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THE LIMITS OF FACT-CHECKING: EIGHT NOTES ON CONSENSUS REALITY

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Introduction

Considerable efforts and resources have been allocated to the fact-checking industry as a potential solution to correcting prior knowledge and offsetting the upsurge in hyper-partisanship that nurtures misinformation (Marietta & Barker, 2019). The expansion of this industry is associated with a political context marked by the spread of misinformation (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012), where trust in government and institutions, including news organizations, have markedly decreased (Amazeen, 2020; Zuckerman, 2017). Several organizations emerged that envisioned an expansion of journalistic practices devoted not only to selecting information but actively classifying information that is deemed to be true and therefore trustworthy and information that is false and, consequently, harmful to the public debate (Graves, 2016). The number of fact-checking organizations more than doubled since 2016, reaching 304 organizations in 84 different countries worldwide (Stencel & Luther, 2020). As the industry expands as a partial solution to mitigate informational uncertainty and institutional distrust, its capabilities and limitations to counter the misinformation landscape should be reviewed.

The main tenet of fact-checking consists of verifying and correcting false claims to protect the democratic principles underpinning political deliberation. The practice is posited as the diametrical opposite of misinformation, providing evidence to rebut the inaccuracies advanced to mislead individuals (Jiang & Wilson, 2018). However, while the fact-checking movement arises and establishes partnerships with social media platforms (Facebook, 2018a, 2018b; Twitter, 2019), practitioners are also shifting their focus to combat online misinformation (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020). This expansion is also designed to counter the growing distrust in democratic institutions, particularly the government and mainstream media (Amazeen, 2020; Zuckerman, 2017), while also

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offsetting the growing epistemic crisis manifested in reports about information disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Yet, the rampant distribution of false content and the epistemic effects of its spreadability across social networks poses fundamental questions about fact-checking limitations in addressing problems that do not occur in isolation. Instead, these problems stem from broader social tensions, technological affordances, and partisan arrangements (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017).

In this study we review the literature on fact-checking and the empirical evidence contending that it can correct prior knowledge and false information. We outline eight fundamental problems with fact-checking revolving around epistemology, methodology, implementation, polarization, bias, efficacy, ambiguity, ephemerality, objectivity, and criticism. We discuss these problems in relation to recent developments, including the establishment of fact-checking agencies across the world and national elections, both in Western countries and in the Global South that led to greater uncertainty despite intense fact-checking. In the following, we discuss in detail the unsurmountable limitations of fact-checking summarized in eight fundamental limitations.

Discussion

The four case studies discussed in this study foreground the shortcomings of fact-checking in contexts where contentious politics took precedence over consensual reasoning. They also caution against normative parameters of valid speech, particularly in contexts of an institutional crisis of trust where hegemonic narratives are fraught and disputed by actors disengaged from consensus reasoning. The case studies also show that dissensus reality and conspiracy theorizing are not prerogatives of the far-right (Benkler et al., 2018), notwithstanding conservatives being reportedly more hostile towards fact-checkers in various countries (Lyons, Mérola, Reifler, & Stoeckel, 2020; Shin & Thorson, 2017).

The allegiances that underpin the misinformation landscape may be detached from ideological fault lines, feeding instead on epistemological cleavages where the establishment of facts is contingent on political and value-based perspectives. Fact checks thus reestablish the social order by resorting to forms of universal demarcation—including true/false, fact/fiction, and nature/spirit—principles that continue to orient journalistic practices (Waisbord, 2018). However, with social media communication allowing social groups to insulate themselves from conflicting information, it may not be possible for individuals to evaluate news or rely on fact-checks based on the trust and authority of the original producer if they sit in opposition to their own modes of justification (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

Conclusion

We reviewed the literature in the area and argued that the central problem with fact-checking is the premise that false information can be offset with more information and that facts are events universally agreed upon. We posit that the growing fact-checking industry is detached from the misinformation landscape and outline eight fundamental problems with fact-checking revolving around epistemology, implementation, bias,

efficacy, ambiguity, objectivity, ephemerality, and criticism. We discuss these shortcomings in relation to the establishment of fact-checking agencies across the world and their role in national elections in the United Kingdom, United States, Malaysia, and Brazil. The article concludes with a discussion on the extent to which fact-checking may be effective against false information in a context where consensus reality has been super-imposed by individual reality.

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