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Influences of Media Routines on Fact-Checking: An Exploratory Study of Sources in PolitiFact Fact-Checks

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This exploratory study examined PolitiFact fact-checks (N=18,446) published between 2008 and 2020 to understand the extent to which the largest political fact-checking network in the United States utilizes traditional media routines in finding check-worthy claims and gathering information to verify claims. An automated content analysis revealed that PolitiFact relies more on routine channels of news production to find check-worthy claims than non-routine channels. The results also show that non-elite sources account for a negligible portion of PolitiFact sources, but the organization uses more non-traditional channels to find sources.

Keywords: fact-checking, journalism, routine, source, PolitiFact

Sources in news stories are known as framers, agenda setters, and primary definers of events who help journalists provide balanced narratives of political events (Carlson, 2009; Kleemans et al., 2017; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Fact-checking, an emerging and yet controversial digital form of journalism that adjudicates the veracity of political statements, made the role of sources more prominent and elevated their status to definers of truth from definers of events (Graves, 2016; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). Fact-checking platforms and news organizations work in the same information landscape, rely on similar resource niches for survival, and face similar economic challenges (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Graves, 2017; Lowrey, 2017). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that fact-checkers utilize traditional media routines in the process of finding

check-worthy claims and gathering information to verify claims. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which PolitiFact, the largest political fact-checking network in the United States, utilizes traditional media routines. The study tested a theoretical assumption that long-established media routines could be utilized by emerging forms of digital news, including fact-checking organizations (Lowrey, 2017; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Singer, 2005).

As misinformation affects society, news consumers are increasingly turning to fact-checking organizations for accurate information (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Graves, 2018). The increasing demand for fact-checks led many legacy news media organizations to produce fact-check articles on a regular basis (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). This new form of news set off new debates among scholars and professionals about political truth, how it is defined, and who defines it in the changing media environment (Graves, 2016; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). As fact-checking becomes a stable and legitimate form of news, independent fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact play the ‘pioneer’ roles (Lowrey, 2017, p. 390). Pioneers set the terms and conditions for being a definer of truth, to a great extent, through routinization of the source selection process in fact-check articles. Empirical studies of sourcing practices by these organizations would shed light on the influences on this emerging form of news media population. This study is an attempt in that direction.

Despite having some unique characteristics, the fact-checking process is highly similar to the journalistic verification of information (Graves, 2017). Fact-checkers utilize journalistic norms and practices to select check-worthy facts, gather information, and present their works (Graves, 2017, p. 524). Like news organizations, fact-checkers need efficiency while allocating their resources and therefore they check only a selected number of facts. Fact-checkers collect information from sources perceived by the audience to be credible and publish articles in a timely manner (Graves, 2017; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Theories of influences on media messages suggest that the need to publish enough acceptable stories with limited resources and within a limited time led news organizations to routinize the information-gathering process (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 109). Decades of research show that news-gathering routines favor the elites in society – people with power and authority – over ordinary citizens (Gans, 2004; Hermida et al., 2014; Reich, 2011). Recent research shows that digital technologies have little impact on the sourcing routines in mainstream news organizations (Freedman et al., 2010). The old routines remained stable as the media environment evolved with the emergence of new technologies (Moon & Hadley, 2014; Schapals & Harb, 2020; Singer, 2005). Singer (2005) argued that digital technologies might have enhanced traditional practices. The expectation that the internet and social media would diversify news sources and give voice to the voiceless didn’t materialize for political news to the extent expected (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Castells, 2008; Heinrich, 2011; Hermida et al., 2014; Massey, 1998; Yousuf & Taylor, 2017).

This study examined 18,446 fact-check articles published by PolitiFact.com between 2008 and 2020. Using an automated content analysis method, it analyzed 162,375 sources to have an understanding of the characteristics of those sources. The study will further the understanding of sourcing practices in an emerging form of digital journalism and thus expand the scope of the theory of influences on digital news content. It is a timely endeavor as scholars across disciplines, professionals, government agencies, and social institutions are debating the best way to tackle the ongoing infodemic (Infodemic, n.d.). The study will contribute to several areas of literature such as media sociology, media

management, and political communication. The findings will also be valuable to researchers in disciplines in social sciences. It will also further the understanding of the role that fact-checking plays in citizens' political decision-making processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Influences of Media Routines on Sources

Media sociology literature suggests that news stories are the fruits of conversations between journalists and people with power, status, and expertise who are often competing with one another for control over the flow of information to the public (Gans, 2004; Gitlin, 2003; Reich, 2015; Schlesinger, 1990). In democratic societies where news media are believed to be free, institutionalized sources take the advantage of news-gathering routines meant to ensure the efficient allocation of resources and provide users with credible information (Lacy et al., 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). These sources, often backed by the institutions they are affiliated with, adapt to the logic of the press (e.g., timeliness, drama) to succeed in supplying and framing the news (Catenaccio et al., 2011; Lacy et al., 2013; Tuchman, 1973). Ordinary people serve as primary sources in the news when information from institutionalized sources is scarce (Kleemans et al., 2017; Yousuf & Taylor, 2017). They often appear in the news as eyewitnesses and victims, and rarely appear as experts or representatives (Kleemans et al., 2017; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016).

A news organization must produce a steady number of stories on a regular basis. Despite having limited resources on the one hand and high variability of newsworthy events and information on the other, the organization manages to maintain its production cycle by imposing routines (Lacy et al., 2013; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 109) noted that routines help news organizations address three important questions: “(1) What is acceptable to the consumer (audience)? (2) What is the organization (media) capable of processing? (3) What raw product is available from suppliers (sources)?” Research shows that established media routines control who serves as sources in the news with priorities given to public figures possessing power and expertise (Cross, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2013). Schudson (2002, p. 255) noted: “Journalism, on a day-to-day basis, is the story of the interaction of reporters and government officials, both politicians and bureaucrats”. To become a source in a news story, one must have some level of authority, status, expertise, or personal connection with journalists (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Reich, 2015; Sigal, 1986). News organizations have a “preferred orientation toward” officials associated with powerful institutions such as government, law enforcement agencies, universities, businesses, and interest groups (Cross, 2010, p. 414). Research shows that people who have the most power in society define issues and events covered in the news (Delmastro & Splendore, 2020; Gans, 1979; Hall et al., 2013).

From a journalist’s perspective, sources are selected on the bases of relevance, accessibility, and credibility (Gans, 2004; Reich, 2011). Some scholars suggest that credibility is at the core of the source selection process. Reich (2011, pp. 51-52) noted, “the standards of source credibility shape the capacity of the press to produce truthful, accurate, fair, unbiased accounts of news and protect themselves, their organizations and eventually their consumers from erroneous information”. The need for a steady supply of credible information further justifies routinizing the source selection process and using official and authoritative sources in the news (Cook, 1998; Turcotte, 2017). Studies show that journalists perceive individuals with more power in society to be more credible and vice versa (Hermida et al., 2014; Reich,

2011). Becker (1967, p. 241) described it as “a hierarchy of credibility” that is a common phenomenon in society. Becker (1967, p. 242) argued:

“Everyone knows” that responsible professionals know more about things than laymen, that police are more respectable and their words ought to be taken more seriously than those of the deviants and criminals with whom they deal. By refusing to accept the hierarchy of credibility, we express disrespect for the entire established order.

Gans (1979), and later Shoemaker and Reese (1996), reiterated that news also follows the hierarchies of society. For a selection of news sources, this means the process is ruled by the people in the top levels of the hierarchies. Digital communication technologies broke down the business model of legacy news media, but the selection of sources continued to follow the social hierarchies in the new media ecosystem and elite sources continued to dominate the news (Freedman et al., 2010).

Many scholars described connectivity and interactivity offered by the new technologies as an opportunity for news organizations to diversify their sources and include voices of people not affiliated with institutions (Castells, 2008; Heinrich, 2011; Massey, 1998). Recent research shows that this expectation did not materialize as news organizations, both legacy media, and the emerging digital media populations, were relying on official sources. Some studies found evidence that journalists communicated with ordinary people on social media and included their voices in breaking news and stories on wars, protests, and natural disasters (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Hermida et al., 2014; Yousuf & Taylor, 2017). However, Hermida (2012) argued that journalistic use of social media was rather opportunistic. Journalists use information from social media to gratify the immediate information-seeking need of users “until professional journalists arrive on the scene, hours or even days later” (Hermida, 2012, p. 664). Yousuf and Taylor (2017) showed that journalists used information from ordinary citizens in Syria because they were not able to travel to war-hit areas of the country. Broersma and Graham (2013) found social media sources were used more often in soft news. In sum, media logic may vary from mass media to digital media to some extent, but media routines remain relatively stable and adaptive to changes in the environment (Dimmick, 2002; Moon & Hadley, 2014; Reich, 2013; Singer, 2005). New technologies might help news organizations enhance traditional practices (Singer, 2005). Increasing journalistic use of social media and ordinary sources in soft news and coverage of conflicts and natural disasters is unlikely to reverse the influences of social hierarchies on the source selection process.

Empirical Research on News Sources

Decades of empirical research provide evidence for a consistent pattern of elite dominance in the news. Sigal (1973) is one of the first scholars to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between the press and the powerful. Sigal pointed out that resource constraints, among other factors, lead to disproportionate coverage of a small number of news centers – primarily the government offices. He analyzed sources in more than 1,000 stories published in the New York Times and the Washington Post and found that many of the sources were from those few news centers. Following his seminal study on sources in major television and magazine news, Gans (1979) noted, “while in theory sources can come from anywhere, in practice, their recruitment and their access to journalists reflects the hierarchies of nation and society” (p. 119).

Berkowitz (1987) studied the connection between news sources and agenda setting in television news. He found that 49.3 percent of local news sources and 48.6 percent of network news sources were

affiliated with the government (including U.S., state, local or foreign government). Lasorsa and Reese (1990) studied news sources in the 1987 stock market crash coverage by CBS Evening News, Newsweek, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal. A content analysis of 167 stories citing 1,022 sources showed that a majority of the sources were elites. Government sources were used to explain the causes of the crash, particularly the national debt, while business executives and lobbyists talked about the effects of the crash. Lasorsa and Reese also found that print media favored Wall Street sources while television news favored government sources. They found that the use of different groups of sources resulted in distinct slants.

Studies on news sourcing practices indicate a continued influence of traditional routines and preponderance of bureaucrats (e.g., government officials), technocrats (e.g., researchers), and capitalists (e.g., corporate executives) in the news (Demers & Merskin, 2000; Kleemans et al., 2017; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). Journalists in the digital era continued to perceive people with power and status to be more credible (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014; Reich, 2011). Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou (2016) studied sources in news stories about irregular migration. They found that the migrants, who were the subject of those stories, accounted for less than 10 percent of the sources largely confirming the challenges disadvantaged groups face accessing elite-dominated mainstream news media. The study examined coverage in USA, France, and Norway. Kleemans et al. (2017) examined if the presentation of citizen voices in news increased over time to counterbalance the virtual monopoly of elite sources. The study found an increased presence of ordinary people in the news. In this study, 1,425 television news stories broadcast between 1990 and 2014 were analyzed. Results show citizen sources became more prominent over time, but elite sources remained the primary definers of news. Citizens do not get a more substantive and relevant voice. They are primarily used as vox pops, regardless of story topics.

Relationship Between Fact-Checking and Journalism

Fact-checking refers to the practice of adjudicating publicly disseminated factual statements and publishing decisions in articles like news stories (Graves, 2016). The International Fact-Checking Network described fact-check articles as “non-partisan reports on the accuracy of statements by public figures and prominent institutions and other widely circulated claims related to public interest issues” (IFCN, n.d., para. 1). Though the practice drew criticism from some professionals (e.g., Flood, 2020) and academics (Uscinski & Butler, 2013), others welcomed it as a “genre of journalism” (Coddington et al., 2014, p. 45), “one of many new journalistic forms and practices in the digital era” (Lowrey, 2017, p. 376), and “an endeavor that maintains core principles of journalism” (Mena, 2019, p. 659). Many legacy news media organizations across the world also joined independent organizations in fact-checking claims (Graves, 2018).

Fact-checking has been started and practiced primarily by journalists, incorporated by legacy news media organizations, and awarded with prestigious journalism awards (Graves et al., 2016). Modern fact-checking, a form of news, emerged in the late 1970s after political campaigns were accused of spinning facts in their advertisements (Dobbs, 2012). News organizations would publish stories critiquing ads containing misleading information (Kaid et al., 1996). In the early 1980s, journalists started fact-checking claims that President Ronald Reagan made at press conferences (McKinnon et al., 1996). Fact-checking started to become popular in the 2000s and gained momentum following the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States (Spivak, 2010; Stelter, 2016).

Fact-checkers at independent fact-checking organizations follow traditional journalistic norms when it comes to “choosing claims to check, contacting the speaker, tracing false claims, dealing with experts, and showing your work” (Graves, 2017, p. 524). For instance, statements are selected for fact-checking using the criteria of newsworthiness. Facts in those statements are then checked following the same procedure that journalists follow. Fact-checkers interview experts as well as people involved in the stories, look for evidence and use digital verification tools (Graves, 2017). Some noted that fact-checking is journalism, but it is more rigorous (Palau-Sampio, 2018).

The embrace of fact-checking by journalists and legacy news media may be explained by strong user demand for such content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Nyhan and Reifler (2015) found that news consumers view fact-checking favorably. Individuals who are more educated and informed are more likely to favor this practice. U.S. citizens are divided about fact-checking along party lines (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Liberals are more likely to favor the practice than conservatives (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Lowrey (2017, p. 376) explained the rise of fact-checking from the perspectives of population ecology and institutional logic. Fact-checking is one of the new forms of journalism facilitated by digital technologies. The practice emerged and grew to fill a journalistic niche created by growing concerns about online misinformation and gained legitimacy (Lowrey, 2017).

Though fact-checking has some strong supporters among journalists and academics, the practice faced criticism (Ailes, 1991; Flood, 2020). The criticism revolved around the effectiveness of fact-checking in containing misinformation (Schwarz et al., 2007), its epistemology (for more on epistemology, see Graves, 2017), and its conflict with the long-established “objective routine” meant to refrain journalists from taking sides (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 114). Refraining from publicly deciding whether a claim was true or not was part of this routine that protected journalists and news organizations from “occupational hazards such as libel suits” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 114). In the 1950s, the press knowingly carried false accusations made by then-senator Joseph McCarthy in his campaign against the communists. The Wall Street Journal called fact-checking “part of a larger journalistic trend that seeks to recast all political debates as matters of lies, misinformation and ‘facts,’ rather than differences of world view or principles” (“PolitiFiction: True ‘lies’ about ObamaCare,,” 2010). At the same time, some criticized fact-checkers for not being more direct about their decisions (Krugman, 2013). Despite sustained criticism, fact-checking has been growing fast and being accepted as a legitimate form of journalism. As Lowrey (2017, p. 391) noted, the practice is “more stable than unstable: some guidelines have been established, the population has fairly clear ‘pioneer’ role models, and mortalities were relatively few”.

Source Selection in Fact-check Articles

As of now, there is little empirical research available about sources in reports published by independent fact-check organizations. Graves and Glaisyer (2012) provided an ethnographic account of their observation of how fact-checkers at PolitiFact work. The study provided some details about how fact-checkers select and utilize sources to select and verify claims. Fact-checkers at PolitiFact utilize databases (e.g., LexisNexis), news programs and reports, and campaign sites to select check-worthy factual claims. Once a claim is selected, they try to contact the author of the claim. Politicians, who anticipate being fact-checked, often provide documentation supporting their claims, which are then scrutinized by fact-checkers to see if the information was taken out of context. Graves and Glaisyer (2012) also noted that fact-checkers rely on academics, experts, and scientists, and utilize official data

from government agencies. Graves' (2017) study provided details about one fact-check that Graves himself did during his observation. No other study examined sources of fact-check articles that provide a broader view of the practice.

Knowledge gained through decades of investigation into sources in news articles can provide insights into possible source selection practices by fact-checkers. Considering the close connection between journalism and fact-checking, it may be argued that the selection process would be close to the same with powerful figures and elite sources dominating stories. But there are some differences in objectives and practices between journalism and fact-checking, which may require them to use different sets of sources.

In journalism, sources provide raw information and often frame stories (Carlson, 2009). Sources can create, amplify, and maintain agendas through their influence on news media (Kleemans et al., 2017). Some of the same sources determine the content topics of fact-checking stories since fact-checkers report on claims or statements that are already published (Elizabeth, 2014). But fact-checkers go a step further and publicly decide what is true based on information provided by their sources (Graves, 2016). Jane Elizabeth noted, "Fact-checkers and fact-checking organizations aim to increase knowledge by re-reporting and researching the purported facts in published/recorded statements made by politicians and anyone whose words impact others' lives and livelihoods" (Elizabeth, 2014, online). In fact-checking, sources are not who define a story, but who defines the truth. Sources in fact-check articles are not meant to provide alternative perspectives for the sake of balance or fairness, but to assess and challenge claims made by powerful figures to mislead the public (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012).

Fact-checkers developed a set of routines to select claims to check (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012). While a news article may contain multiple claims or statements of opinion, a fact-check report typically focuses on one verifiable fact. Any statement of opinion that doesn't contain a verifiable fact is not considered for fact-checking (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012). A news article may contain sources with various levels of experience on a particular topic. But a fact-check report contains sources who have knowledge or provide evidence supporting or rejecting a particular fact. The growth of fact-checking is linked to digital communication technologies that offer cheap, fast, and convenient ways to gather information (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016).

Research Questions

Theoretical discussion and empirical research reviewed above provide insights that may be utilized to make assumptions about potential sourcing practices by fact-checking organizations. These organizations are likely to follow longstanding media routines to produce a manageable number of fact-checks in a timely and credible manner. Routinizing appears to be an efficient tool as fact-checkers must choose from vast misinformation being disseminated every day (Pepper & Burton, 2020). Fact-checking a claim requires easy and fast access to experts and documents, meaning fact-checkers are likely to rely on elite sources and online resources (Kleemans et al., 2017; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). The presence of ordinary people is less likely in fact-check articles than in news media stories as fact-checkers deal with specific facts, not events. However, these assumptions may not be presented as research hypotheses since very little empirical research has been conducted to examine sources in fact-check articles. Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: Is PolitiFact more likely to rely on routine channels of news production than non-routine channels to find claims to fact-check?

RQ2: Is PolitiFact more likely to rely on routine sources of information than non-routine sources for fact-checking claims?

RQ3: Is PolitiFact more likely to use social media to find elite channels and sources than non-elite channels and sources?

METHODS

This study conducted an automated content analysis of the fact-checks published on the PolitiFact website for 13 years from 2008. PolitiFact, launched in 2007, is the largest fact-checking network in the United States for political claims with strong ties to legacy news media organizations (Graves, 2017, p. 519). As of December 2021, it was the only fact-checking network that won a Pulitzer Prize within two years of its launch and had 14 state editions. PolitiFact was suitable for an automated content analysis because the contents on its website were well organized and could be easily extracted and analyzed with computer programs. Automated content analysis is being used increasingly by researchers in media and communications (e.g., Hermida, 2012; Shahin, 2016) as computer programs may increase the efficiency and reliability of research (Zamith, 2017). Algorithms may also improve the validity of text analysis (Riffe et al., 2019).

Data and Coding Instruments

The data for this study, collected from the PolitiFact website – politifact.com, included 18,446 articles published in 13 years between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2020. The corpus includes articles rated by Truth-O-Meter; a six-point scale used by PolitiFact to rate the level of accuracy of a fact-checked statement. A rating indicates the relative accuracy of a statement with True representing the highest level of accuracy and Pants on Fire representing the lowest level of accuracy (Holan, 2018). The authors of this study utilized the power of Python, a high-level computer program, and several Python libraries (i.e., NLTK, Pandas, RE, and spaCy) to automatically download, code, and analyze the data (Bird, Klein & Loper, 2009; Honnibal & Montani, 2017; McKinney, 2010; van Rossum & Drake, 2009). PolitiFact provides a list of sources at the end of every fact-check. In addition to the articles, these lists were collected and analyzed. While channels were analyzed for all articles in the corpus, sources (N = 162,375) in 15,391 fact-check articles were analyzed. Sources in the remaining 3,055 (16.6%) fact-checks were excluded from the analysis because they couldn't be extracted using the program written for this study. For the fact-checks included in the analysis, the first section of a source separated by a comma was read and matched against a set of lexical categories developed by the researchers. For sources where the document type was not clear in the first section, the second section of a source was read and matched. The program was able to categorize over 90% of the sources. The researchers first developed the lexical categories by reading several thousand sources. The categories were then expanded, and more words were added to each category by repeatedly running the program on the data that couldn't be categorized until over 90% of the sources were categorized.

Channels of News Production. This study adopted Wheatley's (2020) definitions of routine and non-routine channels of news production. These definitions are based on Sigal's (1973) conceptualization of sourcing channels. According to Wheatley, routine channels include promotional releases, non-promotional releases (e.g., press notes), common news beats (e.g., police, government,

courts), and other media. Non-routine channels include unexpected events, leaks, enterprise (e.g., stories based on personal communication), and investigations done by the organizations themselves. In this study, channels of news production refer to where PolitiFact looks to find misleading statements. This information is located at the top of a fact-check. For example, someone stated on March 11, 2020, in an interview. In this sentence, an interview is a medium where the statement first appeared. The researchers programmatically separated this information from each fact-check and then categorized them using inductive reasoning (Hayes & Heit, 2018). Routine channels of claims fact-checked by PolitiFact have been divided into four categories: (1) press releases, (2) promotional content such as advertisements, (3) articles published on news websites, (4) interviews aired on shows, and (5) speeches at events. Non-routine channels of claims are divided into four categories: (1) social media posts, (2) emails, (3) information and documents belonging to organizations, and (4) books and reports. The non-routine channels were further analyzed to find out whose posts were more likely to be fact-checked.

Sources of Information. Sources are distinct from channels although a source has the same conceptual root as a channel (Johnson, Paulussen & Van Aelst, 2018; Sigal, 1973). Wheatley (2020) defined sources as “contributors” and channels as “triggers” to stories (p. 283). Sources are actors that contribute to the news with information in the gathering phase while channels contribute to news in the discovery phase. Journalists receive information from a common set of sources—known as routine sources—to complete stories discovered through channels (Berkowitz, 2009; Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Journalists also rely on non-routine sources that include random members of the public as well as data, documents, and reports collected at reporters’ own endeavors. In this study, categories for routine sources are the same as the categories for routine channels with two exceptions. First, an additional category of ‘self-citation’ has been added to the routine sources of information. Self-citation refers to when PolitiFact cites its own articles. Second, two categories—articles on news websites and interviews on shows—were collapsed into one category as the news content category for simplicity. Categories for non-routine sources are also the same as the categories for non-routine channels with one exception. The Email category has been replaced with the Personal Communication category to accommodate a reporter’s personal communication through other means such as in-personal meetings and phone calls.

Elite Channels and Sources. Routines relating to the news-gathering process limit the range of viewpoints mostly to official sources and elite perspectives (Bennett, 1990; Gans, 2004; Hermida et al., 2014; Reich, 2011; Turcotte, 2017). Elite channels are almost certain to be more prominent in fact-check articles as fact-checkers restrict their coverage to “statements by public figures and prominent institutions and other widely circulated claims related to public interest issues” (IFCN, n.d., para. 1). Yet, non-elites may have a say in fact-checks through social media. Social media is the only category out of all categories for routine and non-routine channels and sources where non-elites may be found. Elite channels and sources were separated from non-elite channels and sources programmatically by using spaCy, a Python library for name and entity recognition (Honnibal & Montani, 2017).

Reliability and Validity

DiMaggio et al. (2013) suggested that a reliable text analysis must fulfill four conditions. The study must be: (1) explicit so other researchers can reproduce it; (2) automated so a large volume of content can be analyzed; (3) inductive; and (4) cognizant of the relationality of meaning. This study satisfies all these conditions. The data used in this study was collected from a publicly available website

and the methods are explicitly stated. This enables any researcher to reproduce the study. Instead of analyzing a sample, this study analyzed all stories that the researchers could access at the time of data collection. The volume of sources analyzed in this study was large. The categories for the variables were developed using inductive reasoning. And the researchers recognize that terms may vary in meaning. Though the study, the data, and the code will help researchers design similar studies to analyze news portals, the instruments should not be applied to other studies without modifications. This is one of the reasons the researchers did not combine other major fact-checking organizations such as factcheck.org and Snopes in this study. Each fact-checking organization is unique in terms of scale, coverage area, and presentation style. Comparing them in one study may be misleading. In terms of Riffe et al. (2019)'s categorization of automated content analysis, this study used key-word-in-context (KWIC) and dictionaries that may improve the validity of studies. The researchers developed the lexicons using inductive reasoning.

RESULTS

Summary of Data

Out of 18,446 fact-checks analyzed in this study, 2,357 claims were rated True, 3,159 Mostly True, 3,345 Half True, 3,037 Mostly False, 4,285 False, and 2,263 Pants on Fire (See Figure 1). The lowest number of fact-checks published in a year was 430 in 2009. The highest number of fact-checks published in a year was 2,193 in 2020. A fact-check contained an average of nearly 11 sources. The highest number of sources used in a single fact-check was 113 and the lowest was 1. The fact-check containing 113 sources is a statement made by the National Republican Senatorial Committee on July 6, 2020, on profiteeringpeters.com. The data shows that PolitiFact maintains one key news routine – immediacy. The findings show that over half of the fact-checks (51.9%) were published within a week and over 23% of fact-checks were published within two weeks of a claim appearing on the web.

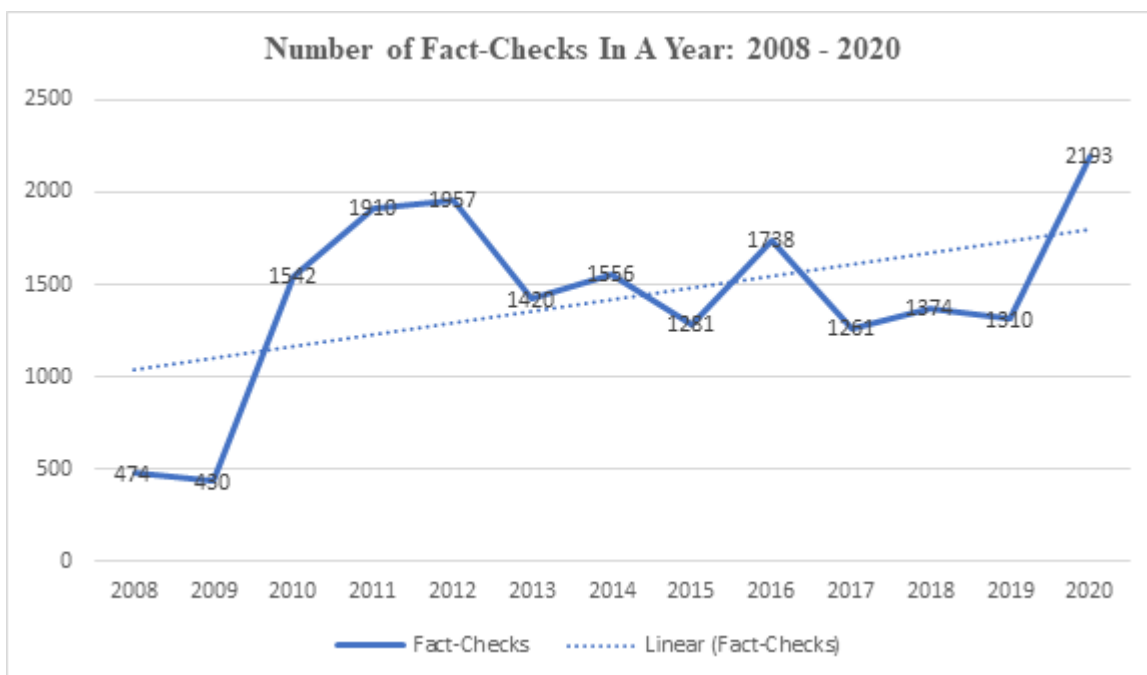


Figure 1. Number of fact-checks in a year. The vertical line shows the number of articles that had been checked and the horizontal line shows the years. This figure represents the gradual increase in fact-checking of articles year-by-year.

Findings

Channels of Selected Claims. RQ1 asks whether PolitiFact is more likely to rely on routine channels of news production than non-routine channels to find claims to fact-check. The results show that routine channels generated notably more fact-check stories than non-routine channels (See Table 1). As many as 71.6% of the claims fact-checked by PolitiFact came from routine channels and only 28.4% came from non-routine channels. Of the routine channels, the highest number of fact-checked claims (25.5%) were made in speeches at events. Claims made at interviews aired on television, radio, or online shows accounted for 17.5% of the total fact-checks. Claims appearing in promotional content such as flyers and advertisements generated 13.9% of the total fact-checks. Press releases generated 8.4% and published articles generated 6.3% of fact-checks. Of the 28.4% of the claims coming from non-routine channels, 22.1% came from social media, 2.6% came from emails, and only 3.7% came from other channels such as books and documents. The data suggest that PolitiFact relies significantly more on routine channels than non-routine channels to find check-worthy claims.

Table 1

Channels of Claims Fact-checked by PolitiFact (by Rating) between 2008 and 2020

	True	M True	H True	M False	False	Fire	Total
Routine Channels:							
Press Releases	11.5%	9.4%	9.0%	9.8%	7.1%	3.7%	8.4%
Promotional	10.8%	12.6%	18.1%	19.8%	11.3%	9.7%	13.9%
Articles	8.1%	6.4%	5.0%	5.3%	5.2%	10.1%	6.3%
Interviews	19.2%	20.2%	18.6%	17.8%	17.0%	11.0%	17.5%
Speeches at Events	33.5%	32.1%	29.6%	24.3%	21.2%	11.9%	25.5%
Non-Routine Channels:							
Social Media	10.9%	12.5%	13.1%	17.5%	32.9%	46.0%	22.1%
Emails	2.5%	2.4%	2.3%	2.3%	2.3%	4.5%	2.6%
Org. Documents	0.4%	0.5%	0.7%	0.5%	0.3%	0.9%	0.5%
Books & Reports*	0.7%	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%	0.5%
Others	2.3%	3.4%	3.1%	2.4%	2.4%	2.3%	2.7%

Notes. M True = Mostly True; H True = Half True; M False = Mostly False; Fire = Pants on Fire

* Books & Reports also include information from archives and data

* Org. Documents category refers to information and documents found on an organization's website or a document attributed to an organization. Organizations include government and non-government bodies.

Sources in Fact-checks. RQ2 asks whether PolitiFact is more likely to rely on routine sources of information than non-routine sources for fact-checking claims. The findings show that PolitiFact uses

routine sources (39.9%) notably less often than non-routine sources (50.6%). News content (26.3%), speeches at events (5.9%), and self-citation (5.7%) were the most frequently used routine sources (See Table 2). Only 0.9% of the sources were promotional content and 0.7% were press releases. Of the non-routine sources, personal communication (email, phone conversion, personal interviews) was the most common source. Over 24% of the sources in the fact-checks were personal communication. Documents belonging to institutions or organizations accounted for 15.2% of the source. Social media accounted for only 6.1% of the source while books and reports made up 6.1% of the sources. A little less than 10% of the sources were categorized as others. In sum, the data suggest that PolitiFact does not rely more on routine sources than non-routine sources. Rather, non-routine sources are used more often than routine sources.

Table 2
Sources Used by PolitiFact to Fact-check Claims between 2008 and 2020

	True	M True	H True	M False	False	Fire	Total
Routine Sources:							
Press Releases	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%	0.7%
Promotional	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%	1.1%	0.8%	0.9%	0.9%
News Content	25.6%	24.2%	24.7%	26.3%	27.9%	30.1%	26.3%
Self-citation	4.4%	5.3%	5.6%	5.9%	6.1%	7.1%	5.7%
Speeches at Events	7.0%	6.0%	5.6%	6.1%	5.8%	5.0%	5.9%
Non-Routine Sources:							
Social Media	4.7%	4.0%	4.3%	4.8%	8.8%	10.4%	6.1%
Personal Comm.	23.6%	27.2%	27.0%	25.4%	21.1%	17.9%	24.1%
Org. documents	17.1%	17.3%	16.6%	15.4%	13.5%	10.6%	15.2%
Books & Reports*	5.8%	5.3%	5.3%	5.2%	5.0%	4.6%	5.2%
Others	10.1%	9.3%	9.3%	8.9%	10.2%	12.8%	9.9%

Note. M True = Mostly True; H True = Half True; M False = Mostly False; Fire = Pants on Fire

* Books & Reports also include information from archives and data

* Org. Documents category refers to information and documents found on an organization's website or a document attributed to an organization. Organizations include government and non-government bodies.

Elite Channels and Sources. RQ3 asks whether PolitiFact is more likely to use social media to find elite channels and sources than non-elite channels and sources. The overall analysis of the channels and sources indicates that an overwhelming majority of claims and sources were elites – individuals or organizations. Most categories in both routine and non-routine channels and sources belong exclusively to elites. Only ‘social media’ categories appeared to contain a small number of non-elite channels and

sources. It's important to remember that 4,056 or 22.1 % of all the claims checked by PolitiFact came from social media. Further analysis of these claims shows that nearly half of the claims coming from social media (1,888 or 46.6%) were made by political elites (e.g., politicians or political parties, or other organizations). The remaining 2,168 claims coming from social media were not attributed to any specific person or group. For instance, 1,046 (25.8% of all social media posts) were identified by PolitiFact as Facebook posts, 555 (13.7%) as viral images, 460 (11.3%) as bloggers, 60 (1.5%) as Instagram posts and 47 (1.2%) as Tweets. In sum, 53.4% of claims coming from social media may be called non-elite channels. This is 11.8% of all the claims fact-checked by PolitiFact.

When it comes to sourcing, non-elites accounted for a small percentage. Out of 162,375 sources analyzed, social media accounted for only 6.1% or 9,864 sources. Further analysis of these 9,864 sources revealed that only 1,702 of them were non-elites. In other words, only 17.3% of social media posts are used as the source account for non-elite sources. In sum, PolitiFact relies on social media more to find elite channels and sources than non-elite channels and sources.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study tested a theoretical assumption that long-established media routines are utilized by emerging forms of digital news, including fact-checking organizations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013; Singer, 2005). It examined whether PolitiFact, the leading fact-checking organization in the United States, utilizes traditional routines in the process of finding check-worthy claims as well as in the process of gathering information to verify claims. It also examined the extent to which PolitiFact relies on elite channels and sources – particularly whether this organization utilizes the power of social media to accommodate non-elite channels and sources. The findings reaffirm the assumption relating to the influences of old routines on this emerging form of news (Moon & Hadley, 2014; Reich, 2013; Singer, 2005). This study also provides evidence showing that PolitiFact reinforces the legitimacy of legacy news media by citing them extensively as sources.

The findings reaffirm what several studies (e.g., Moon & Hadley, 2014; Reich, 2013; Singer, 2005) found about digital media such as blogging and journalistic use of social media. Fact-checkers, who typically don't report on events, depend heavily on elite sources such as legacy media, government, and institutions. Citizen sources rarely exist in fact-check articles. Its use of social media is mostly to find elite sources. Fact-check articles cite many stories published on legacy news media websites. Over 26% of sources cited in fact-check articles are articles – primarily from mainstream news media. In addition, nearly 6% of the sources are self-citations meaning PolitiFact often cites its own fact-checks in other fact-checks. This may also indicate that the selection of statements to verify may be influenced by previous decisions on statement selection – a process of routinization.

The literature suggests that media routines result from the need to maintain the production cycle with limited resources (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 109). The data shows that PolitiFact publishes over half of its fact-checks within a week of claims first appearing. This indicates that PolitiFact is cognizant of the production cycle. Being able to produce that many fact-checks in such a timely manner explain the need for so many legacy media articles, elite, and easily accessible sources. When it comes to the number of sources per story, PolitiFact uses a high number of sources to verify statements. The maximum number of sources in a story was 113. Though many fact-checks contained only one source

each, a fact-check on average contained nearly 11 sources. This demonstrates: (1) the amount of resources fact-checking requires and, (2) the need for easily available routine sources.

The study also found that fact-checkers select statements from speeches more frequently than other sources. Social media, one major source of misinformation, provided only 22% of statements that were fact-checked by PolitiFact. Other major sources of statements include interviews, promotional content (e.g., campaign ads), and online articles. All these major sources may be considered routine sources. Most of the statements coming from social media are also made by or about prominent political personalities. In sum, the statement selection process for fact-checking is heavily routinized. Fact-checkers do not only check statements that are deemed false. Many fact-checks are rated True, Mostly True, and Half True. Though the highest number of statements received a False rating, this study shows that something fact-checked doesn't mean it is false by default.

One major finding in this study is about the growth of fact-checking. One popular belief about fact-checking is that the practice has become popular after Donald Trump launched his presidential campaign (Stelter, 2016). The data analyzed in this study contradicts this belief. The number of fact-checks did not increase after 2015, the year Trump launched his campaign. In fact, more fact-checks were published in 2012 than in 2016. More fact-checks were published in 2011, the year before the presidential election, than in 2015 and 2019 respectively. Further analysis of the data will provide more insights into this interesting phenomenon.

Despite many of its contributions, this study has its limitations. For instance, the diversity and varying scope of coverage by different fact-checking organizations forced the researchers to limit the investigation to PolitiFact only. Though PolitiFact covers a large swathe of fact-checks in the United States, future studies may look at other fact-checking organizations and their sourcing practices. Future studies may also look at the fact-checks published by legacy news media and see how fact-checks by these two different types of organizations differ. Though automated content analysis has the power to improve the reliability and validity of the study, there is room for further qualitative analyses of the data for a more nuanced understanding. Yet, the contributions of this study outweigh its limitations as this seeks to work as a catalyst for further critical analysis of this growing practice of journalism.

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