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Where Do Facts Matter?

The Digital Paradox in Magazines' Fact-Checking Practices

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WHERE DO FACTS MATTER?
The Digital Paradox in Magazines' Fact-Checking Practices

Print magazines are unique among nonfiction media in their dedication of staff and resources to in-depth, word-by-word verification of stories. Over time, this practice has established magazines' reputation for reliability, helped them retain loyal readers amid a glut of information sources, and protected them from litigation. But during the past decade, websites, mobile platforms and social media have expanded the types of stories and other content that magazines provide readers. Doing so has shortened the time between the creation and dissemination of content, challenging and in some cases squeezing out fact-checkers' participation. This study examines the procedures applied to stories in magazines and their non-print platforms, seeking to discern what decisions were made in response to the speed of digital publication, what effects these decisions have had, what lessons have been learned and what changes have been made over time. The results suggest that fact-checking practices for print content remain solidly in place at most magazines, if executed with diminished resources; however, magazine media are also exploring new processes to ensure accuracy and protect their reputations in an accelerated media environment.

KEYWORDS: accuracy; digital journalism; digital magazines; fact-checking; magazine journalism; print magazines; verification

The act and importance of fact-checking broke into American public consciousness with the emergence of "political fact-checking" during the early 21st century. Nonpartisan organizations including FactCheck.org (founded in 2003) and Politifact.com (2007) policed politicians and campaigns for falsehoods and spin. The Duke Reporters Lab (2016) currently lists 69 fact-checking organizations in the U.S., and Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN 2016), created to promote "nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking [as] a powerful instrument of accountability journalism," has 35 international signatories to its new "Code of Principles."

Political fact-checking has not only been done by the media, but also to the information provided by the media. Some fact-checking has been nonpartisan, and some has a clear agenda. One of the earliest media-checking organizations, Accuracy in Media (founded in 1969), has a distinctly conservative bent, and has been criticized by the more neutral Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) for its "disdain for the First Amendment" and conspiracy mongering. On the other end of the spectrum, Media Matters for America (2016) was established in 2004 to "systematically monitor … media outlets for conservative misinformation." By contrast, Poynter's IFCN was created with explicit values of nonpartisanship, fairness and transparency.

The emergence of the internet as both a resource and a publication medium has assisted the fact-checking process and heightened the prevalence and presence of such operations over the past two decades. It has made more information available and sped up the dissemination of both the content being checked and the corrections to its accuracy. Some of this work is done by professional researchers and checkers, and some by "citizen fact-checkers," akin to citizen scientists who contribute to a profession for which they are neither trained nor paid. All of these efforts are post-hoc fact-checking -- checking that is done after facts are published or otherwise disseminated to the public.

Unbeknownst to many of the practitioners of this contemporary professional and citizen fact-checking is that this practice originated in magazine journalism. For the past 75 years, magazines have employed staff for the specific purpose of catching factual errors missed by writers and editors prior to publication. The most prestigious magazines in the United States -- *The New Yorker, WIRED, Harper's, National Geographic* and *The Atlantic* among them -- are famous for fastidious fact-checking of their print editions. These practices have been exported to other magazines as staff members move to other publications, and as magazines aspire to the reputations for accuracy of these leaders. In contrast to political fact-checking, the fact-checking practices at magazines are performed before publication, and the thoroughness of this process confers authority to publications that practice it. As Graves (2016) states, "The routines of internal fact-checking respond to the imperative to eliminate untruth, not call attention to it," unlike political fact-checking, which verifies information already made public. Fact-checking is essential to maintaining the integrity of major magazines' "brands."

But what about these magazines' digital platforms? Particularly during these times of shrinking budgets and mastheads, it may be challenging or impossible to apply the same standards; if lesser standards are applied, they may reduce the accuracy of magazines' digital content and threaten the integrity of these magazines' brands.

To better understand this conundrum, we interviewed top research editors (a common term for fact-checkers) at 11 prominent magazines in the United States about the fact-checking practices applied to their print publications. We also asked about changes to these practices due to reduced resources and the need to check facts in multiple types of digital content. What emerged is a portrait of a field in flux, grappling with seismic changes created by the digital age, where alterations to fact-checking processes and their diminished role present a new set of challenges for the magazine publishing industry.

Accuracy and Journalism

The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (2014) states: “Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” Verifying the accuracy of facts, and even of interpretations of events and information, is an ethical necessity for journalists. Codes of ethics for journalists around the world -- the Society of Professional Journalists in the U.S., the International Federation of Journalists, the Swiss Press Council, and the Chamber of Professional Journalists in Italy, among others -- emphasize the key role of accuracy and of correcting factual errors when they occur (Porlezza and Russ-Mohl 2013, 46).

Accuracy is more than an ethical issue; it serves to define the journalism profession and its societal role. Admittedly, even at its most thorough and fact-checked, journalists’ stories only approximate reality. Unavoidably, “facts and stories are mutually constituted within a value-loaded conceptual scheme that renders them both morally ordered and true,” offering only as much veracity as the vicissitudes of narrative storytelling and journalists’ corroborative efforts can assure (Ettema and Glasser 1998, 136-137). Yet across cultures, accuracy is a prime value in journalists’ “occupational ideology … which functions to self-legitimize their position in society” (Deuze 2005, 446). This commitment to accuracy distinguishes journalism from other kinds of published content: “For the common good, it distinguishes facts from fiction, lies and biased comments” (Broersma 2010, 25). Tuchman identified journalists’ verification routines even in 1972 as “strategies through which newsmen protect themselves from critics and lay professional claim to objectivity” (676). Verification practices aid in the avoidance of libel suits and serve as a defense against everyday complaints from audiences. Even in a time of rapid change in the field, careful verification is as a marker of professionalism across all types of journalism (Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé, and Mychajlowycz 2013, 669).

Journalists strive to ensure accuracy through a variety of work routines, such as seeking out primary sources, recording all interviews, and seeking corroboration of information by expert sources. These and other practices that are aimed at optimizing accuracy are not consistently practiced, however, by professional journalists under time pressure -- a situation that first became acute in the realm of breaking news. Researchers have found that journalists adapt their verification activities for each story and to suit the demands of deadlines and editors. Ettema and Glasser (1998) detail ways that investigative journalists apply varying procedures and standards for verification depending on the nature of the facts, attempting to fit facts together into storylines for “structural corroboration” or to find multiple sources for other kinds of facts. As Hermida (2015) notes, “Verification is a fluid and contested practice, inconsistent in its application” (39).

The time available for careful reporting and verification has decreased due to pressures from the speed of digital publishing and the immense flow of information through social media and other digital platforms. The traditional “verify, then publish” order of activities is today often reversed in fast-paced, breaking news situations, where the first information disseminated may come from non-journalists on the ground, rather than from journalists themselves (Hermida 2015, 38). Professional journalists then race to share and interpret that content. Non-journalists also play a large role in catching errors in these hurried publications. As a result, corrections and updates have become a common element of the new order: first publish, then verify facts, and correct or update as needed. Ideally, stories corrected online are marked and timestamped for transparency's sake (Karlsson 2010; McAthy 2013). As early as 1998 – when the *New York Times*' website was just two years old (Lewis 1996) -- one journalism critic suggested that "competition [had] become a brutal, relentless pressure, forcing normally careful reporters and producers to yield to temptations of wildness and recklessness, hastening to print and broadcast stories that are not fully researched, sourced or checked" (Kalb 1998).

Magazines, by contrast, long had the luxury of less pressing deadlines. Print publications "closed" days before they were sent to a printer, and didn't appear in front of readers until days or weeks after that. Many stories were "evergreen," meaning that they still held value for readers long after publication. Newsmagazines tended toward news analysis and commentary, while consumer magazines crafted stories for niche audiences around "news hooks." There generally was ample time for verification prior to publication. *National Geographic*, for example, could take 15 weeks to produce a full print issue (MEI 2010).

But eventually, magazines, like newspapers before them, came under pressure to produce original content online. The additional 24/7 demands of social media increased the frequency and urgency of magazine deadlines. Today, magazine journalists also work in a "perpetual news cycle" (Gans 2003, 50), where speed and efficiency are key to the production of a constant stream of digital stories, in addition to print.

Magazines' Routines for Accuracy

Research on journalists' views and practices in the pursuit of accuracy has largely focused on daily newspaper journalists and their reporting processes. While magazine journalists who write and edit for weekly or monthly print publications share the same codes of ethics with their newspaper colleagues, they have historically had more time to research, report, edit and fact-check their work. Magazines also have had a different perspective on errors; in contrast to newspapers, whose coverage of issues and events is quickly eclipsed by the next day's news, magazines have a longer shelf life. Audiences spend more time with magazines than they do with newspapers, sometimes saving them for months or years. This relative permanency, combined with journalists' professional commitment to accuracy, heightens the pressure on magazines to produce error-free content.

Time magazine is believed to have been the first U.S. magazine to establish fact-checking as a regular part of the editorial process (Shapiro 1990, 3). As early as World War II, fact-checkers were part of the "well-oiled and polished editorial process that precisely regulated the efforts of the correspondents, researchers, writers and editors. … This tedious and meticulous work method … remained unchanged for decades and gave the magazine character and personality" (Angeletti and Oliva 2010, 57). Angeletti and Oliva describe the process in general terms:

> Accuracy was one of the features that distinguished *Time* from other magazines. Charged with this task was a group of men and women, versed in history, grammar and geography. They verified every historical event, name, place and date in each story. This strict and thorough verification system followed [Henry] Luce's premise that journalism should both inform and educate through the presentation of accurate information. (57)

Fact-checking became an established practice at magazines outside of the U.S. as well. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* had an established *dokumentation* (fact-checking) department by the 1950s. Fact-checker Maximilian Schaefer explains, "I think it is a [part of our magazine's] culture, and because *Der Spiegel* wants to be—and is—a high quality product" (Silverman 2010).

The New Yorker has long been famous for meticulous fact checking. Peter Canby, head of fact-checking at the magazine, began as a fact-checker there in the late 1970s. Canby (2012) recalled in a 2002 lecture:

> During the editorship of William Shawn [1952-1987] … stories progressed in an orderly, almost stately way toward publication. Writers would work on pieces for as long as they felt was useful and necessary, and that often meant years. Once the pieces were accepted, they were edited, copyedited, and fact-checked on a schedule that typically stretched out for weeks and sometimes for months. (76)

The practice of meticulous fact-checking spread to other American magazines -- some because they were owned by the same parent company as one of these fact-checking progenitors, others because these highly regarded magazines set the expectation that fact-checking should be part of the editorial process at reputable magazines. Through a combination of in-house research editors and freelance checkers, fact-checking became part of the standard magazine editorial process in the late 20th century. At smaller publications, the function might be performed by editors with other duties or even by trained interns. Larger publications hired research editors whose sole function was meticulous fact-checking.

Somewhat surprisingly, not much scholarly attention has been paid to magazines' fact-checking, despite its role as a fundamental part of magazines' editorial processes and one that distinguishes magazine media in the pursuit of journalistic accuracy. An early study by Shapiro (1990) provides insight into the full flourishing of fact-checking at weekly print magazines. In 1986 and 1987, Shapiro spent five weeks watching 13 research editors fact-checking 15 stories at two newsmagazines and one sports magazine. She documented what the researchers paused to check, dividing the facts into four categories: objective facts (16%), relatively objective facts (35%), less objective facts (24%), and subjective facts (25%). Her definition of "subjective" was "varied concerns that generally pertain to evidence, the presentation or interpretation of information, generalization and, on rare occasions, fairness" (11). These "subjective facts" include assertions that lack direct evidence, inferences from data, and even the now-familiar narrative device in which the writer represents the thoughts of a subject (Shapiro 1990, 11-12).

Shapiro observed that the more subjective the assertion, the less likely it was to be found correct by fact-checkers: "80 percent of the clearly objective questions, 78 percent of the relatively objective, 53 percent of the less objective, and 43 percent of the subjective matters were judged okay," Shapiro noted (12-13). This suggests that when fact-checking procedures are streamlined to focus only on names, dates, locations, and other objective facts, they may miss the types of errors most likely to need correcting. However, even under intense deadline pressure, Shapiro (1990) found that fact-checkers at the print magazines she studied remained vigilant about both objective and subjective facts. Their effort showed that meticulous methods and time pressure weren't mutually exclusive. "The argument that fact checking is a luxury reserved for weekly or monthly publications is based on several false assumptions," Shapiro wrote. "In fact, most magazine stories are written, edited and checked in the last 48 hours before publication"

(1990, 3). This isn't to say that longer stories at monthly publications weren't given more time, but Shapiro's findings indicate that stories were, when necessary, fact-checked thoroughly and quickly.

Adapting Magazines' Routines for Digital Publishing

Journalists involved in Shapiro's 1990 study would soon see a dramatic shift in the magazine industry. The emergence of the internet during the 1990s represented both a resource and a challenge for magazines and their commitment to fact-checking. It made huge databases of information available to reporters and checkers. But it also brought competition for advertising dollars and audiences, harming magazines' bottom lines and hence their ability to fund costly research departments.

In addition, the economic upheaval of the mid-2000s led to financial crises at many publishers. *Advertising Age* reported that magazines cut 35,000 staff jobs, in all areas of their organizations, between 2009 and 2014 (Jurkowitz 2014). Staff was trimmed throughout the masthead, while the internet simultaneously increased the workload by requiring even monthly magazines to provide daily and even hourly content online and on social media. Magazines also began producing work more typically associated with broadcast media, such as videos and podcasts (Author 2014). They expanded into apps, websites and the gamut of social media, including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook as well as messaging tools, such as Snapchat (Abruzzese 2013).

The contemporary challenge facing magazines is whether and how to fact-check all of this content. This task was easier when magazines simply duplicated their print editions' content on their websites. But today, they feature unique online stories published daily or even multiple times per day, plus social media posts and even original newsletters. They produce this content for an audience that dwarfs their print readership in size. For example, *Mother Jones,* a bimonthly print magazine with a paid and verified circulation of about 215,000, has 1.3 million monthly website visitors, and reaches a total audience of about 8 million across all of its distribution channels (Mother Jones 2016a; 2016b). *The New Yorker* boasts a combined print and online audience of 4.4 million, but also finds an audience through events, a radio hour, an Amazon video series and apps (New Yorker 2016). As of August 2016, the Magazine Media 360 report of the MPA: Association of Magazine Media stated that the combined top 10 magazine brands reach an audience of over 577 million through their print and digital editions, websites, mobile content and video (MPA 2016a). Clearly, magazines are now extending far beyond their printed pages, with products distinct from these publications' traditional functions that challenge their established workflows.

Magazines' reputation for factual accuracy likely serves them well as they strive to reach an audience with this digital content. But 20 years after Shapiro (1990) -- and after the dawn of magazines' digital era -- Navasky and Lerner (2010) found a rather different set of fact-checking routines at magazines. Their survey of editors at 665 consumer magazines found that 57% used the same process for print and online-only content. But 8% of the magazines they surveyed did not fact-check online-only content; 27% applied a "less rigorous" checking process to online-only content; and 8% did not fact-check at all (Navasky and Lerner 2010, 16).

Navasky and Lerner's results (2010) suggest that two decades after Shapiro's research on print magazines, fact-checking routines at magazines had begun to deteriorate, at least for online content. Navasky and Lerner (2010) noted that the increasingly common practice of relying on writers to fact-check themselves was essentially an adoption of newspapers' approach to fact-checking, and stated, “If that is indeed the case, perhaps the industry should take a stand on whether that is a good or bad idea” (41). As a means of taking a stand, they suggested that industry associations, such as the American Society of Magazine Editors, should consider crafting guidelines like their “codes of conduct and guidelines in other areas ... on such matters as online fact-checking, copy-editing, and error-correction” (Navasky and Lerner 2010, 41).

ASME’s Guidelines for Editors and Publishers (2015) state that they “are frequently revised to address emerging concerns but can always be summarized in one sentence: Don’t deceive the reader.” The guidelines do not mention fact-checking or provide any help to magazines struggling to maintain the essential practice of verification of editorial content on their digital platforms. Navasky and Lerner’s study may have been an early indicator that the rigor applied to print magazines’ accuracy would not carry over to magazines’ digital outlets, and that different routines might develop among magazine staff involved in online publishing.

Balancing Print and Digital

Even as magazines expend resources on their online and mobile content, they still strongly value their print editions. Editors note that print provides readers a lasting, immersive, tangible experience as a break from their saturation in digital content. A growing body of research suggests that people read more proficiently and remember more when content appears in print (Jabr 2013). Furthermore, the print magazine remains a visible, cohesive statement of a magazine’s brand, and physically represents the brand in public spaces, such as newsstands.

Print publications are also important because magazines have not yet been able to generate enough digital advertising revenue to match their past levels of revenue from print advertising. While audiences for print have decreased, magazines still charge more for their print ads, citing the lasting quality of print, the immersiveness of the magazine reading experience, and the pass-along readership potential, all of which digital content lacks (Soat 2015). Representing its members’ interests, MPA: Association of Magazine Media remains a strong advocate for print, even offering a guaranteed return on investment for print magazine advertisements (MPA 2016b). In short, print has value for magazines that digital content and revenue haven’t replaced.

Print publications are still flagship products that receive thorough fact-checking. But are the challenges of fast-paced online and social journalism, plus the need to compete in today’s “perpetual” news cycle, overwhelming magazines’ ability to maintain their fact-checking practices on all platforms, or at least requiring them to change their standards? This is a particularly urgent question now that more readers see stories published online than see those in print editions. An earlier study of full-fledged digital magazine production suggests that fact-checking rigor may have begun to diminish (Navasky and Lerner, 2010). But that study, as a survey, did not offer extensive insight into *why* and *how* fact-checking routines have changed. Furthermore, digital publishing has evolved and become even more culturally and financially significant for magazines in the six years since that study.

This study sought to update and explore in greater depth our insights into this critical component of magazines’ print and digital production routines. In response to prior research and the changing conditions of publishing today, these questions guided this study:

> RQ1: What fact-checking routines do magazines currently follow for their print and digital products, and do they differ significantly?

RQ2: What are editors' attitudes regarding the fact-checking routines used for their print and digital content?
RQ3: What are editors' outlooks on the future of these practices at their publications?

Methods

To investigate these issues, we identified 17 prominent national magazines and approached their research editors and others responsible for fact-checking. These magazines were chosen as representatives of consumer publications with strong reputations for thorough fact-checking in print, based on the researchers' familiarity with the industry and on a review of industry news regarding this topic. Several of these magazines have won multiple National Magazine Awards, the highest award for excellence in American magazine journalism.

Editors at 11 of these magazines agreed to be interviewed, for a response rate of 65 percent. These editors were assured that their responses would be anonymous, and that they, their magazines, and their magazines' parent companies would not be identifiable. These editors signed electronic consent forms prior to their interviews. The interview method was appropriate for this study because it allowed for insight into the magazine editors' work routines and their production practices, particularly the "distinctive meaning-making actions" of these interviewees with regard to the routines of fact-checking (Warren 2002, 86). Interviews also allowed for deeper exploration of the trends in magazine fact-checking identified in previous studies.

During February and March 2016, we conducted individual phone interviews of 30 to 45 minutes with these editors. We asked them to describe in detail the fact-checking processes used for print and digital content. They also explained changes in these processes over time, criteria used in determining the degree of scrutiny applied to stories, and ways they would alter the processes if money and personnel were unlimited. We also asked how they regarded the role and importance of fact-checking at their own magazines and across the industry. We followed up with further questions when answers suggested that additional probing would be productive (Rubin and Rubin 2011).

Undergraduate research assistants transcribed the interviews during April and May 2016, using a system in which one student transcribed each recording and another double-checked the first one's work. Using these transcripts, the researchers iteratively identified key themes, "implicit topic[s] that organize a group of repeating ideas" (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003, 38), that related to the research questions. Additional themes developed through the researchers' joint analytic process. This iterative process "is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights" (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009, 77). Interview data were coded and clustered according to the emergent themes (Galletta 2013). This approach led to what Saldana (2009) calls "interpretive convergence," meaning that the researchers agreed upon a consistent analysis of the interview data.

Results

As a whole, this study revealed that fact-checking routines at magazines differ considerably for print and digital content. Print content continues to receive detailed verification, often following practices and procedures refined over decades and distributed among magazines through employees' movement from publication to publication. However, executing these verification processes has become increasingly challenging due to reductions in staff and increases in content production, both caused in part by shifts in technology over the past decade. Those shifts both reduced revenue, leading to staff cuts, and then heightened time pressure due to increased content demands. Specifically, fact-checking routines have been altered in speed and depth; attitudes about what must be checked, who checks it, and how thoroughly all have shifted in response to the proliferation of digital content.

Today's Fact-Checking Routines

The first research question asked what fact-checking routines look like today for these magazines' print and digital products, and whether the routines applied to each platform differ significantly.

Overview of Routines Used for Print Magazines

In many cases, the fact-checking routines research editors apply to their print magazine content haven't changed much over the past several decades, although access to digital databases has been a convenience. Research editors still generally favor the use of hard copies when stories are fact-checked prior to publication, and some continue to employ a complex system of color-coding or "20 different colors of stickies" during their work on paper.

Some research editors and their staff, whether in-house or freelance, follow written guidelines and checklists developed internally to ensure consistency in the print verification process. Other magazines pass down their processes through "oral history" and the "culture of the department," as one editor said, citing the importance of training and experience over strict adherence to a process. Another magazine's routine is not documented for legal reasons: "The lawyers don't like us to do that."

Writers are generally responsible for providing notes, recordings and primary documents, as well as contact information for all quoted sources, so that fact-checkers can essentially "re-report" a story to verify its facts. They typically don't read quotes back to sources, but they check the factual content within them. "You really don't want to give [sources] a chance to totally rework what they've said," one editor explained. "It's more focusing on the accuracy of what they said." Research editors also check interview transcripts to verify that "viewpoints are accurately represented" and that quotes have not been cobbled together from multiple statements in an interview. At one magazine, if a writer interviewed a source with the help of a translator, a fact-checker who speaks the source's language calls the source to check those quotes and facts.

Research editors may refer stories to a legal affairs editor, a legal department at their publication, or a lawyer on retainer to review potentially contentious copy. At some magazines, legal staff reviews the entire print issue, no matter what; at others, research editors share only potentially contentious stories with them. One editor said that the magazine's lawyer "is very much our companion in this process, our collaborator as we are reviewing our final text and making sure it meets not only standards of accuracy, but also of legal liability."

Regardless of the specifics of their individual processes, these magazines still hold fast to fact-checking routines: "We don't go to print if we don't have it fact checked. It's not optional. It just doesn't happen. … It's just not a negotiable piece of the print process."

Resources for Print Fact-Checking

Although fact-checking routines for print publications are quite similar to those used for many decades, the resources available to complete this work have changed, along with the pace. In the interviews, editors often spoke of "doing more with less," referring to budget and staff cutbacks. Most have fewer fact-checkers today (half or one-third of their previous number). As one editor explained, "We have a much smaller staff than we used to have. Yet we are still able to fact-check the entire magazine, which means … everyone's spread a little thinner." Others admit that the fact-checking of print stories has diminished in thoroughness: "We don't really do this anymore, because we don't have time, but [in the past] you had to have three good, hopefully primary sources for every single fact in a story. We simply don't adhere to that anymore."

Some research editors have no permanent staff, but instead manage freelancers and interns. The use of freelancers, fellows and interns as fact-checkers raises concern among many editors. One magazine provides its interns only two hours of training for fact-checking. These checkers' short-term, limited experience means that they haven't developed what some editors called the "second sense" of skilled fact-checkers. As one editor said, "It takes a lot of experience, and if you're not a naturally questioning person, it takes a while [to develop] the second sense." One long-time research editor said using interns is "more for their education than for anything else" and questioned the value of fact-checking by inexperienced checkers. "I think there's a place for that in a magazine or a publication that has no resources at all, perhaps," this editor said. "It's almost like being a little bit pregnant, being a little bit fact-checked. I'm not really sure there's much value to it."

A nuance that challenges inexperienced fact-checkers is the difference between what one editor called "macro facts" and "embedded facts." The former includes "assumptions or positions that people take" -- what Shapiro (1990) calls "subjective facts" -- while the latter includes more basic details of names, places and other facts that Shapiro deems "objective." The "macro facts" require a greater level of sophistication to recognize as necessitating checking. "That takes a lot of critical thinking," the editor observed, noting that less-experienced checkers might not have developed the necessary analytical skills. They don't have the broad perspective of an experienced fact-checker, said another editor: "They may know that you need to check the names, you need to check the spellings, you need to check all the details -- but you can get completely in the woods and miss what the real purpose is, and what really matters." Another editor described this sophistication as "a sense of purpose and philosophy … rather than just knowing the mechanics of how to go through a proof."

Moreover, less experienced checkers are sometimes too trusting of online sources and reluctant to make phone calls to verify facts. "The internet is like your diving board of jumping off into the pool of fact-checking. It's not the pool itself. You're not fact-checking, really, on the internet," one editor said. For all of these reasons, another editor has abandoned the effort to get interns up to speed: "For the time being, I will not be utilizing interns any more because we simply do not have the staff resources to train them like they should be trained."

In addition to lacking an adequate number of trained, permanent staff, some editors have insufficient time to thoroughly check all print content. To compete with other news and information sources, one editor noted that "higher-up editors … decided that we can be more timely and react more to what's going on in the world around us, [so] they wanted us to have a shorter lead time on preparing articles" for the print magazine. This attempt to create a polished print product on a compressed schedule affects the fact-checkers' work. This editor wasn't alone in feeling an economically motivated time crunch. The fact-checkers at another magazine work "extremely late nights and weekends … [and] both weekends before we ship an issue just because the nature of the timing. … We don't have enough checkers, and it's all down to cost." The editors' dedication to accuracy motivates their long work hours: "We've tried to stay as diligent with print as we've ever been, even as our resources dwindle." Another editor saw the work as fighting the good fight: "I'm going down swinging, because I believe that if you're going to do something, that you need to do it right."

Overview of Routines for Magazines' Digital Content

The internet has been a double-edged sword for fact-checkers. On one hand, some of their daily tasks are made far easier by the availability of quick online searches and databases: "You're not going back into the library and flipping through dusty pages. As long as you've got reliable sources to go to, you can find the information really fast." On the other hand, the presence of magazines on digital platforms has created "so much time pressure to get the stories up and out quickly."

This pressure led three magazines included in this study to skip fact-checking *entirely* for their online content, relying solely on writers' diligence to ensure the quality of their stories. Five magazines check only long-form, investigative stories published online, which they admit are rare. In short, 8 of the 11 publications don't routinely check web content. The other three have an abbreviated fact-checking process for digital content that focuses mainly on objective facts. "They'll read it and make a quick check of names and dates and spellings and make sure there isn't anything legally problematic in it," one editor explained of the fact-checking of online stories. "It's sort of a question of triage," said another. This diminished process exists even though two of the 11 editors noted the increasing use of writers trained not as journalists, but as creative writers, who may not adhere to industry standards regarding factual information or accurate quotation.

One editor at a magazine with an abbreviated process described it as a "rotating daily fact-checker system" for online stories: "We track which stories are going up the next day internally and we have fact checkers look at our main, front home page stories every day, so I think we are one of very few outlets that fact-check online."

This lack of rigorous fact-checking of online stories contrasts sharply with the attention still given to these magazines' print stories. Some of these stories are also posted online, and therefore fact-checked by print fact-checkers, but content produced exclusively for digital platforms receives little or no checking. This content may be shorter, simpler, or aggregated from other sources, but errors in it may still diminish the magazine's reputation for accuracy. Some of the editors have reluctantly come to terms with this new state of affairs. "There's a lot of snap judgment going on," one editor explained. "It's sort of a question of triage. We have to live with the reality that we can't [check everything]; things have to move quickly on the website." Another editor said, "Our website is so extensive, there's really no way to check everything. … It's a different forum. It's a different world, on every level of editing, and that's including checking." One editor said the magazine focuses on checking "all the things that can be verified without having to spend days and days on the phone." Another editor said flatly, "There is no fact-checking online." Three editors noted that their processes are still evolving as their magazines continue to grapple with what goes online.

One editor said the "internet-driven FOMO [fear of missing out] feeling as a news organization" motivates the use of post-hoc fact checking for urgent stories that needed quick publishing. However, this editor also noted that some stories require closer attention: "It takes a greater level of distinguishing what type of story you're trying to publish and what the needs of that story are. There's a little bit more case-by-case thinking." Explaining the struggle, another editor said, "We don't really like to say that we don't check everything on the web, but we just can't. Obviously, online news is a balance" between timeliness and caution.

When there is at least minimal checking, editors try to achieve that balance in different ways. At one magazine, some online stories are flagged for vetting by lawyers or a more detailed fact-check, but these are rare -- typically only longer investigative pieces, and only when time permits. At this publication, interns use a basic fact-checking process for "truly time-sensitive" stories: "a quick check of names and dates and spellings, and [they] make sure there isn't anything legally problematic." Then the story goes online, but interns and editors "keep an eye on it, and dabble into some details, and wind up changing them as time allows." This process of publishing time-sensitive stories and then retrospectively fact-checking them "makes me cringe," the editor admitted, "but it's just the way of the world."

A similar process applies at another magazine, where "most of the website is not fact-checked [except for] long-form features" and any stories with potential "legal issues." Finally, one magazine has developed "an express fact-checking system … putting extra weight towards certain kinds of facts, like names, titles, chronologies, figures calculated by the writer … and quoted text." This faster-paced system applies to time-sensitive online stories with few legal concerns. Social media posts generally are not independently fact-checked, but they typically draw on existing content, with the exception of one magazine that uses "lawyered" or fact-checked tweets for stories with legal concerns.

Editors frequently say that writers of online content are the first -- and sometimes only -- defenders of accuracy. As one editor put it, "The editor is probably relying on the author to self-check." This editor also noted the general low pay and lack of time for online writers' efforts, and suggested that consequently, they may pay less attention to accuracy. Another editor noted that online fact-checking is "primarily the responsibility of the writer. … The copy editors, if they get involved, will do a very, very light fact check, but with digital, there's so much time pressure."

A lot depends on the individual writer in this common approach: "The truth is, some writers are better and more responsible than others." At another magazine, "The name of whatever person is on that post would or should be responsible. … I don't like it, but I get it. You cross your fingers and hope that everyone is being responsible, thoughtful and following through." Another magazine has turned over the fact-checking of an annual product-focused issue to its freelance writers for the last few years, with a little more pay allocated specifically for fact-checking themselves: "[We] told them, 'You're responsible for the accuracy of this. We're not fact-checking you.' … I would explain to them how to do it … and it's worked out just fine," this editor said. Involving more editors and checkers in online checking was seen as "simply slowing down the process too much."

Managing Print and Digital Accuracy

The second research question asked how editors feel about the fact-checking routines currently used for their print and digital content, and about the contrast between these varying levels of scrutiny and rigor.

Lasting Importance of Fact-Checking

Editors continue to value fact-checking as part of the magazine production process for a variety of reasons, including protection from legal liability, the ability to tackle controversial topics, and the importance of maintaining their magazines' reputations for trustworthiness and accuracy.

Editors frequently noted the importance of fact-checking as a "first line of defense against lawsuits." One editor said the publisher keeps fact-checking records for seven years "to ensure that we are able to respond to any claim … by showing the efforts we went to fact-check." The involvement of dedicated legal counsel in the fact-checking process gave another magazine "more leeway. We can move more quickly, but we can also do it with confidence. So we feel like we can really … push the envelope" and publish work that may be controversial or challenging.

Writers are also supported and encouraged by thorough fact-checking, another editor noted: "A writer can spend three, four, five months working on this piece and do a huge amount of reporting, and the writing process is very intense ... for them to be able to turn everything over to a fact-checker who's going to go through and give them this extra layer of confidence before they put it out into the world -- that's an important piece." Editors also noted that detailed fact-checking and legal consultation strengthen their magazines' journalism. The fact-checkers, another editor said, "protect the integrity of the magazine, and we protect the pocketbook of the magazine and the company. But … personally, I think the integrity is the most important. That's because I'm a romantic."

Editors credited fact-checking with distinguishing them from less rigorously checked magazines and other media. One editor noted that publishing investigative and sometimes controversial journalism made it important for the magazine to maintain "one of the most rigorous fact-checking processes in the industry … Having such a strong fact-checking process is really what enables us to publish those types of stories." Another editor stated that print "has the responsibility to uphold" a commitment to accuracy, "when you've got all these other types of media coming up where there just isn't any system" for verification. Another editor endorsed this argument on behalf of print magazines more generally:

> The industry is struggling in many ways, but … we are the place where people have expectations that we are going to check it out, and … get it right; we are not just going to copy and paste something that a friend of a friend of a friend said.

Many of the editors spoke about a reputation for accuracy as important to their readers' trust and ongoing engagement:

> We've only got our reputation, really … if you pick up this magazine, you're going to get a solidly reported and checked story that you can believe. We're not going to sensationalize. We're not going to cut corners on fact-checking.

These editors saw thorough fact-checking as a significant asset to their publications, and to the magazine medium more generally.

To further demonstrate the significance of fact-checking, three of the editors – unprompted – referred to the 2014 *Rolling Stone* story about a rape of a University of Virginia student that contained likely fabrication by its primary source and other factual discrepancies. The story was retracted in 2015 and resulted in a successful defamation case by a university administrator against both the magazine and the story's author (Shapiro 2016). One editor we interviewed noted this case as "the most publicized example recently" of failed fact-checking; another said the incident revealed that even "a fantastic checking department" could have "a major debacle that showed that it wasn't functioning as well as it could be. And that could be any place, because we're all dealing with the same constraints." The *Rolling Stone* case demonstrated to another editor that it is critical to maintain "the independence of the fact-checking department … the [*Rolling Stone*] fact-checker really did not have any sort of independent ability to push back and have ownership … it was a disaster."

However, these interviewees admitted that while their print magazines are thoroughly fact-checked, their digital products are not -- a discrepancy that concerned many of these editors.

Print and Digital Fact-Checking Divergence

The editors expressed frustration with the disparity between the rigorous attention paid to accuracy in print and the lax approach to fact-checking digital content. One editor, whose publication does minimal fact-checking of online content, said, "We want to be just as accurate with online as we are in print, and we are just as liable for information when it goes online." Another editor said, "Social media has made it so that if there's a problem, 50,000 people know about it before you can change it."

Some of the editors, however, took solace in their ability to correct inaccuracies caught by readers instead of editors. "It's a bummer, but it's not hard to change. You can go online and update it instantly," one editor said. This editor noted that online errors don't present the same legal risk: "If we hear [a story is] wrong, … it's not as worrisome legally either, because you can take it down." One editor's description summarized the magazines' typical approach: "The philosophy seems to be that a story on the web can be updated, corrected, and in the worst case scenario, taken down. It removes the need for the same set of checks and balances as for the print page." However, as another editor said, "The internet is this weird paradox because yes, it can be fixed in an instant, but the old stuff is also still out there forever. The print magazine is going to be in the shredder or recycling bin a year later. But [readers] can find the cached version of the [web] page" with inaccurate information even after corrections are made.

One editor actually preferred to embrace speed and transparency for online stories over complete accuracy, stating, "I'm not entirely sure that I do" want to fact-check every online story:

> You know, the web is a different animal than print. We get something wrong in print, there's a million printed copies of it somewhere to not change. If I put something on [our website] right now and I make a mistake, I can fix it in five minutes. … Ignoring any kind of libel issues, that is a mistake that does not harm anyone … We can fix it, and we can be transparent about fixing it.

All the editors noted that their publications' approaches to fact-checking online and social media content are in a process of ongoing change. "It has been evolving," one editor explained. "We are really grappling with how to deal with online pieces," another admitted.

The editors expressed that it was challenging to both "react to things that are happening as they're happening, and … [maintain our] more long-form style, and then the quality that everyone expects of it … so that's the sort of balance that they've been trying to negotiate over the last couple of years." While magazines may be publishing shorter, more rapidly produced pieces online, they are also trying to sustain the signature characteristics of magazine journalism in those online stories, with accuracy sometimes a victim of this faster pace. This state of flux makes it difficult to codify fact-checking routines, and errors in online pieces may still reflect poorly on the magazine as a whole.

The Future of Magazine Fact-Checking

The third research question asked what editors felt about the future of fact-checking at magazines, with regard to both print and digital content.

Even as these editors described the importance of fact-checking for their magazines' reputations and legal protection -- and for readers' trust in the medium generally -- they also acknowledged the slim likelihood of in-depth fact-checking ever becoming the norm for digital content. As one said, "I would not say there's a career for web fact-checkers."

Nonetheless, these editors acknowledged that the relative newness of digital platforms means that processes are still evolving for ensuring accuracy. As one editor noted, verification practices have developed in conjunction with innovation in online platforms: "The web editors have been trying to figure out what kind of website they want to have, so accordingly, fact checking has been involved with that." The structure and story styles used online are still a matter of experimentation for most magazines. Another editor said, "There is room in all media for fact checking. It's just a matter of how it's done and how you adapt to the medium."

Meanwhile, the profession of fact-checking itself may be endangered. One editor worried that the current state of "triage" in fact-checking would result in those involved "eventually … only knowing the shortcuts," not a comprehensive approach to the practice. Perhaps, another editor said, fact-checking is "sort of a dying art."

The recent surge of popular interest in the act of fact-checking could potentially reinvigorate this art. Some of the editors noted that the rise in political fact-checking is raising public awareness of the significance of fact-checking and research, and potentially motivating publications to respond:

> The internet and really the last few political campaigns have seen a resurgence and interest in the practice of fact checking, all of these factcheck.org kind of things … culturally, we have become more interested in dissecting the accuracy of what people say, which is really great.

Even reader complaints about errors indicate growing public understanding of the existence and purpose of media organizations' fact-checking:

> When I first started fact checking, I had to go through this whole song and dance in the old days on the phone, explaining what fact checking was to somebody … [today, when an error is noted,] more likely than not, we get, 'Why didn't you fact-check this?' … when no one even knew what those two words meant 20 years ago.

Many of these editors thought their magazines' reputations for accuracy and their readers' trust would help them compete in the crowded digital space:

> [Fact-checking is] important because [our magazine] needs to survive in a digital world. I think we need to use our history and reputation as part of our appeal. … People should know that they're getting a quality, fact-checked, edited magazine.

Discussion

This study focuses on the fact-checking of print and digital content at a select group of well-regarded U.S. magazines. It examines the persistence and importance of fact-checking applied to magazines' print publications, and how and why fact-checking routines differ between print and digital platforms. Finally, it describes challenges editors face as they look toward an even more digitally oriented media future.

Similarities and differences emerge when comparing these results to earlier research on magazines' fact-checking practices. Shapiro (1990) noted that the editors she studied were diligent under deadline pressure and worked hard to maintain accuracy in their print magazines. The editors interviewed here demonstrated similarly deep commitments to the practice of fact-checking in print, with terms like "philosophy" and "a calling" demonstrating that fact-checking is, for them, not merely a set of daily tasks. It may be that the rise of digital media and the concomitant surge in unreliable online information has deepened these editors' belief in the significance of their work and intensified their desire to protect their readers and magazines from inaccuracy.

Additionally, Shapiro (1990) identified the significance of fact-checkers' role in examining what she called "subjective facts" -- those "varied concerns that generally pertain to evidence, the presentation or interpretation of information, generalization and, on rare occasions, fairness" (11). This category of facts was most likely to be found inaccurate by fact-checkers in Shapiro's study. Importantly, this is the type of fact that editors in the present study identified as hardest for less-experienced checkers to recognize as requiring checking. Moreover, the editors in this study consistently noted that when fact-checking is done on digital content, it focuses exclusively on objective facts. Neglecting the accuracy of "subjective facts" certainly poses a threat to the maintenance of accuracy.

This is particularly concerning because, as Shapiro noted, a quarter of the facts checked by rigorous fact-checkers fall into the "subjective" category, including assertions made without direct evidence, inferences, use of qualifiers, and "instances when writers get into subjects' heads." These are precisely the kinds of facts that are not checked on digital platforms, and yet they were the most likely to be found problematic by print fact-checkers (Shapiro 1990, 12-13).

Comparing the results of Navasky and Lerner (2010) to the current research reveals how rapidly fact-checking of digital content is changing, likely due to magazines' effort to increase the pace and volume of online content. Navasky and Lerner (2010) found that 57% of magazines they studied used the same routines for fact-checking print and online content, and 27% checked online content, but less thoroughly than their print content (16). Perhaps foreshadowing the future, they found that websites with more traffic (above 50,000 visitors a month -- small by today's standards) were less rigorous in their fact-checking than websites with less traffic (Navasky and Lerner 2010, 17). Six years later, three of our 11 respondents said none of their online content receives any fact-checking, leaving the responsibility entirely in the hands of writers, and five more said only long-form online content (which they rarely publish) receives any fact-checking. The three who regularly fact-check online content use an expedited process, unlike the thorough vetting done for their print stories.

Back in 2010, Navasky and Lerner called for industry-wide guidelines on factual accuracy online. One editor interviewed here echoed that call: “Ideally, there should be some industry-wide standard. That's really thinking big. There should be some standard practices around this." Instead, as Navasky and Lerner observed, magazines appear to be continuing their shift toward the newspaper model of fact-checking, with writers responsible for verifying their own material and necessary corrections made after publication. Magazine publishers indeed should consider developing an industry-wide standard for verification practices for digital content.

From a magazine industry perspective, rigorous fact-checking routines remain essential to a publication’s reputation for accuracy. That reputation is a significant asset for a magazine’s future survival, whether in print or digital form. As the Tow Center for Digital Journalism (2014) notes, “So many sources of news are now available that any publication with a reputation for accuracy, probity or rigor has an advantage over the run-of-the-mill competition.” Magazines’ reputation for thorough fact-checking could serve them well in this environment.

However, the Tow report also notes that it can be tempting for organizations with solid reputations “to extend their reputation for high quality over new low-cost, high-volume efforts.” In other words, they may develop content focused on curation, aggregation and “commodity” news that is fast and cheap to produce, generates page views, and brings in advertising dollars. The Tow report suggests that this kind of content jeopardizes the established reputations of journalism brands, and therefore should be undertaken cautiously, if at all. This study reveals that magazines may currently risk one of their most valuable assets by neglecting the thorough verification of their online content.

The importance of credibility -- and the ease of losing it -- is hardly unique to magazines. Maier (2005) observes that there is a “corrosive effect of error” on newspaper credibility, to a degree that journalists may not fully appreciate (535). Although journalists might not think that minor mistakes diminish the credibility of the press among the public, research has found that even small errors in spelling and grammar, numbers, names, and titles contribute to public skepticism about the overall accuracy of journalism (Maier 2005, 535).

All the magazines in this study allocate more resources to the verification of their print stories than their digital content. This allocation, though understandable, should perhaps be reconsidered, given that many more readers connect with magazines through their digital platforms. Although corrections can be made more easily online than in print, errors still damage a magazine’s reputation for accuracy. Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord (2016) found that many readers -- particularly those who read a lot of digital content -- are forgiving when they see corrections of minor errors. However, these researchers also found that readers generally held “a traditional ‘vetting before dissemination’ viewpoint,” preferring that information be checked prior to publication (Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2016, 13). That preference held across varying reader demographics and media use habits: “Citizens are conservative in their expectations of what journalism should provide” (15) -- a perspective that journalists competing for audiences would do well to heed.

This issue is particularly acute for magazines, whose editors are facing changes in norms and practices that have defined magazines for decades. Reynolds (2015) explores various descriptions of magazine editors’ role, as offered in textbooks and popular discourse, and identifies the “standards of craft” (481) that magazine editors have traditionally maintained, including verification. In particular, these editors' statements regarding the role of failed fact-checking in the *Rolling Stone* incident constitute "metajournalistic discourse" (Carlson 2016). These statements serve as a form of "boundary work" that legitimizes these editors' work and defines the unique characteristics of magazine journalism, further justifying the existence and authority of fact-checking departments and routines at magazines. *Rolling Stone* requested that Columbia Journalism School faculty conduct an investigation of the reporting and editing failures in the incident; the resulting report has become a touchstone for discussions of the importance of factual accuracy and verification processes throughout journalism (Coronel, Coll, and Kravitz 2015). Drawing upon this metajournalistic understanding of the profession, those working on online content for magazines call upon "the established prestige and efficacy given to traditional journalists," developed by magazines through their long history of accuracy and verification (Agarwel and Barthel 2015, 379). However, as this study shows, magazine editors are now being challenged to develop "a new set of norms while adapting and redefining traditional norms to their workplace routines and practices" (Agarwel and Barthel 2015, 387).

The magazines in this study reflect a profession during a process of change, grappling with how an old model of fact-checking can and should be adapted to newer platforms. It may be that two very different processes for print and digital will emerge. As Hermida (2012) describes, social media have introduced into journalism the potential for crowdsourcing of verification, distributing some of the authority and function of fact-checking to the audience. Increasingly, instead of detailed fact-checking occurring prior to publication, "news and information is published, disseminated, confirmed or refuted in public through a process facilitated by social media" (Hermida 2012, 665). As our study reveals, verification processes applied to print magazines have not translated well to digital content due to the pressures of volume and time. However, editors do take advantage of a "public," distributed verification process for digital content, in which errors caught by readers are corrected post-publication. Ward notes that in times of transition in journalism, a "synthesis of old and new practices [emerges] … guided by a new system of ethics that is a synthesis of old and new norms" (2011, 211). Some magazines appear willing to place some of the responsibility for digital content's accuracy onto their audiences through crowd-sourced verification and post-publication corrections. This willingness suggests a new twist on standard journalistic ideals and ethical practice, in which only accurate information would reach the public. This emerging norm may deserve further critical attention from an ethical perspective.

The divergence in print and digital magazine verification practices suggests two significant observations about magazines today. First, it suggests that magazine editors continue to value the integrity of their print products, seeing them as the flagship properties of their brands and spending disproportionate time and resources on fact-checking them, at the expense of their digital platforms. This is true despite the fact that more people use these magazines' content online and through social media. Second, magazines are still in the process of establishing practices for their digital content to protect their reputations for accuracy and trustworthiness. They are clearly aware that they may lose portions of their audience who value their print editions' accuracy but distrust their digital content.

In an article about the value of his interactions with fact-checkers, award-winning author Ta-Nehisi Coates (2012) writes,

> Being fact-checked is not very fun. Good fact-checkers have a preternatural inclination toward pedantry, and sometimes will address you in a prosecutorial tone. That is their job

> and the adversarial tone is even more important than the actual facts they correct. … a culture of fact-checking, of honesty, is as important as the actual fact-checking.

Whatever magazines' new verification norms and routines look like, maintaining magazines' "culture of fact-checking" seems critical. Nothing less than their brands are at stake.

Conclusion

Magazine editors are at a crossroads between traditional, ante-hoc fact-checking, and an evolving practice of public, post-hoc distributed verification of digital content. Long distinguished from other news forms by its detailed fact-checking practices, the magazine medium is now challenged to embody the accuracy ideal through two divergent sets of verification practices: one for print that is well-established, and one for digital that is still evolving with digital media and the publications' practices in that realm. This study offers a snapshot in time as research editors grapple with the transition and transformation of their publications well beyond print. These results also demonstrate yet another way that digital publishing has affected the ideal of journalistic accuracy and the routines through which it is enacted.

Admittedly, this study includes only a small set of research editors at high-level magazines; practices across the magazine industry vary. Future research should examine a wider variety of magazines and their verification routines, as well as readers' perceptions of the accuracy of print magazines and digital magazine content. Do readers adjust their accuracy expectations according to the source of the content found online, which is increasingly accessed not by directly visiting a magazine's website, but through searches, aggregators and social media (Bell 2016)? And do they change their opinions about the reliability of specific magazine brands when they find errors or corrections? More studies of this type would build our understanding of changing verification routines and their effects across the journalism profession, and their impact on readers who seek accurate information from journalists, regardless of the medium.

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