Nuances in fact-checking: the effect of ambiguous verdicts on readers' perception of fact-checks

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Since claims of "fake news" and "alternative facts" gained notoriety with the election of Donald Trump, fact-checking organisations such as PolitiFact and FactCheck.org have attempted to correct misinformation with "independence, transparency, fairness, thorough reporting and clear writing" (politifact.com). A number of studies have investigated whether exposure to fact-checking succeeds in correcting misinformation, and many have concluded that it does (eg Fridkin, Kenney & Wintersieck, 2015). However, according to Guess et al, 2018, fact checks almost never reach the readers of fake news. This implies a disparity between the aims of fact-checkers and their actual effects, which this research intends to investigate.

Some fact-checkers use a truth scale, such as PolitiFact's Truth-o-Meter, to indicate the accuracy of claims. We take the "verdict" of a claim to be its rating on this truth scale. While fact-checkers largely agree on which claims are true or false (Marietta, 2015), as meta-analysts warn, verdicts of "mostly true" or "mostly false" are more ambiguous and less consistent between fact-checkers (Lim, 2018; Walter et al, 2019). The communication of nuance in fact-checking has not yet been studied experimentally. However, in light of the motivated reasoning theory (Kunda, 1990), and evidence that fact-checking can sometimes "backfire" and strengthen pre-existing misconceptions (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), it seems that ambiguity in fact-checking may have an important impact on reader responses. Therefore this research will consider the question:

RQ: How does nuance in fact-checking affect readers' interpretation of the fact-check?

Taking a "strong" verdict to mean a "True"/ "False" verdict, and a "weak" verdict to mean a "Mostly True"/ "Mostly False" verdict, weak verdicts are a form of nuance in fact-checking. Nuance can be extended to the use of terms such as "technically true" in articles.

H1: Weak verdicts are less persuasive to readers.

In an experiment, "Rated false" tags on headlines significantly reduced belief in their claims compared to "Disputed" tags (Clayton & Nyhan, 2019). The expectation is that where fact-checkers leave room for doubt, as with "Disputed" tags and "Mostly false" verdicts, readers are less likely to update their beliefs.

An overview of existing research by Walter et al, 2019 suggests a partisan divide in willingness to accept fact-checks, which may be a result of an ongoing attempt to discredit fact-checking organisations among Republicans/conservatives. Republicans report more negative perceptions of mainstream media compared to Democrats (Swift, 2016), and popular conversative news sources including Breitbart have labelled fact-checking organisations "leftists" and "partisan" (Bokhari, 2018). This implies that Republicans possibly view fact-checkers not as objective arbiters, but as biased. This effect may be stronger when fact-checks are counterattitudinal (contrary to the reader's pre-existing beliefs) than pro-attitudinal.

H2: When exposed to a pro-attitudinal verdict, readers' partisan sentiments increase the stronger the verdict is.

H3: When exposed to a counterattitudinal verdict, readers are more likely to perceive fact-checkers as biased the stronger the verdict is.

H3a: When exposed to a counterattitudinal verdict, Republicans/conservatives are more likely than Democrats/liberals to perceive fact-checkers as biased.

Although some research has previously investigated how characteristics such as word-count, lexical complexity and the inclusion of graphical truth scales in a fact-check influence its effectiveness, no research has yet considered the impact of presentation on the reader's perception of fact-checker bias. The use of graphical scales was seen to decrease the persuasiveness of a fact-check (Walter et al, 2019).

H3b: When exposed to a counterattitudinal verdict, readers are more likely to perceive fact-checkers as biased when graphical scales are used.

Methodology:
These effects will be studied experimentally by asking a sample of the population of US-based adults to assess fact-check articles and collecting quantitative data on their responses using a Qualtrics survey. Research participants will be drawn from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which offers access to 170,000 workers. US-based MTurk workers differ from the general US population in that they skew younger, more educated, less religious, more computer-literate and more liberal (Follmer et al 2017). The selection of US-based MTurk workers is suitable because this maintains consistency with previous experimental research on fact-checking (eg Clayton & Nyhan, 2019), and secondly, demographics of MTurk workers are skewed towards demographics of likely fact-check readers. However, MTurk may underrepresent African American and Hispanic individuals.
Participants will then be randomly assigned to a control group or one of several experimental conditions. To isolate the effects of the experimental variables they will be exposed to the same article content with variations only in verdict and presence of graphical elements. They will be asked to rate the article for factors such as accuracy, clarity and bias, and then asked whether they agree with a number of statements about the subject of the fact-check related to their trustworthiness, intelligence and possible malicious intent. Demographic data, including political affiliation, will afterwards be collected from the participants via a questionnaire.
Statistical analysis of the data will be carried out using R.
Ethical considerations will be made in accordance with the Trinity ethics review. MTurk workers choose whether to participate and are paid for participation.
For accountability, the plan will be pre-registered.

For weak verdicts, we expect to see motivated reasoning play a greater role in the reader's interpretation of the fact-check. Given that these scales are often ambiguous, under the motivated reasoning theory, more ambiguity allows more freedom for the reader to rationalise the fact-check in the context of their pre-existing beliefs. We expect to see that when there is less ambiguity, counterattitudinal fact-checks are associated with perception of bias in the fact-checker, and pro-attitudinal fact-checks are associated with increased partisan sentiment.

In the context of the wider study of fact-checking, this research will provide unique experimental data related to nuance and reader perception of fact checks. It may help to clarify some of the contradictions in the literature so far, by identifying whether nuance is a factor in the backfire effect.

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