

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.

INTRODUCTION

- 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).
- Fake news, primarily in online news outlets and via social media, propagate events, facts, and quotations that are fabricated or miscontextualized, rather than accurately reporting suspect political claims.
- Traditional fact-checking services do not focus on analyzing fake news.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 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

- **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).
- **Data Collection:** Fact-checking articles posted by each organization during 2 months before and after the recent presidential elections in their respective countries: September through December 2016 for the Washington Post Fact Checker in U.S. (N = 89) and May through August 2017 for JTBC Fact Check in South Korea (N = 61).
- **Data analysis:** Developed a coding scheme (Table 1) to code the types of claim and the evaluative methods used.

Reference: Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236.

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

Wonchan Choi¹ (wchoi@uwm.edu)
Maria Haigh^{1,2} (mhaigh@uwm.edu)

¹School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI, USA

²School of Media and Information, Siegen University, Siegen, Germany



RESULTS

- Both the Washington Post and JTBC often summarized the facts on a controversial issue: Washington Post ($n = 23$, 25.8%) and JTBC ($n = 23$, 49.5%).
- The Washington Post focused more on 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 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%) and the accuracy of internet reports to identify possible fake news ($n = 11$, 18%).
- Both institutions often consult with an independent expert about the claim in question: Washington Post ($n = 19$, 21.3%) and JTBC ($n = 30$, 49.2%); and check official documents and statistics published by the governments or international organizations: Washington Post ($n = 28$, 31.5%) and JTBC ($n = 45$, 73.8%).

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

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%)