

Fake news and fact-checking: Combating misinformation and disinformation in Canadian newsrooms and journalism schools

Les fausses nouvelles et la vérification des faits : Combattre la désinformation et la mésinformation dans les salles de rédaction et les écoles de journalisme au Canada

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates how the global COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted fact-checking to combat misinformation and disinformation in Canadian journalism. Specifically, this work investigates how Canadian journalists and journalism educators may be approaching fact-checking (both ante hoc, or editorial, and post hoc) to respond to more forms of misinformation and disinformation. Through expert in-depth interviews ($n = 14$) with Canadian journalism educators, reporters, and newsroom leaders, this analysis sketches an initial understanding of the place of fact-checking in Canadian journalism practice and pedagogy. This initial study offers five tentative findings from our expert interviews: **(1)** while the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for more fact-checking, Canadian journalists and journalism educators believe the worldwide health crisis was not the sole trigger for an increased focus on fact-checking in Canadian journalism and journalism education; **(2)** over the last decade, Canadian journalism schools may have increased their focus on fact-checking and verification teaching; **(3)** while Canadian newsroom leaders want their journalists to have solid fact-checking and verification skills to combat concerns about information integrity, they are concerned about the skills new graduates bring to the job; **(4)** Canadian journalists and journalism educators believe ante hoc or editorial and post hoc fact-checking should play a more significant role in Canadian journalism; and **(5)** while there is concern about the efficacy of post hoc fact-checking (whether it corrects misconceptions), Canadian journalists and journalism educators appear committed to the practice because of normative and democratic ideals surrounding truth and information integrity. Moreover, this exploratory inquiry highlights the essential democratic work of Canadian journalism to combat misinformation and disinformation.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude exploratoire examine comment la pandémie mondiale de la COVID-19 a mis en lumière la vérification

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des faits pour combattre la désinformation et la désinformation dans le journalisme canadien. Plus précisément, cette étude enquête sur comment les journalistes, formateurs et formatrices en journalisme canadiens pourraient aborder la vérification des faits (à la fois ante hoc, ou éditoriale, et post hoc) pour répondre à la multiplication de la désinformation et de la mésinformation. Grâce à des entretiens approfondis ($n = 14$) avec des formateurs et formatrices en journalisme, des journalistes et des responsables de salles de rédaction, cette analyse esquisse une première compréhension de la place de la vérification des faits dans la pratique et la pédagogie du journalisme au Canada. Cette première étude pro-

pose cinq conclusions provisoires tirées de nos entretiens avec des experts : **(1)** si la pandémie de COVID-19 a mis en évidence la nécessité de renforcer la vérification des faits, les journalistes et les formateurs et formatrices en journalisme canadiens estiment que la crise sanitaire mondiale n'a pas été le seul élément déclencheur d'une plus grande attention portée à la vérification des faits dans le journalisme et la formation en journalisme au Canada ; **(2)** au cours de la dernière décennie, les écoles de journalisme canadiennes ont peut-être mis davantage l'accent sur l'enseignement de la vérification des faits et de la vérification ; **(3)** alors que les dirigeants des salles de rédaction canadiennes souhaitent que leurs journalistes possèdent de solides compétences en matière de vérification des faits afin de lutter contre les préoccupations relatives à l'intégrité de l'information, ils s'inquiètent des compétences que les nouveaux diplômés apportent au travail ; **(4)** les journalistes et les formateurs et formatrices en journalisme canadiens estiment que la vérification des faits ante hoc ou éditoriale et post hoc devrait jouer un rôle plus important dans le journalisme canadien ; et **(5)** alors que l'efficacité de la vérification des faits post hoc suscite des inquiétudes (corrige-t-elle les idées fausses ?), les journalistes canadiens et les enseignants et enseignantes en journalisme semblent attachés à cette pratique en raison des idéaux normatifs et démocratiques qui entourent la vérité et l'intégrité de l'information. De plus, cette enquête exploratoire met en lumière le travail démocratique essentiel du journalisme canadien dans la lutte contre la désinformation et la mésinformation.teurs et formatrices en journalisme, des journalistes et des responsables de salles de rédaction, cette analyse esquisse une première compréhension de la place de la vérification des faits dans la pratique et la pédagogie du journalisme au Canada.

Just like the waves of illness and death that came with the global COVID-19 pandemic, swells of misinformation and disinformation¹ crested with alarming frequency during the global health crisis, leading the World Health Organization (WHO), in fact, to declare an “infodemic” — “the rapid spread of misleading or fabricated news” (World Health Organization, 2020, p. 1) — in addition to the worldwide transmission of respiratory disease. Like the contagious virus, hoaxes about the disease’s origins spread in the pandemic’s initial days. As lockdowns and public health restrictions intensified, falsehoods about the advance of the disease and its prevention circulated wildly. Anti-vaccine misinformation and disinformation, propagated wildly through social media by bad actors, pollut-

ed the global public sphere, hampering efforts to combat the pandemic (Carey et al., 2022; Everts & Greenberg, 2020; Jamison et al., 2020). An alliance of dozens of global fact-checking organizations, in fact, found more than 10,000 dubious claims and narratives about COVID-19 (Poynter Institute, 2023). The consequences of all this erroneous information were material and troubling with some Canadians accepting ludicrous conspiracy theories linking 5G cellular technology to coronavirus (Bellemare & Nicholson, 2020) and a sizable proportion of the population refusing to get vaccinated (Canada, 2023). The Council of Canadian Academics notably concluded that the misinformation about science and health during the pandemic left “individuals and society vulnerable to exploitation and threaten[ed] our ability to work together to address shared challenges” (Canadian Council of Academics, 2023, para 2).

Many Canadian journalists and news organizations reacted to the spike in misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 with increased fact-checking. CBC News’ English and French services, for instance, both intensified their fact-checking efforts to combat COVID-19 disinformation (Fenlon, 2020). Specifically, as part of the Poynter Institute’s International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), Radio-Canada’s Décodeurs began offering both an online resource and weekly television series that fact-check dubious claims on social media (CBC Radio-Canada, 2021). During the pandemic, the Canadian Association of Journalists offered virtual fact-checking² and verification training³ (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2020). Additionally, the Future of Journalism Initiative at Carleton University’s School of Journalism and Communication produced a comprehensive editorial fact-checking guide in 2022 (Truth in Journalism, 2023).

Fact-checking, of course, has always been a part of Canadian journalism. Inherent in good journalism is the idea that journalists check and verify the information they publish — and scrutinize their sources. As Shapiro et al. (2013) found, Canadian journalists deploy a diversity of verification strategies “at times mirroring social scientific methods (source triangulation, analysis of primary data sources or official documents, semi-participant observation), and different degrees of reflexivity or

critical awareness” about their practices (p. 657).

In recent years, fact-checking journalism has emerged as a genre with prominent international players such as Factcheck.org, Full Fact, and Chequeado. While the proliferation of digital misinformation and disinformation sparked a global rise in systematic and branded fact-checking (Amazeen et al., 2018), journalism’s propensity to challenge or counter dubious claims has a long and storied history (Graves, 2016; Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016). The reform-minded muckraker journalists of the progressive era, including Nellie Bly, Julius Chambers and Ida Tarbell, exposed corruption and wrongdoing with their fact-based reporting. In Canada, investigative journalism also has a long history of challenging powerful interests, including infiltrating criminal networks, exonerating the wrongly accused and even bringing down governments (Rosner, 2008). The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal that forced Richard Nixon from the White House in 1974 sparked a dramatic repositioning of journalists from objective (just the facts reporters) to critical (interpretive and analytical storytellers) in both the United States and Canada. Canadian journalists moved from “being the handmaidens of politicians to being their harshest critics” in this era (Taras, 1990, p. 54). In recent years, Donald Trump’s rise to the highest office in the United States in 2017 elevated the prominence of fact-checking. Two years into his presidency, The Toronto Star’s Daniel Dale (2019) documented more than 5,000 false statements by the U.S. president. News stories during Trump’s presidency regularly stated that the U.S. leader’s claims are “patently false” or represent “a false claim” (Adair, 2016).

Considerable U.S.-based scholarship documents fact-checking efforts and potential impact in that country (see, Graves, 2016 for an overview). Taylor and DeCillia (2021) detail nascent efforts by Canadian journalists to combat misinformation and disinformation with fact-checking. Similarly, Mayerhöffer et al. (2022), using data from the international 2021 Media for Democracy Monitor, describe how newsrooms around the world – including in Canada – are countering false information with fact-checking, digital verification tools and even regulatory initiatives. While DeCillia (2018) found that Canadian journalists covering Canada’s

military mission in Afghanistan between 2006-2009 frequently impeached – or fact-checked – the preferred government and military leader framing of that war, there is a deficit of research about fact-checking in the Canadian context. A search of Web of Science – a multidisciplinary index of scholarly journals and conference proceedings – found only DeCillia’s 2018 scholarly analysis of fact-checking in Canadian journalism. A similar search using Scopus – an independent abstract and citation database – revealed no scholarly output about fact-checking in Canadian journalism. Additionally, this work highlights the critical work journalists are doing to combat misinformation and disinformation. Considerable scholarship (see, for example, Benkler et al., 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2020; Bennett & Livingston, 2021) documents the threat misinformation poses to liberal democracy.

This exploratory study attempts to sketch a tentative understanding of the potentially crucial democratic role Canadian journalists are playing in pushing back on post-truth politics and falsehoods. Using data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with fourteen journalism experts, this study seeks to interrogate the interplay between journalism practice, education, and the use of fact-checking as an antidote to misinformation and disinformation. It offers preliminary insights into fact-checking’s place in the curricula of journalism schools, as well as the verification skills newsroom leaders want to see in j-school graduates. Finally, the authors explore the data to offer some observations on how normative notions of journalism’s role in democracy factor into how journalists view the efficacy of fact-checking. The following sections lay out the theoretical foundations of this exploratory study to better position our methodology, research questions, analysis, and findings.

COVID, JOURNALISM AND FACT-CHECKING

Even before the pandemic, the rise of mis/disinformation gave credence to the notion of a “post-Truth era” (Pérez-Escobar et al., 2023, p. 77). The emergence of Donald Trump as a political force in the United States, the European Union referendum in the United Kingdom (Brexit), and the rise of fact-eschewing, populist leaders in Brazil (Bolsonaro), Turkey (Erdogan), and India

(Modi), all supported this argument (p. 77). Social media's penchant for circumventing fact-checkers, exacerbated by algorithms promoting rage, emotion and division, further undermined attempts at truth-telling, even as reality-based media continued to shrink. However, when the coronavirus was confirmed as a sweeping global health risk in early 2022, the discourse around health measures and policies soon included information that was patently false, and often maliciously manipulated by bad actors.

Very early on, health care leaders, government officials, journalism scholars, and journalists identified a concurrent crisis of communication associated with the pandemic. The World Health Organization's (WHO) director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warned the international community that "We're not just fighting a pandemic; we're fighting an infodemic" (*The Lancet*, 2020, para 1). The term "infodemic" quickly found its way into the vernacular and the literature (Singer, 2023), though some authors revised the term slightly to "disinfodemic" (see Posetti et al., n.d.), and "misinfodemic" (see Chou, Gaysynsky, & Vanderpool, 2021) to describe the relentless waves of falsehoods, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience and propaganda spreading (like a disease) on social media. As the world-leading medical journal, *The Lancet*, advised, "A state of affairs cannot continue where, for example, the very existence of the COVID-19 pandemic is denied" (*The Lancet*, 2020, para 5). The ramifications for life-saving policy measures were so dire the WHO engaged 1,300 "infodemic managers" to tackle health-related misinformation globally (World Health Organization, 2022). The ethical imperative for journalism was similarly apparent. A group of academics and journalists teamed up to call out Fox News for news reporting that "endangered" its audience (Krause, et al., 2020). In a letter to the owners of Fox News, the Murdoch family, the group accused the news organization of "dereliction of duty" and cited "false statements downplaying the prevalence of COVID-19 and its harms" as well as "misleading recommendations" on protective measures such as "untested drugs" and "false assessments" of public health measures (*Journalism Professors & Journalists*, 2020, para 2).

The impact of the COVID infodemic on the news industry was captured well in a comprehensive survey by the International Center for Journalists and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. The study covered a range of issues, such as the failure by employers to provide workers with safety equipment to prevent the disease, the challenges of remote work, mental health struggles, and the uptick in personal attacks and harassment directed at news correspondents. Among the most significant findings, however, was the "barrage of disinformation and misinformation" flowing through "politicians, elected officials, government representatives and State-orchestrated networks" (Posetti et al., n.d., p. 3). Respondents to the study identified "advanced verification and fact-checking (67%) as an area of journalism practice requiring 'urgent' attention" (p. 6). Other studies through the pandemic also recognized the value of fact-checking as a corrective force against misinformation and disinformation (See Krause et. al., 2020; Chou et al., 2021; Singer, 2023).

Whether inaccurate information is being spread intentionally or not determines whether it falls under the categories of misinformation or disinformation. The American Psychological Association (APA) provides a concise and clear definition of the two based on that premise: "Misinformation is false or inaccurate information — getting the facts wrong. Disinformation is false information which is deliberately intended to mislead — intentionally misstating the facts" (American Psychological Association, 2022, para. 1). Researchers at the Reuters Institute note this distinction but, given the challenge in discerning a motive to deceive, opt to use the term misinformation solely to characterize false information (Simon et al., 2020, para. 31). Regardless of the nomenclature, the imperative for journalists, given professional and ethical norms, is to represent the truth through a process of verification.

Journalism's relationship with truth has been fraught. Nietzsche famously asserted "there are no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche, 1954 [1873], p. 45). To be sure, truth remains a contested — and much debated — notion (Foucault, 2004). In this vein, arguments rage amongst journalists, scholars and the wider public about the utility and propriety of fact-checking and objectivity in jour-

nalism (Cunningham, 2003). The practice, Graves (2013a, 2016, 2017) argues, challenges traditional understanding of objective/observational reporting (Streckfuss, 1990; Lippmann, 1995 [1920]; Schudson, 2001; see also Ward, 2015). Calling so-called “balls and strikes” moves beyond the typical observational he said/she said/they said of traditional newsgathering, “enact[ing] a deliberate critique of conventional reporting and its practice of objectivity” (Graves, 2016, p. 9). Deciding what is true and what is not true, requires judgment. “Journalism that challenges public statements,” writes Graves (2016, p. 242), “makes it harder in practice for reporters to claim a clear separation from political actors.” Nonetheless, amid a global health crisis journalists had ample empirical data to rely on such as vaccination statistics, infection and death rates, and scientific literature on the efficacy of “treatments” such as hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, or the use of hairdryers and saunas to prevent COVID-19 (Dunlop et al., 2020). Fact-checking efforts by news media were regarded by researchers as “a reliable way to identify timely pieces of misinformation,” while recognizing “their professional work necessarily involves various selection biases” (Simon et al., 2020, para 13).

Journalism, in essence, is a “discipline of verification” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, p. 79), whereby reporters present “facts” and “the truths about facts” (Rosenstiel & Kovach, 2023). Fact-checking takes many forms, including the internal vetting and editing of journalists’ work by peers or editors. This editorial – or ante hoc – fact-checking attempts to spot mistakes or incorrect information before publication, and has been a long-established practice, predating the post-truth era by decades. As the Truth in Journalism Fact-Checking Guide helpfully explains, the ante hoc approach “independently verifies every factual statement included in the story and flags any necessary corrections” (Baker & Fairbank, 2022). The *New Yorker* magazine, of note, began “to mercilessly check facts” after a 1927 error-filled profile of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay led to a defamation lawsuit threat (Dickey, 2019).

Post hoc fact-checking, on the other hand, seeks to establish the veracity of assertions made by sources or organizations after those assertions

have been disseminated to journalists and/or the public. It represents an authentic expression by journalists to expose the truth and correct false or dubious statements present in the public domain. A quick example would be the assertion by Donald Trump in 2016 that he had won a “historic” and “massive landslide” victory over Hillary Clinton in the U.S. presidential election. Journalists reviewed past presidential races and challenged the veracity of that claim by noting out of 58 previous ballots, 37 candidates received larger margins of victory than Trump (Seipel, 2016, para. 9). In the post-truth era, news organizations increasingly dedicate space or on-air segments to fact-checking, even assigning individual journalists to the task, such as Canadian Daniel Dale, who left the *Toronto Star* as a Washington D.C.-based fact-checker to work for CNN. For the most part, post hoc fact-checking organizations focus on topics that are in the public interest, usually made by politicians or celebrities. All fact-checking news services are underpinned by normative ideals of an informed public making decisions in a democracy. The co-founder of FactCheck.org, in fact, wanted the website to be “a resource for those citizens who honestly are bewildered and confused and looking for help in sorting out fact from fiction” (Graves, 2013b, p. 137).

According to Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018), “deciding what is true and what is not true, requires judgment and skill, especially in a period marked by misinformation spread by malicious actors” (p. 265), as was the case during the pandemic. Proponents of journalistic fact-checking liken their efforts to science’s rigorous methods and procedures, “constantly inventing, discarding, and refining theories to explain the confusion of the contemporary world” (Dobbs, 2012, p. 3). Borel (2018) defines fact-checking as “a watchdog endeavour that checks information after it has already been published” (p. 1). Uscinski and Butler (2013) describe fact-checking as the process of “comparing” the statements of elites “to ‘the facts’ so as to determine whether a statement about these topics is a lie” (p. 163). Fact-checking also represents part of the decades-long interpretive turn in journalism (Schudson, 1982; Zelizer, 1993, 2017; Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997), whereby analysis, interpretation and assertive reporting is woven

into the coverage (Hallin, 1986, 1992; Barnhurst, 2003; Fink & Schudson, 2014). Schudson (2013), notably, observes that in the 2000s there was increased emphasis on “truth-telling” and “policing of publicly relevant lies,” producing both “new venues” such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com and “systematic procedures for holding accountable both governmental leaders and those who aspire to elective political office” (p. 169).

The 1970s saw a profound repositioning of news organizations from objective (“just the facts” reporters) to critical (interpretive and analytical storytellers) in both the United States and Canada (Taras, 1990). “The working hypothesis almost universally shared among correspondents,” opined investigative journalist Edward Jay Epstein, “is that politicians are suspect; their public image probably false, their public statements disingenuous, their moral pronouncements hypocritical, their motives self-serving, and their promises ephemeral” (1973, p. 215). This compunction to fact-check was, arguably, later compounded by journalism’s failure to adequately interrogate the Bush White House’s fabricated justification for invading Iraq (Bennett et al., 2007). Skeptical reporting and fact-checking became the “antidote to the stenographic reporting that helped the Bush Administration build its case for the war in 2002 and 2003” (Graves, 2016, p. 62).

While fact-checking gained public prominence in the 1990s with broadcasters increasingly scrutinizing the truth of political campaign commercials (Bank, 2007; Papper, 2007; Graves et al., 2016), the practice morphed into the current cynosure of political reporting and its emphasis on “accountability” (Pittner, 2014; Graves & Konieczna, 2015). It is important to note, however, that fact-checking is not strictly a U.S. phenomenon. Journalists around the world have also turned to fact-checking as a mainstream means of holding decision makers accountable and countering misinformation and disinformation (Mayerhöffer et al., 2022). In the United Kingdom, for instance, Full Fact has checked and corrected facts in the news and social media since 2009 (Full Fact, 2023). In Canada, several small fact-checking operations — Radio-Canada, Canada Fact Check, and AFP Canada — have also attempted to counter

mis-disinformation and challenge dubious claims in a systematic way similar to U.S.-based organizations such as Factcheck.org. For example, AFP Fact Check’s website is filled with stories related to the pandemic, including one that refutes social media claims that Canadian singer Celine Dion’s diagnosis of Stiff-Person Syndrome was the result of COVID vaccinations (Pacorel, 2022).

Recent manifestations of digital journalistic fact-checking flow from practices pioneered by online blogs and social media platforms. Early in the World Wide Web’s history, Snopes.com emerged as an online fact-checking organization focused on investigating urban legends. Factcheck.org — a non-partisan and nonprofit website — began in 2003 to challenge political spin with the aim of cutting “the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics” (FactCheck.org, 2022). The website, dedicated to monitoring the factual accuracy of political actors, was launched by long-time journalist Brooks Jackson and Annenberg Public Policy Centre Director Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Graves, 2016). The emergence and growth of the internet allowed these organizations to specialize exclusively in fact-checking in a way traditional media never had. PolitiFact.com launched as a collaboration between the Tampa Bay Times and the Congressional Quarterly in 2007 (Graves, 2016). The emergence of Factcheck.org and PolitiFact.com institutionalized and mainstreamed fact-checking practices in journalism (Spivak, 2011; Mantzarlis, 2017). Of note, the number of newspaper articles using “fact-checking” or variants of the term grew “dramatically” between 2008-12 (Graves et al., 2016, p. 8).

Ideally, news fact-checking equips democratic citizens with accurate information, making them more resilient to withstand misinformation and malicious disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). While a well-informed Canadian public remains ideally desirable, trust in the country’s news media has declined in recent years. The latest Oxford University-based Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that only 42 per cent of Canadians say they trust the news media (Brin & Charlton, 2022). This erosion in trust coincides with more than seven in ten Canadians saying they worry about false information or fake news

(Edelman, 2022, p. 8). Trust in news, as Ström-
bäck and colleagues stress (2020), remains crucial
in democracy because “even a perfectly informa-
tive news is of little democratic use if citizens...
do not trust the news” (p. 139). It is not clear if
fact-checking as a journalistic practice increases
trust in news. Accuracy – along with the other core
tenets of journalism including fairness, balance,
and completeness – remains a crucial variable in
people’s faith in journalism (American Press In-
stitute, 2016). A series of online field experiments
found that fact-checking did improve news trust,
but “only when defense of journalism stories [and
opinion pieces and editorials] were also present”
(Pingree et al., 2018, p. 1). Recent experimental
research in Australia, however, concluded that
fact-checking can erode trust in news media (Car-
son et al., 2022).

The evidence about the corrective impact of
journalistic fact-checking on audiences is equally
mixed, though research during the pandemic sug-
gests more positive outcomes. While fact-check-
ing seeks to verify information in reporting with
the hope that “truth and transparency can help
people be better informed and equipped to navi-
gate harmful misinformation” (Poynter Institute,
2023), a scholarly debate rages about the effica-
cy of fact-checking (Fridkin et al., 2015). Some
studies suggest fact-checking can correct mis-
information (Garrett et al., 2016; Barrera et al.,
2019; Walter et al., 2020; Altay et al., 2023), but
other research finds that the corrective practice
does not fix public misconceptions (Carey et al.,
2022; Pereira et al., 2022). A recent meta-analy-
sis (Walter et al., 2020) of the fact-checking effect
concluded that the journalism practice does pro-
duce “significantly positive overall influence on
political belief,” yet the influence wanes or weak-
ens over time when so-called “truth scales” akin to
PoltiFact’s TRUTH-O-METER are part of the cor-
rective information. Research on dis- and misin-
formation in the pandemic seems less ambiguous.
Singer (2023) points out that “once a falsehood
has entered today’s unfettered and interconnected
information sphere, attempts to ‘correct’ it yields
effects that can be positive” (p. 336), while Krause
et. al. (2020) underscore the value in fact-check-
ing as a better-received means of risk mitigation

(p. 1052). The caveat these studies offer, though,
is the “volume and seeming indestructibility of
misinformation, particularly on social media”
(Singer, 2023, p. 336). The scholarly literature
demonstrates both the importance and ongoing
emergence of fact-checking in global journalism.
This exploratory study, however, seeks to better
understand the Canadian and educational context
of the practice, building off some of the pandemic
research cited here. Therefore, this work proposes
five research questions:

RQ1: *What role, if at all, did the global COVID-19
pandemic and explosion of misinformation and
disinformation play in the awareness and teach-
ing of fact-checking in Canadian journalism
schools and newsrooms?;*

RQ2: *How have Canadian journalism educators
re-tooled their teaching to focus on fact-checking,
data journalism, science journalism and special-
ized health journalism?;*

RQ3: *What kinds of fact-checking training or
skills do Canadian newsroom leaders want from
journalism students and graduates?;*

RQ4: *What role can editorial/ante hoc and post
hoc fact-checking play in Canadian news?; and*

RQ5: *Do Canadian journalists and journalism
educators think fact-checking actually works? In
other words, does fact-checking correct the pub-
lic’s perceptions of misinformation and disinfor-
mation?*

SOME BRIEF NOTES ON METHODS

In order to answer this study’s research ques-
tions, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth
interviews with more than a dozen (n = 14) Cana-
dian journalists, newsroom leaders and journal-
ism educators with a mind to producing a “deeper
interpretation” of fact-checking in Canadian
journalism⁴ (Flick, 2006, p. 150). Interviews with
experts operate “like night-vision goggles, per-
mitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on
view and examine that which is often looked at

but seldom seen” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. vii). Our interviews offer a description of the practice of fact-checking in Canadian journalism and journalism education (Kvale, 1996). We purposely chose semi-structured interviews with the expectation that the method would elicit “expert knowledge” about fact-checking (Flick, 2006, p. 165). For this exploratory work, expert, in-depth interviews offered a clear entry point to answer our research questions by targeting key working journalists, journalism leaders and educators to offer “crystallization points” of insider knowledge about fact-checking in newsrooms and J-schools (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 2). Moreover, experts, as Elster (1998) observed, provide insight into the causal mechanisms of social practices such as fact-checking. Given this, we approached our interviews with three functions in mind: (1) assessment: to understand the shared meaning journalism experts have about fact-checking in Canada; (2) aggregation: to use experts to bring together, collect and reduce the complexity of the real-world journalism practice of fact-checking to a tentative understanding of the phenomenon; and (3) affirmation: to confirm and disprove prior theory and empiricism about fact-checking in Canadian journalism (von Soest, 2023).

An interpretive constructivist philosophy underpinned our approach to interviewing. As researchers – and longtime journalists – we were cognizant of our “cultural assumptions” that could influence and inform the types of questions we asked and how we might interpret our data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 229-230). While Meuser and Nagel (2009) warn that expert interviews can lead interview subjects to offer lectures, of sorts, about the phenomenon being studied, we did not encounter any teaching. Our study’s topic guide/schedule (see Appendix A) flowed from this study’s theoretical underpinnings and research questions about fact-checking. Our semi-structured interview guide facilitated meaningful dialogue with all our participants. Our professional reputations as journalists and journalism educators put us on equal footing with our participants. The interview guide – with its open-ended questions – provoked thoughtful and expansive responses.

We recruited our participants using a snowballing approach (a non-probability sampling/recruitment technique where existing participants suggest possible future interview subjects). We began by contacting journalists, newsroom leaders and journalism educators we know. This led to other participants. We often concluded our interviews with ‘who else should we interview?’ We were mindful of representing the diversity of Canadian newsrooms and J-schools. Our 14 experts⁵ reflect a reasonable diversity of demographics, experience, and newsrooms (broadcast, digital, legacy and alternative news media).⁶ Table 1 offers a breakdown of our expert interviewees and a count of the participants who chose to be anonymous. Generally speaking, qualitative in-depth interviews research should seek to interview as many participants as possible or until the researchers reach saturation or the point when adding further participants does not offer greater insight. Moreover, “more interviews do not necessarily imply quality or more detailed understanding” (Gaskell, 2007 p. 43). Cognizant of this – and the time constraints of this special issue of *Facts and Frictions* – the researchers felt that we stopped hearing revelations or new themes around 12 interviews.

TABLE 1: BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Category	Anonymous	Total
Journalists	1	4
Newsroom leaders	4	5
Journalism educators	3	5
Total	8	14

In line with our university’s Human Research Ethics Board (HERB) and in compliance with the Government of Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement’s (TCPS2) commitment to the welfare and privacy of research participants, the experts we interviewed had the choice of being anonymous or having their names attached to their words. Our recorded interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 70 minutes. Participants received transcripts of their interviews for verification and correction.

The data from the interviews was systematically analyzed to identify the themes and meaning conveyed in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We used the qualitative analysis software NVivo to “deal with the inherent messiness of the text,” to code the interview data for commonalities and themes (Guest et al., 2012, p. 53). Our iterative analysis identified several themes (or nodes) that connected to our research questions. While some have dismissed thematic analysis as “airy fairy,” not “real research,” or unscientific, we were systematic in our approach and in coming to conclusions. We read and re-read the data (Flick, 2009) with a mind to discovering consistent themes that, in turn, informed this study’s “broader overall ‘story’” or findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92) about fact-checking in Canadian journalism and jour-

nalism education. Table 2 identifies the 11 themes (and their definitions) that emerged from our thematic analysis, their prevalence (high, medium, or low) and their connection to this study’s research questions. See Appendix B for detailed definitions and key words associated with each theme.

To be sure, all hermeneutic inquiry is not generalizable or predictive. The knowledge claims of this exploratory research are, of course, qualified. This initial research project aims to sketch an outline of the practice and pedagogy of fact-checking in Canadian journalism. As noted earlier, there is a deficit of scholarly work about fact-checking in the Canadian context. This work, for lack of a better term, attempts to map the terrain. Having noted that limitation, we contend our expert interviews and subsequent thematic analysis illuminates an unclear part of journalism practice in Canada,

TABLE 2: THEMES IDENTIFIED IN THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF IN-DEPTH, EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Themes and short definition	Prevalence	Research question(s)
1. Importance (the value of fact-checking in Canadian journalism)	High	RQ1, RQ5
2. Role in education (fact-checking practice and pedagogy taught in journalism schools)	High	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ5
3. Pandemic (the relevance of fact-checking sparked by the pandemic)	Moderate	RQ1, RQ2
4. Misinformation and disinformation (the growing need for fact-checking because of increased misinformation and disinformation)	High	RQ1, RQ2
5. Fact-checking skills in journalism education (the importance of fact-checking in journalism education)	High	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
6. Fact-checking skills (specific skills required by journalists and journalism graduates)	Low	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4
7. Critical thinking (the intellectual rigor required to combat misinformation and disinformation)	Low	RQ2, RQ4
8. Methodology and process (best practices for fact-checking)	Moderate	RQ3, RQ4
9. Normative ideals (idealized role of fact-checking in public discourse and democratic society)	High	RQ1, RQ5
10. Efficacy (do journalistic fact-checks work?)	Moderate	RQ5
11. Student reception (how students feel about fact-checking education)	Moderate	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5

offering an initial tentative understanding of the journalism practice of fact-checking. Our findings are consistent with other exploratory scholarship published in this journal (see, for example, Leask et al., 2023). We are also transparent about our goals and theoretical underpinnings. As the coming pages make plain, our data analysis is logical. We connect our description and analysis to theory and the 11 themes from our thematic analysis identified above. Moreover, our interpretations and arguments are open to critical engagement and debate. We welcome critique – and suggestions for further research in this area. We offer these preliminary findings as a springboard to more in-depth research, which we return to in our conclusion. For the purpose of clarity, we blend our findings with a discussion of the theoretical implications in the following section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By means of a roadmap, the coming section answers each of our five research questions in order. Each research question is also connected to the themes that emerged from our analysis of our in-depth expert interview data. Patterns were evident in the interview data, producing the themes reported as findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The quotes included in the coming pages were selected because they vividly or succinctly reflect the key themes identified during our research's thematic analysis of our interview data.

RQ1: *What role, if at all, did the global COVID-19 pandemic and explosion of misinformation and disinformation play in the awareness and teaching of fact-checking in Canadian journalism schools and newsrooms?*

Five themes – importance, role in education, pandemic, misinformation and disinformation, and skills in journalism education – help inform this section's findings and analysis. The consensus among our interviewees is that fact-checking has been a well-established practice for some time, growing in prominence with the emergence of the post-truth era and global rise of populist politics in the years just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Archie McLean, a longtime journalist and current associate professor of journalism at Mount Royal

University, stressed that Donald Trump's election as president of the United States crystallized, in his mind, the importance of fact-checking in journalism and journalism education as a means of combating false claims. This sentiment was echoed numerous times by the experts we interviewed.

Allison Baker, the head of research at *The Walrus* and co-author of the Truth in Journalism's Fact-Checking Guide, said the political landscape and the pandemic pushed fact-checking into the mainstream of public attention, giving the journalistic practice more "cultural awareness." Our interview data also suggest that the novel coronavirus led many Canadian journalism schools and newsrooms to embrace fact-checking in a more meaningful and enthusiastic way, given the challenges to established science, medical experts, and the spread of dis- and misinformation associated with COVID-19. Cecil Rosner, who led newsrooms and investigative units at CBC, including *The Fifth Estate*, captures this well:

A lot of false messaging was circulating during the pandemic, but even more fundamental than that, the whole rise of social media gave rise to the accelerated spread of falsehoods. You combine a serious health emergency with the war in Ukraine, you combine it with absolutely anything important, and you'll get a lot of disinformation floating around and the need for fact-checking. So, I'm not sure I would point to the pandemic as the key, as the thing that's sort of launched it in the current era, but it was one of the factors.

Rosner added that, unlike in the United States where well-funded or endowed organizations often support fact-checking, there hasn't been the same investment in Canada. "Not a lot of big news organizations," said Rosner, "are willing to make that investment on a full-time basis."

In the case of journalism schools, several educators expressed a similar sentiment, suggesting that fact-checking measures have long been a feature of their curriculum, but gained importance in the years since the Trump presidency. For journalism schools, the challenges around covering COVID-19 and its associated conspiracy theories

created an additional opportunity, and a need, to teach fact-checking skills. In some cases, this was picked up with a renewed commitment to verification in existing courses, whereby educators “re-tooled” curriculum with a focus on evaluating the veracity of statements and data provided by various sources. A professor from a university in Western Canada noted that COVID-19 brought a new sense of urgency: “When you start seeing people sharing misinformation about vaccines or homemade cures, I think that that really brought home the notion of, oh, maybe this is something that is not just about lying politicians, it is just much bigger” (Interview 1).

The pandemic also forced instructors to deploy fact-checking on a few occasions right in the middle of classes. One instructor described a situation where she had to combat misinformation when “a handful of students” were caught up in conspiracy theories, and “so I almost overcorrect to say, do you know what the public health officer’s role is? Do you know the ethics that guide them? And so that was always a bit of a struggle” (Interview 1). Another journalism educator similarly felt compelled to shift her focus when considering COVID-19 discussions in class, “I feel like, as an instructor, that I’m going back to the very bare bones, to the basics, I’m just having to go back to what is a fact, define a fact,” she explains. “And never before had I ever had to do that, [in the past] we just jumped right in knowing what facts are, what opinions are, the difference between the two” (Interview 12). Given the skepticism in some segments of the public, journalism instructors recognized a need for greater transparency in the reporting process, and fact-checking for faculty and students became “more public facing.”

Most news leaders in this study acknowledge that COVID-19 did challenge their organization’s approach to newsgathering. Drew Anderson, *The Narwhal’s* prairies reporter, observed how so many people “through fear, confusion, or any number of things, really got sucked into these rabbit holes, and we’re seeing the repercussions of that.” Another longtime journalist turned editorial leader noted that at a time when society is served by “fewer and fewer journalists” there are “more sources of misinformation and disinformation,”

and politicians who are eager to use those messages for “their own ends without much regard for the broader social and political implications” (Interview 8). Some felt they should have seen some of the challenges to COVID-19 coverage coming, given the politicization of information through the Trump era. “Who would’ve thought, pre-COVID, that masks would divide society in the craziest of ways,” one news executive observed. “COVID was a moment that I think we probably didn’t handle well as journalists, nor did the politicians, nor did science. Because we were all so taken aback by it” (Interview 6). For others, the pandemic seemed to underscore the public service component of fact-checking for audiences struggling to make sense of a dire and complicated health scenario: “Any type of fact-checking generally gives people the tools to discern what information they can trust and what they can’t, which is, I guess, a very obvious answer” (Interview 13).

Consistent with the sociology of news literature (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) and fact-checking (Dobbs, 2012; Graves, 2016), many of our experts interviewed for this research linked fact-checking to normative notions of journalists’ role in democracy. Journalism educator Archie McLean, for instance, worries about the tsunami of false information spreading on social media and other platforms undermining democracy. The president of the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ), Brent Jolly, also highlighted the “paramount” importance of fact-checking in maintaining a “common factual foundation.” Jolly wonders how citizens, without an agreed upon set of facts, can “have a conversation about anything, let alone come to some kind of agreement or consensus.” In fact, many of the journalists, including Anderson, mentioned their concerns about the growing propensity of Canadian politicians to be sources of misinformation and disinformation coinciding at the same time with dwindling newsroom resources and layoffs in the industry. Anderson also stressed what he called the “extra noise” from social media polluting our public sphere, adding that journalists are needed more than ever to simplify and filter information. Moreover, one longtime journalist and newsroom leader stressed the importance of journalists hold-

ing politicians to account for their misleading and untruthful claims. “Unverified truth claims in public life,” said this journalist, “need scrutiny and there’s not enough of it” (Interview 9). The news producer, with decades of experience in Canada and internationally, added that all too often data and information get weaponized by bad actors, making it crucial that journalists do an effective and rigorous job rebutting false information so that the lay public, who doesn’t have the skills and time to do the work, gets truthful information to make informed democratic decisions (Interview 9). Having sketched a preliminary understanding of the importance of fact-checking in Canadian journalism, the next section turns to how journalism educators appear to be teaching fact-checking.

RQ2: *How have Canadian journalism educators re-tooled their teaching to focus on fact-checking, data journalism, science journalism and specialized health journalism?*

To answer this research question, we draw from seven themes, including the role of education, pandemic, misinformation and disinformation, skills in journalism education, fact-checking skills, critical thinking, and student reception. Our interview data suggest that most journalism programs incorporate fact-checking into their curricula as segments or “modules” of existing courses. A few schools have stand-alone, fact-checking courses or training, such as Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) where students can take a course in editorial or ante hoc fact-checking. Janice Neil, Associate Professor at TMU’s School of Journalism and former chair, recalls how *Reader’s Digest* offered funding for the program’s existing fact-checking efforts, and a specific fact-checking course was relaunched in 2019. “We saw the light,” Neil says. Allison Baker supports specific courses dedicated entirely to fact-checking in journalism schools if they are properly developed. Baker adds it is best for students to experience fact-checking firsthand, as “there’s only so much you can learn in a classroom, and you’re going to be faced with these larger ethical challenges depending on the story that you’re working on.” One veteran journalist turned educator called the current obses-

sion with fact-checking curious given that she felt fact-checking was a part of her decades-long journalism practice and teaching. Having said that, the journalism professor conceded there is a growing “need to equip the journalist with enough information and the skills... to properly check all of the assertions that are laid over them day after day after day” (Interview 4).

In some cases, perhaps without departmental directives, instructors are finding ways to “carve out” space in existing courses to devote to the practice: “It’s not built in. So, I do use Snopes and FactCheck.org. I start there, and I talk about things that they see on social media and how easy it is, a lot of times, to do a simple fact check” (Interview 12). However, the potential for standalone courses seems to be emerging as a highly valued approach, with several programs taking that route, to the point where one educator observes that “it seems like it’s going in the right direction... people are starting to agree and making sure that it’s getting taught again. Which is nice,” said Viviane Fairbank, who at one time headed Research at *The Walrus* magazine.

Skills that support or augment fact-checking are also gaining greater currency, it appears, in journalism schools, according to the data. This includes courses dedicated to data analysis, investigative journalism, and specialized beats for reporting on the environment, climate crisis, science, and health. This is true of TMU, according to Janice Neil. “We have science and health reporting core electives on the books that – until the pandemic – were offered every second year, but now [they are] offered every year.” Other schools have added data journalism courses or are including data analysis in existing classes. At the same time, there was recognition among educators that the news industry itself is under-resourced. “The trends in journalism, just the economic currents are taking us away from specialization, away from beat reporting more towards the commodification of news,” said Mount Royal University’s Archie McLean. “I see much more the need for beat reporters and experts and people who are experts in an area who can communicate well to the public. Those people are unicorns, and we need more of them. Unfortunately, the economic trends in jour-

nalism are taking us away from those specialized kinds of people.”

This exploratory study’s data suggest newsroom leaders largely support a more focused approach to journalism education that includes fact-checking, data analysis skills and science. Almost all our journalism educators suggested graduates often lack the necessary “critical thinking” required to work effectively as a journalist today, though defining the term varied broadly. Some described it as the persistence to keep asking questions, or skepticism, while others saw it as the ability to check their own personal biases when reporting. One interviewee suggested students need to get past the familiar trope that journalists cannot do math, a mindset that emerges for some in journalism school. Longtime CBC News producer and manager Cecil Rosner points out that maybe it is time for journalism programs to partner with other departments on campus to develop additional expertise. “[Students] know words, and white-balancing your camera, and all the things you need to do to be a good journalist, but you don’t need any expertise in anything else – that makes no sense to me,” he states. “It makes reporters sitting ducks, for being duped.”

Theoretically, the retooling of journalism education dovetails with the “interpretive turn” in journalism (Schudson, 1982; Zelizer, 1993, 2017; Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997), whereby journalists prize analysis, interpretation, and assertive reporting. Moreover, journalism schools’ increased emphasis on fact-checking aligns with modern journalism’s emphasis on “truth-telling” and “policing of publicly relevant lies” (Schudson, 2013, p. 169) and the explosion of digital fact-checking services such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com. But as the coming section makes clear, this study suggests there are concerns amongst Canadian news leaders about the skills that recent journalism graduates bring to their newsrooms.

RQ3: *What kinds of fact-checking training or skills do Canadian newsroom leaders want from journalists?*

All the working journalists and newsroom leaders interviewed for this study wanted journalists with

a tool kit full of fact-checking skills needed to combat misinformation and disinformation. Drawing from five themes – role in education, skills in journalism education, fact-checking skills, methodology and process, and student reception – our expert interviews identified one broad and three specific skills that newsroom leaders want their journalists to possess. All the newsroom leaders interviewed for this study stressed that they look to hire journalists who are curious and critical thinkers. Specifically, when it comes to pushing back on misinformation and disinformation, our interview data suggest that newsroom leaders want:

- Verification skills to quickly identify false and malicious information;
- Data journalism and basic statistics knowledge; and
- A robust understanding of the process or methodology for both post hoc and ante hoc fact-checking.

Considerable fact-checking and information literacy training emphasizes the importance of critical thinking (Hattingh et al., 2020). The Canadian Association of Journalism’s online Misinfo 101: How to Identify and Report on Misinformation, in fact, emphasized that critical thinking is the “most important skill” in fact-checking work. The workshop – rolled out during the height of the pandemic – emphasized the necessity of slowing down and taking a “step back” when reporting to critically appraise sources and their motivations (Canadian Association of Journalists, 2020). Our data suggest that some newsroom leaders worry about the lack of critical thinking skills possessed by recent journalism school graduates. One experienced newsroom manager highlighted concerns about deficiencies surrounding basic scientific and mathematical literacy. Moreover, this newsroom leader was troubled by a new journalist who assumed a connection between correlation and causation. This news executive also highlighted a deficiency around critical thinking and curiosity:

It’s really hard to take a kid straight out of school..., especially undergrad. I feel

like [these recent graduates] are much too confident in their own opinions or analysis of the world... and who is a good source and who is believable and who isn't. (Interview 6)

Another newsroom manager echoed these sentiments but added that critical thinking often improves with time on the job. "You learn more over time and get better over time," adding that she's watched many young journalists get better at research, asking questions and being skeptical of dubious claims (Interview 8). Cecil Rosner also noted the importance of critical thinking and the need for specialized or beat reporters, stressing that "the journalists who will do the best jobs are the ones that are knowledgeable about the things that they're covering:"

You need reporters, you need journalists who are very well versed in a whole bunch of topics and who therefore can't be taken advantage of by people who might want to push a message onto them. It's a combination of that. I don't want to discount the fact that you also need a team because it's true that no matter how many experts you have in your newsroom, there's always going to come a subject area in which no one has that expertise and so you... then need the critical thinking skills of a team or of people in your newsroom, who can who have... good skills [for] digging into the veracity of anything.

In addition to these higher cognitive functions, this study suggests newsroom bosses also want recent graduates to possess specific digital and analogue fact-check skills.

Journalism leaders and journalists all emphasized the importance of having solid fact-checking skills to quickly identify false and malicious information. These skills range from online digital investigation skills such as geolocation and the authentication of user-generated materials to tracing people's digital footprint to more traditional reporting associated with working both confidential sources and on-the-record sources.

One newsroom leader wanted recent graduates to be able to discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of information. Moreover,

this news manager stressed the importance of using online tools to quickly authenticate photos, documents and information that need verification. The same manager also wanted journalists that could find and analyze publicly available data – and an "ability to drill down, to understand the complexity of data sets that are out there and to be able to run those data sets" into meaningful and impactful stories (Interview 6). News leaders interviewed for this research also want journalists who have a robust understanding of the process or methodology for post hoc fact-checking used by organizations such as PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, Snopes, and *The Washington Post's* Fact Checker. Additionally, both a journalism educator and two professional editorial (ante hoc) fact-checkers emphasized the importance of possessing the skills used by in-house fact-checkers who authenticate stories before being published. Having outlined skills and training that newsroom leaders and journalists want from their journalists, the coming section expands on the potential role imagined for fact-checking in Canadian news.

RQ4: *What role can editorial/ante hoc and post hoc fact-checking play in Canadian news?*

This exploratory study suggests that Canadian journalists and journalism educators imagine a robust role for post hoc fact-checking in Canadian news, emphasizing that the rise in digital misinformation/disinformation required a rigorous and systematic process to verify information and scrutinize suspect statements made by public officials. The data associated with this research question comes from three themes – fact-checking skills, critical thinking, and methodology and process – that emerged from our thematic analysis of our in-depth interviews. The head of the Canadian Association of Journalists, Brent Jolly, said fact-checking could possibly "redefine news and journalism as a trusted source of information in a post pandemic world." Veteran journalist and newsroom leader Cecil Rosner suggests legacy news media need to prioritize fact-checking and investigative reporting and "move away from [the] kind of thinking that the bread and butter of everything they do is daily news, agenda-driven news, and reallocating resources to ascertaining the truth of various

things,” he argues. “A big organization [such as] the CBC [could] easily do that if it really wanted to.” Our interview data point to a pressing need for post hoc fact-checking in Canadian news.

Intriguingly, our interviews also suggest the potential crucial role for more editorial or ante hoc fact-checking. Allison Baker and Viviane Fairbank, who both headed (at different times) the fact-checking department at the *Walrus* magazine, stressed the need to expand the teaching and practice of ante hoc/editorial fact-checking. Fairbank and Baker created the Truth in Journalism (TIJ) Fact-Checking Guide as part of their Michener-L. Richard O’Hagan Fellowship for Journalism Education aimed at examining best practices for fact-checking. As the guide notes, editorial fact-checking can, of course, increase accuracy, but also address “broader issues of trust and inclusion” by linking the practice...

...to questions of equity and inclusion – including whether some voices are treated as more authoritative than others. In the post-truth era, when many have become more conscious of the fragility of “objectivity,” it is important for journalists to learn how to acknowledge the close relationship between accuracy and ethical practice (Baker & Fairbank, 2022).

In our interviews with both Baker and Fairbank, the two ante hoc fact-checking experts emphasized the need to expand that form of fact-checking in Canadian journalism and journalism education, highlighting the so-called “Two-Layer Principle” whereby facts are determined in two steps: first, reporting; and later verifying. Fairbank contends this systematic approach, used by ante hoc fact-checkers, not only helps produce better – more accurate – journalism, but can also help reporters think through the evidence or corroboration they need to satisfy fact-checkers who scrutinize their stories.

You... need to know what those two layers look like in principle and... what questions you should be asking yourself in order to verify the information you are reporting on in order to be a good journalist. I think it should be taught in journalism school

a lot more. It should be... talked about in newsrooms a lot more.

Fairbank and Baker also highlighted how the iterative process of editorial fact-checking makes stories not only more accurate, but more polished. The writing and storytelling often benefit from this editing process, Baker said. Fact-checking, she added, “emphasizes the sort of the democratic underpinnings of journalism and the fact that... journalism is inherently collaborative.” Working with several people on a story boosts the overall quality of the piece “because everybody brings something different to the process” and also points out the journalist’s “blind spots” and biases.”

Accuracy, of course, remains a key pillar in people’s trust in news (American Press Institute, 2016) and one of the motivators for many journalism and journalism teachers to keep at fact-checking, despite doubts about its impact on correcting the imprint of misinformation and disinformation. These values are, of course, connected to normative notions of why journalists and journalism educators appear committed to fact-checking despite questions about its efficacy, as the following section outlines.

RQ5: *Do Canadian journalists and journalism educators think fact-checking actually work?*

Our exploration of this research question relies on five of our interview themes – importance, role in education, normative ideals, efficacy, and student reception. Our exploratory study’s data suggest that most Canadian journalists and journalism educators doubt – at some level – the efficacy of fact-checking, but they also remain committed to the practice as a normative expression of pushing back against mis- and disinformation in Canada’s democratic system. As detailed in this study’s conceptual framework, there is no scholarly consensus on whether – and how – fact-checking works (Fridkin et al., 2015). As noted above, some evidence suggests fact-checking does work (Altay et al., 2023; Barrera et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2020), while other studies question the impact of the journalistic practice on correcting misinformation (Carey et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2022). Our in-depth interviews

echoed this scholarly debate, seemingly discouraged by the inconclusive evidence about whether fact-checking makes a difference. Echoing Benkler et al. (2018), one newsroom leader we interviewed acknowledged that fact-checking is not as effective as it might have been before social media, the current multi-channel media ecosystem, and the ubiquitous filter bubbles in which many people wrap themselves. Yet, like the others we interviewed, this longtime journalist remains committed to the practice, stressing that there are sometimes fact-checks that push through all the noise and resonate with audiences: “You know, once in a while, I sort of feel like, oh, we are getting through” (Interview 6).

In fact, all the journalists and journalism educators interviewed for this study, despite their trepidations about the corrective ability of fact-checking, steadfastly insist they will keep teaching and producing both post and ante hoc fact checks. Brent Jolly, head of the Canadian Association of Journalists, acknowledges fact-checking cannot be the sole solution to misinformation and disinformation – but it can, he argues, play a crucial role in “helping the public to decipher what’s accurate and what’s not.” As well, our expert interviews suggest that there is an important potential role that fact-checking can play in boosting the credibility of news at a time when public confidence is falling. “The act of doing it is important and the act of teaching students is important,” said Mount Royal University journalism professor Archie McLean, adding that sometimes it feels like “throwing a pebble into the ocean.”

This one fact check may not matter, but... the alternative is to throw your hands up. I think it’s important to be in the fight, and especially as a journalism school and as people who teach young people about information, I feel like we can’t just throw our hands up... I think we have a responsibility to try it, even though in my darkest hours sometimes... it feels like a losing battle.

These sentiments, of course, echo normative democratic ideals about the role of journalism in keeping citizens informed (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) and

fact-checking’s role in information integrity in democracy (Dobbs, 2012; Graves, 2016). The idealized function of Canadian news media flows from liberalism, whereby journalists are watchdogs and truth-speakers who serve democracy by keeping citizens informed (Ward, 2015; Taylor & DeCilia, 2021). In this monitorial role, journalists act as truth tellers educating the public (Christians et al., 2009). This study highlights the potentially important democratic role Canadian journalism is playing in combating misinformation and disinformation.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study sheds some light on fact-checking (both editorial/ante hoc and post hoc) in Canadian journalism and journalism education. It attempts to begin to fill a scholarly deficit and contributes, in a preliminary way, to our understanding of fact-checking in Canadian news.

This study also highlights the potentially important democratic role Canadian journalists are playing in combating misinformation and disinformation. Our study suggests: **(1)** COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for more fact-checking, but the worldwide health crisis was not the sole trigger for the increased practice and instruction; **(2)** over the last decade, Canadian journalism schools have increased their focus on fact-checking; **(3)** Canadian newsroom leaders want their journalists to have solid fact-checking skills to combat concerns about information integrity; **(4)** Canadian journalists and journalism educators believe ante hoc (editorial) and post hoc fact-checking skills and methodology should play a larger role in Canadian journalism; and **(5)** while most Canadian journalists doubt the efficacy of post hoc fact-checking, they remain committed to the practice because of their commitments to normative and democratic ideals of truth and information integrity.

There are, of course, limitations to this study. The findings come from expert interviews, and therefore, are not generalizable. Yet, our in-depth expert interviews sketch a tentative picture of the current practice and pedagogy surrounding fact-checking in Canadian journalism. This study lays the groundwork for future research. It offers

a springboard, of sorts, for future survey research with a random sample of Canadian journalists about fact-checking to ascertain more generalizable findings about fact-checking in Canada. Future work also needs to consider the fact-checking taking place in French-language Canadian journalism. Subsequent work, akin to the excellent editorial fact-checking guide produced by the Truth in Journalism Project, could also define the best practices or methodology for post hoc fact-checking in Canada.

Notably, our findings suggest there are strong normative aspirations amongst Canadian journalists and journalism educators to push back against the forces of misinformation and disinformation that threaten democracy (Benkler et al., 2018). It is, indeed, remarkable that Canadian journalists and journalism educators feel compelled for ethical and philosophical reasons to continue fact-checking despite their misgivings about its effectiveness. Consistent with Pingree and colleagues (2018), it appears that Canadian journalists and journalism professors believe that fact-checking can both bolster the credibility of journalism and produce democratically desirable outcomes. As one of our expert interviewees asked: “What’s the alternative?” (Interview 6). Perhaps, as Hackett (1991, p. 281) puts it so well, the news media are “not a level playing field, but sometimes it is possible, even playing uphill, to score points, to win a match, and perhaps occasionally even to refine the rules of the game.”

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit [Appendix A and B: Fact-checking online](#) for the list of questions we asked our sources.

NOTES

¹ For the purposes of this study, we define misinformation as inaccurate or false information – rumours, pranks – that “contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts” (Guess and Lyons, 2020, p. 11). Disinformation is false information deliberately or maliciously spread by bad actors, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and propaganda.

² Editorial or ante hoc fact-checking involves fact checkers independently verifying “every factual statement included in the story and flags any necessary corrections” (Baker & Fairbank, 2022). Post hoc fact-checking investigates dubious or troubling claims in the public sphere to establish their truthfulness.

³ Verification is the journalistic practice of establishing the truth, accuracy or validity of information.

⁴ This qualitative research complied with – and was reviewed and approved by – Mount Royal University’s Human Research Ethics Board (Clearance No. 103325). In compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2), this study protected the rights, welfare and privacy of research participants.

⁵ This number of in-depth expert interviews is consistent with the range of interviews required for a meaningful understanding of a social phenomenon (Gaskell, 2007). Moreover, 14 reflects a reasonable number of interviews for this exploratory study.

⁶ A limitation of our initial study is the lack of French-speaking journalists, newsroom leaders and journalism educators in our participant pool. Further research should undoubtedly include French-speaking Canadian journalists and educators.

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