

The Fact-Check Industry | Columbia Journalism Review

By Emily Bell

December 9, 2019

If the presidential election of 2016 revealed one thing more surprising to the mainstream press than the popularity of Donald Trump, it was just how profoundly dysfunctional their publishing environment was. Suddenly, it became clear that social media news feeds were populated with all manner of propaganda, falsehoods, and political advertising—there was a crisis of misinformation in a privately owned public sphere. After not too long, governments and technology platforms responded by embracing the power of fact-checking.

As many parts of the journalism world shrank, fact-checking grew. According to the 2019 Duke University Reporters' Lab census, 44 fact-checking organizations existed five years ago; there are 195 now. Angie Drobnic Holan, the editor of *PolitiFact*, has two explanations. "Firstly, the internet made it practical from a time point of view," she says. "And, secondly, the increasing sophistication of political messaging made it necessary." The checking these organizations do is not the internal prepublication review found at well-resourced magazines, but an independent business of verification, debunking, and correction of untruths that have already been published—and spread widely on the Web. The new age of fact-checking may therefore be interpreted as journalism adapting to the needs of its digital environment. But it might also be seen as a dismantling of journalism's traditional role and a reconstruction of its workflow, flexing to suit the priorities and the ideologies of the tech companies now paying checkers' salaries.

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