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“BUT VERIFYING FACTS IS WHAT WE DO!”

Fact-checking and journalistic professional autonomy

Urban Larssen

Introduction

This chapter presents ethnographic material on journalists' experiences, routines, and views regarding fact-checking and fake news, based on field studies conducted at three Swedish media organisations on a local, regional and national level. The studies are part of a Swedish project aimed at developing a digital tool that can assist journalists in their everyday news work. Through interviews and participant observation, the field studies considered the need for and interest in this kind of tool. The findings were then used as a pre-study to inform the development of the broader fact-checking project.

The project was organised as a collaboration between researchers and representatives from competing sectors of the Swedish media industry. It thus resonates with the kind of open boundary work that has come to characterise the recent rise of a global fact-checking movement (Graves 2018). Although this project did not seek to create a specific fact-checking institution, but instead attempted to supply journalists with better resources for verification in the digital communication landscape, the project can nonetheless be related to academic discussions about fake news, verification as key to journalistic professionalism, and, more generally, on journalistic authority in a so called post-truth news ecosystem (McNair 2018).

In terms of the findings of the field studies, the journalists expressed both the need for and interest in a digital fact-checking tool, but also a fear that institutionalised forms of fact-checking could infringe on professional autonomy, involving an increased control over employees from their employer's perspective. This indicates that the context in which the field studies were pursued is contingent with social and cultural aspects and dimensions that goes beyond a straightforward technical solution to a pressing problem.

In this chapter, I take the opportunity to present the project and set out the ethnographic material that formed part of the basis on which the project was

developed. I start out by describing the project and particularly the objectives and specific features of the main product: *The Fact Assistant* – a web app meant to help journalists verify the legitimacy and validity of claims, media, and sources that appear in their everyday newsroom work. I present the background to the project, how it developed during its process, and some of the problems it has encountered. I proceed by situating the project within academic debate regarding fake news and fact-checking, and then turn to the ethnographic material gathered during the field studies.

The Fact Assistant project – collaborating towards enhanced verification routines

The research and development project named “Faktaassistenten” (The Fact Assistant) ran between March 2018 and April 2020 at the Department of Journalism at Södertörn University in Stockholm. It was carried out as a collaboration between the university and different Swedish news organisations who are all participants in a media industry partnership, “Framtidens Journalistik” (Journalism of the Future). This partnership is led by a consortium coordinated by the public service Swedish Television. Both private and public service media operations are included in the cooperation, and the Fact Assistant project was partly funded by the state-run innovation agency Vinnova, as part of the agency’s programme “From analogue to digital.”

The main goal of the project was to improve procedures by journalists regarding the verification of digital content and to develop a web app that can be used by journalists for fact-checking in their newsroom work. Once its prototype was fully developed and tested, the app would be available to utilise by consortium members to help their journalists verify news content on the web as well as in routine verification processes needed for day-to-day journalistic tasks.¹ The app was designed in such a way that it could be integrated into the news-making process. In addition to providing journalists with methodological steps to verify online content, including pictures, videos, and text, the app enables journalists to store and share their fact-checks and allows them to evaluate the credibility of media and sources. The individual fact-checks contribute to the construction of a knowledge bank, designed to become a resource for journalists in the future. When they subsequently encounter a particular text, picture, or video in their work they can look up whether it has already been fact-checked or not. If it has not, then they would have the opportunity to add and review it. The project aimed at making online content verification a solid and well-established part of journalistic work by facilitating access to tools and data when the need for quick verification arises.

The Fact Assistant app is based on a systematisation of verification in three stages, focussing on three different objects: (1) media content (pictures, videos, statements, etc.); (2) the media in which the statements are published (the website, institutional social media account, etc.); and 3) the sources behind the claim (basically the person or entity that posted the claim). In the app, journalists go through

a step-by-step process connected to each of the three objects. The steps basically consist of series of questions posed in relation to the object under investigation. Within each step, the app has a section titled "resources" that points to various relevant tools that can be used for assessment and analysis (such as Google Reverse Images to establish whether an image has been used previously). The process can be made more or less extensive depending on how much time the journalist has and depending on the claim that is being fact-checked. The investigations can also be saved before completion and then picked up at a later stage. At the end of the process, the user has a basis for assessing the validity of the claim he or she wants to fact-check. The final assessment is something that every journalist can do – the app is just a help along the way. The result of each fact-check is stored in the system. The individual user can choose whether to keep the fact-check private or share with other app users in the same media organisation or with the public at large by publishing the results in an article that embeds machine-readable hyper data in the ClaimReview.²

As for the procedure of the project, a first preparatory step finished in November 2018. This included the field studies of journalists' interests and needs generating the material to which this chapter refers. In December 2018, development work began with meetings with editorial managers drawn from three media organisations: SVT (Swedish public service television), SR (Swedish public service radio), and *Dagens Nyheter* (the largest national daily newspaper in Sweden, commercial with a liberal editorial standpoint). At these meetings, the idea of The Fact Assistant app was presented and discussed, and suggestions on the component parts were made by the participant media, regarding matters such as usability and the degree of sharing that would be appropriate for the accumulated results of the fact-checks.

Step two involved developing the prototype for the web-based app. Responsible for this technical part was Walid Al-Saqaf, a lecturer in journalism and researcher at Södertörn University who specialises in the use of Internet and media technology for journalism. In April 2019, there was a first version of the prototype and the testing could start in workshops organised by the university for a small number of journalists. The prototype was placed under Södertörn University's domain on a server that belongs to the University's shared network. Initially, students in the journalism programmes were included in the testing. Approaches were made to further involve individual journalists in the development work as their comments were seen as instrumental to the project, and they were asked to test the prototype in their day-to-day news work. However, this proved impossible, as outside the confines of the workshops, the journalists who had been introduced to the app were fully occupied with their daily work and could not contribute further. There was, however, a positive attitude to the project and the idea of a digital assistant in the work environment, but despite this encouraging reception, the plan to further involve journalists was postponed. An improved version of The Fact Assistant app was launched shortly after and journalists were again invited to test it in real news work. However, after the initial enthusiasm from journalists, this new version did not spark any further interest or involvement from individual journalists.

The third and final step took into account the results from the surveys after the workshops, along with input and feedback from the steering board. The main focus was to further develop the prototype to make a more attractive and user-friendly app to accomplish testing in real editorial environments. Yet another version of The Fact Assistant app was launched in April 2020 and journalists were invited to test it in their day-to-day news work. However, due mainly to changing work routines as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no opportunity to carry out these real newsroom tests, and instead a number of usability tests via Zoom were carried out. The results confirmed earlier conclusions that journalists were positive about the functioning of the app and deemed it a relevant tool for verification work.

To sum up, The Fact Assistant project addressed the need for improvement in the fact-checking procedures of practicing journalists by specifically targeting everyday news work and routines. Journalists were thus viewed as the professional group under whose authority the fact-checking institution ought to be placed and strengthened. The project was based on the development of a technical solution, and its organisational form was interdisciplinary with academia and media businesses working collaboratively, and with academia furthermore integrating its own development and research activities with teaching. One surprising result arising from the project was the reluctance of journalists to engage fully in the app development process. Lack of time was pointed out by journalists in the follow-up surveys as the main reason, but also a degree of technique fatigue – statements were made that there are simply too many newsroom tools available right now. Whether the latest and more user-friendly version of The Fact Assistant will attract journalists to start using it remains to be evaluated.

Post-truth fact-checking and the crisis of journalism in academic debate

The lack of time and technique fatigue referred to by journalists participating in the workshops can be seen against the background of profound changes affecting the conditions for journalistic production, well-known and thoroughly researched by scholars of media and journalism across the world during the last decades (see e.g. Croteau and Hoynes 2019). A decline in journalistic authority and debate about journalism in crisis has followed, but there is little consensus among scholars, media professionals, and commentators on what this means for the future of journalism and for democracy more broadly (see e.g. Curran 2011; McChesney 2012; Waisbord 2016). Fake news appears as a central and symptom-like but certainly not exhaustive concept in this context. Rather, studies on fake news and fact-checking are merely part of a larger research area on journalism's credibility, position, ideals, and routines in a digitised and 'post-truth' era (McNair 2018).

The changes which have been debated include topics such as: technology developments, competing forms of information provision, convergence of media outlets, and tougher economic conditions. Moving from analogue to digital, the

speed of news production has increased substantially. "Liquid journalism" (Deuze 2008) has replaced linear news models, and journalists need to produce more material on more platforms in the multimodal environment that characterises today's journalism, resulting in "softer attitudes towards verification" (Nygren and Widholm 2018: 39). Current values of immediacy, interactivity, and participation are altering what it means to do journalism today, with key players such as web designers and computer programmers entering the newsroom side-by-side with journalists (Usher 2014), contributing to a de-professionalisation of journalism (see e.g. Witschge and Nygren 2009).

The Internet and social media have caused the evolution of an "inflationary public sphere" (McNair 2018: 42), resulting in a proliferation of journalistic forms and the possibility for basically anyone to produce news and share information on a massive scale. The gatekeeping role previously confined within the borders of the journalistic profession has thus decreased (Bruns 2005), opening up for the possibility of fruitful cooperation and engagement with audiences, e.g. through citizen journalism (see Reich 2008), as well as antagonistic media criticism from populist and far-right alternative media where especially the credibility of legacy media is severely questioned (Figenschou and Ihlebael 2019).

Responses to the changes by the media industry have contributed to the general decline in trust for journalistic authority: managerialism, audience metrics, commercialisation through native advertising, downsizing of work force, and a reduction of fact-checking prior to publishing – not necessarily damaging in themselves, but potentially compromising established journalistic norms and ideals. Thus, to a degree the decline in journalistic authority is partly self-inflicted (Reese 2018). Added to these can be repeated incidents of ethical misconduct (Allan 2005; Otto and Köhler 2018; Allern and Pollack 2019), exemplified by the phone-hacking scandal involving UK newspapers which lead to the Leveson inquiry in 2011–2012; a public, judicial review into the general culture and ethics of the British press (Elstein 2013).

Furthermore, the changes and responses have not only resulted in ambiguity within journalistic ranks regarding their role-conception and authority (Vos and Thomas 2018), but also in a "culture of insecurity" regarding their positions (Ekdale et al. 2015: 383). Layoffs and closings are common phenomena, and convergences and technology development have resulted in different forms of employment based on principles of flexibility, multitasking, and cost efficiency, leading to what Deuze (2013) calls "precarious labor". Bunce (2019) points to a flip side of audience metrics – while (on the positive side) aggregating news consumption habits, providing advertisers with more exact information, and making journalism more responsive to its audiences, it also allows managers to more efficiently monitor and discipline their journalists. Reinardy (2011) documents an increase in burnouts and Ekdale et al. (2015) suggest that journalists who believe their jobs are at risk are resistant to change.

There is thus ample ground for talking about a 'crisis of journalism', but the way scholars depict and analyse this crisis varies. On the one hand, there is a kind

of relief that a crisis has finally arrived, so that journalism can be reinvented in a better form (see Curran 2011; Wasserman 2019). On the other hand, there is confidence in the ability of professional journalism to solve the crisis and endure as the authority for the provision of truthful, reliable, and sustainable news (e.g. Schudson 2018). Zelizer (2015) cautions against the use of the notion of “crisis” in the first place, arguing that “it misses an opportunity to recognize how contingent and differentiated the futures of journalism might be” (ibid.: 888). Tong (2018) suggests that many news organisations are successfully adopting and possessing digital and technological skills and can defend their journalism, not least by regrouping around certain norms such as fact-checking. Others point out that even if mainstream media have problems, there is much to indicate that the crisis has also meant a strengthening of journalism, at least regarding its ideological frame (Wiik 2009; Waisbord 2018).

A more holistic and cultural perspective has gained ground. Scholars following this direction make use of theories that pitch journalism within a larger societal and cultural context. Carlsson (2018a; 2018b) takes a ‘metacommunication’ perspective and reflects on the future of journalism in terms of boundary-making processes and increased self-reflexivity among journalists; Vos and Thomas (2018) talk about internal and external contingencies of the discursive construction of journalistic authority; Kreiss (2019) investigates the social identity of journalists, constructed both by themselves and for themselves by others in distinct socioeconomic contexts. In her study of media and participation (e.g. through citizen journalism), Ahva suggests “viewing journalism as a structure of public communication that is enacted through the practices of various actors at sites that *go beyond the newsroom*” (Ahva 2017: 242, my emphasis). In these approaches, journalism is conceptually brought out of its status as a single institution practiced by professional journalists and analysed in terms of the meaning-making processes of public communication more broadly, not least through new and hybrid forms of cooperation (Peters and Broersma 2013; Pickard 2019).

This brings me back to The Fact Assistant project. The project can be seen as resonating with a growing occupational reform movement on an international scale where journalists work together with non-journalists to stem the spread of fake news and disinformation (Graves 2018; Allern 2019). Graves (2018) documents and explores this movement in detail by attending the two first global summits of fact-checkers, in 2014 and 2015, gathered in the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). He suggests that the births of US institutions such as FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Poynter Institute mark important events that set the movement in motion from 2003 and onwards (cf. Amazeen 2020; Allern 2019). These quickly developed into dedicated fact-checking organisations, conducting their own research, participating in audits during election campaigns and, as a token of their relevance on a transnational level, assisting in the establishment of fact-checking institutes and routines in countries around the world (including Sweden). The movement has gained further momentum since the beginning of the Trump-era during which claims that legacy media are elite, corrupt, and the main provider of

fake news became a worldwide phenomenon. Graves points to differences in the objectives, procedures, and organisations of particular fact-checking initiatives, at the same time identifying areas of convergence among them. Differences lie, for example, in the presentation of findings about fake news, be it misinformation or disinformation. This can be done either in public or privately with involved parties, it can employ rating systems such as PolitiFact's *Truth-O-Meter*, or by using descriptive and more nuanced terms like 'misleading', or instead lengthy explanatory articles.

There are also differences in the organisational form the fact-checkers take. Some are incorporated in traditional news organisations, some are based at an academic department or formed as an NGO, whilst others are combinations of these. Regarding convergence, Graves finds that a broadly shared concern among fact-checkers is the promotion of democratic discourse and accountable government. Furthermore, while professional discourse generally centres on the assertion of difference and the drawing of boundaries between professional fields, he concludes that "international gatherings of fact-checkers are most notable for the boundaries *not* drawn – for the willingness of professional journalists to share jurisdictional authority with non-journalists in ways they typically do not" (Graves: 627, emphasis in original). Graves argues that the ideal of objectivity gains relevance here, and that strengthening the fact-checking procedures is about maintaining the relevance and central position of journalism in the first place. He also points out that different organisational structures for fact-checking makes different sense in different journalistic cultures and calls for ethnographic studies to explore how the construction of autonomy and authority depend on particular ties between actors.

Fact-checking institutions in the Scandinavian countries are part of this global movement, such as the Swedish *Viralgranskaren* (The Viral Reviewer), established in 2014, and the Norwegian *faktiskt.no*, which started its fact-checking work in 2017, both affiliated with the IFCJ. *Faktiskt.no* subsequently inspired the launching of *faktiskt.se* in Sweden with a similar design involving journalists from different well-established media outlets teaming up to pursue fact-checking work (The Facts Assistant project can be seen as stemming from the *faktiskt.se* collaboration). Although there are differences between Swedish and Norwegian fact-checking initiatives, they have much in common and a study of the first 99 fact-checks of *faktiskt.no* (Allern 2019) supplies relevant insights for the Swedish context and for the material presented in this chapter. Allern points out that the organisational form of the Swedish and Norwegian fact-checking initiatives – a collaboration of private media organisations, private and public foundations, and state-run public service media – resonates with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) democratic-corporative media model they saw as typical for Nordic countries. He notes that the fact-checking activity of *faktiskt.no* remains situated within traditional journalism and that the fact-checking endeavour is regarded by the industry as an instrument to strengthen the position and legitimacy of the news media involved.

Allern (2019) clearly sees the value of stimulating and developing media literacy among readerships and members of the political class in the face of a complex and

sometimes bewildering informational landscape. Yet Allern is predominantly critical in his detailed evaluation of the actual work that has been pursued by *faktiskt.no*. He sees little relevance in fact-checking pieces of information that can be regarded as fake news, judging these verifications as having little effect on political debate and opinion-making. He argues that there is a risk that many investigations come out as an accountant-like preoccupation with unimportant details, missing the opportunity to focus on central facts with a more profound meaning for political choices, priorities, and values. He also notes that investigations of news and information with an international scope have been left out intentionally and suggests this is unfortunate given that the mainstream Norwegian media has a well-known weakness of staying loyal to national security and foreign relations interests (see Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2014). Allern also questions the organisational format. “It is puzzling”, he writes, “that fact-checking as an own genre in a Norwegian context is represented by one organization, and thus depends on the priorities that are made in a limited editorial environment. For political democracy, there is no advantage that media who freely and actively should be able to critically evaluate each other’s journalism, outwardly appear as one block in relation to both politicians and the media organizations that are outside the fact-checking community” (ibid.: 185, my translation from Norwegian).

This last point of Allern, corresponding with Graves’ note on ties between actors, is particularly valid for the Swedish context where the launching of *faktiskt.se* in 2018 stirred up considerable public debate. Editorial writers from a broad range of political standpoints (e.g. Linderborg 2018; Boström 2018), and from outside of the *faktiskt.se* group, pointed to difficulties of the fact-checking method. They argued that the first fact-checks done by *faktiskt.se* concerned issues so multifaceted and charged with ideology that it was difficult if not impossible to deliver a true or false verdict, and that *faktiskt.se* had landed wrong in most of their conclusions. They also questioned the teaming up of several of the leading media houses in Sweden and argued that the collaboration hindered them from investigating each other, contrary to the idea of journalism’s role in a democratic and pluralistic public sphere. Moreover, the financial support by the state-run innovation agency Vinnova was seen as problematic since it made the project vulnerable to critique not only from established political camps favouring a downgrading of public service media but also from more antagonistic groups linked to alternative media and the far right. Despite consensus on the need to stem the spread of mis- and disinformation, and contrary to the intentions of the project, the ties between actors involved in *faktiskt.se*, according to its critics, thus put the credibility and autonomy of journalism and the media industry in Sweden at risk.

Fact-checking in the news field: Needs and ambiguities

Having thus situated The Fact Assistant within a broader context and academic debate, let me now turn to the field studies conducted prior to the launching of the project. A central objective of the project was to adopt a bottom-up perspective

rather than top-down. For this reason, a series of field studies among journalists was pursued at a preparatory stage, to involve them in the development of the project. The field studies were carried out in three newsrooms in local, regional, and national media – two public service operations (radio) and one privately owned newspaper, all of whom were members of the partnership Journalism of the Future. Taking responsibility for these studies, I organised a program of 1–2 days with interviews and in-situ observations. I had two general questions in mind when entering the newsrooms: (1) what is the interest for some type of digital tool or assistant and 2) what are the fact-checking needs? The method used to consider these questions was ethnographic and can be roughly divided into three parts. First, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes conducted face to face with individual journalists. The interviews began with the two questions (in connection to which I introduced the basic idea of The Fact Assistant) and then pursued a more open-ended approach. These interviews were mostly carried out in environments separated from the newsroom. Second, ethnographic interviews conducted as conversations with journalists while they were carrying out their day-to-day work. A total of approximately 20 interviews were carried out. Third, observations in the newsrooms during which little or no conversation took place.

In general terms, the answers to my questions were that there is both an interest in a digital fact-checking tool and a need for such a tool. Against this background two associated themes unfolded. One is in relation to the range of programmes or digital tools that are available today or currently in development. The second theme relates to a more general need for control and continuity in the current work situation.

First theme: The interviewed journalists told me they are quite aware of the multitude of technical and software solutions related to fact-checking. The awareness generates different feelings. Some described it as a constant and overwhelming stream of innovation and product development. Others expressed curiosity and joy in trying out new products. Most said they have enough knowledge of a few of them while expressing a concern to acquire more skills, and to get more used to the programmes they consider relevant. Examination of the authenticity of images, for example, is something the respondents experience as challenging, but they do not feel they have problems with fact-checking in this area. Google's Reverse Image Search, for example, is familiar to most and regularly used. At the same time however, there is a need for more advanced fact-checking and to establish routines in relation to aspects such as finding website owners, their histories, origins, and respective positions within networks more quickly. Journalists frequently use Twitter postings in regular news work but getting beyond anonymous or fake profiles and mapping networks is rarely done. In such cases, journalists regarded specific programmes that may facilitate more advanced procedures as a good idea if they contain a clear work schedule. Tools should be easy to use with easy instructions about how the programmes work. If they also contain updates, short news snippets about programmes and recent reviews, then one can easily keep abreast of developments.

Second theme: When it comes to relationships between journalists – the team-work, the discussions, the handovers, the news process as a collective act – and the fact-checking procedures within these relations, there was a general consensus on the idea that an assistant could function as a support mechanism. It would help systematise processes and make formal the knowledge that is kept in the heads and minds of individual journalists, ensuring that knowledge is available to all. In turn, all journalists would thus gain more control. Furthermore, it was considered as an advantage if specific individual fact-checks could contribute to an easily accessible and searchable database, with a system of alerts or red flags on people, organisations, and websites. Journalists felt such a fact-check assistant might then be valuable since you would save time in your day-to-day work, not having to ‘reinvent the wheel’ every time you wanted to check something.

Moving beyond the general questions about interest for and need of a digital tool such as The Fact Assistant, lack of time and stress constantly popped up during the conversations as features of everyday news work. The journalists explained that this is predominantly caused by the fast continuous news cycle, with demands on immediacy not only in delivering the latest news but in keeping an eye on and responding to reactions from audiences through social media and elsewhere. Several of the journalists I spoke to explained that this means less time for fact-checking and research, and that the warning bell for incorrect or doubtful information is less and less heard before publication. As a result, they are relying more on established sources than before, although in cases where misinformation has been spread it is not seldom the trusted sources that fail to deliver correct information. A feeling of stress is further enhanced by frequent reorganisation and turnover of staff, as well as a continuous introduction of new policies from management levels and superiors; policies that several of the journalists I spoke to feel are developed over their heads. Yet another source of stress is technology development connected to so-called deep fakes, i.e. in the sense of manipulating moving images and voices. One local reporter commented: “frankly speaking, when this becomes available for anyone out there, I don’t know how we can keep up with our work.”

In more abstract terms, stress was also expressed as a result of recent public debates over the credibility of established media, paired with uncertainty about how to relate to social media that so easily generates hate storms or triggers debates that are difficult to control. This has less to do with fake news in its more concrete form, as fabricated occasional news. In the local and regional newsrooms I visited, journalists regarded fake news as not particularly present in daily work, or not present at all. They associated this kind of fake news more with superpower and politics on an international level and saw it as a matter for the national media to deal with (still, as one local journalist stated, “if it would happen here, then we are not really prepared, there is no plan for how it would be handled”). Instead, local journalists described a situation where fake news is merely one part of a more complex informational climate. Many attested to a clear switch having occurred

over the course of just a few years regarding social media. Whilst earlier social media was seen and frequently used as a source of information and news, it is now being handled with more care. The journalists said they experience a kind of high-profile climate on social media nowadays where local and traditional media are targeted, particularly by local representatives of the Sweden Democrats party (populist, national conservative) and their populist and far-right supporters. Obviously, mistakes occur every now and then, and this sometimes leads to heated commentary on social media. But it doesn't have to be outright mistakes; heated commentary frequently occurs in relation to regular reporting as well, especially on sensitive and politicised issues such as migration, honour violence, and climate change. As one local reporter commented, "it doesn't matter how well you have checked the facts and how clearly you have sourced it, things just go out of hand anyway". The dynamics of situations when things go wrong, several journalists tried to explain, tend to spiral towards an eschewed reality description where values such as truth and facts have secondary meanings. Journalists and their organisations are accused of not being truthful and in the end pictured as disseminating fake news themselves. A few occasions had occurred among the journalists I spoke to where the result had struck them personally, where hateful campaigns had been directed at them as individuals. A couple of journalists also told me that they had refrained from accepting assignments concerning topics they reckoned would trigger this kind of 'storm'. This decision of theirs had subsequently been brought up during yearly negotiations with their superiors regarding their salaries as failures to fulfil their duties. During conversations about this complex issue, some journalists raised the question of whether a fact-checking app, developed as it would be partly by support from a state agency, would not become just another argument that could be used against them by their critics in a similar manner as with *faktiskt.se*.

Many journalists told me they had been regularly following the viral reviewer *Viralgranskaren* and *faktiskt.se* when they were active, and they saw both of them as good initiatives. However, all of those that commented on *faktiskt.se* felt that the connection to the state-run innovation agency Vinnova was unnecessary as it affected the credibility, not only of *faktiskt.se*, but of the public service media as a whole. "It was very easy for our critics to point their conspiratorial fingers at us and accuse us of being instruments of the government". one public service radio reporter commented. Some also had reservations on the idea of forming a separate fact-checking institution. One of them said, "I was a little provoked by the idea of a particular fact-checking site since it might give the impression that regular journalism does not do fact-checking. But that is exactly what we do, it's what we are good at and what journalism is all about." Many pointed out that fact-checking is about traditional journalistic work. The conversations centered among other things on the importance of local knowledge. In a local context, journalists are situated in a network of decision makers, public officials, and other kinds of authorities on local matters, most of whom the journalists know personally after a

few years on the local beat. A digital tool, a few of the journalists argued, could in this situation be regarded as a kind of overkill when the traditional method to just pick up the phone and call people works in most cases. Yet this was problematised with regards to convergence and increased collaboration across municipal and regional boundaries as local newspapers were bought up and integrated into larger conglomerates where journalists were expected to cover news in several municipalities. Fact-checking thus becomes more important because local knowledge is not enough in such cases. A post-it note on one of the reporters' pinboards next to the phone indicated this, with a list of names of local politicians in neighbouring cities and their political affiliations added in bold style, ready to be glanced at during work beyond the familiar beat.

Several journalists also argued that knowledge and competence regarding advanced fact-checking is unevenly distributed. A few become very knowledgeable through their own efforts. At the same time, they regarded news work as increasingly dependent on people with expert knowledge on digital information and communication. Reporters or managers sometimes travel to pursue further education but turning their newborn skills into concrete application upon their return to the newsroom is rare. On some occasions, experts come to visit and give workshops. These workshops are highly appreciated, but poorly followed up and thus they turn into isolated events. Unless user-friendly, several journalists reckoned, a digital tool might play into the hands of those more skilled members of staff – it will be they who use it and their fact-checking work that appears in the records. In connection to this, some expressed skepticism or concern that a fact-checking tool or assistant would further increase the pressure on the individual journalist, and that an introduction of the tool would mean increased control over the employees from an employer's perspective. One local reporter commented: "Won't there be just more statistics and measurement of our work, just like the measuring of how many clicks my texts generate?"

Conclusion

The field studies presented in this chapter were conducted with a limited group of journalists and during a short period of time and further studies are necessary to produce more solid documentation of enduring patterns and varieties on different levels of analysis. However, the material speaks to several of the issues I pointed at in the literature review. A recurrent theme during my conversations was ambiguity regarding organised forms of fact-checking. Lack of time and technique fatigue can explain a good deal of the reluctance of journalists to take part in the development of The Fact Assistant prototype. But there is also a broader set of aspects of the journalists' work environment which contribute to their hesitation and ambiguity toward the specific form of fact-checking envisaged by the project. To some, the mere suggestion that they need to strengthen their verification competencies provoked their sense of professional integrity. To others, the idea of collecting data on the fact-checks was seen as potentially contributing to enhanced control

and surveillance on a managerial level. Another envisioned risk was that the tool itself, financed partly by state funds, would make journalists increasingly vulnerable to critique posed by antagonistic actors outside of the newsroom, a risk which had previously materialised through earlier fact-checking projects and the public debate that followed. The technical solution in the form of a digital tool, and the potential appropriation of it, is thus considered to be ambiguous and its reception is ambivalent, since it could have applications in several domains: social, professional, and political. In the current complex informational and communicational landscape that journalists are part of, and expected to report on, sustaining journalists' autonomy and authority is a delicate task with remarkable implications for democracy. Taking measures at improving procedures for verification of digital content answers to the ideal of delivering accurate and thoughtful information and analysis, and thus helping to create an enlightened citizenry. Most journalists subscribed to this objective. But just how this should be organised is a more open question and responses to The Fact Assistant model show that journalists are prone to take into consideration the particular ties involved when such measures are taken. If interpreted by their audiences as compromising their autonomy, they would lose their authority to critically scrutinise the powerful.

Notes

- 1 The app is available as open source: <https://github.com/wsaqaf/faktaassistenten>.
- 2 See www.claimreviewproject.com/the-facts-about-claimreview.

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