarded, how the importance of a news story is ranked against others, and how it is published reveals much about the ideologies and values of an organization (Preston & Metykova, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Which stories become news, and exactly what part of the information is highlighted, ultimately affect the political knowledge of the American public.

The Rise of Fact-Checking Journalism

Throughout the history of journalism, different phases have waxed and waned for decades. Objective journalism found its roots within the 1920s, creating a path for more journalistic trends over the next century (Graves et al., 2015). The goal of journalists, while remaining constant throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, has been part of the American media model for decades: to provide fair and objective reporting to their audience void of “personal and cultural biases” that could mar an accurate journalistic report (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, p. 101). The recent trends of fact-checking, to some extent, seem to be a response to the public’s declining trust of media organizations (Riffkin, 2015).

The practices of the news media since the 1950s have created an image far unlike the one they were striving for only a few decades earlier (Graves et al., 2015). At the beginning of the millennium, straight-news reports, published on the front page of newspapers and with no interpretation of the events being reported, decreased 85% from the 1950s (Graves et al., 2015). Interpretive reporting was taking over. The majority of the public does not seem to like this type of reporting. A recent Pew Research Center survey indicated that most Republicans disliked the interpretation of facts within media coverage, whereas Democrats were equally split—half did not mind it, and half disliked it (Barthel & Gottfried, 2016). It is possible that the fact-checking trend is an answer to the public’s opinion of journalism. Graves et al. (2015) argue that fact-checking is a new genre of reporting that beckons back to the values and code of ethics established more than a century ago. They also describe fact-checking journalism as “truth-seeking” and a new form of being a “political watchdog” (Graves et al., 2015, p. 3).

Fact-checking journalism gained popularity in the early 2000s and dramatically increased during consequent election cycles (Graves et al., 2015).

Dedicated fact-checking sources were created at the turn of the 21st century, such as FactCheck.org, followed by PolitiFact, and *The Washington Post's* Fact-checker only four years later (Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015). Whereas traditional fact-checkers examined internal news reporting to verify information, today's fact-checkers focus on external political claims by public figures (Graves, 2016). In 2015, the number of fact-checking sources reached a total of 29 dedicated outlets—24 of which were in place by 2010 (Graves et al., 2015).

The rise in fact-checking should come as little surprise because roughly 80% of Americans who identify as either Democrat or Republican highly favor the use of fact-checking by media organizations (Kurtzleben, 2016). Both sides of the political spectrum appreciate the media's watchdog approach during election cycles, and the importance of fact-checking journalism seems more critical than ever in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. It is important for the American public to know what information presented by politicians is true and what is false. Those corrections need to happen swiftly and authoritatively. Nyhan and Reifler (2012) use social science evidence to create best practices for journalists to apply to their fact-checking coverage to be more successful in minimizing misperceptions. Their suggestions include the following: do not repeat false claims, just correct them; make the corrections to a claim as soon as possible; rely on credible sources; reduce partisan cues; and minimize the number of sources for a story that have political affiliations (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). It is also important to understand if media organizations are choosing to avoid reporting information that does not align with their political ideology.

There is also a perceived danger if traditional news media engage in fact-checking too frequently. As Graves (2016) points out, fact-checkers are in a "tenuous" position and are often accused of being combative rather than "neutral arbiters" of fact. This raises the question: Is journalistic neutrality the same as objectivity? Both of these concepts are based on the news value of reporting factual information, which is the basis of fact-checking.

Fact-Checking in the 2016 Presidential Election

Considering the need for the news media to provide accurate information to the public, especially during political campaigns, this study sets out to investigate how leading media outlets performed this role in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election. In particular, we focus on fact-checking of the three presidential debates, which drew unprecedented audience numbers ("First presidential," 2016) and were key in voter decision making (Katz, 2016). Specifically, we pose the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the characteristics of fact-checking statements used by U.S. print media after each 2016 presidential debate?

RQ 2: How closely did U.S. print media follow established guidelines for correcting misinformation in their fact-checking coverage of the 2016 presidential debates?

Method

This study is based on a quantitative content analysis of U.S. print media. The objective of the analysis is to determine whether and how the national news media followed established guidelines for correcting misinformation in their fact-checking coverage of the 2016 presidential debates. The three debates present an ideal opportunity for the news media to fact-check the claims made by both candidates. The 2016 debates reached the largest audience in 36 years with 84 million viewers watching the first presidential debate on September 26, 2016 (“Third presidential,” 2016). The second and third debates reached 66.5 million and 71.6 million viewers, respectively (“Second presidential,” 2016). Additionally, research has shown that voters find the presidential debates to be helpful in learning about the candidates and contribute to their decision-making process (Heimlich, 2012; Holbrook, 1999).

Sample

The sample for this content analysis comes from the three leading national newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. Because the analysis focuses on the fact-checking of the presidential debates, a purposive research design would be most appropriate. We focused on fact-checking coverage of each presidential debate in the three selected newspapers. The dates and locations for each of the three debates are as follows: September 26, 2016, Hofstra University; October 9, 2016, Washington University in St. Louis; and October 19, 2016, University of Nevada-Las Vegas. We used the online versions of each newspaper to retrieve the articles and searched each online newspaper’s archive using the following keyword phrases: “presidential debate fact-check” or “presidential debate fact-check 2016” or “fact-check presidential debates.” Using manual screening, articles that did not contain actual fact-checking analyses of the targeted debates or that were, for example, links to videos or outside reports were excluded.

Variables

Before moving onto the specific variables of our study, we first introduce the suggestions for “best practices” in fact-checking provided by Nyhan and Reifler (2012). Their guidelines are used in the variable conceptualization, which is explained in more detail next. According to Nyhan and Reifler (2012), media organizations should consider 10 suggestions when creating fact-checking

content, as follows: (a) get the story right the first time, (b) early corrections are better, (c) beware making the problem worse, (d) avoid negations, (e) minimize repetition of false claims, (f) reduce partisan and ideological cues, (g) use credible sources, (h) don't give credence to the fringe, (i) use graphics where appropriate, (j) beware of selective exposure.

Using Nyhan and Reifler's (2012) guidelines, we created a number of coding variables. First, we determined the topic of the fact-check and the candidate being fact-checked (Clinton, Trump, or both candidates). Next, we coded for correction: that is, is the fact-checking statement correct (article states candidate statement is accurate); incorrect (article states candidate statement is inaccurate); partially correct (article states candidate statement is somewhat, but not completely, accurate; e.g., candidate exaggerated facts or cherry-picked content); or inconclusive (no explicit correction of claim is provided; statement cannot be determined as either accurate or inaccurate).

Coders noted if the fact-checking section repeated the false claim directly more than once. They also captured what kind of information was included to support the fact-check, including URL links, video, or tweets. Another variable captured the specific source mentioned to support or dispute the candidate claim. Sources could include individuals, government agencies such as the FBI, media organizations such as CNN, politicians, academics, scientists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or fact-checking Web sites such as FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.com.

In addition to outside sources, the candidate's own previous statements can provide one of the best data points for fact-checking. Therefore, we coded for the use of a direct quote from a candidate or having a video of the candidate to support or dispute the claim. Finally, we coded if the fact-check mentioned the candidate as saying "I was joking" when making the original claim and whether the article as a whole used the words "fib," "flub," or any other descriptors of the candidates' claims.

Coding Process

Two graduate students served as coders. They were trained on the code sheet using fact-checking examples from the desired time period and performed test coding with the lead researcher to determine that variable definitions were clear and straightforward. A few variables were eliminated or collapsed after the initial coding phase.

An online code sheet using Qualtrics survey software was set up and used for coding, which allowed us to download the data directly into SPSS. A total of 32 fact-checks (14%) were selected to check coder agreement. Intercoder reliability was established at 91%, with percentage agreement ranging between 75% and 100%. A total of 231 fact-checking statements were analyzed.

Results

The first research question asked: What are the characteristics of fact-checking statements used by U.S. print media after each 2016 presidential debate? We looked at several variables to answer this question. But first, we noted a few interesting differences in style between the three newspapers under examination. *USA Today* used a bulleted list of fact-checking items at the top of the article and then broke down each item into a fact-checking paragraph, often relying on Twitter screenshots to dispute or support the claim. *The Washington Post* had longer fact-checking sections, often beginning the article with a video from the debate right up front. *The New York Times's* fact-checking statements within the article were shorter—about a paragraph—and were all attributed to different contributors.

Beyond some of these stylistic differences, the topics of the fact-checks were similar. The topics ranged from NAFTA and ISIS to Clinton's e-mail scandal and Trump's leaked "Access Hollywood" videotape. Climate change, taxes, abortion, gun control, and healthcare were among the most common domestic issues in the fact-checking coverage. As for international issues, China, Iraq, Syria, the Iran deal, outsourcing jobs, and the trade deficit were frequently addressed.

In terms of which candidate was fact-checked more often after each presidential debate, the data show that Clinton was fact-checked in 25.1% of the cases, whereas Trump was fact-checked in 69.3% of the cases. The rest of the cases focused on fact-checking both candidates.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the fact-checks appeared immediately following each presidential debate: 75 items were fact-checked on September 26, 2016 (the day of the first debate) and September 27, 2016 (the day after); similarly, 93 fact-checks were published on October 9, 2016 (the day of the second debate) and on October 10, 2016 (the day after); and 63 fact-checks appeared on October 19, 2016 (the day of the last debate) and on October 20, 2016 (the day after). This would suggest that each of the three newspapers had a dedicated team of reporters ready to fact-check the debates at the same time as they were going on.

Perhaps the most interesting finding comes from the data on fact-checking correction. Out of 225 statements included here, 41 (18.2%) explicitly stated that the candidate's statement was correct, whereas 96 (42.7%) stated that candidate's statement was clearly inaccurate. A fair amount of the fact-checking sections found candidate statements to be somewhat or partially correct—57, or 25.3%, of the fact-checks we examined. Rather than stating that a candidate statement was clearly wrong, some articles explained that the statement was exaggerated or taken out of context. In other cases, the presidential candidate was described as "cherry picking" examples to criticize previous administrations. For example, *USA Today* reported that Trump had been "cherry

picking” facts when he stated that Obamacare premiums would increase over the next year, citing the highest increased rate (Gore et al., 2016). It is not considered an entirely wrong claim, but it does have its issues, according to the fact-checkers. Terms such as “overstated” and “mostly misleading” also fit under this category.

Interestingly, there were a number of cases where the candidate’s statement could not be or was not explicitly corrected and was labeled inconclusive by the coders; this was the case in 31, or 13.8%, of the fact-checks. A few articles stated that there was no evidence to back up candidate claims. This was the case, for example, with Trump claiming that he opposed the Iraq War. Comparing the three newspapers in terms of correction statements shows no statistically significant differences (see Table 7.1).

There were a couple of cases where the candidate was “technically correct” on the timeline of the events within the topic, but failed to mention accurate details laying out the whole picture. Several candidate statements were described as not specific enough to be able to be fact-checked; this was the case, for example, with Clinton’s claim that her policies will not “add a penny to the national debt” (Kessler & Lee, 2016). The fact-checking analysis states that the claim does not have enough contextual support to state whether it is correct; however, it does use a graph to show how both Trump’s and Clinton’s plans are projected to affect the national debt over a 10-year period (Kessler & Lee, 2016).

Another important variable of interest captured whether the fact-checking section repeated the false claim directly more than once. A good example here is a repeat of Clinton’s economic plans as they related to taxes in *USA Today* after the first presidential debate. Table 7.2 shows the results for each of the three newspapers. The low cell count for several cells did not allow us to test for statistical significance, but the cross-tabulations suggest some possible differences in the way false claim repeats were handled, with *USA Today* being most likely to do so.

We also captured what kind of information was included to support the fact-check: URL links, video, or tweets. Videos were not commonly used within the fact-checking section in all three newspapers. *USA Today* was the only

Table 7.1 Fact-Checking Statements Across Newspapers

Fact-Checking Statement	New York Times	USA Today	Washington Post
Correct	17 (21.8%)	11 (14.1%)	13 (18.8%)
Incorrect	32 (41%)	36 (46.2%)	28 (40.6%)
Partially correct	17 (21.8%)	23 (29.5%)	17 (24.6%)
Inconclusive	12 (15.4%)	8 (10.3%)	11 (15.9%)

Table 7.2 False Claim Repeated in Fact-Check Stories

False Claim Repeated More Than Once	New York Times	USA Today	Washington Post
Yes	4 (5.6%)	22 (29.3%)	4 (7.1%)
No	67 (94.4%)	53 (70.7%)	52 (92.9%)

Table 7.3 Use of URL Links in Fact-Check Stories

Active URL Links in Fact-Check	New York Times	USA Today	Washington Post
Yes	15 (19%)*	67 (81.7%)	58 (82.9%)
No	64 (81%)*	15 (18.3%)	12 (17.1%)

$p < .001$

newspaper that included tweets within their fact-checking. In terms of taking advantage of the World Wide Web by including active links in the aftermath of the debates, some interesting differences emerged (see Table 7.3). The differences between the three newspapers were statistically significant $\chi^2(2, N=231)=87.13, p < .001$. The results show that *The New York Times* was less likely to embed direct URL links in their fact-checking segments compared with *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*. This does not mean, however, that the so-called newspaper of record did not incorporate external links in other sections of their debate coverage.

Sources are critical components of news reporting and serve to establish journalistic credibility (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). In the case of fact-checking, as noted by Nyhan and Reifler (2012), sources mentioned to support or dispute claims made by politicians become even more critical. We did not quantify the different types of sources used, but noted which specific individuals or organizations were cited in the fact-check. One general trend that we observed was relying on in-house reporting or referring to other media organizations such as CNN. *The Washington Post* seemed to rely more heavily on outside experts such as academics or scientists. All three newspapers were likely to incorporate NGO data or nonpartisan organizations in their fact-checking, which indicates an effort to keep objectivity and balance in their reporting. In an example from a *USA Today* article covering the final debate, journalists sourced reports from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Brennan Center for Justice, and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and cited Rutgers University professor Lorraine Minnite's book, *The Myth of Voter Fraud*, to fact-check Trump's statement about voter fraud in the United States (Gore et al., 2016). Fact-checking Web sites such as FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.com

were also frequently incorporated in the coverage. An interesting fact-check after the second presidential debate included a link to Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's e-mails from WikiLeaks.

In addition to outside sources, the candidate's own previous statements can provide one of the most convincing pieces of evidence in fact-checking. Therefore, we coded for use of a direct quote from the candidate or having a video of the candidate to support or dispute a claim. The data show that using a direct quote from the candidate being fact-checked is a common technique. Interestingly, *The New York Times* coverage utilized this technique much less frequently than did *USA Today* or *The Washington Post*, although the low count in one cell does not meet the minimum expected count (see Table 7.4). For example, a fact-check on Clinton regarding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) used an earlier quote of the former secretary of state from 2012 to supplement the analysis in *The Washington Post* and show she was wrong. Some direct quotes demonstrated the candidate was right, as was the case of Trump on immigration regarding deportation numbers that appeared in *USA Today*.

Finally, it is interesting to note that 17 items, or 7.4% of the coverage, used the words "fib" or "flub" to depict candidate statements, which appears to downplay the seriousness of the issue. However, only two of the fact-checks mentioned candidates as saying "I was joking" when making the original claim.

The second research question asked how closely U.S. print media followed established guidelines for correcting misinformation in their fact-checking coverage of the 2016 presidential debates. We offer point-by-point observations next, following Nyhan and Reifler's recommendations (2012).

Make corrections quickly. Looking at the dates of the fact-checking articles, it appears all three newspapers made a concerted effort to provide correct information immediately following each of the three debates. Specifically, all fact-checking articles we collected appeared the day of and the day after each presidential debate. Each newspaper likely had a team of journalists ready to conduct fact-checks quickly and share that information with the public in a timely manner. The false or misleading information provided by the candidates was corrected quickly with relevant and well-sourced data. The timeliness of the fact-checks appears to fall within recommended guidelines.

Do not repeat the misinformation. Nyhan and Reifler (2012) suggest that repeating misinformation only fuels more misinformation. However, this is

Table 7.4 Use of Direct Quote of Candidate in Fact-Check Stories

Direct Quote or Video of Candidate Statement	New York Times	USA Today	Washington Post
Yes	32 (40.5%)	66 (81.5%)	66 (95.7%)
No	47 (59.5%)	15 (18.5%)	3 (4.3%)

hard to avoid because you need to reference the false statement first. Although there weren't always direct quotes of the false claim, its core message was often reiterated in the process of disproving it. In general, journalists perhaps should be more aware to not directly repeat incorrect information and try to focus on reporting the correct information only.

Do not use sources perceived as biased. This is a general rule of thumb in journalism, but it seems even more vital in the case of fact-checking. If there is misinformation circulating that supports a Democratic candidate, using a Democrat-affiliated source will not alleviate the notion that a statement might not be true. If President Barack Obama, a Democrat, reinforces the notion that Clinton will *not* take away gun rights, to a pro-gun audience, then the audience will more than likely dismiss Obama's attempt to correct the false claim that Clinton plans to ban all gun sales in the United States. It is much better to use sources that are considered fair, an expert in the topic area, and non-partisan (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012).

Looking at the use of sources when fact-checking the debates, the news media made a concerted effort to rely on nonpartisan organizations and NGOs. Data from organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control, the federal government, or New York State crime statistics, for example, were incorporated in the fact-checks. The three newspapers also tried to balance the sources used, for example, Fox News and MSNBC, within the same fact-check. Naturally, there were a number of cases where the candidates themselves were included in videos or direct quotes from previous statements. It was also interesting to see that self-referential coverage of each individual newspaper in the form of "as we have shown in a previous fact-check" was pretty common. Overall, the fact-checks seemed to rely on reputable and nonpartisan sources, as recommended (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Nyhan & Reifler, 2012; Poynter, 2017).

Use visuals to accompany the correction of misinformation. Using charts, graphs, infographics, and other types of visuals helps aid in fixing misinformation because it is less likely to be dismissed by readers, especially online, by giving them a quick snippet of correct facts. Overall, the three newspapers utilized photos and videos to accompany the article as a whole, but did not insert those into the individual fact-checks. Some good examples here include using a map to show North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries and using a graph to show how many gun deaths are classified as homicides.

Discussion and Recommendations

Political fact-checking as a genre has emerged as an important vehicle to fight misrepresentation of facts or misleading information by political figures (Graves, 2016). The goal of this study was to evaluate how leading national newspapers tried to correct information provided by the two presidential

contenders during the 2016 presidential debates. The results show that journalists engaged in consistent practices to correct false claims, but there is also room for improvement in how they perform this fact-checking function.

As Nyhan and Reifler (2012) recommend, speculation and assumptions should be avoided by journalists at all costs. The content analysis reported earlier shows that U.S. print media avoided speculations or offering unsupported claims in their fact-checking coverage. The reporting, for the most part, relied on reputable sources and referenced solid data to either support or dispute candidate claims. However, there is still room for improvement when it comes to how the news media establish whether politicians' statements are true.

Fact-checking, by definition, is an "evidence-based" technique applied by journalists to objects, events, or topics of a questionable nature (Coddington, Molyneux, & Lawrence, 2014). At the same time, it is challenging to determine latent meaning or implicit political intention behind politicians' words. Without having to make an assumption about intention, journalists can still be more clear and straightforward in their fact-checking statements. It should be easier for the average reader to determine if something a politician said is correct, false, or only partially correct. Our analysis shows a number of cases where the "verdict" whether something that either Trump or Clinton claimed was actually supported by the facts was not explicit. This sort of inconclusive fact-checking is not helping voters make informed decisions.

Even using a phrase that negates the misinformation can be problematic (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). Instead, using positive language, such as stating "Hillary Clinton is cleared of charges," seems to work better than stating "Hillary Clinton will not be indicted." Fact-checkers should try to employ more positive language whenever possible.

Another recommendation for the news media is to avoid repeating false claims. Although it is difficult to refute a claim without stating it first, it is good to try to minimize any unnecessary repetition of false information. It is important also to make the fact-checking statement as clear as possible for the typical busy reader and multitasking user.

It is simplistic, of course, to assume that fact-checking journalism will always accomplish its goal of correcting and, by extension, eradicating misleading information in the public sphere (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). But in today's political environment, it is perhaps more important than ever to try to correct misinformation presented by political leaders quickly and decisively. It is the news media's responsibility as the Fourth Estate to keep political figures accountable and offer the most accurate information to the American public.

Ideally, solid reporting will create a consensus that all parties—whether political or ideological—agree to the facts presented within the fact-checking coverage. Another democratic ideal is that the public will make rational decisions after taking all facts and relevant information into consideration. The

reality, however, is that voters often make subjective decisions through their own political and ideological prisms. Even when confronted with clearly false statements by political candidates, it is hard to measure whether or not the public will take such statements as something more than a political stunt to persuade people to favor one group's ideology over another.

This highlights another issue summarized well by Graves (2016, p. 192) in his book on the rise of political fact-checking: "Fact-checkers do celebrate the 'Internet revolution' for greatly easing access to original data and research. But these reporters openly lament the decline of journalism's 'gatekeeper' status, which media and political reformers so often paint as [a] positive development." In other words, the power of traditional media as *the* gatekeeper of information has greatly diminished with the advent of the Internet. Therefore, the influence of any fact-checking reporting they do depends on, first, whether traditional media will be sought out as information sources by the public, and second, on how much trust would the public place on their fact-checks versus other information floating on the Internet by the candidates themselves, by third parties, or by fake news Web sites.

With the proliferation of misleading information flowing through different mediums, such as tabloids, social media sites, and fake news sites during the last election, fact-checking journalism has appointed itself as the judge of whether or not a claim made by an elite figure, such as a political leader, an organization, or party, coincides with what has been presented as historically true about what is being examined. Fact-checking at its core is simply an in-depth look at whether or not something is true, based on current and previous trusted information. How much fact-checking matters in how the public makes voting decisions, especially in today's polarized political environment, deserves further investigation.

Limitations and Future Research

This analysis focused only on three leading national newspapers—namely *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. Future studies should incorporate a wider range of media organizations and consider adding traditional fact-checking news sites to the sample. Another limitation of the study is that it included coverage of the three presidential debates only. Expanding the analysis to encompass the entire campaign and candidate statements that appeared in the news media would be good to consider.

Because the study utilizes content analysis methodology, it cannot provide information about the effectiveness of fact-checking or how readers make sense of any new factual information they uncover. Future studies should employ experimental research designs to capture any causal effects of fact-checking coverage on potential voters. This type of study will allow journalists to better tailor their reporting to their audience.

Finally, it may be important to examine how fact-checkers themselves see their role in the current media landscape. Conducting interviews or focus groups with those reporters will provide a better understanding of how they make their own gatekeeper decisions and why they choose certain topics, issues, or sources versus others. Newsroom observations of daily journalistic practices and routines can also complement this body of research.

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