



Selected Papers of #AoIR2021:
The 22nd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Virtual Event / 13-16 Oct 2021

JUST THE FACTS FIT TO (DELETE:PRINT) BELIEVE: FROM GATEKEEPING TO 'CORRALLING' BY JOURNALISTIC FACT-CHECKERS IN THE ERA OF MISINFORMATION

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This paper introduces the theoretical concept of post-publication information 'corralling' as the next evolutionary step in traditional gatekeeping (Lewin, 1943, 1947; White, 1950) and gate-watching (Bruns, 2003) within a chaotic marketplace of misinformation[1] where alternate-reality expressants[2] battle against an evidence-based factual public record.

Corralling is the modern process of culling but not crafting (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) accurate information from the infinite online supply of falsehoods, misrepresentation, and manipulation across all genres and platforms characterizing internet communication in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In part, corralling is reverse engineering of journalistic gatekeeping, occurring after content publication, rather than during the selection of constituent parts at the beginning. The act of corralling — testing and sequestering accurate information into safe fact zones — is also journalistic critique, exposing pronounced subjective weaknesses in the original gate-keeping process by imposing formulaic protocols and more transparent methods.

While analysis of claims already in the public domain occurs across disciplines, in law, education, history, science and more, it is modern post-publication fact-checkers, positioned both within and external to the journalistic field, who are emerging with sufficient legitimacy to help corral truth from the morass of online fabrications. This, despite early scholarly concerns that repetition of false information further embeds it in the human psyche. Adjustments to the public disputation of erroneous content is proving remedial (Jamieson Hall, 2021).

A New Lease on Journalistic Gatekeeping

Suggested Citation (APA): Todd, P. (October, 2021). Just the Facts Fit to (Delete:Print) Believe: From Gatekeeping to 'Corralling' by Journalistic Fact-Checkers in the Era of Misinformation. Paper presented at AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of International Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Imagine mid-20th C. gatekeeping theorist Kurt Lewin, who examined how housewives control meals, confronted with the internet information food chain some 70 years later: endless selection but also unsolicited deliveries, ripe and rotten, piling up on the dinner table, cascading unchecked from chairs, toppling to the ground and out the door until all the world is drowning in packages. Deciding on what to feed the family becomes quixotic, overwhelming, even dangerous. Even collaborative gate-watchers (Bruns, 2003) willing to help distribute the largesse balk as the false, the toxic, and the tainted contents spill into the informational food stream. 'Prodisage (Bruns, 2008),' after all, anticipated a content community united to improve, not undermine, a multi-genre, global conversation.

The public grows increasingly unable and — and in some cases, frighteningly unwilling to distinguish facts from lies, truth from falsehood, and complexity from conspiracies. Traditional journalistic gatekeepers, even amid allegations of hegemony, discursive self-empowerment, and histrionics, could be forgiven for wondering whether anyone misses them.

By the 2020s, it is too late for a full return to media power: traditional news editing gates are hanging by hinges or crushed to rust, watchers are overwhelmed, and Donald Trump's 'fake news' (a baseless oxymoronic term deployed as a political strategy to undermine factual reporting) has further destabilized journalism. The democratic euphoria accompanying the mass introduction of internet publishing is hardening into anger and fear amid escalating cyber abuse, misinformation, internet criminality, image manipulation, propaganda, and 'co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour' online. By 2021, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford will find that Americans trust their media less (29%) than audiences in Peru (40%), the Philippines (32%), Brazil (54%), and Finland (65%).

Despite attempts to rehabilitate trust in mainstream Western media, a return to traditional gatekeeping is physically and philosophically impossible at this juncture. The sheer capacity of the largely free internet 'news hole' in comparison to the expensive and limited publishing space in print and on commercial airwaves means gatekeeping roles are no longer structural, but affective and must be earned. The mass proliferation of expressants and content-generation across news and social media platforms, through multiple layers of internet infrastructure, including the so-called 'deep' web, dilutes the appeal or viability of singular information authorities, and decentralizes communication control. A China-style internet blackout would be intolerable in many countries where democratic (and increasingly anti-democratic), and capitalist players demand internet freedom to ply their wares and warfare.

Yet, as mainstream journalism struggles to maintain a public foothold, a new phenomenon emerges in the U.S. circa 2003 with the founding of FactCheck.org, a consumer advocate website offering free facts to all. Reporters, scholars, free speech advocates and democratic activists from developing countries soon coalesce around an explosion of fact-checking organizations, positioned at the opposite end of the information delivery spectrum. Without the power to affect newsroom editorial decision-making and well aware of shrinking staff and impossibly tight internet deadlines, the

new information workers throw their energy into assessing and, increasingly, adjudicating the accuracy of what is flowing, already formed, across the internet.

‘Corralling’ Facts in a Vast Landscape of Misinformation

It was necessary to conceive of information ‘corralling’ to effectively describe this modern process of culling but not crafting (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) accurate information from the online plethora of falsehoods, misrepresentation, and manipulation. As such, corralling can be loosely described as a reverse-engineering of information gatekeeping — the sifting and selecting of ‘pertinent’ information undertaken across disciplines, including in journalism.

Unlike the traditional press’s pre-publication practise of excluding from storytelling information deemed unimportant, uninteresting, and/or under-substantiated in the eyes of rotating decision makers, corralling occurs at the end of the selective publication transaction, after claims are in the public domain. Faced with a vast field of inter-knit filtered and unfiltered human expression, modern fact-checkers deploy and publicly document research techniques aimed at assessing the veracity of public claims.

Assertions that can be verified by accountable and approved method form are roped off and privileged. While value judgments are required, as they are in every facet of human life, the PFFC protocol is fashioned for reproducibility, much like academic experimentation, so the public can reach its own conclusion about the veracity of corralled information and the investigative methods undertaken to collect it.

By distinguishing themselves in time and technique from mainstream press, yet rarely calling out media outlets publishing misinformation, post-publication fact-checkers can challenge reported misinformation, while simultaneously shoring up journalistic bona fides from within the field. Unlike formative gatekeeping, this new journalistic genre’s fact corralling upholds many normative press values while also engaging in movement-building, social reform (Graves, 2013) and communication revolution.

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Notes

[1] The term 'misinformation' is preferred over 'disinformation' 'to avoid often impossible accurate adjudication of intent in creating and communicating false information.

[2] I use the term 'expressants' to describe the millions of potential online publishers. It is more accurate than 'citizen' or 'witness journalists,' and more descriptive and informative than 'participants.'