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On: 13 August 2015, At: 07:44

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcri20

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Published online: 03 Aug 2015.



To cite this article: Joseph E. Uscinski (2015) The Epistemology of Fact Checking (Is Still Naìve): Rejoinder to Amazeen, Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society, 27:2, 1-10, DOI: 10.1080/08913811.2015.1055892

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2015.1055892

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THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF FACT CHECKING (IS STILL NAÏVE): REJOINDER TO AMAZEEN

ABSTRACT: Michelle Amazeen's rebuttal of Uscinski and Butler 2013 is unsuccessful. Amazeen's attempt to infer the accuracy of fact checks from their agreement with each other fails on its own terms and, in any event, could as easily be explained by fact checkers' political biases as their common access to the objective truth. She also ignores the distinction between verifiable facts and unverifiable claims about the future, as well as contestable claims about the causes of political, social, and economic phenomena. The social benefits that she claims for the fact-checking enterprise must, at the very least, be weighed against the strong possibility that what passes for fact checking is actually just a veiled continuation of politics by means of journalism rather than being an independent, objective counterweight to political untruths.

Keywords: fact checking, journalism, media bias, political epsitemology, verifiable facts

In "The Epistemology of Fact Checking" (2013), Ryden Butler and I argued that a group of journalists with grand designs but insufficient knowledge had arrogated to themselves the position of arbiters of "truth." Since publication, I have seen no evidence to suggest that our criticisms are without merit, nor have I seen evidence that fact-checking organizations have improved their methods. ¹

To recap briefly, Butler and I first criticized fact checkers' lack of selection criteria for picking statements to be checked. We argued that without explicit selection criteria, fact checkers' own biases would invariably affect their choice of which actors and which statements to check. The end result of this would be to make political actors look much more truthful or dishonest than they might actually be.

We then focused on the statements that fact checkers check. We argued that a sizable portion of the statements checked are not verifiable facts, but are claims that cannot be readily verified or disputed by fact checkers. Specifically, we pointed out that claims about the future cannot be fact checked (since the future has not yet happened) and that claims about causality often cannot be reliably fact checked (since such claims would often require rigorous social-scientific methods). For these reasons, we argued that fact checkers had gone beyond the bounds of checking facts, and had instead waded into a mixture of commentary and naïve Truth-seeking.

Finally, Butler and I criticized the way in which fact checkers check statements once they select them. We showed that fact checkers leave themselves so much discretion in adjudicating the truthfulness of statements that their ratings are meaningless. For example, fact checkers often pick apart statements in such a way as to lose the context of what is being argued, or combine multiple claims in such a way as to obscure the truthfulness of the individual parts of a larger statement. And because there is no a priori methodology of fact checking, fact checkers are free to assign falseness ratings to statements for any reason, regardless of the truth of the statement. This may lead to inconsistent ratings across statements. Thus, fact checkers might rate a true statement as less than true because the statement can be interpreted in a way that the fact checkers have decided isn't the proper way to interpret the true statement (Uscinski and Butler 2013, 168). Or they might rate a claim less than true when they do not have evidence one way or another, or when they interpret the meaning of a statement in a contestable way.2 Or they might rate statements as being far less than true because of minor rounding errors.³

In "Revisiting the Epistemology of Fact-Checking," Michelle Amazeen (2015) attempts to respond to our criticisms of fact checking, first with an empirical analysis and second by claiming that fact checking provides a bevy of social and political goods. In response, I will first argue that not only does her empirical analysis fail to negate any of the criticisms of fact checking made by Butler and myself, but that it fails to support any of the

claims she makes about it. Second, I will show that, despite the social goods Amazeen claims can be gained by more fact checking (a better-informed electorate, more trust in the media, better election outcomes, honest politicians, and more political candidates), fact checking as it is currently practiced is overly grandiose in its designs and has abandoned simply checking facts in favor of offering larger political truths. And because the "methodologies" employed by fact checkers are insufficient, a series of pathologies render the entire enterprise suspect.

Critique of Amazeen's Empirical Analysis

Amazeen presents an analysis of fact checks from the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections to see if fact checkers coming from different organizations and using varying "methodologies" come to the same conclusions about statements made in political ads. She claims that if her analysis finds a high level of agreement between different methodologies, then this would show that the fact checkers are correct. There are four problems with her claim. The first has to do with measurement and the bar she sets for agreement; the second speaks to the validity of her claims; the third is that fact checkers have a high likelihood of coming to similar conclusions because they share similar backgrounds, biases, and training; the fourth regards fact checkers' most basic assumption.

First, Amazeen's analysis counts two fact checks as being in agreement if the different fact checkers either find no fault with a claim and consequently rate it true, or if the two different fact checkers find *any* fault with a claim and consequently rate it *anything* other than wholly true. Since most of the fact-checking outfits involved in the analysis have only one wholly "True" rating (but several ratings indicating untruth, ranging from partially true to wholly false) it should come as no surprise that almost all of the statements that were fact checked in the analysis were rated as something less than wholly true. Even a cursory look at fact checks bears this out: in 2012 *The Washington Post* rated only 7 of 267 statements made by presidential contenders as wholly true (Uscinski and Butler 2013). In short, Amazeen's analysis sets the bar for agreement so low that it cannot be taken seriously.

That two fact checkers agree that *something* is wrong with a claim does not mean that they agree on what that something is. Since Amazeen does not investigate the reasons the fact checkers give for finding fault with a statement, we don't know if the fact checkers agree on those reasons. For

example, consider fact checker A, who finds fault with a statement because it lacks important context, and fact checker B who finds fault with the same statement because the numbers included in it are incorrect. Amazeen's analysis would count these two fact checkers as being in agreement when they clearly are not. Amazeen claims her analysis "triangulates" among fact checkers – but since the fact checkers do not necessarily agree on anything other than that *something* is wrong with a claim, she is not triangulating anything worthy of notice.

Second, agreement between fact checkers (even if that agreement were to be better measured) does not indicate that the fact checkers are correct in their assessments. Fact checkers can be terribly wrong, and given their insistence on checking statements that are not facts, there is little reason to think they are not wrong often. Let us look at two prominent examples: the 2012 and 2013 "Lies of the Year," according to PolitiFact.

In 2012, Mitt Romney was awarded the "Lie of the Year" award for claiming "that Barack Obama 'sold Chrysler to Italians who are going to build Jeeps in China' at the cost of American jobs" (Holan 2012). For two reasons, this statement should never even have been fact checked. First, the statement makes a claim about the future—that Chrysler would move production of Jeeps to China. It is not possible to fact check statements about the future in the present. Second, a causality claim is involved: that moving production to China would cost American jobs. Fact checkers are not equipped to check causal claims such as this. While Romney's claim was rated the "Lie of Year" because, according to Politifact, it was "so obviously false" (ibid.), there is now evidence that Chrysler did later begin Jeep production in China. As Reuters reported only weeks after Romney was given the dubious award, "Fiat FIA.MI and its U.S. unit Chrysler expect to roll out at least 100,000 Jeeps in China when production starts in 2014" (Jewkes and Rebaudo 2013).

In 2013, Barack Obama was given the "Lie of the Year" award (Holan 2013). Unlike the winner of the 2012 award, Obama's statement that "if you like your health care plan, you can keep it" was not true. Millions of people lost their plans due to Obamacare regulations. Yet while in retrospect the statement was rated as "false" (Jacobson 2013b), it had been checked several times prior by PolitiFact and rated much more generously at "half-true" (Jacobson 2012). How can the same statement be both "half-true" and the "false" "lie of the year"? The answer is, apparently, that in this rare case a false fact check was brought to light by a political firestorm.

According to the 2012 fact checks, Obama's statement was half true, but the later imbroglio made this judgment untenable.

Third, it is uncontroversial to suggest that fact checkers may share similar training, backgrounds, and biases, if for no other reason than that they are journalists, and journalists have predictable political backgrounds and ideological predispositions (Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986; Bozell and Baker 1990; Goldberg 2002 and 2009; Harper 2007). This alone should, ceteris paribus, lead to agreement among them about which statements to check and agreement in their subsequent findings (regardless of the statements' truthfulness). Ideology helps people screen out information, interpret it, and decide on its credibility (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Zaller 1992). No matter how professional people try to be, it is virtually impossible for them to escape the ideological lenses they unwittingly bring to their work. This is true for both professors (Uscinski and Simon 2011; Duarte et al. 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014, 92–93) and for journalists (Groseclose 2011).

Fourth, while the ways that different fact checkers package their assessments vary, all of them appear to engage in one form or another of naïve political epistemology, meaning that they assume that the truth is self-evident. Since most political and policy disputes are in fact complex and involve ambiguous evidence, extrapolations, and predictions, epistemological naïveté keeps fact checkers in the game but at the expense of making simplistic true/false judgments (e.g., see Furth 2015). Naïve political epistemology is also the posture one would expect from journalists who do not realize that subtle biases can affect such judgments and that they themselves may be exercising such biases.

The Grandiose Designs of Fact Checking

Where Amazeen differs from us is in how she weights the shortcomings of fact checking relative to its supposed benefits. She agrees with us that fact checkers do take on an air of authority, but she thinks this is good. To us, fact checkers have simply asserted authority over truth by referring to themselves as "fact checkers." They have single-handedly assumed the role of umpire without the qualifications to do so. This is not to say that someone else has these qualifications, but rather that in their epistemological naïveté they assume that no such qualifications are necessary: the truth is accessible to anyone who cares to look for it.

Amazeen concurs with this naïveté by conflating statements that can be factually verified with statements that can't. Even the American Press Institute, which she quotes, lays it down that fact checkers should "investigate verifiable facts" (emph. added). Our concern is less that fact checkers have asserted the authority to check verifiable facts than that they have asserted the authority to pass judgment on claims that can't be verified and on statements that are not factual in nature. The term "fact checker" conjures the image of someone with a narrow role—to compare verifiable political statements to facts—but the current practice of fact checkers is far more grandiose. Since they check statements that cannot be verified, they inevitably make subjective judgments, remove context that speakers found important, and supply context that they (the fact checkers) interpret as important.

Perhaps inadvertently, Amazeen agrees with us when she claims that fact checkers employ varying methodologies across outlets, and varying methodologies over time at the same outlet. Again, she judges this situation favorably, as it allows her to claim that different methodologies converge, indicating the accuracy of them all. I am more skeptical. The reason fact checkers' methodologies vary across time and space is that there is no rigorous, scientific, or transparent methodology for engaging in most of the work that fact checkers do. Let me demonstrate this by showing the inconsistencies in how PolitiFact—the biggest fact-checking outlet—describes its own "methods."

PolitiFact says that when a person makes a statement about the future that eventually turns out to be absolutely true, the statement could still be labeled as false and the person a liar (Jacobson 2013a); for since the person could not have known at the time what would happen in the future, he or she should not get credit for a correct prediction (see Uscinski and Butler 2013, 171). (The irony is of course that fact checkers cannot know what will happen in the future either.) What is really important to PolitiFact, then, is not the truth of a statement, but whether the person making the statement is lying or not, where lying is defined expansively as saying something about the future that one may believe to be true and that may turn out to be true but that one had no warrant for believing to be true. Now consider a PolitiFact check of a statement made by Fox News Channel's Brit Hume. "As a general rule," PolitiFact writes, "we . . . don't assess predictions, but we can compare Hume's sense of the future to what the Census Bureau tells us to expect" (Greenberg 2014). In this selfcontradictory statement, PolitiFact acknowledges that it should not check claims about the future, but then it goes on to do precisely that—just as it has done numerous times before.

PolitiFact acknowledges not only that it checks the uncheckable—claims about the future—but that its rulings are subjective and that "reasonable people can disagree" about them (see discussion in Amazeen 2015). Again, Amazeen is happy about this but I am not. If the statements one is checking are verifiable as facts, then the rulings should not be subjective and reasonable people should have little room to disagree. Subjectivity enters their ratings precisely because they check more than just verifiable facts. Admitting that their ratings are subjective amounts to admitting that they are not checking facts.

I agree with Amazeen on one final point: that fact checkers' current "methods" might be acceptable for verifiable statements. But because many of the statements checked are not verifiable as facts, a single spectrum of ratings from true to false, despite the gradations in between, is inadequate. Sometimes statements can't be verified as true or false. In these cases, a true/false dimension cannot account for the inability to know the truth behind a claim. Labeling a claim "half-true" because the fact checkers can't verify it does the public a disservice given that the claim could be completely true or completely false.

* * *

If we take the claims put forth in Amazeen's article at face value, we end up in a dark place: media organizations that have assumed a monopoly over determining the truth, with the power to sway elections, but that don't use consistent, scientific, or rigorous methods when asserting who the "liars" are. While Amazeen (2013, 17) agrees that "poor practices of fact-checking deserve criticism," she offers no evidence that the practices to which we point are not poor, nor does she suggest that fact checkers do not engage in them. Indeed, she argues that we should want more of this non-scientific analysis. For she thinks that fact checking benefits our politics.

In line with this view, other social scientists have been working to identify the positive effects of fact checking (Gottfried et al. 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2014). But any positive effects should be balanced against whatever negative effects stem from poor epistemology. Holding politicians to account to the truth would be one thing, but holding them to account to the whims and biases of journalists is quite another. It should also be pointed out that political scientists pursuing this line of

thought are on very dangerous ground. By ignoring the epistemological defects of fact checking, they are unwittingly proposing that we make a trade: let us propagate untruths about politicians' "untruths" and, more important, about the self-evidently true or false nature of political claims, for this will (arguably) create a better-informed electorate, inspire more trust in the media, improve the behavior of political actors, and bring into the process political candidates who may not have previously run for office. In short, we are being asked to base our politics on a noble lie about the clear knowability of "lies" and other obvious "untruths."

NOTES

- 1. If anything, since the exit of Bill Adair, the creator of PolitiFact, PolitiFact (perhaps the largest fact-checking outlet) has become more openly deserving of our original criticisms. Even a cursory reading of recent fact checks from this outlet show a snarky and unprofessional tone that perhaps reveals the underlying subjectivity of the enterprise, even when it is conducted more decorously.
- 2. See Greenberg 2015. PunditFact checked the claim made by former Governor Jennifer Granholm (D-Michigan) that "Romney paid less tax than the guys that installed his car elevator." But PunditFact admitted that it was missing important pieces of information: "We don't even know if the car elevators have been installed. And we don't know anything about the people who did the work." This on its own would make it difficult to do the fact check (since there were no facts to which to compare the statement). Compounding this difficulty, the fact checkers admitted that "we don't have all the details on [Romney's] tax bills. The 2011 return was incomplete." The fact checkers went on to admit that "what elevator installers pay in federal taxes depends on their personal circumstances. They could be taxed at a higher—or lower—rate than Romney has been." PunditFact admitted, then, that the statement could be true, or false, and that they did not know which was the case. Instead of acknowledging their ignorance, however, they contended that "this statement is partially accurate. We rate it Half True," which is entirely different from rating their own knowledge of the statement's truth as inadequate. Another problem with this fact check is that PunditFact decided on its own how to interpret the statement. The statement made no mention of tax rates, but rather of taxes. Yet PunditFact decided for some reason that the statement referred to tax rates: "We take her words to refer to tax rates, not the total tax amounts. Romney made about \$22 million a year and paid millions in taxes both years." Had PunditFact not made this judgment call, it is safe to say that even without knowing what the phantom elevator installer paid in taxes, it was likely less than what Romney paid.
- See discussion of a fact check of presidential candidate Rick Santorum in Uscinski and Butler 2013, 173.

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