

Scaling Up the Truth

Fact-Checking Innovations and the Pandemic

By Will Moy



In a complex, rapidly changing information ecosystem, fact-checkers are a trusted source of information for millions of people around the world. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust fact-checkers into a new role: that of first responders to an information crisis. They may see aspects of the crisis before others do; they may have insight into the origins, patterns, and flows of untrustworthy information; and they may be the first to challenge particular kinds or sources of bad information. Fact-checkers have many reasons to be proud of their response to the new coronavirus. A global network of mostly small, nascent independent organizations produced four-thousand fact-checks that—for one indication of scale—have been shown on forty million Facebook posts.¹

In a global pandemic, everybody's choices are important for public health, and so fact-checkers must take audiences as they are, trusting or not. In some cases, fact-checkers are a vital resource for people who are not willing to trust other sources of information. These wary audiences rely on fact-checkers for a number of potential reasons. Some might not trust official or traditional sources of information, such as government statements or major newspapers or television networks, because of their own beliefs and attitudes about the trustworthiness of these sources. Others are distrustful for the good reason that those same official or traditional sources have in fact issued statements that have proved untrustworthy in their context and experience. Regardless of the reason why fact-checkers are needed, they play an important role in the exchange of ideas and information, and depend on others to play theirs. Fact-checking is one way of providing good information that serves everybody.

Although fact-checking is not the same everywhere, fact-checking organizations tend to be generalists: they actively monitor for all kinds of harmful false information, and engage with audiences who are concerned about trustworthiness. That said, fact-checkers usually depend on others for deep subject expertise and to reach wider audiences (academics, for instance, or social media platforms). The significant investment that Facebook has made in fact-checking around the world is one example of this continued engagement, as is the integration of fact-checks into Google and (in some countries) YouTube search results, although Google does not pay individual fact-checking organizations for their work in the way that Facebook does. What observers sometimes miss, however, is that traditional forms of media still have greater reach in many countries than online media. Television, radio, and newspapers are all powerful media formats that provide one shared experience to all their audiences. Information and newsgathering habits are changing rapidly, but for the foreseeable future it will be essential for fact-checkers and traditional media outlets to work together to tackle bad information.

What lessons for fact-checkers have emerged from the pandemic and the global political turmoil of the past few years? Many fall under two big themes: preparation and scale.

Fact-checkers Must Be Prepared for Fast-paced, Complex Challenges

In 2020, fact-checkers improvised; they had no choice but to do so. However, improvisation has its limits. Bad information is as old as humanity, but tackling it globally while lives are on the line and with due respect for free expression is a new and immature field. Fact-checkers need to take lessons in preparedness from emergency management experts. This year, they had to connect with partners on the fly, building vital collaborations with scientists and health bodies—but what if the connections and the plans had been there in advance? Mature disciplines have shared concepts and processes that amplify their efforts. Fact-checkers now have enough experience to develop such concepts and processes for themselves. If the pandemic is a “Level 1” information crisis, where every tool must come out of the toolbox, what is a Level 2 (or Level 3) situation, where the stakes may be less dire but the information is no less in need of fact-checking? What should we expect fact-checkers, internet companies, governments, and others to do in those situations? This foundational question presents great opportunities.

Prepared responses can only be effective if responders understand the environments and audiences for which they need to prepare. Right now, it is not clear that researchers are asking the right questions. The next big information crisis is likely to be vaccine skepticism: every individual will have to evaluate the extent to which they trust the efficacy of a vaccine for the new coronavirus. Their knowledge, beliefs, and feelings about that vaccine will matter tremendously, and it will be the job of fact-checkers to support accurate information to help individuals make informed choices.

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To be successful, fact-checkers rely on a sound understanding of both audiences for and sources of information. In terms of the latter, significant research funding and effort today is understandably applied to those areas involving novel technology or theoretical grounds, only for this research to yield interesting but instantly outdated descriptions of the flow of information online. Yet the former is no less complicated: as the media and information environment fragments, with people accessing more sources than ever before—and with more of those sources being personalized instead of shared experiences—it has become harder than ever to understand audiences. Practically, fact-checkers (and independent media more generally) need to approach the problem with a market research outlook that helps understand the impact of bad information from the audiences’ points of view, and how to position good information to cut through the cacophony.

Finally, in preparing for future challenges, fact-checkers need to recognize their limitations. It is important to distinguish between disinformation, its source, and its effect, as well as between the deliberate actions of disinformation actors and the possibility of unintentional misinformation. Foreign and domestic actors also tend to act in different ways. However, such distinctions often cannot be made reliably in real time. It is especially difficult to positively identify coordinated inauthentic activity online, let alone to attribute it robustly. Fact-checkers should acknowledge the range of threats and then accept that prepared responses will work with imperfect information, leaving researchers and digital investigators to clarify some of these unknowns at a later date.

Fact-checkers Must Be Ready to Scale

The genuine novelty that should most concern fact-checkers and others who analyze the information ecosystem is the challenge of digital speed and scale. Around the world, innovative efforts are rising to this new challenge. No single organization is leading these initiatives, but there are some great examples, some open questions, and some organizations that have not received their due share of attention because many policymakers and researchers focus too narrowly on either the United States and Western Europe and their security interests. Four areas where fact-checkers have shown potential for scale are building communities, building technology, partnering to reach targeted audiences, and influencing policy.

In Spain, for instance, Maldita.es built a network of expert volunteer “superheroes” to help them respond to the pandemic with assistance from doctors and scientists.² Crude crowd-sourced fact-checking is not a sufficient response (as previous experiments have shown), but depending on a small team of fact-checkers is limiting.³ Maldita.es showed that it is possible (if not easy) to invest in building communities that can effectively mobilize and tackle bad information.

Fact-checkers should augment their work with technology, but even more crucially, they can help design systems to enhance accountability that is so often missing. In winning Google’s AI for Social Good Impact Challenge for their work on automated fact-checking, Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact beat more than two-thousand applicants from around the world.⁴ Building this kind of technological expertise within public benefit organizations is crucial, especially when considering that the vast majority of decisions about misinformation are being made by artificial intelligence. Four thousand fact-checks do not turn into forty million posts without assistance from a computer. Nevertheless, these are systems designed by private companies under pressure and without scrutiny. The first part shows how machine learning can be a necessary innovation; the second shows a troubling democratic vulnerability in how it is often deployed.

Collaboration between internet companies such as Facebook and Google and fact-checkers around the world has made it much easier to bring checked and corrected information to people at the point where they make decisions about what to read, share, or do. Other, more local collaborations help target good information to the right decision makers—for instance, forums for parents are good places to talk about vaccines. Partnerships require both time and focus to amplify the impact of their work.

Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact joined forces to point out that fact-checkers possess a unique evidence base about the causes, content, and consequences of bad information. Above all, though, if the rules of the game are broken, the best players and the best tactics will still fail. The people who most need that insight are policymakers, who are now trapped in a guessing game about the veracity of the information propagated through internet companies. Fact-checkers need to ditch the “publish and pray” model and invest in the capacity to systematize their evidence and make their case to policymakers.⁵

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The barriers to each of these changes is high. Overcoming them will involve developing skills and capabilities within fact-checking organizations as well as connections beyond them. They will require sustained investment, which is rare in this constantly changing space. But these innovations have demonstrated their benefits, even as continuous adaptation is needed. The diligent, day-to-day work of fact-checkers is unique. When done well, it is the most solid possible foundation for wider work.

Perhaps the most daunting barriers come from failure to think globally about these challenges. Two billion more people are expected to start using the internet over the coming decades. Their experience will be determined partly by the vision of those funding in this space today. Astute funders will make a pivotal difference if they push for support for a wide range of languages, whatever their profitability; if they support cross-border learning between fact-checking organizations so that needed innovations can be achieved more rapidly; and perhaps above all if they help to rebalance power in conversations among civil society, governments, and large companies. The next two billion users of the internet are just as worthy of investment as the first two billion have been.

Endnotes

- 1 Guy Rosen, "An Update on Our Work to Keep People Informed and Limit Misinformation About COVID-19," Facebook, 16 April 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-misinfo-update>.
- 2 Josie Hollingsworth, "Is it a Marvel film or a fact-checking newsroom? How Malditas.es gives its readers 'superpowers.'" Poynter, 23 October 2020, www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/is-it-a-marvel-film-or-a-fact-checking-newsroom-how-maldita-es-uses-its-readers-superpowers.
- 3 Şükrü Oktay Kılıç, "This fact-checking site tried crowdsources a story. Here's what it learned," 26 April 2020, Poynter, www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/this-fact-checking-site-tried-crowdsourcing-a-story-heres-what-it-learned.
- 4 "Full Fact and International Partners Win Google AI Impact Challenge," Full Fact, 7 May 2019, <https://fullfact.org/blog/2019/may/full-fact-and-international-partners-win-google-ai-impact-challenge>.
- 5 Laura Hazard Owen, "First-generation fact-checking' is no longer good enough. Here's what comes next," NiemanLab, 21 June 2019, www.niemanlab.org/2019/06/first-generation-fact-checking-is-no-longer-good-enough-heres-what-comes-next.