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Book Review for *Media, Culture & Society*

Lucas Graves, *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-checking in American Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Reading Lucas Graves's scene-setting example of a fierce dispute between the Barack Obama and Mitt Romney campaigns over deceptive claims made in an 'attack ad' broadcast during the 2012 presidential election in the United States, one would be forgiven for feeling a certain pang of nostalgia. Those were the days, we might recall fondly, when the journalistic pursuit of facts seemed relatively straightforward. Relative, that is, to what has transpired since Donald Trump's successful campaign to win the White House in November 2016. Gradually, grudgingly we have become accustomed to coping with the polarising vicissitudes of what some commentators label the 'post-truth' era, where Trump's 'alternative facts' align with 'fake news' to the detriment of even the most rudimentary conditions for open, ethical democratic debate. *The New York Times* (2017) has been painstakingly cataloguing 'nearly every outright lie he has told publicly since taking the oath of office,' providing links to the facts in each case for readers to better understand what's at stake. By its tally, Trump made a demonstrably false statement on at least 20 of his first 40 days in office, and by a broader standard – where misleading statements are counted – he said something untrue, in public, on each of the first 40 days of his presidency. 'There is simply no precedent for an American president to spend so much time telling untruths,' the *Times* observed after the administration's first six months. 'Every president has shaded the truth or told occasional whoppers. No other president – of either party - has behaved as Trump is behaving. He is trying to create an atmosphere in which reality is irrelevant.'

Interestingly for purposes of this review, three of the four sources the *Times* credits with assisting its ongoing cataloguing initiative feature prominently in *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-checking in American Journalism*. Each of the outlets in question, namely Factcheck.org, Politifact and *The Washington Post's* Fact Checker, is recognised as a key driver of a fact-checking movement steadily growing in power and influence (the fourth source cited by the *Times* being the *Toronto Star*). From the book's opening pages, Graves devotes his attention to telling the story of 'a group of journalists inventing a new style of political news, one that seeks to revitalize the "truth seeking" tradition of journalism by holding public figures to account for the things they say' (p. 6). To suggest this kind of political fact-checking represents a new genre is not to deny earlier precedents of form, of course, which he briefly traces back to early nineteenth century periodicals, before national magazines introduced 'full-fledged fact-checking departments' in the 1920s and 1930s. A further dimension of this evolution is the more recent shift from internal to external emphases, that is, from taking aim at the reporter's facts (in order to eliminate untruth) to focus on the claims made by the people being reported on instead. Consistent with this trajectory, the 'new fact-checkers' interrogate 'claims that are *already* in the news and publish the results as a new story,' Graves maintains, effectively inviting journalists to take sides in clashes over facts to say which side is correct (p. 8).

To better understand the factors shaping how and why political fact-checking has become a staple of professional news reporting in the US over the last decade, Graves proceeds to examine shifting institutional norms, values and protocols in all of their uneven, sometimes contradictory complexities within a networked news ecosystem. Not surprisingly, technological change is recognised as an important feature of this processual transformation,

though even more challenging to pinpoint are ‘contemporary ways of knowing,’ by which Graves means how facts in political life typically ‘depend on institutional knowledge-building regimes and now difficult public reasoning becomes when those regimes lose authority’ (p. 10). Rather tellingly, fact-checking journalists strive to buttress their own authority in this regard, namely by recalibrating their practical commitment to objectivity as a guiding ethos. Exploring what should count as objectivity – in part to answer the question of how to separate fact from opinion – becomes a significant theme throughout the book’s enquiry. ‘Like earlier generations of journalistic reformers,’ Graves observes, ‘fact-checkers aim to revise their profession’s reigning ideal in order to defend it’ (p. 21).

Briefly, *Deciding What’s True* – the echo with Herb Gans’s classic text *Deciding What’s News* being intentional – is structured as follows. Chapter One profiles the three news organisations widely considered to be forming the core of the professional reform movement, Factcheck.org (launched in 2003), Politifact and *The Washington Post’s* Fact Checker (both founded in 2007). Each is situated within the unstable fact-checking terrain in order to discern its relative efficacy, while at the same time helping to cast light on how the contested boundaries of legitimate fact-checking are being defined, policed and repaired under pressure from a myriad of external interests. Chapter Two steps back to place these institutional developments within a wider historical context, usefully tracing the emergence of certain epistemological tensions associated with the longer ‘interpretive turn’ in US news in order to show how they continue to complicate current judgements about the acceptable standards of fairness and accuracy in normative terms. Chapters Three and Four delve into everyday newsworld routines – such as decisions over which claims to check, the ‘triangulation of truth’ when claims-makers are in dispute, or how distinctions between literal and implied meaning are negotiated – in order to secure necessary insights into how fact-checkers, individually and collectively, navigate the politicised field of experts and data. Findings drawn from formal and informal interviews prove especially valuable, not least by revealing the lived – and at times fraught – contingencies of journalistic decision-making.

Chapter Five offers a case study revolving around PolitiFact’s ‘Truth-O-Meter,’ which is used to rate factual claims (True, Mostly True, Half True, Mostly False, False, Pants on Fire) with accompanying visual illustration on its website. Here Graves’s personal experience as a participant-observer at PolitiFact fact-checking right-wing radio talk show host Glenn Beck makes for fascinating reading, the public confrontation between the two underscoring why these issues matter in a powerful way. In Chapter Six, fact-checkers’ relationships with their audiences come to the fore, providing a useful check on any easy assumptions about media impact or influence. Recurrently overlaid upon these dynamics are priorities set in motion by other news organisations, particularly high-status ones wielding journalistic authority, which demand near-constant managerial care. Chapter Seven pulls together the threads of the book’s investigation by re-centring objectivity for closer scrutiny, showing how adherence to its tenets can both magnify and yet – crucially – undermine fact-checking’s potential to recast professional journalism’s occupational ideologies. Titled ‘The limits of fact-checking,’ it revisits some of the book’s earlier perspectives by reading them against the grain, affording a certain fact-checking of fact-checking that the reader is certain to appreciate.

There is much to admire in *Deciding What’s True*, a pioneering effort to provide a rigorous, in-depth assessment and critique of the fact-checking movement’s intervention. Evidently informing its discussion are more than two hundred hours of fieldwork and interviews conducted by Graves over a five-year period, yet the resultant wealth of data is consistently handled with nuance, sophistication and self-reflexivity. While I personally may

have been inclined to push its central arguments further, such as by rendering fact-checking's affirmation of the objectivity norm in more critical terms by attending to materialities of class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality embedded in power relations (not least in newsrooms, where uncertainties over facticity can become deeply politicised), there is considerable sensitivity here to the structural imperatives constraining the possibilities for reform. And the need for reform is made readily apparent. Indeed, as highlighted at the outset above, the case for this book's vital relevance is being made every day as Trump's alarming tally of demonstrably false statements continues to rise. 'What happens to a democracy whose citizens not only lose common ground but also take a match to the idea of a common reality?,' *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni (2017) wondered after the administration's first six months. 'Thanks in part to Trump,' he added, 'we may find out.'

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