

Journalistic Collaboration as a Response to Online Disinformation

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The campaign which preceded the 2017 French presidential elections was unique, due to a historic level of uncertainty. At the time, France was faced with an upsurge of populism, partly caused by decreasing levels of trust in the political and media elites. The Front National, France's far-right party, and its leader Marine Le Pen, had never been so close to winning the elections. France seemed to be destined to follow the footsteps of the United States, where a so-called «*anti-establishment*» president had been elected; and of the United Kingdom, where a divorce from the European Union was chosen. Both the US election and the UK referendum were heavily targeted by disinformation campaigns. These events served as a warning to mainland Europe, and to France in particular.

It was in this context that CrossCheck was created. In an effort to prevent a potentially disastrous upsurge of online propaganda, nearly thirty newsrooms – mostly from France, but also from the United Kingdom – joined forces to create an extensive factchecking project. During the two and a half months preceding the elections, at the crux of a campaign marked by twists and turns, more than hundred journalists collaborated in an attempt to counter disinformation. This project brought together a large network of actors comprising of journalists, researchers, students, platforms and the audience, in order to collectively produce «*conven-*

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tions » (Becker, 1982), and « social referents guiding future collective activity » (Gilmore, 1990) on a) what disinformation is; b) how it should be understood, and c) which means and methods should be used to counter it.

In effect, this complex collaborative project was an opportunity for journalists to explore their professional identity by reconciling their work habits with those of their peers, whom they would normally see as competitors. These exceptional circumstances allowed for an exploration of what it is that sets journalism apart as a profession; and enabled journalists to both develop better practices and regain the trust of their audience – all this from learning from one another. At the same time, the journalists who took part in the project were faced with a set of tools and technical conventions which are part of a *savoir-faire* that is specific to the factchecking and debunking of disinformation online. Finally, since the audience had the ability to « flag » disinformation via a participative platform, professional journalists were also confronted to various social representations of disinformation, which they had to manage.

The aim of this research is to understand how journalistic culture and practices were adapted, and how they evolved throughout this particular, uncommon project¹. More specifically, the core of this research explores how a sample of journalists with different backgrounds adjusted, individually and collectively, to the evolution of a complex system which tracked and exposed disinformation in a politically tense context. This study aims to show how CrossCheck influenced its participants' work habits, as well as their relations to other journalists. Finally, we examine the question of this project's long term impact on its participants, through the reinforcement of a collaborative, « public service » inspired culture, as opposed to the sense of competition that is historically constitutive of journalism. We thereby suggest that disinformation, and the subsequent response of collaborative factchecking, may serve as an entry point, an opportunity which journalists can seize to question and strengthen their skills and culture, and ultimately better fulfill their public service duty.

**COOPERATION, A NEW CONVENTION
TO RENEW JOURNALISM**

Research on journalism and news production that focuses mainly on journalistic practices tend to neglect some less visible yet crucial actors of news production, such as editors and technicians

(Langonné, 2014). In effect, the « news product » is most of the times the result of a complex set of interactions, negotiations and daily adjustments between different skills, routines, and professional cultures. This fundamental dimension has gained prominence with the development of digital media, as these interactions now integrate a large and diverse spectrum of digital devices and related jobs. This trend should encourage scholars to pay attention to the depth and diversity of the interactions, practices and social roles involved in the process of news production, which is specifically what this study about collaborative factchecking aims to do.

Becker's interactionist approach and his concept of « art worlds » provide a theoretical framework that is relevant to this research objective. Becker postulates that art worlds emerge from daily interactions and routines aimed at saving time, energy and resources. Indeed, the « mutually adjusted activities, materials, and places » (1982, p. 134) produce references or conventions for future activity which are anchored in habits. Social interactions, through discourse and communication, are a vehicle to these reciprocal adjustments, and allow actors to negotiate the validity of conventions, resources or routines. Social actors involved in the « journalistic world » (Bastin, 1999) tend to establish codes of conduct rather through interactions during the process of news production, than by conforming to an unequivocal, exogenous organizing principle guaranteed by strong institutions. Such codes and conventions, consequently, are never fully stabilized. They are dependent on contexts, stakes, and the relations between the actors of the journalistic world, and they can always be negotiated and defined again. From this point of view, it can be assumed that the features of journalism's social world are being deeply affected by digital technologies, and the fundamental role they play in the contemporary mediascape. As a result, one could advance the hypothesis that this shift is led by actors who are willing to position themselves into a social structure that is made of articulated networks rather than dominated by institutions, because the former are perceived as more flexible, malleable and even efficient (van der Haak, Parks, Castells, 2012).

The necessity of cooperation across the field of journalism is maintained both by the nature of the online news market, and by the political and economic crisis of the media. The acceleration and complexification of the online news cycle renders the reflective practice more difficult. The fact that the sheer volume of information that needs to be scrutinized and verified throughout the production of news is growing calls for the optimization of re-

sources and the generation of synergies that can be obtained through the acts of sharing and cooperating. From that perspective, one of the main aspects of journalism's technological shift is that it enables new types of interactions, which continually redefine the social meanings of various forms of newswork and reinforce the « collective nature of journalism » (Lewis, Zamith, 2017, p.112). At the same time, journalists involved in collectives such as investigative news nonprofits and professional factchecking groups understand and justify cooperation in light of their « reformist mission », aimed at rebalancing the tension between the field's commercial orientation and its democratic mission (Graves, Konieczna, 2015). In other words, these openly cooperative practices, which are not completely free from competitive tensions, are considered by journalists who take part in them as part of an explicit mission to improve, or even « save » journalism from perceived threats.

THE ISSUE OF DISINFORMATION ONLINE

One the most acute threats of contemporary journalism is the phenomenon that is colloquially labeled as « fake news », which refers to content with misleading or false information, and/or mislabeled or manipulated images and videos. In this paper, we avoid using this term for a number of reasons. First of all, this term is inadequate and fails to describe the complexities of mis- and disinformation. It's a catch-all, vague and ambiguous term used to refer to a large amount of very different contexts and practices (including satire). Thus, it hinders the implementation of appropriate policy responses (Baym, 2010). Additionally, the term has been co-opted by some politicians to discredit the free press, and by the media establishment to invalidate citizen journalists and alternative news sites (Tambini, 2017). In this paper, we will instead use the term *disinformation*, as defined in the typology proposed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) in their *Information Disorder* theoretical framework. The three types of *Information Disorder* they identify are:

1) Disinformation: information that is false and deliberately produced to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.

2) Misinformation: information that is false, but not produced with the intention of causing harm.

3) Malinformation: accurate information used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization, or country.

The upsurge of online disinformation can be viewed as a symptom of the general crisis of media – a « canary in the digital coal mine » (Beckett, 2017), that also creates opportunities for journalism to be renewed. The global landscape of media and their business models have been profoundly affected by digitization. Newsrooms have been forced to adapt to new advertising models and distribution channels that are dependent on audience maximization, therefore inadvertently valuing the popularity of false news and rumors through economic dynamics (Tambini, 2017). Indeed, oligopolistic platforms such as Google and Facebook capture a significant portion of online revenue, and set online publishing standards that influence journalistic practices and even favor the spread of disinformation (Smyrnaio, 2018). However, this crisis is also political and, just like the issue of disinformation, it is not new. Some of the original factors accelerating the disinformation phenomenon can be located in the mainstream media's inability to address issues of partisanship, bias, ethical standards and ownership concentration, which has led to a growing distrust of journalism as a whole (Nip, 2008, Lilleker, 2017).

The risk of disinformation causing long-term damage to the fabric of democratic societies – by contaminating the public sphere with confusion – is significant enough to demand strategies that can counter this phenomenon. CrossCheck, a project organized during the French presidential campaign, is one such strategy that we will examine in this paper. Our research aims to provide answers to three main questions: how, in a politically tense context, have journalists – with different backgrounds – adjusted, individually and collectively, to the evolution of a complex system which tracked and exposed disinformation? How did participation in the CrossCheck project influence its participants' work habits, as well as their relations to other journalists? Finally, to what extent did CrossCheck had a long-term impact on journalistic practices, through the reinforcement of a collaborative, « public service » inspired culture, as opposed to the sense of competition that is historically constitutive of journalism?

DISINFORMATION IN THE FRENCH CONTEXT

The issue of disinformation online has become salient since the US presidential election and the UK's Brexit referendum, both of which occurred in 2016. Disinformation may not be a recent phenomenon, but its prevalence and impact on audiences have been amplified by the increasing mistrust in traditional journalism and, simultaneously, the rise

of social media use (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017). Indeed, scholars have linked the decreasing level of trust in legacy media to the rise of social media (Phillips, 2010, Donsbach, 2010, Couldry, 2013), which has created a new landscape of news sources that can be difficult to navigate, even for professional journalists (Madden et al., 2017). France has been particularly affected by this phenomenon: trust in the French media is among the lowest in Europe, with a 30% approval rate (Newman et al., 2017) and a majority of the population believes journalists to be influenced by economic and political forces². At the same time, social media use is constantly rising, particularly for news consumption: Facebook is the second most popular website in France behind Google, with more than eight million unique visitors daily. In addition, according to different studies, 15 to 20% of the French consider social networking sites to be an important source of news³.

In a context of recurring terrorist attacks and longstanding socioeconomic issues (e.g. high unemployment, slow economic growth, nepotism, tensions within the working-class and multi-ethnic suburbs), France has not been spared from the spread of conspiracy theories and increasingly uninhibited islamophobic and anti-immigrant discourses. A vast network of loosely-connected, far-right online groups and websites – more or less related to the Front National and coined as the « fachosphère » – has recently been particularly successful at flooding the French internet with a diversity of misleading information and xenophobic propaganda⁴. These groups have been strengthened by the tendency of the French to distrust the political establishment. In fact, only a small minority of the French population trust political parties, and the approval rate of former President François Hollande reached a historical low toward the end of his presidency in 2017.

Considering this particularly unsettled context, which had the potential to provide a fertile ground for disinformation, and given the precedents of disinformation campaigns in the US and the UK, the 2017 campaign represented a unique opportunity for the French mainstream media to demonstrate their ability to handle, and prevent, the impact that a vast disinformation campaign could have on the outcome of the elections.

THE CROSSCHECK PROJECT

CrossCheck was launched in late February 2017, and lasted until the end of the French presidential campaign in May 2017. The project aimed to de-

bunk and verify suspicious information through the collaboration of more than hundred journalists in local and national newsrooms in France and the UK, and also employed ten journalism students who worked as project editors. Every day, for two and a half months, CrossCheck's participants reviewed hundreds of articles online and social media posts relating to the presidential campaign, and eventually published a total of sixty-four debunking reports in both French and English⁵.

Each article published on CrossCheck's website included logos from the newsrooms to confirm their participation to the specific investigative work. All articles were marked according to the following typology: *True*, *False*, *Caution*, *Insufficient Evidence* and *Attention*. If a story was marked as *False*, an additional verdict was also added: *Manipulated*; *Fabricated*; *Misattributed*; *Misleading*; *Misreported* or *Satire*, in order to help readers understand the nuances of mis- and disinformation.

CrossCheck was organized by First Draft, a nonprofit, and funded by Google News Lab. Google News Lab's input was fundamental, as it allowed for the creation of CrossCheck's website, the training of participants and the hiring of additional staff. Facebook also provided funds to support ads for CrossCheck on its platform, thus increasing the project's visibility beyond journalistic circles. As such, this collaboration is also unique in that Facebook and Google set aside their rivalry to both contribute to a collaborative journalistic project, in response to criticism regarding their responsibility in the growing problem of disinformation⁶.

CrossCheck's audience was also invited to signal disinformation by asking questions on the project's website, which was enabled by a Harken plug-in⁷. As a result, CrossCheck received more than 600 questions from the public. Furthermore, the project was very active on social media. Its Twitter page attracted more than 30,000 profile visits, its Facebook page was liked by more than 180,000 followers, and its short explanatory videos gathered more than 1.2 million views during the project's two and a half months lifespan.

CrossCheck united a range of different actors, including universities such as the CFJ (Centre de Formation des Journalistes) and the London School of Economics; and technical partners such as CrowdTangle, Harken, NewsWhip, Check, and SAM. These actors were joined by a diversity of media organizations⁸. Before the project's launch, all participants were invited to a three-day boot camp in Normandie, France. At this boot camp, journalists and students at-

tended a variety of workshops and were given the chance to learn how verification tools could be used. While some tools were introduced by their official representatives (e.g. CrowdTangle, NewsWhip and Check), participants also learned about geolocation, reverse image search, and other verification techniques through presentations by fellow news professionals. The goal of this training was primarily to level-up all participants and explain in detail how CrossCheck would work, but also to ensure that participants acquainted successfully, as they were about to work together, online, during the project. During the training, participants were also introduced to CrossCheck's methodology and workflow.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is based on semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors who participated in CrossCheck, as well a representative of Google, who funded the project, and members of First Draft. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted in June 2017, a few weeks after the project ended. The interviews were recorded and analyzed thematically. The interviewees included journalism students, whose participation as project editors of CrossCheck was central. The sample's criteria comprised of the degree of participation, media type, organizational position, experience, and, of course, availability. We mostly interviewed journalists who were particularly active in the project and worked for news TV channels online, journalistic startups or news agencies. The level of experience of the interviewees ranged from journalism students to senior managers. Finally, the empirical material of the study was completed through participant observation, as one of the authors of this paper worked as a project editor throughout the duration of CrossCheck⁹.

A FUNDAMENTALLY COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

One of the particularities of CrossCheck was that it relied on the collaboration of a hundred journalists from different newsrooms. What seems to have initially enabled this collaboration was a sense of interdependency between the media outlets, which translated into a common sense of responsibility, and eventually into a cross-partisan alliance with the objective to restore the audience's trust and journalists' role as gatekeepers. This was especially relevant in the context of the French elections, given the significant political risk that misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda posed to the election outcome.

While some research has recommended the creation of a cross-partisan consensus to increase the credibility of factchecking, this endeavor may be double-edged, and may oddly resonate with debates about the enduring biases of factcheckers who may claim to be objective or neutral (Uscinski, Butler, 2013). To some interviewees, the sheer number of diverse newsrooms validating a debunk was seen as a significant demonstration of credibility. But other interviewees were aware of the risk that a mainstream media alliance may entail, as it could potentially be interpreted as either a further homogenization of perspectives, or an illegitimate claim to objectivity. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the CrossCheck alliance was underpinned by a sense of interdependency between media organizations as an ecosystem, both on a national and international scale. In terms of public image, interviewees mentioned the risk that if one organization committed a mistake, it could potentially reflect upon the image of the entire project. Conversely, some journalists believed that collaborating created a virtuous circle, that increased the quality of the debunks and factchecking, namely by establishing a system of checks and balances between journalists:

«If some journalists behave haphazardly it reflects on all of the media in general. And by having something positive, done very well, it's also positive for all of the media. »
Journalist, factchecking expert at a major news media

This interdependence was also noticeable in an international sense. Indeed, the interviewees unanimously mentioned the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a warning that measures ought to be taken to prevent the 2017 French elections from being influenced by disinformation. Thus, this time of high stakes and institutional instability can be seen as an opportune moment, or *kairos*, as mentioned by one interviewee:

«The project worked well in France because we were at a time when, us journalists, we had all witnessed the precedent of the American election. We were aware that we were standing on a breeding ground that could potentially be explosive in terms of fake news – with the rise of populism, increasing voting intentions for the National Front, and a disintegration of traditional political parties. »
Senior journalist, news agency

Thus, the interviewees felt encouraged by a sense that it was their responsibility to take action. However, this responsibility stemmed not from a belief that the crisis of journalism may be

responsible for the spread of disinformation, but rather from a sense of duty deriving from them, as journalists, needing to contribute to a healthy democratic debate. They also highlighted that this responsibility was not just theirs; it also belonged to the audience and to social media platforms (the latter, as previously mentioned, had an important role to fulfill in CrossCheck). This sense of shared responsibility, and subsequent collaboration between media actors, resonate with the academic debate that recommends the inclusion of different social groups in the discussion about what journalism should or should not do. But the opinions of the interviewees regarding this extensive collaboration differed. Some expressed skepticism about the participation of the audience, on the basis of the necessity for journalists to maintain their gatekeeping role – a limit previously identified in the context of participatory journalism (Hermida, Thurman, 2008).

The input of platforms was deemed indispensable and worthy of further though cautious development. The interviewees recognized that CrossCheck could not have existed without their input, but they also said that platforms could have provided even more resources. The logic behind this request was that the journalists – with the exception of one interviewee who saw Google as a fully neutral actor – considered Facebook and Google to be the primary and most fertile ground for disinformation to spread. The interviewees were also aware of both their sector's financial hardships and of its increasing dependency upon online distribution platforms. Thus, some suggested the need to agree on a mutually benefitting compromise for collaboration, where newsrooms could enjoy the technological and financial advantages of platforms, while retaining full autonomy over content. Indeed, in terms of CrossCheck's editorial decisions, Google and Facebook did not intervene in the work of journalists, and only provided access to software and funding. Consequently, journalists were able to fulfill their gatekeeping role without external interference. Nevertheless, as mentioned by several interviewees, the platforms' control over the tools and funding of the project still represented an important background issue connected to the increasing technological and economic dependency of journalism upon the internet industry.

The interviewees' opinions regarding the collaboration with the audience were similarly ambivalent. They generally referred to the need to find a strategy that maintained their gatekeeping role, while taking advantage of the audience as a resource. Their accounts denoted an acceptance that the audience could provide a better visibility

of online trends, and that they were better able to report disinformation, thus overcoming the challenge of filter bubbles (Messing, Westwood, 2014). However, some interviewees also believed that it was for the journalists to decide on the validity and usefulness of this participation. The importance of the audience's participation was thus questioned by those who believed that, as professional journalists, they are better equipped to address and process information. Yet, the participation of the audience was alternatively justified by the need to increase efforts towards the building of a community, restoring trust, and fostering dialogue:

« We had reactions from colleagues like, 'But why do you debunk stuff that nobody reads, or that only idiots will share?' It's very symptomatic of journalists in general. But we tried to make them understand that they weren't idiots. Something that's shared 30,000 times, we considered it was interesting to say it's false. » *Senior journalist, news agency*

« Since us, as the media profession, we're in this moment of reflection, to repair a relationship of trust, I think it's essential that the public has someone to turn to, such as reliable journalists. Otherwise, whom do they turn to? There's no one else. » *Journalist, website of major TV channel*

An obvious obstacle to collaboration between newsrooms is competition. However, CrossCheck's participants managed to temporarily overcome this obstacle by focusing their efforts on factchecking under a common, overarching sense of public service. Indeed, the interviews denoted that the issue of competition between newsrooms was overcome by two factors. First, the stakes were deemed too high for journalists to work against each other. Second, the core practice of CrossCheck was factchecking, which they essentially considered as a public service, devoid of the usual « rat race for scoops ». Ultimately, overcoming the obstacle of competition was seen as a significant collective achievement:

« I lost my sense of competition in the way I worked with others. When I work for my regular job, I'm looking for scoops. It's really something that motivates me on a daily basis. » *Journalist, website of major TV channel*

« To debunk fake news is not to find a scoop. There's a dimension of public utility linked to one of journalism's founding principle to

be the fourth estate, to ensure a sound functioning of democracy, to inform the opinion in a healthy way, and to protect it if it's attacked by false information. » *Mid-career journalist, news agency*

With the participants thus joining forces, competition was temporarily overcome within a context that was mutually beneficial to the media outlets. The usual « rat race for scoops » was superseded by the possibility of reaching larger audiences, hence bringing greater societal benefits. One interviewee labeled this type of situation as « coopetition ». Indeed, the sense of competition was still felt by interviewees, as some participants did not seem to fully cooperate. But this lack of participation by some newsrooms was excused by the interviewees who thought it might be due to hierarchical pressures and rigidities, rather than the journalists' individual choices. In addition, some interviewees mentioned their fear of « freeloaders », as they gradually noticed an unequal contribution from different participants. However, this uneven contribution was thought to be balanced by the fact that each participant's contribution depended on the adequacy of their skills and resources, depending on the situation in particular:

«AFP was very involved from the beginning. After a week of work, we could identify who was participating the most. We feared that others would rest on their laurels and publish the CrossCheck's debunks on their website without having worked on it like we did. But it turned out to be completely false. It came in waves and it followed the rhythm of news. Local media were able to contribute when rumors concerned their areas. » *Mid-career journalist, news agency*

Factchecking and verification have been deemed by the interviewees and the academic literature as a founding value of journalistic identity (Kovach, Rosenstiel, 2001, Fenton, Witschge, 2009). In this collaborative context, not only did it gain prominence in the daily practices of journalists, but it also reinforced their value of public service, while challenging their accepted notions of competition.

A MODEL BASED ON HORIZONTAL COLLABORATION

Collaboration during the project took place on a messaging app, Slack, which allowed all journalists to discuss and debate spontaneously, even though they were physically scattered across newsrooms in France and the UK. Discussions were instantaneous and multimodal throughout the project:

«The advantages were that we had access to everyone in one click. We were well organized by name and by media, we knew with whom we were speaking and at what moment. » *Journalist, website of major TV channel*

Discussions were described as horizontal, as if absent of hierarchy, even if participants ranged from interns to experienced factcheckers and journalists. The discussions were courteous, spontaneous, fluid, factual and aimed at reaching a consensus:

«There were very few hierarchical dynamics. I did not feel that the opinion of an intern was less considered than that of a journalist. » *Project editor and journalism student, news website*

The decisions to debunk a story depended on each participant's resources and skills. As explained before, participation was unequal due to the different profiles of the contributors. Thus, journalists were obliged to trust each other, and share their work with individuals with whom they would not normally work:

«It's been complicated at times to get used to trusting someone who's not from my media, and who has different standards. But that was also the point of the game. » *Senior journalist, news agency*

Trust seems to have been established as everyone's different capacity and skills were revealed, at the individual and at the organizational level, and the diversity of the participants' backgrounds turned out to be an advantage. It became natural for a participant in particular to debunk a specific story if it happened to be in his or her range of expertise, whether that be a topic, a language or skill. By joining individual forces and assigning tasks to the most capable person, participants were able to cover a vast array of disinformation:

«BuzzFeed was specialized in social media. Les Décodeurs were legitimized by their experience in deciphering information. We at the AFP were useful because of our global network. » *Senior journalist, news agency*

«What was interesting was that, by aggregating a bunch of skills, we had a maximum of possibilities to verify the veracity of the information. » *Journalist, factchecking expert at an online news and verification outlet*

The absence of strictly defined rules was also central to the collaboration. While all participants had received a three-day training to ensure that everyone had at least a minimum of verification skills, and a basic understanding of how CrossCheck would work, the workflow was constantly adapted during the project. Since the appearance and impact of disinformation varied, it was necessary for journalists to adapt to each situation according to the resources available. Methods were established after having discussed them, and only if there was a consensus around them:

«It wasn't established from the beginning. We learnt through trial and error. There were processes that we defined gradually once we'd realize it was more or less working.» *Senior journalist, news agency*

But consensus was not easily reached. An overarching principle of the CrossCheck project was prudence, but this was a point of disagreement between the journalists. It sometimes led to heated debates, due to the diversity and the complexity of disinformation. Different methods between journalists created divisions between those who wanted to follow their instinct, and those more experienced with debunking online, who urged for caution:

«It was also an opportunity to discover that people work differently, some do without flair, clinically. Personally, it gives me energy to know that a story is false, to the point that, sometimes, other journalists told me, you're going too fast. The fact is, a couple of hours later, it turns out I was right. But for them it was too soon to say it was false.» *Senior journalist, local online news outlet*

Thus, a collaborative model emerged, through horizontal, reasonable debate and the assignment of tasks to the most capable and knowledgeable, according to the situation. Instead of a standardized code of conduct, CrossCheck's participants relied on a workflow that resembles the idea of *phronesis*, a practical wisdom based on prudence, discussion and adaptability. This principle was given priority in the effective conduct of work and allowed for sufficient flexibility. In addition, Slack enabled individuals with different capacities, based in different locations, to access past and present discussions, thus unifying people and practices in time and space. These parameters match the conditions of the ideal public sphere: equal participants were given equal opportunities to deliberate, with a relatively common journalistic knowledge, without coercion, and with a focus on the public good (Bohman, Rehg, 2017).

Two other important ingredients of the collaborative model were autonomy and immediacy. Interviewees mentioned the fact that they were free to decide whether or not to publish CrossCheck's content on their own media as a positive feature, that reinforced their autonomy towards the project. Immediacy, another potential obstacle to quality journalism, was also seen by the participants as a challenge, given the tension between the necessity to react quickly against rumors and the time-intensive nature of factchecking.

In terms of how to best allocate time resources, interviewees diverged. Factchecking, thus done collaboratively, was felt to be slowed down due to the need to wait for the approval of journalists from other newsrooms, who were working for CrossCheck in addition to their regular job. Those journalists who are used to working under tight time constraints, and the hierarchical pressure to publish, were also obliged to slow down and adapt to more experienced factcheckers who often recommended to be prudent and to investigate further. However, the higher amount of time spent on verification was appreciated by those used to working in fast-paced news agencies or TV, particularly because it has ultimately been rewarded by the absence of any debunking mistake. This lack of mistakes was mentioned by many as the ultimate gauge of success:

«Coming from a media that always works in urgency, I thought it was very pleasant to be able to say that we can take our time for once. We would not publish until we fully verified it. It's an incredible luxury in today's journalism.» *Senior journalist, news agency*

«To me what worked best is that we didn't mess up.» *Senior journalist, local newsroom*

This absence of mistakes reaffirmed the journalists' sense of purpose. They mentioned how the audience tends to consider journalistic mistakes – from which journalists are not immune, especially under time pressures – as « fake news ». In this case, favoring quality over immediacy made journalists more confident in their abilities.

THE QUESTION OF OBJECTIVITY, CREDIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Objectivity is intrinsically linked to credibility and transparency. Objectivity, as a claim, was questioned by interviewees. As a practice, it necessarily faced challenges because of the nature of

disinformation, but it was reinforced by credibility and transparency. Credibility was meant to be achieved through the aforementioned cross-partisan alliance. Transparency was demonstrated both between journalists, and between journalists and their audience. Participants had agreed upon including as many sources as possible in their debunks, and to allow readers to follow the thread of verification, so as to foster a trusted relationship. In addition, journalists were happy to share their work with other peers:

«To share my verification work with other newsrooms wasn't a problem for me. Transparency in journalism, it's essential to be credible in the verification. » *Journalist, website of major TV channel*

But even though participants intended to be transparent and credible, CrossCheck's claim to objectivity was challenged by the quantitatively superior amount of disinformation targeting Emmanuel Macron, presidential candidate and Marine Le Pen's main opponent. CrossCheck's participants faced a dilemma: to debunk all the disinformation targeting Macron and potentially reinforce the audience's assumption concerning the media's partiality, or to ignore it and go against their deontology¹⁰. They justified their choices by insisting on the quality and depth in their work:

« Factually, the bulk of disinformation targeted Emmanuel Macron more than any other candidate. That was kind of a trap. Obviously, for us journalists, it's complicated because all newsmaking implies some sort of balance. The problem is that we were not going to invent cases of disinformation which didn't exist. Ergo we reinforce that circle in which people say that journalists defend him anyway.» *Journalist, factchecking expert at an online news and verification outlet.*

Another challenge to CrossCheck's credibility was satire, which was a divisive issue. Some satirical, false information may seem obviously « fake », but when the level of virality was checked it confirmed that it was often shared by a significant number of people. Here the journalists faced another dilemma: to debunk the satire and appear to state the obvious to one audience segment, or to ignore it and let hundreds of thousands of people potentially in a state of confusion. The methods and threshold that defined when to debunk a story or not were thus constantly debated, depending on the story and its level of virality. These disagreements were an opportunity for participants

to question their subjectivity and bias through discussions with peers. Journalists seemed aware of their biases and, as they considered that absolute objectivity was unreachable, a prudence principle was prioritized:

«As journalists we also have our opinions and political affinities. I had the feeling that sometimes they carried a bias in the information processing. » *Senior journalist, news agency*

«We've never managed to define a threshold. The whole problem is in the interpretation of things, in how to say things in the most impartial way possible, which is basically our job, knowing that I personally don't believe in objectivity. » *Senior journalist, news agency*

These accounts call for an *ad hoc* attitude, by highlighting two phenomena: (1) the impossibility of maintaining completely standardized factchecking methods, and (2) inevitable bias, especially since the modern journalism industry is made of quite a socially homogeneous milieu. While these interviews cannot demonstrate how the audience received this approach, they still highlight a strategy to repair trust through transparency: from journalist towards journalist, and from the journalists towards their audience.

After interviewing the participants, it became clear that CrossCheck had brought benefits beyond addressing the issue of disinformation, at both the individual and organizational levels. Most journalists mentioned gaining valuable skills by learning from one another. Through the witnessing and comparing of their peers' methods, journalists realized how their work routines were shaped, and sometimes even restrained, by the outlet for which they worked. Collaborating on the same platform pushed them to find a common ground and to adapt to each other, to find a consensus. Thus, their skills, flair and efficiency improved, independently of their previous experience. CrossCheck also required the use of technological tools such as NewsWhip, CrowdTangle, and Google Reverse Image Search, which facilitated the verification process. Mastering these tools fostered a healthy skepticism towards the content which the participants might encounter:

«To be confronted with others' verification techniques and sensibilities from other media allows you to reevaluate yours and to highlight reflexes that we accumulate by staying in the same newsroom for years. » *Journalist, online media outlet*

«I strengthened my reflexes, I made progress in my professional skills and in fact-checking, and it enabled me to improve my efficiency and speed on a field that is closely related, which is user generated content. »
Journalist, news agency

The professional exposure of the participants increased within their own newsroom, within the field of factchecking, and internationally. Now acquainted with each other, participants built a durable network and are considering future collaboration. While the most experienced web journalists felt less enthusiastic about the individual benefits they gained, they expressed humility by highlighting that journalism is a profession where one constantly learns new things. One participant also mentioned how a story debunked by CrossCheck was used to demonstrate the importance of online propaganda and the social utility of CrossCheck to government officials. This collaborative project also reflected positively on newsrooms, and on the image of the mainstream media. To be publicly associated to CrossCheck and its integrity served as a strategic promotion:

« I think my boss's motivation, as far as I know, was to associate our media brand to a beautiful project like CrossCheck, that tries to rebuild trust with its readers. » *Journalist, website of major TV channel*

Newsrooms could insert their logo on CrossCheck's stories which they had helped to debunk. Particularly appreciated by editors, this feature increased their brand's visibility. They received positive feedback from their audience, and some partners reported gaining a significant amount of traffic on CrossCheck-related content. Thus, one can assume the collaboration to have worked because CrossCheck's image not interfering with the newsroom's own visibility, while conveying an image of intellectual integrity to the audience. CrossCheck was even useful for the more established factchecking outlets, whose experience and knowledge around disinformation was enriched.

With regard to the impact on the audience, which was CrossCheck's primary purpose, journalists were aware that it might have been limited due to CrossCheck's restricted resources, and the fact that some of the audience was out of reach. Although additional time and financial resources could have increased CrossCheck's efficiency and immediacy, one interviewee noted the significant challenges that psychological mechanisms, such as belief perseverance and selective exposure, posed. Furthermore, factchecking tends to speak to an

audience that is already convinced and trustful of mainstream media. Other segments, namely those in greater need of verified information, are also the most difficult to reach and convince:

«There will always be people who are skeptical of the media. There will always be a danger, that doesn't mean we should be scared. » *Editor and factchecking expert, major online news outlet*

The interviewees' disappointment regarding CrossCheck's limited reach was counterbalanced by the quality of their work and the practical advantages of collaboration. They also suggested solutions to increase impact, such as building a network of faithful followers to counter disinformation quantitatively, and to have platforms providing more visibility and funding.

CONCLUSION

This research is a first attempt at understanding the impact of the CrossCheck project on the journalists who took part in the project. On the newsrooms' side, while some of the project's partners (e.g. *Le Monde's* Décodeurs team, and the factchecking unit Désintox at *Libération*) already had strong reputations in factchecking and debunking, participants agreed that they should not compete for this type of work, and that it should in fact be considered a public service. All journalists who took part in the project, including those who had previously worked on factchecking and verification, reported learning new skills. While the kick-off boot camp did provide solid basics, the daily use of new tools and techniques, as well as frequent interactions on Slack on the factchecking process and the verification of images and videos, were acknowledged as extremely powerful ways of embedding new journalistic techniques, and so within the newsroom itself.

The process of working transparently, and having to 'show your work' to newsrooms that would otherwise be seen as competitors, is a first remarkable shift in journalists' representation of their professional environment. While some struggled with the project's slow publishing pace, there was at the time a shared acknowledgement that the collective factchecking process, while slower than traditional reporting, resulted in high quality journalism. Collective editorial decision-making allowed otherwise rival newsrooms to make joint decisions about what to report, and what to strategically ignore. Participants recognized the power of these cross-newsroom conversations. This is particularly

relevant at a time when newsrooms themselves are being used by agents of disinformation, the latter relying on the former to provide oxygen to rumors and fabricated content, thus amplifying them beyond niche online communities, towards wider, mainstream audiences.

The increased cooperation between journalists from different newsrooms, and the frequency and diversity of their interactions thus directed towards a common objective gave rise to a confrontation of their routines, professional cultures and respective editorial identities. Beyond the project's specific workflow, which was formalized upstream, conventions were established between journalists from different backgrounds (especially in terms of temporality and primacy of quality over responsiveness), which created a type of *ad-hoc modus operandi*. These processes evolved informally at the whim of various interactions, within what Rommetveit (1974) describes as a « *temporarily and partially shared social world* ». Their dialogue, made of successive adjustments, can thus be seen as « *a genuinely creative and social activity of constructing some sort of a bridge between very different and previously separate social worlds* » (ibid, p. 29). This idea is also applicable to the cooperation that took place within the project between journalists and non-journalistic professions, which has certainly helped to redefine the boundaries of the journalistic sphere. The centrality of both the technological tools and the digital platforms must be recalled, insofar as they have initiated, centralized, instrumented and captured the flows of this collaborative project. The technological dimension of the latter is in fact pervasive in all its stages

(research, participation of the audience, decision to cover or not a subject, collaboration during the investigation, dissemination and valuation of debunks), and the digital platforms constitute in this context the backbone of the project, a logic that was perfectly integrated by the stakeholders and the participants. Thus, journalists were submerged in a digital entrepreneurial culture through the predominant role of Google and Facebook in the project, as well as the pivotal role of the project managers of First Draft and the prerequisite of the training supported by these actors. They thus imposed *de facto* their codes and conventions at the technical and organizational level of the project as they often do in journalism in general (Smyrnaiois, 2015).

The perceived impartiality of the project was also one of the reasons that it appealed to a wide spectrum of people. However, interactions with the public were limited, since most journalists had more or less explicitly expressed the wish to maintain their gatekeeping authority. Finally, one of the limits of the project is undoubtedly the fact that the necessarily reactive process of debunking leads journalists to follow the agenda of disinformation. The work of rectifying disinformation might then be done at the expense of the creative activity of producing original news stories, which yet constitutes a fundamental function of their profession.

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NOTES

¹ A comprehensive version of this study was published in Smyrnaiois N., Chauvet S., Marty E., "The Impact of CrossCheck on Journalists & the Audience. Learning the lessons from a collaborative journalism project fighting disinformation online during the French Presidential Election", Research Report, First Draft, November 2017. Available at https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Crosscheck_rapport_EN_1129.pdf/

² Baromètre des médias, La Croix, January 2018.

³ See for example Actu 24/7, Médiamétrie, March 2016.

⁴ Astier, Henri, « French election: Is online far right a threat to democracy? » BBC News, April 5, 2017.

⁵ <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/france-en/>

⁶ See for example Tufekci, Zeynep, « Zuckerberg's Preposterous Defense of Facebook », The New York Times, September 29, 2017.

⁷ Hearken is a tool which makes it easier for newsrooms to ask questions to their audience, and to integrate these questions into their editorial output.

⁸ AFP, Bloomberg, Buzzfeed, Centre France, Channel 4, Euractiv, Euronews, Explicite, France Télévisions, Global Voices, L'Express, La Provence, La Voix du Nord, L'Avenir, LCI, Le Monde, Le Journal du Dimanche, Le Télégramme, Les Echos, France 24, Libération, Mashable, Nice Matin, Ouest France, StreetPresse, Rue89 Bordeaux, Rue 89 Lyon, Rue 89 Strasbourg, Saphir News.

⁹ Sophie Chauvet was employed by First Draft as editor for CrossCheck throughout the project.

¹⁰ At the same time the biggest part of the audience's questions to CrossCheck was also about rumors concerning Emmanuel Macron, which means that the choice to debunk these was also justified by the public's demand.

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Journalistic Collaboration as a Response to Online Disinformation

La coopération entre journalistes comme réplique à la désinformation en ligne

A cooperação entre jornalistas como uma resposta à desinformação on-line

En • The goal of this study is to understand how journalistic culture and practices were adapted and how they evolved during a collaborative factchecking project during the 2017 presidential elections in France. The paper explores how a sample of journalists with different backgrounds adjusted, individually and collectively, to the evolution of a complex system which tracked and exposed disinformation in a politically tense context. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors who participated in CrossCheck, Google representatives who funded the project and members of First Draft. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted in June 2017, a few weeks after the project ended. Our findings show that, while some of the project's partners already had strong reputations in factchecking and debunking, participants agreed that they should not compete for this type of work, and that it should in fact be considered a public service. All journalists who took part in the project, including those who had previously worked on factchecking and verification, reported learning new skills. Collective editorial decision-making allowed otherwise rival newsrooms to make joint decisions about what to report and what to strategically ignore. The increased cooperation between journalists from different newsrooms and the frequency and diversity of their interactions directed towards a common objective obliged them to confront their routines, professional cultures and respective editorial identities.

Keywords: factchecking, France, elections, collaboration, CrossCheck

Fr • L'objectif de cette recherche est de comprendre comment la culture et les pratiques journalistiques ont été adaptées et comment elles ont évolué au cours d'un projet collaboratif de vérification de l'information lors des élections présidentielles de 2017 en France. L'article examine comment un échantillon de journalistes d'horizons différents s'est adapté, individuellement et collectivement, à l'évolution d'un système complexe qui traquait et exposait la désinformation dans un contexte politiquement chargé. La recherche repose sur des entretiens semi-structurés avec des journalistes et des rédacteurs ayant participé à CrossCheck, ainsi que des représentants de Google qui ont financé le projet et des membres de First Draft qui l'ont encadré. Au total, 18 entretiens approfondis ont été menés en juin 2017, quelques semaines après la fin du projet. Nos résultats montrent que, si certains des partenaires du projet jouissaient déjà d'une solide réputation en matière de vérification de l'information, les participants ont convenu qu'ils ne devraient pas se concurrencer pour ce type de travail et qu'il devrait en fait être considéré comme un service public. Tous les journalistes qui ont participé au projet, y compris ceux qui avaient déjà travaillé dans le domaine, ont déclaré avoir acquis de nouvelles compétences. La prise de décision éditoriale collective a permis aux salles de rédaction traditionnellement en compétition de prendre des décisions communes. La coopération accrue entre les journalistes de différentes salles de rédaction, ainsi que la fréquence et la diversité de leurs interactions orientées vers un objectif commun ont donné lieu à une confrontation de leurs routines, de leurs cultures professionnelles et de leurs identités éditoriales respectives.

Mots-clés : vérification, France, élections, collaboration, CrossCheck

Pt. O objetivo desta pesquisa é entender como a cultura e as práticas jornalísticas foram adaptadas e como elas evoluíram ao longo de um projeto colaborativo de verificação de fatos durante as eleições presidenciais de 2017 na França. O artigo explora como uma amostra de jornalistas com diferentes históricos se ajustou, individual e coletivamente, à evolução de um sistema complexo que rastreou e expôs desinformação em um contexto politicamente tenso. A pesquisa é baseada em entrevistas semi-estruturadas com jornalistas e editores que participaram do CrossCheck, bem como um representante do Google, que financiou o projeto, e membros do First Draft. Um total de 18 entrevistas em profundidade foram realizadas em junho de 2017, algumas semanas após o término do projeto. Nossas descobertas mostram que, enquanto alguns dos parceiros do projeto já tinham forte reputação na checagem de fatos e seu desmascaramento, os participantes concordaram que não deveriam competir por esse tipo de trabalho, e que, de fato, ele deveria ser considerado um serviço público. Todos os jornalistas que participaram do projeto, incluindo aqueles que haviam trabalhado anteriormente na checagem de fatos e na sua verificação, relataram o aprendizado de novas habilidades. A tomada de decisão editorial coletiva permitiu que, de outro modo, as redações concorrentes fizessem decisões conjuntas sobre o que reportar e o que ignorar estrategicamente. A crescente cooperação entre jornalistas de diferentes redações e a frequência e diversidade de suas interações, assim voltadas para um objetivo comum, levaram à confrontação de suas rotinas, culturas profissionais e respectivas identidades editoriais.

Palavras chave: checagem de fatos, França, eleições, colaboração, CrossCheck

