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Lucas Graves (2016) *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 324. ISBN978-0-231-17507-4 (paperback)

Reviewed by:
Martin Conboy
University of Sheffield, UK.

If journalism, as Jean Chalaby (1996) has claimed, came into existence as a predominantly fact-based discourse then surely the emergence of fact-checking in American journalism must be a symptom of its decline. Not necessarily is the answer provided in this meticulously researched and fluently written account. Moreover, this book claims a more complex dynamic than rise or fall, meaning that we might consider the emergence of the fact-checker as both poison and cure for the underlining democratic claims of journalism in the twenty first century. The author should be congratulated on his ability to weave thorough academic scholarship lightly enough so that the anecdotal and the 'messy' fieldwork can be appreciated as an integral part of the project. Although the focus here is quite appropriately on the American context, there are enough brief examples of other national varieties to indicate that the anxieties within journalism that have given rise to fact-checking are far from a uniquely American problem.

Graves is clear that elite fact-checking is a new and very specific departure for journalism albeit one that has its own historical antecedents. From the 1950s, for instance, objective reporting meant giving equal weight to controversial claims by politicians within a culture that more or less afforded institutional credibility to the soundings of politicians in the news media. The challenges posed by such a neutered approach to reporting led increasingly to mainstream journalists challenging the claims made by their political representatives. The crisis years of the 60s and the 70s with low-points of public trust in politics through Vietnam and Watergate led inexorably to the 'Adwatch' coverage in 1988 and onwards to the 'Fact Check' proper from 2004. This phenomenon continues a trend towards an analytical turn in journalism which in itself was a response to the quest for professional status and intellectual credibility of senior reporters wanting to represent a more complex and even contested view of the world for an increasingly well-informed and critical public.

He charts the work of the three main fact-checking organisations in the US: FactCheck.org; PolitFact and the *Washington Post's* FactChecker. These are, he asserts with a significant degree of authority, inventing a new style of political reporting; turning the checking into a story as journalistic meta-narrative. Whether this makes a difference to political discourse or merely muddies the waters further, fact-checking certainly provides an innovative institutional presence within contemporary journalism practice. The fact-checkers themselves are set apart from bloggers through their deep ties to elite journalism and its core objectives and professionalised systems of ethics. However perhaps we should consider a complementary form of field repair for journalism in crisis through a better education for all journalists, especially in the handling of data and statistics (Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen, 2016). Such an education could complement the work of these truth-triangulators rather than have them as journalism's ethical outriders.

The book is much more than an account of fact-checking, however, delving in accessible but profoundly philosophical ways into the processes and how these align or depart from journalistic norms. Individual chapters assess how facts, values and fairness,

effects and publics are assessed as well as their even more shadowy counterparts, uncertainty and instability within political discourse. These chapters cover how certain facts are chosen for scrutiny. As with all journalism selection is the key and these choices have their own set of inevitable preferences and values in-built. A more fundamental issue arises in considering what is in fact true. He does well to emphasize the specifics of language used in claims to truth, opening the door for us to consider the patternings and rhetoric of such claims.

It ends with the confident claim that fact-checking amounts to nothing short of a new practice of objectivity for a post-high modernist era of journalism. Beyond this, epistemologically, the account provides us with a clear-eyed assessment of how these practices, in attempting to provide solutions to some of the fractures of the current technological-political conjuncture, offer a new objectivity for the unruly abundance of the digital era, moving beyond the 'both-sides' journalism of lame balance for balance's sake.

It addresses one side of that perennial Faustian dualism; the scepticism towards politics and the reporting of politics by journalists. There is of course another side to that binary, namely scepticism towards the journalist deracinated from community, elevated on a professional and sometimes arrogant plane, provoking the cautious, evasive responses of politicians, generating the very cynicism that many journalists thrive on and largely closing down political discourse to an elite game of rhetorical charge and counter-attack.

In considering the limits of fact-checking, its main limitation is also the main residual benefit. Ultimately, readers have to make their own minds up. Yet, the extent to which the fact-checking acts to amplify wider triangulated scepticism between the public, journalism and politicians is less well-considered. This could be the paradox at the heart of praiseworthy attempts to forge a new fact-based discourse for our contemporary world. Nevertheless, in a US beset with attacks on false news and fake media, the fact-checker is as well-placed as any journalistic institution to arrest the march towards authoritarian drowning out of enquiries on behalf of the public.

Chalaby, J.K. (1996). "Journalism as an Anglo-American invention. A comparison of the development of French and Anglo-American journalism, 1830s-1920s". *European Journal of Communication*, 11, 303-326.

Lugo-Ocando, Jairo and An Nguyen (2016) "The State of Data and Statistics in Journalism and Journalism Education: Issues and Debates". *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. 17 (1). 3-17.