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Fact-Checking Polarized Politics: Does The Fact-Check Industry Provide Consistent Guidance on Disputed Realities?

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Abstract: In the contemporary political environment of polarized claims about disputed realities, the online fact-check industry was born. These enterprises have received awards and praise but also accusations of bias and error, bringing their methods and conclusions into question. This paper examines the comparative epistemology of the three major fact-check sites: do they examine the same questions and reach the same conclusions? A content analysis of the published fact-checks addressing three disputed realities – the existence of climate change, the influence of racism, and the consequences of the national debt – suggests substantial differences in the questions asked and the answers offered, limiting the usefulness of fact-checking for citizens trying to decide which version of disputed realities to believe.

Introduction

The online fact-checking industry emerged as an influential facet of American politics within a brief period of recent history, led by FactCheck.com in 2003, PolitiFact in 2007 and The Fact Checker of *The Washington Post* in the same year. Scholarly assessments of the new institutions have been mixed and little empirical scholarship has systematically examined their usefulness. In this paper we assess the claims to knowledge asserted by the major fact-checkers in regard to several factual conflicts in our current politics.

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Disputed Realities and The Rise of Fact-Checking

Some scholars have suggested that the fact-checking sites are either too biased (Ostermeier 2011) or too flawed (Uscinski and Butler 2013; Uscinski 2015) to be of value to citizens seeking the truth. Other scholars are more sympathetic to the goals and processes of fact-checking (Graves 2013a–c; Amazeen 2014, 2015), especially in regard to its potential for correcting misperceptions (Nyhan and Reifler 2012). Recent studies have suggested that fact checking may have important political influences, including moderating whether citizens believe claims made in negative advertising (Fridkin et al. 2015), increasing political knowledge (Gottfried et al. 2013), and encouraging politicians to refrain from making unsubstantiated claims (Nyhan and Reifler 2014). In their book on politicized fact perceptions, Jennifer Hochschild and Katherine Einstein suggest that fact-checking is one way to correct misinformation and improve the public's understanding of disputed realities. But they also sound a note of caution about the reliability of the industry: “who will fact-check the fact-checkers?... It is easy to see how even a citizen who is seeking knowledge could get caught in a reverberating hall of mirrors” (Hochschild and Einstein 2015, p. 158).

A growing literature demonstrates that the American public is divided over perceptions of many disputed realities, from economic conditions to war casualties to the prevalence of racism (and many others; see Kuklinski et al. 2000; Bartels 2002; Kahan and Braman 2006; Gaines et al. 2007; Kahan et al. 2007; Shapiro and Bloch-Elchon 2008; Gerber and Huber 2010; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Kahan 2013; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2014; Khanna and Prior 2014; Marietta and Barker 2014). These studies employ different terms to describe the phenomenon of disputed facts, including *misinformation*, *partisan facts*, *cultural cognition*, *dueling facts*, and *politicized fact perceptions*, but all contribute to the conclusion that public perceptions of many politically-relevant realities are highly disputed.

Perhaps the most well-known disputed reality in contemporary politics is human responsibility for climate change. We believe it is fair to say that most scholars would categorize anthropogenic global warming as an objective fact given the consensus among experts. However, unlike many verifiable facts such as the rate of unemployment or inflation, a quick internet search will reveal politicians with national standing and scholars with elite-sounding titles who will dispute the legitimacy of the data on global warming, provide alternative evidence and theories, or state opposing conclusions with great confidence. For the average citizen, this makes determining the facts in regard to climate change problematically-verifiable rather than easily-verifiable. In 2001, the Gallup question, “Do you believe increases in the Earth's temperature over the last century are due more to the effects of pollution from human activities or natural changes

in the environment that are not due to human activities?” showed a split of 61% who believed that human activities were to blame and 33% who thought natural causes were the more likely source. Thirteen years later in 2014, these numbers were 57% and 40%. Contrary to many expectations, perceptions of global warming have moved *further away* from consensus over the last decade.

In this polarized environment, the fact-check industry came to prominence within a brief period of time between the invasion of Iraq and the election of Barack Obama. The first online fact-checker focused entirely on this subset of journalistic practice was FactCheck.org, launched in December of 2003 by journalist Brooks Jackson and academic Kathleen Hall Jamieson, sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Four years later in 2007 the two other major sites were founded: PolitiFact at the *St. Petersburg Times* (which became the *Tampa Bay Times* in 2012) under the direction of Bill Adair (now a professor of journalism at Duke) and The Fact Checker at *The Washington Post* by Michael Dobbs (taken over by Glenn Kessler four years later in 2011). According to a recent study, these three institutions accounted for over three quarters of the fact checks published between 2003 and 2012 (Wintersieck and Fridkin 2015). Dobbs ties the emergence of the industry to Ronald Reagan’s “startling assertions that turned out to be completely erroneous,” while the final impetus in his view was the lack of media investigation into the Bush administration claims about the existence of weapons of mass destruction as a justification for the Iraq War (Dobbs 2012, p. 4). Brooks Jackson, the co-founder of FactCheck.org, describes the goal of fact-checking as being “a resource for those citizens who honestly are bewildered and confused and looking for help in sorting out fact from fiction” (Graves 2013a, p. 137). As a minimum toward meeting this goal, the major fact-checkers would have to provide consistent guidance on factual disputes. While we have no external gold-standard of truth to apply to the fact-checkers’ assertions (they claim to *be* that gold standard), we *can* test their consistency: if they contradict each other, we can conclude that their collective wisdom is suspect. Do the major fact-checkers ask the same questions and offer the same answers regarding the major disputed realities of our time?

An Empirical Look at Fact-Checking

In order to create a test of the guidance offered by the three major fact-checkers in regard to disputed realities, we conducted an analysis of the assessments published across a 2-year period, from 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2013 (which includes the 2012 presidential campaign). We focused on three disputed realities: whether anthropogenic climate change exists or is an unfounded assertion;

whether racism is a declining force in American society or is still influential (or growing) in power; and whether the national debt is growing to a dangerous degree or remaining at a manageable level that will not cause major economic harm. Perceptions of these contested facts are not only divided among the American public, but relate to policy stances on many long-term political conflicts. In regard to climate change, one factual perception over the other leads toward very different policy prescriptions on a range of issues including limits on CO₂ emissions, increased energy taxes, international treaties, and greater spending on alternative energies. Perceptions of the prevalence of racism are tremendously significant for policies ranging from diversity in university admissions to legal protections for voting rights, both of which have been disputed in recent Supreme Court cases and *both argued on the grounds of the continuing relevance of racism*.¹ Perceptions of the influence of the national debt are connected to the vitriolic conflicts surrounding the government shutdown of 2013 and the broader question of whether greater harm – both economic and social – will be created by further increasing debt or curtailing current spending.² Politically engaged citizens know that these disputed realities have important political ramifications, but they may not know which side to believe. This is where fact-checking may be a vital resource, but only if it provides consistent guidance to interested citizens.

To evaluate this question, we followed a procedure much like a citizen who might look to a fact-check site with one of these disputed realities on their mind. For PolitiFact, we employed the search engine of the site (prominently located at the top right of the home page) to identify all of the fact-checks including the terms “climate change” or “national debt.” The best search term for racism is a bit less clear, so we employed “racism” and “civil rights.” For FactCheck.org and The Fact Checker

¹ See *Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action* (2014) and *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013). One of the facts disputed by the parties in *Shelby County* was the contemporary influence of racism in the Southern states subject to restrictions under the 1965 Voting Rights Act, especially the role of racism in discouraging political participation by minorities. Chief Justice John Roberts was the topic of a PolitiFact report on the veracity of his comments on minority political participation (see “Was Chief Justice John Roberts right about voting rates in Massachusetts, Mississippi” 5 March 2013). Gallup data on perceptions of racism show a remarkable split: Responses to the question “Do you think racism against blacks is or is not widespread in the US?” were 60% Yes and 39% No in June 2015, *increases* from 56% yes and 42% no in 2008. Responses to the question “Do you think the American justice system is biased against black people?” were a more evenly split 47% Yes and 52% No in 2015 (again increases in perceptions of racism compared to 2008).

² We contend that these three disputed facts – climate, racism, and debt – are an important subset of the politicized perceptions of reality facing contemporary American voters, and hence do not present selection bias in any particular ideological or substantive direction. In a study of this nature it is impossible to examine the entire set of politically-relevant disputed realities, of which these three constitute an influential subset.

(which publish a smaller number of reports), we examined each entry during the study time period for references to these disputed realities. We excluded statements focusing on partisan blame (e.g. “Barack Obama built this \$16 trillion debt”), only including fact-checks of the existence or influence of the disputed reality itself. We then examined all of the rulings identified in this manner for statements about the factual reality of these concerns (regardless of the specific title of the fact-check).³

For each of the disputed realities there are two varieties of fact-checks: a) evaluations of statements that these phenomena *are* real (e.g. climate change exists, racism is influential), and b) evaluations of statements that they are *not* real (e.g. climate change is false, racism is declining). Fact-checkers can choose to examine either kind of claim. For example, a fact-check of a statement *upholding* climate change might conclude that the statement is true; a different fact-check of a statement *denying* climate change might conclude that the statement is false. These two results provide similar information to the reader. In regard to climate change, the national debt, or racism, the fact-checkers might focus on either positive or negative assertions to investigate. Our questions include whether the total number of fact-checks *and* whether the balance of the two possible kinds of assertions are equivalent among the three major fact-checkers, as well as what conclusions the fact-checkers draw about each kind of assertion.

For example, President Obama asserted during the 2013 State of the Union Address that “the twelve hottest years on record have come in the last fifteen.” This statement clearly supports the position that climate change is real. PolitiFact rated this statement “True” on its Truth-O-Meter. All similar fact-checks of statements indicating that climate change is a reality were coded on the “Climate change is real” side of the contested fact, while fact-checks of statements disputing its reality were coded on the “Climate change is not real” side. For example, a few months after President Obama’s discussion of climate change, State Representative Wayne Smith of Texas stated in an interview with an Austin newspaper that “science has not shown greenhouse gases to be a problem.” This statement clearly falls in the category of assertions that climate change is not a real problem. PolitiFact rated this statement “Pants on Fire,” its most negative evaluation.

Assertions about racism can be divided into statements indicating that racism is influential in contemporary society and opposing statements suggesting that racism no longer has significant influence. For example, in July 2012

³ Two of the authors completed the search independently, backed up by two work-study students who covered the same ground cooperatively, with the full results aggregated to ensure that all examples had been identified (i.e. the procedure aimed to produce the universe of fact checks on these topics during the study time frame rather than a sample). For the full list of fact-checks see the appendices.

during a speech at the NAACP national convention, Eric Holder stated that voter ID laws disenfranchised Black citizens because “only 8 percent of white voting-age citizens, while 25 percent of African-American voting-age citizens, lack a government-issued photo ID.” As a counterexample of statements suggesting that racism is no longer influential, in August of 2013 Senator John Cornyn of Texas wrote in a newspaper op-ed that 71 percent of Hispanic registered voters and 86 percent of African-American registered voters participated in the 2012 election, suggesting that racism was not deflating minority turnout in the state. However, a third category of statement suggests that racism is not only influential, but *increasing* in power. For example, in August of 2013 James Vincent, President of the Providence, Rhode Island NAACP, stated in a television interview that 24 states now have voter ID laws, compared to two before Barack Obama was elected; Vincent suggested that “these things are related... you have an African-American president, and now all of a sudden you have all these voting rights acts and the elimination of same-day voting and early voting. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.” In other words, racism is not only still with us but increasing. For this disputed fact, we divided the fact-checks into three categories: racism is not influential, racism is influential, and racism is growing in influence. It is important to note that the three examples of fact-checks above all focus on voting as a facet of racism in America. Interpreting these claims is further complicated by the conflicting motivations attributed to proponents of voting restrictions; sponsors of such legislation claim they are trying to prevent fraud, while their critics see the laws as clear efforts to suppress minority votes. Different aspects of racism aside from voting – criminal justice, education, etc. – may receive different evaluations from the fact-checkers. For this reason, the later analyses will consider several distinct facets of racism in different areas of American life.

In regard to the national debt, the dispute is not about whether it exists, but about whether it is growing at a rate that will have negative consequences or whether it is under control and is not something to worry about. In other words, is it a pressing problem? For example, State Representative Chris Kopenga from Wisconsin asserted in September of 2013 that the amount of interest paid on the national debt now exceeds total tax revenue, suggesting that the debt has reached a critical point. PolitiFact rated this statement “False.” On the other hand, Senator Rob Portman of Ohio asserted a few months earlier that our total debt is now \$140,000 per household. PolitiFact rated this statement “Mostly True.” Both were assertions that the debt is a problem, though the evaluations of their veracity were different. Totaling up all of the statements in regard to each of these three disputed realities allows us to examine the fact-checkers’ *selections* and *assessments*: do they examine the same facts and do they reach the same conclusions about their truth or falsehood?

Empirical Results I: Questions

So how do the fact-checkers claim to pick the specific factual assertions that they examine? Each of the fact-checkers offers a summary of their practices on their respective websites. The least informative is the one provided by FactCheck.org: “We monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by major US political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding.” This description provides little information about their processes of selection or assessment.

The Fact Checker has a somewhat more extensive discussion:

The purpose of this Web site, and an accompanying column in the Sunday print edition of *The Washington Post*, is to “truth squad” the statements of political figures *regarding issues of great importance*, be they national, international or local. As a presidential election approaches, we will increasingly focus on statements made in the heat of the presidential contest. But we will not be limited to political charges or countercharges. *We will seek to explain difficult issues*, provide missing context and provide analysis and explanation of various “code words” used by politicians, diplomats and others to obscure or shade the truth. (italics added)

This is followed by a section entitled “A Few Basic Principles”:

- This is a fact-checking operation, not an opinion-checking operation. We are interested only in verifiable facts, though on occasion we may examine the roots of political rhetoric.
- *We will focus our attention and resources on the issues that are most important to voters.* We cannot nitpick every detail of every speech.
- We will stick to the facts of the issue under examination and are unmoved by ad hominem attacks. The identity or political ties of the person or organization making a charge is irrelevant: all that matters is whether their facts are accurate or inaccurate.
- *We will adopt a “reasonable man” standard for reaching conclusions.* We do not demand 100 percent proof.
- We will strive to be dispassionate and non-partisan, drawing attention to inaccurate statements on both left and right.

The two italicized sentences above are The Fact Checker’s statements of the core epistemological concerns of selection and assessment. In regard to selection, he focuses on what he perceives to be most important to voters. This is a highly subjective standard, but Kessler argues that he indeed allows readers to guide the selection of many topics: “I would say about 30 to 40 percent of the fact checks are reader generated... Reader input is very important because there is no way I can possibly hear or see everything. It also lets me know what is on people’s minds” (email correspondence with Kessler, 7 March 2014).

The most extensive and detailed discussion of method is the one by Bill Adair entitled “The Principles of PolitiFact” (1 November 2013 edition). The first subsection of the document is “Choosing claims to check”:

Because we cannot possibly check all claims, we select the most newsworthy and significant ones. In deciding which statement to check, we ask ourselves these questions:

- Is the statement rooted in a fact that is verifiable? We do not check opinions, and we recognize that in the world of speechmaking and political rhetoric, there is license for hyperbole.
- Is the statement leaving a particular impression that may be misleading?
- Is the statement significant? We avoid minor “gotchas” on claims that obviously represent a slip of the tongue.
- Is the statement likely to be passed on and repeated by others?
- Would a typical person hear or read the statement and wonder: Is that true?

This builds upon Kessler’s focus on importance (is the statement significant; will it likely be repeated) and adds a concern with whether the statement sounds fishy. Adair clarified this last concern in a post on 29 May 2013: “We select statements to fact-check based on our news judgment – whether a statement is timely, provocative, whether it’s been repeated and whether readers would wonder if it is true.” Kessler also endorses this approach: “Obviously I will pursue it if it looks suspect” (email correspondence March 2014).

Grounded in his participant observation of the fact-checking process at PolitiFact and FactCheck.org, Graves claims that selection is based on “news sense,” which reduces to the expert judgment acquired by years working in journalism (2013a, ch 3, p. 119–164). “Asked by a student journalist how the group chooses facts to check, Bill Adair responded, ‘We’re guided by news judgment. And we are journalists, we’re not social scientists’” (p. 143). Graves also endorses the fact-checkers’ claims that they pursue stories that sound suspicious – “‘We look for things that don’t sound right,’ Brooks Jackson has explained” – and that they focus on what citizens want to know: “fact-checkers temper this news sense with a fairly self-conscious effort to take into account what average citizens understand or care about” (p. 145). However, it is important to bear in mind that Adair, Jackson, and Kessler are experienced journalists rather than social science thinkers. Their assessment of what is important and questionable may or may not be shared among themselves, with the public, or with scholars of politics.

Another aspect of claim selection is a focus on falsity, reflected in the scales employed by two of the major fact-checkers: the more false, the higher the rating. The FactChecker opts for a well-known cultural trope for dishonesty (Pinocchio). The more false the statement, the more Pinocchios it is awarded, up to four (for “Whoppers”). The gold standard is a Geppetto Checkmark, named for the truthful woodcarver who created the deceitful puppet. PolitiFact prefers their creation of a

Truth-O-Meter, a scientific-looking box with a needle that runs from True to False. A statement so false as to make “a ridiculous claim” sets the box aflame with a “Pants on Fire” rating, another cultural trope referring to the popular children’s taunt.

FactCheck.org is even more focused on false reports, to the exclusion of any mention of accuracy. They differ from the other two major fact-checkers in *only reporting falsehoods*. The most detailed qualitative study to date of the fact-checking process (Graves 2013a) reports that “the three elite fact-checkers all focus on statements which may be false... They differ in their approach to suspect statements, however. FactCheck.org only publishes analyses of claims that turn out to be false” (p. 142). Graves explains the FactCheck.org rationale: “If a reporter knows or if research shows that a budget statistic is accurate, for instance, the work stops there... More than once I heard this explained as a matter of resources – to write up an analysis of truthful claims would leave less time to debunk the false ones” (2013a, p. 143).

The focus on falsity is the opposite of social science approaches to knowledge grounded in statistical inference. It is quite different to assume falsehood and report when truth is found than to assume truth and report when falsehood is found. Statistical methods take the first approach: they assume that the world is full of lies (randomness, spurious relationships) and look for the exceptions of truths (non-random patterns, from which we can draw inferences). If we accept the epistemological basis of falsification, then even those contingent truths are quite possibly lies and we should discard them willingly if new evidence demands it (Popper 1935). Pointing out lies is shooting fish in a data barrel, while identifying possible truths is the hard part. If the mainstream political science approach to method is accurate (randomness and lies are common, while real patterns and truth are rare) the implication is that fact-checkers have a broad range of possible lies to identify, from which they pick only a small subset to examine. The fact-checkers must by necessity reduce all of the many lies to a small number on which to focus each week (and for PolitiFact, one special Lie of the Year chosen from the many possible candidates for such a distinction). Under these conditions, fact-checkers are likely to demonstrate meaningful selection bias in the realities they choose to assess.

So do the fact-checkers’ procedures result in similar patterns of questions asked? Table 1 lists the number of checks published by each of the three fact-checkers regarding each of the three disputed realities. The table also records normalized numbers allowing comparisons among the three institutions (recognizing that PolitiFact publishes substantially more than the other two). If the three major fact-checkers have similar understandings of which facts are important and possibly false, then the numbers of checks of those assertions will be

Table 1: Fact-Checking Questions.

Disputed Reality	PolitiFact	The Fact Checker	FactCheck.org
Climate Change			
Anthropogenic climate change is real	11	0	0
Anthropogenic climate change is not real	4	1	3
Total # of checks	15	1	3
		(4 normalized)	(11 normalized)
Racism			
Racism is growing in influence	4	0	0
Racism is influential	8	0	0
Racism is no longer influential	4	0	0
Total # of checks	16	0	0
		(0 normalized)	(0 normalized)
National Debt			
National debt is dangerous	47	6	7
National debt is not dangerous	6	10	4
Total # of checks	53	16	11
		(70 normalized)	(40 normalized)

Number of checks conducted by each organization, 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2013. Normalized figures take into account the larger number of fact-checks conducted by PolitiFact compared to the two smaller fact-checkers. During this time period, PolitiFact published 4.4 times as many checks as The Fact Checker and 3.6 times as many as FactCheck.org. The normalized estimates illustrate how many fact-checks in each category the smaller fact-checkers would have published if their total output matched PolitiFact's (e.g. for the national debt, $16 \times 4.4 = 70.4$, or approximately 70 fact checks for the debt conducted by The Fact Checker if they were as large as PolitiFact). In this sense, the more accurate comparison of emphasis is not 53–16, but instead 53–70, indicating that PolitiFact and The Fact Checker spent roughly equivalent space on the national debt as a proportion of their total reporting. However, even accounting for total size, the difference in emphasis between PolitiFact and The Fact Checker on climate change and race are substantial.

roughly equivalent. This is a clear measure of differences in selection, potentially indicating selection bias.⁴

The greatest distinction in terms of what is checked or ignored pertains to racism. PolitiFact published 16 checks relating to the influence of racism during the 2-year period of the study; The Fact Checker and FactCheck.org published none. For PolitiFact readers this creates a database if they were to search for this topic. Seventy-five percent of these checks (12 out of 16) focus on claims that racism is influential or growing in power, while 25% focus on claims that it is no longer influential.

In regard to climate change, all three fact-checkers devoted attention to this question. However, the balance of positive and negative statements that receive

⁴ To be clear, differences indicate selection bias on the part of at least one fact-checker. Similarities do not rule out selection bias if all of the fact-checkers are biased in the same fashion.

attention is not similar. The majority of PolitiFact evaluations were of assertions that climate change is real (11 of 15), while The Fact Checker and FactCheck.org only devoted resources to check assertions that climate change is *not* real.

The national debt is the most evenly evaluated of the three disputed realities.⁵ But again, the balance of the two kinds of assertions is not the same. PolitiFact devoted 89% of its checks to assertions that the debt is problematic. The Fact Checker devoted most of its space to the *opposite* sort of claim (63%). While PolitiFact implicitly sees claims of negative consequences as having the likely appearance of falsehood and the need for checking, The Fact Checker indicates the opposite – claims that the debt is *not* consequential have the appearance of possible falsehood and should draw attention. What the fact-checkers evaluate provides implicit information to citizens about what is important and what is suspicious. The information provided in this sense by the three major fact-checkers varies significantly.

Empirical Results II: Answers

Perhaps the core question of the study is whether the fact-checkers provide the same evaluations of contested facts. In regard to how they determine the truth or falsity of a statement, Kessler (The Fact Checker) maintains that he will “adopt a ‘reasonable man’ standard for reaching conclusions.” When asked in correspondence if he employs “a standard path or a methodology to determine facts” he responded, “No. I keep reporting till I get the answer. Sometimes it takes days, sometimes it is very quick.” Adair at PolitiFact identifies their “Process for Truth-O-Meter Rulings”: “A writer researches the claim and writes the Truth-O-Meter article with a recommended ruling. After the article is edited, it is reviewed by a panel of at least three editors that determines the Truth-O-Meter ruling.”⁶ None of

⁵ Many published fact-checks were not included that evaluated statements about blame toward one party, or claims of what people said or did not say about the debt, or other aspects aside from the reality of its size and influence, so the total number dealing with the national debt in some way is higher; the study only includes claims about the size or trajectory of the debt.

⁶ See Graves 2013a for a more in-depth description of the process of the editorial panel, described among PolitiFact workers as the “star chamber” (2013a, pp. 202–208). His dissertation emphasizes the consensus that is achieved: “The examples I heard cited time and again to explain what fact-checkers do, like Haley Barbour’s ‘gross exaggeration’ of job losses, underscore the simplicity and reliability of the enterprise. They seem to require no interpretation and leave little room for disagreement. A public figure deploys a statistic about jobs, or the budget, or taxes, etc.; a fact-checker consults the authoritative data on the subject; the politician either has or hasn’t distorted the ‘real’ numbers. Usually, well-established conventions guide fact-checkers in choosing these sources and using their data” (Graves 2013a, pp. 177–8).

the three fact-checkers identify any specific means of assessing or weighing the evidence with which they evaluate a claim under investigation, instead relying on journalistic judgment. The only clear standard is PolitiFact's process of employing a panel of editors to determine the final score on the Truth-O-Meter. But this procedure still relies on subjective expertise rather than intersubjective method. To the extent that PolitiFact imposes a higher standard than the other fact-checkers, the standard is "our judgment" rather than "my judgment." The fact-checking process may well be open to significant personal or professional biases in the selection and evaluation of evidence.

The best window into these potentially conflicting evaluations may be the unusual cases when the fact-checkers evaluate precisely the same statements. While the three major fact-checkers often consider the same general states of affairs, they rarely focus on the exact same quotation by one politician. There are only three cases in this study of the same explicit statement being evaluated by different fact-checkers. All three relate to the national debt, one of the topics most subject to verification with data that are mutually accepted as legitimate. The first example is a statement made by Senator Dick Durbin on ABC's Sunday news show *This Week* in November of 2012: "Social Security does not add one penny to our debt, not a penny." This assertion drew attention from fact-checkers, but did not draw agreement about its veracity. FactCheck.org described it as a blatant falsehood (28 November 2012): "Sen. Richard Durbin says that, 'Social Security does not add one penny to our debt.' That's false. It was wrong 21 months ago, when Durbin said it once before, and it's even more off the mark now." The discussion cites reports from the Congressional Budget Office to conclude, "It's true that Social Security is 'a separate funded operation,' primarily through payroll taxes and income taxes on benefits. But tax revenues no longer cover the cost of Social Security benefits. As a result, Social Security is adding to the debt." However, The Fact Checker of *The Washington Post* disagreed: "We do not think this line is a slam-dunk falsehood, as some believe [linking to the FactCheck.org review], but it is certainly worth revisiting." After a discussion of the mechanics of the Social Security fund – also citing the Congressional Budget Office – The Fact Checker awarded just one Pinocchio (Mostly True), contradicting FactCheck.org's assessment.

The second instance is Jay Carney's statement that the rate of increase in federal spending under Obama has been lower than all of his predecessors since Eisenhower. In May of 2012 The Fact Checker rated this statement as false (three Pinocchios), while PolitiFact said it was Mostly True.⁷ The third case was President

⁷ To be clear about this particular disagreement, PolitiFact evaluated the blog post itself; The Fact Checker evaluated Jay Carney's quotation of that blog post, a slight distinction regarding the same factual assertion grounded in the same source.

Obama's statement that deficits are falling at the fastest rate in 60 years. In July 2013 PolitiFact rated this statement True. FactCheck.org described it as false. All three of these overlapping fact-checks resulted in disagreement: FactCheck.org and The Fact Checker disagreed on the first one; The Fact Checker and PolitiFact disagreed on the second one; and PolitiFact and FactCheck.org on the third. These disagreements represent a clear disparity of perceived realities among the professional fact-checkers when evaluating precisely the same statements.

However, these one-to-one comparisons are rarely possible given the fact-checkers' propensity to choose different specific quotes from the vast field of statements made by political leaders. The only means of comparison is to examine the same broad assertions – such as the existence of anthropogenic climate change – made by different speakers but addressing the same general point. While the fact-checkers do not examine the same quotes at the same time, they do examine the same general assertions over a longer period of time, providing a database of evaluations for citizens to peruse. If a citizen were to consult a fact-checker over a substantial period of time looking for an understanding of climate change or the national debt, what is the general impression created by the reports of one fact-checker versus the reports of a different fact-checker?

The evaluations of disputed facts provided by PolitiFact and The Fact Checker of *The Washington Post* can be compared directly by placing the Truth-O-Meters and Pinocchios on the same 5-point scale, with 1 indicating True and 5 indicating False. This approach condenses the PolitiFact 6-point scale to The Fact Checker 5-point scale by counting both “Pants on Fire” and “False” ratings as equivalent to 4 Pinocchios. This accords with Kessler's interpretation of their comparison: “This is how I view it: Geppetto=true, One Pinocchio=mostly true, Two Pinocchios=half true, Three Pinocchios=mostly false, Four Pinocchios=false/Pants on Fire” (Kessler in email correspondence 24 March 2014).

Table 2 lists the average rating awarded by PolitiFact and The Fact Checker for both sides of each disputed fact. An average rating above the midpoint of 3.0 indicates that the assertions are more false than true, while below 3.0 indicates more true than false. In regard to climate change, both fact-checkers assessed the claims that climate change was not real to be false: PolitiFact awarded these statements an average rating of 4.3 on the 5-point scale (in 4 total checks) and the Fact Checker awarded a 5.0 on the scale for the one check it made of this kind of assertion. This represents a clear agreement that assertions of climate change's falsity are themselves false. The opposite sort of assertions – that climate change is occurring – were assessed 11 times by PolitiFact and awarded an average rating of 2.2, indicating that they are generally true. This distinction within the PolitiFact ratings (2.2 for assertions that climate change is real versus 4.3 for the opposite assertions) is statistically significant at the 0.01 level in a simple comparison of

Table 2: Fact-Checking Answers.

Disputed Reality	PolitiFact	The Fact Checker	FactCheck.org
Climate Change			
Anthropogenic climate change is real	2.2 (T)	–	–
Anthropogenic climate change is not real	4.3 (F)^a	5.0 (F)	3 False reports
Racism			
Racism is growing in influence	3.3 (F)	–	–
Racism is influential	1.9 (T)^b	–	–
Racism is no longer influential	3.0 (Mixed)^c	–	–
National Debt			
National debt is dangerous	3.3 (F)	2.3 (T)^d	7 False reports
National debt is not dangerous	1.8 (T)^e	2.7 (T)	4 False reports

Numbers for PolitiFact and The Fact Checker represent averages of the published reports on a 1–5 Scale of Falsity: 1=“True” or Geppetto Checkmark; 2=“Mostly True” or 1 Pinocchio; 3=“Half True” or 2 Pinocchios; 4=“Mostly False” or 3 Pinocchios; 5=“False”/“Pants on Fire” or 4 Pinocchios. Above 3.0=on average more false (F) than true (T). Statistically significant distinctions between the two fact-checkers are in bold (explained in each footnote). No statistical comparison is possible with FactCheck.org, which only publishes textual evaluations reporting false statements.

^aDistinct from Climate change is real (2.2 compared to 4.3) at 0.01 level (t-score=3.4).

^bDistinct from PolitiFact Racism is growing (1.9 compared to 3.3) at 0.05 level (t-score=2.57).

^cDistinct from PolitiFact Racism is influential (3.0 compared to 1.9) at 0.05 level (t-score=2.63).

^dDistinct from PolitiFact Debt is dangerous (3.3 compared to 2.3) at 0.05 level (t-score=1.6).

^eDistinct from Debt is dangerous (3.3 compared to 1.8) at 0.01 level (t-score=2.5).

means between the two groups (t-score=3.4). A reader of PolitiFact would clearly gain the impression that climate change was a real phenomenon (i.e. assertions of its reality are true and assertions opposing it are false). The same impression is offered by the less extensive findings of The Fact Checker.

In regard to racism, The Fact Checker provides no guidance for the curious or perplexed citizen contemplating this public dispute. The reports from PolitiFact present a nuanced picture. Claims that racism is influential were rated an average of 1.9 on the scale (more true than false). Claims that racism is no longer influential were rated an average of 3.0 (exactly at the midpoint between true and false). The difference between the two is statistically significant, clearly giving the impression that racism continues to be a powerful force in American society and claims to the contrary are less accurate. This impression holds across the scope of various facets of racism. If we break the fact-checks of statements suggesting that racism is influential into distinct aspects – criminal justice, voting, and education – the average ratings in each category are 1.5, 2.0, and 2.0 respectively, indicating a broad consensus across different forms of racism. However, when

we compare assertions of the current *influence* of racism with assertions that it is *growing* in strength, a different pattern is clear: assertions that racism is increasing are rated much more false (3.3) than assertions that it has maintained influence (1.9). This difference is statistically significant, giving the clear impression that PolitiFact finds racism to be a meaningful force in American society, but suggestions that it is growing in power are much more dubious.

Regarding the national debt, the industry provides opposing conclusions. PolitiFact focused on negative claims about the national debt in the clear majority of cases (47 of 53 total fact-checks). These statements that the debt has negative consequences were given an average rating of 3.3 (more false than true). The fewer number of assertions that the debt was under control were rated an average of 1.8 (mostly true). This difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (t -score=2.5). In other words, the general impression a reader would take away is that the national debt is not as much of a problem as is often claimed (negative statements tend to be false, while positive statements tend to be true). However, The Fact Checker comes to a different conclusion, rating the assertions that the national debt is a problem to be more true than false (2.3 on the scale). This is statistically distinct from PolitiFact's rating of 3.3 at the 0.05 level (t -score of 1.6). In other words, while PolitiFact rates the negative influences of the debt to be generally false, The Fact Checker rates them to be generally true. While PolitiFact and The Fact Checker are in accord about climate change, they disagree in regard to the national debt.

The more problematic comparisons are the purely textual analyses provided by FactCheck.org, which does not endorse the concept of an explicit scale of falsity, instead relying on text alone.⁸ In addition to the inherent problems in comparing text to scales, FactCheck.org does not report on accurate statements, *only publishing reports revealing falsehood*. By contrast, as of its 5000th fact-check published in February 2012, PolitiFact reports that 36% of its ratings are True or Mostly True and 21% are Half True, while only 42% report falsity. There is no direct means of comparing textual reports of falsity alone to scale reports along the full spectrum of accuracy.

So how do we assess the impression created by FactCheck.org regarding the truth or falsity of contemporary disputed realities? Given that all of the evaluations a citizen finds will be false, the impression created does not hinge on a comparison of true versus false ratings. Instead it is a question of *which side of*

⁸ “Rating statements with devices such as ‘truth-o-meters’ or ‘Pinocchios’ are popular with readers, and successful attention-grabbers. But such ratings are by their nature subjective – the difference between one or two ‘Pinocchios’ is a matter of personal judgment, and debatable. Some statements are clearly true, and some provably false, but there’s no agreed method for determining the precise degree of mendacity in any statement that falls somewhere in between” (Brooks Jackson, FactCheck.org 21 December 2012).

the debate draws more false evaluations. For example, statements suggesting that climate change is false received three negative evaluations; no claims that climate change is real were addressed (as all presumably would have been found true and not reported). Hence the aggregate impression created is that claims suggesting that climate change is false are themselves false, i.e. climate change is true.

In regard to the national debt, there are evaluations of falsehood on both sides, but one more than the other. Claims that the debt is a growing problem were found false seven times, while claims that the debt is manageable were found false only four times. Taken in the aggregate, a citizen examining the site for an understanding of the national debt would find claims that the debt is a problem being criticized more frequently than opposing claims (at a ratio of 1.75:1, or 75% more often, a noticeable distinction for a casual observer). Even accounting for the distinct means of presentation, FactCheck.org accords more closely with the positive impression of the status of the debt offered by PolitiFact and disputes the more negative overall evaluation suggested by The Fact Checker.

Conclusion

The professional fact-checking of political realities seems to be enjoying a boom in productivity and reputation (Spivak 2011). PolitiFact's well-publicized Pulitzer Prize in 2009 likely varnished their reputation. Amazeen (2014) finds that PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and The Fact Checker overwhelmingly agree on their evaluations of the general veracity of political ads in the 2008 presidential election.⁹ Our results, however, disagree with both the broad media endorsement of the fact-checkers and the consistency in their findings. When examined from the perspective of the disputed realities of our politics, the fact-checkers do not agree on the questions asked or the answers offered.

⁹ The data presented in this article can be interpreted in an alternative way. Amazeen writes that "FactCheck.org and PolitiFact scrutinized 36 of the same claims across 18 different ads (see table 3). In these cases, agreement between FactCheck.org and PolitiFact was 97%" (page 19 of the pre-publication pdf). However, the analysis considers PolitiFact ratings other than the highest rating of "True" (including "Mostly True") to be equivalent to evaluations reporting inaccuracy. There are six cases of "Mostly True" ratings on PolitiFact compared to evaluations on FactCheck coded "False" or "Distortion/Misleading" that are considered to be in *agreement*. We would argue that "Mostly True" compared to "False" or "Distortion/Misleading" is more fairly considered *disagreement*. If we follow the approach of coding these cases as disagreement, the agreement rate is 80.6% (29 out of 36) rather than the reported 97%. Amazeen's interpretation is that disagreement between PolitiFact and FactCheck.org is an anomaly (3%), while the opposing view is that disagreement occurs in about one in five evaluations.

Beginning with the initial epistemological question of what the fact-checkers examine, there are clear differences in focus among them. The disputed fact of the influence of racism is the largest distinction. PolitiFact chose to evaluate several assertions on the influence of racism, including statements by Jimmy Carter, John Lewis, Jesse Jackson, Cory Booker, Eric Holder, John Roberts, leaders of the NAACP, and several members of Congress. We believe this comports with the importance of the topic as well as the clear dispute among American citizens about the influence of racism in contemporary society. However, our study finds that The Fact Checker and FactCheck.org do not agree with PolitiFact about the relevance of this topic, declining to evaluate any of the statements examined by PolitiFact or any of the other many statements about race and racism in our politics during the 2 years of the study. This is a striking omission given the importance of the topic to American politics.

When it comes to climate change, we begin to see distinctions in the two sides of a given factual dispute that are evaluated. Both kinds of assertions – suggesting that climate change is real and that it is false – were examined by PolitiFact. On average, the assertions supporting its reality were judged to be true, while assertions suggesting its falsehood were themselves judged to be false. The Fact Checker and FactCheck.org agreed on this outcome, but grounded only in fact-checks of assertions *opposing* the reality of climate change. Assertions supporting its reality were not checked, suggesting that those two fact-checkers did not see those assertions as questionable to most readers. What all three fact-checkers agreed upon is that the assertions suggesting that climate change is not real are false.

Finally, the national debt is mutually seen as an important topic, but the fact-checkers disagree on which kinds of statements to question. PolitiFact sees assertions that the national debt is growing to be questionable and in need of fact-checking; however, the many statements asserting the opposite are not assessed at nearly the same rate, suggesting that they sound to the fact-checkers at PolitiFact to be true on the face. The Fact Checker and FactCheck.org disagreed with this approach, questioning both kinds of assertions. Fact-checkers exercise a large amount of subjectivity not only in which disputed realities to evaluate, but also in which kind of positive or negative assertions to check or ignore. In sum, the three major fact-checkers display substantial differences in the disputed facts that they address.¹⁰

10 These findings have drawn the criticism that we should expect different media outlets to cover different topics. However, the distinctions in coverage among the three major fact-checkers are not akin to the minor variations among mainstream media outlets. Three major newspapers may have a different front-page headline on a given day, but still cover roughly the same topics

When we move to the core concern of how the fact-checkers compare in their assessments, it is not the case that they reach consensus conclusions. The good news is that about one disputed fact – climate change – they agree. The bad news is that they disagree about the national debt. PolitiFact finds that assertions that the debt has negative consequences are generally false, while The Fact Checker finds that these kinds of assertions are generally true. If a confused citizen were to turn to FactCheck.org, they would find that its reports give an impression closer to the more positive evaluation of the status of the national debt endorsed by PolitiFact, rather than the more negative assessment by The Fact Checker.

To summarize the comparative epistemologies of the fact-checkers: in regard to questions asked, the three fact-checkers disagreed about which disputed facts should be examined; in regard to answers offered, they agreed on one disputed reality (climate change) and disagreed on another (national debt). Fact-checking seems to allow for meaningful differences in the realities assessed as well as in the conclusions reached. This suggests that for the engaged citizen attempting to sort out the disputed realities of the current political environment, consulting fact-checkers will not be of great service to them in determining which version of competing realities to endorse.

In the polarized environment of contemporary American politics, professional fact-checkers began to ask if Pinocchio's pants were on fire. Through Truth-O-Meters, numbers of marionettes, and old-fashioned text, they have created a new facet of our national political conversation. The question that remains is how useful these institutions are in aiding citizens to navigate the politics of disputed realities. The Fact Checker's definition of two Pinocchios includes "significant omissions and/or exaggerations." Our analysis suggests that fact-check journalism leads to significant omissions of some questions by some institutions. The Fact Checker's definition of three Pinocchios includes "significant factual errors and/or obvious contradictions." For the fact-checkers to dispute each other's findings about the nature of the national debt is a clear contradiction. This suggests an overall rating for the fact-check industry of two or three Pinocchios.

over the course of the ensuing month. The differences found in this study span a 2-year period, over which temporary differences in emphasis should even out. A second criticism is that the differences may be accounted for by economies of coverage within the industry, if different fact-checkers intentionally avoid ground already covered by their competitors. This is not supported by other scholarship on the fact-check industry. One of Graves' conclusions from his participant observation was that the elite fact-checkers have no professional concerns that discourage examination of the same facts. "A tremendous amount of overlap exists in the claims checked by FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and The Fact Checker, who frequently cite one another in their published articles. 'That's the nature [of fact-checking],' Kessler has explained. 'It doesn't really matter that they've done it before and I haven't'" (Graves 2013a, p. 148).

Other scholars might see the selection bias and contradictory findings as leading toward a somewhat more negative rating, while others may contend that journalistic standards decrease it to a mere one Pinocchio. But we conclude that the major fact-checking institutions do not deserve a Geppetto Checkmark in regard to sorting out the disputed realities of contemporary American politics.

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