February 2012

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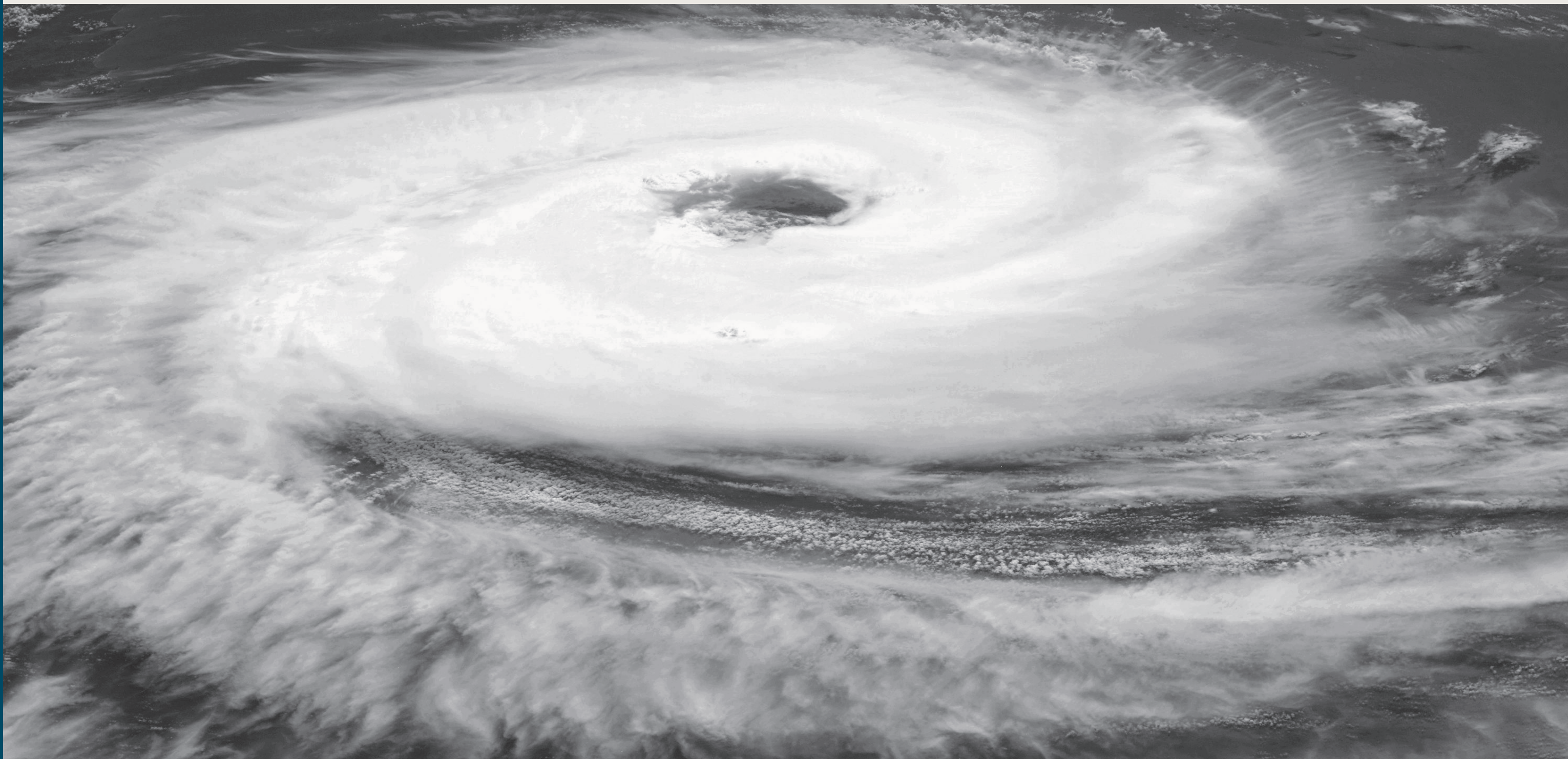
An Overview

Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer
with research support from Kate Fink and Dr John Kelly of Morningside Analytics



Media Policy Initiative
Research Paper

New America Foundation

Supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations

Cover image: The cyclone Catarina, as seen from the International Space Station, the first hurricane observed on the South Atlantic Ocean on March 26 2004, near Brazil. (www.creativecommons.org)

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The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012

An Overview

Lucas Graves and Tom Glaisyer, with Research support from Kate Fink and Dr John Kelly of Morningside Analytics *

Summary

By almost any measure, the 2012 presidential race is shaping up to be the most fact-checked electoral contest in American history. Every new debate and campaign ad yields a blizzard of fact-checking from the new full-time fact-checkers, from traditional news outlets in print and broadcast, and from partisan political organizations of various stripes. And though fact-checking still peaks before elections it is now a year-round enterprise that challenges political claims beyond the campaign trail.

This increasingly crowded and contentious landscape raises at least two fundamental questions. First, who counts as a legitimate fact-checker? The various kinds of fact-checking at work both inside and outside of journalism must be considered in light of their methods, their audiences, and their goals. And second, how effective are fact-checkers—or how effective could they be—in countering widespread misinformation in American political life? The success of the fact-checkers must be assessed in three related areas: changing people's minds, changing journalism, and changing the political conversation. Can fact-checking really stop a lie in its tracks? Can public figures be shamed into being more honest? Or has the damage been done by the time the fact-checkers intervene?

This report reviews the shape of the fact-checking landscape today. It pays special attention to the divide between partisan and nonpartisan fact-checkers, and between fact-checking and conventional reporting. It then examines what we know and what we don't about the effectiveness of fact-checking, using the media footprint of various kinds of fact-checkers as an initial indicator of the influence these groups wield. Media analysis shows how political orientation limits fact-checkers' impact in public discourse.

A preliminary version of this report was distributed at a conference on fact-checking hosted by the New America Foundation on December 14, 2011. Two companion reports prepared for that conference have also been published by NAF: Brendan Nyhan and Jason Riefler,"Misinformation and Fact-checking: Research Findings from Social Science"; and Michael Dobbs, "The Rise of Political Fact-checking. How Reagan Inspired a Journalistic Movement: A Reporter's Eye View."

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How can fact-checking have the biggest impact in fostering a more reasoned debate over important public issues? Should it aim mainly to educate the public, to change political behavior, or to make reporting less timid—or all three?

Introduction

As the debate over health care reform took shape in 2009, veteran journalist James Fallows made a bold prediction about the cleansing effect the Internet would have on that national conversation. Fallows had chronicled the collapse of Clinton's health care reform initiative in the 1990s, paying special attention to misinformation that circulated freely on talk radio as well as in the elite media. An especially damaging claim was that private doctors would have to enroll in the program, or go to jail. This originated in Betsy McCaughey's now-infamous *New Republic* article on the Clinton plan, "No Exit," and was repeated by columnists such as George Will despite being directly contradicted by the legislation itself.[1]

In contrast, today's "ecology of news and opinion" would be much less hospitable to such malicious distortions, Fallows declared in a pair of radio interviews: The "instant feedback" provided by blogs and other fact-checkers would deflate the most egregious falsehoods before they could gain traction.[2] Then in August the "death panels" story reached a fever pitch in the national media, helped along by a provocative Facebook post from Sarah Palin, which proved no less contagious for being instantly and widely debunked.[3] Within a week Fallows had officially reversed course in the *Atlantic*: "I said two weeks ago that I thought today's communications system had caught up with people who invented facts. I was wrong."[4]

The episode highlights two basic sets of questions provoked by the recent and remarkable rise of political fact-checking—what a journalism review last year called, simply, "The Fact-Checking Explosion."[5]

One set of questions revolves around who counts as a legitimate fact-checker. Fallows took the broad view, referring to "blogs, Wikis, and all the rest" providing a "more nimble check-and-balance built into the discussion of ideas these days"—a corrective for the failings of traditional journalism.[6] (He gave the example of a health-care myth from early 2009 that was stopped in its tracks by "crowdsourcing"; leading that charge were liberal bloggers at the *Washington Monthly* and at Media Matters.) Meanwhile media criticism outlets, from *Columbia Journalism Review* to topic-specific sites like Health News Reviews, regularly fact-check reports in the news media. WikiFact-Check and NewsTrust's TruthSquad, both launched in 2010, have tried to provide an online platform for the crowd-sourced fact-checking Fallows referred to. Other new tools, such as the Truth Goggles project at MIT's Media Lab, promise to identify suspicious claims in the news by harnessing the work of multiple fact-checkers.

But the real "explosion" in fact-checking, especially since 2008, has been within the ranks of professional journalism. From the point of view of many journalistic fact-checkers—who almost never cite their partisan counterparts—the rancorous debate on the Internet tends to muddy factual issues, not to clarify them.

What makes a good fact-checker—just solid reasoning and honest documentation, or also a kind of neutrality, a willingness to weigh a question from multiple viewpoints? Can fact-checking be rigorous but also partisan? Can fact-checking be performed by some kind of social software?

The second and even more basic question is whether fact-checking has made, or can make, a difference in public life. The furor over "death panels" underscores how our increasingly diverse, open, and participatory media ecosystem facilitates fact-checking even as it

also makes it easier to spread distortions across a fragmented news landscape. Research by Brendan Nyhan seems to confirm what Fallows had conceded—that fact-checking in 2009 failed on the whole to either stop political actors from repeating myths about health-care reform, or to sway public opinion about those myths.[7] But that research also found hopeful evidence that news reports were quicker and clearer than they had been 15 years earlier in identifying falsehoods.

How can fact-checking have the biggest impact in fostering a more reasoned debate over important public issues? Should it aim mainly to educate the public, to change political behavior, or to make reporting less timid—or all three?

Various kinds of fact-checkers share the goal Fallows articulated, of holding public figures accountable for the things they say and fostering political discourse grounded in a more reasoned debate about agreed-upon facts. Understanding how fact-checkers can "reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics," as the mission statement of FactCheck.org puts it, depends on understanding three specific mechanisms by which fact-checking might work:

- ***Changing people's minds.*** To provide an effective counterweight to misinformation about any given issue, fact-checking must present the relevant facts to the right audiences in a way that encourages them to question misleading claims.
- ***Changing journalism.*** A goal of many fact-checkers—and especially of media critics who fact-check news reports—is to encourage journalists to not just report competing claims but to assess them, and to challenge politicians who attempt to mislead the public.
- ***Changing the conversation.*** By exposing political deception, fact-checkers and journalists in general may exert pressure on political figures to retreat from misleading claims—and perhaps discourage them from making such claims in future.

This report considers the geography of the fact-checking landscape today, paying special attention to the divide between partisan and nonpartisan fact-checkers, and between fact-checking and conventional reporting. It then examines what we know and what we don't about the effectiveness of fact-checking, studying the results of content and network analysis designed to measure the footprint of various fact-checkers in traditional news outlets and in online discourse. Drawing on these findings as well as the companion reports by Michael Dobbs and by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Riefler, the report concludes with a set of recommendations for further research.

The fact-checking landscape

By almost any measure, the 2012 presidential race is shaping up to be the most fact-checked electoral contest in American history. Already, the Republican contenders have come under fire in the national media for ads that appear to take the President's words out of context.[8] Each of the primary debates has yielded a blizzard of fact-checking from traditional news outlets, from dedicated fact-checkers, from partisan media critics, and from the campaigns themselves. Dozens of dedicated fact-checking operations now exist around the country, run in many cases as partnerships among news outlets or between news outlets and civic organizations, universities, etc. Most of these fact-checking efforts, both nationally and at the state level, came into existence after the 2008 election—which itself marked a pronounced rise over 2004.[9]

One result of this increasingly crowded landscape is that fact-checking today takes aim not just at campaign ads and formal debates but at speeches, interviews, emails, flyers, press releases, offhand comments—at any claims made in any forum by candidates, their staffs, or the wider political commentariat. Some fact-checkers focus on political figures, and others on the reporters who cover them.

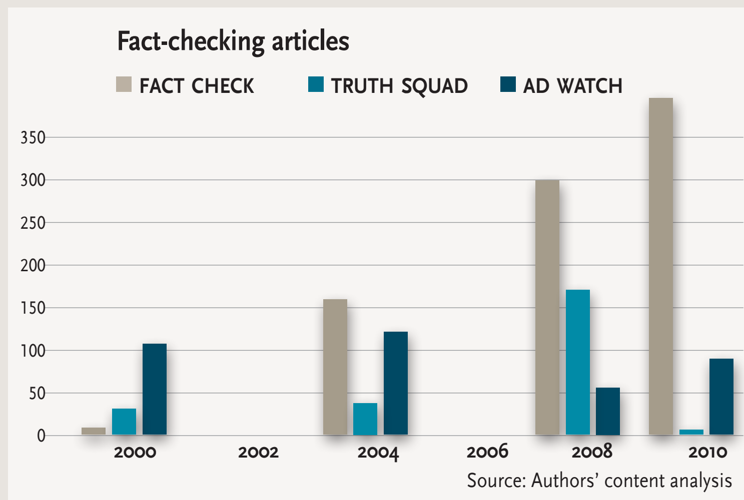
And fact-checking clearly is not just for political campaigns anymore. While the number of "fact check" pieces peaks in election years, this kind of journalism has become a regular feature of the news landscape. Two of the most prominent fact-checkers working today, FactCheck.org and the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker column, were launched (in 2003 and 2007, respectively) to cover presidential campaigns and later became permanent ventures. As the latter's "about" page explains, "We will not be bound by the antics of

The Fact-checking Footprint in News

Content analysis of print and broadcast news sources in the United States reveals a pronounced rise in fact-checking journalism over the last decade. It also offers a closer look at what sorts of claims are checked and at which kinds of news outlets do the checking.

The content analysis began with a search of the Nexis database of English-language news sources for three trigger terms and their respective derivatives: "fact-check," "truth squad," and "ad watch." The study focused on U.S. news outlets and presidential election years to keep the data set manageable for the single coder involved; 2010 was added to give an initial indication of changes since 2008. For each trigger term in each year studied, the first level of analysis excluded those articles and news transcripts which were not examples of fact-checking journalism—i.e., did not authoritatively challenge a claim in the reporter's voice. (More than half of all results were excluded in this way.) The resulting set was tallied and analyzed at the level of both news stories and individual claims.

The aggregate yearly results tell two very clear stories, reflected in the chart below. The first is the rapid overall increase in fact-checking pieces using any of these trigger terms, more than doubling from 2000 to 2004 and rising by another third from 2004 to 2008. (Because the trigger terms were analyzed separately, however, stories including multiple terms may appear more than once. It should also be emphasized that this analysis offers only a glimpse of fact-checking journalism; stories that challenge political claims but do not use any of the trigger terms are not reflected in the results.)



The second distinct trend is a jump in the relative importance of "fact-check" (and its derivatives) as a trigger term. While in 2000 "ad watch" accounted for the lion's share of results, "fact-check" rises dramatically across the years sampled and is clearly dominant by 2008 and 2010. This offers at least initial evidence that journalism that challenges political claims increasingly targets claims made outside of campaign advertisements.

the presidential campaign season, but will focus on any statements by political figures and government officials ... that cry out for fact-checking." PolitiFact, unveiled in 2007, scrutinizes statements not just from officeholders and candidates but from labor unions, trade groups, political action committees, civic organizations, and pundits of every persuasion, including cultural figures such as U2 frontman Bono and Doonesbury cartoonist Garry Trudeau. In 2010 the group awarded a "Pants on Fire!" to 18 percent of the American public over the question of whether President Obama is a Muslim.[10]

Any major event on the political calendar now warrants fact-checking. A Nexis search suggests that as recently as 2000 and 2001, no news outlet ran a "fact check" after the State of the Union address. In 2003 and 2004, only the Associated Press fact-checked the annual speech to Congress. In 2010 and 2011, by contrast, the address drew dozens of fact-checking articles and segments. (In a further sign of the times, the 2011 speech was fact-checked in real time by an unusual coalition that included the Center for Public Integrity, the Huffington Post, the National Journal, and the Sunlight Foundation, using the latter's "Sunlight Live" platform.[11])

However if the explosion of fact-checking over the last decade seems unmistakable, it is also difficult to document, precisely because of that variety. Elected officials themselves frequently issue press releases purporting to "fact check" their political opponents, the media, or outside groups. These announcements sometimes cite professional fact checkers, but they may also draw on original research and involve fairly arcane analysis. For instance, early last year the Republican-controlled House Ways and Means Committee "fact-checked" the methodology of a budget scoring by the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute.[12] Soon after Democrats on the same committee issued a "fact check" of Republican claims about Social Security financing.[13] (Republicans responded with their own press release quoting FactCheck.org.) Fact-checking seems to be a mode of address, a label available to attach to any factual analysis that disputes a competing account. No one wants to be on the wrong side of the facts.

Even journalists use the label in a variety of ways. An article last summer in the *Alaska Dispatch* "fact-checked" ten myths about a recent bear attack.[14] (The target of the ten-point fact-check was other news outlets—mostly from downstate or overseas—which had sensationalized or misreported the incident.) Even further afield, New York magazine's "Vulture" site runs a "Nostalgia Fact-Check" series that offers subjective assessments of how well iconic entertainment titles (i.e. "Footloose," the Muppet movies) hold up today.[15] Thus the fact-checking craze has generated a catchy new vocabulary available to reporters who don't cover politics at all.

Case study: Did the President call Americans "lazy"?

That was the impression many reporters and pundits gave after the President addressed a "business summit" in Honolulu on November 12, 2011. In his remarks to the assembled CEOs, Obama praised the enduring appeal of the U.S. to foreign investors before observing, "But we've been a little bit lazy, I think, over the last couple of decades. We've kind of taken for granted—well, people will want to come here and we aren't out there hungry, selling America and trying to attract new business into America."[16]

The next day, a Sunday, a few bloggers took note; *Business Insider* also reported on the choice of words and solicited a cutting response from the Romney campaign.[17] The piece made clear that the President was talking about drawing foreign investment, but it ran under a fairly blunt headline: "Obama: Americans Have Been 'A Little Bit Lazy' Over The Past Few Decades." On Monday the story started to gain traction online and in cable news. CNN ran a segment titled "Obama Calls American Businesses Lazy,"[18] and video of the comment went into heavy rotation on Fox. Guests such as Newt Gingrich and Dick Morris assailed the President for trying to blame the American public for his own failures.[19]

On Tuesday, newspaper columnists and editorial pages began to weigh in, as did presidential contenders: Rick Perry worked the controversy into a campaign speech in Iowa, and Mitt Romney did the same in South Carolina. "Sometimes, I just don't think that President Obama understands America," Romney declared. "I say that because this week—or was it last week?—he said that Americans are lazy. I don't think that describes America." The *New York Times* addressed the attacks for the first time but took a pass on assessing them, noting only that Obama "did not specifically single out citizens as 'lazy.'"[20] On Wednesday, the Perry campaign dropped a hard-hitting ad (called simply "Lazy") into rotation in Iowa on both broadcast and cable, drawing further coverage. By the end of the week the controversy had been covered in some way by nearly every major news outlets in the country.

The episode neatly illustrated the snowball effect by which partisan chatter can produce a controversy that dominates the news cycle for a few days. It also showcased the fact-checking journalism that has become a staple of campaign coverage. Professional fact-checkers were unequivocal, and unanimous, in rejecting the spin that had been applied to the President's words. PolitiFact ruled it "Mostly False" to say the President called Americans lazy;[21] the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker gave the claim four Pinocchios;[22] and FactCheck.org explained that, "Republican presidential candidates Rick Perry and Mitt Romney both claim President Barack Obama said that 'Americans are lazy.' He didn't. To the contrary, Obama has consistently and repeatedly praised American workers as the 'most productive in the world.'"[23]

These full-time fact-checkers weren't alone. By the end of the week the list of news outlets explaining that the President's words had been taken out of context included the AP, the *New York Times, USA Today,* ABC News, NPR, the *Atlantic*, and the *Week*. Some of these pieces (at the AP, for instance[24]) came in the form of traditional "ad watch" reports analyzing Perry's new spot, while others focused on Romney's comments, or on the lazy "meme" in general. The *New Jersey Star-Ledger* relegated its critique to an editorial.[25] ABC News used a blog post,[26] and *USA Today* reprinted the work of FactCheck.org.[27]

However, several analyses appeared in straight news reporting. The *Times* coverage began on its Caucus blog, but a Nov. 17 news headline (which ran in print the next day) declared flatly that "Perry's Latest Attacks Distort Obama's Words and Past."[28] (The same day the *Times* ran a Caucus piece about several new ads, including Perry's, that failed to check them at all.[29]) NPR pegged its segment to an email from the Romney campaign, and allowed reporter Ari Shapiro to say in his own words that the president was referring to policymakers, not to Americans as a whole.[30]

Media critics also weighed in, fact-checking news coverage of the episode rather than attacks from the presidential contenders—though the substance of the analysis was the same. Left-leaning media watchdog Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting took aim at news accounts (exemplified by a *Times* piece) which reported the attacks on Obama without challenging them.[31] (Meanwhile the conservative-run NewsBusters published a series of posts criticizing news outlets which failed to report on Obama's controversial comments.[32]) And Media Matters ran a lengthy analysis, citing several nonpartisan fact-checkers, to undercut conservative pundits who accused Obama of calling Americans lazy—followed by a list of instances in which conservatives seemed to disparage American workers.[33]

The "lazy" episode highlights the great energy and diversity of fact-checkers operating in today's universe of media and politics—as well as the difficult question of what all of this fact-checking accomplishes. Certainly, careful, objective analysis of the President's words and the attacks on them was available to anyone who cared to look for it. But an undeniable result of this flurry of fact-checking was that many more people heard that the President might have called Americans lazy; indeed, this may have figured into the strategy of the Romney and Perry campaigns, which stood by their attacks even as fact-checkers weighed in.

The political divide

In such a varied landscape, what counts as legitimate fact-checking has become a tricky question. The most obvious divide is between nonpartisan fact-checkers—usually, journalists—and those with a political agenda. As noted above, when James Fallows predicted that online fact-checkers would keep the 2009 health-care debate honest, he was referring to the blogosphere broadly—including partisan sources of commentary and analysis, such as the left-leaning Media Matters for America.

Media Matters deserves close consideration. It frequently applies the fact-checking label to its work, which can include rigorous, detailed and carefully documented analysis of public claims. The group officially describes its mission as "comprehensively monitoring, analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media." In a 2010 interview, then-chief of staff Tate Williams explained that the goal is "to stop a smear in its tracks," which sounds like one definition of fact-checking.[34] He also suggested that in some cases this amounts to doing the investigative work that journalists should be doing themselves. (In 2010 the group hired an investigative journalist, Joe Strupp, to head up in-house efforts.)

Other partisan media critics also engage in ad hoc fact-checking. The "progressive" media watchdog Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting purports to offer "well-documented criticism of media bias and censorship," but this work often involves factual challenges to news reports or to political claims carried in news reports. (For instance, FAIR weighed in on the controversy over the President's "lazy" reference.[35]) Efforts on the right are led by the site NewsBusters and its parent, the Media Research Center. Though the MRC's primary mission is to identify "liberal bias in the media," it also sometimes fact-checks news reports by citing authoritative sources.

Meanwhile fact-checking is a basic ingredient of the kind of annotative journalism practiced by political blogs on the left and the right. The handful of major journalistic coups by blogs over the last decade have been driven by line-by-line analysis of news reports and public documents, analysis that often undercuts claims by public officials or by journalists. (As Columbia Journalism School dean Nick Lemann observed in a 2006 essay on the emerging news landscape, "'We can fact-check your ass!' is one of the familiar rallying cries of the blogosphere."[36]) Two good examples are the blog-borne investigations into the purge of federal prosecutors in 2007 (led by the generally liberal outlet Talking Points Memo), and into the phony National Guard memos of 2004 (involving conservative blogs such as Power Line and Little Green Footballs). The latter episode led online news guru Jeff Jarvis to comment, "Today, bloggers are *fact-checking Dan Rather's ass but good*. Strangely, the fool isn't grateful."[37]

To many professional journalists, however, the fact that blogs and partisan media critics mainly check the work of their political opponents disqualifies them as fact-checkers. In a companion report to this one, Michael Dobbs writes that "If you criticize only one side (in the manner of the left-leaning Media Matters, for example), you are no longer a fact checker. You are a tool in a political campaign." FactCheck.org, PolitiFact and the Washington Post's Fact Checker routinely cite one another in their pieces but do not cite the work of partisan analysts or of political bloggers. PolitiFact's "Beyond the Truth-O-Meter" feature, a round-up of fact-checking work from around the Web, describes a fairly narrow universe. Most entries point to the same small handful of sources: FactCheck.org, the Post's Fact Checker, the Associated Press, AZ Fact Check, and Snopes.com.

Should partisan analysts be excluded from the universe of legitimate fact-checkers? By one argument, the only real test of legitimacy lies in the work itself. Professional fact-checkers carefully document their sources and explain their reasoning so that any reader can see how they arrive at their conclusions. As PolitiFact's web site explains, for example, "PolitiFact relies on on-the-record interviews and publishes a list of sources with every Truth-O-Meter item. ... The goal is to help readers judge for themselves whether they agree with the ruling." (Recently, when PolitiFact reached a different conclusion from its fact-checking peers on a claim Joe Biden made about crime rates, its editors published a thorough analysis of the differences and invited readers to share their thoughts.[38])

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>
> Michael Dobbs, former "Fact Checker" columnist for the *Washington Post*

> "All we can do is say — we show our work, these are the links that we use, this is how we came to this conclusion. If people are going to disagree with us, then there's nothing we can do about that."
>
> Chas Danner, co-founder of "Meet the Facts"

By the logic of this transparent, "show-your-work" approach, it shouldn't matter who does the fact-checking—Media Matters, NewsBusters, or for that matter a paid opposition researcher—only that the work stands up to scrutiny. Asked in an "On the Media" interview whether he could be taken seriously as a fact-checker despite being an admitted Democrat, the co-founder of the site "Meet the Facts" had a straightforward answer: "All we can do is say—we show our work, these are the links that we use, this is how we came to this conclusion. If people are going to disagree with us, then there's nothing we can do about that."[39] This logic is echoed in calls for journalists in general to be transparent about their beliefs and political commitments, rather than maintaining that they don't have any. As Jay Rosen has argued, "it's easier to trust in 'here's where I'm coming from' than the View from

Nowhere."[40] (*Time*'s James Poniewozic made this argument in his essay "The Case for Full Disclosure."[41])

In practice, however, a reputation for independence and a willingness to check politicians of every stripe gives fact-checkers much wider currency. This is unmistakable in tracing the influence of FactCheck.org and PolitiFact. Media outlets which cite the work of the two groups, or which feature Brooks Jackson or Bill Adair as on-air guests, almost always emphasize their status as nonpartisan observers. Thanks in part to that status, in 2008 FactCheck.org became one of the first news organizations to see firsthand the original, embossed Hawaiian birth certificate for President Obama, helping to put to rest doubts about his citizenship (at least for anyone willing to listen).[42] In February of 2011, ABC's Jake Tapper cited PolitiFact's research on the air, in the White House press room, to contradict a budget claim by press secretary Jay Carney—an unusually high-profile example of fact-checking work making a direct impact in public discourse. Tapper prefaced his challenge by emphasizing that PolitiFact "is nonpartisan ... both sides tend to agree with its nonpartisan analysis."[43]

Of course, it is fair to ask whether journalists should cast a wider net in looking for authoritative sources. The question becomes, what tests should reporters and news producers use in deciding who is a credible fact-checker? But the evidence today suggests that fact-checking performed by nonpartisan analysts has broader reach in public discourse. Media analysis reviewed in the next section supports this conclusion, finding that partisan fact-checkers speak mostly to like-minded audiences.

The journalistic divide

Even within the precincts of professional objective journalism, a precise definition of fact-checking can be difficult to nail down. After all, isn't fact-checking a basic ingredient of journalism?[44] The defining techniques of the profession—reporting, interviewing, etc.—all center around gathering and verifying facts. Journalism scholar Jean Chalaby devised the term "fact-centered discourse" to describe the brand of objective reporting, built on those techniques, that first took root in the U.S. and the U.K. in the late 1800s.[45] What distinguished this new genre from older forms of political journalism was precisely its emphasis on providing factual information about current events, marked by a commitment to accuracy, to reliability and to comprehensiveness. What exactly do the new professional fact-checkers add to this "fact-centered" formula?

One commonsense way to distinguish the work of dedicated fact-checkers is to say they focus on reported speech—on what's inside quotation marks. Whereas internal fact-checking at traditional news outlets is mostly designed to make sure the reporter got the quote right, the political fact-checker determines, after the fact, whether the quote is actually true.

Indeed, professional fact-checking organizations spend a lot of time scouring the news for interesting or important claims to check—claims that in many cases a journalist reported but failed to evaluate. On-air news discussion, especially on the Sunday political shows, offers a particularly rich vein because the format allows guests to make bold claims that generally go unchallenged. Both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact scrutinize the transcripts of these programs each week, looking for suspicious statements by the political leaders who headline the shows. (PolitiFact also checks claims by pundits, and has an official fact-checking partnership with ABC's "This Week.") The short-lived fact-checking site "Meet the Facts" was founded by a pair of college students in 2010 to hold politicians accountable for their statements on a single news program, NBC's "Meet the Press." The site's mission statement took aim directly at host David Gregory's remark that it was up to his viewers to decide which guests were telling the truth.

Newspaper reports from the campaign trail are another good starting point for fact-checkers, since they often highlight the most dramatic or controversial parts of a speech. In March, for instance, FactCheck.org took on Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, then a rumored presidential contender, for telling Chicago business leaders that seven million jobs had been lost on President Obama's watch.[46] Figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that Barbour had "grossly exaggerated" actual job losses, which were about half that amount. Nevertheless a report in the *New York Times* had quoted Barbour's statistical

zinger the third paragraph, without telling readers whether it was correct.[47]

Any journalist will rightly object that it is a gross oversimplification to say reporters don't care about the truth of what their sources say. But the overriding goal of internal fact-checking is to eliminate errors or falsehoods, not to draw attention to them, especially in a routine piece of news. If a quote is flagged as problematic, it can always be fixed with an additional interview, or dropped altogether. *The New Yorker*'s storied fact-checking department proceeds by crossing out each word in an article, testing the truth of every single identifiable claim, in or out of quotes. Even at that magazine, though, head fact-checker Peter Canby confirms that the standard response to an error in quotes is to fix it (after consulting with the source) or to cut it. Only if the claim tends to "reveal something about the person's outlook" will a reporter highlight a false statement by a source.

> "Fact check incessantly. Whenever a false assertion is asserted, it has to be corrected in the same paragraph, not in a box of analysis on the side."
>
> Brooke Gladstone, "On the Media" co-host

This comparison underscores an obvious but important point: What distinguishes the new class of dedicated fact-checkers from their journalistic peers is their commitment to *publicize* errors or falsehoods. This is what *New York Times* public editor Arthur Brisbane was asking readers in a controversial column from January, 2012 titled, "Should the Times Be a Truth Vigilante?"—not simply whether the paper should check facts, but whether it should make a point of publicly challenging misleading claims by political figures.[48] The paper has increasingly run dedicated "fact-check" stories after debates and speeches. Brisbane wondered whether that kind of fact-checking be built into routine political coverage; his readers responded with a resounding, "Yes!"[49]

Many fact-checkers and media critics agree that fact-checking shouldn't be limited to special pieces or segments. The partnership between PolitiFact and ABC's "This Week" resulted from a provocative essay by Jay Rosen on using fact-checking to "fix" the Sunday shows as works of journalism.[50] In a 2008 interview with Bill Moyers, "On the Media" co-host Brooke Gladstone declared that the only way to counteract rampant misinformation today is for reporters to "Fact check incessantly. Whenever a false assertion is asserted, it has to be corrected in the same paragraph, not in a box of analysis on the side."[51] Bill Adair told an interviewer in 2008, "I feel that, for the first time in my career, I'm really making a difference. ... We're doing what the press should be doing all the time."[52] In his companion report, Michael Dobbs places fact-checking squarely in the tradition of "truth-seeking" journalism, a tradition that rejects false balance and empowers reporters to evaluate statements and draw conclusions based on their own analysis of objective facts.

It is hard to disagree with this prescription for American journalism. The question becomes how to make political fact-checking a basic part of the reporting toolkit, which demands an honest look at why this is a specialized genre today. What would it mean for reporters to "fact check incessantly?" Can the techniques developed by dedicated fact checkers—a commitment to transparent analysis, to using only named sources, and to naming and shaming—work in any report from Capitol Hill or from the campaign trail? Are there any good reasons for elite news institutions like the *Post* and the *Times* to keep reporting and fact-checking separate—to have one article about what was said at the debate, and another about whether it was true?

The answers hinge at least in part on how much we value so-called "access" journalism. One reason fact-checking has evolved into a specialized genre is that journalists who have to protect their relationships with officials don't make very effective fact-checkers. But the reverse may also be true—that reporters willing to challenge political claims won't be as good at getting inside information. (At the AP, reporters appear to move fluidly between fact-checking and the political desk, but at the *Washington Post* and at the dedicated fact-checking groups, being a political fact-checker is a full-time job.)

The impact of fact-checking

Like all political journalists, fact-checkers have more than one audience, and more than one mission. Formally they write for a broad democratic public, providing information meant to help citizens to make wiser choices at the ballot box or in their lives. The first line on PolitiFact's "about" page, addressed to the reader, says the site's goal is "to help you find the truth in American politics." Glenn Kessler's, at the *Washington Post*, declares "We will seek to explain difficult issues, provide missing context and provide analysis and explanation of various 'code words' used by politicians, diplomats and others to obscure or shade the truth." FactCheck.org aims to "increase public knowledge and understanding." The site maintains an active "Mailbag" page; interns also respond to individual email inquiries, pointing readers to previously published items that address their questions. All three of these fact-checkers, and their many counterparts at the state level, invite readers to submit items they'd like to see checked.

But fact-checkers have a second, narrower audience, which consists of the public figures they cover and of other political journalists. This audience is crucial for fact-checking to function as a brand of "accountability journalism." "Keeping Arizona Honest," runs the motto for AZ Fact Check; the unspoken assumption is that political distortions exposed by the site won't be repeated.

Educating the public

Determining how successful fact-checkers are in their broad educational mission is trickier than it seems. The size of their audience offers one starting point, and here the news is encouraging. Fact-checking appears to be a crowd-pleasing form of journalism, an important reason for its popularity with newspaper publishers and broadcast news producers. The two top fact-checking sites, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact, draw several hundred thousand unique visitors per month—impressive numbers for a specialized and wonky form of journalism. Importantly for advertiser economics, these reports sometimes have an evergreen nature. A fact check may be relevant long after the news event that generated it.

Of course, audience size makes a poor proxy for influence if a fact-checker is preaching to the choir—that is, if audiences are only or mainly exposed to fact-checks that tend to confirm their existing beliefs. This would be a particular irony since fact-checking is meant to be a corrective to what Cass Sunstein, in "Republic.com," called a public sphere in which citizens inhabit divergent and politicized news worlds. (As Adair commented in a recent interview, "What's happened in the internet age is that those filters, the legacy media, are not as important anymore because ... you probably also get information from blogs and internet news sources and even emails that are forwarded to you by your crazy uncle who has various conspiracy theories."[53])

No decisive research exists to say whether people visiting a nonpartisan fact-checking site engage in "confirmation bias" at the level of story selection—whether die-hard Democrats visiting FactCheck.org in mid-November ignored the headline "Wasserman Schultz Manufactures Jobs Figure" to click on "Super PAC Polishes Huntsman's Resume." Anecdotally, professional fact-checkers receive a great deal of email taking issue with "bias" in particular items, which suggests not all readers ignore reports they are likely to disagree with. The furor over PolitiFact's choice of Democratic claims that Republicans voted to end Medicare as its 2011 "Lie of the Year" is a case in point.

Of course, even if a reader who believed the Obamas wouldn't have a White House Christmas tree (or that they called it a "Holiday Tree") did read FactCheck.org's recent debunking of that online rumor, he or she may not have been convinced. Evidence suggests that in certain cases contradictory evidence actually boosts adherence to a mistaken view. In a companion paper, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Riefler review current research about "motivated reasoning" and what this evidence suggests for the fact-checkers' mission of informing the public.

Influencing public discourse

If a second broad goal of fact-checking is to "reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics," as FactCheck.org declares, then politicians and candidates need to pay attention—which

seems to be most likely when the rest of the news media are paying attention.

The link is difficult to prove, because fact-checkers rarely get credit when their work forces a politician to change his tune. After ABC's Jake Tapper cited PolitiFact to challenge White House budget math, President Obama appeared to drop the questionable claim—in a speech a week later he said instead that the budget would bring domestic spending "to the lowest levels since Dwight Eisenhower."[54] (FactCheck.org and PolitiFact took issue with that wording as well.) In his companion report, Michael Dobbs notes that even Rudy Giuliani, notoriously oblivious to complaints about his exaggerations, eventually dropped a claim about U.K. mortality rates from prostate cancer, once enough fact-checkers and reporters had piled on.

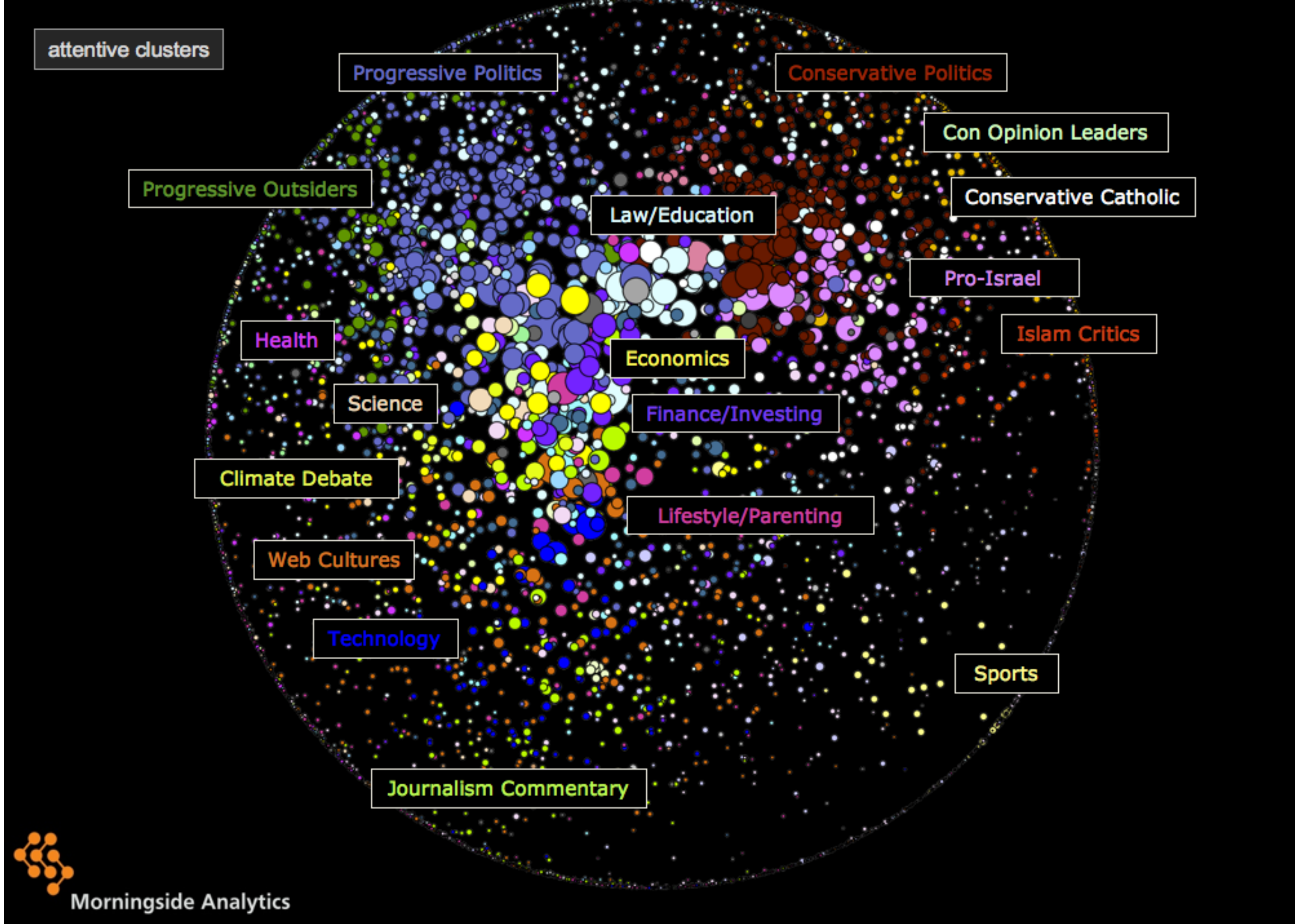
The best evidence that politicians pay attention to fact-checkers may be how heatedly their staffs complain after a negative review. (Every article about fact-checking seems to include grousing from political operatives. "The candidates hate these ... they see it as people coming out and attacking them personally," a political consultant told AJR last year.[55]) But fear of the fact-checker clearly does not inhibit misleading claims, as demonstrated by the Romney campaign's refusal to pull a recent ad that made it seem as if President Obama held an opinion he had actually attributed to John McCain—despite widespread disapproval from fact-checkers.

At a conference about "media fact-checkers" hosted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center in 2007, Republican consultant Ladonna Lee argued that candidates persist with debunked claims because fact-checking "doesn't mean squat when election day comes," pointing to the example of Giuliani's prostate cancer claim. "Now, you all may say, well, if we can show he's a liar, he may not get through this process," she continued. "But in reality, it's not what the voters are interested in."[56] Democratic consultant Josh Grossfeld of the Mammen Group argues that the impact of fact-checking on campaigns is largely tactical—it might affect the timing of a controversial ad, for instance, but not whether the ad runs at all.[57]

Thus evidence about the impact of fact-checking in public discourse is incomplete, anecdotal, and sometimes contradictory. It seems clear that politicians pay attention and in some cases abandon or alter their claims as a result of pressure from fact-checkers and other journalists. In a post at the *American Prospect*, Paul Waldman suggests a politician's response may depend on his or her base: "The narrower their constituency, the more likely they are to continue on unashamed even after being called out for lying."[58] Any number of other factors may also be at play, from when in the campaign cycle a fact-check appears, to the nature of the original claim and whether it evokes basic strategic themes for the candidate.

> Fact-checkers have more than one audience, and more than one mission. Formally they write for a broad democratic public, providing information meant to help citizens to make wiser choices at the ballot box or in their lives. But fact-checkers have a second, narrower audience, which consists of the public figures they cover and of other political journalists.

A crucial unknown variable is whether (or when) fact-checking work influences other reporting, and how that wider coverage in turn affects the likelihood that political actors will repeat a false claim. How rare is it for reporters to cite a fact-checker in order to dispute a political claim? How often do reporters rely on fact-checkers without citing them? A systematic study of the effect of specific fact-checking interventions on subsequent reporting would greatly advance the conversation about whether fact-checking works. (Such a study would face daunting methodological obstacles, the most basic being the difficulty of finding comparable claims to track and the great number of variables that may affect whether a lie is repeated and how it is reported.)



The media footprint

In the absence of rigorous data on the effect of fact-checking interventions, studying the footprint of fact-checkers in the news media and in online discourse offers a useful first look at their influence.

The fact-checking footprint emerges in two strands of research. Content analysis shows the rise of fact-checking journalism in print and broadcast outlets over the last decade (see chart on page 4). Network analysis prepared by Morningside Analytics maps the fact-checking universe based on both language and linking behavior.

Fact-checking and online discourse

Network analysis of online discourse about fact-checking reveals a conversation that is both very political and highly polarized. The above map of "attentive clusters," generated by Morningside Analytics, represents a "semantic slice" of the wider blogosphere—that subset of all blogs that pays the most attention to fact-checking, as revealed by their patterns of linking (to fact-checkers, to articles about fact-checking, and etc.) as well as by the language they use in posts and in tagging those posts. These blogs are grouped, by color, according to their common interests (again, reflecting commonality in their language and linking). For instance, various stripes of political bloggers participate in the conversation about fact-checking, but so do science skeptics, bloggers debating health care issues, and so on.

The clear division of the network map into left and right hemispheres reflects the highly partisan nature of the blogopshere's conversation about fact-checking; online discourse about technology topics, for instance, or about parenting, does not obey the same deep structural divide (though political divisions surface in almost every subject). Anchoring the discussion about fact-checking on the left are mainstream progressive

Who Pays Attention to Fact-checkers

The Morningside Analytics algorithm groups blogs and other online voices based on the language they use and the resources they link to. These "attentive clusters" are then manually profiled to determine the common interests that bind them together. Various clusters defined according to political or other interests emerge in the discourse around fact-checking; the profiles below note the leaders and top information sources for several interesting clusters (including their favorite fact-checkers or media critics when these score highly).

Conservative politics: This cluster is led by Michelle Malkin, InstaPundit, Power Line, the Drudge Report, and other well-known conservative voices, linking to sources such as the Heritage Foundation and Andrew Breitbart's Big Journalism. Favorite media critic: NewsBusters.

Conservative pro-Israel: This cluster is well integrated into the conservative blogosphere but focuses on Israel-related politics and policy. Leaders include Jihad Watch, IsraPundit, and Gates of Vienna; favorite sources are Right Side News, the Middle East Forum, and the Hudson Institute.

Progressive politics insiders: Leading liberal outlets such as Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, and Common Dreams dominate this cluster; typical information sources include Washington Monthly and the American Prospect. Favorite fact-checkers: Political Correction, Media Matters.

Progressive news junkies. This largely pro-Obama cluster is engaged in an active conversation about breaking political news, relying heavily on mainstream news sources like the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, and the Huffington Post. They are also addicted to fact-checking sites: PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and Media Matters are among their top sources.

Military bloggers: These outlets link heavily into conservative opinion leaders (Drudge Report, Opinion Journal, etc.) but also to Iraq and military-related news sources such as the Mudville Gazette and the Northeast Intelligence Network.

Independent/libertarian: This cluster links across the partisan divide (though conservative voices like Instapundit and Kausfiles dominate) and favors a number of distinctly libertarian and free-market outlets, including Reason magazine and the Hayek Center. Favorite fact-checkers: Snopes, FactCheck.org.

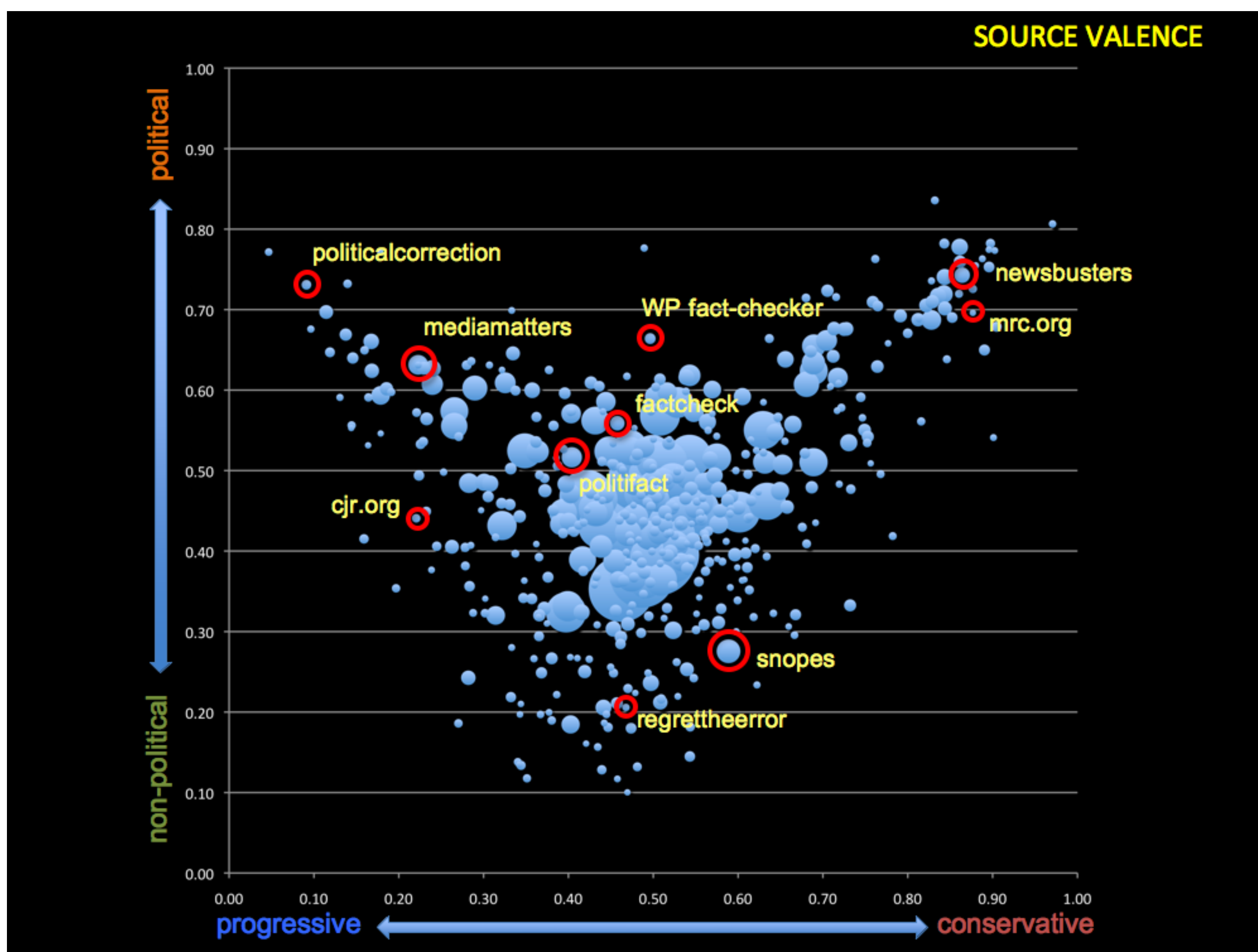
Journalism and technology: This cluster includes sites involved in the conversation about the future of news in a changing economic and technological environment. Members run from Media Bistro and Techdirt to Buzz Machine and Clay Shirky; NiemanLab, MondayNote, and Paid Content are among the top sources.

Health and healthcare: A broad spectrum of sites from the personal, academic, policy, and professional worlds in health and medicine make up this cluster, with top sources that run from the Times' "Well" blog to the FDA and Kaiser Health News. Favorite fact-checker: HealthNewsReviews.org.

Climate debate: Sites in this cluster focus on the debate over global warming, mostly from an environmentalist standpoint; top sources of information include the *Times*' dotEarth blog, Climate Progress, and the EPA.

bloggers, whose core includes outlets such as Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, Think Progress, and etc. One the right one finds two dominant groupings: mainstream conservatives (led by Michelle Malkin, the Drudge Report, etc.) and another conservative cluster focused mainly on Israel and the Middle East. Further on the margin in each case are more politically extreme clusters, such as progressive outsiders (who criticize the Obama Administration from the left) or, on the right, anti-Islam sites and mil-bloggers.

Linking the left and right hemispheres, as a kind of social-network isthmus, one finds a cluster of bloggers focused on federal and state policy around law, education, taxes, and so on. But the fact-checking conversation is diverse and spans a number of groups with interests beyond politics and policy, including



basic areas such as sports, technology, and entertainment. A striking feature of the map is that the mainstream progressive cluster is woven into that wider interest structure, while political discourse on the right is both denser and more isolated.

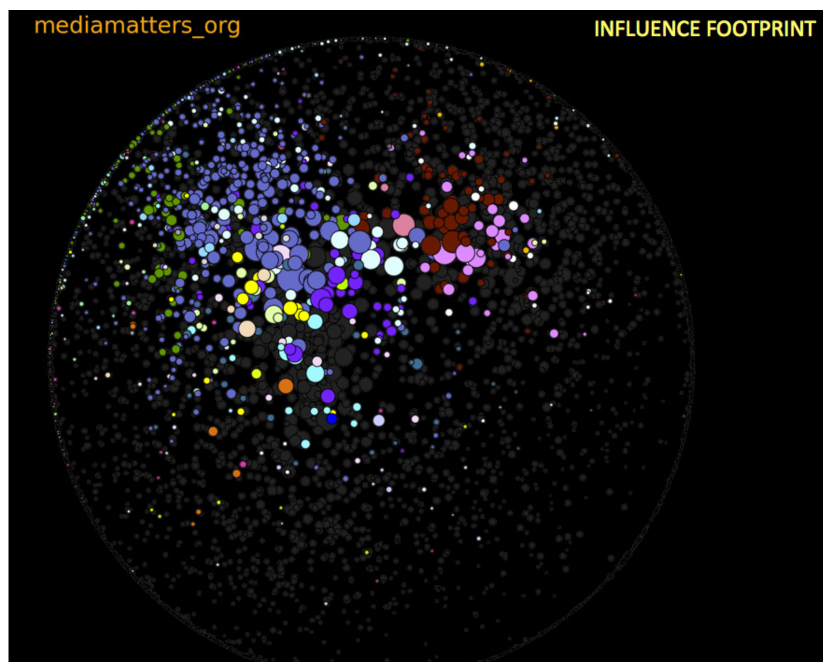
Several clusters of special interest to fact-checkers emerge quite distinctly, including a group of blogs focused on journalism and technology (featuring Jeff Jarvis, Clay Shirky, and other familiar voices as well as outlets like paidcontent.org, journalism.com, and the Online Journalism Review). Other distinct interest areas include health and healthcare, the climate debate, and science/medical skepticism. (See sidebar for more detail on salient clusters and their preferred information sources.)

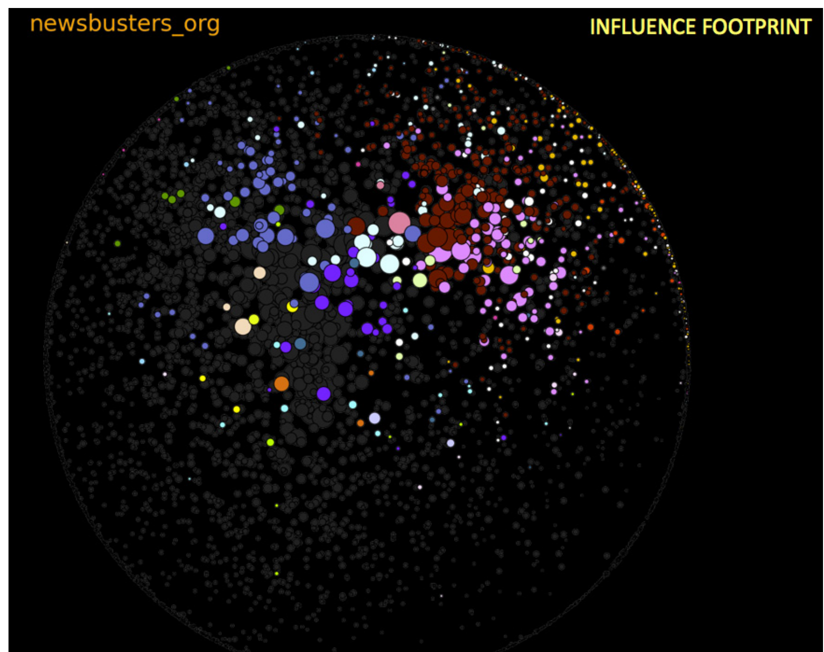
The Morningside Analytics algorithm that produces this semantic slice of the wider blogosphere also reveals what could be called "fact-checking champions"—those individual sites which, regardless of their native interest cluster, are most intensely focused on the conversation about fact-checking. Other than the fact-checking sites themselves, the list includes a number of niche sites (for instance, blogs dedicated to debunking the fact-checkers). But considering only sites above a basic popularity threshold (defined by the number of sites linking to them) produces a revealing array; the top five fact-checking champions are Crooks and Liars, PressThink, the Sunlight Foundation, Legal Insurrection, and the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Political valence of the fact-checkers

While the online conversation around fact-checking is quite polarized on the whole, however, individual fact-checkers and media critics occupy very different positions within it. The "source valence" chart above maps sources of information in this discourse according to

their level of overall politicization (the vertical axis) and their particular political valence (the horizontal axis). Each measure is a reflection of who pays attention to these sites. If a fact-checker is linked to mainly by political blogs, it will score highly on the politicization axis. If liberal clusters link to it more frequently than conservatives, it will be pushed to the left side of the chart; if the opposite is true, it is pulled to the right.





The differences are striking. Snopes.com, the popular general-interest fact-checker that specializes in debunking chain emails and online rumors, appears well below the dense political core of the blogosphere, and roughly in the center of the left-right scale. (Snopes is the most influential of the fact-checkers highlighted here in terms of total links from other sites.) Regret the Error, focused on "media corrections, retractions, apologies, clarifications and trends regarding accuracy and honesty in the press," is similarly apolitical.

The three elite, national fact-checkers—FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker—take part in a deeply political conversation, appearing above the central core of the map. The Post's site scores highest of the three on the politicization index, perhaps because it focuses exclusively on fact-checking public figures while its two peers sometimes run Snopes-like pieces. Despite being highly political, though, all three appear near the center of the left-right axis. This results from two related factors: relatively high attention from centrist or establishment political clusters (such as the policy cluster noted above), and relatively balanced attention from more progressive and conservative clusters.

Partisan fact-checkers and media critics receive much less balanced attention. Media Matters appears to be fairly influential, falling right between PolitiFact and FactCheck.org in terms of inbound links. However, most of that attention comes from bloggers on the left of the political spectrum. Political Correction, a fact-checking site launched by Media Matters, occupies the top left corner—it is literally one of the most left-political sites on the map, in terms linking patterns. The *Columbia Journalism Review* also appears to draw most of its attention from the liberal blogosphere, though it scores far lower in terms of overall politicization.

The Media Research Center and its NewsBusters project emerge clearly as the conservative counterparts to Media Matters. Though they draw less attention overall, an even greater share of that attention

comes from the right side of the spectrum, placing both sites at the far top right of the map. Accuracy In Media, the conservative media watchdog founded in 1969, occupies a similar position.

The fact that partisan media critics and fact-checkers receive most of their attention from fellow travelers does not mean, however, that political opponents ignore them. In many cases opponents are the only outside clusters that do link to partisan information sources, though not as intensely as like-minded outlets. (This pattern, repeated in the broadcast media, is a reliable sign of negative or critical attention.) It is the political center, and the wider blogosphere, that tends to ignore the most partisan voices.

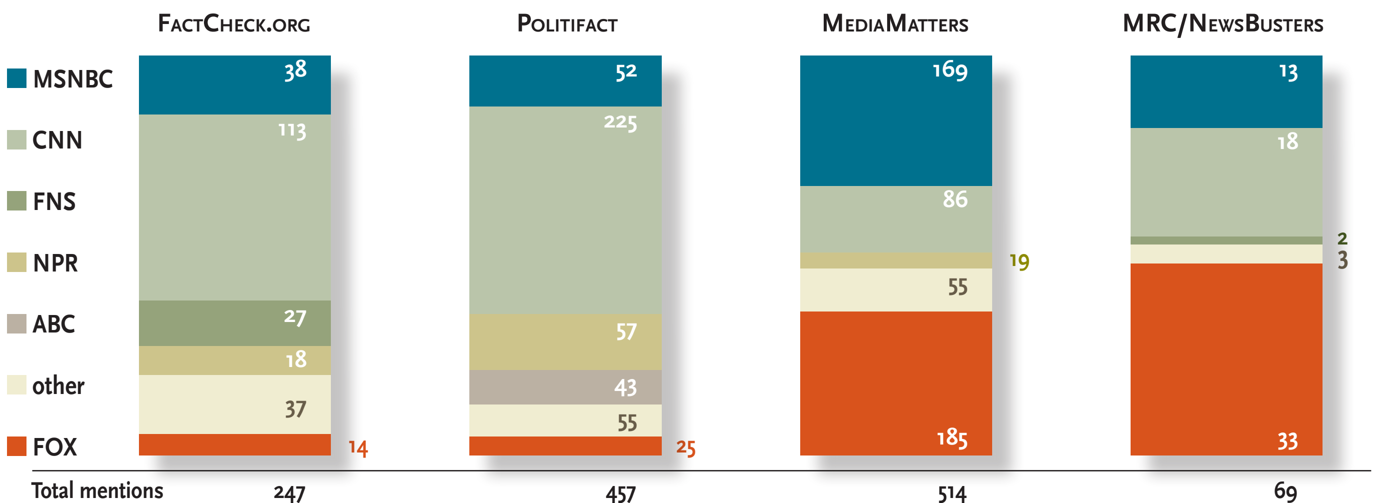
In this way, for instance, Media Matters attentive profile—the map of sites that link to it as an information source—"lights up" every progressive cluster on the map, but also sections of the "conservative politics" and "conservative pro-Israel" clusters. See charts on previous page.) Likewise NewsBusters penetrates far into the conservative blog hemisphere (including "conservative Catholic" and "anti-Islam" clusters) but also receives links from a swath of mainstream "progressive politics" sites, and even from parts of the progressive outsider cluster. These links are almost certainly critical.

In contrast, fact-checkers such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact penetrate deeply into both the liberal and conservative hemispheres, and into the wider blogging world as well. Adjusting for the size of different attentive clusters, which can vary widely, groups that pay more-than-expected attention to FactCheck.org include bloggers discussing military issues and the war on terror, a libertarian/independent cluster, news and politics junkies, and progressive outsiders. PolitiFact is an especially popular source among news and politics junkies, policy bloggers, independents, and progressive insiders. (Again, this is not to say these groups generate most of the traffic to these two fact-checkers, however, because clusters vary in size and activity.)

Fact-checkers in broadcast news

To test for comparable polarization in the traditional media, a content analysis examined the footprint of various fact-checkers and media critics on the television and radio news sources included in Nexis' "news transcripts" category. This citation analysis only tallied the number of news program editions or segments that included at least one reference to one of four organizations: FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, Media Matters, and NewsBusters or its parent the Media Research Center. It did not did not test for fact-checking reports that challenged political claims. References could take any form, from an interview in a formal fact-checking segment to a cursory (or even hostile) reference from a news anchor or guest.

The charts below represent total on-air citations for each group from January 2008 through November



2011, sorted according to the network carrying the story. The results confirm first of all that these fact-checkers and media critics are no strangers to the broadcast news universe: Some 514 segments in the database referred to Media Matters, 457 to PolitiFact, and 247 to FactCheck.org. NewsBusters/MRC has a much smaller broadcast footprint in this period, appearing in 69 segments.

The results also point to the same sort of polarization evident in the online footprints of these groups, though perhaps with a more pronounced emphasis on hostile attention. Both FactCheck.org and PolitiFact receive the lion's share of their attention from networks that position themselves as non-partisan, such as CNN and NPR. Adding the share segments appearing on Fox and MSNBC as a crude ratio of partisan attention yields a score of just 21 percent for FactCheck.org and 17 percent for Poltifact.

Media Matters, the "progressive research and information center" presents a sharp contrast, with a partisan attention ratio of nearly 70 percent. Surprisingly, its primary source of broadcast attention is Fox, accounting for well over a third of all segments mentioning the group, followed closely by MSNBC. (This initial analysis did not code for positive versus hostile references. However, a scan of several dozen results supports the conclusion that references on Fox were negative.)

NewsBusters (dedicated to "documenting, exposing and neutralizing liberal media bias") and the Media Research Center also scored highly on the partisan attention index, with two-thirds of segments that mentioned the groups appearing on Fox or MSNBC. However nearly half of their attention came from Fox, followed by CNN, where MRC founder and president Brent Bozell has been a frequent guest.

Summary of findings

Several findings emerge clearly from the content and network analysis:

- Fact-checking in print and broadcast news outlets has been on the rise over the last decade, with three times as many fact-checks in 2010 as in 2000. Though fact-checking still peaks before an election, both the terms used in fact-checks and their distribution over the year suggest this kind of journalism is moving beyond coverage of political campaigns.
- In broadcast news outlets, attention to fact-checkers obeys a partisan logic: PolitiFact and FactCheck.org are mentioned mainly on ostensibly neutral outlets such as CNN, while liberal Media Matters and conservative NewsBusters get most of their attention from Fox News (on the right) and MSNBC (on the left), though not solely from their ostensible supporters.
- On the Internet, distinctly progressive and conservative voices dominate the discussion about fact-checking. These two quite separate political hemispheres are linked by policy-oriented outlets, which also pay substantial attention to fact-checkers.
- Online attention to partisan fact-checkers and media critics skews very heavily toward their fellow travellers. Progressive outlets link to and talk about Media Matters, while conservative ones pay attention to NewsBusters, for instance. (In each case a core of political opponents also pays attention—very likely negative—to these partisan sites.)
- FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the *Washington Post*'s Fact-Checker also receive attention mainly from political sites. However, these nonpartisan fact-checkers have been very effective in crossing the aisle, with intense but roughly equal attention from political bloggers on the left and the right.
- Though attention to fact-checkers generally comes from voices concerned with policy and politics, several distinct areas of interest emerge in the network, including clusters focused on science, on economics, on health, on climate change, and on the debate over journalism and new media.

This analysis defined the fact-checking world broadly in order to map a wide array of voices involved in that conversation. Building on this platform, network analytic methods might also be used for a more focused mapping of specific claims and counterclaims, to study how individual fact-checking work propagates and which corners of the conversational network it reaches.

Conclusion and open questions

The fact-checking landscape is both too new and too varied to justify firm conclusions about its effectiveness in the longer run. Fact-checkers come in various forms—journalists, media critics, partisans—and continue to experiment with new story formats, new technologies, and new distribution strategies. Moreover, the possibility of aggregating or integrating the work of various fact-checkers, and of marrying it to audience-side annotation tools or data overlays, holds great appeal, though this work remains embryonic.

So far it does seem clear that:

1. Once an untruth has been propagated widely it becomes very difficult to counteract, because of the fragmented media landscape and the difficulty of convincing people to discard erroneous beliefs.
2. Fact-checking has taken root both inside and outside of news organizations.
3. New kinds of fact-checking will continue to emerge as digital news production processes become more sophisticated, creating an opportunity for better use of data and greater engagement by subject-matter experts.

The preceding discussion, as well as the companion reports from Michael Dobbs and from Brendan Nyhan and Jason Riefler, suggest a number of key unanswered questions.

How much of a difference does speed make? Because misperceptions become much more difficult to correct once they are entrenched, Nyhan and Riefler suggest that journalists get the story right the first time, and correct errors as quickly as possible. The effect of simultaneous fact-checking on readers and viewers has not been well studied. However, it is also crucial to understand that this recommendation demands that journalists widen their definition of accuracy to include actively challenging misleading claims.

Should every political reporter be a fact-checker? Many fact-checkers have echoed the call for journalists to challenge misleading claims. Michael Dobbs' report endorses "truth-seeking" journalism that draws conclusions and calls out falsehoods; Arthur Brisbane of the *Times* has also raised the question. This requires an honest look at why reporters avoid challenging their sources today, at how routine fact-checking would change the relationship between reporters and officials, and even at whether anything would be lost.

Are aggregators the answer? New software platforms that match fact-checking research to claims reported in the media seem to offer an appealing solution, by giving audiences the tools to find the truth even when reporters don't. These platforms remain mostly hypothetical today. More importantly, they raise the question of why people choose the information sources they do—and how much impact such tools can have in a fragmented and partisan news environment.

What role can partisan or issue-based fact-checkers play? Initial research seems to confirm that partisan fact-checking outlets are less effective in reaching across the political divide to audiences whose views might be challenged by their work. But the divide between journalism and politics is a blurry one, and historically much celebrated reporting has been produced by partisan voices. In a culture that celebrates transparency, it is worth asking whether fact-checkers and journalists in general should dismiss rigorous research based solely on the politics of its source.

How much can audiences contribute? As Michael Dobbs writes, readers offer an invaluable resource for fact-checkers. However, experiments in "crowdsourced" fact-checking have failed to gain traction so far. Most fact-checkers have experimented with some form of audience input, but in daily practice they also confront very vocal opposition from readers who object to their analysis. A real tension exists between seeing the online public as a source of wisdom, and seeing it mainly as a vehicle for misinformation.

> When do fact-checkers affect political behavior? Perhaps the final test of fact-checking's effectiveness is whether politicians abandon misleading claims after they are exposed. No studies so far have shown how often this is the case or what conditions make it more likely.

How do fact-checkers influence news coverage? A crucial unanswered question is how news coverage changes after the fact-checkers weigh in on a controversial issue. More news outlets are running fact-checking pieces, and in some cases reporters contradict misleading claims even in routine political coverage. But it is not clear how dedicated fact-checkers influence these decisions.

How can fact-checks be more effective? The work of Nyhan and Reifler suggests that the source of the fact check, the wording of the article, and the format of presentation can affect its impact, but relatively little is known. Does the ideology of the news outlet matter? How can fact-checkers debunk a myth without reenforcing its message? What happens when viewers who haven't been exposed to a claim see it refuted by a fact-checker?

When do fact-checkers affect political behavior? Perhaps the final test of fact-checking's effectiveness is whether politicians abandon misleading claims after they are exposed. Though fact-checkers can point to cases where their work altered political rhetoric, no studies so far have attempted to show how often this is the case or what conditions make it more likely.

As we seek to understand how citizens can be inoculated from the pernicious effects of misinformation, learning the answers to these questions will aide those who seek to explore the fact-checking space as fact-checkers, as journalists or as investors. Without more work in this area, our democracy, ever more permeated by misinformation, will be weakened.

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