

Propagandistic Use of Fact-Checking in Health Crisis: The Case of Pro-Government Fact-Checking in Hong Kong

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The effectiveness of fact-checking and its implications for society have garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years. However, few studies have empirically shed light on the propagandistic potential of fact-checking and how it could be co-opted in authoritarian discourses. This study examines the discursive potential of fact-checking as a tool for facilitating authoritarian state propaganda and information control, focusing on the context of Hong Kong, which has been described as experiencing democratic backsliding. Employing a mixed-method content analysis, this research examines 185 COVID-19-related fact-checking posts published in 2020 by a pro-government fact-checking outlet. The findings demonstrate the fact-checker's attempt to appropriate fact-checking as a tool to defend against antigovernment allegations and propagate official narratives. The implications of the findings for our understanding of fact-checking in authoritarian discourses are discussed.

Keywords: pro-government fact-checking, authoritarian discourse, propaganda, COVID-19

The proliferation of political disinformation, misinformation, and fake news in the past decade has spurred unprecedented demands for fact-checking and drawn scholarly attention to the field. Fake news, defined as fabricated content intentionally created with the purpose of specific political or economic interests, is often associated with the notion of propaganda (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Fact-checking is generally considered an effective tool to counter such propaganda (M. Haigh, T. Haigh, & Kozak, 2018). However, fact-checking, which involves discerning the boundaries between truth and falsehood, can become a battleground for political actors to obtain legitimization and hegemony in public discourses (Farkas & Schou, 2018). Combined with fake news allegations, official or pro-government fact-checking can be manipulated by authoritarian state actors to facilitate broader censorship of press freedom (Fang, 2022).

The propagandistic potential of fact-checking is often overlooked in the literature. A more nuanced investigation is needed to explore how fact-checking is appropriated and leveraged in authoritarian discourses. The present study aims to contribute to the discussion by examining fact-checking as a political discursive practice and highlighting its potential for instrumentalization in authoritarian discourses, using the case of COVID-19. Two interrelated questions are at stake. First, how has pro-government fact-checking framed the COVID-19-related false information? Second, how do these discourses of false information serve

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to advance the political agendas of state actors? This article examines these questions by analyzing the practice of a pro-government fact-checker in Hong Kong during the first year of the COVID-19 outbreak.

It was a unique moment in Hong Kong when the COVID-19 outbreak and the mass pro-democracy social movement coincided. On the one hand, public trust in the local government and its pandemic control measures was low. On the other hand, there was a pressing public need for truthful and accurate information. This context provides insights into how pro-government fact-checking can be leveraged to help the government dismiss its opponents and regain legitimacy. Since the enactment of the national security law (NSL) in June 2020, the city has been described as experiencing democratic backsliding, partially evidenced by the curtailment of press freedom (Lee & Chan, 2023). In 2021, the Hong Kong Police explicitly linked the issue of fake news to national security investigations. The government subsequently announced the consideration of an antifake news law (Ting, 2021; Zaharia, 2021).

Against this background, pro-government fact-checking provides a window to look into the city's changing political and media landscape. With the global rise of authoritarianism (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018), insights derived from Hong Kong not only contribute to the global discussion on fact-checking but also to the discussion about authoritarian propaganda.

The Politics of Fact-Checking

Fact-checking originally emerged in the early 20th century as an internal newsroom practice to ensure factual accuracy in journalistic productions. Yet contemporary fact-checking increasingly refers to the practice of validating public statements and then publicizing the results to inform the public (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). In response to the proliferation of misinformation and/or disinformation, a global fact-checking movement has emerged in the past decade. Practitioners with strong roots in professional journalism dominate the field. They generally uphold principles of accuracy, impartiality, independence, transparency in sources and evidence, and an exclusive focus on fact-based claims that can be objectively proved or disproved (Graves, 2016; Walter & Salovich, 2021). Meanwhile, a growing number of nonprofit organizations, think tanks, and academic institutions are joining the ranks.

Throughout the literature, false information has been studied in relation to its potential adverse implications for deliberation and democracy. Fact-checking is proposed as a remedy in the fight against false information (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2022). Consequently, existing studies predominantly focus on the effectiveness of fact-checking, exhibiting mixed results ranging from "backfire effects" and a lack of significant effects to positive effects on reducing political misbelief and promoting media literacy (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Walter, Cohen, Holbert, & Morag, 2020). Recent studies have found that growing science denialism and mistrust in established institutions foster audiences' skepticism toward newsroom fact-checking and prompt them to develop personalized information verification routines (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Some studies are concerned with questionable fact-checking practices and the lack of operational standardization among major agencies (Lim, 2018; Marietta, Barker, & Bowser, 2015). Fact-checkers sometimes venture beyond examining "checkable facts" and attempt to (in)validate uncheckable claims, such as statements of opinion, predictions, and the personal lives of public figures

(Liu & Zhou, 2022; Uscinski & Butler, 2013). Some scholars further call for attention to the contested epistemology of fact-checking (Graves, 2017). Uscinski and Butler (2013), for instance, challenge the underlying epistemological assumption that facts and the fact-opinion distinction are unambiguous and not subject to interpretation. Amazeen (2015), however, defends the fact-checking enterprise, highlighting that while the evaluation of facts often depends on contexts and interpretations, there are certain indisputable facts and practices of deception.

More pertinent to this study is the politicization of fact-checking. At its core, fact-checking involves discerning the boundaries between truthful and false information, a process that can turn it into a contested political battleground. As Farkas and Schou (2018) note in their study of fake news, any attempt to categorize, classify, and identify between “fake” and “true” is a political practice because it involves a struggle over “who obtains the power to define what is deemed as truthful, who can portray social reality accurately, and in what ways” (p. 308). In this sense, fact-checking is part of a larger battleground in which various agents struggle to define what counts as valid or deceitful and who assumes the authority to determine the truth.

Fact-checking can engage in political struggle in various ways. For instance, the Ukrainian activist project *StopFake* turns fact-checking “into a counter-propaganda weapon” against Russian state-sponsored fake news campaigns (Haigh et al., 2018, p. 1). While many journalistic fact-checkers advocate for clear boundaries between fact-checking and activism, emphasizing the importance of remaining impartial (Mena, 2019), some fact-checkers identify as information activists, prioritizing civic engagement and public accountability (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). In some cases, fact-checking motivated by partisan interests may selectively debunk false information to defend their side and discredit their opponents. A typical example is the U.S. conservative outlet *NewsBusters*, which dedicates itself to debunking reports from liberal media (Graves, 2016). Under the veil of fact-checking, the labeling of a political statement as “fake” and untrustworthy can deploy various discursive strategies to undermine the credibility of the target (Farhall, Carson, Wright, Gibbons, & Lukamto, 2019).

The extent to which fact-checking practices depart from professional standards and become mere propaganda is a matter of degree. Some projects may predominantly address opposing opinions rather than factual claims (Jackson, 2017). Fact-checking stamps are often appropriated as intuitively understandable visual cues in projects that deliberately mimic the work of fact-checkers (Schuldt, 2021), despite research suggesting that these stamps do not reduce the perceived accuracy of fake news pieces (Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018). In other instances, a fact-checker that primarily debunks misinformation disfavoring one side can still adhere to certain professional principles, such as using transparent sources. In fact, to maximize political impact, partisan fact-checking needs to employ certain strategies to secure perceived credibility and legitimacy (Tsang, Feng, & Lee, 2023).

In sum, without dismissing the value of fact-checking, more research is needed to understand its political implications across diverse circumstances and contexts. While much of the existing research has focused on the Western professional style of fact-checking, it is equally important to discuss how fact-checking can be understood in authoritarian propagandistic discourses.

Fact-Checking and Information Control in Authoritarian Discourses

Critics have noted a global trend in which governments and populist politicians set up their own fact-checking projects for political purposes. For example, the president-owned news outlet in Mexico launched its fact-checking operation in 2019, claiming to debunk questionable media content using the same name that pre-existing fact-checking initiatives in Mexico have been using. It was seen as an attempt to co-opt "the popularity of fact-checking to format their talking points" (Funke & Benkelman, 2019, para. 6). This trend is closely related to the weaponization of the term "fake news" by populist politicians seeking to discredit the news media, journalistic actors, and their coverage. The most prominent example is former U.S. President Trump's labeling of unfavorable media as "fake news" (Tandoc, 2019).

Scholars generally caution that the weaponization of fake news accusations and the co-optation of fact-checking pose risks to journalism as a democratic institution and, consequently, threaten democracy (Funke & Benkelman, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). The use of "fake news" rhetoric has been linked to the global rise of authoritarianism and media censorship (Neo, 2022; Pascale, 2019). Fake news accusations have become "a useful weapon in the dictator's toolkit against the media" (Lees, 2018). The Committee to Protect Journalists warns about the alarming global rise in journalists being imprisoned under charge of producing or spreading false news (Philp, 2019).

Unlike the decentralized fact-checking landscape in Western democracies, in regimes where the media is heavily censored and seen as a key institution for supporting the state's nation-building efforts, governmental or pro-government fact-checking becomes an important, and sometimes even monopolized, source of information (Schuldt, 2021). The watchdog role of fact-checking may be weakened and distorted. Practitioners, including privately owned ones, would often have to avoid engaging with hardcore political issues and refrain from overseeing political power (Liu & Zhou, 2022). This distinction has important implications that warrant careful consideration and discussion.

Authoritarian discourses often frame fake news as an unprecedented and existential threat that targets national security and fundamental social stability. This framing aims to evoke mass anxiety within society, ultimately justifying the enactment of antifake news legislation that restricts press freedom, facilitates media censorship, and suppresses civil liberties (Neo, 2022). Official fact-checking can be part of these authoritarian efforts. Schuldt's (2021) analysis of official fact-checking sites in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand reveals that their practices primarily serve to perpetuate the perception of a persistent and pervasive fake news threat. Moreover, these official fact-checks align with the antifake news discourses that set the stage for restrictive legislation.

Furthermore, the authoritarian appropriation of fact-checking points to state strategies to manage information that threaten the legitimacy of those in power. For example, rumors, referring to unverified or simply unverifiable information, may be particularly prevalent in nondemocracies because of the lack of independent media and credible public information sources (Shibutani, 1966). The spread of rumors sometimes serves as a form of social protest against the official version of social reality, challenging the state's role as the sole arbiter of truth (Hu, 2009). In societies with low political trust, official rumor rebuttals are often contested by citizens, failing to reframe the issue or enhance citizens' trust during controversial

social affairs (Huang, 2017; Zeng, Burgess, & Bruns, 2019). Despite potential backfire effects, rumor-debunking remains a necessary tool for authoritarian states to maintain authority over official information and narratives. For instance, Fang (2022) argues that fact-checking in mainland China is not only co-opted for domestic information control but also used as part of the state's overseas publicity campaign to dismiss criticisms from Western media and politicians as "false rumors."

The absence of a strict definition of what counts as "fake news" in legislation grants states extensive powers over media and information that they would not otherwise possess. When state authorities become the sole arbiters of truth and falsehood, they can pave the way for establishing legal mechanisms that allow for selective enforcement against political dissent. For China, combined with legal tools to penalize "rumormongers," fact-checking was co-opted as a major strategy to censor unwanted information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fang, 2022).

Information Politics and Fact-Checking in COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was marked by the pervasive spread of false information, to the extent that the World Health Organization termed it an "infodemic." Misinformation surrounding various topics, such as the origin of the virus, false cures and preventative measures, and government response, was widespread on a global scale. The spread of misinformation is often intertwined with existing political and social dynamics in societies, exhibiting a significant degree of heterogeneity (Siwakoti et al., 2021). The pandemic appeared to have become a venue for "very different actors with a range of different motivations and goals to produce a variety of types of misinformation about many different topics" (Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020, p. 8).

Some misinformation may spread "unintentionally," driven by the public's psychological need to cope with anxiety and uncertainty during crises (Shibutani, 1966) and the growing trend of science denialism and institutional distrust (Waisbord, 2018). Certain misinformation appears to be politically motivated. For instance, bioweapon theories—claiming that the coronavirus was created in a secret bioweapons facility and that it was the origin point for a deliberate or accidental release—are being disseminated in both United States and Chinese societies. These theories are believed to involve a geopolitical struggle between the two governments, each trying to assign blame to the other for the pandemic's origins (Mohammadi, Tahamtan, Mansourian, & Overton, 2022). Another example is the dissemination of fake news specifically targeting politicians and government leaders to discredit them and foster distrust among the public (Siwakoti et al., 2021).

The circulation of false claims surrounding COVID-19 led to an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, refusal to wear masks and practice social distancing, and a global reluctance to COVID-19 vaccination (Cotter, DeCook, & Kanthawala, 2022). Consequently, the dismissal of public health precautions and the promotion of unverified, potentially dangerous treatments put people's lives at risk. In response, fact-checkers worldwide, among many other actors, undertook unprecedented efforts. Krause, Freiling, Beets, and Brossard (2020) pointed out that during the pandemic, fact-checkers attempted to define the threat posed by misinformation and positioned themselves as credible mitigators of this threat. A Princeton University report (Siwakoti et al., 2021) on COVID-19 misinformation found that collaborative fact-checking

initiatives involving journalists, citizens, civil society actors, and governments had emerged globally. Distinct fact-checking landscapes were also observed. For example, in Europe and the United States, fact-checking was mainly carried out by privately run, independent organizations. In contrast, the leading fact-checking sites in China were government-affiliated, deviating little from state narratives (Siwakoti et al., 2021).

Empirical studies generally find that fact-checking can effectively counter COVID-19-related misinformation (Kreps & Kriner, 2022; Porter & Wood, 2021), though the effects may be ephemeral (Carey et al., 2022). Fact-checkers have played a crucial role in defending truthfulness within the public sphere, contributing to the functioning of democratic institutions during the pandemic (Lin, 2022; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020). However, research also suggests that fact-checking efforts are sometimes contested by recipients. Tripodi (2022) finds that inconsistencies and ambiguities in governmental fact-checking in the United States fueled conservatives' belief that fact-checking is biased against them. In social communities that deny the COVID threat, fact-checking can paradoxically increase trust in the false message because the fact-check is perceived as further validating the credibility of that message. Moreover, the rhetoric of fact-checking and scientific rigor, such as being critical of data sources, can be manipulated by coronavirus skeptics to promote conspiracy theories (Lee, Yang, Inchoco, Jones, & Satyanarayan, 2021).

Meanwhile, the pandemic presented an opportunity for governments to tighten their political control. Pleyers (2020) observed that some governments exploited the media's attention on the virus spread to silence criticism and monopolize media coverage by prioritizing pandemic-related issues and control measures. These attempts to shape public discourses were not limited to authoritarian states and populist leaders. In terms of social control during the pandemic, "the border between democracy and authoritarian regimes sometimes appears blurred" (Pleyers, 2020, p. 307). Amidst the unprecedented health crisis, a growing number of citizens worldwide sought protection and guidance from state leaders, willingly accepting exceptional social control measures. Some even considered authoritarianism to be the most efficient in handling the crisis.

As discussed, fact-checking that aligns with official discourses can be deployed to promote authoritarian discourses and suppress dissent. In authoritarian states during emergent crises or disasters, newsroom fact-checking tends to treat the government as the sole authority of information, debunking only after official clarifications, as the government often monopolizes the available information (Kwanda & Lin, 2020). Analyzing two fact-checking websites in mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fang (2022) argues that fact-checking was co-opted by the Chinese government to "propagate official discourses" (p. 119). Although their practices shared a similar format with globally established fact-checkers, their content relied heavily on official sources and largely aligned with the government's narrative.

Case Background: COVID-19 and Face-Checking in Hong Kong

Hong Kong presents an intriguing case for examining the authoritarian discursive use of fact-checking. The city has been regarded as a typical hybrid regime with a certain degree of freedom of the press (Cheng, 2016). Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong does not have a pre-publication censorship system. Despite interference from the Chinese Central government after the handover in 1997, a degree of heterogeneity in public discourse has been preserved (Lee, 2018). However, the space for dissent has

dramatically diminished recently, particularly after the enactment of the NSL in June 2020, which criminalized secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign powers (Lee & Chan, 2023).

When COVID-19 cases began to appear in Hong Kong in January 2020, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement¹, which started in June 2019, was ongoing. The mass protests were soon subdued by the outbreak, the government's pandemic control policies, and the implementation of the NSL. Some critics note that the Hong Kong government used the social distancing measures and group gathering restrictions implemented to address the COVID-19 outbreak as a means to disallow mass rallies and the June 4 Tiananmen commemoration (Thiessen, 2020). Deva (2020) argues that Hong Kong provides a case for understanding how an authoritarian state makes use of the pandemic to aid human rights suppression.

Pandemic control in Hong Kong became highly politicized, primarily because of the low level of public trust in the government following the Anti-ELAB movement. Many perceived the government's control measures not as legitimate and reasonable, but rather as politically motivated tactics to suppress public gatherings and protests. This sentiment was particularly strong when the government, despite public pressure, opted to tighten control measures instead of closing the Hong Kong-Mainland border in the early stages of the pandemic (Lee, 2022).

Fact-checking began garnering public attention amid the 2019 protests, where the dynamics were significantly influenced by the presence or absence of truthful information. Several fact-checking agencies have been established since then, including *Annie Lab*, *Factcheck Lab*, and *BUHK Factcheck*. Additionally, civil Facebook pages, such as *Kauyim* and *TrueNews*, have actively engaged in fact-checking efforts. It is also worth noting that, during the movement, the Hong Kong Police adopted a professional fact-checking style in their public communication, such as using verified labels and adding hashtags like "#factcheck" in their Facebook posts to address rumors and allegations against the police force (Kajimoto, 2023).

In early 2020, when the mass protests subsided and the pandemic became another prominent social issue, fact-checkers had to respond accordingly. Considering the political nature of the pandemic, as discussed, it is reasonable to expect partisan fact-checkers to extend their existing biases in the movement-counter movement dynamic (i.e., the antigovernment and pro-government dynamics) to COVID-19-related issues. In particular, pro-government fact-checking could be instrumentalized to justify the government's political control and propagate state agendas. Based on the conceptual and contextual discussion, this empirical study examines the fact-checking practice of the pro-government, self-proclaimed fact-checker *TrueNews* during COVID-19 to investigate how fact-checking can be leveraged by the state to facilitate propaganda during a public health crisis.

¹ The Anti-ELAB Movement originally started as an opposition against the Hong Kong government's plan of amending the Fugitive Ordinance to allow extradition of Hong Kong suspects to mainland China or Taiwan. The movement was sparked by the distrust in the Chinese legal system. Protesters later extended their demands to political reform and investigation of police brutality. It soon evolved into the largest-scale mass protest in the city's history.

*TrueNews*² is a Facebook page established in September 2019 amidst the protests. It claims it fact-checks, with its cover picture highlighting terms like “accuracy,” “fairness,” “in-depth investigation,” and “fact-check.” Its fact-checking techniques include tracing the claims’ origins, conducting reverse image searches, and cross-checking them with official accounts. As of January 2023, its Facebook page had more than 23,000 followers. *TrueNews*’ pro-government bias in the 2019 protest movement has been demonstrated in earlier studies employing quantitative content analysis. These studies indicated that *TrueNews* tended to selectively debunk misinformation targeting the government, offered more explicit criticisms when debunking such information, ventured into misleading claims beyond factual inaccuracies, and uncritically cited government sources (Feng, Tsang, & Lee, 2021; Tsang et al., 2023).

Data and Methods

To address the research questions, the present study analyzed posts pertinent to the COVID outbreak published by the pro-government fact-checking agency *TrueNews* between January 2, 2020 (the date when the first fact-checking post about the new coronavirus was published on *TrueNews*) and December 31, 2020. The final sample consisted of 185 posts.

The data for this study were initially collected by my colleague and me during our work on a project to archive COVID-related misinformation and fact-checking efforts in Hong Kong. As part of the project, a data set of fact-checking posts from *TrueNews* was created. We visited *TrueNews*’ Facebook page daily and collected posts that contained keywords like “COVID,” “Wuhan virus,” “new coronavirus,” or “pandemic.” The data set recorded certain basic information about the posts, including links, publication dates, and the claims or materials being examined.

Since this study aims to explore how fact-checking can be appropriated for propaganda, the selection criteria of the analyzed posts were not based on professional standards of fact-checking, such as nonpartisanship and objectivity. Instead, all posts that contained elements commonly associated with fact-checking, such as a false tag and the (in)validation of a piece of information, were included. A typical post published by *TrueNews* consisted of a title, a few paragraphs of text, and accompanying images in the form of screencaps of the claims being examined, with a false tag (see an example in Figure 1). This study specifically focused on the self-created text and visuals of *TrueNews*, excluding posts that solely reposted information from other sources without any original content.

² *TrueNews*’ Facebook page was no longer publicly accessible when checked on June 2024. Archived data related to this research is available from the author.



Figure 1. A screenshot of a fact-checking post with a red label of "misleading" (誤導) by TrueNews (2020a).

Figure 2 summarizes the posting frequency by month in 2020. TrueNews' COVID-related fact-checking efforts were most prominent in the first three months since the outbreak, reaching a peak in February with 54 posts. This is understandable considering the absence of reliable information during the early stages of the outbreak, which led to the proliferation of rumors, conspiracy theories, and misinformation. The number of posts gradually declined to only a few per month in subsequent months. There was a slight increase between July and September, following a substantial uptick of COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong in July. The implementation of several government interventions in July further fueled the rise of antigovernment rumors and related debunking. These interventions included requesting help from mainland medical workers, postponing the 2020 Legislative Council Election citing public health concerns, and introducing universal testing. Around half of the total posts addressed rumors and misinformation related to these government policies.

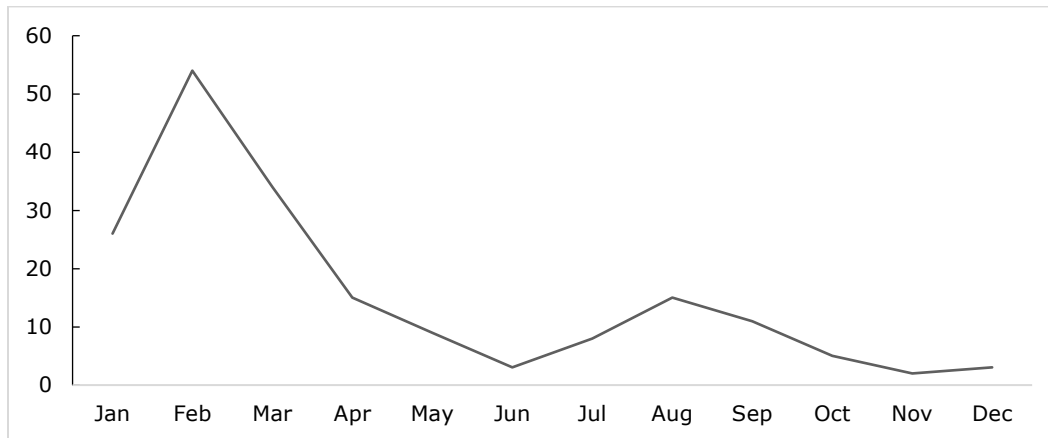


Figure 2. Number of posts published by TrueNews in 2020 by month.

To explore *TrueNews*' pro-government inclination, a quantitative content analysis was first conducted on the posts³. Two key variables were registered (see Appendix for a detailed codebook):

Targets of the claim being examined. This variable aids our understanding of *TrueNews*' selective preference for claims to debunk. It was measured by recording whether the claim verified in the post attacks (a) the Hong Kong government and/or pro-government forces, (b) the Chinese Central government, (c) the pro-democracy camp, and (d) others. For example, claims that coronavirus was created in a secret bioweapons facility in China targeted the Chinese Central Government. The categories are not mutually exclusive. A claim can either target multiple parties simultaneously or not target any specific party.

Source of materials used in the post. The sources of materials were classified into (1) official sources, (2) media sources, which were further differentiated into establishment and nonestablishment media, (3) original sources, (4) experts or professionals, (5) other sources, and (6) no source provided. This variable allowed us to observe the extent to which *TrueNews* relied on government sources and propagated official discourses.

Then, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis based on a close and iterative reading of the posts to identify recurring patterns and logics associated with the analysis of discursive strategies. I went through five phases of the inductive thematic analysis process, as informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). These phases included familiarizing myself with the data (reading and re-reading data and noting down initial ideas), generating initial codes (coding interesting features systematically), searching for themes (collating codes into potential themes), reviewing themes, naming themes, and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In addition to the text, I also paid attention to the formats and visual elements of the posts.

³ The codebook was developed in collaboration with my collaborator, Nathan Tsang Long-Tin. Part of the content analysis results was presented in the 10th Seminar for Hong Kong Cultural and Society held in Hong Kong in November 2022 with Nathan Tsang.

Analysis and Findings

Pro-Government Selective Bias

Overall, 78 (42.2%) of *TrueNews*' posts focused on claims targeting the Hong Kong local government and/or pro-government camp, while 78 (42.2%) focused on claims against the Chinese Central government. The topics covered COVID-19-related government policies, compulsory universal testing, the origins of the coronavirus, and China's initial cover-up of the virus. 140 (75.7%) posts were dedicated to claims targeting the establishment, which combines the Hong Kong government, the pro-government camp, and the Chinese Central government into one category. In contrast, only 14 (7.6%) of the posts examined claims that targeted other entities. Meanwhile, 35 (18.9%) of the posts examined claims that did not target any specific individual or entity (Figure 3). In other words, of the 150 posts that examined claims with at least one specific target, 93.3% examined claims that were unfavorable toward the authorities and/or their supporters. The results indicate *TrueNews*' apparent attempt to counter allegations against the authorities.

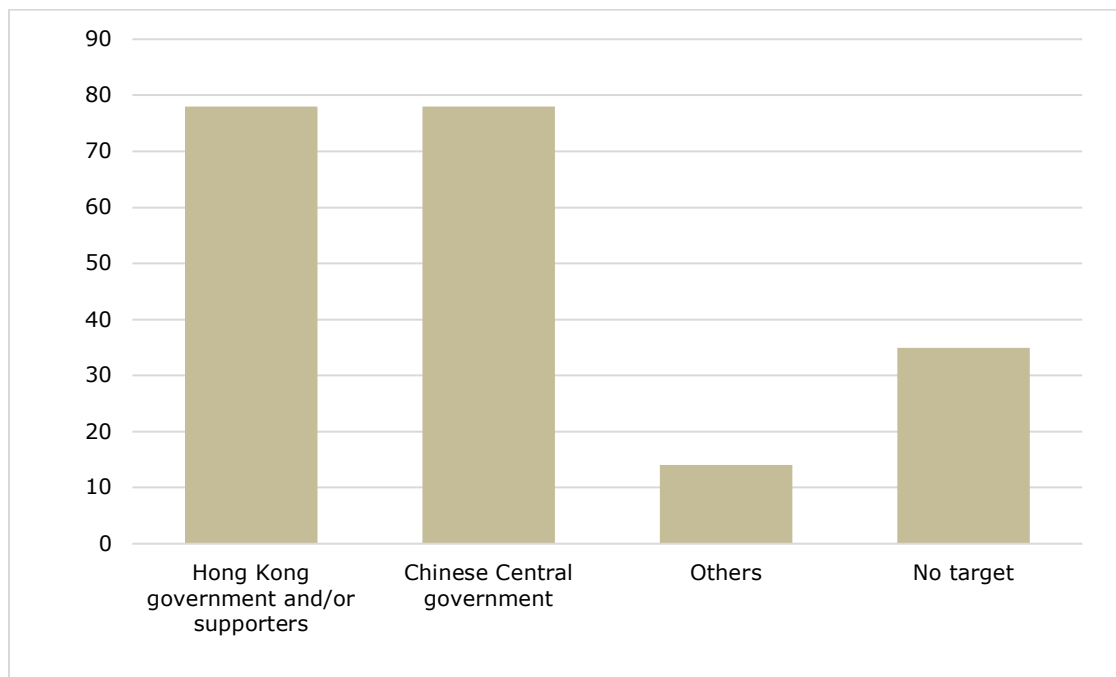


Figure 3. Targets of the claims examined by TrueNews.

About the sourcing pattern of *TrueNews* (Figure 4), the data show that Hong Kong official sources accounted for the largest portion (66 posts, 35.7%). Among these, two-thirds (44 posts) cited the government as the sole source. Additionally, 50 posts (27%) cited media sources, of which over half (28 posts) cited state-owned or pro-government media. It is reasonable to refer to official sources during emergent crises, in which the government often monopolizes available information. However, in situations

where the government itself is subject to dispute, treating official information as unquestionable and the sole truth could potentially suppress alternative voices.

Meanwhile, 40 posts (21.6%) traced original materials, and 15 (8.1%) cited experts. It is worth noting that 21 posts (11.4%) did not cite any source. The absence of transparent sources for cross-checking contradicts the premise of professional fact-checking practices. The results suggest that *TrueNews* may sometimes mimic the style of fact-checking without providing source-based verification.

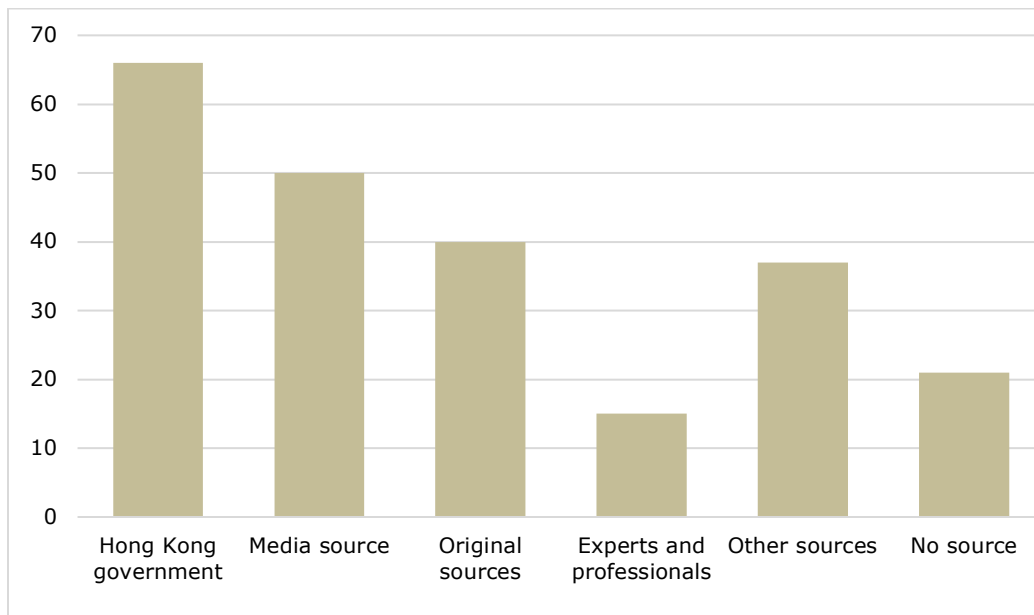


Figure 4. Sources cited in fact-checking posts by TrueNews.

Findings from the textual analysis would provide us with a more nuanced understanding. Across the studied material, three interrelated discursive strategies were identified and will subsequently be elaborated upon.

Labeling Dissents as Anti-Government Propaganda

The analysis showed that *TrueNews* tended to label statements expressing disagreement with the authorities as misleading information or rumors. Here, I provide some examples. In March 2020, a post published by a pro-democracy online media page claimed that Hong Kong's success in combating the virus was not because of the government's efforts, but rather a result of the medical worker union's strike that pressured the government to close the Hong Kong-Mainland China border. In response, *TrueNews'* (2020b) post labeled this claim as "misleading" with a red stamp. It went on to criticize the claim maker as a "propaganda organization" that had "repeatedly spread fabrication information" (TrueNews, 2020b, para. 2). The post cited the government, stating that its decision-making process was based on advice from the government's expert team. The post then concluded that any alternative claims were groundless and misleading.

Another example is when the Hong Kong government implemented a policy mandating citizens to wear masks in public indoor venues in July 2020. Some online critics sarcastically compared this policy to the Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation enacted during the protest movement to express suspicion that the government's decision was politically motivated. *TrueNews* (2020c) published a post that included a red "misleading" label on a screenshot of this online claim. The post stated:

However, at the critical moment of the battle against the epidemic, there are always people who deliberately politicized the issue and smear the government . . . the "yellow ribbon"⁴ district council member raised such a "comparison," intending to incite attacks against the government. In fact, the Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation already mentioned exemptions for health reasons (with a hyperlink to the government website) . . . In other words, the above "questioning" is unreasonable. (*TrueNews*, 2020c, para. 1–3, emphasis in original)

These two examples illustrate how *TrueNews* attributed disagreement with the government's pandemic policies to malicious or propagandistic intentions aimed at undermining governmental authority. It is undeniable that some dissenting statements or claims may contain false information or one-sided propagandistic material. However, the act of disagreement itself, regardless of its reasonableness, falls within the realm of opinion. While fact-checking practitioners might recognize the challenge of distinguishing between facts and opinions in certain cases, it exceeds their scope to offer a classification of the intentions behind claims and criticism. The problem lies not in whether the claim makers have politicized intentions, but rather in the fact that intention is subjective and can be difficult for third parties to objectively verify. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that allowing space for dissent to exist and be debated is essential for democracy and responsible governance. By labeling opinions as deliberately politicizing pandemic control or inciting hatred toward the government, *TrueNews* disputed the integrity and legitimacy of dissenters, potentially stifling necessary public discussions.

An Extension of Counter-Movement Framing

Related to the first aspect, *TrueNews* has also adopted a set of discursive labels developed in the Anti-ELAB movement to criticize dissenters who were critical to the government during the pandemic. An example of this is the use of the term "yellow ribbon," as observed in the aforementioned case.

Another example occurred in July 2020, when Hong Kong experienced a sharp rise in new infections. The local government sought help from the Chinese Central government by requesting medical workers from mainland China. A pro-democracy politician expressed concern that this request intruded upon Hong Kong's existing medical professional system and risked undermining the "one country, two systems" principle. In response, *TrueNews* (2020d) labeled this statement "misleading" with a red stamp, accused the politician of "creating public opinion to slander the Hong Kong government," and associated the statement with the "wong-haak" and "laam-chau" camps (para. 2). "Wong-haak" literally means "yellow and black," with "yellow" referring to the antiestablishment camp and "black" referring to radical protesters in local contexts. "Laam-chau" literally

⁴ "Yellow ribbon" is a term referring to the anti-establishment camp in Hong Kong since the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

signifies “burning together.” These are context-specific terms widely used by state-owned media to emphasize tactical and ideological radicalism during the Anti-ELAB movement. Moreover, *TrueNews*’ text (2020d) depicted the politician as “separatist” (para. 3) and “anti-China and anti-communism” (para. 8).

In this example, *TrueNews* bridged multiple countermovement discursive labels to refute the claim and explicitly criticized the antiestablishment claim makers. By doing so, *TrueNews*’ narrative perpetuated countermovement discourses within the framework of fact-checking and endorsed authoritarian discourses. It is important to note that separatism is one of the four major offenses under the NSL implemented in June 2020, carrying a penalty of five to ten years of fixed-term imprisonment. A recent study by Lee and Chan (2023) on NSL and press control in Hong Kong highlighted that being targeted by pro-government actors can entail both political and legal risks. In this sense, labeling someone as a separatist and anti-China should not be viewed simply as dismissive terms but as bearing explicit legal implications.

Social Threat Framing of Fake News

The third prominent discursive strategy employed by *TrueNews* was to frame falsehoods as an exigent threat to social stability during the health crisis. For example, in January 2020, when the demand for face masks surged because of a short supply in Hong Kong, a fake poster in the name of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB)⁵ was circulated online. The poster claimed that DAB politicians were going to distribute 10,000 boxes of masks to the public for free. *TrueNews* (2020e) debunked the fake poster by directly quoting the DAB’s announcement, which refuted the news and condemned the act of spreading rumors. Additionally, the post depicted the poster as “a propagandistic material” (para. 1), once again attributing a political purpose to it, aligning with the first discursive strategy. Furthermore, it criticized the poster creator for “creating rumor to hold back citywide efforts” and “instigating chaos and trouble while the entire city is fighting against the epidemic” (*TrueNews*, 2020e, para. 3). The post also included a red label stating “making rumors to create chaos” on the materials.

It is important to note that debunking the fake poster is not problematic and may be necessary, considering the potential reach and detrimental consequences of fake news. Similarly, quoting the clarification and denial from the parties involved, such as the DAB in this case, is not problematic either. In fact, this fake poster has also been debunked by other news outlets. Questionable practices arose when the post attempted to blend the cited source with its own criticism and framing of fake news. The emphasis on how a piece of misinformation could undermine social stability and the efforts to fight COVID-19 align with the framing of fake news as an existential security issue observed in authoritarian discourses. This framing has been used to justify the enactment of antifake news laws in societies where social stability is often regarded as a value of greater importance than freedom (Neo, 2022).

It is suggested that amidst an unprecedented health crisis, citizens tend to seek protection and guidance from state leaders, willingly accepting exceptional measures of social control (Pleyers, 2020). While not the primary focus of this study, a close reading of the comments under the posts revealed that

⁵ DAB is the biggest pro-establishment party in Hong Kong.

many called for government or police intervention to halt the spread of false information, such as implementing antifake news laws or arresting those responsible for disseminating misleading information.

Concluding Discussion

This article examines how pro-government fact-checking handled COVID-19-related disinformation and/or misinformation. Prior studies have confirmed that pro-government fact-checking may exhibit biases by selectively debunking more antigovernment claims, providing more explicit criticisms when debunking such claims, and uncritically citing government sources (Feng et al., 2021; Tsang et al., 2023). This study extends the discussion. The analysis reveals that *TrueNews'* pro-government inclination can also be observed in the context of COVID-19, primarily by prioritizing false information or rumors that targeted the authorities and being more likely to rely on official sources.

In addition, the analysis highlights how the pro-government fact-checker employed various discursive strategies to advance its political agendas that favor government discourses under the guise of fact-checking. These discursive strategies include labeling dissent as antigovernment propaganda, an extended appropriation of countermovement labels, and framing false information as a social threat during the health crisis. These strategies and framings are not used in isolation but are often combined to undermine the integrity and legitimacy of those who express critical views toward the government's pandemic control measures, thereby further legitimizing the authorities' control.

The findings have several implications for our understanding of fact-checking and propaganda. First, while existing literature predominantly focuses on the journalistic professional style of fact-checking, this study develops a nuanced understanding of fact-checking and revisits it as a political practice. The act of attaching negative images or impressions to opponents is not a new phenomenon. What distinguishes partisan fact-checking practices from one-sided vituperation is their association with facticity and the perceived authority to determine the truth in political struggle. Drawing on the insights from Farkas and Schou (2018), fact-checking can be seen as a critical focal point in a major political battleground. By co-opting fact-checking, political actors struggle with critical public opinion, aiming to "fixate meaning, obtain hegemony, and impose their worldview onto the social" (p. 307). *TrueNews'* efforts are in line with the global trend in which governments and populist politicians set up fact-checking projects for propaganda (Funke & Benkelman, 2019).

Despite *TrueNews'* pro-government bias, I do not intend to argue that its practices are utterly problematic, nor do I attempt to assess how problematic they are. Official information and official clarification play a significant role during health crises, as misinformation can endanger people's lives (Siwakoti et al., 2021). Some of *TrueNews'* posts have addressed factual inaccuracies and provided transparent, valid sources. Future research could employ a comparative approach to investigate how different actors in different societies co-opt fact-checking for propaganda purposes.

Second, this study highlights the importance of examining pro-government fact-checking in authoritarian discourses, where such fact-checking efforts contribute to establishing a monopoly over determining truth in the public arena (Uscinski, 2015). The findings echo previous studies, which have shown that fact-checking can be manipulated by authoritarian state actors to promote state discourses, suppress dissent, and facilitate broader censorship of press freedom (Fang, 2022). Through a mixed-method content

analysis, this study further substantiates Schuldt's (2021) study on how state-sponsored fact-checking can be integrated into authoritarian discourses to legitimize the passing of antifake news legislation by framing concerns over fake news as existential threats.

By framing misinformation as antigovernment propaganda or even secessionist and subversive activities, pro-government fact-checking may push forward the idea that "fake news" is an urgent social issue. This portrays the government as the primary victim, thereby justifying the need for state intervention. In fact, a search via WiseNews found an opinion piece published as early as June 2019 in the state-owned newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* advising the government to learn from foreign experiences in addressing false information targeting the police. Subsequently, the Hong Kong government announced its consideration of an antifake news law. While pro-government fact-checking may just constitute part of the heterogeneity in public discourse in societies with high levels of freedom of speech, it can monopolize public discourse, restrict free speech, and support media censorship in authoritarian contexts (Fang, 2022; Siwakoti et al., 2021). Future research can systematically investigate the interactions among fact-checking agencies, pro-establishment media outlets, and state discourses.

Third, while previous studies on propagandistic fact-checking focused on political contexts, such as elections and social movements, this study expands the discussion to include the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis acknowledges the politicization of the COVID-19 "infodemic," as observed in the case of Hong Kong. These findings enrich our understanding of how fact-checking can facilitate authoritarian states to regain legitimacy by exploiting health crises. This aligns with previous research showing that the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for states, both authoritarian and democratic, to legitimize tightened social control (Pleyers, 2020). By labeling dissenting public opinions as "fake news" and portraying them as threats to social stability, pro-government fact-checking may serve to justify the escalation of state control measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Insights from Hong Kong shed light on the discussion about authoritarian propaganda in light of the global rise of authoritarianism (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018).

It is important to note that this analysis does not aim to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive account. It only focuses on pro-government fact-checking, using the case of *TrueNews* during the first year of the COVID-19 outbreak. The performance of fact-checkers could certainly evolve in response to changing pandemic situations, developments in vaccination and treatment, and the overall political environment. How do different types of fact-checking, including pro-government ones, adapt and respond to these changes? How do different parts of the state collaborate to facilitate an authoritarian turn under the guise of fact-checking? Future research could include other cases for comparative and longitudinal studies.

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Appendix. Coding Scheme

Targets of the claim being examined. The statement being examined is unfavorable to (multiple options possible for 1-4):

1. Hong Kong government and/or pro-government forces, including different departments, officials, police, and pro-establishment politicians
2. Chinese Central government, including different departments, government at different administrative levels, officials, and police

3. Pro-democracy camp, including opponents of the Hong Kong government, pro-democracy politicians and activists, and pro-democracy citizens
4. Others: entities that cannot be classified into any of the above categories
5. No target: the claim did not attack any entities

Source of material used in the post. Source is defined as materials or information cited to support the fact-checking judgment. Register whether a post consists of the following sources:

1. Hong Kong or Chinese Central official sources: including governmental bodies, officials of the Hong Kong or Chinese government, and official documents (e.g., census data, government press releases, policy reports, and information on the government's official website)
2. Pro-establishment media outlets: including state-owned media, Hong Kong media outlets with organizational links with mainland China or the Hong Kong government, and pro-China online media
3. Nonestablishment media outlets, including pro-democracy media, independent media, and international media
4. Original materials: using materials such as the original, undoctored text, pictures, and videos to verify or falsify the claim
5. Experts or professionals, including scholars, scientists, and medical and healthcare professionals
6. Other sources: including sources that cannot be classified into any of the above categories
7. No source provided