

Analyzing Divergent Methodologies for Political Fact Checking: United States and South Korea

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ABSTRACT

In this work in progress, we explore methods employed by professional journalists to fact-check political claims and debunk inaccurate (“fake”) news stories. We content-analyzed 150 articles evaluating political claims and debunking fake news published by two media companies, the Washington Post (United States) and JTBC (South Korea), during the periods surrounding the recent presidential elections in their respective countries. Overall, the most common types of claims evaluated included false claims made by politicians or political groups about their opponents’ positions and numerical and nonnumerical facts. The most frequently used methods for debunking such false claims included consulting with an independent expert in the given topic domain and checking government statistics or documents. There were some variations in the types of false claims focused and debunking methods used between the two fact-checking organizations.

KEYWORDS

Fake news; disinformation; misinformation; fact check

ASIS&T THESAURUS

Information behavior; knowledge and information

INTRODUCTION

Traditional fact checking assumes the accuracy of reporting and evaluates the accuracy of claims reported to have been made by politicians (Graves, 2016). This model of fact checking has been widely disseminated internationally, with many news organizations running fact-checking operations with a dedicated staff and their own sections on the organization’s website. More recent events, most notably the Russian information offensive conducted around its 2014 invasion of Ukraine and the 2016 presidential election in the United States, posed a challenge to this model of fact checking. The widespread

dissemination of entirely “fake news,” primarily in online news outlets and via social media, created a different problem. Rather than accurately reporting suspect political claims, fake news stories propagated events, facts, and quotations that were fabricated or miscontextualized. For example, a picture said to illustrate child deaths in Ukraine might actually be taken in Syria. Or the report might claim to document the “Pizzagate” imprisonment of children as sex slaves by senior members of the Clinton campaign. As the product of journalistic process, fake news is defined as “*news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers*,” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). Traditional fact-checking services do not focus on analyzing fake news, although other groups such as Snopes.com specialized in evaluating and documenting the accuracy of widely shared online stories. Some groups, such as Ukraine’s StopFake, applied aspects of journalistic fact checking to the debunking of fake news stories (Haigh, Haigh, & Kozak, 2018).

Our study looked at the work of two fact-checking services run by traditional media organizations. We content-analyzed fact-checking results produced by two fact-checking organizations in two countries—the Washington Post Fact Checker (U.S.) and JTBC Fact Check (South Korea)—to address the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What kinds of political claims and suspect news stories did the organizations chose to evaluate?
- RQ2: What are the methods and evidence employed by fact checkers to evaluate the accuracy of political claims and of news reporting?
- RQ3: What was the balance of traditional fact-checking of political claims versus the evaluation of news reports themselves as real or fake.

METHOD

For this exploratory study, we selected two organizations with similar profiles according to Graves’ (2016) framework for mapping the international fact-checking landscape. We looked at the fact-checking articles posted by each organization during a comparable time frame—2

months before and after the recent presidential elections in their respective countries: September through December

2016 for

Political Claim or Report Evaluated	WP	JTBC	Evaluation Methods	WP	JTBC
A claim made by a politician or political group about their own position or action	12 (13.5%)	12 (19.7%)	Checking government stats or documents	28 (31.5%)	45 (73.8%)
A claim made by a politician or political group about an opponent's position or action	26 (29.2%)	11 (18%)	Consulting with an independent expert evaluation of the claim in question	19 (21.3%)	30 (49.2%)
A claim about a number or percentage	32 (36%)	9 (14.8%)	Verifying original context of quoted source in the claim	12 (13.5%)	24 (39.3%)
Another kind of factual claim made by a politician or a political group	4 (4.5%)	15 (24.6%)	Relying on the external evaluation	14 (15.7%)	0 (0%)
Fake news	7 (7.9%)	11 (18%)	Referencing conclusions of trusted reports or credible news sources as an evidence	10 (11.2%)	3 (4.9%)
A flip-flop of a politician or political group	7 (7.9%)	5 (8.2%)	Checking the record of previous statements by the same politician	7 (7.9%)	5 (8.2%)
A causal claim made by a politician or political group (X happened because of Y)	17 (19.1%)	0 (0%)	Referencing a thinktank's or nonprofit's existing analysis	8 (9%)	3 (4.9%)
Summary or explanation of facts on a controversial issue	23 (25.8%)	28 (45.9%)	Referencing findings of other fact checkers as an evidence	8 (9%)	0 (0%)
			Checking the record of previous statements by other politicians as referenced in the claim	5 (5.6%)	0 (0%)

Table 1. Claims or reports examined (left) and evaluation methods (right) used by Washington Post and JTBC

the Washington Post Fact Checker in U.S. ($N = 89$) and May through August 2017 for JTBC Fact Check in South Korea ($N = 61$). In terms of language, the Washington Post Fact Checker publishes in English and JTBC Fact Check publishes in Korean. We developed our coding scheme based on the fake news debunking methods identified by Haigh et al. (2018) and adapted the taxonomy to the context of the professional news organizations focused on fact checking. To test and refine our initial coding scheme, we recruited two third-party coders—one for English and the other for Korean articles. We used the refined coding scheme to code all the articles collected. The coders could assign more than one code for the types of claim being evaluated in each post and the evaluative methods used.

RESULTS

As presented in Table 1, the most common types of fake news debunked by the Washington Post fact checkers included claims made by politicians or political groups about the *positions and actions of their opponents* ($n = 26$, 29.2%) and *numerical facts* ($n = 32$, 36.0%). JTBC, however, focused more on debunking claims about *nonnumerical facts*, such as intentionally erroneous or biased interpretation of the law or juridical decisions ($n = 15$, 24.6%); also, JTBC more often evaluated the accuracy of internet reports to identify possible fake news ($n = 11$, 18%). Although the Washington Post often *summarized the facts on a controversial issue* ($n = 23$, 25.8%), it was even more common in the JTBC, occurring in almost half ($n = 23$, 49.5%) of posts examined. Looking at the evidence used to perform evaluations, we noted that fact checkers at the Washington Post were more likely to *consult with an independent expert about the claim in question* ($n = 19$, 21.3%) than any other method; this was done more routinely by the Korean fact checkers ($n = 30$, 49.2%).

However, the JTBC's most frequent action was to *check official documents and statistics published by the governments or international organizations*, such as the United Nations, to evaluate political claims and reports ($n = 45$, 73.8%).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Both organizations focus on verifying and debunking politicians' or political groups' claims, although JTBC had begun to expand its remit to evaluate online reports as possible fake news. The results suggest that during the most recent presidential elections traditional fact-checking organizations in the United States and South Korea remained focused on subtle analysis of the degree of truthfulness of political claims and not the newer challenges of fake news.

Our immediate next steps will include: (a) expanding the dataset by including other types of fact-checking organizations (e.g., academic, political); (b) refining and validating the coding scheme as a research instrument; and (c) determining whether the new post-2016 focus on fake news has changed the balance of effort devoted by media organizations to checking the accuracy of political claims versus the veracity of news reports.

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