Chapter 13

Combating Fake News Online: Turkish Fact-Checking Services

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ABSTRACT

In today’s post-truth environment, besides the increase in political polarization, the rapid spread of fake news infringes on society. In the struggle with fake news, fact-checking services have begun to play an important role. The aim of this chapter is to highlight how fact-checking services work, what their strategies and limitations are, their interaction with users, and the digital tools they use in such interactions. Thus, the platforms Teyit.org (Confirmation) and Doğruluk Payı (Share of Truth) that operate in Turkey have been chosen as exemplary cases. In the study, the content analysis and the in-depth interview methodological approaches have been used together. As a conclusion, it has been revealed that these aforementioned fact-checking services increase their activities during election times, adopt the principles of political impartiality and economic transparency, use the practices of data journalism, interact with users, and try to create a digital literacy ecosystem as an ultimate goal.

INTRODUCTION

In the post-truth age, where emotions and personal beliefs have started to overtake objective reality when it comes to shaping public opinion, people tend to use information that supports their own position and reject or overlook it if it does not (McIntyre, 2018). This causes political and ideological polarization to intensify and, as a result, leaves facts and truth on the back burner. The fact that people are trapped in social media’s echo chambers, where one person cannot hear the other, poses a threat to the maintenance of transparent communications environments and democratic culture itself. In the digital media environment, where disinformation and fake news are a serious topic of discussion, independent and non-profit fact-checking services have been gaining prominence globally. Through the strategies and practices that these services implement, and by using digital data, software, technology, and the fundamental methods of journalism these services are active in a wide range of areas from questioning traditional media

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and politicians to including citizens in the news production process (Wintersieck, 2017; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018).

In this respect, the aims of the study could be summarized as to: a) highlight the working-styles and strategies of fact-checking services as well as the digital tools they utilize, b) understand how these platforms communicate and interact with users/society in terms of combating fake news, c) highlight the role these platforms have in increasing the digital literacy level of citizens as well as the limitations they face, all within Turkey, where political polarization is intensely experienced (Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Esmer, 2019).

In order to reach these aims, a three-stage methodological approach has been adopted. Firstly, a comprehensive literature review was carried out with the terms post-truth, fake news and fact-checking services. Thus, the Reuters Institute, the Edelman Trust Barometer, Teyit.org, and the European Union Commission’s latest reports were scanned in terms of trust/distrust towards social media, fake news and precautions taken against these issues. In the second stage, a content analysis was carried out on the websites of Turkey’s two most popular fact-checking platforms: “Teyit.org” (Confirmation) and “Doğruluk Payı” (Share of Truth). Thus, the topics that these platforms focus on, the methodology that they follow in the fact-checking process, and the ways in which they present fact-checking analyses to readers were revealed. The statements and interviews of the founders and editors of these platforms were also scanned. Lastly, an interview request was sent to “Teyit.org” and “DP” via email. In-depth interviews were carried out with the 3 people (Teyit.org editor, Teyit.org writer, and DP writer) that accepted the request. These interviews explored the aims and operations of fact-checking services, journalism practices, ways of combating fake news in a post-truth world and the limitations of these services. The reason why this method was chosen was to gather data that included more detailed and subjective experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006) and to support the literature review and content analysis of the study.

BACKGROUND

Fake News and Social Media

The negative effects that may be caused by the spread of misinformation within a society are not a new phenomenon. Even in ancient Greece, Thucydides observed that truth could be used to manipulate public opinion (Garrett, 2011). News that is twisted or made up can be seen in the oldest journalism practices. Moreover, in times of social crises, anxiety, conflict, and transformation, this kind of news intensifies (Kiernan, 2017). One of the oldest examples of this in the press is the 1835 news article called the “Great Moon Hoax,” which the New York Sun newspaper published, and which claimed that “life was found on the moon” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, pp. 214). Just as lying and twisting facts in communication between people is as old as rhetoric, large scale propaganda and misinformation are as old as persuasion campaigns using modern mass communication tools.

With the Internet becoming a widespread part of people’s social lives, it has been stated that manipulation, online gossip, and deception could increase in tandem with the quick spread of information (Ayres, 1999; Katz, 1998). The thing that is different in today’s world is that, because of digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which are dominant, based on interaction, and which serve as places where anyone can produce content, false information can be spread more quickly and to a wider audience than ever before (Waisbord, 2018). With social media and advanced digital tools coming into play, the phenomenon