

Fact-checking, False Balance and 'Fake News': The Discourse and Practice of Verification in Political Communication

Since journalism is often understood as a 'discipline of verification', fact-checking would seem to be fairly central to news-making, but in practice it is limited to basic accuracy of names and dates (Shapiro et al, 2013). Therefore, whilst mainstream news media have been fascinated by the 'fake news' scandal that has undermined trust in social media, they should not be complacent about public doubt in their own ability to 'separate fact from fiction'ⁱ. Indeed journalists' ability to do so has traditionally been hampered by their reluctance to make a judgement on the extent to which their sources' assertions stand up. In particular, the reliance on direct quotation of news sources – used as a 'strategic ritual' against accusations of subjectivity (Tuchman, 1972) – defers responsibility for accuracy and truthfulness to the source, and takes refuge in what is often (especially in the US) disparagingly referred to as 'he said, she said journalism'.

Shapiro et al (2013) argue that verification is as much a strategic ritual as objectivity (Tuchman, 1972), that is to say, it is not about seeking the truth, but avoiding criticism. The principle of conveying 'just the facts' is central to the 'newspaper of record' tradition but if 'facts' are interpreted as accurate quotes conveying the words and deeds of authorities then it risks being uncritical stenography. Investigative journalism often recognises that 'the facts' are not self-evident but must be established, whereas day-to-day reporting often treats conflicting truth-claims as opinions that need only be balanced. In practice, then, dubious claims are challenged only by other sources, typically political opponents, with no adjudication between the two 'sides'.

Verification of substantial claims through double sourcing, checking the credibility of sources, and seeking corroboration are central to investigative journalism, when journalists are setting the agenda and defining a problem, but not when they are simply reporting 'on diary', when they seek not corroboration but *controversy* - someone to *disagree* not confirm. There is little that citizens can do in this situation other than make an intuitive judgement about which source they trust more or find more credible. Research indicates, however, that a heuristic approach (reliance on factors such as party affiliation, ideology and endorsements as shortcuts) is of limited use for voters in understanding which political candidates reflect their policy preferences, and is actively unhelpful for those who are least politically knowledgeable (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). At the same time, audiences will not necessarily accept journalists' assertion of particular facts, even when solid evidence is offered, if this conflicts with their prior beliefs (Dunwoody and Konieczna, 2013) or contradicts established assertions (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). Yet, without reliable verification, even those open to making an informed decision can be placed at a severe disadvantage.

A countervailing trend is the recent emergence of a separate genre of 'fact-checking' journalism – a more modest endeavour than investigative journalism, but also more practical and affordable. There has been some scholarly attention to American fact-checking organisations (Graves 2016) and its influence on politicians and voters, especially Brendan Nyhan's influential work in the field of political psychology (Nyhan and Reifler 2014, Nyhan et al 2017), but so far this has been limited to US politics. This chapter examines fact-checking in the UK in comparative context with the USA, and also locates the development of fact-checking as a separate genre of news in wider debates around verification, including source credibility, expert knowledge and 'false balance'.

Verification in journalism theory and practice

Studies of American and European newsrooms have found the practice of verification to be limited. Drawing on interviews with Canadian journalists, Shapiro et al (2013) argued that whilst journalists strongly identified with the notion of journalism as “a discipline of verification”, in practice the requirement was more limited than this suggests.

It would seem fair, based on our research so far, to say that zeal for accuracy is a professional norm, but also that it is a norm of compromise – the compromise being simply understood rather than articulated. A small, easily checkable, fact needs to be checked, a larger but greyer assertion, not so much, unless it is defamation (Shapiro et al 2013: 668).

This means accuracy in dates, places and the spelling of sources’ names rather than interrogating the substance of the assertions. In the UK, Lewis et al (2008) identified a high proportion of stories that appeared in ‘quality’ broadcast and press news, that had been drawn wholly or principally from press releases or news wires, and that *“in only half these cases did the press make any discernible attempt to contextualise or verify this information, and in less than one in five cases was this done meaningfully”* (Lewis et al 2008: 15, emphasis in original). Diekerhof and Bakker (2012: 244) reported a surprisingly credulous attitude among Dutch journalists toward “highly placed” sources, with journalists believing that elite social actors had no reason to lie, and could not afford to do so, indicating that the deferential assumptions identified by Gans (1979: 130) still persist.

Although the investigative tradition retains a more serious attitude to verification, corroboration tended to be limited to the “pivotal facts” drawn from a witness’ testimony (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 142-3). What constitutes corroboration is anyway quite ambiguous, and journalists must decide how much discrepancy between sources’ accounts can be tolerated. The common factor across news genres, though, is that journalists are for the most part dealing with human sources rather than documents, statistics, or direct evidence,ⁱⁱ and this involves the possibility of relying upon subjective, flawed or misleading accounts.

The principle established in investigative journalism, and recognised as an ideal more generally, is that every claim must be double sourced. However, Godler and Reich (2017) question this definition of verification and suggest that other scholars have set the bar too high. They point to ‘second-order evidence’, or ‘evidence of evidence’ as – at least in some circumstances – an equally sound evidentiary base. In this category, Godler and Reich include “procedural evidence” of the source’s reasoning and evidence, as well as “social evidence” about their position or qualifications, and “psychological evidence” of their (in)sincerity, such as being “evasive, contradictory or otherwise incoherent” (Godler and Reich 2017: 564-5).

These authors also acknowledge that in some circumstances, “due to complexity”, journalists may not have the specialist knowledge required to evaluate the source’s evidence, but suggest that, in this event, “the source’s record on similar matters can be drawn upon” (2017: 564). Elsewhere, however, Reich (2011) finds limited support for the assumption that journalists base their perception of credibility on past contact with a source. Indeed, studies of scientists as news sources indicate journalists are at least as likely to select the most prominent, outspoken or controversial individual, as they would the most reliable (Peters, 2014), and that they rarely choose the most appropriate specialist (Dunwoody and Ryan, 1987).

Studies on source credibility tend to focus on those providing expert testimony of some sort, but another important source of information is testimony from eye-witness accounts or

reports of personal experience. As with experts, we are rarely able – depending on our own knowledge and experience – to judge the validity of witnesses’ claims directly, but need to parse their credibility based on other factors, to decide whether to accord them “cognitive authority” (Wilson 1983, Turner 2001), that is to say, to regard their influence on our beliefs and understanding as legitimate.

Journalists attribute slightly more credibility to passers-by eyewitnesses with no “axe to grind” (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 146; see also Langer, 1992), as they do to disinterested sources more generally (Diekerhof and Bakker, 2012: 246-7), though reporters are not always good at identifying experts’ conflicts of interest (Holland, 2014). In terms of investigative journalism, those who are deemed culpable of wrongdoing – the targets of investigation in particular – are accorded least credibility by this measure, but nonetheless may be given the opportunity to present their own version of events (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 147). This might involve allowing them to deny the allegations, but that is not to say that these denials will be presented as credible.

Effective investigative journalism is not just about detecting, verifying, and revealing new information, but about telling a story to show why that information is important. Kovach (2001: 51) picks out the Pentagon Papers exposé as an example of ‘interpretative investigative reporting’ without the analysis of which the papers “would have meant little to most of the public”. But he also defines investigative journalism as exemplifying “the role of the press as activist, reformer and exposé” (2001: 50), highlighting the moral and political aspect of this interpretation. Ettema and Glasser agree that it is important to establish not only events but also the “moral facts” (1998: 148) of intentionality (guilt) and the impact on victims – what they call the “motive-action-consequence schema” (1998: 144).

Journalists are reluctant to acknowledge this substantive foundation, or regard it as part of the social consensus (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 8-10), but they are also conscious of the risk that readers could *reject* the moral framing. To manage that risk, there is a careful narrative construction of the innocence of those ‘victims’ – establishing them as what Langer (1992) calls ‘good victims’ – and equally prudent selection of the most compelling stories that may generate audience empathy (Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 115). As with the weight of evidence, the moral narrative must also cohere around a specific conclusion, rather than leaving it for the reader to decide, as expected in ‘objective’ reporting (Ryan, 2001: 5).ⁱⁱⁱ Investigative journalists might present a range of subjective perspectives,^{iv} but they also “convey their sense of the evidentiary and moral weight to be allocated to various interpretations” (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 147).

This moral and emotional foundation behind investigative journalism does not sit well with the professional ideology of the liberal model of journalism, especially the North American tradition, which is most highly wedded to the notion of objectivity, yet it is broadly accepted and even valorised by industry prizes (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). The more modest, but more news-focused and *novel* genre of fact-checking could be more vulnerable to accusations of subjectivity and editorialising, especially if these efforts are integrated into ‘straight’ news. Nonetheless, some US journalists are becoming increasingly conscious of the need to take greater responsibility for the truth of what they publish, faced with a President whose relationship with the truth is tenuous at best.

Since Donald Trump entered politics, he has upended dominant assumptions, for instance that even deceitful sources “will tend not to lie about readily refutable points” (Godler and Reich, 2017: 565), or that senior and prominent political figures can’t afford to be caught in a

lie (Diekerhof and Bakker, 2012). Whilst many politicians may be ‘economical with the truth’ or dissemble, Trump seems to have a complete disregard for the truth. Journalists in the US have had to reflect on whether their routines and rituals are equal to this challenge. For instance, an editorial on digital news site *Talking Points Memo*^v argued that “Trump’s campaign has been so different, so indifferent to clear factual claims, so unbridled that he has frequently put this whole edifice under strain to breaking point”, and an op-ed in the *New York Times* (Nicholas Kristof, 15/09/16) called him a crackpot and a mythomaniac – essentially an unhinged compulsive liar – and agonised over how to ‘signal’ this to readers.

Much of this reflective meta-journalism has drawn on a wider debate that has appeared in the opinion and editorial pages of several major US newspapers over the issue of ‘false balance’. A Nexis sample assembled from the last 20 full years (1997-2016) in major US newspapers, showed that there were 136 mentions of ‘false balance’ or ‘false equivalence’,^{vi} 43 of which occurred in 2016, and most of which were related to the Presidential campaigns.^{vii} In the national UK press over the same period there were 67 uses of ‘false balance’, all since 2010, and with a particular spike in 2014. Whilst not necessarily representative of journalists’ practice in general, these articles illustrate the conflicts in norms and expectations of journalistic verification, the limits of ‘just the facts’ reporting, and of conventional measures of source credibility. The following section therefore offers an analysis of this sample of newspaper articles.

Balancing versus weighting and verifying truth claims: false balance and false equivalence

In both the US and UK, the term *false balance* is used to refer to the inappropriate application of balance to a matter of established fact (such as that the earth is round), or settled scientific consensus (such as climate change), rather than to opinion, values and subjective beliefs. Daniel Hallin (1989) observed that the norms set by the social responsibility model of journalism, including balance, do not apply universally to every assertion, but only to those located in the ‘sphere of legitimate controversy’, whilst those in the ‘sphere of consensus’ can simply be stated or assumed. His point was that some socially and politically contentious issues, such as the US role in the Vietnam war, were inappropriately located in the sphere of consensus, simply because they were not contentious among elites. With false balance, the problem is reversed: simply because some people (often but perhaps not always elites) contest climate change, evolution, vaccine safety or even that President Obama was really born in the US, some journalists frame those things as controversies. This suggests that attribution and balance are stronger strategic rituals than verification, certainly of those ‘larger, greyer’ facts. Hallin was, of course, talking more about value consensus than acceptance of fact grounded in evidence, but as Ettema and Glasser (1998) observe, the two are more closely related than journalists like to acknowledge.

In the US, false balance is used interchangeably with the overlapping concept of *false equivalence* (e.g. by Paul Krugman in the *New York Times* 2006, 2016a). The latter term is used to refer to the inappropriate weighting of unequally significant or legitimate sources, but on political as well as scientific questions, and also (variously and confusingly) to false analogies and inappropriate comparisons or moral equivalences. It is therefore a term applied at least as much to value-based judgements (especially of political legitimacy) as judgements of expert interpretation of evidence (which hinge more on credibility).

False *balance* has been used in the US, as it has in the UK, to refer to the undue attention given to ill-informed or self-interested commentators who question established climate change science, but only four of the 136 articles in the US sample, or 3% actually did so, in contrast to

the 50% of mentions in UK nationals. Other examples of scientific truth claims that critics argued were inappropriately 'balanced' with sceptical voices included evolution (letter, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2005), and more contentiously the safety of GM crops (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Missouri), 2003). However, whilst critics agree that 'false balance' is unhelpful, there is no apparent consensus about how to assert facts or dispute lies and misrepresentations. An obvious solution would be to simply state assertions such as climate change as fact and exclude inexpert critics as lacking credibility, but this can be interpreted as censorship (e.g. Express 2011).

Nonetheless, even the most vociferous critics of false balance within journalism, such as the *New York Times*' Public Editor, Margaret Sullivan, tend to call for just such opaque adjudications. For example, one issue that Sullivan returned to several times was the allegation of voter fraud repeatedly made by Republicans, dating back long before Trump's candidacy (*New York Times*, 2012b, 2014b, 2014c), which was a matter of both factual and political dispute. The factual argument was over whether voter fraud was really a problem, with Democrats pointing out that there was no evidence of this offence actually occurring. Whilst it is difficult to prove a negative – and it is not unreasonable to suggest it was incumbent on Republican critics to provide evidence – it would have helped the reader if news reports had detailed what attempts had been made to detect voter fraud, to give a sense of how likely it was to have been detected if it had occurred. The *political* argument was that Republicans wanted to introduce more stringent voter registration measures, which Democrats argued was intended to suppress minority votes. This requires another form of evidence, though predictions and forecasts do not enjoy the certainty of 'facts'. Sullivan's intervention was limited, however, to encouraging and then praising the inclusion of the statement that there was no evidence of voter fraud, which does assert a verified fact, but excludes the more ambiguous arguments and evidence that fact-checking would draw upon.^{viii}

Other truth claims were not directly verifiable, so could only be judged in terms of the credibility of the source. On this basis, Sullivan was repeatedly critical of anonymous sources, where readers had to trust journalists' credibility judgements. However, she reconsidered her most forceful criticisms – of the use of anonymous police sources in the investigation into the Ferguson police shooting that were supposed to 'balance' the evidence of two named eye-witnesses^{ix} (*New York Times*, 2014a) once the Justice Department report supported the police account with "the testimony of more than 40 witnesses" (*New York Times*, 2015). There is a certain pragmatism, then, when a story is reported before the evidence has been fully considered but, as Kovach (2001: 53) reflects, there is also a risk for journalists when reporting on an official investigation, of being the servant of the authorities rather than holding them to account.

Where sources contradict one another on claims that are difficult or impossible to verify, comparative credibility judgements are of particular importance. For example, a freelance journalist writing in *USA Today* (2002) complained that in a story about the war in Afghanistan, "Pentagon denials coming out of Washington are given equal credibility with eyewitness reports from anti-Taliban villagers on the ground; the story dissolves into a false balance of he-said, she-said", which she interpreted as evidence of post-9/11 'hyperpatriotism'. Journalists had, she suggests, undervalued authenticity and moral status of victimhood in their credibility judgements.

However, even when claims are based on expert knowledge and research, they can be politicised. The most obvious example is climate change, which is the subject of half of the references to 'false balance' which occur in the British press (and a further 10% on science

more broadly, including the MMR scare). Interestingly, however, the two spikes in coverage of the issue in the press focus on a BBC Trust report (July 2011) and a Parliamentary report (Science and Technology Select Committee, April 2014), as well as a complaint upheld by the BBC Trust (July 2014), that criticised the corporation for giving too much airtime to sceptics such as Lord Lawson (Chancellor of the Exchequer under Margaret Thatcher, essentially a representative of business interests). These complaints were framed by the conservative press as the liberal BBC muzzling critics (*Express*, 2011) and “tak[ing] its orders from the green lobby” (*Times*, 2014). The only sustained reflection on journalism as a whole appears in the *Independent’s* (2015) ‘The Only Way is Ethics’ column, by ex-regulator Will Gore.

More recently, the EU referendum campaign illustrated the ways in which expert evidence could be misused, manipulated, undermined and dismissed, or marshalled to support an account of the EU as either essential to the British economy or a burden on the state owing to supranational agreements like the free movement of people. But whilst there was much media analysis of Conservative MP and Vote Leave campaigner Michael Gove’s assertion that ‘the British people have had enough of experts’, again there was little reflection by journalists on their own role in the impoverishment of public debate. In contrast, there has been a significant amount of soul-searching in the US about the 2016 Presidential election coverage. In this instance, however, the focus was principally on false equivalence between the candidates’ moral legitimacy or wrongdoing, rather than between their conflicting truth claims as such.

One particularly prominent spat involved Margaret Sullivan’s successor as *New York Times* Public Editor, Liz Spayd (2016b), who was far less sympathetic to complaints of false balance and advanced a notion of objectivity that implied that journalists made no value judgements at all. Readers contested the moral equivalence drawn between Hilary Clinton’s habitual dissembling, potential conflicts of interest, and errors over email use, with Donald Trump’s complete disregard for the truth, his major conflicts of interest, and the many settled lawsuits. Spayd countered that critics were asking journalists to make value judgements on whether, to use her example, Trump’s request to Russia to hack his opponent, was of greater significance than Clinton’s use of an insecure email server, and suggested that to make such a judgement was inimical to objective journalism, rather than simply asserting what Ettema and Glasser (1998) call ‘moral facts’.

Spayd was roundly criticised by other commentators, both in the press and online, not least because deciding on the relative significance of stories is the essence of news judgement. However, Spayd suggested that the “individual merits of the story” could be objectively measured, refusing to acknowledge that news is constructed. In contrast, Justin Peters, previously of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, argued in *Slate*^x, that the fetishisation of objectivity and balance “is largely an attempt to conceal those judgements from the reading public”, even though they are informed and valuable judgements. Journalists wedded to the professional ideology of objectivity fear that acknowledging the subjectivity of journalists’ selection and framing choices undermines the authority of journalism, whilst critics argue that transparency *increases* the credibility of those judgements.

Spayd may however have had a point that accusations of ‘false equivalence’ are used to complain of ideological bias in a way that itself risks bias. People tend to perceive partiality only against their own perspective, due to the long-established human tendency toward confirmation bias^{xi} (Starkey, 2007). In the past, American newspaper commentators have argued that Palestinian violence should be portrayed as worse than Israeli violence, not as equivalent (*Washington Post*, 2000, *New York Times*, 2002), as well as that gun-toting radical

right-wing protests against Democratic Party policies and candidates cannot be compared to liberal anti-Bush protests (*New York Times*, 2009). However, as critics have pointed out, Spayd's sense that the argument in this case was being used "mostly in support of liberal causes and candidates" does not in itself mean that the complaints are ideologically motivated, since that would assume that culpability cannot lie mostly on one side. In other words, it conflates impartiality with equal ('balanced') criticism, which is exactly the mentality that critics were objecting to. This highlights the limitation of relying solely on source credibility, as measured by interests or ideology, without actual verification of the claim itself. As Jonathan Chait (*New York Magazine*, 2016) argues, for Spayd, "the motive question is the beginning and end of her inquiry".

Another justification Spayd offered is that the coverage reflected public opinion, since Clinton was disliked as much as Trump. Carlos Maza^{xii}, calls this a "self-fulfilling argument" since public perception could well have been *influenced* by the *New York Times'* presentation of the Clinton controversies as scandals. In the *New York Times* opinion pages, Nicholas Kristof (2016c) and Paul Krugman (2016d) referenced a CNN/ORC poll that found that voters thought Trump "more honest and trustworthy" than Clinton. Krugman argued that "If Donald Trump becomes president, the news media will bear a large share of the blame", and attributes to Kristof the view that the poll "is prima facie evidence of massive media failure". In fact, Kristof prevaricates that he is "not sure that journalism bears responsibility", given low levels of trust in mainstream media and therefore of influence, but that it is still beholden on them to do better.

One significant difficulty for journalists is the general operating assumption that "facts do speak for themselves. If one side is more compelling, that is apparent from the objective journalist's report" (Ryan, 2001: 7), and that objective journalists do not need to "shout, 'this side is superior', as some critics seem to suggest they should, but the superiority is apparent" (2001: 9). Given the audacity of Trump's lies and 'bullshitting', that is, having no regard for the truth (Davis, 2017), journalists assumed that this would be clear to the audience. Hence, as Josh Marshall editor's blog at online news site *Talking Points Memo*^{xiii} points out most of the "damaging press" that Trump has received "has been simply publishing or airing things he's said publicly" without explicit criticism. In contrast, they believed that Clinton's sophisticated spin machine required more digging, giving a disproportionate impression of her wrongdoing.

Moreover, Sullivan had long argued that it is *readers* (voters, citizens) who are demanding the new approach to verification, and driving it through social and other digital media. Citing Stevenson, *The Times's* political editor, she recounted his interest in

"... fact-checking ... [which is] one of the most positive trends in journalism that I can remember. It's all a part of a movement – brought about, in part, by a more demanding public, fueled by media critics, bloggers and denizens of the social media world – to present the truth, not just conflicting arguments leading to confusion" (Margaret Sullivan, *New York Times* 2012b).

However, this 'movement' has remained on the sidelines of journalism in online enclaves, signalled as a separate journalistic practice from straight news.

Fact-checking the small statistical facts

Fact-checking websites and blogs originated in the US in 2003 with 'FactCheck.org' – a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania – which inspired the British *Channel 4 News* 'FactCheck' blog in 2005. The *Washington Post's* 'Fact Checker' and *Tampa Bay Times'* 'Politifacts' both followed in 2007, independent British organisation 'Full

Fact' in 2009 and the *BBC's* 'Reality Check' in 2010. The British sites have grown significantly over the last three general elections: C4 FactCheck doubled the number of fact-check articles between 2015 and the snap election of 2017, and Reality Check issued more quick response items on specific debate claims. The most remarkable, however, was independent fact-checker Full Fact – in 2015 they aimed to raise £25,000 through crowdfunding to kit out an election office for their volunteers, two years later they raised over £100,000 and were able to add to their permanent staff of 11 to create a 30-strong election team. In between 2015 and 2017, there was a highly contested referendum on EU membership that is likely to have raised public frustration at politicians twisting facts with impunity, an example I will return to below.

It is interesting that elections are the context in which news organisations recognise that they could do more to inform their audience (suggesting a limited view of citizens' political participation perhaps), but equally that 'fact-checking' emerged from outside the industry and remains a separate news genre. Journalists and editors are consciously reluctant to incorporate fact-checking into their general practice, not for practical, resource-related reasons, but because accusing a politician of lying looks too much like bias. A Public Editor column in the *New York Times* (2012a) cites the Executive Editor Jill Abramson's concern that if fact-checking became a "reflexive element of too many news stories, our readers would find the *Times* was being tendentious" and may even see it "as a combatant, not an arbiter of what the facts were". In the UK, Full Fact battled for five years to gain charitable status from the charity commission because of concerns that their aim of promoting "civic responsibility and engagement" could involve political controversy.^{xiv} In a review of US fact-checking, Lucas Graves (2016: 10) describes this tension, noting "there is a story of shifting institutional norms and practices: fact-checkers enact a deliberate critique of conventional reporting and its practice of objectivity." This function is all the more important, he argues, in a digital world where journalists can no longer 'decide what's news' (Gans 1979), because of competition from social media, so they can only 'decide what's true'.

That is rather grander than the practical reality, which is limited to deciding whether a given politician's claim is accurate, with a focus on statistics and other 'hard' factual claims. In his study of 'hybrid media' combining traditional news and digital innovations, Chadwick (2017: 201) quotes Alice Tartleton, a member of the C4 FactCheck team, explaining that the purpose is "about 'having the small scoop' by puncturing the bubble of politicians' often selective use of statistics". This can, however, risk neglecting the bigger, grayer, assertions that have more political punch. Having said that, Cushion and Lewis (2016) found that only 4% of statistics used in the general broadcast news coverage of the British EU referendum campaign were challenged or verified (at least explicitly), and that more statistical claims came from politicians than any other group, especially experts from think tanks and universities, so it is significant that fact-checkers attempted to do this.

The EU referendum is an interesting example for analysis, in fact, because of the highly contested claims on both sides. Rather than making manifesto pledges, arguments both in favour of remaining in the EU (from the government-backed Remain campaign and others) and leaving (from a range of competing and conflicting Leave campaigns) made predictions about the impact of either outcome on growth, jobs, wages, public services and so on. On both sides, those claims were highly politicised, to back up the overall narrative – for Remain, that leaving would cause a recession, and for Leave that continued 'uncontrolled' immigration was the biggest threat to future prosperity and only leaving the EU would allow the country to 'take back control'.

Campaigners' dubious and outright false claims frequently went unchallenged in the mainstream news reporting because their political opponents chose strategically to focus elsewhere. For instance, Remain campaigners rarely challenged the notorious claim that the UK sends £350million a week to Brussels because the real figure also sounded quite high (around £161million according to Reality Check, though assessments differed). Although BBC and Channel 4 fact-checkers disputed the figure online, in their news bulletins politicians were allowed to continue to make the claim (as well as suggesting it would otherwise be used to fund the NHS, though they were not in a position to make that pledge), and use it as a backdrop for interviews, written on the side of a double-decker bus.

One particularly interesting fact-check was of the claim that rising immigrant labour drives down wages. This exemplifies politicians' attempts to rationalise the hostility to immigration at the centre of the 'Leave' campaign. Whilst references to this assertion in the press in the final three weeks of the campaign made scant reference to evidence – only a third mentioned a source and just 18% offered data – all three UK fact-checkers addressed the claim. They focused on a report from the Bank of England^{xv} that found that in unskilled and semi-skilled service sectors, a 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of immigrants in a given workforce corresponded to a 1.88% decrease in wages. This was leapt upon by leave campaigners who misinterpreted (or purposely misrepresented) it as the consequence of a 10% increase in immigration. This small difference in wording changes the meaning from a very large change in immigrant population to a much more plausible one.

Reality Check (2016b) pointed out that “a 10 percentage point increase in immigrants working in a sector is a lot” and put the overall increase in the proportion of non-UK nationals in work in the UK at just 6.4 percentage points over 18 years. Full Fact (2016) gave a more specific context, in terms of the low-skilled and semi-skilled service occupations in question (though across all of the UK, where the report specified certain regions), which was rather higher at 8% over 8 years, but calculated this effect as “a drop of between 1 and 2 pence per hour, each year”. FactCheck (2016b), meanwhile, estimated a 10% rise in the EU-born population at 300,000 and a 10 percentage point rise at 9 million. All of these attempt to explain the statistics in a meaningful way, but even though FactCheck and Full Fact frame their checks as responding to Boris Johnson's misrepresentation of the figure in a televised debate, they do not point this out explicitly. FactCheck even buried the point in a parenthetical aside, whilst suggesting that Johnson had merely omitted a caveat, and “if he had talked about ‘a reduction in wages for the low-skilled’ rather than just ‘a reduction in wages’ he would have been right”, which is a very generous interpretation that doesn't challenge political misuse of statistics as effectively as they can.

However, in the press, the only reported challenge to Johnson's assertion was from 'Remain' campaigner Alex Salmond in the TV debate, and then only by a sketch-writer who adjudicated Salmond the winner of the spat on the merely presentational basis that he had read the report, whilst Johnson was forced to admit that he had not. Furthermore, the statistics were only cited twice in the press sample, and though they did so accurately, they were mediated and politicised by campaigning sources, who omitted statistical explanation and caveats, and framed the impact as significant.

However, the pitfalls of mass immigration disproportionately affect the poorest sector of the population, MacKinnon [a member of campaign group Economists for Brexit] points out, citing a Bank of England study last year that showed a 10% increase in the proportion of immigrants was associated with a 2% drop in pay among unskilled service workers. "The negative effects come through at the lower end of the scale. That's why you get this social resentment," he says (*Sunday Times*, 2016).

The report was also bandied about as support for even more sweeping generalisations, such as Vote Leave chair, Gisela Stuart (quoted in *Guardian* 2016a), who said, “as the Bank of England has confirmed, uncontrolled immigration has played a key role in bringing down wages.”

Of course, partisan commentators don't need to use statistics at all – several columnists in the *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* simply stated *as fact* the claim that immigration drives wages down, as well as two *Sun* editorials, but also reluctant ‘Remainers’ on the left, Len McCluskey (General Secretary of Unite the Union, *Guardian* 2016a) and Jeremy Corbyn (Labour leader in the *i [Independent]* 2016c). Even some pro-immigration Remainers accepted the immigration/wage depression argument as common sense, or at least as a persistent public belief (*Times* 2016b, *Guardian* 2016b, *Independent* 2016a).

The newspaper articles that did *not* start from a specific political angle considered, not only the evidence of an impact of immigration on wages, but also the claim that the economic impact of leaving the EU would have a greater effect, especially the TUC's research indicating that leaving the EU (in comparison with staying in) would cost £38 per week in average wages. These reports were based on the many economic forecasts that predicted a fall in GDP growth as a consequence of Brexit. However, these economic forecasts were also heavily politicised in their use by campaigners.

Politicians in the Remain camp – especially then Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne – tended to frame economic forecasts as *fact* rather than informed but fallible expert *opinion or judgement*. Channel 4's FactCheck (2016a) described Cameron's phrasing in one such speech as “overcooking it slightly” and pointed out that “obviously we're talking about predicting the future here and there's no way the Treasury or anyone else can ‘confirm’ that something will or won't happen”. Another problem with the political interpretation of the statistics was the dubious framing of GDP growth forecasts in terms of a cost per household, as pointed out by Reality Check (2016b).

However, the principal objection to the economic forecasts was based on doubts about the cognitive authority of economists, which shaded from scepticism to cynicism. By comparison, whilst there was some acknowledgement of uncertainty and ambiguity in the treatment of claims on immigration and wages, they were not framed in such a way that undermined the research altogether. For instance, they remarked that “evidence on wage impacts is a bit less conclusive” (*The Times* 2016a) and “the truth of the competing claims is hard to establish” (*Independent* 2016b), but set out the evidence and caveats. In contrast, references to economic forecasts cast aspersions on the whole discipline: “our elite, brilliant economists have a solid record of getting it wrong” (*Telegraph* 2016) and dismiss the figures as political scaremongering: “the Leave campaign has used civil servants, paid for by us, to trawl up all sorts of economic forecasts” (*Sunday Express* 2016).

Interestingly, economic forecasts were also treated with significant scepticism by the BBC fact-checker, Reality Check. Several fact-checks on economic questions referred back to an ‘explainer’ on economic modelling that cast doubt on the validity of the entire enterprise (in somewhat patronising tones – “Q: Economic models – are they like fashion models? A: No, they're a bit more realistic than that. But not much” (Reality Check 2016a)), and set out some measures of cognitive authority that readers might consider. It advised the concerned voter to examine various measures of credibility such as “how well-respected the people conducting the research are”, any evidence of an association with one side of the campaign, and bias motivated by past EU support such as funding, whilst also warning that those factors aren't

always a good measure. Ultimately, however, it concludes with a recommendation, not on how to make an informed judgement on uncertain evidence and the credibility of experts, but to make an instinctive judgement on whether they trust them, regardless of their credentials.

And remember there's also the option to decide that you don't care what even the finest economists predict, or even that you don't think the economic impact is the most important thing about EU membership (Reality Check 2016a).

At the same time, however, voters do have alternative sources of information from experts, such as their own experience of past economic growth that might not correspond with rising wages and secure jobs, despite the assurances of economists^{xvi}. This provides quite reasonable grounds to accord them low cognitive authority, but also suggests that fact-checking might not always be persuasive or effective at better informing people.

Effectiveness of factchecking

In the US, President Trump has capitalised on this trust that people place in their own observations and extrapolations, and the corresponding fall in trust in self-proclaimed experts and authorities, including the media. For this reason, Chadwick argues, no amount of fact-checking would undermine his supporters' approval.

When Trump made racist, sexist, or xenophobic remarks, exaggerated claims or massaged statistical evidence, elite media had treated him as either an amateur to be ridiculed, or had responded with manufactured outrage that further fueled Trump's publicity-hungry campaign and its theme that elite media were biased. This was a disturbing analysis that sent shock waves through professional media organizations (Chadwick 2017: 253).

That is not necessarily to say, however, that Trump's supporters are impervious to factual correction, but that the small, checkable facts are of less importance to them than the larger, more ambiguous assertions about America's place in the world and what would make it 'great again'. Davis (2017: Loc 1839) argues that they "simply decide that it's better to support someone who is on their side rather than someone who has a grasp of the facts." In a widely-quoted remark, Salena Zito (2016) argued that when Trump makes a claim such as that 58% of black youths cannot get a job, a figure that "drive[s] fact-checkers to distraction" as it includes those in full time education, "the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally".

Nyhan et al (2017) responded to this by testing three hypotheses on responses to fact-checking indicated by previous conflicting research findings. The first of these is "motivated resistance" – that people are "highly resistant to unwelcome information" that contradicts their ideological convictions, and indeed double down on the misbelief in a 'backfire' effect. The second is "differential acceptance" – that people can adjust their factual beliefs even against their ideological convictions, but to a lesser degree than those for whom the correction confirms their beliefs. Finally, the third is "differential interpretation" – that people can adjust their factual beliefs but interpret those facts differentially according to their ideological convictions.

The researchers compared survey responses from those exposed only to Trump's assertions on rising crime, with those of another group that were also provided corrections from FBI crime data stating crime had fallen, and another provided with both plus a denial and criticism of FBI credibility, as well as a control group. They found that Trump supporters' assessment of the amount of crime on a five-point scale was the same whether they had read Trump's statement or not (though interestingly Clinton supporters *reduced* their estimate in

response to Trump's assertion that it had risen) suggesting that he was reflecting their instinctive views rather than influencing them (2017: 6-8). Trump supporters *did* adjust their assessment of crime levels down in response to the correction, however, although to a lesser degree than Clinton supporters. At the same time, they also thought the article slightly less accurate with the correction and were more doubtful of FBI statistics when used as a correction to their candidate (2017: 9-10). However, Trump supporters did not adjust their belief in the need for tougher law and order measures, or their favourability toward Trump. The authors conclude that like the media's response to Trump, his supporters in return "took the corrections literally, but apparently not seriously". In other words, their policy convictions do not appear to have a factual basis.

The discourse of 'Fake news' - discrediting rather than disproving

Prior political beliefs are therefore often more influential on our credibility judgements than evidence and expertise of the source. Politicians can succeed by claiming to share those beliefs, but that relates to another dimension of credibility – *sincerity* (or *authenticity*). Trump's supporters probably see him as more honest and trustworthy than his opponent, not because they thought his statements accurate, but because they felt that his politics were sincere, unfiltered and unspun. This is not necessarily an attitude that is confined to the right. One of the founders of the left-wing website *The Canary*, Kerry-Anne Mendoza, argues that the British left-liberal press lost the trust of many of its readers over its negative framing of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, especially on the basis of judging him unelectable, despite apparently sharing his political position. Because of this, she argues, "people stopped trusting their motives".^{xvii} However, headline statistics showing low trust in mainstream news mask huge differences in the trust placed in individual channels, publications, and platforms. In addition, one purported reason for the decline in trust in mainstream media is that people experience greater exposure to the established media outlets that they don't ordinarily read, *via social media*,^{xviii} therefore increasing their awareness of aspects of the mainstream media they find politically distasteful. This suggests that a pluralistic media environment *increases* people's distrust of the media, rather than exposing them to a wider range of viewpoints to better inform their beliefs.

This distrust is what allowed Trump to turn the 'fake news' label back against the mainstream media. Politifact remarked that "In the short time we've been devoted to fact-checking 'fake news', the phrase has been overused and misappropriated to the point that it's become pretty much meaningless".^{xix} Trump's modus operandi has not been to refute hostile claims, however, but to muddy the waters, a long-established tactic used by propagandists and PR professionals, for instance in casting doubt on climate change science, or on the evidence that tobacco is carcinogenic.

Nonetheless, Trump shows some signs of being sensitive to fact-checking – one Washington Post Fact-checker article (Kessler et al, 2016) quotes him hedging, "I better say 'think,' otherwise they'll give you a Pinocchio [...] And I don't like those – I don't like Pinocchios," though this suggests a very narrow definition of fact-checkable truth claims. In other words, he suggests that you can turn a factual assertion into an *opinion* – which need not be verified or challenged, but merely 'balanced' with other opinions – simply by prefacing it with the word 'think'. More predictably, Donald Trump's alt-right media supporters have accused US fact-checkers of liberal bias (principally Breitbart,^{xx} whose Executive Chairman, Steve Bannon, served as Trump's Chief Strategist), as has Sean Spicer, then White House Press Secretary, who coined the term 'alternative facts' in a dispute over media debunking of his claim that Trump's was the most watched inauguration ever,^{xxi} though his later arguments were less obviously counterfactual.

Disproving and debunking false claims, myths and bad assumptions is important for rational political debate, but also contributes to the general sense that all public claims can be discredited, which turns healthy scepticism into cynicism. *Times* columnist, Hugo Rifkind argued that factchecking itself plays into the hands of those trying to spread misinformation via doubt.

Nor, depressingly, are fact-checkers [the answer]. It is a naive fallacy to assume fake news is all just the work of the odd enterprising crank or charlatan, trying to sell a lie. Nato's Handbook of Russian Information Warfare discusses fake news as a distinctive part of the Kremlin's cyberwarfare strategy. Crucially, the point is not merely to deceive; rather, it is to sow seeds of doubt and create a background hum of mistrust. For the noblest of reasons, Facebook wants us to realise that much of what we read cannot be trusted. The horrible paradox is that this is what the bad guys want us to think too. (*Times* 2017)

There certainly is evidence of what Nyhan and Reifler (2010) call the 'backfire effect' in response to fact-checking of news circulated on social media, because it is interpreted as an act of censorship, carried out by the liberal mainstream media, against 'conservative' free speech. A *Guardian* article featuring interviews with writers of 'fake news' stories related examples where conservative groups on Facebook had increased traffic to disputed stories - according to one writer, "with Facebook trying to throttle it and say, 'don't share it,' it actually had the opposite effect".

He [Jestin Coler, fake news publisher] also noted that many consumers of fake news won't be swayed by a "disputed" tag given their distrust of the media and fact-checkers: "A far-right individual who sees it's been disputed by Snopes, that adds fuel to the fire and entrenches them more in their belief" (*Guardian* 16/05/17).

The bloggers interviewed were, like Trump, unconcerned with the truth, and see an emotional engagement with the claim as just as important "A lot of people think Obama is Muslim. That's what it plays on. Is it real? I don't know [...]. The fact is a lot of people thought it was real or it reflects their sentiment" (*Guardian* 16/05/17).

The problems with journalistic verification in contemporary politics are not, therefore, wholly or even mainly about accuracy of small, particular facts, but about the credibility of the bigger, greyer claims and their moral ordering. Ettema and Glasser (1998: 151) argue that in investigative journalism this depends, ultimately, on the implicit values of the journalist. In an increasingly polarised society any moral interpretation is increasingly contested and resisted, to the extent that facts no longer constrain the moral or narrative interpretation of an event. Where once alternative *interpretations* were widespread, now the existence of 'alternative facts' threatens to become a commonplace assertion.

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ⁱ <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>

ⁱⁱ Journalists trust their own direct experience and witnesses more than any second-hand information (Ettema and Glasser 1998: 146; Reich 2011: 61), but this is a very limited source in practice: one study put it at just 4% of articles (Reich 2011: 61).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ryan argues that factual verification is not contrary to his definition of objective journalism, but his is an idealised defence of objectivity from a critical realist perspective (against relativist critics and the proponents of advocacy journalism), whilst acknowledging that there may be a problem with implementation.

^{iv} One investigative reporter explained "I present [all the points of view] in such a way that readers will have the advantage of the information that I had in order to make up my mind" (quoted in Ettema and Glasser, 1998: 147)

^v <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblog/the-crisis-at-the-times-and-that-public-editor-piece>

^{vi} From a search on Nexis using its category of 'major US newspapers' grouped by moderate similarity, and manually excluding those relating to sport or entertainment and references to 'false balance sheets'.

^{vii} In the first five years (1997-2001) there was on average just under one reference per year, 2.6 over the next five years (2002-2006), rising to 3.6 (2007-2011), and leaping to 19 mentions in 2012, and an average 20.2 in the five years to and including 2016.

viii For example, this more recent fact-check on voter fraud claims: <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/oct/17/donald-trump/donald-trumps-pants-fire-claim-large-scale-voter-f/>

ix The eye-witnesses said that the victim had his hands up when he was shot by police, whilst the authorities reported support for the officer's account that the man was advancing on him.

x http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/culturebox/2016/09/nyt_public_editor_says_false_balance_isn_t_a_problem_is_also_guilty_of_it.html

xi <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2016/09/12/new-york-times-proves-false-balance-ruining-good-campaign-coverage/212996>

xii <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblogger/the-crisis-at-the-times-and-that-public-editor-piece>

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xiv <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/research/Documents/workingpapers/2015/swp574.pdf>

xv <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/research/Documents/workingpapers/2015/swp574.pdf>

xvi Stephen Turner (2001: 132) contrasts economics with the physical sciences, arguing that letters to newspapers signed by hundreds of economists shows how little they can claim to speak representatively on behalf of the discipline.

xvii <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/aug/06/can-you-trust-mainstream-media>

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