

Why do journalists fact-check?

The role of demand- and supply-side factors

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Abstract

Why has fact-checking spread so quickly within U.S. political journalism? The practice does not appear to diffuse organically at a state or regional level — PolitiFact affiliates had no effect on fact-checking coverage by other newspapers in their states during 2012. However, results from a field experiment in 2014 show that messages promoting the high status and journalistic values of fact-checking increased the prevalence of fact-checking coverage, while messages about audience demand were somewhat less successful. These findings suggest that the spread of fact-checking is driven primarily by professional motives within journalism.

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American political journalism is being transformed by what has been called an “explosion” in fact-checking (Spivak 2011), a style of reporting dedicated to assessing the truth of political claims. Under the objectivity norm that dominates the mainstream press in the United States, reporters have typically refrained from taking sides in factual disputes or contesting public political claims (e.g., Schudson 2001; Cunningham 2003; Fritz, Keefer, and Nyhan 2004). This norm of deliberate neutrality appears to be eroding, however, as leading news organizations embrace the fact-checking genre. Over the last decade, fact-checking has become a staple of political coverage at a growing number of news outlets around the country, including many of the most popular and prestigious national news sources (e.g., Graves and Glaisyer 2012; Amazeen 2013).

Though fact-checking has precursors in American news, discussed below, the recent surge in this style of reporting appears to reflect a fairly rapid shift in attitudes and behavior within the profession of journalism. What accounts for such a shift? How does a new practice like fact-checking spread among reporters and newsrooms across the country? One explanation is that journalists emulate high-status practices in their field, copying innovations that seem to invite professional recognition by visibly performing journalism’s democratic role. This hypothesis is consistent with the rhetoric of leading practitioners, who avidly promote fact-checking as a more demanding and valuable form of reporting meant to restore the “truth-seeking” role of journalism (Dobbs 2012; Graves 2013).

Focusing on professional emulation raises the question of exactly *which* influences help to promote an innovative and sometimes controversial practice like fact-checking. One possibility is that the genre has diffused more or less organically from outlet to outlet, as reporters and editors imitate successful techniques deployed by their immediate rivals. However, fact-checking may not spread so easily through the ranks of everyday newsrooms. An alternative account would emphasize the influence of elite, national news organizations, and of the dedicated fact-checking outlets which have won professional acclaim and evangelized the practice so aggressively. In this account, it is the behavior of a select group of high-status peers which counts the most in changing professional practice.

It may also be that professional considerations are not the primary factors driving the diffusion of fact-checking. One obvious competing explanation places the

emphasis on commercial considerations. Journalists and media organizations frequently justify fact-checking as a response to perceived reader demand, one which can attract interest and loyalty from news consumers in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. There is ample evidence that news outlets try to provide the content their readers want (e.g., Hamilton 2004; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010). Meeting audience demand is not necessarily inconsistent with pursuing professional status and recognition, of course. But any study of the spread of fact-checking should consider commercial as well as professional motivations.

In this article, we seek to arbitrate among these competing explanations to understand how and why fact-checking has spread so rapidly in the U.S. political media. We first conduct a difference-in-differences analysis of fact-checking coverage during the 2008 and 2012 elections, which allows us to estimate whether the launch of state PolitiFact affiliates in 2012 increased fact-checking coverage among other newspapers in those states. We find no evidence of emulation within the state press corps in PolitiFact states. Instead, our results indicate the increase in fact-checking coverage in 2012 was primarily driven by newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers, which suggests that diffusion is instead occurring as a result of the efforts of journalistic entrepreneurs who have convinced outlets to embrace this practice.

With little evidence that simple emulation is taking place at the state level, our second study thus examines the relative influence of demand- or supply-side factors on fact-checking coverage using a national field experiment conducted among political reporters at a large sample of U.S. newspapers during the fall 2014 campaign. If fact-checking is growing in prominence primarily as a response to reminders of the status of journalists who practice fact-checking and its consistency with the values of the profession, the reminders of those status and values considerations should increase the prominence of fact-checking in subsequent coverage. However, if fact-checking content is instead being produced mainly in response to audience demand, then messages alerting reporters to readers' interest in the format should cause it to be covered more frequently. We find that messages emphasizing professional considerations significantly increased newspapers' coverage of fact-checking compared with a control group, while those emphasizing reader demand for fact-checking did not.

These findings represent the first systematic quantitative evidence about the process by which fact-checking spreads as well as the conditions under which journalists are most receptive to fact-checking. Professional status and values considerations within journalism appear to be most responsible for the growth and dissemination of the practice — a finding that has important implications for the literatures on fact-checking, the development and history of journalism, the empirical factors that influence political coverage in the media, and the diffusion of innovation within professions.

Understanding professional innovations in journalism

The history of journalism demonstrates that new practices like fact-checking can spread quickly and widely. Most notably, the U.S. media was transformed by the shift from the party press model of the 19th century to the professional, objective journalism of the 20th. Explanations for the spread of the objective news paradigm have focused on economic incentives (the desire to pursue the widest possible audience by abandoning party ties; see, e.g., Hamilton 2004) and technological changes (such as the spread of the telegraph, which some argue promoted the use of a standardized and neutral news language; see, e.g., Carey 1992; Shaw 1967). However, these economic or technical explanations by themselves miss an equally important part of the story: the new professional self-understanding of journalism as separate from the political field. This new journalistic sensibility, rooted partly in the Progressive faith in science and reason, became cemented in new institutions — journalism schools, professional organizations, and journalistic codes of ethics — that helped set expectations for behavior and thereby aided the spread of objective news practices (Schudson 2001).

More specific news practices can also spread through diffusion processes. For instance, the innovation of the news interview, one of basic routines of objective reporting, took several decades to become established journalistic practice in the United States after the Civil War and much longer in Europe (Schudson 1995; Chalaby 1996). Politicians and many journalists reacted with skepticism to the notion that reporters should be able to interrogate public figures and publish their answers verbatim; the practice was seen as both disrespectful and as journalistically

unsound. By World War I, however, interviews and quotes were routine feature of news production, a practice political figures not only accepted but sought to take advantage of through institutional innovations like press releases and news conferences (Schudson 1995).

By directly questioning and challenging political claims, fact-checking challenges narrow definitions of journalistic objectivity. It continues a much longer and well-established "interpretive turn" (Barnhurst 2014) in U.S. reporting, by which journalists have claimed ever-greater authority to analyze the political world (Barnhurst 2003; Fink and Schudson 2014; Hallin 1992). Over the last decade, fact-checking has spread rapidly among professional news organizations in the U.S. and, increasingly, overseas (Kessler 2014). The genre has an immediate precursor in the "ad watch" reports analyzing the accuracy of political advertising that gained popularity in the 1990s (Dobbs 2012; Graves 2013). However, this style of reporting achieved new prominence with the emergence of three dedicated, full-time fact-checking operations staffed by professional journalists: FactCheck.org, which was launched in 2003, and PolitiFact and the Washington Post's Fact Checker, which were both unveiled in 2007. These organizations quickly achieved high visibility and acceptance in the media world. Their work has won major journalism awards, including a Pulitzer Prize for PolitiFact; they have established partnerships with well-known outlets such as NPR, CNN, and USA Today; and they are cited and quoted heavily in print and broadcast media.

As the genre has gained professional acceptance, it has become more common in elite political coverage and is seen as part of a trend toward more frequent "accountability" reporting (Graves and Konieczna 2015; Pittner 2014). Established news organizations now regularly fact-check major speeches, debates, and other political events in standalone pieces or under a recurring label such the New York Times' "Check Point." Precise measures are difficult to find, but this trend includes nearly every elite national news organization in the U.S. and dozens more at the state and local level (Graves and Glaisyer 2012; Moore 2012; Spivak 2011). One recent estimated counted just under 30 dedicated fact-checking outlets in the U.S., most less than five years old (Adair and Thakore 2015).

The rapid spread of fact-checking within contemporary political journalism in the U.S. necessitates a better understanding of its causes. Moreover, understanding

the growth of fact-checking may also prove helpful in explaining its further adoption by individual journalists and/or news organizations. We present two studies below that evaluate different possible explanations for this diffusion process below.

Study 1: Does fact-checking diffuse among peer news outlets?

The history reviewed above suggests that journalistic innovations can diffuse rapidly, but how and why does this process take place? One possibility is that reporters and editors emulate successful practices in their immediate competitive environment. As we note, many studies of professional newswork underscore patterns of “imitation” and cue-taking among rival reporters and news outlets (Boczkowski 2010; Reinemann 2004). This pattern of emulation applies to day-to-day coverage as well as to more substantial innovations that have spread across the news industry such as the expanded Op-Ed page introduced by the New York Times in 1970 (Socolow 2010; Shaw 1975) and the rise of ‘adwatch’ reports in the 1990s (Bank 2007; Papper 2007).

Study 1 leverages the expansion of one high-profile fact-checking brand to test the influence fact-checkers have on their journalistic rivals. PolitiFact launched in 2007 as an independent, Washington-based unit of the St. Petersburg Times. The national fact-checking site gained widespread notice during the 2008 elections (winning a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage). In 2010, PolitiFact began to license state PolitiFact franchises to media partners, which were primarily major state newspapers such as the Austin American-Statesman and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. During the 2012 election cycle, eleven of these partnerships were in operation. We provide the full list of states and partner organizations in Table 1.

PolitiFact’s rapid growth between 2008 and 2012 invites an important question: How did other news outlets in states that gained a PolitiFact franchise respond? One possibility is that immediate competitors to the new PolitiFact partners responded in kind. If the growth of fact-checking represents a shift in journalistic norms, we might expect to see a disproportionate increase in fact-checking coverage among in-state rivals to a PolitiFact franchise compared to news outlets in

Table 1: State PolitiFact partners in 2012

State	Affiliate organization(s)
Florida	Miami Herald/Tampa Bay Times
Georgia	Atlanta Journal-Constitution
New Hampshire	The Telegraph
New Jersey	The Star-Ledger
Ohio	The Plain Dealer
Oregon	The Oregonian
Rhode Island	The Providence Journal
Tennessee	Commercial Appeal/Knoxville News Sentinel
Texas	Austin American-Statesman
Virginia	Richmond Times-Dispatch
Wisconsin	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

non-PolitiFact states. Under this hypothesis, the visible embrace of fact-checking by prominent state news outlets would reinforce the journalistic value of the genre and set an example for competitors, increasing pressure on them to follow suit.

However, another possibility exists. Media outlets competing with one of PolitiFact’s state partners might instead cede the new genre to their rival. Competing news outlets within a given market often try to differentiate their coverage, becoming known for a particular section or beat (Hamilton 2004). As a result, a news organization might be reluctant to embrace fact-checking once a state rival establishes a PolitiFact franchise. (By the same token, a media company might hesitate to partner with PolitiFact if a high-profile fact-checker already exists in its state.) If such a crowd-out effect exists, journalistic rivals of PolitiFact affiliates might cover fact-checking *less* than among news organizations in states which did not gain a PolitiFact franchise.

Research design

We employ a difference-in-difference research design that estimates *changes* in the frequency of fact-checking coverage between 2008 and 2012, comparing the difference in fact-checking coverage between these two elections for newspapers in states that gained a PolitiFact affiliate and those in states which did not. This de-

sign does *not* require that unaffiliated outlets in PolitiFact states and those in other states have the same expected level of fact-checking coverage. A difference-in-differences design explicitly accounts for changes in average levels of the outcome variable over time (in this case, the incidence of fact-checking coverage by election) as well as preexisting differences between the treatment and control groups (in this case, the journalistic and/or political culture of PolitiFact states might differ from non-PolitiFact states). To identify the causal effect of the introduction of PolitiFact affiliates in 2012 on coverage in other outlets in those states, however, it is necessary to instead assume that fact-checking coverage would have shifted in parallel for the two groups between 2008 and 2012 if the absence of the introduction of the affiliates in 2012. (We find support for this “parallel paths” assumption below by comparing the shifts in coverage over time in an earlier time period, finding that fact-checking coverage in the two groups of states grew roughly in parallel between 2004 and 2008.)

In order to capture data from the largest and most important newspapers in each state, we selected outlets according to the following criteria: newspapers in the 50 U.S. states that became a PolitiFact affiliate by 2012, were based in a state capital, or whose circulation exceeded 100,000 or was among the three largest in its state (as recorded by the Editor & Publisher International Yearbook).¹ We then excluded every newspaper which was not available for the study period (2003–2012) in at least one of three electronic databases: LexisNexis Academic, Proquest, and Access World News. This procedure yielded the final set of 173 newspapers in our sample, which covers the District of Columbia and every U.S. state but Hawaii. The full list appears in Table A1 in the Appendix.

We used a standardized database search to represent the level of fact-checking coverage in each publication before the presidential elections in 2004, 2008, and 2012. The outcome variable for the study was the number of articles returned by the following search, which were conducted within each publication in the relevant database for the year periods concluding on election day each of those years:²

¹USA Today was excluded because it is an exclusively national newspaper.

²Searches were conducted by trained research assistants who were unaware of the study goals. Extensive efforts to develop a reliable manual coding procedure to identify when journalists evaluated the factual accuracy of statements by political elites proved unsuccessful.

"factcheck" OR "fact-check" OR "fact check" OR "factchecks" OR "fact-checks" OR "fact checks" OR "factchecker" OR "fact-checker" OR "fact checker" OR "factcheckers" OR "fact-checkers" OR "fact checkers" OR "factchecking" OR "fact-checking" OR "fact checking" OR "factchecked" OR "fact checked" OR "fact-checked" OR PolitiFact OR factcheck.org

Two checks of this data helped to validate our results. First, in order to verify that the the database used for a given newspaper did not affect the outcome variable, we conducted a series of comparative searches among newspapers appearing in multiple databases. These comparison searches yielded nearly identical results. Second, we used hand-coding to manually check the validity of 200 randomly chosen articles. This manual check found that political fact-checking was practiced or discussed in 73 percent of the articles returned by the search. It is important to note that as long as this measurement error is not correlated with the predictors being examined, it should limit the effects observed and make statistical significance less likely.

Results

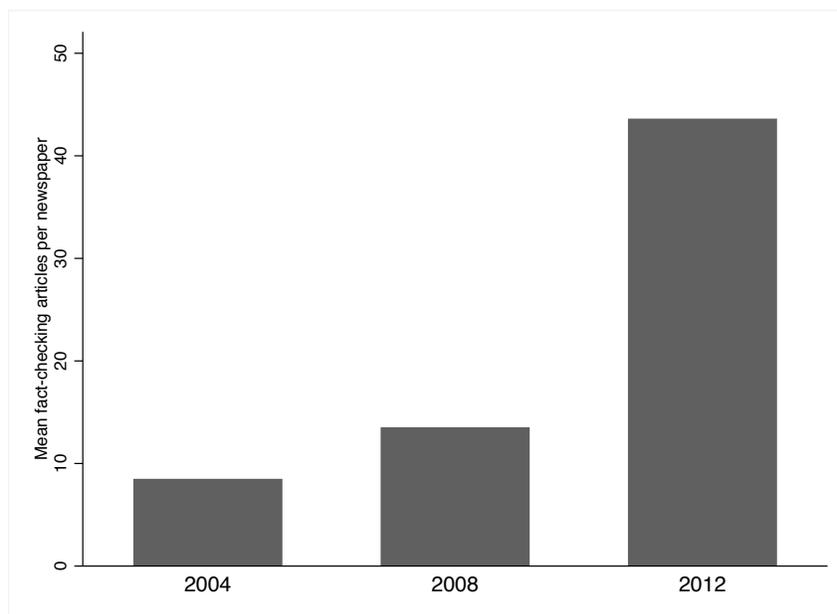
Our results indicate that fact-checking coverage grew dramatically during the study period. As Figure 1 shows, the mean number of qualifying articles per newspaper in our sample increased rapidly, going from 8.5 in 2004 to 13.5 in 2008 and 43.6 in 2012.

When we disaggregate our results by state and affiliate status in Figure 2, however, we find two results of note.³ First, the change in fact-checking coverage from 2004 to 2008 was similar among outlets in states where PolitiFact affiliates were later created and those where no affiliates were launched, validating a key assumption of our research design.⁴ However, the growth in fact-checking coverage from

³The St. Petersburg/Tampa Bay Times and Washington Post are excluded from this figure and the difference-in-differences analysis below because they had already launched national fact-checkers in 2008.

⁴This conclusion is confirmed by a difference-in-differences analysis of fact-checking coverage in 2004 and 2008, which cannot reject the null hypothesis that the change in coverage did not differ between non-affiliates in PolitiFact states and those in other states (results available upon request).

Figure 1: Growth in newspaper fact-checking coverage: 2004–2012

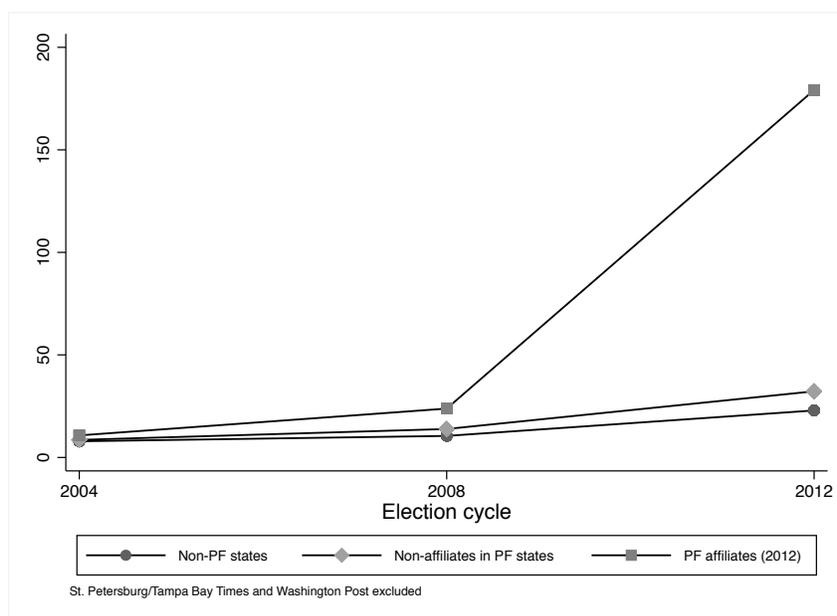


Mean articles per newspaper mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers during the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list of outlets).

2008 to 2012 was heavily concentrated among state PolitiFact affiliates. While coverage of fact-checking did increase substantially among unaffiliated outlets (from a mean of 12 stories during the 2008 election to 26 during the 2012 election), the data in the figure suggests that the increase in coverage between 2008 and 2012 was similar among non-affiliate outlets in states with PolitiFact affiliates and those in other states.

We test this finding more rigorously in Table 2, which presents the results of our difference-in-differences model of changes in fact-checking coverage from 2008 to 2012. Generalized linear models do not identify the causal effect of interest in a difference-in-differences model (Blundell and Dias 2009; Lechner 2011) so our preferred specification is OLS (the left column of results). However, because our outcome measure is an event count, we also estimate a Poisson model to demonstrate the robustness of our results (right column). Both models are esti-

Figure 2: Mean fact-checking coverage over time by newspaper type



Mean of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers in a large sample of newspapers by PolitiFact affiliate status and state (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list). The St. Petersburg/Tampa Bay Times and Washington Post were excluded from these data because they launched dedicated national fact-checkers during the 2008 election cycle.

mated with robust standard errors clustered at the state level to account for potential heteroskedasticity or non-independence by state.⁵

Consistent with the graphs above, Table 2 indicates that fact-checking coverage did increase significantly from 2008 to 2012, growing from an average of 11 to 23 articles per newspaper. However, once we account for this more general increase and any time-invariant differences between states in which a PolitiFact affiliate was present in 2012 and those with no affiliates at the time (which are accounted for

⁵Poisson models with robust standard errors account for overdispersion while being more robust to misspecification than the negative binomial model (Cameron and Trivedi 2005, 677), though our results are substantively identical if we estimate a negative binomial model instead (available upon request).

Table 2: Changes in newspaper fact-checking coverage (2008 to 2012)

	OLS	Poisson
2012 election	12.40** (1.68)	0.78** (0.07)
Non-affiliate in PolitiFact state	3.37 (3.49)	0.28 (0.26)
Non-affiliate in PolitiFact state \times 2012	5.97 (5.70)	0.06 (0.28)
PolitiFact affiliate	13.33** (4.15)	0.82** (0.20)
PolitiFact affiliate \times 2012	142.93** (35.78)	1.24** (0.29)
N	342	342

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. OLS and Poisson estimates with robust standard errors clustered by state. The reference category for the election indicator is the 2008 election. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers in a large sample of newspapers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list; excludes the Washington Post and St. Petersburg/Tampa Bay Times).

in the model by the PolitiFact state indicator), we find no evidence that coverage increased *more* between 2008 and 2012 among non-affiliated outlets in PolitiFact states and those in other states. The coefficient for the key PolitiFact state \times 2012 election term, though in the expected (positive) direction, is not significant. These results are not supportive of the emulation hypothesis. By contrast, fact-checking coverage among PolitiFact affiliates skyrocketed, increasing from an average of 24 articles in 2008 to 179 in 2012 — a significant increase compared with unaffiliated outlets in other states as well as those in PolitiFact states ($p < .01$ in each case for both the OLS and Poisson models in Table 2).⁶

Discussion

Our results indicate that a major expansion of fact-checking appears to have no significant effect on fact-checking coverage by other outlets in the state. We conclude

⁶The difference in coverage growth from 2008 to 2012 between PolitiFact affiliates and other outlets in those states was estimated as the difference between the interaction terms in Table 2. An analogous comparison of 2008 coverage levels finds no significant pre-treatment differences between PolitiFact affiliates and non-affiliates in PolitiFact states.

from this finding that mere proximity to a new journalistic practice is insufficient to change behavior by other journalists. One possible explanation is that journalists are more responsive to cues from elite outlets at the national level or peer outlets beyond their state than to other members of their state press corps.⁷

At the same time, the study offers further evidence of the increasing importance of fact-checking within American journalism. Fact-checking coverage grew rapidly in 2012. While this increase was concentrated among PolitiFact's state affiliates, coverage at unaffiliated outlets still more than doubled relative to 2008 levels. While this style of reporting continues to be rare as a proportion of all political coverage, the increases in fact-checking coverage we observe confirm that this phenomenon is not limited to high-profile national news organizations.

One important caveat should be kept in mind when considering our findings, however. Our results are based on a keyword-based estimate of fact-checking coverage rather than on a direct measure of the incidence of reporters evaluating the accuracy of political claims in print.⁸ The advantage of the search strategy we employ is that it provides a consistent and replicable measure that could feasibly be collected for more than 170 newspapers in nearly every state across three elections. However, it is possible that this approach could fail to detect more subtle differences in coverage style that would be consistent with the emulation hypothesis (for instance, an increase in incidental instances of political fact-checking not captured with our search). We discuss the need for development of new measurement strategies further in the conclusion.

Study 2: Do status concerns drive fact-checking?

The results of the previous study suggest that fact-checking does not appear to disseminate organically within states, which is consistent with studies showing that the diffusion of new practices within other professions is often slowed by inertia

⁷It is also true, of course, that newspapers may take cues not only from other newspapers in a state but from television, radio, and online outlets that are beyond the scope of this study.

⁸As noted above, extensive efforts to create a reliable measure of this outcome were not successful. It would also be impossible to employ any such human-coded measure at the scale used in this study.

or resistance (e.g., Abbott 1988; Strang and Soule 1998).⁹ In Study 2, we therefore seek to better understand the dissemination of fact-checking by evaluating the predictions of two competing explanations for its growth within journalism: an account emphasizing the role of professional values and status considerations in increasing the supply of fact-checking (which we refer to as “supply-side” factors) and an alternative explanation emphasizing increased demand for fact-checking among news consumers (“demand-side” factors). In this sense, we contribute to the larger literature on the relative role of supply and demand factors in influencing media content, which has often focused on ideological slant and negative coverage rather than the use of new content formats (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder 2011; Puglisi and Snyder 2011, 2015).

One explanation for the widespread adoption of fact-checking is that the practice has been embraced by leading news organizations — including standard-bearers like the New York Times — and recognized as upholding the core values of the profession. As noted above, PolitiFact won the Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 2008 election, a clear signal of the new genre’s embrace by journalistic elites. Despite isolated complaints from some reporters as the format became more visible (e.g. Brisbane 2012; Smith 2011), fact-checking has achieved remarkable professional acceptance in the last five years. For instance, the new public editor of the New York Times dedicated one of her first columns to a full-throated defense of fact-checking, rejecting concerns raised by her predecessor (Sullivan 2012).

This sort of professional influence has often been cited to explain the behavior of journalists and news organizations in other contexts. Many studies emphasize the extent to which editors and reporters monitor their peers at other news organizations, especially those at high-status, agenda-setting news outlets (Boczkowski 2009; Gans 2004; Sigal 1973). Content analysis has repeatedly confirmed these patterns of “intermedia” cue-taking (Reese and Danielian 1989; Shaw 1999; Boczkowski and de Santos 2007). The mechanisms by which journalists influence one another include face-to-face contact at conferences, in press rooms, and on the beat (Crouse 1973; Darnton 1975; Dunwoody 1980; Velthuis 2006) as well as “routine reliance”

⁹Physicians, for instance, commonly fail to alter their behavior to follow clinical guidelines even when the recommendations are as simple as washing their hands regularly (e.g., Cabana et al. 1999; Pittet, Mourouga, and Perneger 1999).

on one another's published work for the details, sources, and context that inform developing stories (Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Reinemann 2004). This research points consistently to two reasons that editors and reporters monitor and imitate their peers: competition for professional status and recognition and the need to make editorial decisions (about newsworthiness, accuracy, etc.) under conditions of uncertainty. Journalists and the news organizations they work for define success in relation to their peers and may therefore be influenced by reminders of the prevalence of fact-checking among leading news outlets and the shared professional values that its practitioners seeks to uphold.

However, journalists and news organizations respond to commercial as well as professional imperatives in making editorial decisions. An alternative account of the rise of fact-checking might emphasize the perceived *demand* for the often colorful and lively format among news audiences. Many studies suggest that reader demand plays an important (though not always decisive) role in shaping the content of political coverage (e.g., Hamilton 2004; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder 2011; Puglisi and Snyder 2011, 2015). Any number of editorial innovations today and in the past have respond to the preferences of audiences and advertisers as much as to journalistic concerns. One example are the new automobile, real estate and lifestyle sections added to newspapers beginning in the 1980s, which were designed in part as new advertising platforms and have often been criticized on journalistic grounds (e.g. Underwood 1995).

Fact-checking has frequently been identified by practitioners as a genre that can potentially broaden the audience for political coverage. Surveys and traffic statistics suggest that fact-checking is quite popular with news audiences. In an NPR survey, for instance, listeners rated fact-checking the most important style of political coverage; three out of four asked hear it on a daily basis (Schumacher-Matos 2012). Established fact-checkers often cite such figures to demonstrate growing public interest in the format. For instance, PolitiFact exceeded one million visitors per day during the 2012 presidential race — a landmark within the field and a statistic that the organization trumpeted to counter criticisms that fact-checking had been ineffective (Adair 2012). The mission statements of leading fact-checking sites all emphasize service to a public eager to hold politicians accountable. Likewise, these organizations frequently publish reader letters expressing the value of

the genre and emphasize audience demand in negotiations with traditional media partners who license their work or publicize it to wider audiences (Graves 2013).

In practice of course these factors are not mutually exclusive. Newsrooms almost certainly consider both professional and commercial priorities before dedicating significant resources to fact-checking (for instance, by licensing a PolitiFact affiliate or launching a permanent feature). New professional practices may be justified in different terms depending on the audience and the context — for instance, in an awards ceremony and a board meeting. For precisely this reason, the field experiment described below isolates and compares two prominent rationales for the dramatic surge in fact-checking of the last several years.

Experimental design

To evaluate these predictions and determine what specific mechanisms most influence the use of fact-checking, we conducted a field experiment during the fall 2014 general election campaign in which we randomly assigned political journalists to be sent correspondence that used either supply-side or demand-side messages to promote the use of fact-checking or to a control condition.¹⁰ The use of randomized correspondence has been used successfully in other studies of elite behavior (Bergan 2009; Broockman 2013; Butler and Broockman 2011; Butler and Nickerson 2011; Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012; Loewen and MacKenzie 2015; Loewen and Rubenson 2011; McClendon 2014; Nyhan N.d.), but to our knowledge has not previously been applied to journalists.¹¹

These messages asked journalists to participate in a survey about fact-checking while describing different reasons that reporters should fact-check. Reporters were randomly assigned to receive one of these types of messages or to a control group. Each treatment group was sent emails on September 22, September 30, and October 17, 2014 and letters on October 9 and 17, 2014. The supply-side messages

¹⁰The design, hypotheses, and analysis of this study were preregistered on November 3, 2014 (before the outcome measures had been collected) with Experiments in Governance and Politics (EGAP) as study #100 (<http://egap.org/design-registration/registered-designs/>). We note deviations from the analysis plan below.

¹¹The study also contributes to broader literatures on field experiments involving firms (e.g., Bandiera, Barankay, and Rasul 2010, 2011; De Grip and Sauer mann 2012) and political institutions (Grossman and Paler 2015).

emphasized the professional prestige and recognition given to fact-checkers, while demand-side correspondence instead highlighted the demand for fact-checking from the public. (We provide further details on the content of these messages further below.)

Supply-side treatment

The supply-side treatments emphasize the professional prestige of fact-checking and the way in which it upholds the ideals of the profession. Figure A1 in the Appendix provides the first message that was sent to this treatment group; the other messages that were sent, which are nearly identical, are available in the preregistration or upon request from the authors. The key components of the messages are:

1. Demonstrating that high-prestige journalists are doing fact-checking;
2. Presenting fact-checking as consistent with the highest ideals of journalism;
3. Informing reporters that the American Press Institute, a respected organization within the profession, will be monitoring coverage to “identify the best examples of media fact-checking within the profession during the 2014 campaign” and stating that “[w]e hope to be able to recommend your work to them;”
4. A link to a survey asking questions about fact-checking.¹²

The supply-side treatment thus addresses what Gans (2003) has called “journalism’s theory of democracy,” the unquestioned assumption by reporters that their coverage supplies the information citizens need to participate meaningfully in democratic self-government.

Our approach of emphasizing the prestige and recognition that accrues to those who fact-checking is consistent with a vast literature showing that peer effects (broadly speaking) can help to promote the diffusion of behaviors ranging from

¹²The survey component was included so that we had a plausible reason for contacting journalists in the first place. The content of the responses are not a planned outcome of the study. (Only journalists in the treatment conditions could take the survey; non-response was high.)

voting to intergroup tolerance (e.g., Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Gerber and Rogers 2009; Paluck 2011; Bond et al. 2012; Meer 2011; Bollinger and Gillingham 2012; Kast, Meier, and Pomeranz 2012; Paluck and Shepherd 2012). In particular, comparisons to peers or social reference groups have been shown to be a powerful tool for promoting behavior change (e.g., Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008; Cialdini 2008; Ayres, Raseman, and Shih 2013), though such effects are not always observed or can backfire (Werch et al. 2000; Wechsler et al. 2003; Schultz et al. 2007; Allcott 2011; Beshears et al. 2011; Livingstone, Young, and Manstead 2011; Costa and Kahn 2013; Bolsen, Ferraro, and Miranda 2014). Researchers are now starting to explore the effects of these social or peer comparisons in a professional context within health. Often these studies focus on releasing performance data, which seems to have limited effects (e.g., Marshall et al. 2000; Robinowitz and Dudley 2006). It may be more effective to specifically highlight comparisons with their high-performing peers (Kiefe et al. 2001; Kolstad 2013), as we do here.

Demand-side treatment

The demand treatment messages, by contrast, emphasize the extent to which consumers want the content that fact-checking provides. The first email sent to this treatment group is provided in Figure A2 in the Appendix; the other messages that were sent are again nearly identical and available upon request or in the preregistration document. (Supply- and demand- side mailings occurred on exactly the same schedule.) The key components of these are:

1. Making the case that readers are hungry for more fact-checking;
2. Presenting evidence that fact-checking is attracting significant audiences;
3. Informing reporters that we will be monitoring coverage (and their response to reader demand) by saying “The American Press Institute will be tracking reader response to your newspaper to identify the fact-checking content that readers find most compelling during the 2014 campaign” and stating that “We hope to be able to recommend your work to them;”
4. A link to a survey asking questions about fact-checking.

Hypotheses and research questions

Our experiment seeks to test the following preregistered hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Journalists and media outlets that are assigned to receive the supply-side treatment will be more likely to incorporate fact-checking into their political coverage than those assigned to the control condition.

Hypothesis 1b: Journalists and media outlets that are assigned to receive the demand-side treatment will be more likely to incorporate fact-checking into their political coverage than those that are assigned to the control condition.

Hypothesis 2: The supply-side treatment will generate more fact-checking content than the demand-side treatment.

Research questions

We will also investigate the following preregistered research questions, examining three important substantive questions for which we do not have clear *a priori* theoretical expectations. First, we are interested in testing whether newspapers vary in how responsive they are to messages promoting the use of fact-checking based on their past coverage of the practice (which we measure using the measure of fact-checking coverage in 2012 used in Study 1). This question addresses potentially important statistical concerns about heterogeneous treatment effects and also has substantively important implications for understanding which newspapers are most responsive to efforts to promote fact-checking.

Research question 1: Are messages promoting greater use of fact-checking more or less effective among outlets who already feature fact-checking relatively frequently and the reporters who work at them?¹³

¹³As we discuss below, outlets with dedicated fact-checking operations are excluded from our sample. As such, the research question investigates differences among media organizations that have not made a formal commitment to the approach.

A second research question we plan to investigate is whether fact-checking by nearby outlets changes the effects of messages about fact-checking (i.e., where a PolitiFact affiliate or dedicated fact-checking project such as the Truth in Numbers project at the Cleveland Plain Dealer was in operation in 2014). It is possible that reporters are more responsive to messages about fact-checking when it is practiced by their journalistic peers in a state (though Study 1, which was conducted after our study design was preregistered, found no evidence that the launch of the affiliates themselves changed fact-checking coverage in 2012). Alternatively, media outlets and the reporters they employ who are reminded of fact-checking may actually be *less* responsive when fact-checking is already in use nearby if they wish to differentiate their coverage from those of competitors.

Research question 2: Are messages promoting greater use of fact-checking more or less effective among journalists and outlets in states in which an outlet has a dedicated fact-checking operation?

Finally, we are interested in the effects of competitive political campaigns on fact-checking, which we measure using an indicator for the presence of a gubernatorial or U.S. Senate race with a Cook Political Report rating of “tossup” or “leaning” on September 15, 2014. One possibility is that the debate and reader interest generated by these sorts of campaigns motivate media outlets to devote more resources to coverage, including fact-checking. In this sense, fact-checking might act as a complement to existing political coverage, which typically takes a more agnostic approach to factual claims and counter-claims between candidates. However, an alternate possibility is that fact-checking acts as a substitute for traditional forms of campaign coverage. When a campaign is less competitive or an important politician faces little opposition, fact-checking may help provide an alternate form of accountability for their public statements. Conversely, competitive campaigns might strain the resources of media outlets, which are forced to devote more coverage to traditional “horse-race” coverage of campaign events such as stump speeches, television advertisements, polls, and debates, leaving little capacity for fact-checking.

Research question 3: Are messages promoting greater use of fact-checking more or less effective in states with competitive statewide

campaigns?

Experimental sample

The universe for our experimental sample begins with newspapers from Study 1 with circulations over 100,000 and that had articles written by staff members available in full-text electronic databases for 2014. Our dataset consists of 1689 reporters at 82 newspapers. More formally, we used the following procedures to generate these outlets and reporters for inclusion in the study:

1. The newspaper must have had a minimum circulation of 100,000 in 2007,¹⁴ still be in operation, and not be online-only or free.¹⁵ This criterion allows us to ensure that our results are comparable with study 1, which uses the same sampling frame.
2. The newspaper must have full-text availability for content published during the study period in the LexisNexis Academic, Proquest, or Access World News databases (the news databases we use for this study, which cover almost all of the outlets selected using the first criterion).
3. Names and email contact information for political reporting staff must be available for the outlet (necessary for randomization at the journalist level) and qualifying articles must be published by newspaper staff.¹⁶
4. All outlets that had full-time dedicated fact-checking operations were excluded (current or past PolitiFact affiliates and the *Washington Post*).

¹⁴We used circulation in 2007 because it is prior to significant growth in fact-checking in the 2008 election and allows for the lag between changes in newspaper economics and newsroom staffing. Despite the downturn in newspaper circulation, the relative ordering of newspapers by circulation is highly consistent — for instance, all of the top 50 newspapers by circulation in 2014 are in our sample (excluding those dropped based on the criteria listed below) and virtually all of the outlets in our sample remain among the top 100 daily or Sunday newspapers by circulation.

¹⁵This criterion excludes the *Examiner* [CA], *Washington Examiner*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Rocky Mountain News*, and *am New York*; the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* is treated as the sum of the circulations of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* and *Honolulu Advertiser* and is therefore included.

¹⁶All qualifying articles in the *Press Enterprise* were written by *Orange County Register* staff writers; it was therefore excluded.

5. The *New York Times* was excluded because of a conflict of interest. It was also necessary to exclude the *Wall Street Journal*, an outlier in the number of qualifying reporters which created balance problems for the multilevel randomization design (which is described below).

To create a list of political reporters for each newspaper in the qualifying sample, we conducted the following political keywords search in an electronic database in which the newspaper was archived (either LexisNexis Academic, Proquest, or Access World News) for the period of June 1–30, 2014:

election OR presidential OR Senate OR Senator OR Sen. OR Congress OR Congressman OR Congresswoman OR Legislature OR Legislator OR "House of Representatives" OR "State House" OR Capitol OR "state assembly" OR "general assembly" OR "legislative assembly" OR assemblyman OR assemblywoman OR Democrat OR Republican OR Democratic OR DFL OR GOP OR governor OR Gov. OR Mayor OR constitution OR "city council" OR councilman OR council-woman

We included a journalist in our experimental sample if he or she authored or co-authored three or more articles that included the search terms during the period in question (opinion articles were excluded from this count). To validate this procedure, we hand-coded a sample of 100 reporters from 25 randomly selected outlets and found that 81% were correctly coded as having written three or more political articles.¹⁷

Randomization and assignment to treatment

In this study, we utilize a multilevel randomization strategy that ensures that we obtain valid estimates of the individual-level effects of our treatments as well as estimates of any potential intra-organizational spillovers within media outlets. We first block randomized at the outlet (newspaper) level to one of five conditions and then randomized journalists within those outlets as described below:

¹⁷To the extent that some reporters were mistakenly included in the sample despite not focusing on political coverage, it should reduce any treatment effect we find (non-political reporters are unlikely to cover fact-checking under most circumstances regardless of what messages they receive).

1. Supply side (high) – All of the eligible journalists in the organization were sent the supply-side treatment messages.
2. Supply side (low) – One half of the eligible journalists in the organization were sent the supply-side treatment messages (reporters in the low saturation conditions were randomly assigned to receive the messages or not).
3. Demand side (high) – All of the eligible journalists in the organization were sent the demand-side treatment messages.
4. Demand side (low) – One half of the eligible journalists in the organization were sent the demand-side treatment messages (reporters in the low saturation conditions were randomly assigned to receive the messages or not).
5. Control – No reporters in the organization were sent either the supply-side or demand-side treatment messages.

By randomly varying the level of saturation of pro-factchecking messages within a random subset of outlets in our treatment groups, we can directly estimate whether and to what extent the treatments are affecting untreated journalists within the outlet — a possible complication in any experimental design of this type (Philipson 2000; Nickerson 2008; Babcock and Hartman 2010; Baird et al. 2014; Sinclair, McConnell, and Green 2012; see also Bowers, Fredrickson, and Panagopoulos 2013, Aronow and Samii 2012, and Coppock and Sircar 2013). Under certain assumptions, this design allows us to estimate whether there are intra-organizational spillovers in which reporters who were not assigned to treatment are influenced by its content through some form of contact with members of the treatment groups, whose prevalence will vary exogenously with the level of saturation.¹⁸

To account for differences across different types of outlets, we utilize block randomization in a multilevel context (Duflo, Glennerster, and Kremer 2007; Moore 2012). Specifically, we block randomized at the outlet level within groups defined the presence of competitive campaign for governor or U.S. Senate (those with at

¹⁸While we expect that our treatments are capable of having an immediate effect on reporters, our expectations about intra-organization spillover are more agnostic, especially during the relatively short study period. It is necessary to account for the *possibility* of spillover in our design, however, given the way that it can distort experimental estimates.

least one “tossup” or “leaning” race as classified by the Cook Political Report on September 15, 2014), maximizing balance in the number of qualifying reporters at the outlet. We then block randomized within each outlet at the reporter level according to the design described above while maximizing balance in the frequency of political coverage by reporters during the June 1–30, 2014 period (measured using the article count described above).¹⁹ The use of a multilevel block-randomized design ensured that our treatment and control groups are almost perfectly balanced on key covariates at both the outlet and journalist level, which we demonstrate using the balance statistics that are presented in Table A2 in the Appendix.

Outcome measure

Our outcome measure is a variant of the keyword-based measure of fact-checking coverage used in Study 1. After the election, research assistants (who were blind to treatment condition) searched media coverage by reporters and outlets in our sample for keywords related to fact-checking (a well-defined and replicable approach with low false positive rates) to determine where and how frequently these terms were used by the authors and outlets (using the LexisNexis Academic, Proquest, or Access World News databases). Specifically, the RAs conducted the following fact-checking keywords search for the period of September 22–November 4, 2014, which was our prespecified study period:

”factcheck” OR ”fact-check” OR ”fact check” OR ”factchecks” OR
”fact-checks” OR ”fact checks” OR ”factchecker” OR ”fact-checker”
OR ”fact checker” OR ”factcheckers” OR ”fact-checkers” OR ”fact
checkers” OR ”factchecking” OR ”fact-checking” OR ”fact checking”
OR ”factchecked” OR ”fact checked” OR ”fact-checked” OR Politi-
fact OR factcheck.org

The RAs then counted the number of qualifying news articles mentioning fact-checking or prominent factcheckers that were authored or co-authored by each reporter in the data during the study period. (We excluded letters to the editor,

¹⁹All randomizations were performed using the blockTools package for R with the default optimal greedy algorithm (Moore 2014).

opinion articles, and editorials; further details and coding instructions are available upon request.) These totals were then also summed by newspaper.²⁰

Analysis approach

We test our hypothesis by analyzing the average treatment effect (ATE) of assignment to treatment at both the individual and outlet level. These models are estimated using weighted least squares with robust standard errors where the weights are the inverse probability of treatment within blocks to account for the block randomization design (Gerber and Green 2012, 117). The standard errors of all reporter-level analyses are clustered on outlet to account for interdependence within newspapers. To improve the precision of our estimates, we include a control measure for the total output of political articles published in June 2014 by the journalist or outlet in question (as measured by the political keyword search described above).²¹ Using the same approach, we will also test the research questions described above — specifically, whether the effects of treatment varies by prior fact-checking coverage at the outlet (RQ1) or journalist level (RQ2) or by whether the outlet or journalist are in a state with a PolitiFact affiliate or other dedicated fact-checker (RQ3). In each case, we will interact the treatment assignment indicators with the covariate in question (prior fact-checking coverage or PolitiFact state).²²

²⁰As described in the preregistration document, we intended to analyze a human-coded measure of when journalists evaluated the accuracy of public statements in coverage of campaign events such as debates. However, we could not achieve sufficiently high levels of intercoder reliability to be assured of the validity of this measure and therefore do not consider it here. We discuss the need for new measurement strategies in the conclusion.

²¹We do not use the proportion of political articles including fact-checking terms as an outcome measure because fact-checking articles may not always include the political keywords used in our search. The number of articles published in a prior period that include political keywords is instead used as a predictor variable to approximate the general frequency of political coverage in that outlet.

²²Our analysis deviates from the preregistration in two minor respects. First, we hoped to use whether or not a reporter opened an email that was sent to them as a measure of receipt of treatment that would allow us to estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) in addition to the average treatment effect (ATE). However, the survey software package we used (Qualtrics) does not provide individual-level data on who opens emails sent by the service. We decided not to use an alternate provider like MailChimp because sending emails to our sample would have violated their terms of service. We also proposed to consider whether or not a reporter took the survey linked in our email, but too few reporters in the treatment conditions took the survey to make it plausible that all of the effects of the treatment operated through taking the survey (a necessary assumption in estimating the ATT from a measure of receipt of treatment; see, e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2014).

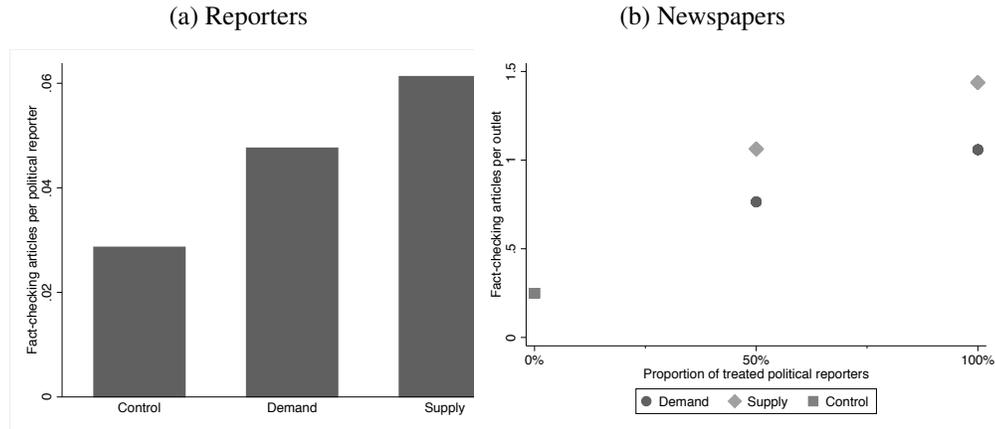
Results

The data indicate that coverage of fact-checking is still quite rare. Despite the growth in coverage of the practice documented in Study 1, our keyword-based measure of its prevalence during the fall 2014 campaign indicates that newspapers without dedicated fact-checking operations seldom mention it in their reporting. Just 31 of the 82 newspapers in our sample (38%) had a political reporter in our sample use one or more of the keywords in our search during the study period (mean articles per newspaper: 0.91, 95% CI: 0.52–1.30). Similarly, only fifty reporters in our sample (3%) covered fact-checking during the study period (mean articles per reporter: 0.04, 95% CI: 0.03–0.06).

Before turning to formal tests of our hypotheses, it is first necessary to consider whether our treatment effects spilled over to untreated reporters at newspapers in the low saturation demand and supply conditions. When we compare untreated journalists in treated newspapers with those who work at newspapers in which no reporters were treated (see Table A3 in the Appendix), the results are not statistically significant. However, the confidence intervals for possible spillover effects are quite wide and easily encompass the treatment effect estimates we report for our treatments at the newspaper level below (95% CI for demand: -0.02, 0.08, 95% CI for supply: -0.02, 0.09). In addition, if we conduct a post hoc analysis comparing untreated journalists in the treated newspapers as a group with journalists at newspapers in the control group, we can nearly reject the null hypothesis of no difference ($m = .04$ for treated newspapers, $m = .01$ for control newspapers; $t = -1.60$, $p < .06$ one-sided). We therefore report both journalist- and newspaper-level results.

We first plot mean fact-checking coverage by condition at the journalist and newspaper level in Figure 3. The bar graph of fact-checking content at the reporter level by condition in Figure 3a is broadly consistent with our expectations. There appears to be more fact-checking in the supply condition compared to the demand condition and more fact-checking in the demand condition compared to the control, though the differences are small. The pattern in Figure 3b is more compelling, showing that fact-checking coverage increases with saturation levels in both treatment groups and appears to have a stronger effect among newspapers in the the

Figure 3: Experimental results



Means by experimental condition. Outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

supply group.

Table 3 presents regression estimates in which we examine these conclusions more formally. We present estimates of the effects of our treatments at both the journalist and newspaper levels. It is important to note that the results reported in Table 3a are treatment-specific estimates corresponding to the full models in Table A4 in the Appendix; correspondingly, the results in Table 3b are the treatment-specific estimates from Table A5. Each treatment is estimated in a separate model that is weighted using inverse probability of treatment weights to account for the block randomization design (Gerber and Green 2012, 117).²³

Looking first at the reporter-level results in Table 3a, we observe that our treatments fall short of conventional levels of statistical significance. However, the

²³These models each include an indicator for each treatment as well as our estimate of the volume of political coverage by the reporter or newspaper as a control variable (rescaled so that the coefficients are more interpretable). As Tables A5 and A6 make clear, our results do not vary based on the use of these treatment weights, but we include them to maintain consistency with our preregistration.

Table 3: Treatment effect estimates: Hypotheses

(a) Journalists		(b) Newspapers	
	Coefficient (SE)		Coefficient (SE)
Supply treatment	0.03 (0.02)	Supply (high)	1.17* (0.68)
		Supply (low)	0.76* (0.44)
Demand treatment	0.02 (0.02)	Demand (high)	0.79 (0.50)
		Demand (low)	0.49 (0.38)
N	1689	N	82

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided); standard errors for journalists are clustered by newspaper. Weighted least squares estimates of each treatment effect where the weights are the inverse probability of a given treatment for the block randomization design; all models include a measure of prior political coverage by the reporter or newspaper and are estimated with robust standard errors (see Tables A5 and A6 in Appendix). The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

treatment effects are in the direction we expected under Hypotheses 1a and 1b and the coefficient for the supply treatment is larger than the coefficient for the demand treatment as expected under Hypothesis 2. When we aggregate the individual-level results at the newspaper level in Table 3b, the results come into better focus. Both the high- and low-saturation supply-side treatments have positive and statistically significant effects ($p < 0.05$, one-sided). By contrast, neither the high-saturation nor the low-saturation demand treatments reach statistical significance.

To increase our statistical power, we combine the supply treatments into a single group and the demand treatment into a single group.²⁴ When we pool the supply and demand treatment groups in this way in Table A6 of the Appendix, we find that coverage of fact-checking increased significantly for newspapers relative

²⁴We did not preregister a pooled analysis of the high- and low- saturation conditions at the outlet level – this analysis should be considered to be a deviation from our analysis plan.

to controls among both those who received the supply ($p < 0.05$ two-sided) and demand treatment messages ($p < 0.05$ one-sided).

H1 is thus supported. However, though the strength of the evidence in favor of H1a is stronger than H1b (the point estimates for the supply treatment effect are larger than for the corresponding demand treatment effects and we can reject the null hypothesis with a higher confidence level), we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no difference between the supply and demand treatments at the journalist or newspaper level in Table 3 or the pooled analysis in Table A6. H2 is thus not supported.

Finally, we are interested in how the contextual factors outlined in our pre-specified research questions may condition the effect of our treatment conditions. In particular, we consider how previous fact-checking at the outlet (RQ1),²⁵ the presence of a PolitiFact affiliate in the state (RQ2), and competitive gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races (RQ3) might interact with the supply and demand treatments. Results from these analyses are presented in Tables 4 (journalist level) and A8 (newspaper level).²⁶ In the analyses that follow, we find that these contextual factors do not consistently moderate the effect of any of our treatments.

Looking first at the journalist-level results in Table 4, we see that there are no significant interactions across all three models corresponding to our research questions of interest. Likewise, the newspaper-level results in Table A8 reveal only one significant interaction. The low-saturation supply treatment had no significant effect on newspaper that were below the outlet-level median in fact-checking coverage during the 2012 election. However, for newspapers that were above the median in fact-checking in the previous electoral cycle, the marginal effect of the low-saturation supply treatment was statistically significant ($\beta = 1.49$, $p < .05$). However, this conclusion should be treated as highly tentative given the the potential for multiple comparisons problems in this table, the lack of a corresponding effect among newspapers in the high-saturation supply group, and the fact that the

²⁵We use a median split in the analyses in the main text for expositional reasons and present models that include a continuous measure of keywords in Tables A7 and A8 of the Appendix.

²⁶We deviate slightly from the preregistered analysis plan in Tables 4 and A8 for simplicity. The preregistration says that we will analyze these models using weighted least squares but it is tedious to estimate separate models for each treatment in each model and the results are identical (available upon request). We therefore presented unweighted results in the main text.

Table 4: Treatment effect estimates: Research questions (journalists)

	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Supply treatment	0.05 (0.05)	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Demand treatment	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)
Political coverage(/100)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)
High fact-checking coverage (2012)	0.02 (0.002)		
Supply \times high fact-checking	-0.03 (0.05)		
Demand \times high fact-checking	0.00 (0.04)		
PolitiFact state		-0.03* (0.01)	
Supply \times PolitiFact state		-0.02 (0.03)	
Demand \times PolitiFact state		0.06 (0.04)	
Competitive race			0.00 (0.02)
Supply \times competitive			0.08 (0.06)
Demand \times competitive			0.01 (0.04)
Constant	0.03 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)	0.04 (0.02)
N	1689	1689	1689

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors (clustered at the newspaper level in the journalist results). The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

interaction with the continuous fact-checking measure in Table A8 is not statistically significant.

Discussion

Study 2 offers compelling evidence that appeals to journalistic status and values can successfully promote fact-checking coverage at U.S. newspapers, which might help explain the turn toward fact-checking observed over the last decade (as documented in Study 1). An appeal based on audience demand had somewhat more modest effects but also significantly increased fact-checking coverage enough that we could not directly distinguish it from the supply treatment message effects.²⁷

While the absolute effect sizes in our experiment are relatively modest — approximately one additional story mentioning fact-checking per treated newspaper — the effects are quite large relative to the extremely low baseline. Most of the newspapers studied did not produce even a single qualifying article absent our stimulus (81% of newspapers in our control group published 0 articles [13/16]; $m = .25$). By contrast, the prevalence of fact-checking coverage increased substantially in our treatment conditions, especially the low- and high-saturation supply conditions ($m=1.06$ and $m=1.44$, respectively) but also the demand conditions ($m=0.76$ for low saturation, $m=1.06$ for high saturation).

These results should also be considered in light of the particular challenge faced by field experiments such as this one. In contrast to studies which measure survey-based outcomes under tightly controlled experimental conditions, we evaluate the effect of our treatments in the real world on the actual outcome of interest: journalistic behavior during a real U.S. election. This approach maximizes the external validity of our results and minimizes the extrapolation that is necessary from more artificial study contexts. However, it also requires testing the effect of a necessarily weak and artificial treatment on the real-world behavior of professionals facing the demands and pressures of their actual workplaces, which likely diluted the effects of our treatment. Unlike subjects recruited for a controlled experiment, the busy journalists we studied may have given our letters and emails little attention or ig-

²⁷It is also possible that messages focused on demand would be more effective than those relating to supply issues with particular groups of journalists or in certain internal contexts — for instance, convincing a publisher or editor to embrace the format.

Table 5: Treatment effect estimates: Research questions (newspapers)

	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Supply treatment (high)	1.60 (1.37)	1.61* (0.94)	0.69* (0.34)
Supply treatment (low)	-0.07 (0.30)	1.11* (0.58)	0.79 (0.52)
Demand treatment (high)	0.29 (0.39)	0.70 (0.74)	0.90 (0.73)
Demand treatment (low)	0.80 (0.74)	0.49 (0.44)	0.88* (0.51)
Political coverage (/1000)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
High fact-checking coverage (2012)	-0.41* (0.24)		
Supply (high) × high fact-checking	-0.61 (1.44)		
Supply (low) × high fact-checking	1.56* (0.74)		
Demand (high) × high fact-checking	1.94 (1.96)		
Demand (low) × high fact-checking	-0.22 (0.84)		
PolitiFact state		-0.28* (0.17)	
Supply (high) × PolitiFact state		-1.22 (0.95)	
Supply (low) × PolitiFact state		-1.10 (0.58)	
Demand (high) × PolitiFact state		0.48 (0.94)	
Demand (low) × PolitiFact state		0.00 (0.58)	
Competitive race			0.39 (0.35)
Supply (high) × competitive			1.30 (1.62)
Supply (low) × competitive			0.02 (1.04)
Demand (high) × competitive			-0.24 (1.02)
Demand (low) × competitive			-1.06 (0.69)
Constant	0.39 (0.23)	0.26 (0.18)	
N	82	82	82

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

nored them altogether, which likely explains why we can better distinguish the effects of the experiment at the outlet level due to the power of aggregation.

Conclusion

The studies we present here take two important steps forward in understanding the spread of fact-checking in political reporting. Our field experiment offers compelling evidence that fact-checking appeals to the core values of status-conscious professional journalists. This finding is consistent with the messages that fact-checkers use to promote their work in professional venues like trade magazines and conferences or when seeking partnerships with other news outlets. Our results suggest that this message holds substantial appeal in newsrooms across the country.

At the same time, our historical study finds little evidence that fact-checking spreads mainly through patterns of emulation among news organizations covering the same region or state. As noted above, other mechanisms may be more important in spreading of new journalistic practices such as attention to industry leaders or to “meta-journalistic discourse” (Graves and Konieczna 2015; Zelizer 1993).

Three priorities for future research emerge from this study. First, it is essential is to design reliable approaches to measuring the actual incidence of political fact-checking in news reports. This has been a difficult challenge due to the lack of a consensus definition of political fact-checking²⁸ and a coding procedure that can reliably and comprehensively identify instances of fact-checking, a subtle task that requires considering an array of subtle factors such as the framing of a story and the choice and deployment of sources. It can be surprisingly difficult to draw a clear line between “he said, she said” accounts and those that question official claims. However, an accurate picture of the changes taking place in professional journalism today depends on developing such measures.

Another priority is to extend the analysis developed here to a wider news ecosystem that includes television, radio, and online outlets as well as print. While newspapers continue to set the agenda in local reporting (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010), a more comprehensive picture of the news landscape will help

²⁸Even journalists apply the term to a range of techniques and formats which depart from narrower interpretations of objective reporting.

to measure the growth of fact-checking as well as the patterns by which it spreads. What has been called “intermedia influence” in journalism often operates across media platforms (e.g. Reese and Danielian 1989) and may result in particular innovations diffusing in idiosyncratic ways. The wave of “adwatch” reports which preceded contemporary fact-checking took root in local TV newsrooms as well as newspapers, for instance. Likewise, cable news today often produces fact-checking segments based on research by dedicated outlets (Graves 2013).

Most important, the results presented here do not examine why or whether fact-checking is taken up within a particular newsroom. Though our field experiment found significant results at the level of news outlets, it remains unclear whether outlet- or reporter-level factors are more important in the spread of the practice or how the two levels of analysis might interact. Individual reporters might typically begin fact-checking before newsrooms embrace the practice more formally, but in other cases an organizational mandate could help encourage journalists in the newsroom to change their approach. Further research into these mechanisms is needed to understand how this journalistic innovation spreads.

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Appendix

Table A1: Newspaper sample

State	Newspaper	Headquarters city	Study 1	Study 2
Alabama	Birmingham News	Birmingham	X	X
Alabama	Huntsville Times	Huntsville	X	
Alabama	Montgomery Advertiser	Montgomery	X	
Alabama	Press-Register	Mobile	X	
Alaska	Anchorage Daily News	Anchorage	X	
Alaska	Fairbanks Daily News Miner	Fairbanks	X	
Alaska	Juneau Empire	Juneau	X	
Arizona	The Arizona Daily Star	Tuscon	X	X
Arizona	The Arizona Republic	Phoenix	X	X
Arkansas	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	Little Rock	X	X
Arkansas	Times Record	Fort Smith	X	
California	Contra Costa Times	Walnut Creek	X	X
California	Daily News	Woodland Hills	X	X
California	Fresno Bee	Fresno	X	X
California	Investor's Business Daily	Los Angeles	X	X
California	Sacramento Bee	Sacramento	X	X
California	San Diego Union-Tribune	San Diego	X	X
California	San Jose Mercury News	San Jose	X	X
California	The Los Angeles Times	Los Angeles	X	X
California	The Orange County Register	Santa Ana	X	X
California	The Press-Enterprise	Riverside	X	
California	The San Francisco Chronicle	San Francisco	X	X
Colorado	The Denver Post	Denver	X	X
Colorado	The Gazette	Colorado Springs	X	
Connecticut	Connecticut Post	Bridgeport	X	
Connecticut	Hartford Courant	Hartford	X	X
Connecticut	New Haven Register	New Haven	X	
Delaware	Delaware State News	Dover	X	
District of Columbia	The Washington Post	Washington	X	
District of Columbia	The Washington Times	Washington	X	X
Florida	Daytona Beach News-Journal	Daytona Beach	X	X
Florida	Orlando Sentinel	Orlando	X	X
Florida	Sarasota Herald-Tribune	Sarasota	X	X
Florida	South Florida Sun-Sentinel	Fort Lauderdale	X	X

Table A1 – continued from previous page

State	Newspaper	City (HQ)	Study 1	Study 2
Florida	St. Petersburg Times/ Tampa Bay Times	Saint Petersburg	X	
Florida	Tallahassee Democrat	Tallahassee	X	
Florida	The Florida Times-Union	Jacksonville	X	X
Florida	The Miami Herald	Miami	X	
Florida	The Palm Beach Post	West Palm Beach	X	X
Florida	The Tampa Tribune	Tampa	X	X
Georgia	Gwinnett Daily Post	Lawrenceville	X	
Georgia	The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	Atlanta	X	
Georgia	The Augusta Chronicle	Augusta	X	
Hawaii	The Honolulu Star-Advertiser	Honolulu		X
Idaho	Lewiston Morning Tribune	Lewiston	X	
Idaho	Post Register	Idaho Falls	X	
Idaho	The Idaho Statesman	Boise	X	
Illinois	Chicago Sun-Times	Chicago	X	X
Illinois	Chicago Tribune	Chicago	X	X
Illinois	Daily Herald	Arlington Heights	X	X
Illinois	State Journal-Register	Springfield	X	
Indiana	Indianapolis Star	Indianapolis	X	X
Indiana	South Bend Tribune	South Bend	X	
Indiana	The Times	Munster	X	
Iowa	Quad-City Times	Davenport	X	
Iowa	The Des Moines Register	Des Moines	X	X
Iowa	The Gazette	Cedar Rapids	X	
Kansas	Hutchinson News	Hutchinson	X	
Kansas	Topeka Capital-Journal	Topeka	X	
Kansas	Wichita Eagle	Wichita	X	
Kentucky	Lexington Herald-Leader	Lexington	X	X
Kentucky	The Courier-Journal	Louisville	X	X
Kentucky	The Kentucky Post	Covington	X	
Louisiana	The Advocate	Baton Rouge	X	
Louisiana	Times-Picayune	New Orleans	X	X
Maine	Bangor Daily News	Bangor	X	
Maine	Kennebec Journal	Augusta	X	
Maine	Portland Press Herald	Portland	X	
Maine	Sun Journal	Lewiston	X	
Maryland	The Capital	Annapolis	X	
Maryland	The Sun	Baltimore	X	X

Table A1 – continued from previous page

State	Newspaper	City (HQ)	Study 1	Study 2
Massachusetts	Boston Herald	Boston	X	X
Massachusetts	Telegram and Gazette	Worcester	X	
Massachusetts	The Boston Globe	Boston	X	X
Michigan	Detroit Free Press	Detroit	X	X
Michigan	Lansing State Journal	Lansing	X	
Michigan	The Detroit News	Detroit	X	X
Michigan	The Grand Rapids Press	Grand Rapids	X	X
Minnesota	St. Paul Pioneer Press	St. Paul	X	X
Minnesota	Star Tribune	Minneapolis	X	X
Mississippi	Clarion-Ledger	Jackson	X	
Mississippi	Sun Herald	Biloxi	X	
Missouri	Jefferson City News-Tribune	Jefferson City	X	
Missouri	Kansas City Star	Kansas City	X	X
Missouri	Springfield News-Leader	Springfield	X	
Missouri	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	St. Louis	X	X
Montana	Billings Gazette	Billings	X	
Montana	Great Falls Tribune	Great Falls	X	
Montana	Independent Record	Helena	X	
Montana	Missoulian	Missoula	X	
Nebraska	Grand Island Independent	Grand Island	X	
Nebraska	Lincoln Journal Star	Lincoln	X	
Nebraska	Omaha World-Herald	Omaha	X	X
Nevada	Las Vegas Review-Journal	Las Vegas	X	X
Nevada	Las Vegas Sun	Las Vegas	X	
Nevada	Nevada Appeal	Carson City	X	
Nevada	Reno Gazette-Journal	Reno	X	
New Hampshire	Concord Monitor	Concord	X	
New Hampshire	New Hampshire Union Leader	Manchester	X	
New Hampshire	The Telegraph	Nashua	X	
New Jersey	Asbury Park Press	Neptune	X	X
New Jersey	The Record	Hackensack	X	X
New Jersey	The Star-Ledger	Newark	X	
New Jersey	The Times	Trenton	X	
New Mexico	Albuquerque Journal	Albuquerque	X	X
New Mexico	Santa Fe New Mexican	Santa Fe	X	
New York	Daily News	New York City	X	X
New York	New York Post	New York City	X	X

Table A1 – continued from previous page

State	Newspaper	City (HQ)	Study 1	Study 2
New York	New York Times	New York City	X	
New York	Newsday	Long Island	X	X
New York	Rochester Democrat and Chronicle	Rochester	X	X
New York	The Buffalo News	Buffalo	X	X
New York	The Journal News	White Plains		X
New York	The Post-Standard	Syracuse	X	X
New York	Times Union	Albany	X	
New York	Wall Street Journal	New York City	X	
North Carolina	News & Record	Greensboro	X	
North Carolina	The Charlotte Observer	Charlotte	X	X
North Carolina	The News and Observer	Raleigh	X	X
North Dakota	Bismarck Tribune	Bismarck	X	
North Dakota	Grand Forks Herald	Grand Forks	X	
Ohio	Akron Beacon Journal	Akron	X	X
Ohio	Dayton Daily News	Dayton	X	X
Ohio	The Blade	Toledo	X	X
Ohio	The Cincinnati Enquirer	Cincinnati	X	X
Ohio	The Columbus Dispatch	Columbus	X	X
Ohio	The Plain Dealer	Cleveland	X	
Oklahoma	The Lawton Constitution	Lawton	X	
Oklahoma	The Oklahoman	Oklahoma City	X	X
Oklahoma	Tulsa World	Tulsa	X	X
Oregon	The Oregonian	Portland	X	
Oregon	The Register-Guard	Eugene	X	
Oregon	The Statesman Journal	Salem	X	
Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	Pittsburgh	X	X
Pennsylvania	The Morning Call	Allentown	X	X
Pennsylvania	The Patriot-News	Harrisburg	X	
Pennsylvania	The Philadelphia Daily News	Philadelphia	X	X
Pennsylvania	The Philadelphia Inquirer	Philadelphia	X	X
Pennsylvania	Tribune-Review	Pittsburgh		X
Rhode Island	The Providence Journal	Providence	X	
South Carolina	The Greenville News	Greenville	X	
South Carolina	The Post and Courier	Charleston	X	
South Carolina	The State	Columbia	X	X
South Dakota	American News	Aberdeen	X	
South Dakota	Argus Leader	Sioux Falls	X	

Table A1 – continued from previous page

State	Newspaper	City (HQ)	Study 1	Study 2
South Dakota	Rapid City Journal	Rapid City	X	
Tennessee	Knoxville News Sentinel	Knoxville	X	X
Tennessee	The Commercial Appeal	Memphis	X	X
Tennessee	The Tennessean	Nashville	X	X
Texas	Austin American-Statesman	Austin	X	
Texas	Fort Worth Star-Telegram	Fort Worth	X	X
Texas	Houston Chronicle	Houston	X	X
Texas	San Antonio Express-News	San Antonio	X	X
Texas	The Dallas Morning News	Dallas	X	X
Utah	Standard-Examiner	Ogden	X	
Utah	The Deseret Morning / Deseret News	Salt Lake City	X	
Utah	The Salt Lake Tribune	Salt Lake City	X	X
Vermont	Rutland Herald	Rutland	X	
Vermont	The Burlington Free Press	Burlington	X	
Vermont	The Caledonian-Record	Saint Johnsbury	X	
Vermont	The Times Argus	Barre	X	
Virginia	Richmond Times-Dispatch	Richmond	X	
Virginia	The Virginian-Pilot	Norfolk	X	X
Virginia	USA Today	Arlington	X	X
Washington	Seattle Post-Intelligencer	Seattle	X	
Washington	Seattle Times	Seattle	X	X
Washington	The News Tribune	Tacoma	X	X
Washington	The Olympian	Olympia	X	
West Virginia	Charleston Daily Mail	Charleston	X	
West Virginia	Charleston Gazette	Charleston	X	
West Virginia	The Herald Dispatch	Huntington	X	
Wisconsin	Green Bay Press-Gazette	Green Bay	X	
Wisconsin	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	Milwaukee	X	
Wisconsin	The Capital Times	Madison	X	
Wisconsin	Wisconsin State Journal	Madison	X	
Wyoming	Wyoming Tribune-Eagle	Cheyenne	X	

Table A2: Balance statistics

(a) Journalists

	Supply	Demand	Control	<i>p</i> -value
Competitive	0.36	0.35	0.36	0.95
Political articles	7.90	8.04	7.82	0.84
N	522	504	663	

(b) Newspapers

	Supply (H)	Supply (L)	Demand (H)	Demand (L)	Control	<i>p</i> -value
Competitive	0.38	0.38	0.35	0.35	0.38	1.00
Reporters	22.1	21.1	19.5	20.4	20	0.98
N	16	16	17	17	16	

Unweighted means by experimental condition. *p*-values are from F-tests of the joint null hypothesis that all coefficients are zero in OLS regressions where the characteristic in question is the outcome variable and covariates are indicators for treatment conditions (available upon request).

Table A3: Spillover analysis: Untreated journalists

	Coefficient (SE)
Supply (newspaper)	0.03 (0.03)
Demand (newspaper)	0.03 (0.03)
Constant	0.01 (0.01)
N	663

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). Ordinary least squares estimates with robust standard errors clustered by newspaper. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

Table A4: Journalist treatment effect estimates (full models)

	Unweighted	<i>Treatment-specific IPTWs</i>	
		Demand	Supply
Demand	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Supply	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Political keywords (/100)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)
Constant	0.04 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)	0.04 (0.02)
Observations	1689	1689	1689

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors. Bolded coefficients are the treatment effect estimates with treatment-specific inverse probability of treatment weights (IPTWs) that appear in Table 3b. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

Table A5: Newspaper treatment effect estimates (full models)

	Unweighted	<i>Treatment-specific inverse probability of treatment weights</i>			
		Demand low	Demand high	Supply low	Supply high
Demand low	0.48 (0.38)	0.49 (0.38)	0.46 (0.38)	0.45 (0.38)	0.51 (0.37)
Demand high	0.79 (0.51)	0.80 (0.52)	0.79 (0.50)	0.78 (0.51)	0.81 (0.52)
Supply low	0.78* (0.45)	0.80* (0.46)	0.76* (0.45)	0.76* (0.44)	0.81* (0.46)
Supply high	1.16* (0.67)	1.17* (0.65)	1.14* (0.66)	1.14* (0.67)	1.17* (0.68)
Political keywords (/100)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Constant	0.21 (0.16)	0.23 (0.15)	0.17 (0.16)	0.17 (0.18)	0.24 (0.18)
Observations	82	82	82	82	82

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors. Bolded coefficients are the treatment effect estimates with treatment-specific inverse probability of treatment weights (IPTWs) that appear in Table 3b. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

Table A6: Pooled supply and demand treatments

	Coefficient (SE)
Supply (high and low saturation)	0.97** (0.42)
Demand (high and low saturation)	0.64* (0.33)
Political keywords (/100)	0.01 (0.01)
Constant	0.21 (0.16)
Observations	82

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided); ** $p < 0.05$ (two-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

Table A7: Treatment effect estimates: RQ1 (journalists)

	RQ1
Supply treatment	0.05 (0.05)
Demand treatment	0.03 (0.02)
Political coverage (/100)	-0.01 (0.09)
Previous fact-checking coverage (/100)	0.01 (0.09)
Supply \times previous fact-checking (/100)	-0.05 (0.08)
Demand \times previous fact-checking (/100)	-0.03 (0.04)
Constant	0.03 (0.01)
N	1689

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

Table A8: Treatment effect estimates: RQ1 (newspapers)

	RQ1
Supply treatment (high)	1.76 (1.62)
Supply treatment (low)	0.60 (0.59)
Demand treatment (high)	0.58 (0.50)
Demand treatment (low)	0.99 (0.71)
Political coverage (/1000)	0.03 (0.02)
Previous fact-checking coverage (2012)	-0.01* (0.005)
Supply (high) × previous fact-checking	-0.02 (0.03)
Supply (low) × previous fact-checking	0.01 (0.02)
Demand (high) × previous fact-checking	0.01 (0.02)
Demand (low) × previous fact-checking	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	0.33 (0.23)
N	82

* $p < 0.05$ (one-sided). OLS models with robust standard errors. The outcome variable is the number of articles returned by a keyword search for articles mentioning fact-checking or dedicated fact-checkers written by political reporters at a large sample of newspapers excluding current or former PolitiFact affiliates or newspapers with dedicated fact-checkers (see Table A1 in Appendix for full list).

Figure A1: Initial supply treatment email



Dear Jason,

An important trend is changing political reporting – what *American Journalism Review* called the “fact-checking explosion” that “seeks to separate truth from fiction in political claims.”

Reporters understand better than anyone how politicians stretch the truth on the campaign trail. Fact-checking is a new form of accountability journalism that the most effective reporters are using to fight political misinformation and give voters the information they need to make informed choices.

Nearly every major US news outlet fact-checked candidates in the 2012 race, including leading newspapers such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and the Associated Press as well as broadcasters like ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and National Public Radio. Dozens of smaller outlets did admirable fact-checking at the state and local level, including the Nashua Telegraph, Texas Tribune, Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, Seattle Times, and Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

To date, nonpartisan fact-checkers like [PolitiFact](#) and [FactCheck.org](#) have won more than a dozen major journalism awards – including a Pulitzer Prize – for their innovative efforts.

We’re part of a team of researchers working with the American Press Institute. Our goal is to recognize the best fact-checking in American newspapers and to help reporters see how top journalists in outlets of every size are successfully incorporating fact-checking into their reporting. The American Press Institute will be tracking coverage in your newspaper in order to identify the best examples of media fact-checking within the profession during the 2014 campaign. We hope to be able to recommend your work to them.

For now, we would like to ask you to take a one-minute survey intended to find out how you feel about fact-checking. We will check back with you regularly between now and the election to find out whether your feelings about fact-checking have changed and how you are incorporating it into your reporting.

[Take the Wisconsin/Exeter Journalist Survey](#)

Clicking on the link to the survey means you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study (the “Wisconsin/Exeter Journalist Survey”). All of your responses will be confidential. Participation is completely voluntary – you may decline to participate, end participation in the survey at any time by closing your browser window, or refuse to answer any question. There are no risks or benefits from participating on the survey.

Sincerely,
Lucas Graves
University of Wisconsin-Madison
School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Jason Reifler
University of Exeter (UK)
Centre for Elections, Media, and Participation

Email sent September 22, 2014 to journalists in the supply treatment condition.

Figure A2: Initial demand treatment email



Dear Jason,

An important trend is changing political reporting – what *American Journalism Review* called the “fact-checking explosion” that “seeks to separate truth from fiction in political claims.”

People who read newspapers understand that politicians stretch the truth on the campaign trail. Fact-checking is a new form of accountability journalism that readers love because it give them the information they need to fight political misinformation and to make informed choices as voters.

Evidence suggests that fact-checking is extremely popular with print, broadcast, and online audiences. In an NPR survey, 90% of listeners rated fact-checking political claims as “very important.” Traffic to one well-known fact-checking website exceeded one million readers per day at some points during the 2012 campaign! In total, 11% of Americans said they read a fact-check during the last presidential election. Readers are eager for more fact-checking of public officials at every level of politics.

That demand is the reason nonpartisan fact-checkers like [PolitiFact](#) and [FactCheck.org](#) have built dedicated audiences of readers who come back time after time for their innovative efforts.

We're part of a team of researchers working with the American Press Institute. Our goal is to document how journalists in newspapers of every size are succeeding in attracting and engaging readers when they successfully incorporate fact-checking into their reporting. The American Press Institute will be tracking reader response to your newspaper to identify the fact-checking content that readers find most compelling during the 2014 campaign. We hope to be able to recommend your work to them.

For now, we would like to ask you to take part in a one-minute survey to see your response to readers' appetite for fact-checking. We will check back with you regularly between now and the election to find out whether your feelings about fact-checking have changed and how you are incorporating it into your reporting.

[Take the Wisconsin/Exeter Journalist Survey](#)

Clicking on the link to the survey means you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study (the “Wisconsin/Exeter Journalist Survey”). All of your responses will be confidential. Participation is completely voluntary – you may decline to participate, end participation in the survey at any time by closing your browser window, or refuse to answer any question. There are no risks or benefits from participating on the survey.

Sincerely,
Lucas Graves
University of Wisconsin-Madison
School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Jason Reifler
University of Exeter (UK)
Centre for Elections, Media, and Participation

Email sent September 22, 2014 to journalists in the demand treatment condition.