

# Fact Checking the Campaign: How Political Reporters Use Twitter to Set the Record Straight (or Not)

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## Abstract

In a multichannel era of fragmented and contested political communication, both misinformation and fact checking have taken on new significance. The rise of Twitter as a key venue for political journalists would seem to support their fact-checking activities. Through a content analysis of political journalists' Twitter discourse surrounding the 2012 presidential debates, this study examines the degree to which fact-checking techniques were used on Twitter and the ways in which journalists on Twitter adhered to the practices of either "professional" or "scientific" objectivity—the mode that underlies the fact-checking enterprise—or disregarded objectivity altogether. A typology of tweets indicates that fact checking played a notable but secondary role in journalists' Twitter discourse. Professional objectivity, especially simple stenography, dominated reporting practices on Twitter, and opinion and commentary were also prevalent. We determine that Twitter is indeed conducive to some elements of fact checking. But taken as a whole, our data suggest that journalists and commentators posted opinionated tweets about the candidates' claims more often than they fact checked those claims.

## Keywords

journalism, elections, debates, fact checking, objectivity, norms and routines

If information is the currency of democracy, the problem of misinformation presents a serious challenge to the quality of democratic self-governance (Kuklinski et al. 2000).

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Particularly in this multichannel era marked by political polarization and selective exposure to media (Stroud 2011), high-profile policy debates can turn on stories and claims by political elites that stretch the truth or fundamentally distort it. Former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin's "death panels" claims, for example, indelibly shaped the contours and perhaps even the outcome of the debate over federal health-care reforms in 2010 (Lawrence and Schafer 2012; Nyhan 2010).

Over the past decade or so, the "fact checking" genre of journalism has developed an evidence-based method for assessing political claims that, anecdotal evidence suggests, may be exercising a growing influence on the news. At the same time, the rise of social media sites like Twitter has offered new possibilities for broad-based, instantaneous discussion of political claims. The free-flowing, wide-ranging arena of Twitter would seem to support fact-checking-like activities by journalists by making real-time commentary and crowd-sourcing possible. For example, Bill Adair, creator of PolitiFact.com, has claimed that his organization's fact checking is directly supported by Twitter (Adair 2013). During widely watched events like presidential election debates, Adair says, PolitiFact's reporters monitor Twitter to see which candidate claims are most heavily discussed, and readers use Twitter to submit calls for fact checking directly to PolitiFact.

At the same time, Twitter's opinionated ambience may invite mainstream journalists to step outside the constraints of traditional professional objectivity and the "he said/she said" style of journalism (Lasorsa et al. 2012; Lawrence and Schafer 2012; Pingree 2011). In both these ways, Twitter opens possibilities for new patterns of news reporting on politics.

This study analyzes how political reporters at a variety of news outlets used Twitter to cover the 2012 U.S. presidential election debates. The 2012 election was marked by the rising popularity of both Twitter and fact checking. Having grown exponentially since the previous presidential election, Twitter significantly shaped the campaign media environment for the first time in 2012. The first 2012 general election debate was the most-tweeted U.S. political event to that date in Twitter's short history (Sharp 2012a, 2012b). Commentators observed that Twitter had stolen from television the post-debate power to establish conventional political wisdom (Stelter 2012) but urged audiences to be wary of quick conclusions flowing through the Twittersverse (Gavin 2012).

The 2012 campaign was also "the most fact-checked in history" according to PolitiFact's Adair (2012, para. 11)—with greater demands from the public for journalists to expose political falsehoods and greater urgency to do so in Twitter time (Sullivan 2012). But as demand for real-time fact checking increased, fact checking also faced unprecedented resistance, led by a Mitt Romney campaign staffer's famous declaration that "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers" (Simmons 2012, para. 9)—leading some critics to charge that fact checking had failed in its mission (Carr 2012; Shafer 2012).

Through close analysis of the "tweets" of over four hundred individual journalists, we determine that Twitter is indeed conducive to some elements of fact checking. Twitter is indeed a platform for candidate claims to be questioned, and public questioning of political claims is an important step in correcting misinformation. But the

fast-moving, opinionated commentary for which Twitter seems ideal is not the same thing as the “scientific” mode of objectivity upon which serious fact checking rests. Ultimately, Twitter’s 140-character form may not be conducive to the genre of fact checking advocated by many full-time fact checkers.

We begin with a brief analysis of the two modes of objectivity that underlie daily mainstream news on one hand and the fact-checking genre on the other. We then consider how these norms may be enacted in the rapidly swirling currents of political discourse on Twitter.

## Literature Review

### *Objectivity and Fact Checking*

Journalistic fact checking, with its aim to definitively judge the veracity or falsehood of political statements, operates against the backdrop of the profession’s objectivity norm. Indeed, its relationship with what might be called *professional objectivity* is one of its defining attributes.

The central principle of professional objectivity in American journalism is the notion that facts can and should be separated from values or opinions, with journalists reporting only the facts (Schudson 2001), a premise grounded in positivism’s strict binary between objectivity and subjectivity (Wien 2005). In practice, this norm manifests itself as “neutrality,” “balance,” and in news stories that are careful not appear to take a side (Chalaby 1996; Pingree 2011; Streckfuss 1990). Journalists often maintain this neutrality by adhering to the “he said, she said” reporting style that studiously quotes the claims of two sides of a dispute, leaving the reader to determine the truth of the matter, even for verifiable factual issues (Lawrence and Schafer 2012; Pingree 2011). Through this practice, professional objectivity is at least as much a performative and strategic ritual designed to protect journalism’s cultural authority (Boudana 2011; Tuchman 1972) as it is a philosophically guided professional norm.

A second form of the objectivity norm, what we might call *scientific objectivity*, also derives from positivism’s fact/value distinction, yet takes a very different shape in practice. In contrast to professional objectivity’s both-sides balance, scientific objectivity is built instead on the scientific method, with its process of testing hypotheses and then drawing—and declaring—conclusions based on the weight of evidence (Pingree 2011; Streckfuss 1990). Scientific objectivity remained in the margins throughout the twentieth century as professional objectivity defined American journalism, but it has gained cachet in recent years. Kovach and Rosenstiel’s (2007) influential treatise advocated it as the method of journalism’s core element of *verification*, and it has been foundational in the development of computer-assisted reporting and data-driven journalism (Wien 2005).

Political fact checking shares with mainstream journalism an emphasis on fact-centered discourse (Graves and Glaisyer 2012; Pingree et al. 2013). But it makes a crucial divergence from traditional journalism in its focus on *adjudicating* factual disputes. Such adjudication has been widely called for by critics of professional objectivity

(Cunningham 2003; Dobbs 2012; Graves 2013; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007), but modern political journalism has performed less of it in practice (Hardy et al. 2009; Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Lawrence and Schafer 2012). This discomfort with adjudication in most mainstream news has spurred the growth of the “fact-checking” genre of journalism (Graves 2013), led by three national operations—PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and *The Washington Post’s* Fact Checker. Each of these operations publishes detailed, annotated articles concluding with verdicts on the truthfulness of a wide variety of political statements; two of them include a graphical meter rating the veracity of each claim. This format is also the standard for similar fact-checking units run by regional news organizations, many of which have formed since the 2008 election (Graves and Glaisyer 2012).

The verification of claims in the fact-checking process involves three basic elements borrowed from the scientific method (Graves 2013): claims, evidence, and judgments. First, fact checkers select verifiable statements in the realm of fact, rather than opinion, especially those made by prominent political officials (see also Dobbs 2012). They draw claims from continual monitoring of political commentary, as well as reader contributions, and often gravitate toward claims they suspect are false (Adair 2013). As Graves documents, fact checkers then select evidence with which to evaluate the claim, often relying on a mixture of documents and experts and privileging information from official government and nonpartisan sources. Based on their interpretation of that evidence, they reach a judgment. The mainstream genre of fact checking then typically includes a rating or ranking that conveys the outlet’s judgment about the claim, such as PolitiFact’s Truth-O-Meter scale.<sup>1</sup>

Fact checking constitutes an alternative to the mainstream practice of professional objectivity in that fact checkers “not only *report* fact, but publicly *decide* it” (Graves 2013: 18, emphasis in original). They thus offer a continual corrective and challenge to daily news that, by carefully observing the norms of professional objectivity, may end up serving as a megaphone for misleading claims. As Graves (2013) notes, fact checkers see themselves as working within the broad tradition of objectivity, even as they seek to reform it by adjudicating factual statements and emphasizing transparency and reproducibility of method. Fact checking is thus an embodiment of scientific objectivity rather than professional objectivity: Reporter/fact checkers do not simply pass along the claims of powerful sources, as journalists working within the professional paradigm of objectivity are often obliged to do. Although it appears anecdotally that scientific objectivity continues to be relegated to the margins of most political journalism, research has not yet determined the degree to which the fact checkers’ approach has been adopted by journalists not specifically devoted to that practice, a question this study aims to address.

### *Twitter and Journalism*

As Twitter has become the central circulatory system of information among reporters (Hamby 2013; Lawrence, forthcoming), the possibilities for more widespread fact checking by all reporters—not just the established fact checkers—have arguably

become greater. Fact-checking politicians' claims is presumably made easier by Twitter's real-time, broad-based conversation, and the verdicts of the established fact checkers may gain broader exposure and influence over reporters working for other news outlets—particularly if social media audiences are calling for the news to fact check the candidates more diligently (see Brisbane 2012).

Yet Twitter (and social media platforms more generally) may simultaneously make fact checking more difficult because the networked, decentralized nature of the contemporary digital information environment presents challenges to both forms of objectivity. Since the 1990s, emerging online paradigms of inclusivity and multiculturalism have called into question the binary perspective of professional objectivity that positions journalism between just two sides on each issue (Deuze 2005), and the multiaxiality of networked digital media magnifies this challenge (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). With more perspectives being presented and weighed within the arena of public discussion, the positivist line between subjectivity and objectivity is eroded as journalists are revealed to be situated within the world and their stories, just like everyone else who presents their perspective online (Blaagaard 2013; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). This makes it more difficult for journalists to defend the notion that they alone can represent objective reality (Bogaerts and Carpentier 2013). This is the contested environment surrounding objectivity in which contemporary political fact checking operates—one in which journalists' ability to either present competing truth claims as equally valid (as in professional objectivity) or to methodically draw independent, authoritative conclusions about reality (as in scientific objectivity) is being sharply questioned.

Twitter thus presents a proverbial double-edged sword, by making collaborative, real-time checking of political claims possible but enmeshing that effort in the abbreviated and contested forms of expression dominant there (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). Twitter's decentralization, immediacy, and penchant for opinion expression may undermine journalists' ability to serve as authoritative gatekeepers and truth-tellers (Barnard 2012; Hermida 2012; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012).

Various studies and authors suggest that this enervation of authority has begun to pull journalists away from standard rules in their practice of professional norms on Twitter. Journalists are becoming more open to sharing personal information and opinions, using features of Twitter such as retweets to negotiate objectivity norms while dabbling in a blend of fact-centered reporting mixed with emotion, humor, "lifecasting," and their own and others' opinions (Lasorsa et al. 2012; Lawrence et al. 2013; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). As a result of these evolving norms and Twitter's technical and space limitations, political discourse on Twitter often resembles what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) termed the "journalism of assertion."

Indeed, Twitter presents a particularly challenging setting in which to observe the norm of scientific objectivity and practice the journalism of verification. On Twitter, fragments of information (and misinformation) are introduced, spread, contested, and corrected in an interactive process involving both professional journalists and (at least in theory) nonprofessional Twitter users. The social media environment makes the traditionally opaque process of verification more open, iterative, and tentative

(Hermida 2012). The speed and volume of the information that rushes through Twitter's floodgates also confound the comparatively slow traditional journalistic processes of verification and fact checking (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). It is not clear whether an effective form of political fact checking built on deliberateness and thoroughness (Graves 2013; Pingree 2011) can take place amid the speed and 140-character brevity of Twitter. What elements of the fact-checking process are actually performed by political journalists and how Twitter's affordances are used in the process are both critical factors determining how the emerging journalistic practice of fact checking manifests itself in a continually flowing information environment marked at its core by a fading distinction between fact and opinion.

This confluence of opportunities for and challenges to journalistic fact checking is at its most pointed and visible during live political events such as general election debates, which have become central moments in political discourse on Twitter (Larsson and Moe 2012). Twitter has come to serve as an integral backchannel to the narrative unfolding on television, where users annotate the proceedings and counter the messages of established media sources (Burgess and Bruns 2012), turning political monologue into dialogue (see also Mazumdar et al. 2013). Debates are also central to the practice of political journalism and fact checking (Pingree et al. 2012). Debates have traditionally served as an important stage for candidates to present their platforms to voters, and an important venue for journalists to weigh those claims (though research has consistently shown that journalists emphasize candidate character, strategy, and perceived "wins" and "losses" more than the substantive candidate claims; Benoit 2007; Kendall 1997).

Because the real-time, live event setting is a particularly rich context for studying Twitter, and because presidential debates are likely to contain a wealth of candidate claims, this study examines how journalists used Twitter during the three U.S. presidential candidate debates in the fall of 2012.

To that end, this study raises the following research questions:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** To what extent do political journalists use Twitter to discuss the claims made during presidential debates?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** What types of debate claims are discussed by journalists on Twitter?

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** How are journalists incorporating professional and/or scientific objectivity when discussing debate claims on Twitter?

## **Research Methods**

Research was conducted in three main phases. During the collection phase, a custom software program archived tweets from a purposive sample of 430 political journalists and commentators who covered the 2012 presidential campaign for U.S. media outlets. In the sampling phase, a portion of the tweets posted during the presidential debates and the hours immediately following them was selected for analysis. In the final phase, this sample and other debate-related data were coded by a team of trained coders using a codebook developed by the authors.

**Table 1.** National News Outlets Included in Sample of Campaign Reporters.

Print	B-cast TV	Cable TV	Web-Only or Primarily	Radio	Wire Service
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	ABC	CNN	BuzzFeed	NPR	Associated Press
<i>The New York Times</i>	CBS	Fox News	Huffington Post		
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	NBC	MSNBC	Politico		
<i>The Washington Post</i>			Slate		
<i>Time</i>			Talking Pts. Memo		
<i>USA Today</i>					

### Twitter Database

The first step was to identify a purposive sample of journalists at major media outlets who were covering the 2012 campaign. This was done using a media database curated by Cision, which has maintained media listings in the United States for more than seventy-five years. The sample included reporters from prominent national news outlets (see Table 1), as well as those working for seventy-six local and regional outlets in key swing states including Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, Iowa, Virginia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania—the top eight states in campaign advertising spending through July 2012 (when the sample of reporters was created).<sup>2</sup> All journalists at each of these outlets who were identified in the Cision database as covering the campaign or politics were included in the sample (both reporters and commentators were included, but editors were excluded). The database listed a Twitter account for many of these journalists; a search was performed on Twitter for the rest to determine if they had an active account. The final sample included 430 political reporters and commentators with active Twitter accounts, 74 (17 percent) of whom were identified by Cision as an “analyst,” “columnist,” “commentator,” or “contributor”—in other words, journalists more likely to express their own opinions.

Postings to Twitter are available to the public, but for them to be saved and studied, they must be captured. This was done using a custom-built software program that queried Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) every fifteen minutes from August 26 to November 18, 2012, asking if anything new had been posted to the 430 accounts chosen. The full text of each new tweet by these reporters—roughly 261,000 tweets during this time frame—along with a time stamp and the user’s Twitter handle and profile description was then saved to a database.

### Sample for Coding

Although it is reasonable to expect that much fact checking on Twitter occurred in real time, as each debate progressed, it is also possible that fact checking continued to emerge after each debate ended and reporters had time to review claims made during the debates. For this reason, we retrieved tweets from our sample of Twitter accounts

from one hour before each debate began until noon Eastern Time the following day, yielding a total of 17,922 tweets.

From this sample, we purposively selected all tweets relevant to the fact-checking questions in this study by identifying those that referenced (explicitly or implicitly) a claim by the candidates or by their supporters or critics (as reported below, the vast majority of claims referenced in our sample were from the candidates themselves rather than from their surrogates or critics from the political parties or ideological groups). These ranged from direct quotes from a candidate to a journalist's response to something a candidate said. Tweets that mentioned fact checking or called for a claim to be fact checked were also considered relevant. The sample included both the Twitter user's original tweets and those they retweeted from others.<sup>3</sup> A total of 3,788 tweets and retweets relevant to candidate claims were identified. These relatively few tweets (compared with the total reporter tweets captured during the three debates) constitute the empirical record of how these political journalists negotiated norms and practices of objectivity and fact checking within the fast-paced setting of Twitter. (As discussed further below, this relatively small fraction constitutes a finding in and of itself, indicating that journalists often use Twitter for discussion of topics unrelated to politicians' claims.) A random sample of half of these tweets ( $n = 1,895$ ) was selected for manual coding, using a random start point and choosing every second tweet.

To better assess which claims journalists selected for discussion on Twitter, coders coded the debate transcripts for all candidate claims, cataloging and categorizing by topic 1,040 distinct claims made during the three debates. Together, this data set tracks debate claims as they were originally made by the candidates and then as they were discussed by journalists on Twitter.

## Measures

Fact checking fundamentally turns on claims (and sometimes counterclaims): statements, putatively factual, that are subjected to tests of evidence and then judged for their accuracy. Due to both Twitter's abbreviated form and to the norms of professional objectivity, and perhaps for other reasons as well, individual tweets may not contain all four elements. We therefore analyzed each tweet in our sample for each element of fact checking.

**Claim.** Coders examined each tweet for the presence of an original *claim* made by a candidate, their surrogates, or a debate moderator. These claims ranged from the specific (Obama saying the budget sequester would not happen) to the broad (discussion of Romney's vague tax plan). Coders also coded who made the original claim referenced in the tweet (Romney, Obama, Republican/conservative sources beyond Romney himself, Democratic/liberal sources beyond Obama himself, or a moderator) and noted the *topic* of those original claims. These open-ended topic codes were then inductively recoded into ten topic categories: foreign policy, economy or finance, health care, immigration, education, women's issues, military, energy, candidate or party records, and other.



*Counterclaim.* Reporters occasionally tweeted statements set in opposition to a candidate's original claim, which were coded as *counterclaims*. Sometimes, these statements were made by others and simply passed on in the reporter's tweet. For example, these two quotes were included in a single tweet during one debate—"Romney: 'We can't kill our way out of this mess.' Obama: 'I kept the American people safe the last four years.'" These were coded as counterclaims *by someone other than the journalist*. Journalists sometimes made the counterclaim themselves ("Romney auto answer is outbreak of #romnesia"). These were coded as counterclaims *by the author of the tweet*.

*Judgment.* As discussed earlier, the essence of the fact-checking genre is rendering a judgment on the veracity of a claim—proclaiming a claim either true or false (or, often, somewhere in between). On Twitter, this can take various forms. Sometimes the journalist or commentator includes an explicit judgment about the truth of the original claim. Key words indicating such a judgment include "true," "false," "wrong," "right," and so on. For example, the tweet "The difference between 5.6% and 7.8% unemployment is NOT 9 million jobs. Same lie in all three debates" was coded as containing a judgment because of the word "lie." Other times, journalists' tweets only hint at a definitive judgment, though the direction of the judgment (whether the claim was true or false) can be inferred. Coders were instructed that an implied *judgment* and a *counterclaim* present in the same tweet indicate the journalist's verdict that the candidate has made a false or misleading claim.

*Evidence.* Journalists sometimes mentioned factual evidence in their tweets, often to support a counterclaim or judgment, but sometimes just to add context to a candidate's claim. Tweets that included figures or statistics were coded as containing *data evidence* (for instance, "Debt is up by 50% since President Obama took office"). Tweets that included evidence in the form of an official position or quote from an expert source or an official document were coded as *statement evidence* ("U.S. Navy Adm. John Nathman (ret.) on Romney's defense budget: 'That's a lot of debt and deficit.'").

A key affordance of Twitter that could enhance fact checking is the ability to embed hyperlinks within a tweet that take the reader to other sources of news, conversation, and for purposes of this study, evidence. Coders were instructed to indicate whether each tweet in the sample contained a link, and if so, to where. Specifically, links were categorized as leading to (1) a *government* Web site, database, or document; (2) a *professional fact-checking* operation, like PolitiFact or FactCheck.org; (3) to any other type of *media* site; or (4) elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

Intercoder reliability was tested in two different rounds using three coders who each coded the same two hundred tweets—approximately 10 percent of the sample. Raw agreement among the three coders was over 90 percent for six variables (claim, judgment, data evidence, statement evidence, link source, claim party) and 84 percent for one variable (counterclaim). Krippendorff's alpha reached the .80 standard for three variables (data evidence, link source, claim party). For variables that fell short of that standard, the coders reached agreement through discussion before proceeding.<sup>5</sup>

## Results

RQ1 asked to what extent Twitter is used to discuss claims made by the candidates. Of the 1,894 tweets coded, 1,706 referenced identifiable, specific claims made by the candidates themselves.<sup>6</sup> Compared with the total number of tweets collected during the relevant time frame from our sample of journalists (17,922), this number (based on our initial purposive sampling of all tweets relevant to fact checking) indicates that political journalists' tweets dealt with candidates' claims far less than with other subjects.

As might be suspected given previous research (Lawrence et al. 2013), much of the rest of the sample (i.e., tweets *not* dealing with candidate claims) included a mix of humor and opinion about the debates or the candidates sprinkled with reporters' comments on their own work experiences and working conditions. For example, one tweet from a reporter for *The News-Press*, of Florida, asked, "Is Obama thinking more about his 20th anniversary than tonight's debate?" A major focus was debate performance and strategy, such as in this tweet from a *Washington Post* reporter: "Thought Obama came out a little too fiery. Has modulated into the right space now."

RQ2 asked what types of candidate claims are discussed on Twitter. Our RQ1 findings suggest a context for the answer: Relatively few candidate claims were discussed, let alone fact checked, among journalists on Twitter. Moreover, less than half the claims made by the candidates during the three debates became fodder for discussion on Twitter: 499 (48 percent) of the 1,040 distinct claims made during the three debates were mentioned in our Twitter sample. Of these, 309 claims were mentioned only once or twice, and only 21 (2 percent) were mentioned ten or more times.

By far the most-tweeted set of claims was an exchange during the second debate about whether President Obama had immediately called the 2012 attack on the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi an act of terror. Three back-to-back claims (Obama saying he immediately called it an act of terror during his remarks from the White House Rose Garden, Romney saying it took the president fourteen days to call it an act of terror, and moderator Candy Crowley saying that yes, the president had immediately called it an act of terror) were mentioned a combined eighty-six times. The second most-mentioned claim was Obama's line in the third debate about today's U.S. Navy having fewer "horses and bayonets," mentioned thirty-three times. A qualitative look at journalists' most-tweeted claims reveals that most were one-line zingers from the debates, such as Romney saying, "We can't kill our way out of this mess" and Obama saying that, unlike Mitt Romney, he did not often look at his pension because "it's not as big as yours."

In terms of which candidate's claims were subject to more discussion, coders found 523 claims made by Romney and 491 made by Obama in the debate transcripts, a ratio of 1.065 times more claims by Romney. In the Twitter sample, reporters tweeted 940 times (50 percent) about Romney claims, and 751 times (40 percent) about Obama claims, a ratio of 1.245 times more Romney claims.<sup>7</sup> This apparently greater scrutiny of Romney is not seen, however, when considering only the most-mentioned claims on Twitter. Obama's claims (particularly about Benghazi) were more likely to be

**Table 2.** Typology of Tweets Referencing Politicians' Claims.

Type	Elements of the Tweet	Form of Objectivity	%
Stenography	Claim alone	Professional	64
He said, she said	Claim with counterclaim by another source	Professional	2
You be the judge	Claim with evidence, no judgment	Scientific	11
Full fact check	Claim, evidence, and judgment	Scientific	4
Pushback	Claim with counterclaim by journalist	Disregarded	14
Believe me	Claim and judgment, no evidence	Disregarded	5

mentioned ten or more times by journalists in the Twitter sample (24 percent), compared with 14 percent of Romney's claims;  $\chi^2 = 28.9(1)$ ,  $p < .001$ .

In terms of topical focus, the claims journalists tweeted about dealt most often with the economy (34 percent,  $n = 579$ ) and foreign policy (31 percent,  $n = 525$ ). The economy category included claims dealing with taxes, government spending, and jobs. The foreign policy category included claims dealing with Libya, Iran, Israel, China, and Iraq. Health care (8 percent,  $n = 131$ ) and energy (6 percent,  $n = 103$ ) were the next most common topics. Journalists also tweeted claims dealing with candidate records (5 percent,  $n = 89$ ), women's issues (5 percent,  $n = 79$ ), education (4 percent,  $n = 64$ ), immigration (4 percent,  $n = 63$ ), the military (3 percent,  $n = 43$ ), and other subjects (1 percent,  $n = 22$ ).

RQ3 asked how journalists are incorporating professional or scientific objectivity when discussing candidate claims. To answer this question, we offer a typology of tweets found in our sample, presented in Table 2. The *stenography* form, which proved by far the most common, simply records a candidate statement and offers no counterclaim, evidence, or evaluation of the claim—for example, this tweet from a reporter at *KUSA-TV* in Colorado—"Romney: I'm going to help women by creating a better economy. #Debate." The *he said, she said* type reflects the other prevailing practice of professional objectivity, introducing only a counterclaim by another source, usually the competing candidate—for example, this tweet from a *New York Times* writer: "Romney brings up 'apology tour.' Obama: 'This is the biggest whopper that's been told during the course of the campaign.' #Debate."

Tweets incorporating external *evidence* (which we dub *you be the judge* and *full fact check*) represent forms of scientific objectivity: They go beyond the partisan candidate debate to provide the reader with additional information and context and, in the case of *full fact check*, render an independent judgment on the veracity of the claim. For example, *Time* magazine's White House correspondent posted a *you be the judge* tweet during a disagreement over Romney's auto bailout plan in the third debate, inviting his readers to see Romney's previous claims for themselves: "Here is what Romney said on auto bailout: <http://t.co/uGfNIM09>." An example of a *full fact check* tweet is this one from an *ABC News* journalist: "Did Romney say the Arizona immigration law—#SB1070—was a model for the nation as Obama asserted? No, he did not—<http://t.co/EPOSaDd>." In terms of the types of evidence journalists relied on, the

**Table 3.** Journalists' Reliance on Forms of Objectivity.

	Form of Objectivity Used			
	Traditional	Scientific	Objectivity Disregarded	
Reporters	75%	14%	11%	100%
Commentators	52%	16%	31%	100%

$\chi^2 = 120.86(2), p < .001$

tweets in our sample were less likely to contain corroborating *data* within them—either in the form of authoritative statements or data facts—and more likely to contain *links* to external sources of corroborating evidence.

In keeping with our expectation that Twitter also offers opportunities for journalists to disregard objectivity, in the *pushback* and *believe me* types of tweets, the journalist directly expresses his or her own view—whether by making his or her own counterclaim, or by offering his or her own verdict on a candidate's claim—*without* providing external, corroborating evidence. An example of a *pushback* tweet is this one from a reporter for Talking Points Memo: “Romney’s 8 year balanced budget is the wildest claim of the election and comes up the least by far.” An example of a *believe me* tweet is this one from a *Fox News* commentator: “Obama flat wrong on Arizona law; Romney taking notes.”

Overall, professional objectivity was the most common form of objectivity practiced by journalists in our sample, comprising 66 percent of all tweets coded; nearly all of those tweets offered simple stenography rather than contrasting candidate claims. Signs of scientific objectivity were found in 15 percent of all tweets, and 19 percent of tweets did not follow either of these standards, instead offering counterclaims and judgments by the journalist without providing evidence to support that judgment.

As discussed above, the key distinguishing element of “scientific” fact checking is the rendering of a judgment by the reporter. Of the 155 judgments identified in the sample, 92 (60 percent) judged the candidate’s original claim to be false or misleading, and 62 (40 percent) found the original claim to be true. Romney was found to be wrong more often than Obama (74 percent to 42 percent) and, conversely, Obama was found to be right more often than Romney (57 percent to 26 percent). Of all the “false” verdicts, 69 percent were attributed to Romney and 31 percent to Obama;  $\chi^2 = 15.56(1), p < .001$ .

As might be expected, reporters in our sample acted somewhat differently than commentators. As shown in Table 3, those identified as columnists, commentators, or contributors were less likely to rely on professional objectivity (52 percent of their tweets) and more likely to disregard objectivity altogether (31 percent). Reporters’ tweets most often reflected professional objectivity (75 percent), but sometimes used scientific objectivity (14 percent) or disregarded objectivity (11 percent). Regarding specific tweet types, stenography tweets were more likely to come from reporters (73 percent) than commentators (50 percent), and pushback tweets were more likely to

**Table 4.** Use of Objectivity by News Outlet Type.

	Form of Objectivity Used			
	Traditional	Scientific	Objectivity Disregarded	
Radio	83%	4%	13%	100%
Print	73%	12%	15%	100%
Broadcast TV	72%	20%	9%	100%
Web	69%	17%	14%	100%
Cable TV	55%	15%	30%	100%
$\chi^2 = 83.726(8), p < .001$				

come from commentators (23 percent) than reporters (8 percent);  $\chi^2 = 123.35(5), p < .001$ . Interestingly, commentators were more likely than reporters to post full fact checks that included a claim, evidence, and judgment in a tweet (6 percent to 3 percent);  $\chi^2 = 9.48(1), p < .01$ .

There were also differences in how news outlet types practiced various forms of objectivity (see Table 4). Journalists and commentators working for cable television stations were least likely to rely on traditional objectivity (55 percent of the time) and more likely to disregard objectivity (30 percent). Broadcast television journalists (20 percent) and journalists working for Web-only outlets (17 percent) were most likely to use scientific objectivity. The differences among these groups are significant;  $\chi^2 = 83.726(8), p < .001$ .

## Discussion and Conclusion

Twitter's affordances—real-time conversation and the ability to easily link to external sources of evidence, for example—could make fact checking during live events like presidential debates easier and more widely practiced by journalists. Our data suggest that fact checking is not the most prominent use to which Twitter was put by reporters and commentators covering the 2012 presidential election. Indeed, only a fraction of tweets in our sample referenced specific candidate claims at all. Nevertheless, elements of fact checking were present in enough tweets to be worthy of study, particularly if there is a future upward trend in these practices as Twitter becomes even more widely used by journalists. Moreover, it is possible that some fact-checking tweets exercised outsized influence in the unfolding conversation about the debates online and beyond. For example, the heavy attention given by reporters on Twitter to the Obama–Romney exchange about the president's response to Benghazi seems likely to have shaped subsequent news coverage of that pivotal moment in the debate.

For now, our data show that the established norms and practices of mainstream journalism are more prominent among political journalists on Twitter than those associated with the emergent genre of fact checking. Among the tweets that referenced claims made by the presidential candidates, at least some of which were eligible for

fact checking, almost two-thirds (60 percent) reflected traditional practices of “professional” objectivity: stenography—simply passing along a claim made by a politician—and “he said, she said” repetition of a politician’s claims and his opponent’s counterclaim. A small but not insignificant portion (15 percent) reflected the “scientific” approach to objectivity that underlies the emergent fact-checking genre, by referencing *evidence* for or against the claim and, in a few cases, rendering an explicit judgment about the validity of the claim—though such tweets were more likely to come from commentators than from news reporters.

Interestingly, another 25 percent of tweets in our sample disregarded both notions of objectivity. These tweets either passed judgment on a claim without providing evidence for that judgment or pushed back against the politician’s claim with the journalist’s own counterclaim, again without reference to external evidence. These forms of tweets, both of which Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) might call the “journalism of assertion,” were more likely to come from commentators whose job description includes opinion, but 11 percent of tweets from regular reporters displayed similar disregard for objectivity. Taken as a whole, journalists and commentators posted opinionated tweets about the candidates’ claims more often than they fact checked those claims—leaving us to wonder whether Twitter’s 140-character form and the opinionated environment that has quickly evolved around it (Lasorsa et al. 2012) are conducive to the fully developed fact checking advocated and practiced by professional fact checkers. Indeed, as noted above, Twitter presents journalists with a double-edged sword: It enables collaborative, real-time checking of claims but enmeshes that effort in the highly abbreviated and opinionated forms of expression dominant in the twittersphere.

Our data provide an intriguing preliminary answer to the question of what *kinds* of claims were fact checked on Twitter during the debates, with what kinds of evidence. We find that claims by Mitt Romney, particularly about domestic policy issues, were subject to more discussion, and that Romney’s claims were more likely to be judged false—in one form of tweet or another. These findings do not necessarily indicate, however, that Romney’s claims were disproportionately fact checked. It could be, for example, that Romney made more claims that met journalists’ criteria of *verifiable* statements (see Dobbs 2012; Graves 2013; Lawrence and Schafer 2012). It could also be the case that one candidate engaged in more verifiable falsehoods than the other. So while these findings raise intriguing questions about a possible incumbent party bonus benefiting President Obama, or about journalistic adherence to partisan politics, closer study of the specific claims by each candidate is required before drawing firm conclusions. Interestingly, we find that overall, journalists’ use of *evidence* was evenly distributed between tweets that found the original claim right and tweets that found the claim wrong.

If combating and correcting misinformation is a crucial function of the press in a democratic society (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2010), then has the rise of Twitter as the new circulatory system of political reporting helped that effort? Certainly, our findings seem compatible with previous studies of traditional news coverage (Benoit 2007; Kendall 1997) showing that journalists render a skewed representation of presidential

debates. Beyond that, the findings and the typology of Twitter uses presented here may raise as many questions as they answer. First, because our data were limited to American journalists, our findings cannot be generalized beyond that context; further studies could examine and compare the confluence of fact-checking discourse and Twitter in various international environments. Second, as an examination of professional journalistic practice, this study does not include the reception and effects of that practice on its audience. We cannot therefore draw conclusions about how the journalistic authority involved with fact checking is received by audiences on Twitter, though applications of the fact-checking effects research of the sort conducted by Pingree et al. (2013) to the Twitter environment would be a useful avenue to explore. Finally, this study examines only one particular area of journalistic discourse—Twitter—and cannot necessarily be taken as indicative of political journalists' behavior across other platforms. Additional research could directly compare journalists' behavior on Twitter with their traditional-media output.

But overall, our findings suggest that the campaign was hardly “dictated by fact checkers,” as the Romney campaign famously suggested because most political reporters on Twitter relied mostly on traditional “stenography” and “he said, she said” forms of coverage and commentary—even during presidential debates that were identified as the most-tweeted and the most fact checked in history. As Twitter and other forms of social media continue to take hold and to evolve, the typology and findings presented here suggest useful questions for research as we look ahead to the 2016 presidential campaign.

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### **Notes**

1. Graves (2013) argues this pseudoscientific device encourages fact checkers to objectify the rationales for their conclusions.
2. We chose states to include in our sample based on ad spending at the time the sample was compiled (see *Associated Press* 2012; *The New York Times* 2012). Pennsylvania was later surpassed by spending in Wisconsin and New Hampshire and was No. 10 in campaign ad spending as of October 23, 2012. Because many state and local outlets have at best one

reporter assigned to cover national politics, we chose all reporters who listed politics as a beat who were available in the database within each state.

3. Despite journalists' usual caveat that retweets do not equal endorsements, it is quite possible that journalists use retweets to disseminate fact-checking information (in addition to, as some studies indicate, disseminating opinions toward which they are sympathetic—see Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012).
4. The content at each link was not part of the coding and was not evaluated. This study was designed to measure whether journalists are using Twitter to point their readers toward evidence, not to check the validity of the evidence they point toward. Still, it is worth noting that, among the tweets containing links, the top five most frequently linked sites were well-recognized sources of news and information: *The New York Times* ( $n = 34$ , 14 percent), PolitiFact ( $n = 25$ , 11 percent), *The Washington Post* ( $n = 13$ , 5 percent), *Politico* ( $n = 12$ , 5 percent), and The White House ( $n = 12$ , 5 percent).
5. For two variables (counterclaim and judgment), alphas were between .66 and .79 before agreement was reached through discussion. For two other variables (statement evidence and claim), alphas were below .66 before discussion and agreement, though this was a result of a skewed distribution with a very small number of diverging values (Di Eugenio and Glass 2004).
6. A few tweets did not contain any identifiable candidate claims—(e.g., “Romney is lying” with no reference to any specific Romney claim). About 9 percent ( $n = 162$ ) of tweets dealt with more than one claim, including a claim by the debate moderator. A very few (less than 1 percent) contained claims made by representatives of the candidates' parties.
7. There were small but significant differences in the types of claims journalists discussed for each candidate. Journalists more often discussed Romney's claims about economic and financial issues (38 percent, compared with 30 percent for Obama), and more often discussed Obama's claims about foreign policy (36 percent, compared with 25 percent for Romney). A chi-square test found these differences to be significant,  $\chi^2 = 57.31(9)$ ,  $p < .001$ .

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