

# LESSONS FROM THE INFODEMIC: FACT-CHECKING AND THE OLD-NEW IDEALS OF ‘MODERN JOURNALISM’

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**Abstract:** The wave of disinformation that marked recent years led to the emergence of new conceptual categories, such as ‘post-truth’. However, it also generated forms of reaction to the phenomenon, such as fact-checking, a journalistic genre that has recently established itself worldwide. The first theoretical hypothesis of this paper postulates that the success of fact-checking can be interpreted as a contemporary return to the ideals of so-called ‘modern’ journalism. These ideals emerged between the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century and were incorporated within journalism through the principles of the Enlightenment and scientific modernity: objectivity, impartiality, reliance on data and evidence (until they dispersed, in the postmodern turn, with the occurrence of the web). This paper analyses the potentials and limits of this “old-new” model of journalism, using examples from leading international fact-checking projects. Regarding the limits, it will be discussed how practicing fact-checking without adopting a partial point of view is unachievable. Additionally, our analysis will also shed light on how, upon closer inspection, the category of ‘disinformation’ itself turns out to be ambiguous. As for the potentials, we will examine best practices that allow a scrutiny of journalistic narratives on facts, considering examples of ‘good fact-checking’ that does not claim absolute objectivity. We develop the argument that good fact-checking can help to pursue a new model of objectivity and scientificity, based on assumptions such as the falsifiability of statements, the replicability of experiments, and the delimitation of the context of analysis. Finally, we argue that this objectivity should be seen as a form of open rationality rather than a new ‘dogmatism of facts’.

**Keywords:** fact-checking, objectivity, journalism, infodemic, epistemology

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## Introduction

There is no agreement among scholars, on the fact that the advent of the web and the consequent transfer of the production and consumption of information on digital platforms have caused an increase in the quantity of fake news, or weakened the same ability of viewers to discern credible information from misinformation. Even the concept of “infodemic (Rothkopf, 2003; WHO, 2020), which was extensively used during the pandemic to describe both the excessive quantity of news disseminated and the absence of rigorous editorial quality control (Cinelli *et al.*, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020) has been disputed by different studies. For example, Simon and Camargo (2021) highlighted how the expression “infodemic” can be used to describe conflicting phenomena, and how it has often been utilized as a metaphor to describe a situation lacking empirical evidence.

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Additionally, scientific literature demonstrates that keywords such as “disinformation,” “misinformation,” and “conspiracy theory” do not have a univocal definition, and are at the center of heated debates among scholars who want to determine their main characteristics (Santos d’Amorim and Miranda, 2021; Tucker *et al.*, 2018). Other studies have stressed how the massive flow of news about Covid-19 that circulated online did not necessarily impact the ability of readers to understand and identify more or less accurate information (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020).

It seems then more useful to frame the popularity and affirmation of notions such as information disorder (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017), infodemic and above all post truth in the public and academic debate, in an epistemological paradigm rather than in terms of empirical or quantitative evidence. The Oxford Dictionaries chose “post-truth” as the word of the year in 2016 defined as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>1</sup> This definition allows us to reject the idea that fake news is a “digital entity” (Gray *et al.*, 2020) circulating only online, and to frame the connection between disinformation and the digital sphere within a wider epistemological setting. In fact, some scholars (Ferraris, 2017; Lorusso, 2018) have characterized post-truth as a discursive regime in which it is increasingly difficult to trace a distinction between truth and falsehood, since the assessment of “the correspondence to the truth” of a statement is influenced by preexisting beliefs of those who receive it. This is the case defined by the fragmentation of the digital public sphere in homophilic networks and in ideological bubbles (Pariser, 2011; Klinger and Svensson, 2018). The resulting radicalization and polarization lead to a clash of “worldviews.” Within this scenario, only the extent to which a piece of information aligns with one’s own (pre-established) worldview is it possible to evaluate that same information as true, regardless of its correspondence to factual evidence. From an epistemological point of view, the transferring of information to online setting would cause a cognitive slippage rather than a quantitative increase of fake news. It would bring, therefore, to the affirmation of a discursive regime that starts from the existence of a jumble of subjective visions of reality, all considered equally legitimate and all guided, as the Oxford Dictionaries states, by “appeals to emotion and personal beliefs.”

This epistemological slippage can be subsumed within the gradual affirmation of the postmodern paradigm of the sixties and seventies (Lyotard, 1984). Specifically, postmodernism was characterized by a perspective that breaks with the ideals of objectivity and universality of the Enlightenment and scientific modernity. Not surprisingly, a well-known aphorism by Nietzsche, “facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations” (1967, Aphorism 481) is considered the emblem of the transition from modernity to postmodernity, and in particular, in the subsequent appropriations by trends such as “weak thought” (Vattimo and Rovatti, 1983).

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<sup>1</sup> From Oxford Language. (2016, November 8). Word of the Year 2016-Oxford Languages. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

### ***Modern and Postmodern Journalism***

The above epistemological frames have a correspondence in journalism; in fact, starting in the sixties and throughout the seventies, the passage from a modern to a postmodern paradigm has been detected in this field as well. Additionally, the postmodern paradigm has been more and more linked to the transfer of news production and consumption on digital platforms. In other words, a correspondence between postmodernism and journalism came to exist, to the extent that the latter has been explicitly defined as a form of “postmodern journalism” (Gade, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). The origin of the so-called modern paradigm of journalistic information is usually traced to between the second half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, which is the historical phase when journalism establishes itself as a profession, codified into specific rules and procedures (Schudson, 1978). The expression “modern journalism” refers to a series of assumptions that journalism incorporates starting from the principles of the Enlightenment and scientific modernity, and which constitute the “canon” of a journalistic account of reality to be understood as objective, impartial, and not contaminated by subjective views. The paradigm of objectivity is therefore generally considered as a direct application of scientific modernity to journalism (Schudson, 1990; Durham, 1998). However, the normative model of modern journalism falls into crisis with the establishment, in philosophical and cultural fields, of the postmodern paradigm.

The postmodernism’s questioning of the alleged universality of modern reason, in fact leads to a consequent deconstruction of the metanarratives that modernity itself had forged, that is, those systems of thought that contained unitary principles, the bases of which made it possible to encompass the meaning of reality (Reason, Spirit, the laws of materialism). All of this led to a consequent crisis of those discourses that claimed to provide an objective description of reality itself, based on universal principles. Journalism is evidently among these discourses. Emotions and subjective points of view, previously removed from the normative and modern paradigm, begin to find more and more space in journalistic texts starting from the sixties and seventies and in relation to the affirmation of new journalistic styles such as New Journalism (Weber, 1971; Dennis and Rivers, 1974). This trend is clearly strengthened with the advent of the web. Online journalism in fact generates a growing contamination between media (traditional and digital), information actors (professionals and common users), communication models (broadcast and conversational), and content (hard and soft news; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). An epistemological break is thus created with respect to the fences that the modern model had erected to separate professional, impartial and objective journalism from what, as an expression of subjective points of view, journalism was not.

Postmodernism is therefore connected to a series of processes typically linked to online journalism, such as the affirmation of citizen journalism and the figure of the participatory news consumer (Hartley, 2000) or prosumer, which is the common user who becomes an actor and information producer. Journalism on the web, ultimately, subverts the modern assumptions that banished subjectivism and emotions from the narrative of the facts. On the web, journalism as an expression of a “biographical society” is affirmed, in which personal stories find more and more space (Plummer, 2001). Similarly, emotions are also increasingly present in journalistic texts in the age of networked news (Beckett and Deuze, 2016). For all these reasons, a substantial equivalence is created between online journalism and postmodern journalism: both mark the end of the modern paradigm focused on a (presumed) objective and impartial narration of reality.

### ***Fact-checking and the return of modern journalism***

This substantial epistemological equivalence between online environment and postmodern subjectivism has been questioned, in recent years, by some “counter-knowledge” that advocate a return to a strong concept of “reality.” Among these is fact-checking, which arises specifically as a reaction to the circulation of so-called fake news and more generally to the phenomenon variously defined as “disinformation” or “information disorder,” especially in online environments. Its origins are commonly identified in the U.S.-based journalism, albeit there is some disagreement on the exact predecessors of contemporary fact-checking projects. The candidates cited more often are some practices in political reporting during the early Reagan years (Dobbs, 2012) or in the “adwatch” genre during the 1988 U.S. presidential election (Shawcross, 2016). The oldest political fact-checking projects still active today were launched during the 2000s: Factcheck.org in 2003, PolitiFact and The Washington Post’s Fact-checker both in 2007, with a relevant precursor in Spinsanity, launched in 2001 and which appears to be “the first nonpartisan fact-checker focused strictly on U.S. politics” (Graves, 2016b). At the global level, most fact-checking projects were born in the last decade and now number several hundred,<sup>2</sup> differing in terms of organization (size, type, and even self-definition), but also of mission, objectives, and information practices (Zagni, 2022). Some fact-checking projects were born in the academic field, others as independent media, still others as specialized sections of non-governmental organizations or legacy media. The exchange between different experiences has been identified as one of the hallmarks of the fact-checking movement on a global level (Graves, 2016a).

Our hypothesis is that one can read in the success of fact-checking a contemporary return to the ideals of so-called modern journalism and to the type of rationality it represented in the journalistic field: objectivity, impartiality, reliance on data and evidence. While traditional newspapers are no longer based on these values, fact-checking sites still are; they “control” information and political debate from a top-down perspective and present themselves as a counter-knowledge that balances relativism, partisanship, and sensationalism prevailing in online information.

### **Methodology and research questions**

The question is whether it is possible, through fact-checking, to effectively return to the ideals of modern journalism, as well as whether these same ideas are not only achievable but “desirable.” In order to answer these questions, our work proposes to carry out a qualitative analysis of some fact-checking projects, with the aim of highlighting the potentialities and limits of this journalistic counter-knowledge and the return that it presupposes to a very strong model of “objectivity” as much as of rationality. Since any claim to objectivity and impartiality can hide the attempt to affirm a partial point of view as universal, the position of the fact-checkers is particularly delicate. They may in fact appear in the public debate as “arbitrators” of a truth which, however, in the digital public sphere and after the affirmation of constructivist strands of thought, becomes difficult to conceive in absolute and non-critical terms. It is therefore necessary to scrutinize some of the main fact-checking projects to

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2 The Duke Reporters’ Lab of Duke University (Durham, North Carolina, USA) runs a global census of fact-checking projects. As of March 2022, 353 projects from over 100 different countries were registered as “active”, with a further 113 listed as “inactive”. The census is accessible at the link: <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking/> (accessed March 7, 2022)

understand whether this journalistic activity actually results in a return to the ideals of modern journalism or if, on the contrary, there are best practices that allow for a careful scrutiny of the facts and of journalistic narratives on the facts, without thereby making fact-checking a new “court of truth.” The qualitative analysis that follows will therefore have to answer the following research question:

RQ1: is it really possible, through fact-checking, to pursue a model of objective journalism like the modern one?

RQ2: If this is not possible, what model of “scientificity” can fact-checking aspire to?

### ***The criteria for being a fact-checker***

Some essential coordinates to delimit the perimeter of fact-checking come from an analysis of the Code of Principles of the International Fact-Checking Network, the most important professional network of project active in the sector.<sup>3</sup> To become a signatory, projects must demonstrate compliance with five main principles (each divided into further sub-criteria):

1. impartiality and fairness
2. standards and transparency of sources
3. transparency of funding sources and organization
4. standard and transparency<sup>4</sup> of methodology
5. open and honest corrections policy

In March 2022, the IFCN Code had over one hundred active signatories, coming from dozens of different countries: adherence to it is widely regarded as the reference standard for evaluating the professionalism of fact-checking projects. The collaboration program with Meta, the technological company that manages social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, places the signing of the IFC Code<sup>5</sup> as a necessary condition to participate.

The tension towards transparency, objectivity and impartiality is evident from the five IFCN criteria mentioned above. Fact-checking is an information approach that analyzes the different voices of a deeply polarized media landscape in an equidistant way. This leads to the exclusion, for example, of very well-known projects that deal with disinformation but that do not hide their politically oriented nature: an example is Media Matters for America (MMFA), an American non-profit that claims to deal with “conservative misinformation-news or commentary that is not accurate, reliable, or credible and that forwards the conservative agenda.”<sup>6</sup> This limitation actually places a project like MMFA out of the

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<sup>3</sup> The IFCN was founded in 2015 and is based at the Poynter journalistic research institute in St. Petersburg, Florida (USA)

<sup>4</sup> See IFCN, The Commitments of the Code of Principles. Retrieved on March 8, 2022 from <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-commitments-of-the-code-of-principles>

<sup>5</sup> See, Meta’s Third Party Fact-Checking Program. Retrieved on March 27, 2022 from <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/third-party-fact-checking>

<sup>6</sup> See, MMFA. *About US*. Retrieved on March 8, 2022 from <https://www.mediamatters.org/about-us>

possibility of joining the international fact-checking network represented by the IFCN, even if part of its activity can undoubtedly be defined as content verification.

### ***The limits of fact-checking: the impossible objectivity***

A qualitative evaluation of the practice of fact-checking highlights some limits that are difficult to ignore in the model of objectivity and impartiality it implies. First of all, it is necessary to ask ourselves if it is really possible, for those who select the contents, to identify and exclude all their biases: every fact-checker inevitably brings with him a personal point of view on current events and on the facts he has to deal with. He is an expression of a specific historical and cultural environment, and possesses convictions about society, the economy, and politics. The self-discipline of fact-checkers can help limit the explicit influence of these aspects on the verification work, but if this personal effort is difficult to evaluate on the one hand, it should be noted on the other that many of the main fact-checking projects devote substantial energy towards implementing editorial processes and practices that guarantee impartiality, a sign that this aspect requires considerable effort to be achieved. Full Fact, for example, the main independent fact-checking project in the United Kingdom, dedicates a section of its website to the theme of impartiality, in which it states:

“We have rigorous safeguards in place at every level of our organisation to ensure our neutrality. These have been carefully constructed based on advice from our board and examples ranging from Amnesty International to the BBC. They include the cross-party board, fundraising safeguards, a conflict of interests’ policy, restrictions on staff political activity, feedback processes, operating guidelines, external reviews, and more. Most importantly, they include carefully recruiting staff who are sensitive to these issues.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the section of the international news agency AFP dedicated to fact-checking, which has invested heavily in the sector in recent years with dedicated journalists in dozens of countries, has instituted ethical principles where they require that, “AFP journalists must speak with an independent voice, free of prejudice, bias or external influence” adding that failure to comply with these principles can lead to sanctions.<sup>8</sup> The many mechanisms set up by Full Fact and the firm stances of AFP are proof of the undeniable difficulty in ensuring a truly impartial point of view.

Secondly, one can reflect on the fact that the selection made by fact-checking projects is necessarily partial. Information verification work can aim to deal with a limited amount of content each day. With regards to political fact-checking, for example, the Italian fact-checking project Pagella Politica<sup>9</sup> declares on its website that it does not propose “a statistically valid indicator of the credibility of politicians,” since it collects “a limited sample of declarations.”<sup>10</sup> In its nearly ten years of activity, Pagella Politica has analyzed more than 3,200 statements by Italian politicians: a substantial number,

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<sup>7</sup> Full Fact, *Impartiality*. Retrieved on March 27, 2022 from <https://fullfact.org/about/impartiality/>

<sup>8</sup> AFP, *Fact-Checking at AFP*. Retrieved on March 27, 2022 from <https://factcheck.afp.com/fact-checking-afp>

<sup>9</sup> Transparency statement: one of the two co-authors of this contribution is the project director.

<sup>10</sup> Pagella Politica, *Progetto*. Retrieved on March 27, 2022 from <https://pagellapolitica.it/progetto>

but which amounts to an average of less than one statements per day. It is clear that no political fact-checking project can aspire to completeness. The same can be said even more absolutely for projects that do not strictly deal with statements made by politicians. In fact, fact-checking projects can generally deal only with the most relevant issues, verifying a fraction of the contents that make up the information ecosystem. The activity of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)<sup>11</sup> allows for a good overview, from a quantitative point of view, at a European level. The project, funded in part by the European Commission, publishes a monthly summary of the activities of the fact-checkers and contains the number of verifications carried out by over a dozen projects. By February 2022, thirteen of them had published a total of 1,067 verification articles, a number that must refer to more than ten countries of the European Union. Similar figures were also found in previous monthly reports. The vast majority of the contents also referred to two of the most relevant stories of that period, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. It can therefore be concluded that fact-checking is able to deal with a small or very small part of the content circulating in the information ecosystem.

Third, some limitations come from the characteristics of the current information ecosystem. The first concerns access to the content published on the platforms. It is open to fact-checkers in ways mostly established by the platforms themselves, for example within projects such as Meta's 3PFC. Access to private groups is necessarily limited or absent (also due to the obvious limitations concerning user privacy). This is also why fact-checking projects usually invite the public to send reports, relying on the audience to share content with them that would otherwise be inaccessible. Dependence on platforms places an insuperable limit on the idea of fact-checking as the return of an objective, impartial, totally neutral journalism, in line with the assumptions of modern journalism. Indeed, it has been shown that infrastructures have inherent biases that also affect fact-checking: for example, a recent empirical study compared the two main infrastructures that collect and give access to fact checked stories concerning Covid-19 from several fact-checking organizations, i.e. Google and Poynter. The result of the research showed how the two platforms gave access to very different contents in terms of typology, geographical origin, topics covered, and how each privileged the content of some fact-checking organizations to the detriment of others (Nissen *et al.*, 2022). The difference in content obviously affects the "portion" of reality that is subjected to scrutiny and shown to users, which differs from platform to platform. In the context of the platform society (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), in which journalistic information is increasingly dependent on large platforms, even for fact-checking it is impossible to escape the partiality and biases incorporated in them.

### ***The potentialities of fact-checking: falsifiability and scientific methodology***

Aware of the limits outlined so far, it is necessary to underline what kind of "objectivity" and "scientificity" it is possible to achieve through the practice of fact-checking. First of all, it should be highlighted how fact-checking is particularly attentive to the establishment of best practices of relevance to the journalistic world and, as we will see, most of them imply a vision of journalism in

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<sup>11</sup> EDMO Fact-Checking Network, *Covid-19- related disinformation falls to its lowest...* (Monthly Brief n.9). March 15, 2022. Retrieved on March 27, 2022 from <https://edmo.eu/fact-checking-briefs/>

For transparency purposes, one of the two co-authors of this paper is the director of *Pagella Politica*, an Italian fact-checking project that is responsible for coordinating the activities of the fact-checking network and drafting briefs. EDMO receives funding from the European Commission.

stark contrast to the postmodern paradigm. This is evident in the work of the International Fact-Checking Network, whose main role, in addition to facilitating communications between the various projects and promoting support initiatives, is precisely the promotion of good information practices summarized in its Code, such as the corrections, clarity in methodology, transparency in the use of sources. Many of these practices act as a positive model for informational practice and it is easy to recognize in them a strong resemblance to the methods of scientific research.

Several fact-checking projects recognize that not everything can be verified: this limitation, however, implies the affirmation in a positive sense that, for example, when a political statement is based on data or facts, it can be objectively verified. The Argentine fact-checking project Chequeado has a label that it applies to political advertisements and brochures, “inchequeable” (unverifiable), used when “among the statements under analysis there are none that are based on facts or data or that can be tested.”<sup>12</sup> The concept of testing and checking data or facts comes close to the idea of falsifiability that is central to the Popperian definition of scientific theories. In fact, it implies that only deniable statements, that is, falsifiable statements, can be subjected to verification.

Similarly, the policy of transparency of sources explicitly promoted by the IFC Code of Principles advances the need to provide all the evidence that the verification was carried out, again in analogy with the principle of scientific research which requires the exhaustive publication of data to allow replicability of the experiment. The parallel is made even more explicit by the IFCN itself, which requires that the sources be cited “so that users can replicate their work (i.e., of fact-checkers) if they wish.”<sup>13</sup> The fact-checking project present in several African countries, called Africa Check, specifies that “for all the evidence we present, we provide a link or cite the source.”<sup>14</sup> Similar statements can be found in numerous other sections of fact-checking sites that explain their methodology. In the field of investigation, carefully delimited by statements that can be verified on the basis of reasonably certain data and facts, fact-checking aims to present an objective and transparent information model.

Moreover, the lack of completeness and of a sufficient context is assessed by the fact-checkers themselves as a problem in the subject of their verifications. In other words, not only must the analysis be comprehensive but so too must the contents being analyzed, such as political statements; these must include information deemed necessary for their full contextualization and understanding. Otherwise, fact-checking expresses a partially negative value judgment. For example, PolitiFact assigns the half-true verdict when “the statement is partially accurate, but leaves out important details or present things out of context.”<sup>15</sup> The delimitation of the field of investigation, the replicability, the completeness in

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<sup>12</sup> Translated from the original: “En las afirmaciones bajo análisis no se encontró ninguna que esté basada en hechos y datos ni pueda ser contrastada.” Chequeado, *Método*. Retrieved on March 29, 2022 from <https://chequeado.com/metodo/>

<sup>13</sup> IFCN. *The commitments of the code of principles*, cit.

<sup>14</sup> “For all evidence we present, we provide a link or quote the source”. Africa Check, *How We Fact-check*. Retrieved on March 29, 2022 from <https://africacheck.org/how-we-fact-check>

<sup>15</sup> PolitiFact. *The Principles of the Truth-O-Meter: PolitiFact’s methodology for independent fact-checking*. Retrieved on March 29, 2022 from

the list of sources, and the tension towards the adequacy of the context are all founding elements of the contemporary fact-checking method and in open contrast to the subjectivism of postmodern influence. In doing so, fact-checking projects have been able to obtain several important awards. In 2009, US-based PolitiFact won a Pulitzer Prize for National Journalism for its coverage of the previous year's presidential election, a crucial recognition for the project's growth (Adair, 2017). Back in the United States, The Fact-Checker section of the Washington Post has been nominated for numerous journalism awards. The Spanish fact-checking project Maldita.es won the European Press Prize for innovation in 2021 and, in the same year, the International Fact-Checking Network was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The prestige of these awards indicates that, at a minimum, fact-checking is recognized as a well-established information practice and that it promotes virtuous models, despite its recent tradition in current forms.

## **Conclusions**

The hypothesis from which we started in this contribution asserts that fact-checking represents an attempt to return to the principles of so-called "modern journalism": objectivity, impartiality, reliance on data and evidence. From this point of view, fact-checking would represent the journalistic equivalent of a "neo-realist" epistemological current that advocates a return to a strong concept of reality, as a reaction to the postmodern turn and the proliferation of fake news online. The analysis we carried out, however, shows that the return to a journalistic model characterized in those terms, is in fact unattainable. The first research question, "is it really possible, through fact-checking, to pursue a model of objective journalism like the modern one?" can therefore only lead to a negative answer. In fact, the theoretical studies and empirical cases analyzed show that there are numerous factors that make the fact-checkers' scrutiny of facts partial and limited.

This does not imply, however, that fact-checking cannot aspire to a different model of objectivity and scientificity. We have in fact identified an answer to the second research question, "which model of 'scientificity' can fact-checking aspire to?" In our opinion, this model can be defined as a preliminary starting point at least from these four elements of a methodological and epistemic nature: 1. falsifiability, namely the fact that only deniable statements can be subjected to verification; 2. the principle of scientific research which requires the exhaustive publication of data and completeness in the list of sources, so as to allow that experiment to be replicable; 3. the deliberate delimitation of the field of investigation; 4. the tension towards the adequacy of the context.

Any type of journalism carries with it an epistemological paradigm that frames it within methods, investigation procedures, and that defines the possibilities and limits of the knowledge that it aims to achieve. If the canon of modern journalism was centered on the principles of the Enlightenment and scientific modernity, and that of postmodern journalism on the perspectivism and subjectivism of the philosophical and cultural movement of the same name, fact-checking must aspire to a form of knowledge that differs from both of those paradigms. The shift of the production and consumption of information on digital platforms has posed new challenges to journalism, which has necessarily had to reconfigure its professional routines, and its narratives, in a context in which knowledge is increasingly

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<https://www.politifact.com/article/2018/feb/12/principles-truth-o-meter-politifacts-methodology-i/#Truth-O-Meter%20ratings>

co-produced by a set of actors, including platforms and users themselves. In this scenario, the real challenge for fact-checking is to develop methodological and operational tools that allow to overcome the relativistic excesses we have witnessed in recent years, without returning to a new “dogmatism of fact.” This study obviously has limitations: the selection of fact-checking projects we used for our qualitative analysis is not exhaustive. The principles we proposed with regard to the elaboration of a new fact-checking epistemology are therefore extrapolated from projects that are the objects of our analysis but do not automatically extend to the entire galaxy of fact-checking projects. However, this study might represent a first theoretical formulation for the elaboration of an epistemology of fact-checking that goes beyond naive positivism, anchored to the ideals of objectivity of modern journalism. Future research, that draws on a wider database and makes use of qualitative-quantitative methodologies, could verify whether the principles proposed in this paper might find an application in the current practices of fact-checkers. Furthermore, it is also important to study the way in which fact-checkers represent their cognitive objectives. In this respect, a limitation of this study is that it only focuses on an analysis of the methodological sections of fact-checking projects. Further studies based on interviews with fact-checkers could verify whether there is a correspondence between the epistemological principles presented in the methodological sections and the narratives of the fact-checkers, so as to understand if the latter believe they are operating on the basis of the positivist epistemology typical of modern journalism, or if they are aware of the limitations of this model of “objectivity.”

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