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**VERIFYING NEWS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK
FACT-CHECKING JOURNALISM**

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Abstract:

Over the past two decades, fact-checking has expanded from internal media function to 237 independent organizations that actively check and verify the statements of public figures and track disinformation across 78 countries. This study investigates the role of watchdog reformers and fact-checkers as an emerging movement that seeks to secure the accuracy of information by holding accountable public figures and media networks for any errors or the dissemination of false claims across the globe. Three of these organizations located in US, Europe, and Africa are operating as non-profit organizations, and analyzed for this research study: Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check. This study conducts textual analysis with a close reading of articles dealing with the coverage of coronavirus from the three websites. The study aims to analyze how these dedicated fact-checking organizations are operating, and how the functions encompassed by social responsibility theory guide their motives. The data is gathered through the collection of fact-checking articles on the organizations' websites. It is showed that the selected functions of social responsibility theory guide the objectives of the three fact-checking organizations analyzed, which are to supply public affairs information, enlighten society, keep watch against the governments. This study approaches different mechanisms to map areas of convergence as well as divergence within these fact-checking outlets.

Key words: Verifying News, Coronavirus, Journalism.

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Introduction

We live in the “Fourth Industrial Revolution Era” which is characterized by digital transformation that is impacting all aspects of our life, culturally, scientifically, politically, and economically. Once taking the time to reflect on the way we communicate and acquire information nowadays, we notice these huge shifts we are facing. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, are clear examples of the increasing uses of such tools for newsgathering, either by media outlets or normal citizens.

A recent report published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in April 2020 analyzes the way citizens access their news and information about Coronavirus disease 2019 (Kleis Nielsen, Fletcher, Newman, Brennen, & N. Howard, 2020) (a novel strain of coronavirus without a vaccine available to protect against it). The Reuters’ report reveals that most people in the six countries it addresses are getting their news and information about coronavirus from social media platforms, while the last data collected about this emerging pandemic which is affecting 210 countries around this globe indicates that coronavirus’ case fatality rate is still increasing reaching 165,073 deaths, (Google News, 2020). The misinformation, disinformation and fake news that are covering this phenomenon are alarming media scholars, journalists and everyone trying to access accurate information during a time when the majority is relying on social media platforms.

The ‘trust gap’ between the information available to people from scientists and experts and those provided through online platforms and digital news organizations are significantly worthy of an analysis revealing the reasons why respondents rate these online tools as being less accurate than health authorities, experts and media organizations (Kleis Nielsen, Fletcher, Newman, Brennen, & N. Howard, 2020). The alarming amount of incorrect and deceiving content that is spreading, recently, on social media, traditional media organizations, and public figures has been reported as a growing and serious “info pandemic” that requires an urgent solution. In February, the World Health Organization declared that the new coronavirus pandemic was associated with an ‘infodemic’ of misinformation (World Health Organization, 2020). Therefore, media scholars, journalists, fact-checkers, and academics expressed their concern about the serious risk of misinforming people that this pandemic is presenting to public health and public debate calling it “the biggest challenge fact-checkers have ever faced” (Suarez, 2020, n.p).

Thus, the Coronavirus has called people’s attention to the debate on fake news; a serious public topic for discussion that has increased after the US elections and the UK’s referendum in 2016. Therefore, this study utilizes a qualitative research method and the textual analysis as a technique to investigate the remarkable and dedicated fact-checking units across the globe. Taking into consideration that fact-checkers emerged as journalists and reformers who take the responsibility to revive an old habit within the sphere of journalistic ethical reform during the 21st century, this research analyzes the texts of FactCheck.org, Full Fact and Africa Check to understand how these non-profit media organizations operate differently from conventional media organizations and explore the particular tasks they fulfill, particularly by evaluating them using the insights of the social responsibility theory.

These three non-profit organizations are selected from the 290 fact-checking projects, which adhere to the global criteria of the Reporter’s Lab attributed to fact-checking organizations. Secondly, these websites are among the list provided by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)’s verified and active signatories to its Code of Principles (Poynter, n.d).

Literature Review

Truth and Trust in Journalism

The most important distinction between information, misinformation, and disinformation is the concept of truth and the nuances of falseness; hence, the definition of information supposes an understanding of the truth. According to Stahl (2006), “there is no universally accepted theory or definition of truth” (p. 83). Considering that the truth is a socially oriented phenomenon, (Petrenko, 2019) the search for the essence and absolute meanings of the truth was debated by researches and scholars long ago. The criteria defining something to be labeled as true or false varies as the context differs. Therefore, it may be critical of how external realities can reflect mental representations. For this matter, Drew Khlentzos (2004) acknowledges that “truth does indeed require mind-independent links between our truth-bearers and the various things in the world that they represent”(p. 331). The concept suggested by Khlentzos indicates the inefficiency of representation, and with this in mind “if the world is as resolutely mind-independent as the realist makes out, then there is a problem about how we get to know about it in the first place” (Khlentzos, 2004, p. 4). This matter signifies the vulnerability of the truth when someone attempts to make true claims about the existing world.

The subjectivity of information and mis/dis-information

The nuances of truth as a concept are important in this study because it has to do with what constitutes and defines information and mis-/dis-information. It is important to distinguish between the meaning of information, misinformation, and disinformation though scholars and philosophers mention the difficulties surrounding the definition of these terms. Scholars have long discussed the nature of information and tried to reach a unified definition of what constitutes information, where it comes from, and the way it affects audiences. The historical development of theories about the nature of information is quite long, beginning with Shannon and Weaver (1949), and their model based on information in communication which is being transferred through a channel of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Shannon modeled information as signals transmitted between one sender and one receiver, without a clear distinction between misinformation and disinformation since they are considered ‘noises’ that interrupt the process of communication. Shannon’s idea which is shaped in mathematical terms regarded how information can be transmitted in the face of noises. Therefore, through the use of error-correcting schemes, communication can be preserved from noises and interruption. Some scholars perceived information as a social construct by human beings and “search for universal dimensions of sense-making” (Dervin & Nilan, 1986) (Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997). Misinformation and disinformation are to be also seen as an informational process that occurs in the talk of individuals and that are regarded as information people may articulate while constructing some reality. In this way, misinformation and disinformation are extensions and versions of information (Karlova & Fisher, 2013). Yet, reaching an operational definition of these three concepts is important because the efficacy of this research paper relies on a common understanding of this definition.

While the term of information advances a normative conception as consistently accurate, true, complete, and current, the discourse regarding ‘fake news’ and information disorder combines two concepts: misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is defined as false information, yet the sender who is disseminating it assumes that it is true while, disinformation is false information deliberately disseminated. Thus, misinformation (inaccurate information) and disinformation (deceptive information) (Karlova & Fisher, 2013).

While the Oxford English Dictionary defines misinformation as, “the act of giving wrong information about something” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.), Christopher Fox (1983) describes misinformation as “a species of information, just as misinforming is a species of informing...informing does not require truth and information need not be true; but misinforming requires falsehood, and misinformation must be false (Fox, 1983, p. 193)

The subjective understanding of information and the way information is seen as situational is also stated by the scholar Michael Keeble Buckland. His article specifies why misinformation and disinformation can be difficult to define and to identify since one of the

key characteristics of “information-as-knowledge is that it is intangible: one cannot touch it or measure it in any direct way” (Buckland, 1991, p. 351). The subjectivity of information, knowledge, and beliefs makes misinformation and disinformation in one situation another information in another one, because the meanings and context are different. Whereas Karlova and Lee (2011) mention that misinformation is viewed as including “mistakes, ambiguity, or vagueness, requiring various kinds of “corrections” (Karlova & Lee, 2011).

Losee (1997) states that misinformation may be defined as information that is not justified, adding that misinformation can be also deceptive since “the person making the lie knows the truth and, instead of repeating it, chooses to produce a lie for some purpose, the lie is then information about the process that produced it” (Losee, 1997, p. 267). Other scholars, however, make the argument that deceptive misinformation is called disinformation.

Journalism in the time of Post- Truth

Brian Creech and Amber Roessner (2019) mention how the concern over fake news is not a new phenomenon. They state that in 1896, the New York Times acknowledged the existence of disinformation which hindered the democratic process within the society. The American newspaper stated in its edition of July 12, 1896, that “it is unfortunate that circumstances force people to lose their faith in the power of the newspaper to adhere to the truth” (Creech & Roessner, 2019). Misleading people and spreading inaccurate information was and still a part of news production. Indeed, while lamenting the rise of fake news that endangers the journalistic profession, the American newspaper publisher and the owner of the New York Times, Adolph Ochs promised the establishment of decent and dignified journalism (Creech & Roessner, 2019, p. 263). This matter signifies that the rise of fake news was as the core of journalists’ consciousness and a practice “old as news itself”. Looking back at the historical background of fake news, the 19th century also witnessed the increase of cheap newsprints allowing partisan newspapers to expand greatly their reach (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 211).

The former editor of The Guardian newspaper, Alan Rusbridger states that we live in a world where “news was broken” (Rusbridger, 2018, p. 9). More precisely, the British journalist, refers to the way the system of information whose function was to inform people and make them understand the world, and the system of news which “oiled the wheels of society, that pollinated communities, that kept the powerful honest is no longer functioning like before” (Rusbridger, 2018, p. 9). In the opening pages of his book about the transformation of journalism and the fake news era, Rusbridger presents a reading of the past, present, and future of journalism and the forces challenging its freedom, by a flashback on two decades that transformed completely the practice of journalism, and led to “too much false news, not enough reliable news. There might soon be entire communities without news. Or without news they could trust” (Rusbridger, 2018, p. 10).

Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow (2017) allude to the story of “Great Moon Hoax” of 1835 when the New York Sun deceived its readers by publishing a series of articles about discovering life on the moon. The series of six articles announced the so-called “discovery” of life on the moon by the English scientist and astronomer, Sir John Herschel, and offered to the readers “vivid description of the new life on the moon with its “massive craters, enormous amethyst crystals, rushing rivers and lush vegetation” (History.com Editors, 2009). In the same context, the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt also brings up the relevant correlation between truth and politics, in her essay Truth and Politics (Arendt, 2010). She explains how societies are witnessing a kind of “modern political lie” which is distinguished from the traditional one. Arendt states how politicians tend to change the “preexisting circumstances of the world” for the sake of their own interests and agenda. For Arendt, the public sphere is nowadays “not only the place of political action that creates history but also, and centrally, the place of the political lie that denies it” (Caruth, Katz, & Keenan, p. 80).

One of the characteristics of politics is the act of hiding the truth, because “truthfulness is an honorable ideal,” the reality is associated with pragmatic purposes, and necessitates “the lie, the half-truth, the obfuscation, and the omission” a matter that can be paraphrased by

what the scholar Jeff Malpas states about a politician's point of view who mentioned that "one simply has to do 'whatever it takes,' and if that involves an element of deceit or misdirection, then so be it" (Malpas, 2008, p. 2). In the same way, Michael A. Peters (2015) underlines the issue of deceit and indicates that besides the politicians, CEOs of well-known companies contribute to the spread of deliberate manipulations and continuous lies while neglecting their obligations towards citizens. Moreover, these public figures make conditions worse. If politicians and public figures are not committed and responsible, besides not keeping their promises causing harmful results against ethical norms of democracy within the public sphere, one can question the role of journalism in reclaiming citizens' rights and accounting for politicians' dishonest. Consequently, the issue of deception and lying raises the concern over the responsibility of every journalist- either a professional or non-professional towards instituting verification and fact-checking practices as priorities when diffusing and publishing news. For this purpose, playing the role of "reformers" is a burden today to be carried by decent journalists during this era of post-truth, and fake news.

Fake News and Social Responsibility

This existing phenomenon of fake news continues to represent a serious challenge for the task of informing communities with day-to-day events and news as they unfold obvious explanation can be found in the studies/works of political theorists and philosophers, cultural studies scholars, and media critics whose ground-breaking research exposed the dangerous relationship between lies and politics. Taking the example of Hannah Arendt, the famous political thinkers of the twentieth century who reflected critically on the concept of lies in her books and deconstructed the role of lying within the political modern public life. Arendt determines the significant role of political actions by indicating their ties to establishing a democratic public sphere. Arendt clarifies that public sphere was transformed into an area of deception, and to a place of lies, hence, it is nowadays "not only the place of political action that creates history but also, and centrally, the place of the political lie that denies it" (Caruth, Katz, & Keenan, p. 80).

Taking into consideration that yellow press of the late 19th century threatened the concepts of accuracy, and accountability, besides, the moral responsibilities were not established by the Libertarian theory, Peterson (1956) emphasized the necessity of expanding notions such as "the public's right to know" or "the public responsibility of the press" (Vaca-Baqueiro, 2017, p. 73). fact, Peterson (1956) specified how libertarian theory failed to establish the public's right to information or required the publisher to assume moral responsibilities (Siebert, Bernard, & Schramm, 1956, p. 73). Thus, the social responsibility's main premise as follows: "freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society" (Siebert, Bernard, & Schramm, 1956, p. 74). Peterson recognizes then the social responsibilities of the press by making them "the basis of operational policies" (Siebert, Bernard, & Schramm, 1956, p. 74). For this reason, a reconsideration of the notion of freedom of the press and the role of media was highlighted through the six functions of the Social Responsibility theory. These six functions were developed as a normative and ethical key for what the media should be done and underlying journalists' duties. For the achievement of accountability, responsibility, and autonomy, the press must play six functions within society:

1. Supplying the political system which can be operationalized by providing accurate information, platforms for discussion, forums for debate on public affairs.
2. Enlightening the public, through assisting the public so as to make it capable of self-government.
3. Serve as a watchdog against the government,
4. Serve the economic system with advertising; by bringing together the buyers and sellers through advertising,
5. Supplying entertainment to the public.
6. Preserving a sort of financial independence to avoid undue pressure from advertisers or strong financial supporters.

The authors mentioned that the social responsibility theory's functions are not new, indeed some of the functions were discussed in the Libertarian Theory. Yet the difference is that the

social responsibility reflects its dissatisfaction with the application of those functions within the society and “the interpretation of those functions by some media owners and operators and with the way in which the press has carried them out” (Siebert, Bernard, & Schramm, 1956, p. 74). Besides, some functions were seen as more important than others, since the fourth function (advertising and economic benefit) and the fifth one (entertainment) are not ‘to be carried out at the expense of the media’s other functions’ (Van Wyk, 2017, p. 33).

RQ: How do the selected websites (Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check) apply the functions of Social Responsibility theory in their coverage of the Coronavirus Outbreak?

The answering of the study’s research question requires investigating the application of the six functions of social responsibility theory by Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check. Yet for this study, the researcher will focus on the first three functions namely:

- 1) Supplying public affairs information and furthering debate and discussions. This function will be operationalized through searching for evidence of how these fact-checking organizations provide information and explain the coronavirus’ issue to their public.
- 2) Enlightening the public. This function will be operationalized through investigating the process of checking facts and the sources provided to the public.
- 3) Keeping watch against the government. This function will be operationalized through investigating the way fact-checking plays the role of “watchdogs”.

However, the three fact-checking organizations do not apply the functions four and five (stated above on page 29) which are to link buyers and sellers through advertising and supply entertainment, since the selected organizations are non-profits websites, seeking the common interest. While the sixth function is revealed as the three websites preserve their financial sustainability.

The Findings

RQ: How do the selected websites (Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check) apply the functions of Social Responsibility theory in their coverage of the Coronavirus Outbreak?

Having gathered all the data (articles) that dealt with the fact-checking coverage of the coronavirus between the period of 30 January and 11 March 2021, which are published by Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check, the researcher will now proceed to use these articles as the basis for analyzing whether the non-profit websites fulfil the media functions mentioned by social responsibility theory. The themes that were extracted from this qualitative analysis are as follows: Health care discussions during the COVID-19 pandemic and Public figures misleading information.

The discussion draws on the insights of Social Responsibility theory which is anchored in the idea of a collective and shared understanding among professional journalists of a commitment to the protection of the public sphere, the accuracy of the information, and the ability to enlighten society with truthful details that might impact their life. The research showed that three websites, Factchecked.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check has some similarities and differences while covering the coronavirus pandemic. These websites provide the readers with enough background and contextual information that would help them in the three different continents, America, Europe, and Africa to avoid any confusion related to the coronavirus. The three websites debunked to an equal extent the false claims that are related to health issues. Yet only Factcheck.org delved more deeply into portraying the misleading information articulated by politicians and public figures.

Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check’s objectives to encompass the social responsibility theory’s functions have some similarities and differences. Firstly, the three non-profit websites share the purpose of improving public debate within the areas that they cover. The fact-checking websites admit their goal to preserve a healthy public sphere, by the verification of online claims that are shared through social media platforms. These findings support the view of the recent studies that show the correlation between technological advancement and disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The data collected show how these websites give a particular concern over the false claims spread on

social media platforms about health matters, and their contribution to intensifying fear and confusion. Fact-checkers from Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check verify constantly the content produced by social media users and check the accuracy of contents that are shared through online platforms.

For this matter, the three non-profit websites are partners in Facebook's third party-fact-checking program to stop the spread of false information on social media. The new findings from this study reflect the quick response of these non-profit websites to the broadly emerging online disinformation challenge linked to the coronavirus. The data collected reflect the multiple tools which are guaranteed by the non-profit organizations to correct the inaccurate online claims in the public interest and for the common good. These fact-checking organizations are aware of the growing threat that may be inflicted on society due to the appearance of Infodemic during coronavirus time. For this matter, checking the unreliable claims is at the core of the first function of social responsibility theory, requiring the servicing of the political system with information and enhancing the healthy public discussions. Hence the commitment to seeking the "truth" and applying the five principles that make every journalist accountable based on the voluntary and self-regulatory professional codes of conduct is applied by these three fact-checking websites during the era of fake news and coronavirus.

Moreover, if seeking revenues by fake news is much easier and cheap for media outlets as discussed above in the literature review (Kari, 2018), the social costs are much expensive and high. Public trust in media and political actors is reduced. Besides, the data collected from the three websites proved the previous studies mentioning that audiences are greatly attracted to news appealing to their emotions, particularly the way false claims are shared quickly on social media (Kari, 2018).

Furthermore, the new findings of this study confirm that these fact-checking websites are playing effectively the role of "reformers" and watchdog journalists. For this purpose, the third function of the social responsibility theory is applied by the three chosen fact-checking websites. The findings of this study reveal the concern of Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check to hold politicians and media organizations accountable for their reporting, particularly, with the emergence of the current COVID-19 pandemic during the so-called post-truth era. The three websites focused during their coverage on checking the politicians and public figures claims, with a slight difference. For instance, Fact-check.org is more into concentrating on political issues and checking American president Donald Trump's statements. This can be explained due to the website's interest in the U.S. politics as mentioned in the description and the literature review above "a nonpartisan, nonprofit 'consumer advocate' for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in US politics" (Our Mission, n.d). The way these three websites strive to perform the watchdog norms reflect the long-established practices of the news media as the fourth estate since the selected non-profit websites represent and defend the voices of the people and fight corruption, by exposing bias and inaccuracy of public figures and other incompetence of media outlets. Pursuing the "truth" is the goal of "watchdog journalism," as explained by media studies, like Jebril (2013) who indicates that "the liberal press theory expects the press to provide a marketplace of ideas and sees the government as the primary (if not only) threat to press freedom" (Jebril, 2013, p. 4). The findings of this study are that the digitalization of the public sphere is viewed as a new challenge to the democratic public sphere and free discussions within society, yet this so-called post-truth era has not prevented the fact-checking organizations from carrying the old habit of external verification and checking facts, particularly during the outbreak of a dramatic atmosphere brought by advancement technologies and coronavirus. A matter that suggests the utility of social responsibility though being labeled as an idealistic and normative theory in the previous limitation's section. These websites offer valuable assistance in helping combat the spread of fake news through their commitment to social responsibility theory, transparency, protecting the free discussions, and dissemination of accurate information in the public arena.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed the textual coverage of coronavirus by Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check and the application of social responsibility theory. This study portrays how “trust” is a keyword governing the ethical charter between journalists and the public since if “the press does not have the trust of the people it strives to inform, enlighten, and occasionally, inspire or enrage, it ceases to fulfill the lofty role it claims in a democratic society (Silverman, 2007, p. 3). Mistakes, errors and misleading news destroy the fundamental role to be carried believably by journalists, an issue to be considered during this era of post-truth and fake news that are shaped by the existence of advanced technologies and social media. The post-truth era raises the awareness of media “credibility” that can be damaged, contaminated, and destroyed by deceiving media and political statements. It then forces the flourishing of press criticism and the establishing of new forms of accountable journalism. Thus, a larger “outbreak” in verification and fact-checking organizations have started to take place, globally, in the search of professional media practices and norms.

Taking into consideration that lies are the vital source of destruction in the level of trust in the press, the concept of verifying news and fact-checking information is a significant part of the ecology and news environment. This study aimed at explaining how checking facts is an old habit for media organizations to verify their information before being published. Thus, fact-checking was a key element within traditional newsrooms, and it was carried out by the work of dedicated journalists whose main job is to verify information such as; wrong numbers, names, addresses, titles. It was the checking of journalists’ facts, that spread within the journalistic environment in an internal mode. Today, the external model of fact-checking organizations has become an influential and significant power for “accountability journalism” and “watchdog journalism” around the world, forcing politicians to change their behaviors. Today politicians are constantly being checked by media and fact-checking organizations, thus, “they are more careful what they say because they know they are being fact-checked — and this is the term they used — “PolitiFacted (Adair, 2016). These institutions aim to make politicians and people who are in power accountable for their statements.

Fact-checking invaded all forms of media, starting with print sources to traditional and digital media outlets which to evaluate the accuracy of the information and enhance the powerful position of media. The motives pushing media organizations to adopt the fact-checking as one of its practices while dealing with political and health issues are from one side, to reinforce the core values of journalism as a fourth power, and its ability to account for political issues, thus it is a way leading to maintain the ideals of the journalistic profession. On the other side, this adoption of fact-checking can be viewed as a way to enhance the social responsibility within the public sphere, by appealing to consumers’ interests and wishes for accurate information. It is a way for journalists to be more sensitive to their audience’s demands. A matter that confirms the concern over reviving watchdog journalism as a practice in the media field. Overall, this study’s analysis is consistent with the function of social responsibility theory applied by the three organizations which emerged as reformers in the journalistic field. FactCheck.org, Full Fact, and Africa Check. Those fact-checking websites are taking the road of earlier examples of journalistic “field repair,” and “public journalism movement” of the 1990s. Their purpose is to promote and improve the quality of public and civic life, therefore, when journalists are living in an era where objective reporting is failing, they are forced to explore new and innovative techniques for checking facts.

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