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Correcting False Information: Journalistic Coverage During the 2016 and 2020 US Elections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines journalistic coverage of false information through a qualitative textual analysis of news about four popular false information cases during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections: The false claims that (1) the Pope endorsed Donald Trump; (2) Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager ran a pedophilia ring in a pizza shop; (3) the 2020 election was fraudulent and stolen; and (4) liberal politicians and celebrities were Satan worshippers and pedophiles. The analysis identified three dimensions of correction of false information in news coverage. The first dimension examined emphasis on the correct rather than false information. This nuanced past research by considering different practices, such as elaborating on correct information and avoiding the inclusion of incorrect information. The second dimension referred to the tone used to correct false information. The adoption of an assertive tone demonstrated journalists' use of their voice to authoritatively correct false information. The third dimension entailed the inclusion of sources, which were used to frame correct information consistently with a diversity of audiences' worldviews. These findings offer a framework to assess journalistic reporting on false information and illuminate strategies to stem its spread.

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News media; false information; United States; coverage; qualitative analysis; correction; debunking

Despite the explosion of research on false information, a significant blind spot has persisted. Scholars have studied deceptive information in terms of its patterns of dissemination (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019; Silverman 2016; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018), exposure rates (Grinberg et al. 2019), effectiveness (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016), and impact—or lack thereof—on politics (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018) and journalism (Carlson 2020). However, few studies have analyzed news coverage of false information itself. That gap matters because false information can be amplified through press coverage, thus eroding trust in news (Ognyanova et al. 2020), polluting information ecosystems (Meel and Vishwakarma 2020), and exploiting emotionality to enhance virality (Ghanem, Rosso, and Rangel 2020; Martel, Pennycook, and Rand 2020).

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This study examines how news media cover false information. We analyze news coverage of four popular false information cases during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections in the US, namely the false claims that (1) the Pope endorsed Donald Trump; (2) Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager ran a pedophilia ring in a pizza shop; (3) the 2020 election was fraudulent and stolen; and (4) liberal politicians and celebrities were Satan worshippers and pedophiles. Our investigation is premised on the idea that researchers must understand how false information is covered before evaluating the effectiveness of correcting tactics and proposing refinements. Following a qualitative analysis, we identified dimensions that should be considered when assessing such coverage: (1) emphasis on the correct or the false information; (2) tone used to correct false information; and (3) sources used to frame evidence supporting correct information in news media coverage. These findings offer a framework to assess journalistic reporting on false information and illuminate strategies to stem its spread.

False Information in News Media Coverage

False information undermines the foundation of democracy, as citizens can unknowingly make decisions based on untruths and unfounded emotional responses (Chan et al. 2017; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Research on false information and related concepts has garnered significant attention in recent years (Freelon and Wells 2020), a stream of scholarship that has overwhelmingly shown detrimental effects to society, politics, and journalism. Scholars have argued that false information pollutes information ecosystems (Meel and Vishwakarma 2020). It disrupts journalistic work by exerting an intermedia agenda-setting effect, influencing what issues news organizations cover (Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2018). Additionally, exposure to false information is related to decreased trust in the press and government (Ognyanova et al. 2020).

The effects of false information can be amplified if and when it infiltrates news media (Van Duyn and Collier 2019). News media coverage of false information contributes to spreading it among audiences that would not be reached otherwise (Patterson 2020; Philips 2018; Silverman 2015; Tsfati et al. 2020). Tsfati et al. (2020) elaborate on why traditional news outlets cover false information cases: (1) journalists perceive that correcting misinformation is their professional duty; (2) fake news stories meet newsworthiness criteria; (3) journalists perceive fake news as an important social problem that should be corrected; and (4) fake news stories fit the journalists' ideological beliefs, which might affect news-making processes as journalists are, like all human beings, subject to confirmation bias (e.g., Patterson and Donsbach 1996). Additionally, as explained by Philips (2018), news coverage of false information can be problematic because journalists tend to lack training in this practice. Consequently, news media efforts to correct false information can backfire (Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

Research examining correction of false information has tended to frame the issue in terms of strategies' effectiveness in limiting public misperceptions, with a focus on presence and placement of correct information relative to false information. One such strategy consists of offering pre-exposure warnings, which allow receivers to "tag" a message as "suspect" before its processing, thus fighting initial expectations of information to be true (Lewandowsky et al. 2012, 116). Similarly, inoculation is a strategy consisting of offering a warning prior to exposure, followed by a rebuttal of the false information

(Jamieson 1992; Roozenbeek et al. 2022). Additionally, experimental research has shown that providing correct information after false information is received can effectively limit misperceptions (Bode and Vraga 2015; 2018), especially when a reputable source is included (Vraga and Bode 2017; 2018). While warning strategies consist of providing correcting information before the false information and debunking strategies consist of providing correcting information after false information is included, another strategy consists of providing correcting information before *and* after the false information. This is known as the truth sandwich (“How to make a ‘truth sandwich,’” 2018; Lakoff and Durán 2018, 8:07; Rosen 2020).

Although presence and placement variables are well conceptualized in experimental and survey research, this study argues that missing qualitative nuance can affect how correcting strategies are assessed and refined in order to prevent undesired effects. Consequently, an examination of news media coverage of false information is necessary to distinguish qualitative dimensions defining how correct information is presented. This study aims to conceptualize qualitative dimensions of correcting information in news media coverage of false information cases.

Conceptual Framework

The present study is informed by the theoretical consideration of news media as an institution. Institutions are defined by shared formal or informal norms, values, and behaviors (Parsons 2007). Based on this approach, normative beliefs and social values shared over time across news organizations underly journalism’s institutional identity and guide journalistic work (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Vos 2018). These shared norms and values shape journalists’ role orientations (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Among them, those concerned with uncovering the truth, shedding light on falsities, and correcting them, demonstrate the shared value that public access to factual information is necessary for the functioning of democracies (Jamieson and Waldman 2004; Tsfati et al. 2020). These normative beliefs and social values underlying role orientations can be narrated discursively by journalists or expressed through practice (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Vos 2018). In this case, the aforementioned role orientations are practiced through the journalistic work of correcting false information in news coverage. While these role orientations do not necessarily apply to journalism worldwide (Hanitzsch et al. 2019), they are relevant for US journalistic coverage (e.g., Jamieson and Waldman 2004).

Based on this theoretical approach, we consider that, US’ news media, as an institution sharing a cohesive set of beliefs and values guiding the practice of correcting false information in news coverage, should operate similarly across organizations. Underlying this expectation is the assumption that where journalistic correction is present in news coverage, the practice is guided by this shared set of norms and values. Therefore, for this study’s purposes, instances of correction of false information present in coverage by a diverse sample of outlets and media are examined globally, as opposed to by individual outlet, to shed light onto how false information can be corrected by the news media as an institution.

The consideration of the news media as an institution is relevant for case selection as well, as the most popular false information cases surrounding the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections (i.e., those examined in this study) focused on stories that benefitted

Donald Trump over his political opponents. Specifically, for 2016, we selected the false story that Pope Francis endorsed Trump (the “Pope case”), which drove the most engagement on Facebook three months before the 2016 election (Silverman 2016). Additionally, we selected the false claim that Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager ran a pedophilia ring in a pizza shop. This case, also known as “pizzagate,” drove broad coverage from mainstream media even before it resulted in a shooting in said pizza shop (Al-Rawi 2019; Gillin 2016; Tsfati et al. 2020). For 2020, we selected the false claim that the presidential election was fraudulent and stolen (the “Stop the Steal” case) (Funke 2020) and the false story that liberal politicians and celebrities were Satan worshippers and pedophiles (the “QAnon case”), linked to the QAnon conspiracy theory (Drobnic Holan 2020). Despite news outlets’ ideological leanings, based on our institutional approach, we expect to find correcting strategies employed by journalists across media. In that vein, it is important to consider that most US news outlets conduct fact-checks internally or in partnership with external organizations (Graves 2016).

We selected cases that were most popular on fact-checking sites, social and mainstream media, and/or which had highest sociopolitical impact as estimated by previous research (Al-Rawi 2019; Drobnic Holan 2016; Funke 2020; Funke and Sanders 2020; Gillin 2016; Silverman 2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016; Valverde 2020) to assure ample news media coverage. While some suggest deliberation at the root of some of these cases (e.g., Silverman and Alexander 2016), their popularity complicates the task of discerning publics’ intention when sharing related information. Therefore, we describe them as false information cases instead of disinformation or misinformation, the intentional or unintentional spread of false information, respectively (Wardle 2017). We recognize that popular cases of false information might have been reported on differently than those less prominent. However, our goal was to maximize our chances of finding instances of journalistic correction.

In sum, an institutional theoretical approach allows us to conduct a qualitative exploration to identify dimensions present in correction of false information in coverage, across US news media and cases of false information. As seen above, previous literature on correction of false information has been largely quantitative, the next section explains the focus and contributions of this qualitative inquiry.

Correcting False Information

The foregoing literature on correction of false information suggests that presence and placement of correct information relative to false information can play an important role in enhancing the correction’s effectiveness. However, this stream of research also suggests that interventions to correct false information can backfire, thus resulting in opposite effects (Lakoff 2014; Lewandowsky et al. 2012; van der Meer, Hameleers, and Ohme 2023).

Emphasis

Continued influence effects take place when audiences persistently rely on false information despite being exposed to correct information (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Additionally, according to Lewandowsky et al. (2012), familiarity backfire effects take place when, in an effort to correct false information, the latter is emphasized (i.e.,

through repetition), triggering the audience's thought-elaboration and thus making successful debiasing less likely. Because emphasizing the false information strengthens the audience's neural synapses, it entrenches the inaccurate beliefs, complicating their correction (Chan et al. 2017; Lakoff 2014; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Furthermore, Van Duyn and Collier's (2019) experimental study shows that discourse about false information in news can decrease audiences' accuracy in distinguishing false from correct information.

To avoid these undesired effects, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) suggest that repetition of false information should be avoided. Additionally, the authors recommend emphasizing the correct over the false information. Emphasizing the correct information by providing an alternative narrative can be effective to correct false information (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). In order to enhance its correcting effectiveness, the alternative information provided must be plausible, coherent, sufficiently detailed, easy to understand, identified and presented as correct, and consistent with pre-existing information (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Schwarz et al. 2007; van den Broek 2010). While Lewandowsky et al. (2012) reveal that providing an alternative narrative is particularly effective because it fills the gaps left by a simple retraction, this strategy is only applicable when such an alternative explanation, in fact, exists.

Given the literature reviewed above and drawing from an institutional approach to journalism, we expect that the news media will aim to emphasize correct information over false information in their coverage of false information cases. However, how to emphasize correct information, while avoiding the reinforcement of the false information, remains unclear. For that reason, we further specify this study's goal of conceptualizing qualitative dimensions of correcting information in news media coverage of false information cases with the following research question:

RQ1: How is correct information emphasized over false information by the news media in their coverage of false information cases?

The cases selected for analysis provide an appropriate venue to address this research question. For instance, while the Pope case offers a clear opportunity for straightforward correction, it lacks an alternative correct narrative, as nothing close to the Pope endorsing Donald Trump ever happened. In contrast, the Stop the Steal case, while also built around false information, namely that the 2020 election was stolen, might have required additional clarification regarding the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the election.

Tone

False information dissemination often relies on emotional appeals to drive traffic (Ghanem, Rosso, and Rangel 2020; Bakir and McStay 2018). Emotion elicited by false information can be exploited to foster its circulation (Martel, Pennycook, and Rand 2020). Importantly, emotion can also be crucial in the effectiveness of correcting strategies, as audiences' reliance on emotion can increase their acceptance and endorsement of false information (Martel, Pennycook, and Rand 2020). Emotions' arousal levels and valence can result in different types of cognitive processing depending on the motivations they activate (Chen, Duckworth, and Chaiken 1999). For instance, anxiety might trigger accuracy-motivated processing, by which audiences will consider all relevant information, while anger might trigger defense-motivated processing, by which audiences will

prioritize information that is consistent with their previously-held beliefs (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, and Chen 1996; Chen, Duckworth, and Chaiken 1999). Hence, Van Duyn and Collier (2019, 43) prescribe “linguistic caution” for news organizations covering false information, as framing the discussion about its prevalence and the gravity of its consequences can result in increased distrust in news. Still, emotion may be strategically used in correcting strategies. For instance, among other recommendations, Jamieson (1992:, 112) proposes that responding to illegitimate political attacks using false information by “taking umbrage” can limit the public’s misperceptions.

In journalistic settings, correction of false information is often referred to as fact-checking, namely the task of internally or externally verifying news content before or after publication (Graves 2016). To some extent, fact-checks differ from the understanding of journalism as neutral in that, beyond describing reality, they explicitly evaluate the accuracy of information and claim to represent facts (Graves 2016; Tsfaty et al. 2020). Further, Graves (2016) characterizes fact-checking as a journalistic style, especially relevant for political news, articulated around the normative value of revealing the truth. As put by Graves (2016:, 12): “fact-checking continues a decades-long turn toward more assertive, analytical reporting that claims the authority to interpret politics for readers.” Thus, the fact-checking style is characterized by journalists’ use of their own voice to actively and openly challenge false information in news in an assertive tone.

While some approaches to journalism may eschew emotion, especially if journalism is understood as analytical and neutral, research shows that news media condemned false information in 2016 (Carlson 2020). Given the literature reviewed above and drawing from an institutional approach to journalism, we expect that the news media will aim to use journalists’ voices to correct false information. To shed light on how they can do so, we focus on tone, understood as the sentiment or emotional content of a text (Young and Soroka 2012), in this case, news coverage. Thus, we ask:

RQ2: How is tone used by the news media to correct false information in their coverage of false information cases?

The cases selected for analysis offer an opportunity to address this research question. Including cases in 2016 and 2020 allowed us to capture possible changes in tone over time, especially considering that the Pizzagate case was a foundational antecedent to the QAnon case. This is relevant considering the salience of the topic in popular, academic, and journalistic discourse (Carlson 2020; Freelon and Wells 2020), as well as the increasing influence of the fact-checking movement on American journalism over these years (Graves 2016).

Evidence Framing

Lewandowsky et al. (2012) bring attention to the important role of audiences’ worldview in the effective correction of false information. For example, if correct information contradicts one’s worldview, it can backfire by strengthening beliefs in the false information (Chen, Duckworth, and Chaiken 1999; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Lewandowsky et al. (2012) highlight the important role of political ideology in preventing the correction of consistent false information when it comes to public and political affairs. Similarly, audiences might endorse and circulate false information that is perceived to advance their political goals while giving less importance to the veracity of its content (Huddy and

Bankert 2017). In that sense, Graves (2016) highlights the complicated yet crucial task of fact-checking journalism in negotiating and ultimately deciding what constitutes truth at times when consensus is rare, as seen in recent decades marked by media fragmentation and political polarization in the US. This is particularly important for American journalists, as trust in news has grown divided along partisan lines (Gottfried and Liedke 2021; Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Mitchell et al. 2014).

Van Duyn and Collier's (2019) research suggests that decreased accuracy in distinguishing false from correct information caused by exposure to discourse about false information is not necessarily significantly affected by ideology, nor cues about source partisanship. However, generalized trends of declining trust in news in the US (Newman et al. 2022) as well as backfire effects linked to external fact-checking (Carson et al. 2022; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2018), can contribute to undermining journalists' authority to correct false information. To prevent this, it might be useful to consider Lewandowsky et al.'s (2012) recommended best practice of framing evidence consistently with audiences' worldview.

Given the literature reviewed above and drawing from an institutional approach to journalism, we expect that the news media will aim to use evidence and sources to frame correct information in a manner that is consistent or avoids clashing with diverse audiences' worldviews. Importantly, the four cases selected for analysis favored Donald Trump, an ideological asymmetry that mirrors false information dissemination patterns broadly (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Graves 2016). Consequently, the analysis was conducted from an understanding of worldviews centered around political ideology and partisanship. Moreover, given the ideological asymmetry of the false information cases examined, this involved examining the framing of correct information in a way that avoids clashing with a conservative worldview specifically. In this vein, our third research question asks:

RQ3: How is evidence framed by the news media to avoid clashing with a conservative ideology in their coverage of false information cases that favor this worldview?

Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of news media coverage of four cases of false information surrounding the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections to examine emphasis, tone, and framing of evidence in correcting strategies used by the news media. In order to draw conclusions aligned with our theoretical consideration of news media as an institution, we conducted a sampling strategy that included the main actors in the US media ecosystem. Beyond reach and social relevance, we did not have theoretical reasons to include or exclude any particular outlet. Thus, our sample included a range of US media and outlets, namely national newspapers (The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post), broadcast transcripts (NBC, ABC, CBS, PBS, NPR) and cable news transcripts (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News). While this sample cannot possibly encompass all journalistic coverage of the selected false information cases, these outlets have wide reach and visibility in the US and have been used in previous research examining news coverage about false information (e.g., Carlson 2020). Such a sample allowed for the identification of qualitative dimensions

which were prominent in news media coverage of false information cases during the 2016 and 2020 elections.

Prior to sampling, we defined the queries used to search in the Factiva database through an iterative process consisting of inspecting the results retrieved and refining the search terms. The queries can be found in the Supplementary Online File. We built our sample from archived news media coverage published or aired between September 1 and January 31 of both years, 2016 and 2020. This period was selected to capture the time leading up to and after the elections, with the exception of the Stop the Steal case, which we set to start on November 3, with the vote count for the 2020 US presidential election. We used stratified random sampling at the outlet level for each case to select an approximate 10% of the stories in each news media outlet (52 news stories for the Pope case, 77 for the Pizzagate case, 75 for the Stop the Steal case, and 45 for the QAnon case) (more information about sample sizes can be found in Tables A-D of the Supplementary Online File). This allowed us to build a sample that was manageable for an in-depth qualitative analysis. Although we did not expect differences by outlet, selecting a sample including the main news media in the US allowed us to draw conclusions from the practice of correcting false information by the news media generally, consistent with our institutional approach.

Upon sampling, and prior to the qualitative analysis, we conducted a quantitative content analysis to assure that the stories analyzed included false information pertaining to one of the selected cases, as well as corrections. We performed several rounds of training, including joint and individual coding, debriefing sessions, and iterative codebook refining. Ultimately, we achieved excellent inter-coder reliability for presence of false information (Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.98) and presence of corrections in the news story (Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.95). Therefore, we are confident that we identified situations in which journalistic correction was present.

The qualitative analysis was informed by previous research highlighting the importance of emphasis over correct or false information, tone, and framing of evidence in news coverage. The analysis was conducted manually and followed the steps of (1) data immersion; (2) first cycle coding; and (3) second cycle coding (Saldaña 2013; Tracy 2013). For the first cycle coding phase, taking our research-based considerations into account, we used descriptive coding to compile a list of themes in the data, which corresponded with correcting strategies present in the data. For the second cycle coding phase, guided by our research questions, we grouped the codes into three categories, which organize our findings section: (1) emphasis, (2) tone, and (3) evidence framing.

Findings

Our qualitative analysis examined the main qualitative dimensions of correcting strategies that the main US news media outlets used to report on false information surrounding the 2016 and 2020 US elections.

Emphasis

This dimension stems from the consideration that journalistic coverage can emphasize correct or false information, and that emphasizing false information can entrench beliefs and complicate their correction (Chan et al. 2017; Lakoff 2014; Lewandowsky

et al. 2012). The qualitative analysis revealed that, in covering false information, journalists placed varying degrees of emphasis on correct and false information. Emphasis on correct information was achieved by focusing or only reporting on true events, like the shooting at the pizza parlor resulting from the Pizzagate case, or on Donald Trump's refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election, without repeating the false information regarding pedophilia and fraud, respectively. Emphasis on the correct information was also reflected in paraphrasing and avoiding false information repetition. This was achieved for example by being vague when referring to false information without further elaboration:

Meanwhile, Trump's transition team is in damage control tonight. His national security adviser pick, Michael Flynn, and Flynn's son are both under fire for pushing conspiracy theories online, which include spreading a story which was not true about a DC pizza parlor where a gunman opened fire. (Pizzagate Case, 2016, NPR)

Conversely, news coverage emphasized false information when it encompassed false information repetition and/or elaboration. For instance, the news coverage emphasized false information by including it literally (e.g., Donald Trump's false tweets about the election) or commenting and debating about it.

Yeah, I'll read it to you. Quote, "If you count the legal votes, I easily win the election. If you count the illegal and late votes, they can steal the election from us," exclamation point, end quote. So, so obviously that's not true. These are not illegal votes that are being counted. We've said it repeatedly, ad nauseam. I'm not gonna get into all of that again. (Stop the Steal Case, 2020, ABC)

Emphasizing false over correct information also included repeating false information with none or minimal information correcting it. This practice contradicts the recommendation of emphasizing correct information by providing it in a detailed, coherent, plausible manner, and identified as such, as an alternative to false information (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Schwarz et al. 2007; van den Broek 2010). As expected, following this recommendation for the Pope case proved complicated, as the endorsement simply did not happen. Regarding the Stop the Steal case, which arguably required additional clarification regarding the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the 2020 election (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), the best practice was followed with variable fidelity, as seen in the examples below, all found in coverage by the same news outlet:

Pope Francis shocks the world, endorses Donald Trump for president. Fake. (Pope Case, 2016, ABC)

Police say a man with a gun in his car and paperwork on "stop the steal," the false claims about the election ... (Stop the Steal Case, 2020, ABC)

We saw the campaign just a few minutes ago send out an email to supporters saying we must protect the integrity of this election. And then we saw a number of tweets from President Trump himself today saying this over the course of the last few days, George [Stephanopoulos]. But I have to say it again, there is nothing illegal, nothing wrong about these votes being counted. This is the democratic system working as it should. It's supposed to take this long given the historic nature of the pandemic that we're living in right now. (Stop the Steal Case, 2020, ABC)

Similarly, news reporting about false information tended to use the cases included in this study as examples. This was especially the case for the Pope and Pizzagate cases, which

illustrated false information dissemination in 2016, as well as the QAnon case, which was prominently referred to as a broader conspiracy theory. The inclusion of these cases as examples without accompanying specific correcting information, arguably contributed to emphasizing false over correct information.

And so, here is an example, Jim. Business insider compiled a list of the top fake news stories of this election cycle. And among them are stories about President Obama banning the pledge of allegiance, cutting support from veterans, a story about the Pope endorsing Donald Trump. (Pope Case, 2016, NBC)

Some 1% of Democrats and 5% of Republicans have a favorable view of the loosely organized, conspiracy-promoting group, many of whose believe an international cabal is scheming against Trump. (QAnon Case, 2020, WSJ)

There were multiple images about QAnon, the conspiracy theory that believed a cabal of Democrats and wealthy elites are secretly running a child sex trafficking ring, one that President Trump has been quietly working to destroy. (QAnon Case, 2020, PBS)

Further, the correct and false information were at times placed in conversation with one another. This practice appeared to equate truth and falsity to opposing sides, creating the impression of a false debate and implicitly giving the same credence to correct and false information. Although this was not a dominant theme in the data, it is important to note that false balance has been proven to be detrimental in correcting false information (e.g., Boykoff and Boykoff 2004) and is rejected by fact-checkers (Graves 2016).

(Soundbite of archived recording). Joe Biden: Democracy is sometimes messy. It sometimes requires a little patience as well.

Shapiro: The process is working, he said. A bit later at the White House, President Trump delivered a tirade full of false claims, accusing Democrats of trying to steal the election.

(Soundbite of archived recording). President Donald Trump: We were winning in all the key locations by a lot, actually, and then our numbers started miraculously getting whittled away in secret.

Shapiro: This election is a test of American democracy, and we're going to look now at whether the United States is passing that test with two guests. (Stop the Steal Case, 2020, NPR)

Tone

This dimension refers to emotional linguistic markers present in journalistic correction of false information. The examination of tone stems from the consideration that emotion can play an important role in false information acceptance and dissemination (Chen, Duckworth, and Chaiken 1999; Ghanem, Rosso, and Rangel 2020; Bakir and McStay, 2018), and that an assertive tone is encompassed in the fact-checking journalistic style to correct false information (Graves 2016). There were different degrees of assertiveness present in the data based on the tone used by journalists. In the example below, the reporter not only calls the Pizzagate story "false" but "utterly" so, and not only qualifies it as a "lie" but an "egregious and deliberate" one. This kind of language, as well as other words indicating assertiveness and determination (e.g., "decisively," "totally," "complete," etc.) were used to establish the lack of credibility given to particular false information cases, suggesting a definitive falseness without any doubt.

It's an utterly false story about child abuse here at this restaurant, linking the names of Hillary Clinton, her campaign manager John Podesta, and the owner, an egregious and deliberate lie. (Pizzagate Case, 2016, ABC)

And while I don't think that Donald Trump thinks he is going to pull it off, he is trying to keep his options [open]. And one of the options he would like to keep open is to literally steal an election by claiming that the Democratic Party has stolen an election. It's a pervasive, unpatriotic lie[s] ... (Stop the Steal Case, 2020, Fox)

Many of those who believe the totally unfounded conspiracies and prophecies of QAnon expected January 20th to be Judgment Day. (QAnon Case, 2020, NBC)

Redundancy additionally reflected assertiveness in correcting false information. News coverage included synonyms to convey and reinforce a piece of information's false nature. In the example below, it was repeated that QAnon was a conspiracy theory and that their claims were fantasies. This is similar to the truth sandwich explained above ("How to make a "truth sandwich"," 2018; Lakoff and Durán 2018, 8:07; Rosen 2020). However, the redundancy or repetition can take place only before (like in the example below) or only after the false information is introduced.

YouTube on Thursday became the latest social media to take steps to stop QAnon, the sprawling conspiracy theory community whose online fantasies about a cabal of satanic pedophiles running the world have spilled over into offline violence. (QAnon Case, 2020, The New York Times)

Assertiveness was combined with the use of emotionally intense subjective or opinion-based terms. For instance, terms like "wild," "bogus," "insane," "ridiculous," "cult," "lunacy," and "scandal" were used in reporting about the Pizzagate and QAnon false information cases:

And, of course, it seems not just false but ridiculous, absurd to allege that Hillary Clinton is running a child sex ring out of a pizza joint in northwest DC But this guy believed it. (Pizzagate Case, 2016, MSNBC—although by a journalist affiliated with USA Today)

[Trump]'s clearly not condemning this conspiracy theory. The president of the United States actually encouraging a totally insane movement ... (QAnon Case, 2020, CNN)

As seen above, an assertive tone as well as emotionally intense subjective language were employed in both years, and across cases, including for coverage of the Pizzagate and QAnon cases. However, the analysis unearthed another linguistic difference across time: the 2016 false information cases, but not those in 2020, were called "fake news." This suggests that journalists effectively reflected on and responded to a weaponization of the term by political elites, most notably Donald Trump (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Funke 2017; Habgood-Coote 2018; Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

After the election, Hillary Clinton supporters decried the proliferation of fake news on Facebook — made-up stories about the pope endorsing Trump and such. (Pope Case, 2016, Washington Post)

"Pizzagate" started on the internet shortly before Election Day when right-wing sites that make up fake news spread rumors that Hillary Clinton was involved in a child sex trafficking ring in DC. (Pizzagate Case, 2016, CBS)

Alternatively, labeling information as "misleading," "unproven," "alleged," and using language suggesting a lack of evidence illustrated a lower degree of assertiveness in

the tone used to correct false information, compared to describing information as false or a lie. For instance, in the first example below, it is unclear whether the false article claiming the Pope's endorsement of Trump is false or misleading (or fantastical), despite the qualitative difference between these terms. In the second example, QAnon is labeled a conspiracy theory and the false information is repeated following a cautionary "without evidence" warning:

Such claims became increasingly unsustainable amid reports that News Feed and Trending Topics, two core Facebook products, had promoted a number of false, misleading and fantastical political stories, such as an article saying Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump, which was shared by over 100,000 users. (Pope Case, 2016, Washington Post)

QAnon is a sprawling conspiracy theory that claims without evidence that a group of Satan worshipping members of the deep state are plotting to destroy President Trump and establish world domination. (QAnon Case, 2020, CNN)

Another example of lack of assertiveness in the tone used to correct false information includes the use of quotes repeating the false information without further explanation or debiasing other than its attribution to a source external to the outlet:

For months, Ms. Ward has sent out fund-raising appeals talking about what she calls the "stolen" election. (Stop the Steal Case, 2020, The New York Times)

While the use of quotes provides some distance between the journalists and those endorsing the false information, it falls short from demonstrating the journalists' own voice in authoritatively distinguishing correct from false information, a recognized element of fact-checking (Graves 2016).

Evidence Framing

Analyzing how evidence was framed in the news coverage of false information involved examining the inclusion and use of particular sources to support the correct information and/or refute the false information. This dimension stems from the consideration that partisanship plays a role in US publics' trust in news (Gottfried and Liedke 2021; Jurkowitz et al. 2020; Mitchell et al. 2014), thus further complicating journalists' correction of belief-confirming, albeit false, information. Furthermore, this dimension was informed by Lewandowsky et al.'s (2012) recommendation of framing evidence supporting correct information in a way that avoids clashing with audiences' ideology, especially when the false information is consistent with said ideology. Furthermore, the authors highlight the importance of source selection to achieve this goal (113).

The news media coverage analyzed included external evidence disproving the false information such as witnesses and official sources, which could be particularly compelling for audiences who distrust the news. This dimension was not a prominent theme in the data, although it was most notable in the Pizzagate and QAnon cases. For example, the owner of the DC pizza parlor at the center of the Pizzagate case was used as a source offering first-hand evidence disproving the false story.

[Pizza parlor owner, James Alefantis]: "These stories are completely and entirely false. What happened today demonstrates that promoting false and reckless conspiracy theories do come with consequences." (Pizzagate, 2016, CBS)

None of the wildly accusatory claims are true. Alefantis told the Times that he asked Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, YouTube and the FBI to help him stop the spread of the conspiracy theory, which uses photos of his friends and staff's own kids as "evidence". (Pizzagate, 2016, Washington Post)

In that sense, governmental organizations, the police, and the FBI were also included as evidence supporting the correcting information:

The false theory that spurred Welch to action — that a child sex ring tied to Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton and campaign chairman John Podesta was operating beneath Comet Ping Pong— spread through Twitter, 4chan and Reddit, and was magnified on Infowars by talk-show host Alex Jones. People came to refer to it by the hashtag "Pizzagate." The FBI and DC police assessed the claims and determined them to be false, according to a DC police spokesman and a federal law enforcement official. (Pizzagate, 2016, Washington Post)

The theory claims there is a deep [state] within the US government that is controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles and that President Donald Trump is trying to take them down. [...] And now the FBI has warned that conspiracy theories like QAnon could very likely motivate criminal, sometimes violent activity in the US. (QAnon, 2020, CNN)

This is important given that, first, the false information cases analyzed were biased in favor of Donald Trump; second, trust in most news outlets is particularly low among Republicans (Gottfried and Liedke 2021); and third, framing evidence consistently with audiences' worldview can enhance the effectiveness of the correcting strategy. Thus, including evidence provided by, for instance, law enforcement, which is a source particularly well regarded and trusted among conservative publics (e.g., Brown 2017), might support the correction of false information in news coverage.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explains how US news media addressed false information surrounding the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections. Although false information was often accompanied by correcting information, the literature suggests that this might not be sufficient for effective debiasing (Chan et al. 2017; Lakoff 2014; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). In that sense, a qualitative analysis examined the dimension of emphasis, which nuanced past research by adding the consideration of varying degrees of focus on the correct, rather than the incorrect, information. For example, news reports referred to a false information case and provided correct data, without repeating false information. This is important because such a strategy can contribute to limiting the audiences' misperceptions (Lakoff 2014; Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

The analysis further explored the dimension of tone, referring to the emotional linguistic markers present in journalistic correction of false information. While we agree with Carlson et al.'s (2021, 179) proposed departure from journalistic "detached objectivity" as a path forward to avoid important consequences of diminished journalistic relevance such as widespread false information, our research suggests that journalistic coverage of false information in recent years was more diverse than it may often be assumed, at times following but at times departing from objectivity norms. In terms of following objectivity norms, the analysis uncovered the practice of false balance, namely equating correct and

false information behind the impression of a two-sided debate, which is traditionally associated with the objectivity ideal in American journalism (Schudson 2001).

However, the analysis also revealed that assertiveness was a prominent feature of the tone used in the correction of false information in news coverage. Hence, the use of an assertive tone demonstrated a distancing from neutrality and an embrace of the fact-checking journalistic style marked by journalists' use of their own voice to authoritatively correct false information (Graves 2016). Assertiveness can be related to research suggesting that journalists perceive correcting false information as their responsibility, understand this mission as a fight, and relatedly tend to condemn false information spread as an informational moral panic (Carlson 2020; Tsfati et al. 2020).

Additionally, the analysis identified the inclusion of emotionally intense subjective terms to further qualify the false information (e.g., ridiculous). Importantly, while the use of such terms might contribute to stronger assertiveness in correcting strategies, it could also backfire based on four potential reasons. First, these terms might not be clear in indicating a story's lack of truth. For example, an event can be wild or scandalous, yet true. Second, this subjective language might provide an interpretive framework by which true and false are perceived as opinions instead of facts. This, in turn, can complicate future correcting efforts. Third, audience members might apply these adjectives to believers of the false information (e.g., insane), which in turn might contribute to the politicization of particular false information cases, ultimately stirring the conversation towards matters of political identity over fact-based information. Finally, these terms might also draw audiences' attention, emphasizing false information and thus contributing to its dissemination based on its shock and emotional value (e.g., Ghanem, Rosso, and Rangel 2020; Martel, Pennycook, and Rand 2020).

Relatedly, although not very prominent in the data, our qualitative analysis showed the use of first-hand evidence and sources disproving the false information to frame evidence consistently with a diversity of audiences' worldviews, including the presumably most skeptical publics. Although partisan divides in media trust have widened in recent years in the US (Gottfried and Liedke 2021), providing external sources holds the potential to be a remarkable strategy in a situation of low trust in news, especially if these have authority across the ideological spectrum. Moreover, experimental research suggests that providing correcting information endorsed by a reputable source after the false information is repeated can be an effective correcting strategy (Bode and Vraga 2015, 2018; Vraga and Bode 2017, 2018).

The dimensions examined by the qualitative analysis—namely emphasis, tone, and evidence framing parallel the modern fact-checking movement—the exercise of elaborating, interpreting, and selecting sources of evidence with a goal, which conflicts with notions of detached objectivity, as it intends not to describe the world, but to provide audiences with factually correct information (Graves 2016; Tsfati et al. 2020). This study provided a high-level analysis of false information news coverage in the US to understand how journalists have reported on false information at politically crucial times. However, such an exploratory study does not come without limitations. Below we outline three main ones, as well as related future research directions that stand to benefit from our contributions.

First, our goal to include the most relevant outlets, media, and false information cases in our analysis came at the cost of sacrificing complexity in terms of trends for individual

outlets and stories. This limited our confidence in advancing conclusions at the outlet level. We encourage future research expanding the sample and developing a codebook for a quantitative content analysis to measure the frequency of the dimensions identified as well as to allow comparisons between outlets.

Second, a question that arises from our study relates to journalists' perspectives. For instance, our findings suggest that the term "fake news" was used in coverage of false information cases in 2016, while it was virtually absent in the 2020 news coverage. Notably, the relevance of false information after the 2016 US election led to a journalistic and scholarly reckoning around the negative consequences of repeating the term "fake news," namely a generalized decrease of trust in news (Funke 2017; Habgood-Coote 2018; Van Duyn and Collier 2019), as well as the weaponization of the term against journalists by political elites (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). This is important because it suggests that journalists reacted and refined their strategies to report on false information cases from one election cycle to the following one. Future research could explore journalists' viewpoints, with a focus on changing newsroom norms, internal discussions and trainings.

Third, while this study provided a review of coverage by mainstream US news outlets to report on false information, an assessment of these strategies' correcting effectiveness was out of scope. Based on literature examining false information and correcting strategies (e.g., Bode and Vraga 2015, 2018; Vraga and Bode 2017, 2018), we encourage future research to test the effectiveness of the strategies revealed inductively in this study.

In conclusion, this study offers a set of qualitative dimensions of correcting strategies in news media coverage of the most popular false information cases by mainstream news outlets in the US surrounding the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. As false information runs rampant across the globe, trust in news is exceptionally low, and these phenomena are weaponized against journalists (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Newman et al. 2022), this work advances understanding and recognition of the challenges stemming from this cycle, in hopes of informing future research grounded in patterns of journalistic coverage.

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