

Research Paper

MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

A Critical Assessment of Fact-checking in 2012

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Executive summary

The enterprise of fact-checking continues to proliferate throughout the U.S. news media to an unprecedented degree. While many welcome this trend, others question the effectiveness of fact-checking and some have even begun to push back. A common critique is that fact-checking has failed to eradicate deceptive and misleading claims by politicians and is therefore ineffective. Others have concerns about the presence of bias in fact-checking work. This report draws on evidence from social science as well as recent interviews with reporters, fact-checkers, critics, and political figures to consider these issues and how they played out during the 2012 campaign. Because fact-checking is relatively young, robust metrics to empirically measure its effectiveness are still being established. Hence, a recurring theme in this report is the difficulty in definitively distinguishing the effects of fact-checking.

A broad conceptualization of fact-checking suggests it can influence three constituencies: the public, political operatives, and journalists. Fact-checkers are outspoken that their primary objective is to inform the public. However, fact-checkers also acknowledge other audiences, though sometimes implicitly. Thinking about fact-checking as a multidimensional initiative assists in understanding the many ways in which it could influence politics. First, it may help to inform the public. Fact-checkers have acquired a vast audience and they may help to make them better-informed. For instance, a recent study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center finds that people who rely on fact-checking are more informed about politics than are those who do not.¹ In addition, fact-checking may have helped spur some political operatives to make more accurate claims. However, others have resisted fact-checking and even pushed

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back against it—a reaction that could be interpreted as either reflecting the impact of fact-checking or demonstrating its ineffectiveness. Finally, fact-checking has even influenced journalism, the profession from which it emerged, spreading widely in the field and drawing attention to the field’s responsibility to hold politicians accountable.

Beyond conceptualizing a framework of ways to consider the effectiveness of fact-checking, this report examines some of the criticisms of fact-checking to help identify current problems and controversies in the field and define best practices. For instance, deciding which claims to check and which evidence to consider are two difficult areas to negotiate. In both cases, the most credible fact-checking engages verifiable facts rather than opinions or ideology. Finally, opinions differ on the extent to which rating scales make the fact-checking enterprise more accessible or divert attention toward a debate over word choice.

Introduction

If 2004 was the “Year of the Fact Check,”² then 2012 was the “Year of the Fact-Check Attack.” From the October 3rd cover story in *Time* magazine³ to reports in *USA Today*⁴ and the *New York Times*⁵, the efficacy of fact-checking received national attention from the mainstream press. Whether fact-checking made any difference was a question of central concern.

Fueling some of the scrutiny, Neil Newhouse, a pollster for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, infamously declared, “...we’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers.”⁶ This became exhibit A in the argument that fact-checking did not matter, prompting countless bloggers to ponder whether fact-

checking had any influence at all on electoral politics. In the *New York Times*’ Media Decoder blog, for instance, David Carr wrote, “...both candidates’ campaigns laid out a number of whoppers, got clobbered for doing so, and then kept right on saying them.”⁷

The repetition of previously debunked claims became exhibit B in the case against fact-checking. At the same time, however, others argued that fact-checking does influence political behavior. “PolitiFact changes how some elected officials and candidates frame their messages and communicate with

“We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers.”

Neil Newhouse,
Pollster for
Republican
presidential candidate
Mitt Romney.

constituents,” wrote Connie Schultz, wife of Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown.⁸

These divergent views exemplify a common but narrow conception of whether fact-checking makes a difference. This report examines more broadly how fact-checking can be influential across multiple audiences and reviews the difficulties in measuring the effects of fact-checking.

Previous reports from the New America Foundation (NAF) have surveyed the rise of political fact-checking,⁹ its participants¹⁰ and how it may be effectively employed against misinformation.¹¹ Most relevant to the present assessment, the NAF research brief by Graves and Glaisyer suggested that the effectiveness of fact-checking ought to be evaluated in terms of “changing people’s minds, changing journalism, and changing the political conversation.”¹²

This research brief attempts to offer nuanced perspectives from the fact-checkers (and those interested in fact-checking) and reconcile what is known about the relationship of fact-checking with three constituencies: the public, political operatives and journalists. While the focus of mainstream news media was primarily on how effective fact-checking was at influencing candidate behavior, this report explores a more expansive view of how fact-checking can be effective. Beyond affecting the behavior of politicians, consideration is given to how fact-checking makes a difference for citizens and influences journalists,

themselves. To varying degrees, a persistent challenge across all three audiences is the difficulty in definitively distinguishing the effects of fact-checking.

Considering how fact-checking can make a difference is addressed in five sections of this report. In terms of the public, evidence of fact-checking’s effects on voter knowledge is first reviewed followed by the accessibility of fact-checking information and its influence on audience engagement. Next, the impact of fact-checking on political operatives is considered as far as its ability to hold politicians accountable for their behavior as well as how politicians accepted or rejected fact-checking. The influence of fact-checking on the profession of journalism is then considered with respect to how the diffusion of fact-checking is changing the journalistic reporting model and offering more opportunities to hold politicians accountable.

Because the enterprise of fact-checking is relatively young, robust metrics to empirically measure its effectiveness are still being established. Furthermore, while this assessment of the fact-checking enterprise is based primarily upon the perspectives of those from within, it is not by any means a defense of fact-checking. Accordingly, section four explores some of the critiques of fact-checking along with the factors driving the criticism. The report concludes with recommended best practices for fact-checking.

To begin to explore how fact-checking can be influential, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted during the months of November and December, 2012. Potential subjects were contacted via email or telephone and invited to participate in an online pre-interview survey. The non-random survey was intended to identify qualified and interested informants for the interviews by allowing them to leave their contact information if they were interested in participating in a follow-up discussion. In addition, the survey collected information about perceptions of and experiences with fact-checking. Initial subjects were selected by their practical experience in the field of fact-checking or political journalism (based upon published articles, reports, etc.) and/or based upon their experience with political campaigning (sitting political officials and/or former/unsuccessful candidates and their surrogates). The survey response rate was 48 percent yielding 35 completed surveys. Additional interview subjects were identified via snowball sampling techniques (initial informants were asked to recommend others having proficiency in this area). In total, 18 interviews lasting approximately an hour in length were completed among fact-checkers, journalists, media critics, political

operatives, and academics (see Appendix A for a detailed list).

Purpose and Methods of Fact-checking

Before addressing the influences of fact-checking, it is important to note the perceived purposes of fact-checking and distinguish the different approaches used by the fact-checkers.¹³ This clarification is necessary because many of the criticisms of

fact-checking relate to either the purpose of fact-checking itself or a specific element in the process. Furthermore, as noted by Graves and Glaisyer, “fact-checkers have more than one audience, and more than one mission.”¹⁴ Do the fact-checkers consider these varying audiences, and are they of equal import?

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Bill Adair, Editor,
PolitiFact National.

As far as the intended purpose of fact-checking, the interviews revealed widespread agreement among the fact-checkers as to who their primary audience is. “These fact-checks are not for the candidates or the PACs, the campaigns; they’re for our viewers,” explained Pat Doe, a swing-state television reporter.¹⁵ Likewise, Kurtis Lee, a political reporter at the *Denver Post* said: “I don’t think the ‘[Political] Polygraphs’ are meant to change

the candidates' behavior. It's just to inform the public."¹⁶ Bill Adair, editor of PolitiFact National, offered a similar perspective: "Our goal as journalists is to inform democracy, not change candidates' behavior. So we don't set out trying to get politicians to stop lying. The role of the journalist was and is to inform people."¹⁷ While Glenn Kessler of the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker also agreed that fact-checking is intended to inform people, he does not believe that it is designed to change their opinions. "My goal is to make people better informed," he explained. "It doesn't matter what they then do with that information as to whether they vote Republican or Democrat. It's just that a better informed public allows for a better informed discourse."¹⁸ Thus, the goal of "changing people's minds" referred to by Graves and Glaisyer may be more ambitious than what the professional fact-checkers themselves intend.¹⁹

According to its practitioners, the primary purpose of fact-checking is to inform the public. Although there is wide agreement about the purpose of fact-checking, the philosophies and methods of practitioners varied widely. First, FactCheck.org the oldest of the three "elite" fact-checking organizations²⁰ was established using an approach of reaching the public indirectly through journalists. While FactCheck's primary aim is to "increase public knowledge and understanding,"²¹ its founders did not think they had the

capacity to reach the public directly, explained Kathleen Hall Jamieson, University of Pennsylvania communications scholar and co-founder of FactCheck.org. They had virtually no money, and Internet diffusion into mainstream journalism did not exist in 2003 the way it does today. "Our notion was really simple," she said...

It was that if we could quickly figure out what the claims were and claims tend to repeat themselves in campaigns...we would be able to do the research upfront. A journalist would hear the claim someplace, not know, come to our site, and be able to get back to the primary source material and be able to get the context...it would diffuse into the journalistic product, and we wouldn't get credit for it. We would just be a resource. And that's why our slogan on the site was 'Please Steal Our Stuff.'²²

To their surprise, however, the public did go to FactCheck.org because most journalists did cite it when they drew upon the site's work in their coverage. A mention of FactCheck.org by Dick Cheney during the 2004 vice presidential debate drove even more of the public directly to the site. Nonetheless, according to Jamieson, the Factcheck.org approach continues to focus on reaching journalists and making it easier for them to do their job.

In contrast, the strategy for PolitiFact and the Fact Checker, both founded in 2007, is to reach the public directly. Thus, FactCheck relies upon a journalistic diffusion method while PolitiFact and the Fact Checker rely more on direct public exposure.

Another significant difference in the approaches the elite fact-checkers employ involves the evaluative process. FactCheck does not offer a rating system because the founders believe it is the evaluative process itself that is crucial in helping voters understand a particular statement. FactCheck strives to offer the public a broader understanding of the context in which an interpretation is occurring by identifying what is potentially misleading. Voters can then draw the best conclusion. “We carefully contextualize and let people draw appropriate judgments from the available evidence,” said Jamieson.²³

Alternatively, PolitiFact employs its Truth-O-Meter rating system to facilitate the interpretive process and make it more accessible. Explained Adair, “I think that using a rating system provides the reader with a helpful summary of the work, and I think that’s really valuable. And I think it makes the fact-checking accessible to more people.”²⁴ Kessler’s Fact Checker also employs a rating system but in the form of “Pinocchios.” However, Kessler readily concedes that the Pinocchios are a “gimmick.” “It’s a quick, easy way to summarize your conclusion,” he explained.

(How the use of ratings systems affects perceptions of fact-checking will be explored below.)

The editing process is another area of differentiation between the elite fact-checkers. PolitiFact has a formalized multi-step process. After an article is written, an editor reviews it. Once agreement is reached over the article’s content, it goes to an additional panel of 3 editors who review the article and determine if it is suitable to publish. “This process is unique in American journalism,” observed Adair. “[A]t a time of shrinking resources, PolitiFact makes the commitment that every Truth-O-Meter item is reviewed by three editors.” FactCheck has an editorial staff of six, said Jackson. He estimated that 90% of their articles have at least four sets of eyes on them before being posted publically. Almost every piece is fact-checked by a staffer, copy-edited by a senior staffer and then reviewed by both Jackson and Jamieson.²⁵ In contrast, many blog posts have no editing.²⁶ While the Fact Checker originates on-line, the *Washington Post* does give at least one column a week prominent display (page A2 or A4) in the Sunday newspaper. Kessler indicated that his material is reviewed by a copy editor. When he had an assistant during the 2012 election, Kessler edited those columns, which then went to the copy editor as well.²⁷

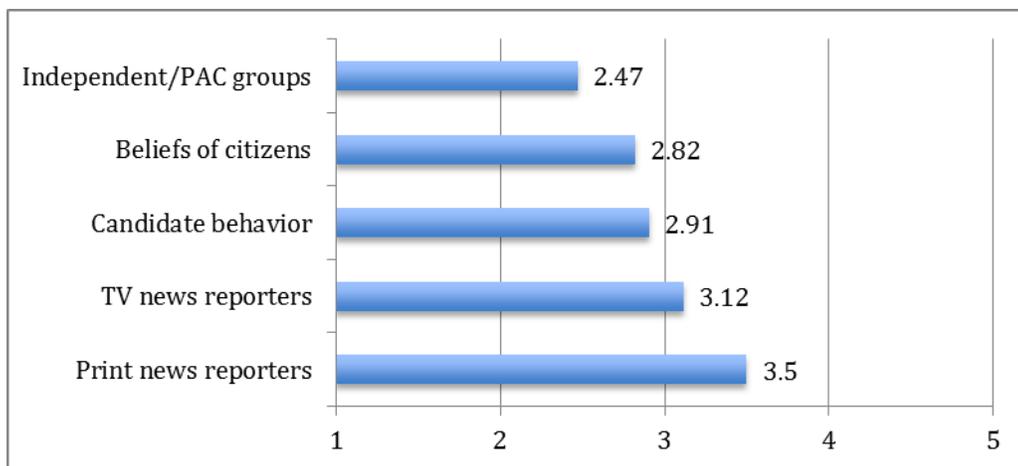
A final noteworthy process difference is the language used in the fact-checks. According to Jamieson, FactCheck.org takes extreme care to avoid implying intentionality.²⁸ While the political ads themselves often scold opponents for lying, FactCheck does not use this term. As defined by philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok, a lie is an “intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement.”²⁹ The challenge, as observed by FactCheck’s Jackson, is knowing the intention of the candidates: “[W]e have no way of reading minds or divining anyone’s intent,” he explained.³⁰ Furthermore, suggested Jamieson, “It’s perfectly possible that someone’s engaging in a high level of self-delusion.”³¹ Thus, FactCheck tends to avoid this type of language. It does, however, compile an annual list of the biggest “Whoppers.”³² More explicit is the

Fact Checker’s rating system that is based upon Pinocchio - the fictional children’s character who was prone to telling lies. Likewise, PolitiFact has a “Pants on Fire” designation on its rating scale and also assigns an annual “Lie of the Year” award. All of these distinctions will be revisited as the challenges of fact-checking are explored in the pages that follow.

Influences of fact-checking

In exploring whether and how fact-checking makes a difference, a non-random survey of journalists and political operatives was conducted. Among the 35 respondents, fact-checking was generally perceived as most influential on mainstream print reporters and least influential on the behavior of independent expenditure/PAC groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Perceived Influence of Fact-Checking



Note: Respondents were asked, “Thinking about your local area, how much influence do you believe fact-checking had on each of the following...?” Bars represent the average score on a five-point scale with 1 representing “no influence at all” and 5 representing “a great deal of influence.” n=35.

Interestingly, despite widespread agreement that the purpose of fact-checking was to inform the public, the “beliefs of citizens” measure was perceived as having been influenced by fact-checking to a lesser degree than other factors. A common refrain among respondents was that it was difficult for them to say just how much of an impact fact-checking was having on the public. While all the fact-checkers believed their work helped the public, the majority was unaware of any scientific evidence and had little to go on other than intuition and anecdotes of reader feedback. Accordingly, the following framework may be useful in clarifying who fact-checkers and observers believe is influenced by their work. The report will also review any empirical evidence that may or may not support these observations.

Influencing the public

Voter knowledge: If the primary goal of fact-checking is to inform the public, then one measure of its effectiveness would be to demonstrate that members of the population who rely on fact-checking are more accurately informed than people who have not been exposed to fact-checking. This type of evidence is available from the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s deception survey conducted at the end of each election.

For the first time, this year’s survey included questions about the use of fact-checking information. The results indicated that people who reported visiting a fact-checking or news website that engaged in fact-checking were more likely to correctly answer questions about the 2012 presidential race than respondents who had not reported visiting these types of fact-checking sites. These differences were present even after controlling for respondent characteristics such as education, race, gender, ideology and interest in the election.³³ Said Jackson, “We have evidence that we are making the public a little bit harder to fool.”³⁴ While these results suggest that fact-checking is making a difference, the study cannot definitively rule out the possibility that more informed voters seek out fact-checking websites, thus exemplifying the difficulty in determining the impact of fact-checking.

Despite this encouraging evidence, however, is recognition that some people are so partisan that fact-checking doesn’t matter. “Intensely partisan people,” explained Jackson, “...don’t care what the facts are...they’ll seize on whatever fragment of evidence supports their precooked beliefs, and they’ll find any excuse to reject even the most solid evidence that might force them to change their mind if they would accept that it’s a reality.”³⁵ Indeed, social science has demonstrated that the more strongly one

identifies with a particular political party or ideology, the more likely one is misinformed on issues that reflect negatively on a preferred party/ideology. This phenomenon becomes more prevalent on salient issues that are widely covered in the media.³⁶ Fact-checking tends to be ineffective on high partisans and can even have a backfire effect where the misperception is strengthened.³⁷ It is important, therefore, that attempts to measure voter learning take into consideration the strength and direction of an individual’s party identification.

journalism,” said Adair. In addition to its national reporting, PolitiFact had 11 state sites offering coverage during the 2012 elections. Each site was affiliated with at least one newspaper. In Tennessee and Florida, the site affiliated with two newspapers. In some states, such as Ohio, the state partners syndicated the PolitiFact content to other newspapers in the state.³⁸ Moreover, FactCheck.org developed media partnerships in 2012 with *USA Today*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Huffington Post* and *Yahoo! News*. “We got more eyeballs than we would have otherwise,” said

Table 1. Partnerships

<u>PolitiFact</u>	<u>FactCheck</u>	<u>The Fact Checker</u>
11 state newspaper affiliations	USA Today	The Washington Post
Two newspaper affiliations in Tennessee and Florida	Philadelphia Inquirer	MSNBC
Television news: CBS affiliate, Tampa, FL Bay News 9, Tampa, FL Hearst TV– 24 stations	Huffington Post	
	Yahoo! News	

Accessibility: Another potential measure of the effectiveness of fact-checking is assessing the extent to which corrective information is available to the public. For those who are receptive to information that, as Kessler has said, “may be out of their ideological cul-de-sac,” the opportunity for exposure to fact-checking has never been greater. “The scope of our work was unprecedented in the history of

Jackson. “I think we’ve got a lot of good content that people appreciate, and if we can get it to a wider audience, well, so much the better.”³⁹ Thus, the expanded presence of fact-checkers in 2012 likely increased the opportunity for more members of the public to have access to fact-checking (see Table 1).

Greater accessibility to information, then, represents another way in which fact-checking can be influential, albeit indirectly. However, empirical studies of just how much of the population have access to fact-checking information are scarce.

Even with the growth of the fact-checking organizations, accessibility is by no means assured. According to Liz Barrett, co-editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review's* Swing States Project, there are still some people who don't know where to go or even that sources exist to help citizens assess the accuracy of political claims.⁴⁰ Some of this is a function of geography. Unless one lives in a so-called battleground or swing state, few television ads are aired by the presidential campaigns.

With the vast majority of the fact-checking by FactCheck.org and the Fact Checker focused on national races, residents in non-battleground states likely have much less of an opportunity to see fact-checking in their local news or to seek out fact-checks about dubious claims that they've encountered. PolitiFact arguably has the greatest reach into downballot races given its presence in 11 states. Even then, however, PolitiFact affiliates often only focused on one race.

For instance, Tom Kertscher of PolitiFact Wisconsin explained that their "focus in this 2012 election was on the race for US Senate [in Wisconsin]. It was so dominant that we really had to almost completely

ignore the different races for Congress...those people could be running many, many TV ads and we simply wouldn't get to them because our attention was so focused on the Senate." This was primarily a function of where PolitiFact WI thought it could make the most impact. If it did a fact-check on a claim from a Congressional race in central Wisconsin, the coverage would likely not draw as much interest from its readers unless the claim had some sort of statewide or national relevance.⁴¹ Where national fact-checkers leave off, then, is arguably where the more localized fact-checking efforts have to take over.

According to a 2010 Pew research report, television (both local and network/cable) continued to be the most popular platform for obtaining news among approximately three out of four Americans.⁴² Accordingly, television is typically where national and state-wide political battles are fought with advertising. Yet, according to a study by Tim Karr, a Senior Director at Free Press, very little, if any, fact-checking takes place on local broadcast television.⁴³ "I looked at battleground markets including Charlotte, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Tampa, Las Vegas, and Denver," explained Karr. "With the exception of Denver which did do some local fact-checking most of these other markets, largely in their [broadcast] news coverage, didn't provide on-air fact-

checking of the ads that many of the stations themselves were airing.”⁴⁴

Karr’s report, however, indicated another noteworthy exception: the CBS affiliate in the Tampa market WTSP featured PolitiFact Florida’s Katie Sanders.⁴⁵ Despite these exceptions, Karr’s observations are consistent with studies of political advertising coverage from previous elections. Much of the news reporting about political advertising tends to merely repeat the content of the ads with a focus on ad strategy rather than scrutinizing the accuracy of the claims within the ads.⁴⁶ Even in markets where fact-checking was notably prevalent like Denver the torrent of political ads overwhelmed the efforts of even the most substantive reporting from the best political reporters.⁴⁷ Thus, despite the growing efforts of fact-checking, much of the public is not exposed to fact-checks in the most popular news medium and the one in which they are most likely to encounter political advertising.⁴⁸ Thus, while fact-checking has made great strides in its accessibility to the public, it still has considerable room to grow in order to reach the vast majority of citizens who are not exposed to fact-checks. A greater number of systematic studies like Karr’s would facilitate the monitoring of fact-checking accessibility.

Voter engagement: Feedback from readers is another measure of influence. Indeed, many interviewees relied on feedback as a

gauge of fact-checking’s effectiveness. While qualitative analysis of the content of e-mails, letters and phone calls is not scientific by any means, it does offer anecdotal evidence of how readers and viewers feel about fact-checking. “I’ve been a journalist since approximately 1994,” remarked Angie Drobnic Holan, Editor of PolitiFact Florida and Deputy Editor of PolitiFact National. “I have never received the kind of reader feedback that I have from doing the PolitiFact work.” She explained,

We get emails regularly like every week from people around the country. We don’t know them; we didn’t seek them out. And they send us these emails that say things like, “What you’re doing is so important. Thank you so much. I don’t know how I would be able to make a decision about voting without your work.” I don’t think everybody feels that way, but just the intensity of thankfulness in these emails, it’s really like I mean, I’ve never gotten emails like that for other stories that I’ve worked on...and here at PolitiFact, we get these on a regular basis.⁴⁹

Doe, the swing-state television journalist, observed that the fact-checking segment was a very popular item on his television station quite plausibly because viewers do not have the time to research all the claims in political ads. “I get tons of email...a lot of people say, ‘Thank you for doing that. It

helped me to understand what was true and what wasn't."⁵⁰ PolitiFact's Kertscher agreed that fact-checking work generates plenty of reader feedback—both praise and criticism: "We're sure glad you're there. I don't always agree with the way you rate a particular statement, but I really rely on PolitiFact, and I'm so glad you're here." Kertscher observed that on rare occasions, he'll hear from a reader outside of Wisconsin saying, "Boy, I came across this article on the Web. I sure wish we had PolitiFact in our newspaper."⁵¹ Thus, reader feedback serves not only as a gauge on performance for fact-checkers (albeit a qualitative one), it also illustrates how fact-checking has motivated some portion of the public to engage in political dialog.

As Kertscher mentioned, not all the feedback is positive. Often the criticisms center on why a particular rating was concluded. Henry Gomez of PolitiFact Ohio explained, "The most common complaint is, 'Why did this get a mostly true? This is definitely true. This is 100% true.' Or, 'Why did this get a false? This is a truthful statement...'"⁵² Kessler agreed, saying, "People got very upset at some of my judgments." More than half of the email feedback Kessler receives complains that he is biased: Even without the use of a specific rating scale,

there are complaints. Said Jackson, "...a lot of them are from people who say 'You're a bunch of Communists' or 'You're a bunch of Fascists' depending upon which favored candidate we've criticized."⁵³ But both Kessler and Jackson remarked that there are a fair number of emails thanking them for what they do. However, even the complaints, concluded Gomez, offer opportunities to enter into good conversations with readers.⁵⁴ (For specific examples of email feedback, see Appendix B.) To the extent that fact-checking encourages the public to engage in political discourse, then, it is having an influence. Measuring the degree of influence, however, would require quantitative research.

"About 30% was saying I'm either a left wing liberal or 30% said I was a right wing conservative."

Glenn Kessler, Editor,
The Fact Checker

Influencing Political Operatives

Accountability: Fact-checking may also influence political behavior.⁵⁵ A great deal of public debate in 2012 focused on this question. The idea is that fact-checking is supposed to hold candidates and their surrogates accountable for claims they make in ads, speeches, etc., by causing them to adjust their claims or cease making inaccurate statements. However, many informants described situations where debunked claims continued unabated.

A prominent example Holan offered was Romney talking about Obama apologizing. “I think all the fact-checkers debunked that,” said Holan. “And because it was in his book in 2010, we debunked it very early. And yet, he continued to say it. He said it in the third debate. That was just something he wasn’t going to stop saying, no matter what the fact-checkers said.”⁵⁶ The repetition of disproved claims occurred on both sides of the political spectrum. Jackson observed that the Obama campaign ran an ad about Romney’s stance on abortion that was “absolutely false.” He explained:

They said, basically, he [Romney] supported banning abortion even in cases of rape or incest. And that’s the opposite position that he’s taken ever since he became generally against abortion. He has always supported exemptions for rape or incest or to save the life of the mother...We [FactCheck.org] said this is a false ad. So what do they do? They run a second false ad saying exactly the same thing...they just ignored us and continued making the claim.⁵⁷

Jackson’s conclusion that the influence of fact-checking on campaigns was limited was a sentiment shared by other interviewees (but not all). It is also indicative of a growing tension faced by fact-checkers between their outspoken commitment to inform the public and a tacit understanding that repeated political

inaccuracies do affect whether people perceive fact-checking to be effective.

To get feedback on political behavior directly from campaign consultants, the Annenberg Public Policy Center invites both presidential campaigns to participate in their quadrennial post-election debriefings. Since the founding of FactCheck.org, one of the matters discussed has been whether the campaigns pay attention to fact-checking or not. According to Jamieson, campaign consultants have typically indicated they generally did pay attention to fact-checking but that it did not necessarily dictate campaign strategies. However, “[w]e heard at our election debriefing this year that they largely didn’t pay attention to them [fact-checkers],” said Jamieson.⁵⁸ Another observer of the debriefings suggested that it was the quantity of fact-checking in 2012 that largely overwhelmed the consultants with so many details.⁵⁹ In either case, the feedback is based upon consultant anecdotes rather than a systematic study of effects.

To further explore practitioner perspectives on fact-checking, many political operatives were invited to participate in this research. One of the only ones who agreed to be interviewed for this project (and actually followed through on sharing her perspective) was Kara Carscaden, a Deputy Press Secretary from Obama’s 2012 campaign.⁶⁰ According to Carscaden, “We took it [fact-checking]

seriously and paid heed to what they said. We certainly had differences with them a lot of the time, but we took them seriously...Being honest and truthful was very important to us, so we treated these guys as members of the press and took them seriously.”⁶¹ There were, in fact, examples where the Obama campaign changed the wording in some of their ads after a fact-check. In 2012, the greatest point of contention between the Obama campaign and fact-checkers, said Carscaden, was with claims Obama made about Romney’s relationship to Bain Capital and outsourcing. The Obama campaign ran an ad in June saying that Romney shipped jobs to China. “The fact is...” said Jackson,

...the companies that they were referring to were acquired by Bain Capital at a time after Romney had left and was running the Olympics. He was president of Bain in name only and had nothing to do with the decisions being made by those companies. So he didn’t ship jobs to China. Well, later they changed that a little bit by saying he invested in companies or his companies shipped jobs to China.⁶²

Rather than a substantive improvement, Jackson saw it as a tactical change in phrasing. Explained Carscaden, “We just simply believed that if you owned the company and you profited from the company, you’re responsible for their actions. The fact-checkers didn’t see it

that way.”⁶³ This back and forth exchange exemplifies not only the he said/she said reporting model, but the difficulty in relying upon qualitative evidence to evaluate the effect of fact-checking.

Despite the pessimistic view of some of the fact-checkers from an accountability standpoint, quite a few anecdotes of changes in campaign rhetoric were offered. PolitiFact’s Adair, in particular, was much more optimistic that fact-checking does make many campaigns more mindful of how they phrase their messaging. An illustrative example was the issue of Medicare in 2011. “Last year,” explained Adair,

...we chose as our “Lie of the Year” the Democratic line that Republicans, by supporting Paul Ryan’s budget, voted to end Medicare. That is false. We rated it “false” or “pants on fire” depending on the wording...If you trace the frequency of that wording, “Republicans voted to end Medicare...” and how often it was used in quotations by members of Congress and party leaders after we chose it, I suspect you will find that it dramatically fell off, that there were far fewer times that Democrats used that message. Instead, I believe because of our fact-checking, the Democrats changed the talking point and altered it to make it more accurate. They changed it to “Ryan would end the guarantee of Medicare” or “would end Medicare’s guaranteed

coverage.” That was a line we heard repeatedly after we chose “end of Medicare” as the lie of the year. And I suspect that is because the Democrats sat around and said, “We need to say this in a more accurate way.”⁶⁴

Adair’s observation is empirically verifiable. According to the Congressional Record, during the first session of the 112th Congress (in 2011), 50 articles referred to some variant of the phrase “voted to end Medicare.” After PolitiFact’s 2011 “Lie of the Year” award, the number of references to ending Medicare during 2012 was halved. Only 26 articles referred to the phrase during the second session of the 112th Congress. Thus, this quantitative evidence is suggestive of fact-checking influencing political behavior.⁶⁵

Other notable changes in campaign rhetoric included instances during the primaries. Jamieson said that Romney’s claim about creating 100,000 jobs as Governor of Massachusetts was corrected in a primary debate after challenges from fact-checkers, opposing candidates and debate moderators.⁶⁶ She also pointed out that Republican primary contender Newt Gingrich changed his claim that he had balanced four budgets as Speaker of the House after fact-checkers noted he wasn’t Speaker during all four.⁶⁷ At the state level, Nancy Madsen of PolitiFact Virginia observed that during the 2012 Virginia senate race, former Governor Tim Kaine’s campaign was sensitive to feedback from

fact-checkers. “His staff would generally change the talking points for the candidate,” Madsen said. “His ads would say something slightly different to make it more factually true and make the implications more true.”⁶⁸ Gomez has also observed increasing precision in the statements of some candidates in Ohio. “That’s a good thing,” he said. “You want politicians to say what they mean, and you want them to be truthful and accurate.”⁶⁹

Besides the candidate campaigns, there was significant concern in 2012 over the behavior of independent expenditure groups, which were newly empowered by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the *Citizens United* case. As a result, the share of political advertising increased dramatically for these groups even beyond the confines of the presidential race.⁷⁰ While there were also instances of changes to third-party group ads, the examples were fewer and less clearly attributable to fact-checking. For instance, in the North Dakota Senate race, American Crossroads pulled an ad about Heidi Heitkamp after false ratings from fact-checkers and replaced it with another ad making a different claim.⁷¹ Priorities USA was another 501(c)4 tax-exempt group that came under fire for misleading advertising. One of its ads implied that Romney bore responsibility for the death of a woman.⁷² According to Jamieson, “the fact-checking and [CNN anchor] Wolf Blitzer did a superb job holding Bill Burton [the ad

creator] accountable.”⁷³ The ad was pulled, she said.⁷⁴ Thus, concluded Jamieson, the ability to hold third party groups to account is particularly effective when journalists are able to confront the group leaders on air in real time as exemplified by Blitzer in the Priorities USA case.⁷⁵

Within the context of accountability, evidence of campaigns altering their messages to become more accurate is a positive effect of fact-checking. But as Adair cautions, it is only a by-product. “That’s great and we welcome that,” he said. “But it’s important to emphasize that is not our goal, and I don’t think that by itself is a measurement of the usefulness of fact-checks.”⁷⁶ Jamieson emphasized the same point: “It’s not the goal of the fact-checking process...they’re going to do whatever they believe will get them elected. And if they can override the fact-checking with repeated airing, they will try to do that.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, as observed by Zack McMillan of PolitiFact Tennessee, it is hard to prove a negative. “I don’t know if someone would have created an ad if not for fact-checking,” said McMillan.⁷⁸ In essence, it is impossible to document all the lies that were not told because of fact-checking. As noted by Dartmouth political scientist Brendan Nyhan, assessing the effects of the fact-checking movement would require comparing the present to “a counterfactual scenario in which there were no fact-checkers but the world was otherwise identical.”⁷⁹ In other words, the

existence of inaccuracies is not evidence of fact-checking’s failure; things could be worse otherwise. Nonetheless, the fact-checkers’ awareness of and attention to changes in political behavior underscores that this concern is a relevant one even if it is difficult to measure.

Beyond accountability: Besides sometimes changing the rhetoric of politicians, the influence of fact-checking on political operatives was evidenced in other ways. Most obviously, perhaps, was the selective adoption of fact-checking evaluations in the candidates’ own ads. When it suited their agenda, candidates highlighted the fact-checkers in their ads to emphasize their opponents’ factual indiscretions. Furthermore, Kessler observed that both the Romney and Obama campaigns had designated spokespeople who dealt directly with the fact-checkers. “That shows how important it became,” said Kessler.⁸⁰ Moreover, the pushback against fact-checking was another indication of its influence. Both Jackson and Jamieson observed that there was more of a counterattack against fact-checking than in years’ past. “The political operatives are annoyed by us,” said Jackson. “They want to give their version of the facts to voters whether they’re true or not, and they want to have them accepted. And a lot of people are not accepting because of us...[fact-checking] interferes with what they’re trying to accomplish,” he explained.⁸¹ As Carscaden and others attested, most

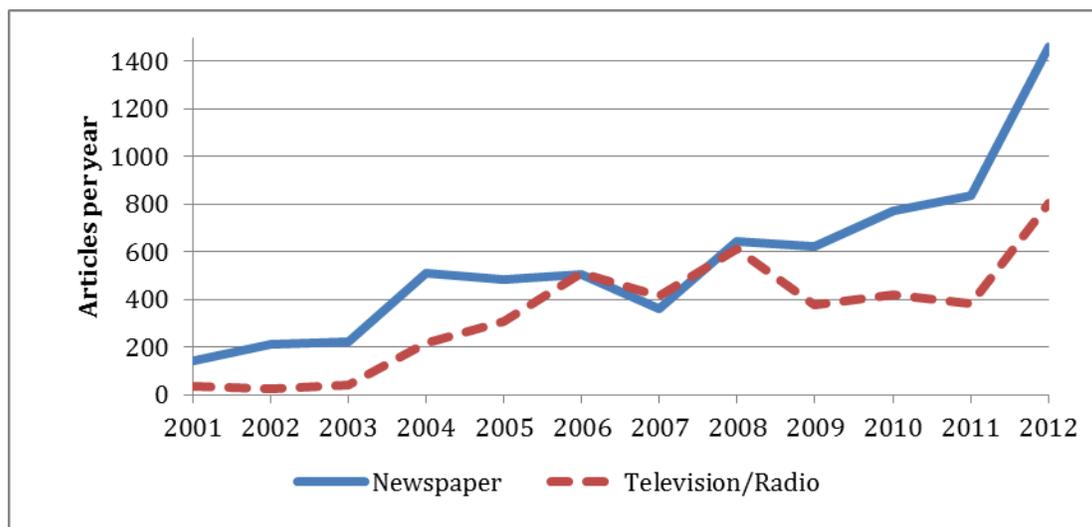
campaigns were very forthcoming with materials to substantiate a claim. According to Gomez, however, Senate candidate Josh Mandell refused to substantiate his claim that his opponent was allowing Ohio jobs to go to China. “He was unable to provide one example of a job that left Ohio for China because of Sherrod Brown,” explained Gomez.⁸² Instead, Mandell rebuffed Gomez, stating, “You’re the reporters you go do the grunt work.” His refusal to engage with PolitiFact’s Gomez was because of a perception that “*The Plain Dealer’s* PolitiFact project is completely biased, sensationalized and without credibility.”⁸³ In some other cases of pushback, most notably in Ohio and Virginia, the voting records and social media accounts of fact-

checkers were publicized. Because of evidence that particular journalists only voted in Democratic primaries or had made sympathetic remarks about liberal causes in personal social media accounts, the implication was that these fact-checkers were not impartial.⁸⁴ These accusations of bias are a topic that will be addressed in the next section. It serves here to illustrate the type of pushback fact-checkers have been facing another indication fact-checking is having some sort of impact.

Influencing journalism

Diffusion: A final area that is considered in assessing the effects of fact-checking is its influence on journalism. As illustrated in Figure 2, just the mere reference of the

Figure 2. Growth of Fact-checking Mentions



Note: Figure 2 illustrates the growth of fact-checking mentions in the news media over the last dozen years. The y-axis represents the number of articles or transcripts that mentioned fact-checking. Since 2001, the number of fact-checking mentions increased over 900% in US newspapers and over 2,000% on US radio and television news programs, though merely mentioning fact-checking does not constitute fact-checking itself.

word “fact-check” in the news media has increased dramatically in the last dozen years. Some of this is driven by the proliferation of media organizations offering fact-checking. As previously mentioned, both FactCheck and PolitiFact had partnerships with other media organizations in 2012. More news outlets are offering their own, original fact-checking as well. According to Doe, “Since we’ve been doing fact-checking, other stations have felt pressure to do it. And so, they’ve started later in the election season.”⁸⁵ Moreover, the media outlets that are incorporating fact-checking are doing so in a less ghettoized manner. As observed by Barrett, “It felt like this was the first cycle where it became the thing to do to fact-check and not have it just always live in a box off to the side. Sometimes it actually made it to the main story.”⁸⁶ Nevertheless, a systematic study quantifying how many news organizations offer fact-checking and in what format has yet to materialize.

Despite the growth in some markets, Karr warns that many broadcast news organizations have abdicated their responsibility to do fact-checking, especially at the local level. There is an expectation that groups like FactCheck will pick up the slack, he said. “Of course, FactCheck.org does not have the bandwidth to fact-check local races. They tend to focus on the national races—the presidential election and prominent

senatorial or congressional races,” explained Karr.⁸⁷ PolitiFact is making inroads, however. According to Adair, PolitiFact has 10 state sites that check claims by mayors, county officials as well as state officials.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, local political journalism overall has likely been less affected by fact-checking in terms of diffusion into its reporting structure.

For the professional fact-checking organizations, being cited and quoted by prominent media outlets is the most tangible evidence that their work has an effect.⁸⁹ “I think that more than ever before,” said Adair, “political journalists are aware of fact-checking and when it’s appropriate, mention it in their stories.” Adair indicated a number of news organizations that have cited not just PolitiFact, but FactCheck and the Fact Checker as well, including the *New York Times*, the *Associated Press*, *USA Today* and even broadcast reporting by Jake Tapper of CNN.⁹⁰ Similarly, Kessler shared that it was not only *Washington Post* reporters that linked to his work. “The *New York Times* actually did a story about Newt Gingrich calling on the Super PAC to withdraw the ‘King of Bain’ ad after the *Washington Post* Fact Checker gave it four Pinocchios,” he explained.⁹¹ While Kessler was often interviewed on MSNBC because the *Post* has a relationship with it, he pointed out he was also on NPR and even FOX. After Kessler wrote a critical fact-check on Nancy Pelosi, Bill O’Reilly of FOX highlighted it

and said, “I never thought I’d be citing the *Washington Post*, but you’ve got to look at this Fact Checker guy.”⁹²

In essence, the proliferation of fact-checking has created a framework that is now a force political operatives increasingly must confront. This “corrective structure,” observed Jamieson, is therefore capable of creating at least an accurate context around the deceptive information.⁹³ “You can’t broad-brushly paint all the fact-checkers as the same,” said Kessler. “What I do is different in some ways than PolitiFact and FactCheck.org, though we tend to generally broadly agree on our assessments” he explained.⁹⁴ This is a critical point. Despite the varying methodologies used by the elite fact-checkers, they all contend that they typically agree. The only systematic study to date found that FactCheck and PolitiFact agreed nine out of ten times on claims they both fact-checked during the 2008 presidential election, suggesting very strong agreement on evaluating the factual evidence supporting political claims.⁹⁵

Journalistic reporting: A more expansive consideration of fact-checking’s influence on journalism would recognize a move away from the traditional journalistic paradigm to what can arguably be called a fact-checking model of journalism. Traditional journalism subscribes to descriptive reporting of objective facts “he-said/she-said” reporting.⁹⁶ “In the old

tradition,” explained Jackson, “you quote what people say, and you get it as accurately as you can.” It used to be that editors served as gatekeepers, only allowing properly vetted and accurate information to be published. In this way, a lot of inaccurate information was kept away from the public’s attention. Since the rise of the Web, however, anyone with a keyboard and an Internet connection can say anything, and it travels around the world instantaneously. Marketplace pressures have made scooping a news story supersede its validity. “So the public today is just bombarded by false information,” said Jackson, explaining:

There are no gates anymore. There are not even any fences. It’s just a jungle of misinformation. So I think the news business is slowly evolving and needs to evolve more quickly away from the gatekeeper model, which is no longer even relevant, into more of an umpire/referee, an adjudicator model where people are inevitably going to hear false claims. We can’t keep them out of the public discourse anymore.⁹⁷

It was the he-said/she-said reporting that led to the rise of FactCheck.org, said Jamieson. When there were contested claims, journalists were failing to put any context around them. Adair was one of those journalists. “The reason we created PolitiFact was because of my guilt that I had just been passing along factual claims without verifying their accuracy,” he

admitted. “I felt like I had let readers down by doing that when I covered the White House.”⁹⁸

The fact-checking method of journalism diverges from traditional journalism in many of its practices. Whereas conventional reporting resists argument and seeks balance in the sources quoted to maintain neutrality, fact-checking encourages reporters to criticize and render judgment, which often leads to accusations of bias.⁹⁹ It also requires a different approach to reporting and the news cycle. The race for the journalistic scoop is replaced by contemplative deliberation since fact-checking takes time. Rather than trafficking in horse race reporting or process stories on campaign strategy, fact-checking often focuses on individual factual disputes. Instead of relying on information from unnamed sources, sources in fact-check articles are typically quoted on the record. Likewise, fact-checking encourages reporters to seek out reputable or credible sources rather than those with the most influence or access. This paradigm shift creates challenges for journalism in general and fact-checking specifically.

Opportunity: Critics have questioned the effectiveness of fact-checking when candidates have repeated false and misleading claims that were previously exposed as inaccurate. However, one could argue that fact-checking was successful in providing context and evidence for other

journalists to challenge candidates when they repeated the suspect claims. On national television, for instance, Wolf Blitzer held Bill Burton to account for the claim that Romney was responsible for a woman’s death. Priorities USA pulled the ad.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, on KSNV-TV, Las Vegas and its NBC affiliates, reporter and debate moderator Jon Ralston held Congressional candidate Joe Oceguera to account for an ad claiming his opponent was against funding for a rape crisis center.¹⁰¹ “That ad really was one of the more egregious ones just because some of the claims were so obviously false,” said Ralston. “But he, using spin and equivocations, defended it when I confronted him with it directly on the air with Heck sitting right there. There’s not much more I can do than that,” lamented Ralston.¹⁰² The ad continued. Fact-checking, however, provided Ralston with the contextual information he needed to confront Oceguera. Moreover, during the final weeks of the presidential election, the Romney campaign ran an ad claiming that the Jeep brand automaker was going to build Jeeps in China. The ad was widely condemned by fact-checkers for giving the misleading impression that Jeep was moving its US manufacturing to China. Jeep’s parent company, Chrysler, criticized the ad as well. At the end of the year, PolitiFact awarded the ad its 2012 “Lie of the Year” designation, suggesting that the ad contributed to Romney’s loss. “People often say that politicians don’t pay a price for deception,” wrote Holan. “But this

time was different: A flood of negative press coverage rained down on the Romney campaign, and he failed to turn the tide in Ohio, the most important state in the presidential election.”¹⁰³ Journalists took advantage of the corrective information offered by fact-checking to put accurate context around the misleading Jeep claims.

Nonetheless, there were examples of debate moderators failing to hold candidates to account for their claims during the presidential debates when there was the opportunity to do so. Jamieson observed that there were two claims that were aggressively fact-checked that were kept out of the debates. The first was that Obama was going to gut the welfare requirement.¹⁰⁴ The other was the claim that Romney opposed abortion even in cases of rape or incest.¹⁰⁵ “For whatever strategic reason...” explained Jamieson,

...the candidates did not put either of those into the debates at the presidential level in the general election, and we don’t know why. They may not have seen an opportunity to do it, but one could hypothesize that given clear fact-checking across the major organizations on those claims, they didn’t want to take the risk of exposing the narrowcast audience to the corrections and the larger audience to the fact of the deceptions.¹⁰⁶

She concluded that it was a failure of the debate moderators that neither claim was

raised during the debates. The fact-checking structure successfully provided the informational context to challenge a claim. Journalists failed to take advantage of the opportunities that were presented. In this respect, the fact-checking was successful; the mainstream journalists were not. A complicating factor that journalists must contend with, however, is that by raising the inaccurate claims, they risk spreading them to a wider audience. Regardless of whether or not journalists took advantage of an opportunity to hold a politician to account, one measurable impact of fact-checking would be to establish how often these opportunities arose. While this is another example of the difficulty in evaluating the effect of fact-checking, it is arguable that without fact-checking information, the likelihood of a journalist being able to take advantage of an opportunity to hold a political actor accountable is certainly minimal if it exists at all.

Challenges of Fact-checking

After considering both the anecdotal and empirical effects of fact-checking in the context of the 2012 campaign, it is also worth examining the criticisms that have been offered. As will be demonstrated, many of the criticisms are not indictments of fact-checking as an approach or style of journalism but rather indictments of problematic practices in the field.

Accusations of subjectivity/selection bias

One of the most common criticisms offered during the campaign is the accusation that fact-checking is often biased. For instance, according to Mark Hemingway, a media critic at the *Weekly Standard*, fact-checkers' political preferences and beliefs may influence which claims are selected for scrutiny. "You're more inclined to think that something is interesting to fact-check if there's a disagreement with it, and you're more inclined to find a disagreement with something that you don't agree with to start with. So you're less inclined to go out and find something that challenges your own viewpoint."

To support their claims of fact-checking bias, critics point to two recent studies. One was from a University of Minnesota political scientist, Eric Ostermeier. In a blog posting, he shared the results of a content analysis he conducted which suggested that PolitiFact rated Republican statements as false at three times the rate of Democrats during a 13-month period. The implication was that PolitiFact was biased against Republicans in the selection of which statements it selected to scrutinize.¹⁰⁷ The other study was from the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University. The results of this study indicated that PolitiFact rated as false statements by the Republicans twice as often as they did Democrats. The study findings were released as a press release with the headline, "Study: PolitiFact Rates

GOP as Biggest Liar."¹⁰⁸ While no additional interpretation was offered in the press release, the headline does seem to imply that PolitiFact set out to determine which party was more inaccurate. But, as indicated on PolitiFact's home page, its intent is to help readers "find the truth in American politics"¹⁰⁹ rather than evaluate which party is more inaccurate.

The problem with these critiques is that a discrepancy in rated statements does not prove bias. There is no reason to assume that the number of misleading claims found by fact-checkers would be equal between the parties at any given time. As observed by Jamieson, what needs consideration is the universe of claims that could be checked:

If the Republicans had much more advertising, they are going to have more claims available to be checked. And as a result, the odds are you're going to have more fact-checking of them than of the Democrats. So, in a year in which one party has a contested primary and the other doesn't, it's going to look as if, assuming that you've got the same amount of deception across every minute of content, it's going to look as if you're going after the Republicans if you're using this "in the real world, it would be 50/50" standard.¹¹⁰

An appropriate way to examine the issue of bias, then, would start with determining how many of all the claims that could be

checked were indeed evaluated by a particular fact-checker.

Another area of subjectivity that could compromise fact-checking involves the types of statements that are assessed. According to *Columbia Journalism Review's* Greg Marx, "Many times what they are assessing is not so much 'Is this particular claim factual?' as 'Is this an okay thing?' 'Is this within the bounds of reasonable discourse to say?'" Although fact-checkers are sometimes disciplined about avoiding non-factual claims, Marx finds they sometimes stray beyond the boundaries they identify into evaluating claims that cannot be checked.¹¹¹ "While the language of fact-checking is powerful," he wrote in *CJR*, "it's also limited and the fact-checkers' tendency to stretch that language beyond its limitations undermines the credibility of their project."¹¹² For example, he took exception to PolitiFact's 2011 "Lie of the Year"- the Democratic claim that Republicans wanted to end Medicare. Marx conceded the language was problematic but challenged whether it was actually a "lie." Rather than the accuracy of a statement, he felt judgment was being rendered about the legitimacy of the Democratic rhetoric. In another instance, Hemingway observed that the AP fact-checked former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty for saying, "ObamaCare is unconstitutional."¹¹³ "Pawlenty wrote this for *USA Today* on a newspaper page with the word 'opinion' in large letters across

the top of the page," explained Hemingway.¹¹⁴ In essence, the AP was fact-checking Pawlenty's opinion. From these perspectives, then, the best fact-checking will separate statements of fact from normative claims and statements of opinion or ideology. Said Hemingway: "Stick to the realm of the quantifiable and empirical...I realize that's not always a clear-cut dividing line, but it's far more clear cut than fact-checkers make it out to be."¹¹⁵ As noted by Graves, fact-checkers have a very narrow field within which to operate given these boundaries, which are often blurred in practice.¹¹⁶

Some fact-checking has been controversial and drawn accusations of bias because of its use of rating scales. PolitiFact, for example, has its "Truth-O-Meter," the Fact Checker assigns "Pinocchios," and the *Las Vegas Sun's* "Line of Attack" feature has a fairness meter. The use of rating scales derives from the pressure to make the information more accessible to the general public. "Too often in journalism," explained Adair,

...the approach is let's write it long, and who cares if it's a little boring. People should read it anyway. I think that "eat your vegetables" approach is wrong. What we've done with the Truth-O-Meter is manage to do solid substantive journalism but also to summarize it with a catchy meter that allows people to see at a glance the relative accuracy of a statement.¹¹⁷

Jamieson concedes that accessibility is a problem with FactCheck’s longform journalism. However, she said, this drawback helps to avoid backfire effects whereby the inaccurate information becomes amplified. “We don’t get the problem that some scholars have found with short-term factual correction,” she explained. By walking readers through a problematic claim and providing context, voters acquire “schematic knowledge” that is helpful to them in evaluating a claim.¹¹⁸ For others, the ratings draw accusations of subjectivity, further complicating the fact-checking enterprise as a whole. Kessler readily admitted that awarding of Pinocchios is decidedly subjective as well as the most difficult part of his job. “My one Pinocchio might be another person’s three Pinocchios,” he said. “There’s no easy way to get around that...I try to be as consistent as I possibly can in the way I award these things.”

Barrett is not against rating scales per se but believes it is important to frame the critiques appropriately. “I know that people like the Pinocchio scales and easy to process scales like that and rating systems,” said Barrett. “But I think PolitiFact distracted a lot of people and moved the conversation in less productive ways with their rating system the way that it was.”¹¹⁹

There were instances when fact-checking became the news story itself because of disagreement over the degree of

truthfulness in a claim (consider, for instance, the Democratic “end of Medicare” controversy). In these cases, focus is deflected away from the inaccurate statement toward a debate over the extent of its inaccuracy. A rating scale that Barrett finds less problematic is the *Las Vegas Sun*’s “fairness meter” from its “Line of Attack” feature.¹²⁰ Rather than trying to jam assessments into a true/false frame, “they took the time to judge the fairness of the claim, which requires explaining where it goes astray,” she explained.¹²¹ Whether what constitutes a fair attack would be any less controversial than a claim’s degree of accuracy remains to be seen.

While some critics have challenged the validity of the ratings themselves, others, said Jackson, question the worth of the fact-checkers suggesting their ratings were inconsistent with one another. “I’d challenge them on that,” responds Jackson to the detractors. “What are the specific examples they are giving of when and where leading fact-checking organizations came to different conclusions? I suspect it’s going to be things like, ‘Well, Kessler gave it only three Pinocchios, but FactCheck said it was false’ or some nonsense like that,” he said.¹²² In fact, a study released in October 2012 by the Center for Media and Public Affairs does purport to measure disagreement between two of the fact-checkers PolitiFact and the Fact Checker. “Fact-checkers Disagree

on Who Lies Most” is how the press release announces the study.¹²³

The study, however, is suspect on multiple counts. First, fact-checkers do not claim to measure which candidate “lies most” as suggested by the title of the study. Second, the press release does not clearly indicate how many of the 152 assessed statements were evaluated by both fact-checkers in the study. An inquiry to clarify this point was answered by the president of CMPA, Dr. Robert Lichter. According to Lichter, the data comparing the two organizations included cases in which the fact-checkers evaluated similar but not identical claims.¹²⁴ In the world of fact-checking, different wording or different context around a claim can make a difference in how a statement is evaluated. In essence, the conclusions of the study are invalid because they do not measure how the two fact-checking organizations measured identical statements.

Finally, some critics have accused fact-checkers of slanting the sources they consult and evidence that they draw on when evaluating claims. According to Hemingway, professional fact-checkers often fail to “go to somebody on the opposite side of the political fence and say, ‘Hey, what do you make of this?’”¹²⁵ Jason Hart, a partisan media critic with Media Trackers Ohio, offered a similar complaint. “Evidence that’s going to be included is included because the journalist felt that it was important,” said Hart. “They may

mention something that’s incredibly important by my opinion, or they may downplay it because, in their opinion, that fact or that aspect of the claim really doesn’t matter,” he explained.¹²⁶

These criticisms are ones that have faced not just fact-checkers, but traditional journalists as well.¹²⁷ One approach to addressing this concern is offered by the founders of FactCheck.org, who have written about the factors they consider when selecting which sources and evidence to consult. While they look for general agreement among experts, they concede that consensus is not foolproof. When weighing the use of evidence, they give more attention to sworn testimony. They consider the self-interest and reputation of a speaker as well as the transparency and precision of statements. Convergence of evidence from different methods, what PolitiFact informally calls “triangulating the truth,” also adds credibility to an issue.¹²⁸

Conclusions

These criticisms suggest that it is important for fact-checkers to be careful and as neutral as possible in the statements they select and the evidence they consult. They should likewise seek to avoid evaluating statements that cannot be verified factually. Their primary goal should be to provide the public with the best available evidence to understand why a claim is misleading or

inaccurate. They should also weigh the controversy created by ratings systems against their benefits in terms of potentially increased accessibility.

More broadly, this research sought to explore whether fact-checking is effective. While the fact-checkers themselves primarily seek to inform the public, this report demonstrates how they are also aware of the potential to influence journalism and political actors and may sometimes seek to do so.¹²⁹ The extent to which they are effective in doing so, however, is not yet clear because of how hard it is to definitively evaluate the impact of fact-checking. At a minimum, fact-checking has become increasingly accessible to the public and may sometimes spur political operatives to be more accurate in their claims. However, some members of the public and political operatives have resisted fact-checking and even pushed back against it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, fact-checking has deeply influenced journalism, the profession from which it emerged, by revolutionizing its conventions and encouraging reporters to hold politicians accountable. Ultimately, the degree to which fact-checking matters depends upon what we - as citizens, politicians, and journalists - do with it.

Best practices

Based upon a variety of resources, the following recommendations for fact-checking are offered. They are a compilation of commonly cited best practices shared by the fact-checkers who participated in this research effort as well as those described in previous NAF research briefs.¹³⁰

1. *Evaluate knowable facts.* Fact-checkers should separate statements of fact from normative statements of opinion or ideology. Political beliefs or statements of what ought to be are not factually verifiable. For instance, Kessler indicated that Republicans generally believe any tax increase is bad for the economy. Stated as an opinion, it cannot be fact-checked. However, whether specific tax hikes benefit the economy can be assessed. Additionally, if a factual claim is suspect but unverifiable, fact-checkers should say so, specifically distinguishing what is known from speculation.

2. *Use reputable sources that are widely recognized as credible.* Fact-checkers should consider and disclose the expertise and reputation of the individual or organization that is providing them with information and the role of that information in their assessments. While information from those who stand to gain or lose should not automatically be dismissed, it should be considered accordingly. Furthermore, sources should always be interviewed on

the record so that others can judge the credibility of the source themselves. Finally, whenever possible, fact-checkers should use original documents and interviews rather than relying upon secondary reports.

3. *Provide necessary context for readers.* Readers need context to specifically understand what it is about a claim that is potentially inaccurate or misleading. As indicated on the PolitiFact website, they “...examine the claim in the full context, the comments made before and after it, the question that prompted it, and the point the person was trying to make.”¹³¹ In particular, fact-checkers should tell readers whether the precision of the language used had any bearing on an assessment of a claim in other words, whether the speaker was imprecise or omitted relevant context or whether they misstated the evidence in question directly.

4. *Integrate fact-checking into coverage and avoid circulating false claims.* Particularly for news organizations, it is vital to get the story right the first time. Social science studies have demonstrated that it is much harder to correct an inaccurate claim once it is in circulation.¹³² Journalists likewise have an obligation to avoid legitimizing political ad inaccuracies by airing these ads without scrutiny (particularly those at broadcast television outlets, which are required to serve the public interest in exchange for their broadcast license). FlackCheck.org (a sister organization to

FactCheck.org) offers a guide for effective fact-checking both on-air and online.¹³³ Moreover, print news organizations need to ensure that reporters are aware of any fact-checking efforts of colleagues so that problematic claims are covered appropriately when they are repeated in the future. Just as important, journalists who function as both beat reporters and fact-checkers need to consistently correct the same inaccurate claims from the top of a ticket to down-ballot races.¹³⁴ Ideally, said Jamieson, what is needed is a news convention that allows for fact-checking of claims that persist. What she calls an “ongoing story structure” would start in the broadcast studio and move to the Web; journalists would disclose that an inaccurate ad is continuing to air (with a “there they go again” narrative) and direct viewers to the station website for more details.¹³⁵

5. *Separate fact-checkers from beat reporters.* Ideally, fact-checking should be a dedicated function rather than having several beat reporters doing part-time fact-checking. Differentiating job functions in this way will protect a news organization from at least two complications. As PolitiFact’s Madsen explained, fact-checking puts enormous time pressure on reporters who are already covering a campaign on a day-to-day basis. More importantly, she observed, separation of these functions protects the beat reporters from the backlash from a poor fact-check

rating. Reporters who serve in both capacities need to be aware that a negative rating may threaten their access to a campaign or the candidate.¹³⁶

6. *Admit mistakes.* When necessary, fact-checkers should make prompt reassessments of new information and issue any necessary corrections when the facts change or they make an error. All of the fact-checkers indicated that occasional mistakes happen. Being open to corrections will help establish credibility with readers and critics.

Appendix A

List of Informants

<u>Informant</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Interview Date</u>
Bill Adair	PolitiFact National	November 16, 2012
Liz Cox Barrett	<i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>	November 16, 2012
Pat Doe ¹⁵	Swing State TV Reporter	November 28, 2012
Kara Carscaden	Deputy Press Secretary, Obama campaign	December 19, 2012
Henry Gomez	<i>The Plain Dealer</i> /PolitiFact Ohio	December 7, 2012
Jason Hart	Media Trackers Ohio	December 19, 2012
Mark Hemingway	<i>The Weekly Standard</i>	December 12, 2012
Angie Drobnic Holan	PolitiFact Florida/National	November 15, 2012
Brooks Jackson	FactCheck.org	December 10, 2012
Kathleen Hall Jamieson	FactCheck.org/FlackCheck.org	December 17, 2012
Tim Karr	Free Press	November 15, 2012
Tom Kertscher	PolitiFact Wisconsin	November 15, 2012
Glenn Kessler	The Fact Checker	November 28, 2012
Kurtis Lee	<i>The Denver Post</i>	November 30, 2012
Nancy Madsen	PolitiFact Virginia	November 30, 2012
Greg Marx	<i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>	December 6, 2012
Zack McMillan	PolitiFact Tennessee	November 20, 2012
Jon Ralston	KSNV-TV, Las Vegas	December 20, 2012

Appendix B

Select email feedback

Comments from FactCheck.org readers from June, 2012 to November, 2012:

Factual errors, misstatements, and summaries occur in every campaign, and our job as voters is to decide which ones matter to us. You're not trying to do that for us, and I for one really appreciate it.

[Susan Rati Lane](#) (who was responding to readers who accuse us of false equivalency)
Somerville, Mass.

I want to thank everyone that helps run FactCheck.org. I'll be honest, I haven't cared about politics much, and a big reason for it is that it's frustrating to deal with all the lies...I'm ever so grateful for a website that is truly neutral. Thank you again, and I'll be sure to pass this website on to as many people as I can.

[L. Yang](#)
New York, N.Y.

Thank you so much for all your efforts to reveal the facts. In the muddled up, mixed up world of politics, it is so refreshing to know where to find the truth, not the partial truth or the sort of truth, but real nonpartisan facts.

[Cindy Withrow](#)
Charleston, W.Va.

I feel like I can come to this site and get the analysis that helps make voters like me have an informed vote that cuts through the political garbage that both sides sling. Again, thank you.

[Dustin Slayer](#)
Ashland, Ky.

Your reporting is so thorough it puts traditional news to shame! Anyone who thinks you are biased seems to use info that you said in your article, and formed opinions on that. The true source of unbiased fact finding is in the depths of your articles.

[Jeffrey Engert](#)
Chicago, Ill.

Comments from PolitiFact.com readers from [August, 2012](#):

Well-wishes...

"Thanks for at least trying to present the truth in all the garbage that comes out in our political system. Most people want to believe the leaders of their selected parties, but unless a trusted, unbiased, politically unfinanced organization can reveal the researched facts behind a statement or accusation, no one can call themselves an informed voter. Although I sometimes (often) disagree with your ratings, I feel your website presents a HUGE public service to the voting public. ... Happy 5th birthday, and I wish you many more."

"I was watching Fox News during the RNC and heard a pundit describe 'fact-checkers' as having 'jumped the shark.' Nothing could be further from the truth, and I applaud the work PolitiFact and similar organizations do for the American people. Facts matter. The good work PolitiFact does every day is appreciated by thinking Americans."

"I love how the right says 'PolitiFact is biased!' and the left says 'PolitiFact is biased!' You folks just keep on doin' what you do."

"I hope you realize each and every day that you are saving democracy in America."

...and criticisms:

Before the conventions, readers were frustrated with our [Pants on Fire](#) rating for Harry Reid's claim that Mitt Romney didn't pay taxes for 10 years:

"I love your work but I was disappointed and confused with the review of Harry Reid's comment about Romney's taxes. It got a 'Pants on Fire' rating because Reid did not backup his claim? Does that mean if Romney releases tax returns showing this to be the truth, you would change your rating?"

"If Harry Reid has no proof for his claim Romney paid no taxes, will you also give Romney a Pants on Fire for saying he paid taxes but providing no proof? Or does Romney get the benefit of a doubt? ... I think you erred though on even taking this 'claim' since all Reid said was this was what he was told. This is just political tit for tat, not really worth your time."

Comments from the Fact Checker's [Facebook](#) page:

Tracy Paxton Fact checker rocks!

October 3, 2012 at 11:49am

Jeffrey Victorian I rather enjoy the data, timelines, and actual facts the various fact checking sites provide. It's the conclusions of demonstrably True or False that drive me crazy. They are little more than repackaged opinions that rely on perspective while given an unwarranted level of credibility.

October 3, 2012 at 12:06pm

Frank Shepherd .. you just gotta click on this Fact Checker link to realize just how totally out of context this 14 year old clip is presented by Rummy... shows me is very very desperate....

September 20, 2012 at 11:34am

Marlene Langkilde Tuitele <3<3<3 THANKS!

September 20, 2012 at 12:01pm

Mark Zander While I agree with most of the previous comments, I do have to say that I am surprised at this article. It looks like you were actually at least a little objective and not so much pushing your agenda with this article. Three Pinocchio's is better than the two that you usually give your man, and understandable in this case.

September 18, 2012 at 9:21am

Endnotes

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- ³ Scherer, Michael. 2012. “Blue truth, red truth.” Time.com. October 3, 2012. <http://swampland.time.com/2012/10/03/blue-truth-red-truth/>
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- ⁸ Schultz, Connie. 2012. “Oh, those pesky truth-tellers.” Creators Syndicate. September 12, 2012. <http://www.pokemon.creators.com/liberal/connie-schultz/oh-those-pesky-truth-tellers.html>
- ⁹ Dobbs, Michael. 2012. “The rise of political fact-checking.” New America Foundation. February 2012. http://mediapolicy.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_rise_of_political_fact_checking_1
- ¹⁰ Graves, Lucas and Tom Glaisyer. 2012. “The fact-checking universe in Spring 2012: An overview.” New America Foundation. February, 2012. http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_fact_checking_universe_in_spring_2012 Many of the findings in this study parallel the work of Graves, Lucas. 2013. “Deciding what’s true: Fact-checking journalism and the new ecology of news.” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.
- ¹¹ Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler. 2012. “Misinformation and fact-checking: Research findings from social science.” New America Foundation. February, 2012. http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/misinformation_and_fact_checking
- ¹² Graves and Glaisyer 2012 p. 1.
- ¹³ For a more extensive comparison of the elite fact-checkers, see Graves, 2013.
- ¹⁴ Graves and Glaisyer 2012 p. 10.

¹⁵ Interview, November 28, 2012. Pat Doe is a pseudonym to protect the identity of this reporter who was not authorized for an on-the-record interview by his/her employer.

¹⁶ Interview, November 30, 2012. The “Political Polygraph” was the *Denver Post*’s column that regularly analyzed campaign claims.

¹⁷ Interview, November 16, 2012.

¹⁸ Interview, November 28, 2012.

¹⁹ This point is also made by Graves, 2013.

²⁰ As classified by Graves and Glaisyer 2012.

²¹ <http://factcheck.org/about/>

²² Interview, December 17, 2012.

²³ Interview, December 17, 2012.

²⁴ Interview, November 16, 2012.

²⁵ Personal communication, January 11, 2013. As of January 1, 2013, Jackson stepped down as Director of FactCheck.org. It is expected that the new Director, Eugene Kiely, will follow a similar process.

²⁶ Interview, November 16, 2012.

²⁷ Personal communication, January 19, 2013.

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³⁵ Interview, December 10, 2012.

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³⁸ Interview, November 16, 2012.

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⁴¹ Interview, November 15, 2012.

⁴² Purcell, Kristin, Lee Rainie, Amy Mitchell, Tom Rosenstiel, and Kenny Olmstead. 2010. "Understanding the participatory news consumer." Pew Internet & American Life Project. March 1, 2010. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-News/Summary-of-Findings.aspx>

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⁴⁴ Interview, November 15, 2012. It should be noted that Greg Marx, co-editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review's* Swing States Project, mentioned a story in progress at *CJR* documenting that one Denver television station's political coverage was comprised almost entirely of TV ad fact-check segments. "That was in response – in large part- to viewer feedback," said Marx. "There's an audience demand for this sort of stuff." Interview, December 6, 2012.

⁴⁵ Karr 2012a. Adair indicated that PolitiFact Florida also has a partnership with a local cable news channel, Bay News 9, which airs weekly fact-checking segments. Furthermore, while these markets were beyond the scope of Karr's study, PolitiFact also had a partnership with Hearst TV, which has 24 stations, in which Hearst aired regular segments -- weekly during the last few months of the campaign -- on fact-checking. Those segments aired in markets such as Manchester, NH, a battleground state, and Des Moines, a key primary state. Personal communication, January 21, 2013.

⁴⁶ For examples, see Amazeen, Michelle. 2012. "Blind spots: Examining political advertising misinformation and how U.S. news media hold political actors accountable." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 74(02).

<http://gradworks.umi.com/35/39/3539244.html>; Fowler, Erika Franklin and Travis N. Ridout. 2009. "Local television and newspaper coverage of political advertising." *Political Communications*, 26: 119-136; Iyengar, Shanto, Helmut Norpoth and Kyu S. Hahn. 2004. "Consumer demand for election news: The horserace sells." *The Journal of Politics*, 66(1): 157-175.

⁴⁷ Karr, Tim. 2012b. "Money, news and deception in Denver: Are TV stations doing enough to offset Super PAC lies?" Free Press. October, 2012. <http://www.freepress.net/resource/100247/money-news-and-deception-denver>

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⁴⁹ Interview, November 15, 2012.

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⁵¹ Interview, November 15, 2012.

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⁵⁷ Interview, December 10, 2012. Also see Farley, Robert. 2012a. "Twisting Romney's abortion stance." FactCheck.org. July 9, 2012. <http://factcheck.org/2012/07/twisting-romneys-abortion-stance/>; Farley, Robert. 2012b. "Falsifying Romney's

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⁵⁸ Interview, December 17, 2012. For example, see Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. 2009. *Electing the president 2008: The insiders’ view*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁵⁹ Goldman, Joseph P. Personal communication, February 8, 2013.

⁶⁰ Justin Barasky from Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown’s campaign consented to an interview but did not make himself available at the agreed upon time. He was unresponsive to requests to reschedule the interview. Other campaigns that were unresponsive to requests for an interview include Shelley Berkeley’s Nevada Senate campaign, Joe Heck’s Nevada Congressional campaign, Connie Mack’s Florida Senate campaign, Josh Mandell’s Ohio Senate campaign, Bill Nelson’s Florida Senate campaign, John Ocegüera’s Nevada Congressional campaign, Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign including Eric Fehrstrom and Neil Newhouse, and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s administration. Additionally, representatives from American Crossroads and the Ohio Democratic Party were unresponsive to requests for an interview.

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⁶³ Interview, December 19, 2012.

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⁶⁹ Interview, December 7, 2012.

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