

Fact-Checking Role Performances and Problematic Covid-19 Vaccine Content in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The move from political fact-checking to a “public health” or debunking model of fact-checking, sustained by policies and funding from platforms, highlights important tensions in the case of Covid-19. Building on findings from studies focused on journalistic role performance, we investigated how professional fact-checkers in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa conceived of and performed their professional roles when addressing Covid-19 vaccination topics. Interviews with fact-checkers from six well-established, Meta-affiliated, International Fact-Checking Network-accredited organizations operating in these regions indicated that fact-checkers recognized the diversification of tasks and new roles associated with addressing problematic content from social media users. However, fact-checkers expressed unanimous commitment to prioritizing political and media watchdog activities in response to problematic Covid-19 vaccine information spreading from elite sources. To compare these role conceptions with role performance, we conducted a content analysis of Covid-19 vaccine content posted in 2021 to these fact-checkers’ Facebook accounts. We found that content was mostly associated with explainers or debunking content (addressing hoaxes or rumors about Covid-19 vaccines from non-elite social media users). In particular, the abundance of explainers, compared with other genres of fact-checking content, aligns fact-checkers with professional roles as civic service providers, educators, and “interpreters” of health information. Only a small proportion of the Covid-19 vaccine-related posts from each fact-checker contained verifications of claims from authoritative (elite “top-down”) sources (i.e., politicians, media, and health/science professionals). This study offers insights into a particularly tumultuous time of political activity in these regions and considers implications for practice innovation.

Keywords

Africa; Covid-19; debunking; fact-checking; journalistic role performance; Latin America; Meta; politics; social media; vaccines

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, a growing body of research has investigated the Covid-19 fact-checking practices of various actors in online spaces (Brautović & John, 2023; Krause et al., 2020; Martínez-García & Ferrer, 2023; Moon et al., 2022; Zamit et al., 2020). Covid-19 has been characterized as “a multi-layered risk” for fact-checkers (Krause et al., 2020, p. 1052) because the challenges of distinguishing deliberate disinformation from non-expert misinterpretations and the associated health risks seem to be exacerbated in social media contexts. Problematic Covid-19 information spreads through media channels and platforms beyond national boundaries, and political discourses are deeply intertwined with scientific debates (Bruns et al., 2020; Ceron, de-Lima-Santos, & Quiles, 2021; Ceron, Gruszynski Sanseverino, et al., 2021; Freiling et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2020; Graham & FitzGerald, 2024; Hart et al., 2020; Scheufele et al., 2021). Political and media actors have been shown to be catalysts for amplifying problematic Covid-19 vaccination content, attracting “a highly engaged audience of predominantly far-right activists, anti-vaxxers, and conspiracy theorists who help to mobilize and amplify these post-truth narratives” (Graham & FitzGerald, 2024, p. 15). In the current study, we use the term “problematic information” as a catch-all for any Covid-19-related content that fact-checkers in our study selected to be problematic. This term captures misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). We recognize the definitional problems associated with the current intent-based and content-based typologies of mis- and disinformation, and we understand that propaganda and conspiracy-related content spreads alongside clickbait, rumors, hoaxes, and satire (Aïmeur et al., 2023). Given that we are investigating how fact-checkers assess media, claim, and actor legitimacy while performing their roles, we are primarily interested in how fact-checkers themselves conceive of problematic information independently of current academic debate. We identified this content through interviews with fact-checkers and through an analysis of organizational Facebook post content.

Social media platforms have their own understandings of what constitutes problematic content. To address what Meta recognized as problematic Covid-19 information flows online, they instituted policies and financially supported several media organizations and new platform practices. This included automatically directing Meta searches to credible sources of public health information and prohibiting problematic Facebook advertising. Meta’s Third-Party Partner Program also funds professional fact-checking organizations in more than 110 countries (Meta, n.d.-c) to flag problematic content across the Meta platforms’ ecology (Facebook, Instagram, and Threads). Once fact-checked, the content’s visibility is reduced on the platforms’ backend (Meta, n.d.-b). As part of this program, Meta’s third-party fact-checkers gain access to Meta’s proprietary artificial intelligence-enabled claim-surfacing tool (Full Fact, 2020; Funke, 2019). Membership in the program has led to several new fact-checking organizations establishing themselves, particularly in the so-called Global South; Graves et al. (2023) found that half of fact-checkers operating in 2023 were based in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Yet, support from platforms has created several tensions within the field of fact-checking. Of particular importance for this study, Meta’s fact-checking policies require their sponsored partner fact-checking

organizations to avoid debunking content and opinions from political actors and celebrities, among other elites, and avoid debunking political advertising (Meta, n.d.-a). Outside of the work produced through the official Meta partnership, Meta's policies do not prohibit fact-checkers from verifying claims from elite actors and posting that content on their own websites and social media accounts. Fact-checkers can even repost a fact check of a politician's Facebook post to their own website and social media accounts. However, this fact-checking effort would not be recognized as part of the fact-checker's arrangement with Meta, and therefore would not be financially supported. The content would not be flagged as problematic by Meta and so it would not be subject to reduced circulation on Meta platforms.

Graves et al. (2023) argue that through platform support, fact-checking has taken a "debunking turn," catalyzed by the proliferation of viral Covid-19 misinformation on platforms. Debunking strategies contrast with fact-checking practices that originated within the field of political journalism and news media to cover elections or political debates (Graves, 2016). Financial incentives or limits on work paid by platform partners may influence fact-checkers' priorities towards either debunking or political fact-checking, prompting fact-checkers to prioritize particular platform contexts (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Graves & Amazeen, 2019). In light of this, the rise of Meta's Third-Party Program as a dominant business model within the field of fact-checking may potentially hamper other high-standard verification practices, such as political, media, or scientific fact-checking. This could hinder impactful fact-checking interventions because politicians, in particular, continue to be important spreaders of problematic information (Graham & FitzGerald, 2024; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Despite the recognized field-wide pivot from a "public reason" model of fact-checking towards this "public health" model (Graves et al., 2023), there have been renewed calls for greater scrutiny of political elites from significant researchers in the field (e.g., Nielsen, 2024). Given the limited capacity and competing role demands of fact-checkers, particularly those operating in the so-called Global South, it is important to consider how fact-checkers think about and act in their roles, particularly when it comes to politicized scientific topics, like Covid-19 (Freiling et al., 2023; Moon et al., 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Connecting Fact-Checkers' Role Conceptions With Fact-Checking Practices and Methodologies*

Fact-checking is an ongoing and adaptive process; fact-checkers are developing their strategies to meet the challenges associated with maintaining journalistic integrity and combating misinformation at scale. To better understand how fact-checkers conceive of their roles and perform their activities, we draw on the theoretical and methodological research tools developed to study journalistic role performance (Mellado et al., 2016). The theory of journalistic role performance, and the project, investigates how journalists' practices have evolved alongside significant disruptions to the work of news organizations (Mellado et al., 2016). The proposed journalistic roles identified through the project include the interventionist, the watchdog, the loyal-facilitator, the service provider, the infotainer, and civic roles. These roles manifest across different practices, contexts, and news beats, and are influenced by elements including platforms, ownership, and political freedom (Mellado et al., 2024). Some researchers have extended the boundaries of the theory to identify a "negotiative" theory of roles, which recognizes that journalists undergo a process of negotiation to reconcile the perceived gap between their social role orientation and actual role performance, highlighting the importance of discourses in journalistic role enactment (Raemy & Vos, 2021). Researchers have found this theoretical framework useful because it not only captures how journalistic roles manifest in

practice but also helps researchers identify the tensions between professional conceptions of roles and how these roles are enacted in practice.

As Graves (2018) and others have demonstrated, fact-checking roles are mostly traditional. Fact-checkers are heterogeneous professionals and their field includes journalists, academics, and citizens who bring diverse traditions to their practices and journalistic cultures. However, they opt to work collaboratively and associatively to inform citizen decision-making and undertake media watchdog tasks rooted in civic movements. They often focus their efforts on verifying claims of prominent political figures engaged in electoral campaigns, political speeches, and other aspects of everyday politics. These are traditional journalistic roles previously described by Mellado et al. (2016) in their journalistic role performance typology. Political fact-checking methodologies are considered central to professional fact-checkers' self-perceptions of their watchdog roles (Ferracioli et al., 2022; Lauer, 2024) and these methodologies have standardized over the decades for political claims (Nieminen & Sankari, 2021). The *watchdog role*, considered the *raison d'être* of journalists, refers to a performance of journalistic monitoring and holding established power to account (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). This has been traditionally rooted in a professional commitment to scrutinize both the messaging and the actions of political, media, and civil elites to uphold the public interest (Tandoc et al., 2018). Rather than reflecting or reporting information about events, watchdog journalism requires investigation and criticality to expose wrongdoing. In fact-checking, this watchdog role has been enacted in how fact-checkers address what Luengo and García-Marín (2020) call "top-down" claims from elite actors, as opposed to debunking "bottom-up" claims represented by claims of social media users.

It is undeniable that fact-checkers have become key actors in the social media realm: creating their own detection and verification tools (Full Fact, 2020) and ways of correcting problematic information. Along with the debunking turn, fact-checkers' selection practices differ from traditional journalists because their starting point and routines are not shaped by the search for newsworthiness (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) or shareworthiness (Trilling et al., 2017), but rather checkworthiness (Soprano et al., 2021). The search for checkworthiness, as a set of journalistic and technological conditions, prompts fact-checkers to consider interventions beyond non-partisan guiding codes. These interventions support their role as journalistic "restorers," which remains a main aspirational and performative journalistic goal rooted in the fact-checking movement (Graves, 2016). New verification genres, shaped by topics and the origin of claims, and using embedded media, are emerging out of the growing fact-checking industry (Verhoeven et al., 2024). Fact-checkers' ways of correcting combine the hard formats (such as written verdicts and medium-sized explainers) and prebunking and debunking formats (which bring together vernacular objects, such as memes, gifs, illustrations, and visual explanations, in the explainers' distribution). Singer (2018) argues that fact-checkers are actually entrepreneurs, experimenting with media literacy and civic engagement activities, and finding ways to maintain their independence and commitment to transparency with increasingly scarce journalistic resources. These emergent practices and dependencies on platforms reflect roles that are not aligned with the existing typologies of journalistic role performance, which focus on journalists' individualistic and influencer-like roles on social media platforms (Mellado, 2022; Mellado & Hermida, 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, fact-checkers had central roles as intermediaries (Mellado & Vos, 2016), taking sides against producers of harmful content derived from problematic information and following platform content moderation imperatives. They also worked as interpreters rather than infotainers (another typified journalistic role) by making use of all platform resources and affordances at hand to distribute their

outputs and explain, in lay and engaging ways, the scientific and political complexities of the pandemic (Montaña-Niño et al., 2023). Fact-checkers in Latin America, in particular, were exploring long, short, and platformed formats where political fact-checking, prebunking, and debunking overlap at some points, and they were also innovating with explanatory pieces or short “checktainment” videos and memes distributed on social media platforms (Montaña-Niño et al., 2023).

2.2. Fact-Checking in the So-Called Global South

Fact-checkers working in regions in the so-called Global South, including fact-checkers in many countries working under authoritarian political systems, face additional challenges compared with their colleagues working in the Northern Hemisphere. They need to adapt fact-checking practices that have emerged in Western journalistic cultures to global standards and overcome the linguistic limitations of automated tools designed predominantly in English (Ceron, de-Lima-Santos, & Quiles, 2021; Ceron, Gruszynski Sanseverino, et al., 2021; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Moreno Gil et al., 2021; Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). Yet, research into role conceptions and the practices of fact-checkers working in platform-supported partnerships outside of the United States and European contexts has been particularly limited (see, for example, Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Graves et al., 2023).

In 2021, the ongoing spread of Covid-19 coincided with tumultuous periods of electoral political activity in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Government representatives in many countries engaged in “vaccine diplomacy” (Hill, 2021), creating complex geopolitical tensions that contributed to the spread of problematic information relating to Covid-19 vaccines. Representatives from Russia and China engaged in negotiations with many countries in the Global South to promote and sell their vaccines in competition with vaccines manufactured by companies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. For example, Sputnik V and the Chinese vaccines were acquired by governments in numerous countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa (Hill, 2021; Mallapaty, 2021). At the same time, problematic Covid-19 vaccine information circulated extensively, exploiting scientific uncertainties and public mistrust in political agendas. Some populist-elected governments deferred responsibility for public health communication to regional entities, which increased message confusion (Knaul et al., 2021) or promoted untested drugs or natural remedies as preventions and cures for Covid-19 (see, for example, Richey et al., 2021). Much of this large-scale problematic information and the responses to vaccine diplomacy flowed in multiple directions around the globe. According to the Argentinian fact-checking organization, Chequeado, in the last half of 2021, false claims that had been verified tended to travel from the United States and Spain to Latin America (Tardáguila, 2021). Despite some vaccine hesitancy and resistance attributed to concerns about safety and side effects, acceptance rates of Covid-19 vaccines in sub-Saharan Africa were generally high (Kanyanda et al., 2021), but political influences and religious beliefs played key roles in vaccine uncertainty (Kabakama et al., 2022).

Platform regulation in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa also lags behind the European Union and individual countries (i.e., Australia and Canada) that are attempting to regulate the power of the larger platforms and their business models. Studies to assess the regulatory relations of big technology companies have also emphasized the important place that platforms hold for creative industries and journalistic players (Bouquillion et al., 2023). The global deprecation of mainstream media news implicitly means that a move towards financially strengthening fact-checking operations globally is necessary, and so a better understanding of their evolving professional roles and practices is imperative. By drawing on the theoretical

framework established through research into journalistic role performance, this study investigates how Meta-affiliated fact-checkers in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa conceived of and negotiated their roles in relation to problematic Covid-19 vaccine information and associated health claims. Specifically, we investigate how fact-checkers' relationships with Meta and the audiences that these fact-checkers serve potentially impact their role conceptions and online content dissemination practices.

3. Methods

Aligning with journalistic role performance methodologies, this study employed a mixed methods approach combining an analysis of interview data collected from fact-checkers working in Latin American and sub-Saharan African regions with an analysis of Facebook post data gathered from these fact-checkers' employing organizations. We identified the third-party fact-checking organizations working in these regions through Meta's list of independent fact-checking organizations by country (Meta, n.d.-c). All six fact-checking organizations chosen for this study stated on their websites (e.g., on their "About Us" page) that they dedicate substantial effort to political fact-checking (i.e., holding public figures to account, monitoring political promises and discourse, and undertaking civic watchdog activities in the national interest).

3.1. Interviews With Fact-Checkers and Analysis

We recruited and interviewed 10 representatives from Meta-supported International Fact-Checking Network-accredited fact-checkers in Latin American and sub-Saharan African regions (four interviewees from two organizations in sub-Saharan Africa and six interviewees from four organizations in Latin America). Interviewees spoke to us freely on the condition that their interview data would be anonymized. We asked these fact-checkers about their practices when selecting and verifying Covid-19 vaccination claims, packaging and disseminating fact-checked content about Covid-19 vaccines, and their relationships with Meta and the communities they served. In particular, we focused on the various decision-making processes, methodologies, and infrastructures that these fact-checkers drew on to engage with their strategic communities of interest, considering how they conceived of their roles (e.g., as political watchdog, civic service provider, interventionist/advocate, loyal-facilitator of elite actor agendas, consumer service provider, interpreter, infotainer, promoter, celebrity, and joker). These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English, where required, using automated (i.e., Otter.ai) and manual processing. Using NVivo qualitative analysis software, we thematically coded the interview transcripts, looking for similarities and differences in the ways that fact-checkers conceived of their work in terms of workflows and practices, the tactics associated with fact-checking (i.e., political fact-checking, debunking, and prebunking information), and the ways that fact-checkers assessed the impact of their work and audience engagement when considering online platform policies, affordances, and constraints. Using a consensus-coding approach, at least two members of the team conducted the initial analysis to identify themes, and then all team members met to discuss and decide on the themes (focusing on similarities and differences across regions and operations).

3.2. Facebook Posts Collection and Coding

We also conducted a content analysis of all of the Covid-19 vaccination content posted in 2021 to the publicly accessible Facebook pages of the six Meta-supported International Fact-Checking

Network-accredited fact-checking organizations that were the focus of this study. We assume that these Facebook pages post content produced by fact-checkers independently from the work they produce in the official Meta partnership. However, we were interested in how fact-checkers' relationships with Meta could potentially interact with their role performances, so directing our attention to fact-checkers' activities on a Meta platform seemed appropriate. We chose to focus on Facebook because this platform continues to have the largest or second-largest user base in these regions (Statista, 2024). While WhatsApp might have more daily active users in some countries, publicly accessible data is not available. Facebook is also synonymous for many users in these regions with Meta's Free Basics Platform, which provides users with free access to Facebook and a limited number of news, health, and local government websites (Meta, n.d.-d). The leveraging of this platform's many affordances for political campaigning and outreach is well recognized. We used Crowdtangle to collect all of the Facebook post content and engagement data using the terms "coronavirus/Covid-19," "vaccine," "pandemic," and the corresponding Spanish terms "coronavirus/covid 19," "vacunas," "vacunación," "pandemia," and variations on those terms. After removing duplicates, we identified 2,103 Facebook posts (1,880 Facebook posts from four Latin American fact-checkers and 223 posts from two sub-Saharan African fact-checking organizations). The coding team was familiar with the political, social, and economic contexts where Meta-supported fact-checking organizations were operating.

The research team iteratively developed the codebook within the project (see Supplementary File, Codebook for analyzing Covid-19 vaccine-related posts from fact-checkers on Facebook in 2021) using existing fact-checking research and resources informing contextual considerations (Ferracioli et al., 2022; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Meta, n.d.-b; United Nations, 2022) and through close readings and discussions of post content. The codebook was pretested and improved through several rounds of coder training. All coding team members then coded a random sample of Facebook posts ($n = 140$) to test for intercoder reliability. Each team member read each Facebook post several times and categorized the post for whether it was a fact check containing a claim from an elite source (i.e., politician, celebrity, scientist or public health officer, or other) or if no elite source was identified. After the coding process, we made the decision to re-categorize fact checks of non-elite actors to "debunks" to compare differences in fact-checking based on claim sources. We operationalized fact-checkers' self-identified watchdog role in the coding process as indicated by their targeting of elite actors (i.e., fact checks of claims made by top-down actors). The team also identified the other types of content produced (explainers/analysis and promotional posts), the topics included in the posts, and the platform or media where claims were identified. We coded claims identified as "Meta included," when the list of platforms mentioned included at least one Meta platform (WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook); coding for non-meta platforms that did not include any of Meta's platforms (e.g., X [formerly Twitter], YouTube, and TikTok); ambient platforms (where social media platforms were referred to in general, without specifying a particular platform); media reporting; websites; and other (including political speeches and press releases).

We used the standard statistical packages in R that run Krippendorff's alpha with bootstrapping (tidyverse, irr, and kripp.boot) to calculate reliability scores. All codes met or exceeded the standard minimum acceptable level of reliability at 0.80 (Lacy et al., 2015; see Supplementary File, Table A). The team met to discuss and resolve discrepancies through consensus. We further refined the codebook descriptions, in relation to claim types and media types, in particular. Four team members then coded a quarter of the remaining posts each (approximately 461 of the remaining 1,843 posts).

We have provided three examples of Facebook posts contained in the dataset to represent the diversity of post purposes, claim types, and media types, where claims were identified. Figure 1 presents a typical example of the kind of debunk post contained in our dataset. The post contains a video debunking claims that ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine were proven Covid-19 treatments, and that the AstraZeneca vaccine was unsafe. This post, which encourages users not to share Covid-19 vaccine misinformation, was shared widely on Facebook in Kenya.

We have also included an example of a political fact check using one of the most engaged-with posts from a Latin American fact-checker who checked a claim made by a presidential candidate on X about vaccine efficacy during the Delta variant spread (see Figure 2). The translation of the post is the following:

Senator and presidential candidate Gustavo Petro tweeted saying that vaccines are useless against the COVID delta variant, but that is FALSE. Petro drew the wrong conclusion from an article in The New York Times that talked about reinforcing biosecurity measures against this variant. However, this article does not say vaccines do not work against it. Don't stop getting vaccinated!

The third example is a Facebook post containing a media correction. This, one of the most engaged-with Facebook posts, was a fact check of international and national media reporting of a link between the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and Guillain-Barré syndrome, indicating that some people who had received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine dose had presented at media facilities with the neurological disorder. The fact-checked claim is accompanied by a meme using a picture of the Italian-Senegalese influencer, Khaby Lame, who is well known among social media fans for his silent (mime) statements against “non-sense” situations, football, and



Figure 1. Example of a Facebook post from a sub-Saharan African fact-checker debunking a claim from social media users.



Figure 2. Example of political fact-checking based on a claim published on X.

other vernacular comedic videos (see Figure 3). The meme points out the unlikely occurrence of this event and appeals to vernacular content to engage users and amplify the preventive message.

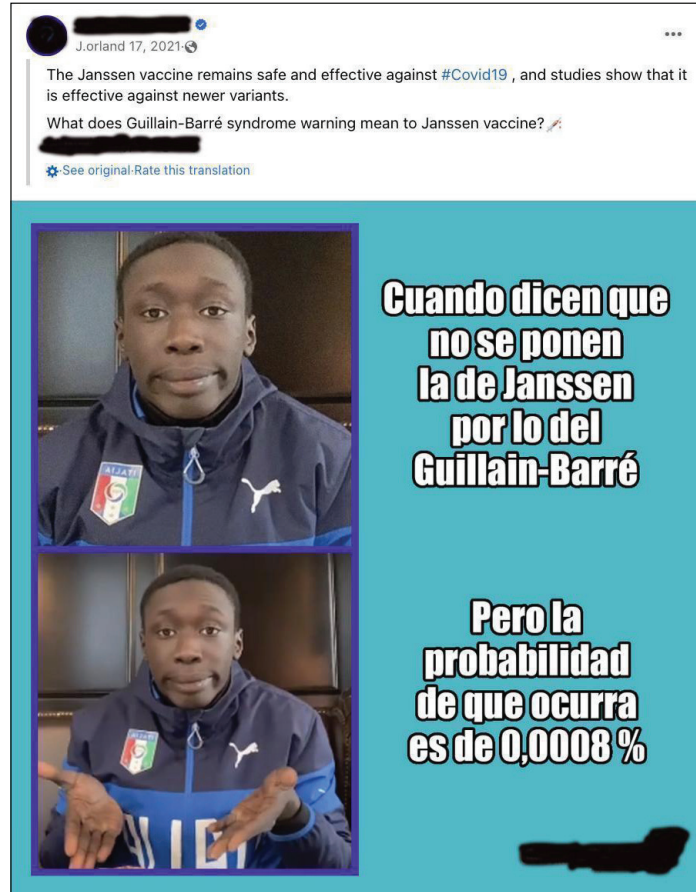


Figure 3. A popular meme included in a Facebook post with a link to clarifications of media claims, explaining that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is safe and effective.

3.3. Statistical Analysis and Visualization

After coding the Facebook post data, we employed statistical analyses to confirm associations between categorical variables and to identify significant mean differences between groups and engagement rates. We were particularly interested in evaluating the associations between media platforms and sources of claims. We ran a contingency table analysis using a chi-squared value for significance. To analyze the differences in engagement rate generated by types of claims and sources, we conducted an analysis of variances (ANOVA) and post-hoc tests. Post engagement rate was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Engagement Rate \%} = \left(\frac{\text{Post Comments} + \text{Shares} + \text{Reactions}}{\text{Subscriber Count at Time of Posting}} \right) \times 100$$

This metric provided a normalized within-study measure to compare the types of content audiences engaged with. Patterns and trends in the data were visualized using Tableau software.

4. Findings

The fact-checkers we interviewed all confirmed that a priority for them in 2021 was preparing social media users to deal with problematic Covid-19 vaccine claims on social media and providing content to prevent social amplification through the combination of verification genres and formats, for example:

At the end of the day, it is kind of teaching the user to say: “Hey, stop sharing this, because this is false, right?” If something you read generates a quick and very big emotion for you, that’s probably misinformation and you should ask us or take your time before sharing it. (P8, Latin America)

I think society is at the point where media consumers are extremely vulnerable. And I say vulnerable, especially because there’s so much false information making circulation. And people are not aware of the dangers in consuming certain information online or even offline. So, it’s critical that people be provided the truth. (P9, sub-Saharan Africa)

Fact-checkers emphasized the important role that they saw for themselves in addressing harm, for example: “Health information to us, it’s lifesaving, I would say. So that is the extent that we see it as crucial as saving a life” (P10, sub-Saharan Africa).

The content-coding of the Facebook posts corroborates this pattern. Over half (53%; $n = 1,105$) of the 2,103 Facebook posts in our sample were coded as explainer/analysis content (see Figure 4), which supports fact-checkers’ conceptions of their roles in civic engagement.

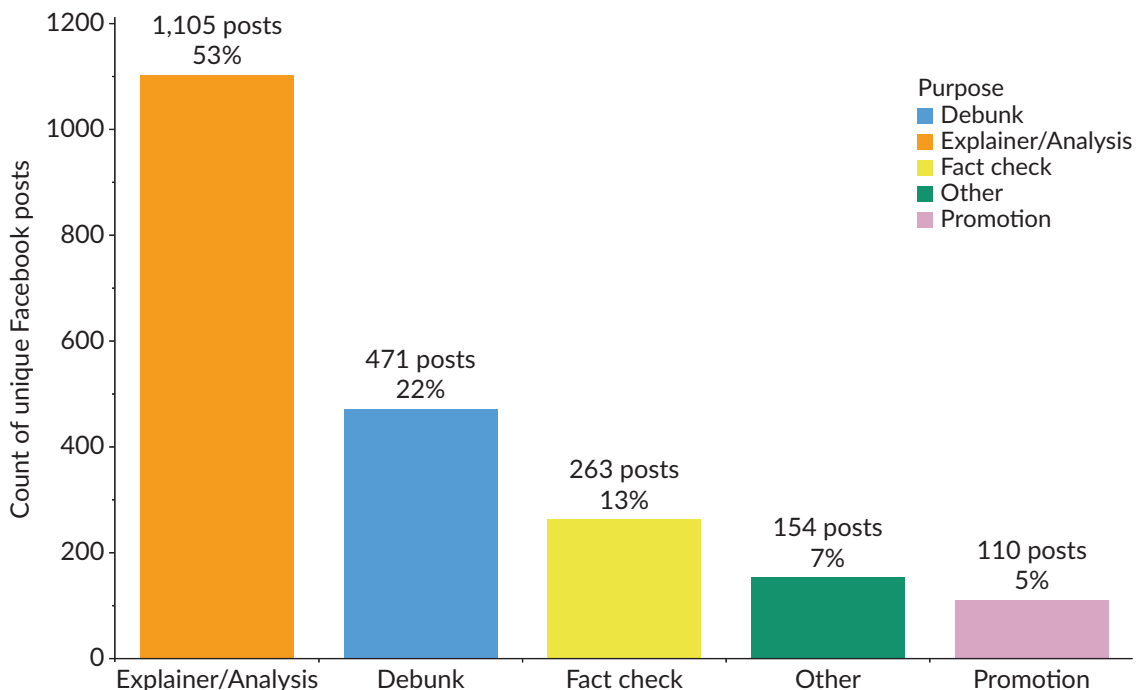


Figure 4. Volume and proportion of Covid-19 vaccine content on fact-checkers’ Facebook pages.

Fact-checkers' reposts of debunking content, including links to web-based articles that focus on debunks of claims, dominated Covid-19 vaccine fact-checking posts (22% of the posts) when compared to fact-checking posts verifying claims from elite actors. Only 13% of content is related to verifications of claims made by media, politicians, and health professionals.

All of the fact-checkers we interviewed stated that problematic political content was a priority for their organizations and that deliberate political propaganda associated with Covid-19 vaccination had been a significant issue in their region. Traditional political watchdog activities were considered to be an everyday task for each fact-checker on their own websites and an unavoidable and indispensable service, given the perceived impact that exaggerations and distortions from institutional and prominent actors were having, for example:

In Tanzania, for instance, their former president, the one who died, was a skeptic. So, he said, "there [was] no such thing as COVID. And that they [did] not have COVID in Tanzania." So, it's very difficult to change the mindset of multiple people, when even the political bodies say, "There is no COVID." That, in its own way, also creates and builds on the misinformation. So I'd say the skeptics, conspiracy theorists, religious bodies, and political leaders are responsible for a lot of that [problematic information]. (P1, sub-Saharan Africa)

Because we have seen several times politicians make false claims and dish out wrong statistics, in order to gain popularity, or to decimate the personalities of the opposition, this is not healthy for democracy. And without democratic stability, then we would have chaos and with chaos, we wouldn't even have an existing society. So that's why political information disorder, or fact-checking, as a whole is crucial to our organization. (P10, sub-Saharan Africa)

In general, the fact-checkers we interviewed observed that political actors were refining their tactics to spread falsehoods. They explained that it was a demanding task to discern facts from overstatements, and it was time-consuming and difficult to distinguish truthful statements from false ones.

While there was recognition from interviewees that political fact-checking verifications associated with Covid-19 vaccine content were essential at this time, the fact-checking content posted to fact-checkers' Facebook pages tended to avoid distributing verifications of political claims on Meta platforms. In contrast to debunking content, where Meta platforms were identified as a major source of problematic content, verifications of claims from elite actors, including politicians and media outlets, mostly implicated non-Meta platforms (e.g., X, YouTube, and TikTok), media reporting, political speeches, televised debates, and press releases (see Figure 5).

Problematic claims from scientific and health professionals made on Meta platforms, however, were targeted for fact-checking, confirming a commitment to civic-service provision by fact-checkers for Facebook users, at least when it came to disseminating fact-checked content about claims made by scientific and health sources.

To determine if these differences were statistically significant, we conducted a contingency table analysis (see Table 1). Results show that there was a significant association between media platforms and sources of claims ($\chi^2 = 566.543$, $df = 30$, $p < 0.001$).

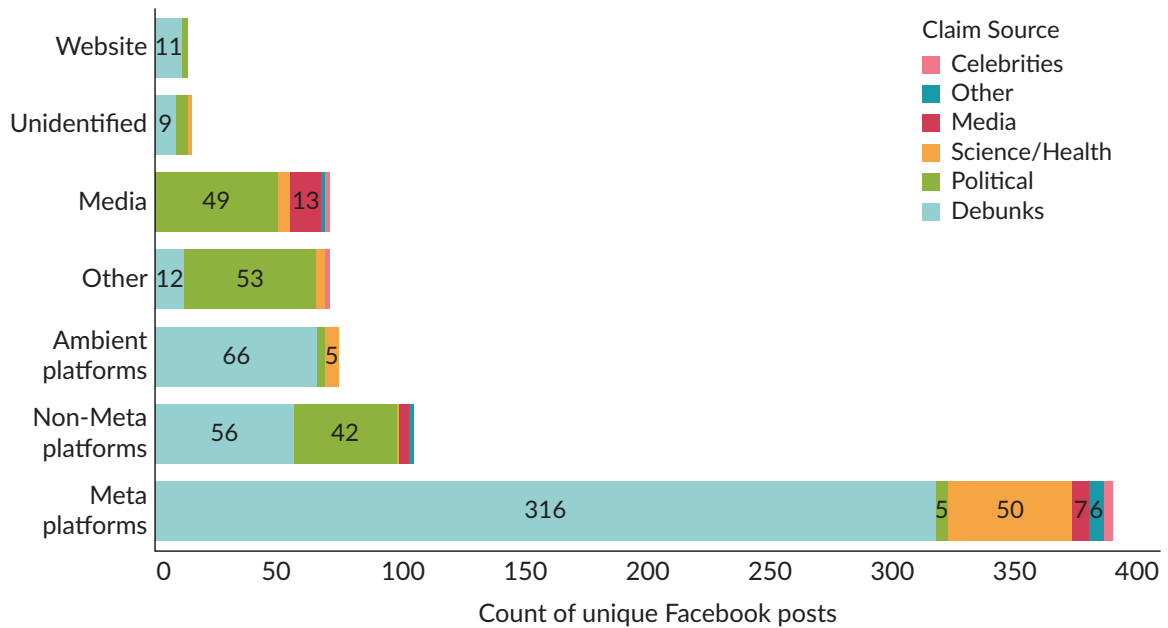


Figure 5. Volume of Facebook posts by source of claim and the platform where claims were identified.

Table 1. Fact checks by platform and source of claims.

Media type/Platforms		Source of claims						Total
		Celebrities	Media	Debunk	Other	Political	Science/Health	
Ambient platforms	Count	—	1 (1)	77(67)	—	6.8 (6)	15 (13)	100 (87)
	Standardized residuals	-0.510	-0.628	-0.926	-0.807	-1.270	4.352	
Media	% (N)	2.2 (2)	26.9 (24)	1.1 (1)	1.1(1)	61.7(55)	6.7(6)	100 (89)
	Standardized residuals	3.546	16.754	-19.524	0.470	15.577	0.774	
Meta platforms only/ included	% (N)	0.7 (3)	1.7 (7)	78 (324)	1.6 (7)	3.1 (13)	14 (58)	100 (412)
	Standardized residuals	1.879	-0.622	-1.263	2.652	-5.715	9.442	
Other	% (N)	0.9(1)	—	12(13)	0.8 (1)	75 (84)	11.6 (13)	100 (112)
	Standardized residuals	1.239	-1.590	-19.131	0.232	22.150	3.303	
Website	% (N)	—	—	78(11)	7 (1)	14 (2)	—	100 (14)
	Standardized residuals	-0.201	-0.549	-0.216	2.868	0.383	-0.861	
Non-Meta platforms only	% (N)	—	9 (12)	41 (55)	3.8 (5)	42 (56)	3 (4)	100 (132)
	Standardized residuals	-0.635	5.803	-11.811	4.336	11.851	-1.069	
Total	% (N)	0.28(6)	2.1(44)	81(1,700)	0.7(15)	11 (233)	5 (105)	100 (2,103)

Notes: $X^2 = 1,600.778$, $df = 34$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 2,103$.

In sum, the fact-checking organizations in this study tended to post Covid-19 vaccination-related political content that verified claims made on X (or other non-Meta platforms) and political claims reported through mainstream media outlets in preference to verifying claims made by politicians on Facebook.

Most interviewees confirmed that their organization independently distributed verifications of political claims online separately from Meta's Third-Party Partner Program activities. All interviewees reported that their organizations disseminated political fact checks through their own preferred channels and were free from the restrictions of the Meta platform policies, which regulated debunking activities only, for example:

We have our dissemination avenues, not just through the platforms. It's also on our website, to our network partners. So when we're working with other newsrooms, and journalists across our different markets, we also have that flexibility of deciding what kind of content we can debunk and verify. So, it [platform policy] doesn't affect how we operate or how we work. (P1, sub-Saharan Africa)

Consistent with sub-Saharan fact-checkers, Latin American fact-checkers underscored their independence in choosing what to fact-check, for example:

It [political fact-checking] is already part of what the [fact-checking organization] does, as in our day-to-day life. It is not counted in the Meta quota that they ask us to aim for but, in the end, the verification of the politicians' speech is completed...it's a part of the [fact-checking organization's] product. (P7, Latin America)

The Facebook content associated with political fact-checks mainly focused on local political actors (i.e., verifications of claims made by local politicians and political parties and elected government officials) in the regions where the fact-checkers were operating. Interviewees reported that clashes with Meta in terms of political fact-checking were much rarer than clashes with Meta platform users and politicians themselves. Politicians, in particular, were singled out for attacking fact-checkers after they verified claims about Covid-19 medications that were not medically approved as cures for Covid-19. As Figure 6 shows, fact-checkers' Covid-19 vaccine-related fact checks (i.e., verifications of claims from political actors, media, and science/health professionals) posted to Facebook also received relatively more overall engagement than the more numerous posts focused on debunking content from users on Meta platforms (i.e., the "public health" fact-checking content).

An additional analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that the mean differences between the five kinds of posts were significant ($F = 6.069$, $df = [3, 2,099]$, $p < 0.01$), with fact checks ($M = 0.112$, $SD = 0.187$) producing a higher engagement rate than debunks ($M = 0.059$, $SD = 0.081$) and explainers ($M = 0.041$, $SD = 0.418$). A follow-up post-hoc test analysis of variance revealed a significant mean difference between fact checks of claims from authoritative sources and explainers/analyses and debunks. In fact, as Table 2 shows, explainers/analysis and debunks produced significantly lower engagement rates on Facebook than fact-checked claims from media, politicians, scientists, and other elites ($MD = -.036$, $SE = 0.010$, $p < 0.01$).

Interestingly, fact checks of mainstream media claims produced the highest rate of Facebook user engagement on average (see Figure 7). In contrast, celebrity fact checks, despite their seeming potential for popularity, appeared to garner the least engagement.

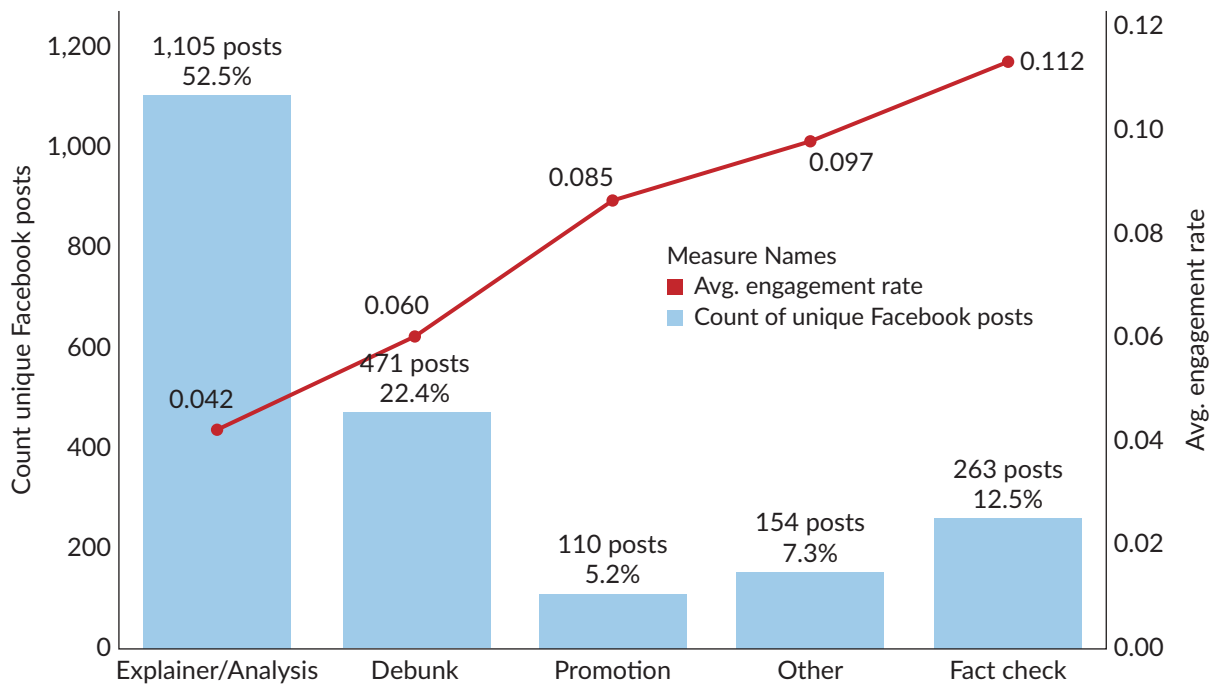


Figure 6. Type of fact-checking content compared by unique post count and average engagement rate.

Table 2. Post-hoc comparisons of types of claims by engagement rate.

		Mean Difference	SE	p_{tukey}
Explainer/Analysis	Fact check	-0.036	0.010	0.003 **
	Other	-0.055	0.019	0.020 *
	Promotion	-0.044	0.022	0.197
Fact check	Other	-0.018	0.020	0.780
	Promotion	-0.007	0.023	0.989
Other	Promotion	0.011	0.028	0.977

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Results from the analysis of variance (ANOVA; see Supplementary File, Table B) show that the mean differences between Facebook post engagement rates and the five claim source groups were significant ($F = 6.656$, $df = (5, 728)$, $p < 0.1$), with media ($M = 0.154$, $SD = 0.273$), science/health ($M = 0.112$, $SD = 0.142$), and political ($M = 0.110$, $SD = 0.191$) claims generating more engagement than debunks ($M = 0.060$, $SD = 0.084$), and celebrities ($M = 0.019$, $SD = 0.023$). Post-hoc comparisons of variance showed that media ($MD = 0.095$, $SE = 0.027$, $p < 0.01$), political ($MD = 0.051$, $SE = 0.112$, $p < 0.001$), and scientific ($MD = 0.052$, $SE = 0.017$, $p < 0.05$) claims generated more engagement (measured by rate of engagement) than debunks from social media (Table 3).

While we identified significant variety in claim selection practices, the fact-checkers we interviewed emphasized that they applied their standard fact-checking selection and verification methodologies to all their fact-checking activities and did not change their practices when verifying different types of claims. According to fact-checkers, their assessment of what made a claim checkable was based on the potential for

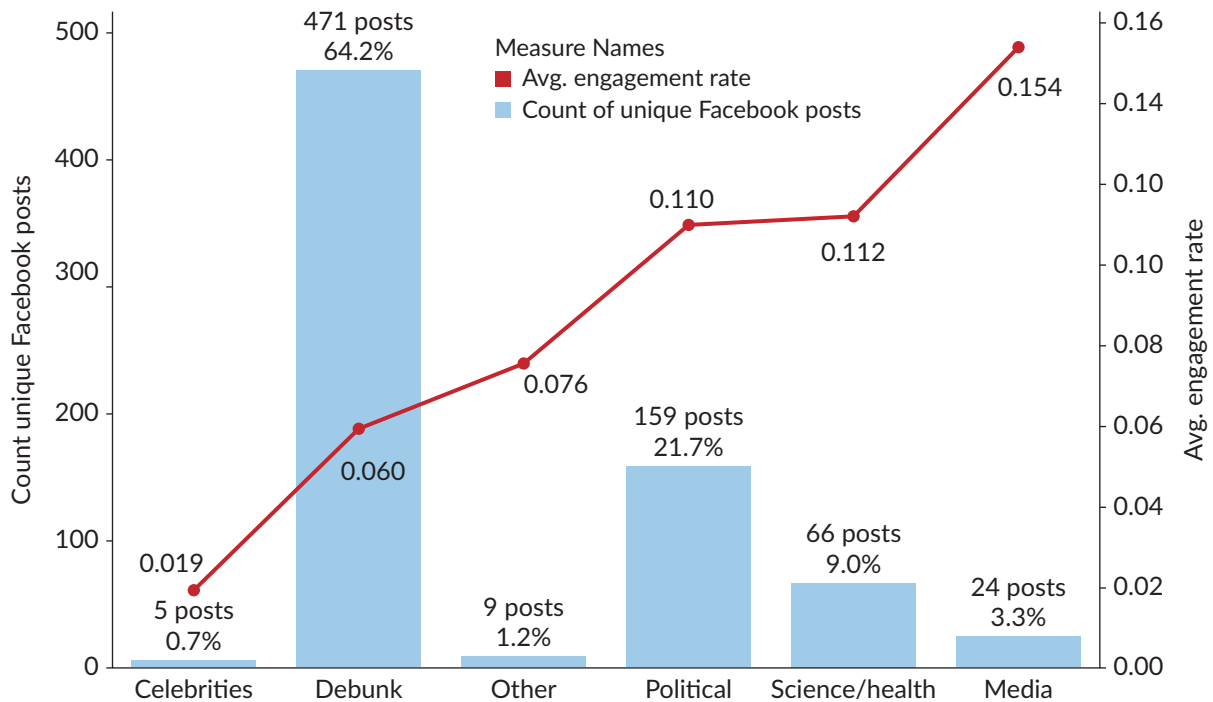


Figure 7. Claim sources compared by unique post count and average engagement rate (in red).

Table 3. Post-hoc comparisons of claim source by engagement rate.

		Mean Difference	SE	p_{Tukey}
Celebrities	Media	-0.135	0.064	0.278
	Other	-0.056	0.072	0.971
	Political	-0.091	0.059	0.634
	Science/health	-0.092	0.060	0.637
	Debunks	-0.040	0.058	0.983
Media	Other	0.079	0.051	0.629
	Political	0.044	0.028	0.630
	Science/health	0.042	0.031	0.742
	Debunks	0.095	0.027	0.007 **
Other	Political	-0.035	0.044	0.971
	Science/health	-0.036	0.046	0.970
	Debunk	0.016	0.044	0.999
Political	Science/health	-0.002	0.019	1.000
	Debunks	0.051	0.012	< 0.001 ***
Science/health	Debunks	0.052	0.017	0.027 *

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

public harm, which has become a pivotal fact-checking claim selection criterion. However, some fact-checkers explained that they needed a separate methodology for verifying claims from elite or authoritative actors in comparison to their methodology for debunking social media claims because, unlike political fact-checking, with debunking online platform disinformation there was often difficulty in spotting

the source of the claim or, in the words of Participant 9 from Latin America, identifying the “patient zero” of disinformation.

We found evidence in the interview data that fact-checkers prioritized the investigative aspects of their watchdog role by undertaking regional investigations on the commercialization of disputed Covid-19 cures that were promoted by some governments. For example, Participant 6 stated that they worked with a cross-national fact-checking group “to do a series of reports on how the Covid-19 disinformation traveled through the countries and...did a regional investigation on how chlorine dioxide had spread so much [as a Covid-19 remedy] and who benefited economically from particular interests.”

Fact-checkers in both regions viewed their roles as simplifying complex information for audiences to make it accessible and understandable, particularly when asked about strategies to capture audience attention and experimenting with new formats, for example:

We also felt that people online do not really have the time to read long writing, so we started doing one-minute visual videos where we explain our verdict and why we think this is false or not. So, you could just watch it in a minute and then you’re done. (P10, sub-Saharan Africa)

Right now we are investing a lot of resources, time, money and effort in vertical videos, going to TikTok, going to younger audiences. Especially, because younger people are the ones who are the fastest adopters of these kinds of platforms and so they help us to explain to the grandparents [older people] that something is false or a lie. (P6, Latin America)

The posts by Latin American fact-checking organizations placed a stronger emphasis on including humor in their posts, and fact checks and explainers were often accompanied by popular and original memes. For example:

We had to use those strategies especially at the beginning, when we were trying to grow on TikTok, where we were newcomers and a little bit on YouTube, although [on Youtube] it wasn’t so successful. In the end, we tried to appeal a little to humor but obviously in a very tactful [way] as well. We play with trends on social media and other platforms usually on Fridays. We usually put out a meme and we try to make it have a humorous component regarding some misinformation. (P1, Latin America)

Fact-checkers in sub-Saharan Africa were much more conservative and careful in their approaches to using humor and vernacular comedy in content dissemination, indicating that it might be taken out of national and linguistic contexts and cause harm, for example:

Because we know that fact-checking can be classified as boring from time to time...we had campaigns on Twitter and TikTok, where people had to do like skits, embedding their humor that was content specific to their audiences in the country that we thought their audiences would understand. (P10, sub-Saharan Africa)

5. Discussion

In this study, we set out to identify how platform-sponsored fact-checkers in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa negotiated their various and competing professional roles when addressing problematic Covid-19 vaccine claims, particularly on Facebook. Drawing on existing research, we understand that fact-checkers adopt many roles, including as political and media watchdogs (Graves, 2016), public health communicators (Graves et al., 2023), and entrepreneurs (Singer, 2018). In this research, we found that, in relation to addressing problematic Covid-19 vaccine information, fact-checkers across both regions negotiated their roles relatively consistently as civic service providers, and then as political and media watchdogs. Over half of the Covid-19 vaccine posts from Facebook that we coded in this study focused on explainer/analysis content, indicating that these organizations were prioritizing explanations and analysis, in preference to verifying or debunking claims. Fact-checkers in this study may have been using explainer/analysis formats to diversify their Covid-19 vaccine coverage and reach broader audiences who were looking to understand emerging trends and narratives at the time. The focus on this explainer/analysis content also indicates that addressing the veracity of claims was only one part of these organizations' roles, and that literacy and capacity-building initiatives were considered important, a finding also confirmed by interviewees in this study. Engaging in this kind of work, outside of addressing authoritative claims and specific rumors, may also build organizations' credibility and audience understanding of fact-checking methodologies. These findings support Graves et al.'s (2023) speculation that the circumstances surrounding the proliferation of problematic Covid-19 content on social media platforms prompted a shift to a "public health" model of fact-checking.

However, our findings give a more nuanced picture of regions beyond the United States and Europe. Fact-checkers in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America were primarily concerned with addressing harm from problematic content but faced an uneasy tension in managing their roles as interpreters (informing and educating audiences) alongside their role in attracting and retaining audience attention. Using Mellado and Vos's (2016) journalistic role performance typology, sub-Saharan Africa fact-checkers demonstrated a propensity towards roles as social media interpreters, whereas Latin American fact-checkers appeared more open to the role of infotainer, making fact-checked content enjoyable and entertaining. Yet, these fact-checkers also understood that working in diverse linguistic and national contexts meant that satire needed to be approached carefully. Platform vernacular humor, in particular, can be both problematic content and a strategy to engage audiences because it relies on assumptions about whether humor is shared between those producing the content and those reading, listening to, or viewing it (Tandoc et al., 2018; Wardle, 2018).

Despite this focus on public health-style content provision and debunking, political and media fact-checking activities were still a preoccupation for fact-checkers. Political fact-checking associated with Covid-19 vaccine misinformation was inescapable, given that many countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa were heading for elections in 2021. However, political and verified media claims related to Covid-19 vaccines were less likely to be disseminated on Meta platforms, in contrast to content verifying claims made by health/science professionals. We cannot know why there was a limited number of verifications of political claims about Covid-19 vaccinations on Meta platforms reported in Facebook posts in 2021. Meta's policies regarding political fact-checking (Meta, n.d.-a) do not prohibit fact-checkers from verifying political claims and posting political verification content on their own website and social media accounts. However,

problematic political Covid-19 vaccine information was most likely handled differently on Meta platforms at the time. Fact-checkers are encouraged through Meta's Third-Party Partner Program to focus their efforts on problematic claims made by non-elite users on Meta platforms, which might explain the large proportion of debunking content in the Facebook dataset. Given the preferred use of X by politicians in both regions at the time that data was collected, the focus on verifications of political content posted to X is not surprising. Researchers have also recognized that limited financial incentives may influence fact-checkers' capacity to engage in political fact-checking and the platforms they prioritize (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Graves & Amazeen, 2019). Through explainer content, fact-checkers also addressed uncertainties related to trending politicized Covid-19 science without referring directly to political sources, i.e., without directly fact-checking claims. Labeling problematic information disseminated by government actors as "mistakes" or "partially true" and avoiding overly criticizing the most likely trustworthy sources (i.e., government institutions and elected politicians) in office during the pandemic may also possibly indicate evidence of 're-fusion' practices (i.e., supporting governments in power in order to maintain stability during times of crisis) as identified by Luengo and García-Marín (2020). Our findings partly confirm Graves et al.'s (2023) findings from their interviews with political fact-checkers that the same standardized verification processes are applied to both political fact-checking and debunking online misinformation from unknown users. According to our interviewees, all claims and verifications, regardless of the source, were judged on the basis of harm reduction. However, fact-checkers, particularly in Latin America, had different methodologies for debunking social media misinformation and correcting false political claims. The ability to identify a source for a Covid-19 vaccine claim, or not, meant differences in approaches were needed for limiting the spread of claims and measuring the success of fact-checking practices. We also found that top-down (i.e., media, science/health, and political) fact checks generated more engagement per post on average than debunks of online content or verifications of celebrity claims, yet there were fewer top-down fact checks in the dataset in comparison to debunks. The higher engagement rate for these fact checks suggests, as one explanation, that audiences may perceive elite sources as more authoritative or the topics they cover more interesting than claims from social media users, or generalized claims without an identified source. Audiences may also perceive fact checks of claims from authoritative sources as more consequential. While the ratio of top-down fact-checks to debunks suggests that fact-checking organizations may have allocated less attention and resources to scrutinizing elite actors when covering Covid-19 related content, it is possible that top-down watchdog-style fact-checking efforts took the place that was not captured in our dataset. While we focused specifically on Covid-19 vaccine and associated health claims, these findings show that the fact-checkers we interviewed for this study put much value in the watchdog role performed by fact-checkers. While social media debunking activities continue to be supported by platforms and fact-checkers were heavily engaged in disseminating debunking content, as evidenced by the high number of reposts of links to web-based articles that include debunks of claims, these links to fact-checkers' debunks received some of the lowest levels of Facebook user engagement. It is possible that this debunking content may be inadvertently suppressed algorithmically on Facebook, given that many of the reposts of links to web-based articles include debunks made through the official Meta partnership. Yet, if Facebook audiences are not aware of the public health role of fact-checkers on the platform, because the circulation of this content is reduced, then it is important to consider who fact-checkers are disseminating this content for (Meta or Facebook audiences), and if Meta might have a role in supporting fact-checkers in amplifying this debunking content. Another option, that Facebook users are seeing this content but not engaging with it, could indicate that users may not yet understand, or acknowledge the value of, this fact-checking role when compared with fact-checkers' watchdog role.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on a small number of interviewees (10) and a narrow topic- and time-bound dataset of Facebook content from a select number of fact-checking outlets (six) in two regions. Therefore, the findings may not capture all of the role conceptions or content practices of all fact-checkers operating in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Additionally, findings from our Facebook sample were limited to the second year of the pandemic, when the news ecosystem and news agendas were focused on the global and contextual aspects of this major event marked by an increasing trend towards distrust, news avoidance, and audience “disengagement” recorded in global reports (Newman et al., 2022). This situation may have potentially motivated fact-checking organizations to expand their traditional understandings of the watchdog role, particularly among organizations that dedicate their efforts mainly to verifying political content. However, the study offers a useful mixed methods approach for better understanding the diversity of roles available to fact-checkers and what they tend to prioritize when addressing problematic Covid-19 claims. We did not direct the study towards a content analysis of fact-checkers’ websites and so we are unable to determine the proportion of Covid-19 vaccine content that was shared between fact-checkers’ websites and their Facebook pages (i.e., what links from fact-checkers’ websites were shared on Facebook or what website content was repurposed into Facebook content). The Facebook data collected for this study focused specifically on Covid-19 vaccines and health-related claims. Political fact-checking of claims not associated with Covid-19 vaccines is likely to have occurred in 2021 and related posts disseminated through fact-checkers’ Facebook pages. Including this content in the study may have provided more context for understanding fact-checkers’ role performances more generally. Our operationalization of fact checkers’ watchdog role performances, as the scrutiny of top-down actors, did not account for disinformation campaigns originating with concealed elite actors such as state actors, who may facilitate organized “astroturfing” disinformation campaigns (i.e., the use of troll farms and bot networks; Graham et al., 2020; Keller et al., 2019). While we did not identify Facebook content associated with investigations of concealed elite actors, fact-checkers did highlight these activities in our interviews with them. An operationalized definition of watchdog performance that accounts for these changing media conditions would provide much-needed nuance. These limitations offer important avenues for future research, taking account of broader trends surrounding problematic content on platforms beyond those owned by Meta. While organizations linked to fact-checking like Code for Africa already forensically investigate disinformation structures and economies (see, for example, African Digital Democracy Observatory, 2024), more research is needed to better understand how fact-checkers understand and perform their watchdog roles through “power conscious” investigations into coordinated inauthentic behavior and “influence campaigns” led covertly by state actors and other private interest groups. We only coded English and Spanish-language posts and so we may have missed important content created in other languages. Multilingual and multi-national contexts are important aspects to consider in future studies, perhaps by comparing platform posting patterns on other expert-related topics associated with problematic online content and considering fact-checkers’ rationales for their claim selection and content dissemination choices in these particular contexts. This study extends and elaborates on Mellado and Vos’s (2016) contribution, which aimed to contrast self-perceived (normative) professional roles with implicit (methodological) roles observable in the production of content. Given the complex contexts that platform-supported fact-checkers experience and operate in, particularly in the so-called Global South, our ultimate aim is to inspire more comparative research that captures practice innovation in this institutionalized field.

5.2. Implications for Practice

This study's findings can inform future fact-checking practices in four main ways. Firstly, given the limited time and resources available to fact-checkers in regions in the so-called Global South, it is not unreasonable to think that specific quotas and goals imposed by platforms—usually related to debunking users' problematic information claims on social media—may have a direct impact on fact-checking roles, practices, and priorities. It is important for fact-checkers to continually re-evaluate the role that digital platforms such as Meta may have as supporters of fact-checking organizations and units, and the influence of this business model on the choices of roles that fact-checkers perform.

Secondly, our research shows that there is a gap between fact-checking normative professional expectations and the practical roles that fact-checkers perform. This is something that other scholars have found previously in different newsrooms and contexts (Raemy & Vos, 2021; Vu et al., 2022), including the balancing act between traditional journalistic values and the demands of contemporary media environments. Yet, audiences appeared to engage according to the expected normative role of fact-checkers as watchdogs, correcting false claims from elites. It is important for fact-checkers to further consider these competing expectations from platforms and audiences regarding which problematic information takes priority.

Thirdly, this research shows that there are significant regional differences when it comes to the use of satire, vernacular humor, and infotainment to debunk problematic information on social media. As humor has a very local-cultural dynamic, transnational organizations that operate in the African context are very careful when using these resources to engage audiences, to avoid misinterpretations. In contrast, national projects in Latin America are more likely to adopt these strategies to attract young audiences and explore the affordances of social video platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Our study leaves open an important question related to the use of humor and infotainment in fact-checking practices: If one of the main roles of journalists and media is to provide audiences with knowledge and interpretation to make informed decisions, could fact-checkers use different formats and strategies to engage their users with humor and checktainment without risking their credibility and trust? Finally, what we can see from the findings in our study is that the “debunking turn,” lessons from the pandemic, and the perennial conspiracy theories circulating on platforms, have contributed to broadening roles for fact-checkers as educators and interpreters, and in a few cases as infotainers. Fact-checkers have opportunities to build on these broader roles, particularly when it comes to scientific fact-checking. With platforms' growing focus on addressing harmful medical misinformation (see, for example, Google, n.d.), there may be opportunities for fact-checkers to specialize in health research-related topics and further explore how debunking content and correcting false political claims can be used in media literacy efforts in future health crises.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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