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Unveiling the Many Faces of Fact-Checking: State of the Art of Academic Research on Information Correction.

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Abstract: Research on fact-checking, which began gaining traction around 2010, has seen a significant surge in interest, complicating efforts to overview the field comprehensively. Previous mappings of fact-checking research were often limited in scope and accessibility and lacked context in the post-infodemic era. Addressing these gaps, a systematic literature review was conducted on English-language academic publications from 2010 to 2023, encompassing 675 articles. This review delved into various aspects of fact-checking, such as infrastructure, practices, tools, genres, effectiveness, public perception, and the emerging role of AI. It highlighted the necessity for refined research methodologies, longitudinal effectiveness studies, and a deeper understanding of social context's impact on misinformation and fact-checking efficacy, particularly beyond the U.S. This comprehensive analysis offers invaluable insights into the evolving landscape of fact-checking and information verification.

Keywords: information verification, prebunking, debunking, fact-checking, information correction

INTRODUCTION

As fact-checking has become a central response to information disorders, academic research on this practice has grown exponentially. Scholarly publications on fact-checking began after 2010 (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Schudson, 2013; Uscinski & Butler, 2013), with a surge post-2016 due to the US Presidential elections and Brexit. This expanded to practical issues like infrastructure and automation (Hammouchi & Ghongho, 2022; Malik et al., 2021), and human practices (Ceron et al., 2021; Dhawan et al., 2021). Audience perception studies highlight the importance of effectiveness (Hameleers, 2022; Tunçer & Tam, 2022).

According to the Reporters' Lab database, the number of fact-check outlets has increased significantly – from 11 sites in 2008 to 424 in 2022, which indicates a 3,854% increase. By 2023, the number of fact-checking organizations had dropped to 417[1]. This rapidly emerging field demands revision – a helicopter's view – on the topics and domains of academic research. There have been several funding initiatives to promote fact-checking as a tool for combating information disorder (The Fact-Checking Innovation Initiative.[2], AFP Fact Check[3], and European Digital Media Observatory Fact-Checking[4]). Systematic literature reviews (SLRs) map fact-checking from technological perspectives (Capuano et al., 2023; Sequete et al., 2020), emphasizing the need for MILs to build an informed public (Onifade, 2023; Dierickx et al., 2023). Yet, all this expanding body of work lacks systematic integration: studies vary in focus, terminology, and disciplinary grounding, making it difficult to grasp the field's conceptual coherence and cumulative knowledge.

The aim of this study is to chart the evolving landscape of fact-checking research and to uncover how academia has responded to the surge of misinformation and disinformation since 2010. Through a systematic review of 675 peer-reviewed publications, the study maps the main topics, domains, and conceptual frameworks shaping the scholarly understanding of fact-checking as both a journalistic and socio-technical practice.

While we acknowledge that in a rapidly emerging field such as fact-checking, many valuable insights appear in reports, policy briefs, and popular science materials published by fact-checking organizations and expert communities, these outputs are not always peer-reviewed and therefore vary in methodological transparency and reliability. To ensure the analytical consistency and scientific rigor of this systematic literature review, we limited our corpus to peer-reviewed academic publications indexed in major scholarly databases. This approach

[1] https://reporterslab.org/category/fact-checking/
[2] https://www.poynter.org/innovation-initiative/
[3] https://factcheck.afp.com/
[4] https://edmo.eu/fact-checking/

enables a critical assessment of how fact-checking is conceptualized and studied within academic scholarship, while recognizing that non-academic sources represent a dynamic and practice-oriented complement to this body of research.

Stemming from the problem-setting, we approach the empirical material with the following Research Question (RQ):

- RQ: What research topics and topical domains are studied in fact-checking research?

METHOD

Our SLR approach follows Kapantai et al. (2021) and Behutiye et al. (2017), based on Kitchenham and Charters (2007). We collected academic literature from Web of Science, EBSCO, and Scopus, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure quality. The search terms included: ((“fact-check*” OR debunk* OR prebunk*) AND (journalism OR media OR disinformation OR misinformation OR user* OR tools OR automat* OR “fake news” OR “news verification”)) OR “fact-check* epistemolog*”. We limited the search to 2010–2023, English language, and journal or critical review publications.

Searching only for “fact-checking” and “journalism” or “media” will return thousands of hits. Therefore, it is necessary to set some limitations: publication dates between 2010–2023, English language, and journal or critical review publication type. Similarly to Nieminen and Rapeli (2019), we do not question the scientific quality of the excluded contributions or contributions in languages other than English, but we chose these parameters for the sake of systematic selection. Conducted in April 2023, the search included all entries until that date.

This query brought 1116 results on Web of Science, 3803 on EBSCO, and 1054 on Scopus. 4616 articles were uploaded to Rayyan, a customizable online software for conducting SLRs that enables easy literature screening in a team. Out of that initial sample, 49 duplicates were detected and deleted by the software automatically, and 2867 duplicates were inspected manually. Out of the remaining 1749 articles, there were 694 inclusions, 25 maybes, and 1031 exclusions in the first screening round out of three.

The three screening rounds were a part of the study protocol to ensure impartiality and intercoder reliability, which we valued “not as a measure of ‘objectivity’ but as a means of reflexively improving the analysis by provoking dialogue between researchers” (Campbell et al., 2013; Hruschka et al., 2004; O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). After the initial data purification was done by Coder 1, the second round was done by Coder 2, designed both as a control mechanism and another revenue for the inductive labeling of themes and topics. To arrive at a consensus

on the conflicting 'maybe' cases, Coder 1 and Coder 2 had a revision meeting: 675 articles were included in the sample, and 1074 articles were excluded.

Exclusions were based on focus (N=248), publication type (N=46), language (N=16), missing abstracts (N=6), low research design quality (N=6), and ethical considerations regarding academic freedom (N=8). We also excluded articles where the focus was not on fact-checking per se but which suggested fact-checking in their abstracts as a possible remedy without going into more detail (N=264). Other co-authors decided on the conflicting decisions remaining, Coder 3 (N=1) and Coder 4 (N=1).

After the exclusions, we juxtaposed and compared the themes and research categorization criteria. Applying logical processing, we introduced our topical map of research on fact-checking. Coder 1 and Coder 2 developed initial coding schemes inductively and coded the sample separately. After consultation with co-authors, the codes were re-checked to avoid potential connotational misunderstandings. Coder 1 and Coder 2 held meetings throughout the coding process, discussed and rephrased codes marked with different words but with the same meaning to both, and discussed connotational misunderstandings until there was no more conflict of opinion. The results were then combined into a comprehensive overview. It is important to note that many articles are marked with multiple labels, so the sum of the articles in the groups exceeds that of the total articles in the sample.

FINDINGS

The conceptualization of fact-checking is explored in 52 articles, focusing on disinformation mapping (n=27), fact-checking evolution (n=12), and epistemology (n=13). Mapping includes SLR articles and topical studies (Bekoulis et al., 2021; Caled & Silva, 2022; Shahzad & Khan, 2022). Core aspects are discussed in 335 articles, covering effectiveness (n=221), pre-bunking (n=13), correcting falsehoods (n=113), and flagging falsehoods (n=22). Fact-checking is seen as a public good (Berghel, 2017), conformation journalism (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2018), and crisis communication (Krause et al., 2020; Tian & Ding, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). Yu et al. (2023) note interdisciplinary research on misinformation sharing.

Fact-checking domains are covered in 266 articles, including COVID-19 (n=145), politics (n=82), medicine (n=21), climate change (n=9), and armed conflicts (n=7). Regional studies are in 302 articles, focusing on the U.S. (n=61), Spain (n=38), Brazil (n=18), the UK (n=17), China (n=17), and India (n=12). Professional practices are examined in 145 articles, including fact-checkers' practices (n=70), journalists' verification (n=46), infrastructure (n=16), and perceptions (n=14).

Fact-checking and debunking provide a roadmap for combating information disorders (Eysenbach, 2020; Lewandowsky, 2021). Contexts are discussed in 250 articles, including social media (n=103), scientific fact-checking (n=100), and experiments (n=77). A coordinated approach is needed, combining authorities, academics, and fact-checkers (Furnémont & Rokša-Zubčević, 2021; Durach et al., 2020). Fact-checking outside media is analyzed in 247 articles, focusing on audience perceptions (n=107), human practices (n=73), and media literacy (n=59).

Naeem and Bhatti (2020) highlight librarians' roles, while Hoque et al. (2021) call for socio-technical solutions to disinformation. New approaches are explored in 151 articles, covering tools (n=94), automated fact-checking (n=50), and new technologies (n=9). European actions against disinformation are also described (García et al., 2019).

FACT-CHECKING AS A JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE

The driving force of fact-checking relates to the professional motives of journalists (Graves et al., 2016). However, professional ideals may clash with everyday practice: while journalists emphasize the importance of checking information, they sometimes publish information that turns out to be imprecise (Dumitru, 2021). Journalists do not have consistent routines for confirming information from social media and blogs, and significant uncertainty exists among them regarding the feasibility of verifying such content (Edwardsson et al., 2021). Thomson et al. (2022) stress that today, the naked eye cannot necessarily discern visual manipulations, and source credibility is also not enough because reputable journalists are also known to share manipulated or inaccurate user-generated information.

Deficiencies in journalistic verification can be observed when covering secluded, faraway countries to which journalists do not have direct access; in these cases, errors cascade from one media outlet to the next, and even after more information has become available, journalists do not necessarily feel the need to issue a correction because of the obscure nature of the subject (Seo, 2022). Journalists advocate for fellow professionals to adopt more stringent fact-checking methods, especially when journalism's watchdog role is essential (Shapals, 2018). Of the three strategies Sarelska and Jenkins (2022) have identified in how journalists responded to COVID-19 falsehoods, only the fact-checking approach directly challenges disinformation. On the other hand, a study shows that journalists employ specific combinations of traditional fact-checking skills, and in most cases, this is enough to adequately examine information (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022).

Online disinformation has encouraged a shift in journalism practice from competition to collaboration (Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Smyrnaios et al., 2019).

Micallef et al. (2022) found that fact-checkers are overwhelmed as the work is labor intensive and feel they are failing to fulfill journalistic duties because their impact and reach are limited (Singer, 2020).

FACT-CHECKING AS A NEW GENRE

Studies reveal the emergence of fact-checking organizations globally, driven by various forces. Fact-checking Africa, for instance, targets news from legacy media (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018). In Tunisia, initiatives lacked editorial guidance and training (Zammit et al., 2020). Tsek.ph in the Philippines was established by universities and newsrooms for elections (Chua & Soriano, 2020). Spain's public service media set up units responding to COVID-19 misinformation (Palomo & Sedano, 2021; Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020). StopFake in Ukraine counters Russian propaganda (Haigh et al., 2018). Verificado 2018 in Mexico was a collaborative effort before the elections (Martinez-Carrillo & Tamul, 2019). Critical factors for these initiatives include elections, foreign interference, and the pandemic. Amazeen (2018) discusses a global movement arising from public disempowerment, journalism's downturn, technological change, and socio-political discord.

Lelo (2022) highlights economic and editorial influences on fact-checkers, noting similarities to journalism. Ownership structures and business models vary, with differences between media group operations and journalist-led initiatives (Esteban-Navarro et al., 2021). Fact-checkers need skills in technology, visualization, and databases (Ruiz et al., 2021). Amazeen (2015) reports a consensus on information selection and verification, with fact-checkers viewing their work as more trustworthy and educational (Singer, 2020). Juneström (2021) identifies accessibility, trust-building, and pedagogy as crucial aspects. Kim and Buzzelli (2022) suggest an emerging institutional form of fact-checking.

Palau-Sampio (2018) finds differences in Latin American fact-checking practices, with room for improvement in sourcing and expert insight. Lim (2018) notes that ambiguous political language influences claim selection and judgment variability. Schudson (2013) emphasizes adherence to journalism standards, with differences in transparency and source use (Vu et al., 2022). Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2021) report that Colombian journalists see fact-checking as restoring credibility, while in authoritarian Arab countries, fact-checkers practice self-censorship (Fakida, 2021). Jo et al. (2022) explore public funding for fact-checking in South Korea. Horowitz et al. (2021) discuss the public service media's role in countering misinformation. Social media interventions by news media are effective against health misinformation, though "truth scales" and partial refutations weaken this effect (Walter et al., 2020).

FACT-CHECKING ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

False information often spreads via social media, and platform responses are crucial. Cotter et al. (2022) found that Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube's approaches to COVID-19 misinformation were inadequate. Nissen et al. (2022) noted biases in fact-checks facilitated by Google and the Poynter Institute. Fact-checkers must adapt their work to different platforms for funding (Lelo, 2022) and debunk rival media for economic viability (Long et al., 2019), increasing administrative burdens and vulnerability for smaller organizations. Crowdsourcing is rare (Martinez-Carrillo & Tamul, 2019).

Warnings and corrective labels, or flagging, are perceived differently, and labels indicating government affiliation reduce political information sharing (Liang et al., 2022). Scharrer et al. (2022) found that warnings increased skepticism toward health misinformation. However, fact-checking labels do not alter credibility perceptions of single posts but do affect site evaluations (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020). Critical comments by users curb sharing false information more effectively than platform warnings (Colliander, 2019). Garrett and Poulsen (2019) found that neither fact-checkers nor peer warnings effectively persuaded users about political posts, but humor labels reduced reactance.

Flagging is still developing, with the potential to help navigate information environments while respecting freedom of expression (Morrow et al., 2022). Fact-checking amplification was studied from platform-specific and audience perspectives. Li and Chang (2022) identified source credibility, political views, and prior shares as factors in sharing fact-checks. People share fact-checks selectively based on political alignment (Shin & Thorson, 2017). Correction-sharing is less studied than misinformation-sharing, with insufficient research on influencing factors.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FACT-CHECKING

Studies on fact-checking effectiveness overlap with correcting false information, audience perceptions, and context. Bocharov and Demidov (2021) argue that fact-checking requires cultural competence and prioritizing facts. Effectiveness is limited by ideological divisions and audience reach (Robertson et al., 2020). Trust in the government aids rumor-disproving in China (Gao et al., 2022), but no significant effect was found in Germany (Radechovsky et al., 2019). Fact-checking in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa needs to be combined with media literacy and public health information (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022).

Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning affect fact-checking. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) noted the "backfire effect," but Wood and Porter (2018) and

Swire-Thompson et al. (2020) found little evidence for it. Cognitive processes in assessing truthfulness are crucial (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Even if fact-checking stops people from believing false claims, it may not be able to change the attitudes toward the political figure that made them (Nyhan et al., 2020). Similarly, it has been shown to improve attitudes toward immigrants without affecting policy preferences (Choi et al., 2023). Dan and Dixon (2021) suggest targeting societal outcomes to reduce polarization.

Li and Wagner (2020) identify three audience types: uninformed, ambiguous, and misinformed, with only the uninformed likely to change their beliefs. Biltoft (2020) highlights gullibility and refusal to accept facts. Risk factors are over-confidence and distinguishing facts from opinions (Martinez-Costa et al., 2022; Merpert et al., 2018). Belief in others' susceptibility to misinformation increases verification efforts (Sun, 2022). Warnings about reputational risks have limited effect (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Ma et al., 2022).

Timing in fact-checking is critical. Early evidence publication and rumor detection support timely interventions (Allein et al., 2021; Liu & Rong, 2022; Ma et al., 2020). Prebunking and debunking effectiveness are debated (Tay et al., 2022; van der Linden et al., 2021; Arcos et al., 2022).

Innovative formats like cartoon characters and audio dramas enhance fact-checking transmission (Opgenhaffen, 2021; Winters et al., 2021). Fact-checking's impact depends on audience alignment, consistency, timing, and source credibility. Corrections do not fully eliminate misinformation, and beliefs do not entirely revert; political, marketing, and health topics resist corrections (Walter et al., 2020).

RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF FACT-CHECKS

Fact-checking is a professional and human practice of information verification. Studies combining fact-checking with Media and Information Literacies (MILs) emphasize individual responsibility for debunking false information with the most effective real-time corrections (Kim & Walker, 2020; Musi & Reed, 2022). Social learning models, crowdsourcing, and critical thinking are also explored (Sikder et al., 2020; Soprano et al., 2021; Stokes-Parish, 2022). Experiments show MIL interventions improve distinguishing evidence-based information from misinformation (Hameleers, 2022; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020). New media literacy influences media trust and fact-checking motivation (Lee et al., 2022; Shahzad & Khan, 2022).

Critical thinking and MILs are crucial in curbing misinformation. Educational approaches include games, performance art, and mobile apps (Basol et al., 2021; França et al., 2021). Journalists and fact-checkers teach these skills in various

settings (Cunliffe-Jones, 2020). Emotional framing and humor-based corrections are studied for effectiveness (Kim & Chen, 2022; Vraga et al., 2019).

Fact-checks serve as data archives for researchers, aiding in studies on information disorders (León et al., 2022; Musi & Reed, 2022). Fact-checking organizations' websites are used as research sources (Pathak et al., 2021). Researchers incorporate fact-checking in strategies against misinformation and conduct experiments (Li & Wagner, 2020; Bekoulis et al., 2022) — fact-checking 'archives' false narratives, highlighting the importance of quality fact-checks for re-usability.

Innovating fact-checking includes online tools supporting individual fact-checking (Berghel, 2017) and APIs (Meel & Vishwakarma, 2020), machine learning (Smith & Bastian, 2022) and network models (Tambuscio et al., 2018), assessing bias (Allen et al., 2021), AI-assisted (Grmuša & Prelog, 2021), and fully automated fact-checking (Parratt-Fernandez et al., 2021). Platform-specific innovations include debunking functions on X (King et al., 2021), WhatsApp changes (Reis et al., 2020), and Instagram correction testing (Vraga et al., 2020). Fact-checking tools like Google Fact Check Tools are reviewed (Alfoldiova, 2018).

DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review (SLR) aimed to map the landscape of fact-checking research, focusing on its conceptualization, core aspects, domains, regional practices, and innovations. The findings reveal a multifaceted field with significant implications for theory, practice, and policy. The conceptualization of fact-checking highlights its role in disinformation mapping, evolution, and epistemology (Bekoulis et al., 2021; Caled & Silva, 2022; Shahzad & Khan, 2022). Core aspects such as effectiveness, pre-bunking, correcting falsehoods, and flagging falsehoods are discussed in several contexts (Berghel, 2017; Krause et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021), aligning with existing literature that underscores the interdisciplinary nature of fact-checking research (Yu et al., 2023).

Regional studies reveal diverse fact-checking practices, emphasizing the need to assess fact-checker performance across contexts (Amazeen, 2015; Nieminen & Sankari, 2021; Uscinski & Butler, 2013), as fact-checking effectiveness varies by country and organization. Fact-checking is influenced by internal and external forces, including technology platforms (Lelo, 2022; Nissen et al., 2022). Research designs need improvement, as the experiments on fact-checking effectiveness can lack real-life context. The quality of fact-checking should also be further examined, as it serves as a study tool for MILs and an archive of false narratives, and findings indicate a high reuse rate (Kim & Walker, 2020; Musi & Reed, 2022).

A coordinated approach involving authorities, academics, and fact-checkers is necessary (Furnémont & Rokša-Zubčević, 2021; Durach et al., 2020). Innovations

in fact-checking, including online tools, machine learning, AI-assisted, and fully automated fact-checking, are explored in newer articles (Meel & Vishwakarma, 2020; Smith & Bastian, 2022; Parratt-Fernandez et al., 2021). However, there is a gap in research highlighting who, how, and how often these new tools will be used. Future research should address the need for longitudinal and qualitative studies and insights from non-Western contexts.

The SLR methodology provides a comprehensive overview of the field but has limitations. The exclusion of non-English articles and the focus on peer-reviewed journals may have omitted relevant studies. Additionally, the rapid evolution of fact-checking practices means that some recent developments may not be fully captured. It should be noted that a large body of work only mentions fact-checking in passing as a buzzword while offering few new insights into the practice or genre itself.

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive mapping of academic research on fact-checking as a journalistic, technological, and socio-cultural practice. We analyzed 675 peer-reviewed publications across three major databases. The results reveal that fact-checking has evolved from a journalistic activity into a multifaceted field intersecting communication, technology, political science, and psychology. Research has expanded from conceptual and epistemological debates to applied domains such as health communication, political campaigning, crisis communication, and the COVID-19 infodemic. Thematically, fact-checking studies focus on effectiveness, correction and pre-bunking strategies, professional practices, and audience perceptions, while new trends emerge in automation, artificial intelligence, and platform-specific verification tools.

These findings underscore that fact-checking is no longer solely a journalistic correction mechanism but a key component of contemporary information governance and media literacy. Understanding how fact-checking operates across domains helps researchers and practitioners to evaluate its societal impact, inform policy initiatives, and design more effective interventions to mitigate misinformation. Mapping the academic landscape also exposes the unevenness of global research – most studies originate from Western contexts – and the dominance of experimental and survey-based approaches, which limits understanding of cultural, institutional, and ethical dimensions of fact-checking.

While this review focuses on peer-reviewed academic literature to ensure analytical rigor and comparability, we acknowledge that a large and influential body of knowledge also exists outside academia in the form of reports, policy briefs, and popular science materials published by fact-checking organizations

and expert communities. Future research should systematically analyze these sources to capture the practical evolution of fact-checking, its policy relevance, and its educational potential within Media and Information Literacy frameworks. Combining academic and practitioner perspectives will offer a more holistic understanding of fact-checking as both a scholarly field and a professional practice essential to democratic information ecosystems.

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