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Florian Dauphin

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The challenges and the limits of fact-checking and debunking in the fight against disinformation: the case of the French experience

By Florian Dauphin

While consideration of the effects of disinformation on public opinion and initiatives to regulate it are not new, the global proliferation of “fake news,” an expression that became widely popular in 2016, and the conspiracy and pseudo-scientific theories that may accompany it seem to mark a certain turning point. On one hand, social media amplify its reverberation, and, on the other hand, the effects of disinformation are a major social problem, omnipresent in debates, causing a certain “social panic”. This awareness of the social problem has reconfigured the relationships between the different actors involved, including politicians, journalists and the public/citizens, and manifests mainly in initiatives to eradicate fake news.

In the fight against disinformation, two countermeasures are emerging to restore truth in the new digital information environment: fact-checking and debunking. Although the situation is largely a global problem, our research develops the French context of the measures and effects of the struggle against disinformation, and, based on a review of the literature on fact-checking and a field survey of French debunkers, shows the limited and sometimes perverse effects that these initiatives can have on the public.

The term “fact-checking” refers to the verifying of facts contained in a piece of writing or speech. In this sense, it is an old practice at the foundation of journalism. However, the term has become more popular since 2008 and is becoming particularly used and claimed by journalists, newsrooms and political

analysts. It is used ostentatiously, becoming a form of labelling, following the identification of disinformation as a public problem, particularly in exceptional situations, such as terrorist attacks, conspiracy theories and pseudo-scientific theories linked to COVID-19.

Although there were earlier initiatives, it was from 2008 that major French newspapers launched sections aimed at denouncing false information: “Désintox” in Libération and “Les Décodeurs” in Le Monde, among the first. These new spaces are dedicated to refuting false information and journalists are employed for this sole mission. It was the political speeches deemed to be fallacious that motivated almost all French media to generalize the fact-checking sections in 2012 during the campaign for the presidency of the French Republic.

This fight against disinformation grew in reaction to disinformation campaigns that have echoed strongly in France: the election of Donald Trump in the USA and “Brexit” pushed by Boris Johnson in the UK. Moreover, it was the Trump era that democratized the term “fake news” in 2016. Finally, the rise of social media, which is not sufficiently regulated and allows anyone to say anything and everything, has given rise to a desire on the part of journalists to regain control of the news while also having an educational aim.

There are two problems with journalists' fact-checking approach: Firstly, through specialized fact-checking spaces against fake news, journalists are playing on their credibility in the face of the general public's distrust, which appears to be strong in France. But at the same time, the implicit message is that the ethics of the journalistic profession in general are not based on the investigation of sources, which is at the centre of the profession. Secondly, the notion of “fact-checking” seems to give rise to a common myth among journalists of the absolute objectivity of information, which is reinforced by data journalism methods.

While the expression “fact-checking” has become part of the journalistic jargon, the term “debunking” is used more in France on social media by activists in all fields. Debunking has given rise to an amateur appropriation of the concept. Derived from *bunkum*, meaning nonsense, the neologism “debunker” designates the fact that an individual or a group discredits a person considered an impostor, refutes an ideological corpus judged to be false and exposes what is perceived as a lie. The main objective is therefore to reduce the potential impact of the disinformation, which can be conspiracy theories and pseudo-scientific theories, by restoring the truth. The approach consists of listing the elements considered as proof of false information and attributing the origin of the authors of the disinformation. The aim of the protagonists is also to reinforce the critical skills of the public by encouraging the intellectual self-

defence of the public deemed to be credulous. The expression is therefore used more by amateurs who produce content on the internet aimed at debunking information considered false than by journalists.

The leitmotiv of debunking is to reinform in an often militant way. The practice of debunking is becoming increasingly popular on social media to combat disinformation. This is particularly true of YouTubers who call themselves “debunkers” but also “sceptics” and “zeteticians”. The term “zetetic” (from the Greek word *zetetikos*, meaning one who likes to search) was allegedly already used by the sceptical philosopher Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 365-275 BC) and was brought up to date in France by the biophysicist Henri Broch in the 1980s to describe a scientific and critical method applied to paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science. Subsequently, it has been more widely used to designate an approach aimed at detecting cognitive biases on various subjects.

These YouTubers, most of whom are amateurs and autodidacts in science, have become important players in the field of science popularisation/scientific mediation in France in the space of a few years, even if these notions raise many questions. Some of their videos have millions of views. They influence their audiences on the truths they wish to defend in order to counter conspiracy theories, pseudo-scientific discourses and false beliefs/theories and become authority figures for their community in the face of other communities animated by the supporters of false ideas. These actors question the stakes of the fight against disinformation and are led to think explicitly about communication strategies, in terms of form and content, in the face of audiences and the consideration of effects.

Journalists and debunkers are encouraged to question best practices with regard to the evaluation of the expected effects on the public. In France, while many

academic works deal with fact-checking, the literature on debunking remains largely absent. Research in Anglophone countries, on the other hand, gives a more important place to debunking, even if the two expressions, although different, are generally used in a similar way. It appears pertinent to distinguish between the two notions, because they are based on different uses and practices in the fight against disinformation.

There is some common ground between debunking and fact-checking since the debunking approach uses fact-checking and fact-checking also aims to restore the truth. Nevertheless, there are some notable differences. First, fact-checking is built on the notions of objectivity and impartiality that are claimed by journalists. In contrast, debunking does not claim to be neutral and impartial. Thus, debunkers immediately assume the role of a partisan and militant strategy. The approach is used by individuals, or a group of individuals, to denounce an actor or a belief deemed hostile for society. The axiological implication in the sense of Max Weber's values is assumed. Moreover, fact-checking is not directly targeted, since the goal is above all the verification of facts. The practice of debunking is directly targeted against a specific actor or subject and begins with the intention of exposing disinformation that needs to be corrected and of modifying the beliefs of individuals who doubt, or are influenced by, the disinformation.

This difference in axiological implication in the two postures shows a different relationship to the truth. Fact-checking is based on factual elements and a nuanced conception of the relationship to truth, whereas debunking aims at establishing a truth concerning a theory, or a belief, judged to be false. The search for the uncovering of the lie is played out in a radical posture. Consequently, debunking is a strategic approach. Unlike fact-checking, not all falsehoods are valid, because debunking is focused on solving a strategic problem in order to reduce negative consequences. As a result,

there is a hierarchy of errors to be corrected.

Furthermore, while fact-checking is used by organizations, such as journalists and newsrooms, debunking is an amateur practice by an individual or a small informal group of people. Fact-checking is implemented by professionals, who have the position of journalist in an organization, while debunkers are pro/amateur influencers, i.e. individuals who exert influence on their community in their own name. Although debunkers appear on the margins of the "journalistic field" in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, they can be in competition with journalists focused on scientific popularization. A minority of them make this their principal activity and do not exclude the opportunity to become journalists, even if they have some reticence about the profession. Debunkers believe journalists are lacking in science skills and combativeness in the face of disinformation and misinformers.

This pro/amateur and informal character of the approach induces several differences compared to journalistic practice. First, because of the institutional status linked to the practice, fact-checking aims at a standardization that is learned in journalism schools and that is governed within the framework of media by peer control. In contrast, debunking is an informal practice, built in situ, by trial and error, which is rarely corrected by peers. Both practices are "labialisations", or trademarks, which aim to be successful with the public but with strong distinctions: journalists seek legitimization of a status within a structure, while debunkers aim at legitimizing a role for a place in social media. It follows that the first aim is for credibility with the public, while the second seeks success through the approbation of their community, which they aim to increase.

Finally, debunking and fact-checking practices are largely differentiated according to the relationship with the public. The issues at stake in relation to public

feedback are moderate in the case of fact-checking since it is a question of erroneous facts to be corrected. On the contrary, the stakes are high for debunkers since by debunking false theories/beliefs, they personally expose themselves to potentially hateful speech and action by their adversaries.

We have indicated that the axiological engagement is particularly strong in the debunking posture with regard to the truth that the protagonists wish to restore. The militant and political approach, in the name of science, raises issues regarding the reception of the public. For while the debunking approach is successful and gives actors a sense of social utility and a place in scientific mediation, it tends to polarize the false beliefs of the credulous rather than converting them into beliefs that are considered "right".

Although this polarizing effect of debunking is a subject of debate, the YouTubers are well aware that a video will not change the minds of individuals who are fiercely convinced by an idea that is considered false and that "belief conversion" takes place gradually, which leads them to relativize the effects of their videos themselves. Consequently, there is a paradox, because, if the protagonists doubt the effectiveness of the demystification process with the credulous public, they are also aware of the success of the process with the convinced public, which constitutes their community. The YouTubers' objective, more or less admitted, is to be viewed, shared, commented and liked as much as possible. Therefore, they are aware that their content must be different. The videos of their detractors,

containing conspiracy theories and fake news, in their effect of unveiling and confronting a dominant discourse, appear sensational and are privileged over content deemed more "true" but less catchy.

Some YouTubers recognize that direct confrontation aimed at debunking conspiracy theories and fake news, which they call a clash, significantly increases the number of views of their videos. This competition for the audience (the "buzz") can have perverse effects on the way YouTubers produce videos. This awareness of the scope of the clash in the promotion of their videos appears particularly interesting, because it can mirror their detractors, those who disseminate conspiracy theories and fake news. The YouTubers sometimes seem inclined to radicalize their point of view in a confrontational and excessive way in order to distinguish themselves, and they justify this, rightly or wrongly, by the YouTube algorithm.

Some also believe their videos influence an audience vacillating between beliefs. What reinforces this and encourages them to keep fighting obscurantism in their videos are the messages received from former conspiracists who say they have changed their opinion in part because of a YouTuber's channel. The debunkers insist on their influence, qualitative rather than quantitative, and their ability to "bring nuance and complexity to internet users" as one interviewee points out. Another argued that he wishes to arouse "the art of doubt rather than that of suspicion".

Florian Dauphin is a lecturer in the department of Philosophy - Human and Social Sciences at the University of Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens, France. He also works with the Habiter le Monde Laboratory (EA 4287).