



#CoE_WFD

Lab 3 - Fact-checking: Is it worth the effort?

Moderator:

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Initiatives:

CrossCheck (France/United Kingdom) by Ms Marie BOHNER, Project Coordinator of CrossCheck

Africa Check by Mr Robert HOLLOWAY, Chair of Africa Check, United Kingdom

Discussants:

Mr Jamal Eddine NAJI, Director General, Audiovisual Communication, Morocco

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The lab in brief

Fact-checking is an important dimension of journalism that contributes to a healthy democracy of informed citizens. However, fact-checkers can be depressed by the obstacles of the lack of an independent press where they operate, the lack of reliable data and sources of official information, and the time and effort required to investigate and report on a suspicious claim.

The discussion explored the effects of news and information distribution, i.e. the significance of social media platforms. Some expressed a desire to instill a greater appreciation of traditional journalism (as editors of legitimate information), while others suggested an earlier intervention in schools.

There was a consensus that more and better engagement with citizens is required, and the CrossCheck initiative showed how this could be achieved, through an interconnected model among professional journalists, the public and social media providers.

About the initiatives

CrossCheck (France/United Kingdom)

CrossCheck was launched in February 2017, to create a claim verification service for the French presidential campaign. The project had 37 partner news organisations that investigated 64 claims and produced videos and infographics. To go beyond a simple true-false dichotomy, Cross-Check developed a typology of seven types of misinformation/disinformation: 1. Satire or parody (no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool); 2. Misleading content (misleading us of information to frame an issue or individual); 3. Imposter content (when genuine sources are impersonated); 4. Fabricated content (new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm); 5. False connection (when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content); 6. False context (when genuine content is shared with false contextual information); 7. Manipulated content (when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive).

The joint collaboration within the media sector wasn't obvious: some saw participation as a way of increasing competition, while others didn't see the need for increased transparency. For local media partners, it was an opportunity to increase trust with their audiences. An important lesson the project partners learned was that their reaching out to ordinary people on the ground—showing individuals how fact-checking works—resulted in direct engagement with those on both extreme sides of the political spectrum. The presenter saw this as a way of satisfying a public service mission of media organisations.

Africa Check

Africa Check was established in 2012, as a UK-based non-profit organization two years ago but it created a French-speaking subsidiary and it is now in the process of transitioning the business to Africa. Africa Check employs 15 staff full-time and operates in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal. It has fact-checked over 1,500 claims; the major theme is public health, but it also covers migration, economy, and weapons.

The initiative contributed to get rid of certain contagious diseases. From 1998–2001, Nigeria had an annual rate of about 50 new cases of polio. Then in 2002 there was a rumour that vaccines were part of a conspiracy to make women infertile, and politicians did nothing to dispel such rumour; new cases of polio increased to 1,600 in 2006. A public information campaign helped reduce that number, but the presenter made the point that more than 3,000 people got polio because of unfounded rumours that were not checked by the media.

Key points issues by the debate

The responsibility of public service by journalists and fact-checkers. It was argued that journalists provide a public service by investing time and resources to uncover information that would otherwise remain unknown; the role of investigative journalists was highlighted. It was also argued that citizens will seek more accurate information once they are showed what it is, which is a role of a fact-checker.

Challenges included the capacity to establish independent media channels in regimes where freedom of the press and/or access to reliable data (especially from government sources) does not exist.

Another challenge is the influence of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Google, which do not see themselves as media outlets and thus not accountable to established standards of journalism. Here a conundrum is the practical need for journalists and fact-checkers to use social media to communicate with their audiences, thus compelling a pragmatic engagement with the platform providers.

The re-engagement between journalism and the public. It was mooted whether the formal profession of journalism has become endangered. A suggested response was to train the principles of journalism to children, from the age of five.

Legislating against those who publish false claims was deemed impractical (e.g. jurisdiction enforcement) and potentially undesirable (as governments could use such powers to curtail voices of opposition). Yet there was a wish to have this conversation between journalists and governments.

Educating the general public on the subject of misinformation was agreed as a good, long-term solution. It was suggested that such learning should take place at a local level, where there should be a higher level of trust (than at a higher, more abstract, national level). Also, this could be a way to revitalise local journalism: "Journalists need to understand what their responsibilities are, their ethics and what they do as a public service. Citizens have to understand how important freedom of expression is for journalists."

The innovative response of mainstream media. A view was expressed that a trained journalist knows the difference between 'fake news' and 'real news', so the issue is to not republish the misinformation. That is, are we giving too much importance to false claims in influencing public opinion (recalling disinformation campaigns decades ago)?

This led to a discussion on the regulation of standards of professional journalists, and whether self-regulation would encourage evermore cooperation, in order to restore and ensure credibility and trust by the public.

CrossCheck was cited as a positive example of how professional journalists can be closer to individual citizens across the political/social/economic spectrum, and with the application of social media.

Recommendations

- ✓ To enforce norms of freedom of speech, an independent media, and professional civil service.
- ✓ To provide financial support to misinformation education in schools and local communities, to engender local journalism.
- ✓ To promote projects that demonstrate innovation among professional journalists, the public, and global social media providers.