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HOW FACT-CHECKERS ARE BECOMING MACHINE LEARNERS: A CASE OF META'S THIRD PARTY PROGRAMME

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Introduction

Political fact-checking, emerging in the US at the beginning 2000s as a particular form of journalism, has expanded to an international movement with hundreds of organisations across the globe (Duke Reporters lab, 2023). One of the recent developments in the field is what some scholars call the "debunking turn" (Graves et al. 2023), in which fact-checking organisations move from fact-checking expressions of politicians and public figures to checking claims made on social media.

A main driver of this change is the proliferation of a paid program initiated by Meta, where fact-checkers check and label claims on the platform in exchange for monetary remuneration (Meta, 2021). In this process, items (e.g., Facebook posts) are pushed to fact-checkers through an internal interface created for them by Facebook, which includes ML components to identify potential false claims (Ananny, 2020).

This paper draws on interviews with and fieldwork amongst fact-checkers who are or have been part of the Meta partnership. Based on the empirical insights we argue that the human-machine assemblage in fact-checking is (1) enabling a move beyond the 'debunking turn' by turning journalists into 'machine learners' (Mackenzie, 2017) and (2) cements a 'politics of demarcation' (Marres, 2018) in which public contestation over public facts is diminished and moved into networked infrastructures (Annany, 2020).

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With this argument, the paper highlights an additional aspect of the platformisation of journalism, as the labelling and claim-checking work of journalists now also enables large tech platforms to expand technical infrastructures that commodify journalistic work by turning it into training data aimed at improving their ML systems and algorithms. This enables platforms to move further beyond their current market role (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), as they also participate in the further industrialisation and standardisation of fact-checking.

As large tech companies become industry leaders in the provision of ML systems for, among other things, fact-checking, the need to understand what politics they produce equally increases, as they become integral in the production of democratic ideals of citizens and public debate (Marres, 2018; Annany, 2020).

The Fact-Checking Assemblage

In this paper, we approach fact-checking as a sociotechnical phenomenon, where human fact-checkers and machine learning systems work in collaboration to select, produce and present 'facts' on Facebook. Concretely, we draw on existing work that engaged with machine learning and its interfaces as sociotechnical assemblages (Bucher, 2013; Schjøtt Hansen and Hartley, 2021; Rieder and Skop, 2021, see also Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that highlight how agency emerges through the assembling of heterogeneous actors (human and non-human). As Bucher (2013: 481) writes: "(...) Facebook, by organizing heterogeneous relations in a specific way, constitutes a productive force: it makes new relations possible".

In this paper, it is the 'productiveness' of this assemblage that is at the centre of the analysis, as we explore how it produces and limits certain agencies for fact-checkers. In analysing what we refer to as the 'fact-checking assemblage', we, therefore, pay careful attention to how the machine learning system by Meta, its interface and affordances produce certain understandings of fact-checkers, facts, and the political role of fact-checking in society. In turn, we also show examples of ways in which fact-checkers negotiate with the system or simply circumvent it (see also Schjøtt and Bengtsson, 2024).

Methodology

This contribution is based on two bodies of empirical work done separately. The first is a series of semi-structured interviews with fact checkers who are members of the International Fact Checkers' Network (IFCN) and partake in Meta's third-party fact-checking program (3PFC). The group is quite heterogeneous in terms of geographic spread and includes 18 fact-checkers from eight countries and three continents. Some of them worked directly with Facebook as part of the partnership and some were related to the periphery of the project in different ways. Interviews were conducted in March 2021-November 2023, each interview lasting 45 to 90 minutes. Background and contextual data were also gathered from Facebook's public website, which discussed the program, and attendance at two fact-checking global summits,

“Global Fact”, on June 2022 in Oslo and June 2023 in Seoul.

The second body of data is comprised of observations collected during an ethnographic enquiry at Tjekdet.dk, the Danish fact-checking organisation that acts as the third-party fact-checker for Meta in Denmark. The fieldwork was conducted in the spring of 2021 and over four months with weekly full-day visits to their offices in Copenhagen.

The interviews were analysed using Abductive Analysis (Tavori and Timmermans, 2014). Similarly, the observational data was iteratively coded using a ‘bottom-up’ strategy to develop thematic codes (Gibbs, 2012). In this analysis, overlapping codes regarding the fact-checkers attempts to ‘train’ the system are combined, together with codes relating to the underlying assumptions tied to the democratic role of fact-checking and the way these were negotiated through the affordances provided by Meta.

Preliminary Analysis

The core of the work fact-checkers do for Meta is labelling claims made by users on the platform, based on a list of labels provided by Meta. These are False, Altered, Partly False, Missing Context, True, and Satire (Meta, 2021). Fact-checkers also write an article on each fact check, which they get paid for. However, the interface visible to users on Meta platforms only promotes the label and fact-checking organisation name, and reading the article, where additional context is provided, demands clicking to move to another link. On their organisational public websites, some fact-checking organisations use other labels or do not use short labels at all. In the analysis, we show how the labelling practice has a structuring and disciplinary effect, cementing certain understandings of public truths or falsehoods, and forcing fact-checkers to comply with these.

We furthermore illustrate how the fact-checkers were either directed to ‘train’ the system by adding the ‘true’ label to content in the initial phase of their participation in the program or took it upon themselves to label false positives because they assumed it would help enhance the workings of the system. Thereby, the fact-checkers became part of the system as active ‘machine learners’ (Mackenzie, 2017), who via global labelling schemes contribute to targeted training of the ML system in different languages. However, this work reduces the richness of fact-checking by further standardising how it can be carried out. Something that was also noted by the fact-checkers who would find the scheme limiting and either leave the programme or circumvent it by publishing other fact-checks, not identified via Meta’s claim check interface, which was deemed of more societal value by the fact-checkers.

Based on the analysis we draw attention to how the flow of labour and professional freedom of fact-checkers is being transformed and industrialised, as it is boiled down to content labelling that is used on the platform and for deeper enhancement of ML systems. In this way, platformised infrastructures offered to them by Meta, not only serve the platform in real-time but also allow for a long-term commodification of fact

checkers' work and expertise, which might later render them redundant. We also illustrate how the Meta fact-checking program, via the structuring of fact-checking work, is participating in the construction of what 'facts' are and how they can and should be publicly dealt with. Thereby, cementing both the liberal ideals of the citizen and the value of 'debunking', as opposed to public deliberation over facts.

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