

## WJEC 2022 Online Conference

### Expert reports

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#### *Journalism Education in the Age of Misinformation*

Alexandra Wake, with the assistance of Gordon Farrer  
& Sonny Thomas, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia  
alex.wake@rmit.edu.au

Chair: Nico Drok

Expert: Alexandra Wake

Rapporteur: Sonia Virginia Moreira

**Abstract:** Intentional misinformation is a strategy that has been used for centuries as an instrument of disputing power and convincing the public opinion in favour of a particular idea or a project. In the current stage of widespread infodemia, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the journalistic field as a potential fair mediator of these issues. This stream seeks to capture information about what is currently being taught in journalism programmes across the world, discuss challenges and opportunities for journalism students, and discuss ways journalism educators can help the public and the industry deal with misinformation and disinformation.

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

(Thomas Gradgrind, in Charles Dicken's 1854 classic *Hard Times*).

Although there is nothing new about facts, nor the desire for journalists to impart them, the sub-discipline of fact checking has only recently been increasingly embraced as a journalistic practice in a post-truth world. Fact-checking has become a global industry, with more than 353 fact-checking outlets in 102 countries operating in 70 languages (Stencel and Luther, 2021). According to the Duke Reporters' Lab, half of the world's fact checkers are associated with media outlets, but there are also 26 affiliated with academic institutions. Some have multiple affiliations. Fact checking is now being included in journalism courses at universities and in professional settings. This expert paper brings together some insights from a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Journalism Education Council (WJEC) roundtable event 'Fact Check and Verification as Core Journalism Curriculum' hosted by RMIT University in 2021, alongside relevant literature exploring the nature and presence of fact-check based education approaches.

This paper uses “fact checking” in a way that acknowledges that it can be a catch-all term for a range of practices that often quite distinct in focus, intent and output. These include: political fact-checking (a practice that checks the accuracy of statements made by public figures after they have entered public discourse); more general fact checking of non-journalistic content (such as blog posts, tweets, “fake news” on sites posing as legitimate news sites etc); verification (eg, using tools to authenticate user generated content such as photographs or video purportedly originating in a war zone or disaster weather event before using that content in reporting); and debunking (similar to general fact checking but targeted at faked photos/videos and memes that make emotional claims/frame issues unfairly etc and which spread fast on social media).

### **What is fact checking?**

It’s important start with a clear definition for ‘fact checking’. Graves (2018) argues there is an important difference between the process of checking one’s facts, that is, to eliminate errors from a story, and the rise of ‘fact checking’ as a distinct mode of journalism. Graves notes there is some dispute over the contemporary meaning of fact checking but points to the following (abbreviated) definition from Elizabeth (2014, n.p.) as a guide: “Fact checkers and fact checking organizations aim to increase knowledge by re-reporting and researching the purported facts”. The important distinction here relates to the reexamination of existing purported facts as opposed to the process of verifying new information. Bruns (2018, p. 356) notes that the rise of fact checking can best be understood as a response to an “authority crisis” where the vast quantities of information available on the internet – especially user-generated content lacking the journalistic vigour of verification – has bypassed the traditional role of the media as a gatekeeper of information. In addition, the vast quantities of online misinformation and disinformation have led to what is termed by some as the “post-truth” era where the very nature of truth is under question. To combat this uncertainty and the many challenges it poses to democracy, an organised community of fact checkers came together and sought to develop common standards and practices in an attempt to regain journalistic authority. In this context, fact checking can be understood as a distinct discipline with its own cultures of practice responding to the specific threat of the post-truth era (Graves 2018). Thus, these distinctions from other forms of journalism call for students to be educated with a specific skill set related to fact checking.

Farrer (2017) argues there are also philosophical and epistemological dimensions to fact checking that demand the specific focus of journalism educators. The practice of fact checking necessarily requires the journalist to reach a “conclusion about truth” (n.p.). Traditionally, journalism students have ~~often~~ been encouraged to not take a position on an issue. Rather, they are taught to summarise opposing viewpoints, giving equal weight to contesting ideas. But Farrer says this approach is problematic and can lend a false sense of legitimacy to mistruths if taken at face value. While taking a position in journalism is not unique to the practice of fact checking (for example opinion pieces or investigative reports that reveal/conclude that corruption or malpractice have taken place) it does serve as an important vector for journalism educators to consider the practices of journalism more broadly.

Moreover, from a practical perspective, fact checking is an identified in-demand skillset sought by employers (Das 2021, Wardell, 2021). To meet this demand and best prepare students to enter the workforce, there is a clear rationale to educate students with specific and identifiable skills in the processes of fact checking. Interestingly, despite the prevalence of fact checking in the news media mix and the demand from employers, fact checking-specific

courses appear to be relatively rare. There are several compelling examples across the world of how fact checking is being taught in schools, universities and the professional context. However, for the most part, the courses appear to be rare and concentrated in certain areas and institutions. There are some notable limitations in this assessment – namely that a lack of literature relating to fact checking specific university courses may not necessarily signal its absence within programs. Furthermore, it's not clear to what degree these skills may be embedded into more generalised courses, whether the conception of “fact checking” includes verification and/or debunking, or what specific skills are being taught.

### **Fact checking within universities**

University journalism educators are constantly adapting course content to prepare students for success in a rapidly evolving digital and often challenging environment (Callaghan and McManus 2010). The emergence of dedicated fact checking courses within universities is the latest in those curriculum adaptations.

In Hong Kong, one of the earliest examples referenced in the literature is at the University of Hong Kong. In a paper titled: Ahead of the e-Curve in Fact- Checking and Verification Education: The University of Hong Kong's Cyber News Verification Lab Leads Verification Education in Asia, Kruger (2016) discussed the curriculum design of a project designed to develop undergraduate journalism students' skills in online verification and fact checking. The objective of the Lab was twofold, firstly to teach students to “identify, analyse and deconstruct real-life case studies emanating in real-time from online sources” and secondly to “evaluate and report on their findings in a journalistic manner” (n.p). According to Kruger, the project sought to educate students through “experiential learning” (n.p.) as defined by Kolb (1984, p. 41) as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience”. Experiential learning focuses on the development of real-world practical skills, in this case, a number of assignments utilising a software platform called ‘the Check’, developed by Meedan. Following classes and lectures relating to news literacy, online verification and fact checking, students were able to apply this knowledge by collectively uploading content sourced from social media and other news sources to the platform, outlining the steps they took to verify the information present (Kruger 2016).

One of the ideas explored in the paper is the development of a scale to measure the outcomes of students' learning. Kruger (2016) notes that media literacy is a well-established area of research, but identifies a need for a scale that accounts for “news literacy competencies and critical thinking skills in a digital native, participatory, ‘post-truth’ era” (n.p). Following consultation with media experts, a “verification measurement scale” (n.p.) from 0-4 was developed. The scale evaluated five key areas including technical skills, observation skills, the student's ability to question the motive behind sources, the extent to which secondary ‘crosscheck’ sources were utilised and whether contact was made with the original publisher of the information. At the end of the semester, students were asked to list steps they would have undertaken to verify an online source before and after the coursework. A content analysis of the student's responses was then conducted and the verification measurement scale was applied by the instructor. Through these findings, Kruger concluded a “significant increase in the quality of verification techniques and critical thinking actions by students” as a result of the project.

Following the Cyber News Verification Lab project, a subsequent student-led fact checking lab was established at the University of Hong Kong. Speaking at the UNESCO WJEC

roundtable event, Associate Professor Masato Kajimoto (2021) explained that the “Annie Lab” offered students a hands-on learning experience in a newsroom environment. For some students, this is offered through an undergraduate capstone subject, while others are offered paid summer internships. The lab functions as a newsroom throughout the week and publishes regular student-produced fact checking content on its website. This practical learning is delivered alongside two classroom-based optional elective fact checking subjects. The undergraduate subject is offered to all students and the graduate subject is offered to journalism students only.

One of the important themes raised in Kajimoto’s discussion were some of the regionally specific challenges that exist in teaching fact checking and journalism more broadly. Despite strong demand to teach fact checking in some regions of South-East Asia where the democratic model is either failing or absent, university educators must account for differences in the way syllabi are designed. For example, terminology such as “democracy” or “citizenship” that may be ubiquitously found in western journalism course content may not be appropriate. In countries which are outside the liberal democratic tradition, the existence of fact checking and verification courses raises the question of their purpose or motivation. Is the intention to spread democratic ideals through the practice of fact checking, to ‘hold power to account’, or is it for another reason. This could be a useful question for academic inquiry.

Furthermore, Kajimoto noted the challenges associated with the proliferation of misinformation on regionally and language-specific social media platforms. However, this also presents an opportunity for the Annie Lab and international universities more broadly. With access to significant numbers of bi-lingual students trained in the skills of fact checking, the lab is uniquely placed to efficiently and reliably translate content in a way that most newsrooms would not have the capacity for. These factors demonstrate there are both challenges and opportunities present in regional differences and emphasises the important role of international dialogue and cooperation between journalism university educators.

In Australia, where this paper has been developed, there is little evidence in the form of literature that supports the prevalence of fact checking being taught at the 28 universities which offer journalism programs. However, at the Royal Melbourne Institute for Technology (RMIT) a strong focus has been placed on developing the skills of fact checking in the journalism cohort. In 2016 fact checking skills were introduced as a four-week module within a larger course, Journalism Technologies, with an award winning-assignment called, Fact Check Your Mother, established by lecturer Tito Ambyo (Little, 2017). In 2018, RMIT was the first Australian university to introduce a subject focused on fact checking and verification skills. The subject, developed and led by Farrer, is taught in the first year of RMIT’s Bachelor of Communication (Journalism) program and unlike the University of Hong Kong’s elective coursework, it is compulsory for all journalism students. Farrer (2021) [told the UNESCO round table event, his course has a strong focus on the technical skills of verification using open-source intelligence (OSINT). In essence, this involves using publicly available information (for example google maps, databases or reverse images searches) to either verify or debunk claims and user-generated content (such as images and video) shared on social media. Farrer argues OSINT is one of the most powerful investigative tools available to fact checkers and journalists more broadly and represents the “future of journalism”. Farrer stresses the constantly evolving nature of these tools means the most important educational outcome of OSINT-focused education is not the knowledge of a particular system or method, but rather a student’s ability to think creatively about a problem and utilise existing information.

RMIT also offers internships to students at the RMIT ABC Fact Check, a newsroom embedded in RMIT's School of Media and Communication. Fact Check is a joint publishing venture between RMIT and the national publicly funded broadcaster the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Fact Check publishes its work via the ABC's digital news platform and as a result makes a significant contribution towards political discourse in Australia via its large national audience. As one of two IFCN accredited fact checking units in the country, the relationship between RMIT and the ABC is unique in the Australian context (Das 2021). It also offers valuable insights into the potential benefits afforded by such a close working relationship between educational institutions and media organisations. The benefits offered to students in this relationship are clear. As established by Kruger (2016), experiential learning offers students hands-on experience increasing their chances of employability following graduation. However, there are also significant benefits afforded to the media organisation itself, most especially in the context of the resources required to successfully run a fact check unit.

In Spain, a controversial fact checking teaching project is detailed in the paper Fact-Checking Skills And Project-Based Learning About Infodemic And Disinformation, Pérez-Escolará, Ordóñez-Olmedoa and Alcaide-Pulido (2021) present. The project sought to: "rais[e] awareness of the risks of disinformation and infodemic, as well as identifying the main social competencies and skills related to fact checking that students should acquire" (n.p.). The authors emphasised the importance of teaching fact checking as a process that begins with the pre-emptive stages of monitoring and spotting misinformation. Similar to other approaches referenced earlier, the researchers promote a practical approach to students learning. In this case, a "Project Based Learning" (PBL) and "thematic-experiential classes" (n.p.) approach is described by the author. In practice, this involved presenting a lecture to communications students in two Spanish universities which contained false information about COVID-19. Students were unaware this was occurring and were later asked to write an essay summarising the information from the lecture. After reviewing the essays, the researchers concluded that only about 14% of students identified the information as false and corrected it in their essays. They were also able to determine that certain types of mistruths were more readily accepted by the students. For example, students were much more likely to accept mistruths about the impact of coronavirus as opposed to misinformation around COVID-19 remedies. The study notes the project did receive ethics approval and was conducted in a controlled environment (a university). However, there are some questions raised by this approach. While the study rightfully highlights the need for students to approach sources with a critical mindset – it's unclear whether there could be risks associated with the practice of intentionally circulating misinformation, even if it is later corrected. Furthermore, prominent fact checking methodologies, such as the one referenced within the study developed by Mantzarlis (2018), emphasise the importance of relying on trusted sources as the basis for fact checking. In the context of the 'post-truth' information overload, it's unclear whether such an experiment could have the unintended consequence of eroding trust within students from trusted sources, in this case, their university. With these questions in mind, there is a clear rationale to develop best practice international guidelines on fact check education to alleviate any perceived or actual concerns.

### **Other fact checking education**

Fact checking education does occur in a variety of ways outside of journalism curriculum, such as internships or via short courses attached to the multiple fact check units and journalism education providers such as the Poynter Institute.

In the United States, for example, students in general civics courses are introduced to the idea of ‘lateral reading’. Brodsky et al., (2021, n.p.) offer the following definition: “Lateral reading offers a way for students to act on awareness and skepticism fostered through media and news literacy interventions by leaving the original messages in order to investigate sources and verify claims”. In their paper titled: Improving college students’ fact checking strategies through lateral reading instruction in a general education civics course, the authors outline a process taught to students to improve their ability to critically analyse online sources. This process is derived from Caulfield’s (2017) book *Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers*. This process, alongside other material, was integrated into the curriculum of first-year general education civics courses across several US universities. In order to evaluate students’ progress, a number of assignments and questionnaires were conducted before and after the content was delivered, alongside a control group who completed regular coursework. The authors concluded that students who were taught fact checking skills were “more likely to read laterally and accurately assess the trustworthiness of online content” than their peers in the control group.

In Australia, skills in fact checking are also being taught outside of the context of journalism. At RMIT, this content is offered to all enrolled students regardless of their degree in the format of a short online “micro-credential”, which covers the basics of fact checking. The course is available to all students free of cost as an optional extra. Completion of the course earns students a digital badge which can be added to resumes and shown to future prospective employers. According to Sushi Das, Chief of Staff at RMIT ABC Fact Check and developer of the credential, the course is aimed at all students in recognition of fact checking and online verification being an in-demand skillset across many industries beyond the realm of journalism. It also accounts for the importance of news literacy, that is, an aptitude for the critical consumption of news, as compared to its production (Das 2021).

In Hong Kong, this philosophy of teaching fact checking outside of the journalistic context can also be found at the University of Hong Kong where Kajimoto teaches a university-wide undergraduate elective course combining news literacy and fact checking skills. Speaking at the roundtable event, Kajimoto (2021) noted: “What we are trying to do is to train the future news audience rather than future journalists in logical reasoning and analytical skills and effective writing ... this is a skill that everybody should learn”. These examples demonstrate the transferability of fact checking skills across a wide spectrum of industries and their desirability from the perspective of educators and employers alike.

## **Professional development**

Fact checking is being introduced to newsrooms around the world, but research has found that few journalists feel confident in their skills. When asked by First Draft, a not-for-profit research organisation focused on combatting misinformation, if they had adequate training and support to deal with misinformation and disinformation campaigns, just 14.1% of surveyed journalists answered: “yes”. Similar results were recorded in New Zealand and the Pacific region (Kruger 2021). Speaking at the round-table event, Kruger identified a particular need for ongoing support and training for journalists in this space. In response, First Draft has developed a number of initiatives that provide support to journalists to continuously expand their fact checking skillset. One example is ‘cross-check’ a collaborative information-sharing programme bringing together 110 journalists from a range of media organisations. Journalists are provided ongoing training on how to effectively and ethically report on misinformation by First Draft’s researchers and are also invited to participate in virtual misinformation crisis simulations and information sharing on an ongoing basis via Slack – an online messaging service. Regular research output from First Draft is also disseminated through these channels. Kruger notes that it is in the absence of proper and reliable information that false narratives often flourish. This factor is most apparent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where rapid developments and a lack of scientific research can leave an information gap that is instead filled with misinformation. Thus, Kruger argues that fact checkers and journalists more broadly must take on a preemptive role in identifying where information gaps may be forming and filling this reputable information. By identifying, sharing and centralising information sources across journalist networks, First Draft aims to provide journalists with greater support and training in this practice.

Google News Initiative training (Google, 2022) is also very active globally, not only offering online content but in-person workshops on request to students and working journalists in local newsrooms, large and small. Such training includes, but is not limited to, advanced search skills and use of google maps/earth platforms. These sessions focus on google tools, although not exclusively, are vital to OSINT AND FCnV journalism.

A focus on collaboration is also present in the work of Data Leads, a digital media and information initiative based in India. Presenting at the UNESCO round table event, Nazakat (2021) identified the problem of misinformation to be particularly acute in India where media literacy is typically low but access to the internet is rapidly expanding. In the face of this challenge, Nazakat emphasised the importance of collaboration not just amongst journalists – but also across experts in other professions. In 2015, Data Leads held boot camp training sessions hosting both journalists and doctors in order to collaboratively design more effective strategies of fact checking and addressing medical misinformation. This project has since evolved to encompass a network of doctors spanning 30 countries and has played an important role in addressing COVID-19 related misinformation across Asia. According to Nazakat, this experience demonstrated the need for a broader and more effective fact checking and training network in India. Supported by the Google News Initiative, the India Training Network was established in 2018 and has since trained over 1300 newsrooms and 700 universities in fact checking. Since 2018, fact checking has flourished in India going from about five fact check organisations to many hundreds in the present day. The sheer scale of the Indian experience illustrates the huge challenges of tackling misinformation on the Asian continent but also shows how innovative professional training partnerships can provide some solutions.

## **In a post truth world**

There's a need to address the challenge that the audience for information is increasingly divided between those who respect and seek out fact and expertise in order to make informed decisions, and those for whom emotion is the driving force behind decision and opinion-making and their understanding of the world (particularly in the US where communities are fundamentally epistemologically different – they don't operate with a common set of facts) (Martel, Pennycook, & Rand, 2020, and Ecker, Lewandowsky, Cook, et al 2020 ).

Journalism – that is, “quality” journalism that makes claims to trustworthiness based on its adherence to fact, impartiality and transparency – is not an effective counter to emotion. (To deliberately misquote Ben Shapiro (2019): “Feelings don't care about your facts”.) That is, the critical thinking skills and tools identified here as crucial to good journalism practice – those skills and tools argued here as essential to journalism education – must also be foundational to all education programs delivered to all students at all levels.

## **Conclusion**

The dangers associated with misinformation and their corrosive impact on democracy are well documented, discussed and researched. Yet, a review of the relevant literature suggests these skills are rarely specifically taught in educational facilities, and media professionals feel unprepared to deal with these challenges. However, where these skills are being taught there are some clear and tangible benefits identified. For students of journalism, it provides the relevant skills to prepare them to produce the in-demand product of fact checks. For university students more broadly, it can promote the widely applicable skills of critical analysis and creative thinking. There's also evidence of innovative partnerships between big tech, universities and media organisations providing an avenue to support the struggling news media industry. However, with one recent research experiment (Carson, 2022) finding that independent fact-checking decreased readers' trust in a news story and news outlet, educators must acknowledge that fact checking courses may not actually increase trust in media, one of the clear aims of the introduction of such skills training.

## **Resources**

RMIT's Gordon Farrer has prepared the following primer for students in his Fact Checking and Verification course. It's a work in progress that he is happy to share| Tw: [@post fact](#)

RMIT Resource: Getting into Open Source Intelligence (OSINT)

Feel free to share this doc: [LINK](#)

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### **Author Bios**

Alexandra Wake is an associate professor in Journalism at RMIT University and the elected President of the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia. She is an active leader, educator and researcher in journalism. Her research, teaching and practice sits at the nexus of journalism practice, journalism education, equality, diversity and mental health. Dr Wake has taught journalism at RMIT, Deakin University, Dubai Women's College, and was a trainer on international aid projects including at the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Before turning full time to the academy, she spent more than 25 years working as a journalist in Australia, the Asia Pacific and the Middle East. Dr Wake has been an education advisor for Mindframe for Journalists since 2012 and was a Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma Academic Fellow in 2011. She is part of a number of international journalism education research groups that focus on gender, trauma and fact checking.

Sonam Thomas is a researcher and reporter with RMIT ABC Fact Check focusing on the political fact checking of Australian politics. He is also currently undertaking a PhD at RMIT University in conjunction with an Australian Research Council funded project assessing the extent to which election pledges are upheld and assisting in the creation of an election promise tracker covering the upcoming Australian federal political term. Formerly, he studied a Bachelor of Arts (Media & Communications and Politics and International Studies) at the University of Melbourne and a Master of Media at RMIT University and held a number of freelance multimedia production roles.

Gordon Farrer is a lecturer at RMIT University and was the founder of the Fact Checking and Verification Course in the journalism program. He moved from industry to the academy after more than 25 years as a journalist at a variety of organisations, including News Corp and Fairfax, where he held various editorial roles. Farrer is developing a reputation as an international educator, practitioner and researcher in fact checking and verification, OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) skills and is as a specialist commentator on fake news, misinformation and journalism practice.