



Checking the Facts:

Campaign coverage, online journalism and fact-checking in the 2016 Australian federal and US presidential election campaigns

A report for the Journalism, Education and Research Association of Australia

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Executive Summary

This report considers the current role and position of fact-checking in Australian political and election campaign journalism. This innovative journalistic approach, which has a long history in the United States, is only just over five years old in Australia – the first dedicated fact-checkers launched ahead of the 2013 federal election campaign. The report presents the results of a case study focusing on how three Australian and three United States legacy news organisations incorporated fact-checking into their online coverage of key events in national-level elections in 2016. The report finds that while fact-checking was consistently integrated throughout the US coverage, it was much less commonly taken up in Australia, with only the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) providing routine fact-checking of the campaign events studied. The report concludes with four key recommendations for Australian political journalists and legacy news media organisations to consider, discussed in detail in the final section:

1. Develop internal strategies and collaborations to reverse siloing of fact-checking content in legacy news organisations' online offerings.
2. Pursue options for extending or re-purposing existing analytical 'fact-check' content, with the inclusion of graphic or data-based presentation styles.
3. Explore partnering with independent fact-checking organisations.
4. Explore partnering with tertiary institutions and journalism schools.

Introduction: Fact-checking, Journalism and Democracy

The first local fact-checkers launched in Australia five years ago, before the 2013 federal election. Since then, they have been the focus of public, journalism industry and scholarly discussion about the role, value and sustainability of their operations. These discussions are vital, particularly in light of shared (although not universal) and deeply-held beliefs about the indispensable public interest function of political journalism in a healthy democracy. Considerations and reconsiderations of the contribution of political journalism to democracy have only sharpened since the 2016 US presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump to the Oval Office. Australian political journalists and scholars are particularly aware of, and responsive to, the challenges to the profession characteristic of the Trump era, with developments in the US representing a ‘shot in the arm’¹ for political and campaign journalists. It is in this context that I seek in this report to consider the current role and position of fact-checking in Australian political and election campaign journalism. Fact-checking, I argue, is a valuable innovation in political journalism. If adequately funded and integrated across platforms, approaches and organisations it can play a key role in helping journalists address the disruptions of the current moment and the challenge of providing authoritative political coverage in a complex, fluid and networked news ecology.

Professional journalism has long been concerned with ‘facts’ both in practice and self-conception. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel identify in their seminal book *The Elements of Journalism*, it operates as a ‘discipline of verification’ reliant on consistent and transparent methods of checking sources, information and claims in reporting.² In an Australian context, Farrer and Wake have argued that journalists’ ‘fundamental mission is to verify and contextualise information’,³ while Lucas Graves, in his history of political fact-checking in US journalism, notes that ‘newspapers have long employed fact-checkers’ and proof-readers in an internal process that ‘takes aim at the reporter’.⁴

¹ Farrer, G and Wake, A (15 June, 2017) Joint Submission to the Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, Submission 26, p.3.

² Kovach, B and Rosenstiel, T (2014) *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. 3rd Edn. Random House: New York.

³ Farrer and Wake (15 June, 2017), p. 3.

⁴ Graves, L (2016) *Deciding What’s True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 7.

Graves makes a distinction between this and contemporary fact-checking which does ‘just the opposite’: ‘investigate[s] claims that are *already* in the news and publish[es] the results as a news story’, representing a ‘new form of political news’.⁵

Those who research and work in political fact-checking tend to say it both makes an important contribution to the health of democracy and is a significant and valuable innovation in journalism practice. They connect its particular contemporary value to the changing social, cultural and technological environment in which political journalists now operate. For Bill Adair, founder and former editor of *Politifact* in the US, it is ‘no longer enough, in the information age, to just pass on the soundbites from politicians – we have to tell our readers the truth’.⁶ Similarly, Glenn Kessler, who writes the *Washington Post* ‘Fact Checker’ column, has argued that ‘political fact-checking’ is now ‘an essential component of independent journalism in a democratic society’.⁷ For Kessler, fact-checking ‘has the potential to quickly raise the level of political discourse and the quality of journalism’ with limited resources required beyond ‘a website and some dedicated professionals’.

In this report, I detail the results and insights of one element of a broader project which researched the impact of new sources of political information on legacy news organisations’ election campaign coverage in Australia and the US. First, I chart the rise and spread of fact-checking in Australia and the US through engagement with key industry and scholarly debates about its adoption and effectiveness. I then map the current landscape, placing fact-checking into the context of the rapidly evolving digital news ecology. With this as a foundation, I present the results of an empirical analysis which focused on the online coverage provided by six legacy news organisations of high-profile set-piece campaign events during the 2016 Australian federal and US presidential elections. In doing so, I ask: how and where does fact-checking appear in this online campaign coverage? What are the key differences in the use of fact-checking in the Australian and US coverage, and what might be learned from these for future

⁵ Graves (2016), p. 8.

⁶ Adair, B in Knott, M (29 April, 2013) ‘Fact off: ABC and Fray’s Politifact dig into pollie’s spin’. *Crikey*. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2013/04/29/fact-off-abc-and-frays-politifact-dig-into-pollies-spin/>.

⁷ Kessler, G (6 January, 2014) ‘Just the facts: Politics and the new journalism’. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2014-01-06/just-facts>.

Australian political and campaign coverage? Guided by these questions, I then make four key recommendations for the Australian journalism industry.

The Rise and Growth of Fact-Checking: Industry and Scholarly Debates

Contemporary iterations of journalistic fact-checking have evolved in a social, media and political landscape increasingly characterised by the conditions of ‘information disorder’.⁸ This term, coined by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, brings together the challenges of disruptions wrought by ‘mis-, dis- and mal-information’, which together contribute to ‘the polluted information streams that are now characteristic of our modern, networked and increasingly polarised world’.⁹ In this context, industry and scholarly debates about the effectiveness and value of fact-checking are gaining increasing traction in Australia and internationally alongside rising concern about ‘fake news’ (both about the use of the term by political actors, and the spread of false information and news stories). Changes and challenges to the role of journalism – as a ‘discipline of verification’ – have been a central aspect of these conversations, as has consideration of the way that the internet provides ‘an “open” format’ both for the process and reporting of the checks.¹⁰

In 2013, as locally-run sites began to launch in Australia, some journalists expressed concerns that the ‘popularity of these fact-checking sites’ was an indication ‘that journalism [was] failing to adequately perform its function’.¹¹ Writing in a *Guardian Australia* column, Bronwen Clune questioned the benefit of fact-checks presented without ‘proper journalistic framing’, arguing that ‘journalism is about unearthing facts - not just accurate ones but the right ones, difficult ones, uncomfortable ones, and putting them in context’, an area where she argued fact-checking sites could not compete.¹² She queried, in particular, what the establishment of the ABC’s own Fact Check Unit said ‘about the rigour of basic journalism within our government-funded

⁸ Wardle, C and Derakhshan, H (2017) *Information Disorder*. Council of Europe Report DGI(2017)09.

⁹ Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), p. 10.

¹⁰ Guerrini, F (8 July, 2013) ‘From traditional to online fact-checking’. *European Journalism Observatory*. <https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/traditional-online-fact-checking>.

¹¹ Clune, B (16 July, 2013) ‘Are fact-checking sites a symptom of the media not doing its job?’ *Guardian Australia*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/16/data-journalism-fact-checking-australia>.

¹² Clune (2013).

media'. This was a critique echoed by conservative commentator Chris Kenny who argued in *The Australian* that 'it should be safe to assume an assessment of the facts has been of paramount concern in all of Auntie's output'.¹³ These critiques were countered by *Conversation Fact Check* editor Gay Alcorn, when reflecting on the role of fact-checking in coverage of the 2013 election campaign:

Of course journalists should test factual claims routinely - and they often do, although the speed of news makes it difficult at times. Social media, too, often holds politicians - and journalists - to account, challenging assertions and statements of "fact". Dedicated fact-checking sites don't replace other critical forms of journalism, but are an addition to them, an example of much-needed innovation.¹⁴

These debates follow the contours of similar conversations in the US. For example, in the wake of the 2012 presidential campaign the late *New York Times* media columnist David Carr wrote that 'it was the truth that ended up as a smoldering wreck'.¹⁵ Carr acknowledged that fact-checking was both widespread in the campaign, with 'all the big national newspapers [having] major fact-checking initiatives' alongside standalone organisations and social media, and also popular with readers. Despite this, he argued that it was ineffective in achieving its democratic aims: 'Fact-checking, as it turns out, is more of a cottage industry than a civic corrective'. Again, these critiques were challenged by those involved in fact-checking initiatives, such as *FactCheck.Org* founding editor Brooks Jackson.¹⁶

While those in the profession have been paying attention to the rise and impact of fact-checking in the US for almost a decade¹⁷, recent attempts in the US and internationally to understand how and where fact-checking is growing have also seen the production of a series of industry-focused reports, produced by both journalists and scholars (Table One). Fact-checking has also been raised in reports focused on related issues, such as

¹³ Kenny, C (8 June, 2013) 'Objective fact-check a fiction'. *The Australian*. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/objective-fact-check-a-fiction/news-story/4309213cc43ffe3f2ed01fe248bb600b>.

¹⁴ Alcorn, G (6 September, 2013) 'Fact-checking the 2013 election'. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/fact-checking-the-2013-election-17946>.

¹⁵ Carr, D (6 November, 2012) 'A last fact check: It didn't work'. *New York Times*, Media Decoder blog. <https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/a-last-fact-check-it-didnt-work/>.

¹⁶ Jackson, B (21 December, 2012) 'Firefighters, fact-checking and American journalism'. *FactCheck.Org*. <https://www.factcheck.org/2012/12/firefighters-fact-checking-and-american-journalism/>.

¹⁷ See, for example, Spivak C (December, 2011) 'The fact-checking explosion'. *American Journalism Review*. <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4980>

the impact of exposure to ‘misinformation’ during the 2016 presidential campaign.¹⁸ Other projects take an ongoing approach rather than producing a single report. For example, the Duke Reporters’ Lab has been maintaining a database of international fact-checking efforts since 2014. So far, no report has been produced with an Australian focus; something I have sought to remedy in this research.

Table 1: Reports on the Rise, Effectiveness and Impact of Fact-Checking, 2012-2018

Authors	Year	Title
Graves, L	2018	Understanding the Promise and Limits of Automated Fact-Checking.
Iannucci, R and Adair, B	2017	Heroes or Hacks: The Partisan Divide over Fact-Checking.
Stencel, M	2015	‘Fact Check This’: How US Politics Adapts to Media Scrutiny.
Cherubini, F and Graves, L	2016	The Rise of Fact-Checking Sites in Europe.
Elizabeth, J et al	2015	Fact-checking and accountability journalism: Popular, effective – but sometimes misunderstood’.
Graves, L et al	2015	The Diffusion of fact-checking: Understanding the growth of a journalistic innovation.
Dobbs, M	2012	The Rise of Political Fact-Checking: How Regan Inspired a Journalistic Movement – A Reporter’s Eye View.
Graves, L and Glaisyer, T	2012	The Fact-Checking Universe in Spring 2012: An Overview.

Of key concern in these reports and industry discussions is the concern that fact-checkers may have difficulty finding sustainable funding and business models. Alexios Mantzarlis argues that fact-checkers face additional challenges on top of those already impacting traditional journalism operations. This is because fact-checking itself is ‘less scalable and more labour intensive’ than some other forms of journalism and ‘cannot yet reliably be automated’, and because ‘funding is often tied to the misguided idea that fact-checking is only relevant during an election cycle’.¹⁹ These challenges are also relevant in the Australian industry. Organisations that attempt to take on this ‘immense, time consuming, expensive and resource-demanding practice’ face significant funding challenges.²⁰ Additionally, there has been fierce local debate about the market impact of the ABC’s original Fact Check Unit as a publicly-funded operator.²¹

¹⁸ For example, Guess, A, Nyhan, B and Reifler, J (2018) *Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the Consumption of Fake News During the 2016 US Presidential Election*. Poynter Institute, Knight Foundation and American Press Institute with the European Research Council. Available at: <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf>; also Wardle and Derakhshan (2017).

¹⁹ Mantzarlis, A (6 January, 2016) ‘Why do fact-checking sites close? And how can new ones avoid that fate?’ *Poynter*. <https://www.poynter.org/news/why-do-fact-checking-sites-close-and-how-can-new-ones-avoid-fate>.

²⁰ Farrer and Wake (2017), p. 4.

²¹ See Skelton, R (19 February, 2014) ‘Claims of ABC dominance fail the fact check’. *The Age*. <https://www.theage.com.au/opinion/claims-of-abc-dominance-fail-the-fact-check-20140218->

Alongside these industry debates and reports, more traditional scholarly attention to fact-checking in journalism spans disciplines from journalism and media studies to political science and communication, information and computational technology and behavioural science. US presidential politics, and formal politics at other levels, have been the dominant empirical focus in research with a particular interest in fact-checking's role in, and relationship to, political and election campaign coverage.

European research is also growing. Researchers have sought to:

- assess the process and results of fact-checking of political advertising;²²
- consider the impact of fact-checking on political actors and elites;²³
- examine the impact of fact-checking on audience knowledge and voter perceptions and behaviours;²⁴
- explore journalistic approaches to fact-checking on social media;²⁵ and
- consider the development of tools for automation of fact-checking.²⁶

32ybo.html; Alcorn, G (4 February, 2014) 'Dominant ABC hurting the commercial sector'. *The Age*. <https://www.theage.com.au/opinion/dominant-abc-hurting-the-commercial-sector-20140213-32n3r.html>; Mantzarlis, A (25 January, 2016) 'Fact-checking on TV: Australia's ABC Fact Check'. *Poynter*. <https://www.poynter.org/news/fact-checking-tv-australias-abc-fact-check>.

²² Amazeen, M A (2015) 'Checking the fact-checkers in 2008: Predicting Political Ad Scrutiny and Assessing Consistency'. *Journal of Political Marketing* 15(4): 433-464.

²³ Nyhan, B and Reifler, J (2014) 'The effect of fact-checking on elites: A field experiment on US state legislators'. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 628-640.

²⁴ Barrera Rodriguez, O, Guriev, S M, Henry, E and Zhuravskaya, E (2017) *Facts, Alternative Facts, and Fact Checking in Times of Post-Truth Politics*. CEPR Discussion Paper No. DP12220, August.

Available: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3018474>; Shin, J and Thorson, K (2017) 'Partisan Selective Sharing: The Biased Diffusion of Fact-Checking Messages on Social Media'. *Journal of Communication* 67(2): 233-255;

Nyhan, B and Reifler, J (2015) *Estimating fact-checking's effects: Evidence from a long-term experiment during campaign 2014*. Washington DC: American Press Institute; Amazeen, M A, Thorson, E, Muddiman, A and Graves, L (2015) *A Comparison of Correction Formats: The Effectiveness and Effects of Rating Scale versus Contextual Corrections on Misinformation*. The American Press Institute, February.

Available at: <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/The-Effectiveness-of-Rating-Scales.pdf>; Gottfried, J A, Hardy, B W, Winneg, K M and Hall Jamieson, K (2013) 'Did fact checking matter in the 2012 Presidential Campaign?' *American Behavioural Scientist* 57(11): 1558-1567.

²⁵ Coddington, M, Molyneux, L and Lawrence, R G (2014) 'Fact-checking the campaign: How political reporters use Twitter to set the record straight (or not)'. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 19(4): 391-409.

²⁶ Hassan, N, Li, C and Tremayne, M (2015) 'Detecting check-worthy factual claims in presidential debates'. Conference Proceedings, *24th ACM International Conference on Information and Knowledge Management*, Melbourne Australia, October 18-23. Available at:

<https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=2806416.2806652>; Kriplean, T, Bonnar, C, Borning, A, Kinney, B and Gill, B (2014) 'Integrating on-demand fact-checking with public dialogue'. *CSCW '14 Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*, Baltimore MD, 15-19 February. Available at: <https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2531677>.

More broadly, the rise of fact-checking has stimulated vigorous debate about its methods and epistemology.²⁷ It is also occasionally appears in research that takes a broader interest in facts, and political or election campaign journalism.²⁸ Despite this growing international interest, there has been almost no scholarly attention to fact-checking in journalism studies and related disciplines in Australia, with the exception of Farrer and Wake's 2017 submission to the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism. They argue for the democratic value of fact-checking, positioning it in Australia as a 'a subset within a larger (still developing) verification ecosystem' which includes practices (some journalistic, others not) that seek to:

...adjudicate on the truthfulness of public statements, to correct misinformation (and disinformation), to deter politicians and others from deliberately or carelessly stretching or twisting (or ignoring) the truth, and to deter the sharing of material via social media that has been found to be false.²⁹

Alongside contemporary pressures (outlined above) they also identify longer-term contextual factors, such as 'the democratisation of publishing platforms and the rise of the citizen journalist'; 'the influence of political communication advisers' in political debate; 'the loss of trust in journalism and (more generally) in "expertise"'; and 'the tsunami of unfiltered and uncontested available information online', leading to challenges for citizens' political knowledge development.³⁰ They argue for the value of fact-checking which they position as 'a boon to all sides of politics and Australian democracy'.

Identifying the Fact-checkers: Mapping the field in Australia and the United States

In order to map the current shape of the political fact-checking field in Australia and the US, a definition relevant to the focus of this project is required. Graves and Glaysier note that the fact-checking landscape has become 'increasingly crowded' since 2008, with the 'real "explosion" ... within the ranks of professional journalism' and peaks of activity

²⁷ Uscinksi, J E and Butler, R W (2013) 'The epistemology of fact checking'. *Critical Review* 25(2): 162-180; Amazeen, M A (2015b) 'Revisiting the epistemology of fact checking'. *Critical Review* 27(1): 1-22; Uscinksi, J E (2015) 'The epistemology of fact-checking (is still naïve): Rejoinder to Amazeen'. *Critical Review* 27(2): 243-252.

²⁸ Jackson, B and Hall Jamieson, K (2004) 'Finding fact in political debate'. *American Behavioural Scientist* 48(2): 229-237.

²⁹ Farrer and Wake (2017), p.3.

³⁰ Farrer and Wake (2017), p. 4.

during election campaigns.³¹ This research is specifically interested in fact-checking defined by these two characteristics: undertaken by professional journalists or dedicated fact-check researchers with emphasis on political and campaign coverage (whether hosted by an existing news outlet or a dedicated fact-checking organisation). Political fact-checking has number of key identifying characteristics, such as commitment ‘to unbiased reporting and equal scrutiny of all politicians’³² and to ‘publicize errors or falsehoods’.³³ The Duke Reporter’s Lab, for example, includes:

...non-partisan organizations... that regularly publish articles or broadcast segments that assess the accuracy of statement made by public officials, political parties, candidates, journalists, news organizations, associations and other groups’.³⁴

Six key questions form the framework for identifying fact-checkers to include in the Lab’s database (Figure One). These are broad enough to capture fact-checkers who do not include or focus on politics; who are inactive; and who operate ‘promise trackers’ or ‘ad-watchers’. Within this framework, the Lab charts significant growth in the industry from 44 offerings in 2014 to 149 active globally at the start of 2018, with 21 launching since the start of 2017 alone.³⁵ The industry is fluid: some operations are short-lived while others close down between election campaigns. There were also differences in structure, for example, 41 of the 47 US projects were ‘arms of established news outlets’ (a much higher rate than international operators).³⁶

Figure 1: Key Questions for Identifying Fact-Checkers (Duke Reporters’ Lab)³⁷

<p>Does the site:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Examine all parties and sides?Examine discrete claims and reach conclusions?Track political promises?Make sources and methods transparent?Disclose funding and affiliations?Have news and information as its primary mission?
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³¹ Graves and Glaysier (2012), pp. 2-3.

³² Kessler (2014).

³³ Graves and Glaysier (2012), p.9.

³⁴ Adair, B and Stencel, M (22 June, 2016) ‘How we identify fact-checkers’. *Duke Reporters’ Lab*. <https://reporterslab.org/how-we-identify-fact-checkers/>.

³⁵ Stencel, M and Griffin, R (2018) ‘Fact-checking triples over four years’. *Duke Reporters’ Lab*, 22 February: <https://reporterslab.org/tag/fact-checking-census/>.

³⁶ Wang, S (22 February, 2018) ‘A 2018 survey of fact-checking projects around the world finds a booming field, with at least 149 dedicated initiatives’. *Nieman Lab*, ‘Reporting and Production’. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/02/a-2018-survey-of-fact-checking-projects-around-the-world-finds-a-booming-field-with-at-least-149-dedicated-initiatives/>.

³⁷ Adapted from Adair and Stencel (2016).

This report takes a narrower frame, as it is interested specifically in outlets or operations with a focus on politics or election campaigns, or that included political fact-checking as part of a broader journalistic exercise. The first dedicated Australian fact-checking operations of this kind were launched in 2013 (although *Crikey's* now-inactive 'Get Fact' column had been posting intermittently since 2012). Of the four that have launched in Australia, only two remain active (Table Two). Both *Politifact Australia* and the original ABC *Fact Check* Unit were suspended or closed due to challenges in securing sustainable funding. For example, *Politifact Australia* was originally funded by its founding editor (and veteran Fairfax journalist) Peter Fray with short-term support from Channel Seven and Fairfax that ended after the 2013 election. The ABC's *Fact Check* Unit fell victim to 2016 Federal Government budget cuts to funding that had been previously earmarked for 'enhanced newsgathering' approaches.³⁸

Table 2: Australian Fact-Checking Sites and Organisations, 2013-2018 ³⁹

Name	Dates active	Funding/Affiliation
<i>Politifact Australia</i>	May 2013 – December 2013	Private (Peter Fray); Fairfax Media / Seven Network
<i>ABC Fact Check</i>	August 2013 – July 2016	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
<i>The Conversation Fact Check</i>	July 2013 - ongoing	The Conversation
<i>RMIT ABC Fact Check</i>	February 2017 - ongoing	Joint funding: Australian Broadcasting Corporation and RMIT University

Two of these Australian fact-checkers were active at the time of the 2016 election: ABC *Fact Check* and *The Conversation Fact Check*. The ABC *Fact Check* model was unique both for being operated by 'an independent, publicly-owned statutory authority' and because of the 'distinctly cross-media' character of its outputs, which were across online,

³⁸ Davidson, D (17 May, 2016) 'ABC Fact Check to close'. *The Australian*. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/abc-fact-check-to-close/news-story/9a52255be8af4b9bf2f7febd31719a00>.

³⁹ Reynolds, M (18 November, 2013) 'Politifact on skeleton staff while seeking new funding'. *Mumbrella*. <https://mumbrella.com.au/politifact-skeleton-staff-seeking-urgent-funding-190236>; Reynolds, M (17 December, 2013) 'Politifact Australia to enter "hiatus" period'. *Mumbrella*. <https://mumbrella.com.au/politifact-australia-enter-hiatus-period-196995>; Quinn, K (14 February, 2017) 'Fact Check redux: Unit reborn as RMIT-ABC joint venture eight months after axing'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/fact-check-redux-unit-reborn-as-rmitabc-joint-venture-eight-months-after-axing-20170214-gucrs6.html>; Christensen, N (3 July, 2013) 'The Conversation latest publisher to launch fact checking service'. *Mumbrella*. <https://mumbrella.com.au/the-conversation-to-launch-electionfactcheck-165381>.

television and radio.⁴⁰ The *Conversation* is also distinctive in its approach, which incorporates blind scholarly peer review into its fact-checks and encourages republishing by other news organisations in line with its Creative Commons publishing model.⁴¹ While the latter is the only Australian fact-checker to have maintained continuity since its launch, the ABC returned to the field in 2017, relaunching its fact-checking unit in a new partnership with RMIT University⁴². The inaugural director of this new unit, Russell Skelton, was also the founding editor of the original ABC *Fact Check*. At the time of the relaunch he emphasised the continuity of service and approach between the two:

Fact checkers must be accountable to readers and the public, they must promptly correct errors, publish legitimate reader concerns and be utterly transparent in their methodology and processes. The same level of rigor must where possible be applied to every fact check. This was ABC Fact Check's approach... The RMIT ABC Fact Check partnership will be no different. It is a nonpartisan, non-profit collaboration that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion around the public policy issues and debates.⁴³

Aside from the ABC's contributions to the field in their current and previous iterations, there are no other fact-checkers run by or integrated into existing Australian news organisations. It is worth noting, however, that *Guardian Australia* regularly republishes those produced by *The Conversation*.

In line with the larger population and media market size (as well as the longer history of political fact-checking of this nature) it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been significantly more fact-checking operations operating in the US. Some of these provide services not within the scope of this project, while others have become inactive. Listed below (Table Three) are only those currently active who include or focus on national-level politics.

⁴⁰ Mantzarlis (25 January, 2016).

⁴¹ Creagh, S and Mountain, W (17 February, 2017) 'How we do FactChecks at The Conversation'. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-we-do-factchecks-at-the-conversation-73134>.

⁴² Quinn (2017).

⁴³ Skelton, R (2017) 'Fact Check's return perfect timing in 'post truth' age of alternative facts and fake news'. *ABC News Online*, 3 April: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-16/fact-check-return-perfect-timing-in-post-truth-age/8277268>.

Table 3: Currently Active, Nationally-focused US Fact-checking Sites and Organisations ⁴⁴

Name	Funding/Affiliation
AP Fact Check	Associated Press for publication by their member news media organisations.
CBS News Fact Check	Affiliated with CBS News, hosted online and provided by the network's digital staff.
CNN Reality Check	Broadcast and online fact-checking from the CNN Politics Team.
Detector de Mentiras	Hosted by the digital arm of Spanish-language broadcaster Univision.
Los Angeles Times Fact Check	Provides political fact-checking across the newspaper's website.
NBC's Trump Tracker	Provides political fact-checks online as well as tracking Trump's campaign promises; run by broadcaster NBC News.
New York Times Fact Check	Dedicated fact-checker from <i>Times's</i> Washington bureau; incorporated throughout website and newspaper's political reporting.
Newsweek Fact Checks	Weekly news magazine hosts occasional fact-checking provided by its staff.
NPR Fact Check	Fact-checking provided online by National Public Radio staff, including annotation of major political stories and debates. Funding mix (indirect) taxpayer support, member stations, sponsors, grants, donations.
Politifact	Run by Tampa Bay Times; non-profit element of the Poynter Institute since 2018. National network with state-based affiliates; funded by advertising, grants, donors and membership fees.
Snopes.Com	Long-running online fact-checking site; independently-owned and operated since 1994. Provides political fact-checking as part of broader focus on urban legend and rumours.
The Daily Caller's Check Your Fact	Affiliated with conservative media outlet <i>The Daily Caller</i> , funded by advertising. Work appears on <i>Daily Caller</i> and standalone website.
The Washington Post Fact Checker	In-house fact-checking by Glenn Kessler, in dedicated Fact Checker' column on the newspaper's website.
The Weekly Standard's Fact Check	Stand-alone, dedicated fact-checker operated by conservative publication <i>The Weekly Standard</i> . Funded by advertising, subscriptions with some support from Facebook.
Verbatim	Political fact-checking conducted by online encyclopaedia <i>Ballotpedia</i> . Funded by nonpartisan, not-for-profit organisation Lucy Burns Institute.

Crowded and Competitive: Fact-checking in the Online Journalism Landscape

These fact-checkers, whether in-house or at dedicated organisations and outlets, operate as one source of political information in an increasingly crowded digital news landscape. Political reporting (undertaken by professional journalists and others), debate, analysis and discussion is hosted online by a wide array of established and emerging sites. The outputs of these sites vary significantly in how consistently they provide news or journalistic content as opposed to other kinds of political information. By virtue of being hosted at least in part, if not wholly, online, these fact-checking sites form part of a political news, information and discussion ecology that is necessarily

⁴⁴ List and details adapted from Duke Reporters' Lab database, 2018. This list does not include fact-checkers primarily focused on political advertising such as Civil Beat Ad Watch.

networked and *global*, even though the focus of attention for many is on national political news and issues. The online news ecology – part of what Wardle and Derakhshan refer to as the ‘new media ecosystem’⁴⁵ – is characterised by range of journalistic forms, some of which operate as stand-alone offerings and others which are incorporated into mainstream or legacy news websites. Online journalism is only one element of this ‘ecosystem’, which:

...is dominated by increasingly partisan radio, television and social media; exaggerated emotional articulations of the world; quick delivery via algorithmically derived feeds on smartphones and audiences that skim headlines to cope with the floods of information before them.⁴⁶

Online political and election coverage operates in this context and appears in a range of formats and genres. Siapera, in her exploration of ‘changes in journalism and their links to the political process’, has identified ‘seven different forms of online journalism’:

1. ‘the celebrated civic or participatory media’;
2. ‘j-blogs’ and ‘blogs featuring journalistic output’;
3. ‘news aggregators, delivering customised news stories on demand’;
4. ‘online versions of mainstream news media’;
5. ‘multimedia or visual journalism’;
6. ‘open source journalism’; and
7. ‘social media journalism’.⁴⁷

She argues that online journalism is ‘becoming increasingly complex and varied in its form’. Each form emphasises ‘different aspects of the news’ and establishes ‘a different relationship with the public sphere, the informal aspects of the political process, and with formal political institutions’.⁴⁸

Elsewhere, I have noted that the online Australian political news landscape places legacy news media organisations into direct competition with a range of new competitors.⁴⁹ These ‘new entrants’ include both local operations such as *The New Daily*

⁴⁵ Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Siapera, E (2012) ‘Forms of Online Journalism and Politics.’ In: Siapera, E. and Veglis, A. (Eds) *The Handbook of Global Online Journalism*. Malden MA: Wiley, p. 155.

⁴⁸ Siapera (2012), pp.155-6.

⁴⁹ Brookes, S (2018) ‘Join us for all the developments’: *Guardian Australia* and the construction of journalistic identity in press gallery reporting. *Media International Australia* [DOI 10.1177/1737/1329878X18766079]: 1-16.

and ‘overseas transplants’ like *Daily Mail Online* and *Guardian Australia*.⁵⁰ Alongside these are competitors whose offerings take advantage of the blurring of boundaries between news, opinion, information and entertainment (not limited to the digital or online news environment) (Table Four). Political blogs (some of which are run by journalists, some of which are hosted by mainstream or legacy news organisations) also operate in this space, as does the political journalism hosted on open ‘social journalism’ platforms like *Medium* and political podcasts that are produced by news media organisations (such as the *Slate Political Gabfest* or ABC’s *Party Room* podcast) or run independently (such as *Pod Save America*).

Table 4: Online Political News, Information and Discussion in Australia and the US - Key Forms, Genres and Platforms

Online Political News/Information Format/Platform	Examples (Australia and US)
Digital or online-only general news providers	<i>The New Daily, Guardian Australia, Slate, Salon, BuzzFeed, Axios, Mashable, Vice, Huffington Post</i>
Independent politically-focused or investigative news sites	<i>Centre for Public Integrity, ProPublica, Crikey, Politico, The Investigative Fund, The Hill</i>
Social media, messaging and microblogging platforms	<i>Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram</i>
Video-sharing and live-streaming platforms	<i>Youtube, Vimeo, Periscope, Facebook Live</i>
Independent data or explanatory journalism sites	<i>Vox, 538.Com</i>
Online spaces for citizen engagement and agenda-setting	<i>OurSay, Eyewitness Media Hub</i>
Scholarly opinion or analysis sites	<i>The Conversation, Online Opinion</i>

Methodology

This research explored the ways in which six legacy news organisations (three in Australia, three in the US) incorporated fact-checking as an element of their broader online election campaign coverage. The six news outlets were chosen to represent a mix of funding models, ownership and reach (Table Five). All were also chosen to represent public service or what is traditionally referred to, in terms of print journalism, as ‘broadsheet’ news, irrespective of the current physical format of their hard copy iterations. I considered how these legacy news organisations in each country covered five high-profile, set-piece campaign events and focused on three elements of their online coverage: homepages; election-specific websites or dedicated election pages; and

⁵⁰ Watkins J, Park S, Blood R, et al. (22 June, 2017) *Digital News Report: Australia 2016*. Report for News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT, Australia; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, Oxford.

liveblogs or live updates pages. The events themselves were chosen for their relative predictability in the campaign, resonance across the two countries, and significant media resources traditionally dedicated to covering them (Table Six). This included campaign launches or party conventions; formal leaders' debates; and town hall-style debates.

Table 5: Australian and United States Legacy News Outlets included in Sample

News outlets	Formats	Location / Reach	Ownership / Funding
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	Print (broadsheet) and digital	Sydney, NSW; metropolitan	Fairfax; commercial
<i>The Australian</i>	Print (broadsheet) and digital	Sydney, NSW; national	News Corp Australia; commercial
Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)	Broadcast and digital	Sydney, NSW and various Aust. locations; national	Public; government/public funded
<i>The New York Times</i>	Print (broadsheet) and digital	New York, NY; metropolitan	The New York Times Company; commercial
<i>The Washington Post</i>	Print (broadsheet) and digital	Washington DC; metropolitan	Nash Holdings LLC; commercial
Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)	Broadcast and digital	Arlington, VA and various US locations; national	Public; public, grants, sponsorships and donations

Table 6: 2016 Australian Federal Election and US Presidential Election Campaign Set-Piece Events Included in Sample

Date	Event	Event Type	Location and campaign
13 May 2016	Sky News People's Forum	Campaign debate: Town hall	Sydney, NSW; Australian federal election
29 May 2016	National Press Club Leaders' Debate	Campaign debate: Leaders' debate	Canberra, ACT; Australian federal election
17 June 2016	Facebook Leaders' Debate	Campaign debate: Leaders' debate	Online; Australian federal election
19 June 2016	Labor Party Campaign Launch	Campaign launch/ leader's speech	Sydney, NSW; Australian federal election
26 June 2016	Liberal Party Campaign Launch	Campaign launch/ leader's speech	Sydney, NSW; Australian federal election
21 July 2016	Trump Address, Republican National Convention	Campaign launch/ leader's speech	Cleveland, OH; US presidential election
28 July 2016	Clinton Address, Democratic Convention	Campaign launch/ leader's speech	Philadelphia, PA; US presidential election
26 Sept. 2016	First Presidential Debate	Campaign debate: Leaders' debate	Hofstra University, NY; US presidential election
9 Oct. 2016	Second Presidential Debate	Campaign debate: Town hall	Washington University, MO; US presidential election
19 Oct. 2016	Third Presidential Debate	Campaign debate: Leaders' debate	University of Nevada, NV; US presidential election

Once the sample was collected, a detailed reading of the texts was conducted noting the presence and prominence (where relevant) of fact-checking as well as other key online journalism features, guided by academic literature. Of particular relevance was Malik and Shapiro's list of characteristics of digital journalism, developed to distinguish it 'substantively from journalism that existed up until the dawn of the internet': interactive; unfinished; long-lasting; global; personal; and un-siloed.⁵¹ These, they argue, should be understood as 'landmarks' of the digital journalism landscape rather than 'hurdles' for entry, with researchers looking for 'the presence of some combination of interactive engagement, author-audience collaboration, contingent publication, resilient impact, and global reach'.⁵² Also relevant were categories developed in Singer's longitudinal studies of online newspapers, against which editors were asked to 'list and describe up to three online-only campaign content areas of which they were the proudest'.⁵³ These contributed to the broader digital journalism goals of 'comprehensiveness, timeliness, user engagement, and multimedia presentation' and included:

- in-depth or detailed coverage;
- up-to-date information;
- journalist blogs;
- multimedia and animations;
- user personalisation options (such as quizzes and interactive guides or games);
- user contributions;
- social media; and
- multiplatform.⁵⁴

This previous work served as a guide for the development of five categories into which I allocated key features of the coverage in the sample (Table Seven). In line with the goals of the research, the focus was on features that appeared on, were linked to or

⁵¹ Malik, A and Shapiro, I (2017) 'What's Digital? What's Journalism?' In: Franklin, B. and Eldridge II, S. A. (Eds) *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 19-21.

⁵² Malik and Shapiro (2017), p. 22.

⁵³ Singer, J (2015) 'On a Role: Online Newspapers, Participatory Journalism, and the US Presidential Elections.' In: Vos, T. P. and Heinderyckx, F. (Eds) *Gatekeeping in Transition*. New York: Routledge, pp. 85-103; Singer, J (2009) 'Role Call: 2008 Campaign and Election Coverage on the Web Sites of Leading US Newspapers.' *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 86(4): 833.

⁵⁴ Singer (2009), pp. 833-34; Singer (2015), p. 100.

referenced on the website homepage, dedicated election page or live blog *during* coverage of these campaign events.

Results: Online Journalism Features and Fact-Checking in Election Campaign Coverage

Close analysis of the journalism in the sample allowed for a broader, systematic mapping of the coverage through which I explored the way these legacy news organisations incorporated the formats and styles of digital journalism into their election campaign reporting. I paid particular attention to the presence and prominence of fact-checking, and identified fifteen accompanying online and digital journalism features (Table Seven) organised into five categories. While the categories themselves were adopted with remarkable consistency across both the Australian and US outlets in the sample, take-up of the individual features was mixed. For example, there was near-universal application of the three structural features including use of live-blogs as ‘hubs’ to anchor live coverage of the campaign events. The exception was the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* coverage of the Facebook Leaders’ Debate, which did not feature a live-blog (perhaps due to the co-hosting of the debate by rival News Corp).

Table 7: Key Online Journalism Features Identified in Textual Analysis of Sample

Category	Key Online/Digital Journalism Features
1. Structural features	Political content hosted on the home-page
	Election-specific webpage
	Live-blog or live updates page
2. Audio-visual features	Live-streaming video of campaign event
	Inclusion of video stories or content
	Inclusion of images or slideshows
	Inclusion of data and graphics
3. Journalistic analysis and explanatory material	Inclusion of opinion, commentary and analysis
	Inclusion of explanatory journalism and ‘background’ reporting
	Inclusion of fact-checking
	Annotated or enhanced content
4. Interactive and engagement features	Inclusion of interactives or personalisation options
	Inclusion of audience engagement tools
	Community and audience indicators
5. Links to extended coverage	Links to campaign coverage hosted elsewhere
	Links to podcasts and audio material

Similarly, while all of the legacy news organisations in the sample included key features from the audio-visual, analytical and explanatory, and interactive and engagement categories, some were more consistently integrated than others. Both the US and Australian news organisations consistently and explicitly mobilised features and technologies to prioritise the construction of a community in which journalists and audience members were seemingly engaged in a collaborative political exercise. Markers that signalled journalistic interest in and willingness to engage with the views of audiences appeared frequently but varied in their substantiveness and prominence. For example, social media buttons inviting audience members to share, like or tweet responses were ubiquitous, as were 'open' or moderated comment threads. Some features were less common, such as the ABC's inclusion of audience vox-pops in live-blogs and the *New York Times*' creative use of visual, emoji-based response trackers that mapped viewer responses to live-streaming video in real-time. Some organisations included requests for user-generated content in their coverage, such as the ABC's call for audiences to share targeted political advertising or identify key campaign issues. For the most part, these engagement mechanisms were differentiated from professional journalistic content, clearly marked as such and often structurally separated by being located 'below the line' or in side-bars. This distinction reflects Curran and colleagues' summary of research into online journalism, which has found that 'user-generated input to news websites overwhelmingly takes the form of comment rather than of news reporting', partially because of a reluctance on the part of 'online news professionals' to cede control of the site and the agenda to 'amateurs'.⁵⁵ Singer, too, has found that 'while numerous options for users to contribute to political coverage are now widely available', online news editors 'continue to see the newsroom's output – in particular, technologically enhanced forms of traditional political information' as their most valuable 'contributions to the democratic process'.⁵⁶

There were also clear differences in some elements of the coverage. The Australian news organisations in the sample were less likely to include detailed data and explanatory journalism or annotated content. Additionally, there was a significant

⁵⁵ Curran, J, Coen S, Aalberg T, Hayashi, K, Jones, P K, Splendore S, Papathanassopolous, S, Rowe D, Tiffen R (2013) 'Internet revolution revisited: A comparative study of online news', *Media, Culture and Society* 35(7): 880-897.

⁵⁶ Singer (2015), p. 86.

variation in tone between the Australian live-blogs and their US counterparts, with those hosted by the US news outlets in the sample (particularly at the *New York Times*) taking a much more conversational approach. However, the use of fact-checking was the clearest and most consistent area of differentiation between the online campaign coverage offered by the Australian and US legacy news organisations in the sample.

Fact-Checking in the Sample

The use of and engagement with political fact-checking was the area in which there was the largest gap between the online campaign coverage provided by the Australian legacy outlets in the sample and their US counterparts. While there was consistency across the sample in take up of other new or innovative digital journalism formats and features, fact-checking was not universally applied or referenced in the Australian coverage. This was in stark contrast to its near-universal application in the US coverage in the sample. All three of the US organisations – the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and PBS – produced their own in-house fact-checking for the five campaign events analysed. These fact-checks were prominently positioned, integrated into the live-blogs and updated throughout the events in the form of live fact-checking.

The *New York Times*, for example, included a reference to its fact-checking operation prominently on the front page of its website during the first leaders' debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton on 27 September. Directly underneath the live-video stream and headed 'Fact Check', it offered: 'We're checking the candidates' claims' in bold text, followed by a preview of the most recent check ('Mr Trump said China is "devaluing their currency." Is that true?'). Clicking this link took audience members to a stand-alone column 'Fact-checking the first debate live' (*New York Times* 2016), which was updated throughout the event and operated separately to (but referenced on) a live-blog featuring journalists' analysis and debate highlights page.⁵⁷ Covering that same debate, the *Washington Post* incorporated fact-checks into its central live-blog throughout the event. Members of the fact-checking team posted checks of claims made during the debate directly to the live-blog. These checks featured journalistic analysis of the claim, background data and context, and a rating on the 'Pinocchio' scale. For

⁵⁷ *New York Times* (26 September, 2016) 'Our fact checks of the first debate'. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/27/us/politics/fact-check-debate.html>.

example, a claim by Hillary Clinton that people who are on the terrorist watch list are able to buy guns was rated ‘Two Pinocchios’ by the fact-checker for its lack of context;⁵⁸ while Trump’s assertion that New York’s ‘stop and frisk’ approach to policing crime was successful was refuted with aid of a data-based graphic showing violent crime rates from 1970-2014.⁵⁹ Similarly, PBS incorporated its fact-checking with its other live-blog offerings in its coverage of the first debate, inviting voters to: ‘Join our team of in-house experts as we analyse, fact check and provide context to the candidates’ statements, in real time, as the date unfolds’.⁶⁰

In Australia, the ABC was both the only organisation in the sample to host its own in-house fact-checking *and* the only organisation to engage explicitly with fact-checking during these campaign events or immediately after. Neither the *Sydney Morning Herald* nor *The Australian* hosted their own fact-checking, live or otherwise, or featured fact-checking done elsewhere (in the way the *Guardian Australia* re-published fact checks run by *The Conversation*). The ABC’s original *Fact Check* Unit was active during the 2016 election providing routine completion of fact-checks, updating its *Promise Tracker* and offering live fact-checking during key campaign events, debates and speeches on its own page and its social media feeds. At the time of the leaders’ debate, for example, the *Fact Check* Unit’s Twitter account had 21, 500 followers, and their live fact-checks were also visible to those following the #leadersdebate, #ausvotes and #factcheck hashtags. Similarly, the *Fact Check* Unit used Twitter to live fact-check the Labor launch, incorporating infographics, data and explainers for context. However this was not integrated across the ABC’s online coverage more broadly.

The *Fact Check* Unit’s checks were consistently absent from the political coverage provided on the ABC News homepage, election-specific page and live-blog during the events included in this analysis. Rather, they were hosted either on the stand-alone *Fact Check* page or (in the case of live fact-checking) on the Unit’s social media accounts. The

⁵⁸ Lee, M (27 September, 2016) ‘Fact Check: Clinton on gun purchases and the “no fly” list’. Trump-Clinton Debate Live-Blog, *Washington Post*.

⁵⁹ Lee, M (27 September, 2016) ‘Fact Check: Trump on crime statistics and stop-and-frisk’. Trump-Clinton Debate Live-Blog, *Washington Post*.

⁶⁰ PBS News Desk (26 September, 2016) ‘Join our experts in a live debate analysis and fact check’. *PBS Newshour Online*. Archived as ‘Fact-checking and analysing the first presidential debate’. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/join-experts-live-debate-analysis-fact-check>.

ABC's election news-focused website pages did not link or refer to the *Fact Check* Unit's live checks, nor did they routinely reference or integrate historic or pre-existing checks from the Unit's page as a means of providing context or verification for political claims made during these set-piece events. This was particularly notable considering that the ABC's online coverage of these events featured an impressive array of other 'enhanced' online journalism features, highlighted in its sidebar links: such as to its VoteCompass and 'spot the difference on policy' tools, and other interactives designed to allow audiences to see 'where the parties stand on the big issues' or 'add your voice' through the hashtag #abcmyvote'. Additionally, the ABC's election live-blog was engaged with the organisation's social media accounts in other ways. Its coverage of the Labor launch, for example, included video from the ABC News Snapchat account and images from their @ABCPoliPics Twitter account alongside coverage of the speech, quotes and analysis.

The work of the *Fact Check* Unit was also missing from previews of coverage included in this analysis. For example, in this post which kicked off the ABC's live-blog on the evening of the National Press Club leaders' debate:

Let's get ready to rumble! Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten will tonight go head-to-head in the first national, free-to-air leaders' debate. It all starts at 7:30pm and you can watch it live on ABC and ABC News 24, as well as our ABC News Facebook page. After a week of headlines dominated by budget "black holes", prepare for a bit of to and fro on finances as part of the mix. My colleague Matthew Doran has compiled a handy overview of what lies ahead, which you can peruse here. I'll be with you until 9pm this evening – you can also chat with me on Twitter @stephanieando.⁶¹

As noted above, this absence was in stark contrast to the ABC's embrace of new, digital and innovative formats and genres in online political reporting more broadly. The public broadcaster integrated a wide range of 'enhanced' content features into its online campaign event coverage, from vox pops featuring comments from and 'selfies' of debate audience members embedded into the live blog to a series of sidebar boxes featuring interactive and engagement-focused content. Some analysis pieces included a

⁶¹ Anderson in ABC News (29 May, 2016) 'Election 2016: Live Blog – As It Happened'. *ABC News Online*. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-29/election-live-blog-may-29-leaders-debate-shorten-turnbull/7454654>.

link to the *Fact Check Unit's Promise Tracker*,⁶² as did the live-blog covering the People's Forum debate on 13 May. However, these featured the final tally of the tracker ('How does the Coalition's record stack up?') rather than live fact-checks of the claims made during the forum.

Although the *Australian* and *Sydney Morning Herald* didn't conduct their own fact checks, it is significant to note that some of the coverage provided by these outlets offered analysis with the same goals as political fact-checking without being labelled as such. For example, following the National Press Club leader's debate *Age* economics editor Peter Martin's analysis piece (published across Fairfax web platforms) provided context and fact-checking on the claims made by both leaders about the costing and economic impact of company tax cuts.⁶³ It argued that 'each is using sleight of hand' and provided links to Treasury modelling as well as previous Fairfax reporting.⁶⁴

Conclusions and Recommendations

Political fact-checking, at its best, can provide a thoughtful, rigorous and critical intervention in public and political debate during and beyond election campaigns. It is a powerful tool that allows journalists to embrace the possibilities of, and work within, the digital news landscape. The most engaging fact-checking in the sample combined elements of investigative, data and explanatory journalism with humour, irreverence and visual tools and formats designed to appeal to the same networks through which 'fake news' can spread. In the coverage provided by the US outlets, it was embedded into political reporting as well as gathered into stand-alone pages or columns and highlighted as a key feature of live campaign coverage.

⁶² Doran, M (29 May, 2016) 'Election 2016: Leaders' debate sees Malcolm Turnbull, Bill Shorten make pitches to Australia'. *ABC News Online*. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-29/malcolm-turnbull-and-bill-shorten-face-off-at-leaders-debate/7457418>.

⁶³ Martin, P (29 May, 2016) 'Election 2016: Decoding the debate. Both sides mislead on company tax'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/election-2016-decoding-the-debate-both-sides-mislead-on-company-tax-20160529-gp6rp5.html>.

⁶⁴ Gittins, R (27 May, 2016) "'Growth and jobs": The numbers that debunk a company tax cut'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/growth-and-jobs-the-numbers-that-debunk-a-company-tax-cut-20160527-gp572e.html>; Martin, P (12 May, 2016) 'Election 2016: The weak case for a company tax cut'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/election-2016-the-weak-case-for-a-company-tax-cut-20160511-gos1np.html>.

Fact-checking efforts of this kind offer Australian journalists one mechanism (alongside other forms of traditional and innovative campaign coverage) through which to counter some of the particular challenges posed by an era of ‘information disorder’; challenges which show no signs of abating. The fact-checking provided by journalists – whether hosted by legacy news organisations, in partnerships with other kinds of institutions, or at stand-alone fact-checkers – can be of vital benefit to citizens in navigating this landscape.

Political fact-checking alone cannot solve the ‘complex web’ of motivations, dissemination tools and modes of consumption that make up an increasingly ‘polluted’ news and information environment.⁶⁵ Nor can it single-handedly counter the broad-based ‘crisis’ of trust in institutions, including the news media, identified across a range of liberal democracies.⁶⁶ This does not mean that legacy news media organisations have no role to play in addressing these challenges. On the contrary, they are both tasked to do so as part of their *fourth estate* role and well-placed to try. Edelman Trust Barometer figures released in February 2018 found that despite a broader decline, ‘trust in traditional news media and journalism has rebounded’ in Australia, from 46% in 2017 to 61% in 2018.⁶⁷ It also indicated that Australians recognised the difference between ‘journalism in newspapers and online media’ and information found on social media, and were ‘far more willing’ to trust the former.

There is, then, an opportunity for Australian legacy news organisations to embrace fact-checking as one method of intervening in the increasingly ‘polluted’ news and information environment. This is addressed by the report of the 2017 Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, which acknowledged the the journalistic and democratic value of fact-checking.⁶⁸ Its first recommendation proposed that:

⁶⁵ Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), p.4.

⁶⁶ Newman, N with Fletcher, R, Kalegoropolous, A, Levy, D A L and Nielson, R K (2017) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*. Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, p. 21.

⁶⁷ Meade, A (7 February, 2018) ‘Australia’s trust in media at record low as ‘fake news’ fears grow, survey finds. *Guardian Australia*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/feb/07/australias-trust-in-media-at-record-low-as-fake-news-fears-grow-survey-finds>.

⁶⁸ Senate Select Committee (2017), p. 97.

...the ABC and SBS be funded adequately, so that they can deliver on their charter obligations, support rural and regional service provision and have strong fact checking capacity.⁶⁹

This recommendation is specific to Australia's public broadcasters. However, it is relevant for political and campaign journalists across organisations and outlets, a group for whom the provision of public interest journalism is key both to their professional identity and role in supporting the healthy functioning of democracy.

The support expressed in this recommendation for fact-checking as an element of public interest journalism is valuable. It also highlights a key challenge: that the ability of legacy news outlets to provide systematic fact-checking is reliant on the resourcing available. It is also impacted by the extent to which the professional culture of news organisations and national journalistic culture privileges fact-checking; and the degree to which other stand-alone fact-checkers provide this service for citizens in the national media market. As noted above, Farrer and Wake have identified that fact-checking is an 'immense, time consuming, expensive and resource-demanding practice'.⁷⁰ This is a pressure particularly relevant in an Australian news landscape in which legacy newsrooms have experienced two decades of contraction in editorial staff and resources.⁷¹ In the 2016 Australian federal election this was compounded by the financial pressure of covering an unusually long election campaign (eight weeks, rather than the usual four or five). These and other competitive pressures saw legacy news organisations rethink their approach to campaign journalism.⁷²

⁶⁹ Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (February, 2018) *Report*. Canberra ACT: Department of the Senate, Parliament House, p. ix.

⁷⁰ Farrer and Wake (2017) p. 4.

⁷¹ For example, Slattery, C (5 April, 2017) 'Fairfax Media announces further job losses, slashes \$30 million from editorial budget.' *ABC News Online*. [http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-05/fairfax-media-announces-further-job-losses-amid-\\$30m-budget-cut/8419584](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-05/fairfax-media-announces-further-job-losses-amid-$30m-budget-cut/8419584); O'Donnell, P, Zion, L and Sherwood, M (2016) 'Where do journalists go after newsroom job cuts?', *Journalism Practice* 10(1), pp. 36-39; Beecher, E (July, 2013) 'The death of Fairfax and the end of newspapers'. *The Monthly*. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2013/july/1372600800/eric-beecher/death-fairfax-and-end-newspapers>; Young, S (2010) 'The Journalism "Crisis": Is Australia immune or just ahead of its time?' *Journalism Studies* 11(4): 610-624.

⁷² Jericho, G (25 May, 2016) 'Dear journalists, get off the campaign bus'. *ABC News Online*. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-25/jericho-dear-journalists,-get-off-the-campaign-bus/7443760>; Bourke, L (20 May, 2016) 'The unreal world of an election campaign'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/the-unreal-world-of-an-election-campaign-20160519-goz2zp.html>; Furze, A (29 October, 2016) 'Why news outlets threw political leaders under the bus... and other lessons of the campaign trail.' *The Citizen*. <https://www.thecitizen.org.au/articles/why-news-outlets-threw-political-leaders-under-bus-and-other-lessons-campaign-trail>.

Without adequate funding, the kinds of interactive, integrated and up-to-the minute fact-checking incorporated by the US legacy news organisations in the sample will be difficult to achieve. This would represent a lost opportunity to revitalise campaign and political journalism in Australia through the provision of a significant new resource and format.

Finally, it is important to note that this report focused its analysis on the content of six legacy news organisations' online coverage. I am now conducting further research in which I have interviewed political journalists in both Australia and the US. This new project will consider workplace conditions, professional values and norms. It extends the insights of this report by exploring the routines, experiences and perspectives of political journalists in both countries in relation to fact-checking and other changes in campaign and political coverage. Further research would also be valuable in applying a national-comparative approach beyond Australia and the US; looking beyond election campaigns; and incorporating a wider range of news organisations.

Recommendations

It is with the economic and other resource pressures outlined above in mind that I make four key recommendations in this report. These recommendations are aimed at suggesting ways that Australian legacy media organisations might further integrate fact-checking into their political and election campaign coverage.

1. *Develop internal strategies and collaborations to reverse siloing of fact-checking content in legacy news organisations' online offerings.* Both through its previous iteration as the ABC *Fact Check* Unit, active during the 2016 election campaign, and its current form as RMIT-ABC *Fact Check*, the ABC provides detailed fact-checking that is innovative in its embrace of multimedia dissemination formats. However, more could be done to address the siloing of this content to discrete areas of the organisation's online offering, in particular during election campaigns. Methods might include more consistently featuring fact-checks on homepage or election-specific websites; embedding video, graphic or data-based

fact-checks into live-blog coverage; or re-posting social media links to live or historical fact-checks when previewing or live-blogging campaign events.

2. *Pursue options for extending or re-purposing existing analytical 'fact-check' content, with the inclusion of graphic or data-based presentation styles.* Legacy news organisations are producing analytical, data-driven and explanatory material in a range of formats and spaces online. Some of this material is developed with similar goals to those of fact-checking. Organisations could explore ways in which, especially but not only during election campaigns, to collate this material and consider extending its emphasis on fact-checking where appropriate.
3. *Explore partnering with independent fact-checking organisations.* Informal or formal partnering with stand-alone or independent fact-checking organisations provides one mechanism for legacy news organisations to integrate regular fact-checking into political coverage while reducing resourcing and budgetary pressures. This has been successfully (albeit informally) modelled by *Guardian Australia* in their publishing of *The Conversation's* fact-checks, and trialled by the 2013 election campaign partnership between *Politifact Australia*, Channel Seven and Fairfax.
4. *Explore partnering with tertiary institutions and journalism schools.* This was a key recommendation offered by Farrer and Wake (2017: 5) in their submission to the 2017 Senate Inquiry into Public Interest Journalism; it is important both to cite and include here. Farrer and Wake (2017: 5) suggested that the Committee had a role to play in facilitating and funding the 'establishment of accredited fact-checking operations in Journalism schools of tertiary institutions, and to facilitate accredited fact-checking partnerships between tertiary institutions and private sector news organisations'. This possibility could be explored in direct partnerships (as modelled by RMIT ABC Fact Check), or in larger and more diffuse partnerships (as modelled, although not with an emphasis on fact-checking, by the UniPollWatch coverage of the 2016 election).

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