

# Fact-Checkers on the Fringe: Investigating Methods and Practices Associated With Contested Areas of Fact-Checking

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## Abstract

This study investigates the methods and practices used by self-identified fact-checkers situated on the fringe of the field of fact-checking to support their agenda for public recognition and legitimacy. Using a case study approach and selecting nine cases across five countries (Russia, Brazil, India, China, and Singapore), we identify the most common distinguishable attributes and tactics associated with this ambiguous collection of actors. In addition to identifying how fringe fact-checkers weaponize fact-checking practices and exploit or mimic the social standing of accredited fact-checkers, we critique examples where state-supported fact-checkers associated with authoritarian governance structures fact-check for national interests. We propose a spectrum of fact-checkers including those where public or general interest fact-checkers follow journalistic ideals and align with accredited communities of practice or non-accredited peer recognition, and a collection of fringe fact-checkers ranging from “special interest” actors promoting specific political agendas to hostile actors with disruptive, destructive, and openly propagandistic interests and aims to destabilize the global public sphere. The article contributes to current research and debates about the institutionalization of fact-checking and the understudied area of fact-checking impersonation, a problematic activity associated with misinformation and propaganda on platforms and the internet.

## Keywords

fact checking; fact-checking norms; fringe fact-checkers; International Fact-Checking Network; politics; state-sponsorship

## 1. Introduction

The last decade has seen fact-checking consolidated into a recognized and institutionalized field of journalistic practice, led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The IFCN is the main global fact-checking accreditation body, promoting non-partisan codes of practice, professional fact-checking norms, and standardized methodologies across the nascent global community of practitioners (Graves, 2018; Lauer, 2021; Lauer & Graves, 2024). Along with the IFCN, other satellite regional networks, including the European Fact-Checking Standards Network, the Asia Fact-Checkers Network, the Arab Fact-Checking Network, the African Fact-Checking Alliance, and Latam Chequea in Latin America support these guiding principles and strengthen the institutionalized presence of fact-checkers online and offline in their geopolitical areas of influence. However, various hyper-partisan, state-sponsored, and not-well-understood actors also self-identify as fact-checkers and claim to engage in fact-checking. This has led to what researchers have labeled “fake” fact-checking and “impersonation” (EU Disinfo Lab, 2021; Funke, 2019; Jahangir, 2021; Moshirnia, 2020). Yet, the boundaries between what might be considered as trustworthy and independent fact-checking practices versus (hyper-) partisan or fringe practices can be challenging to identify. This article maps these contested areas of fact-checking by categorizing problematic actors in this specialized space.

To understand these actors, we extend Eldridge’s (2019) formulation of antagonistic voice versus antagonistic stance/relationship. Borrowing from Mouffe’s (2000) idea of agonism and antagonism, Eldridge distinguishes between two forms of antagonism. Antagonistic *voices* are those that aim to critique the field and its practices to improve the field overall. This formulation is close to Mouffe’s conception of agonism, which is a particular form of antagonism aiming at progress built on constructive conflicts. Such antagonistic voices take an adversarial tone to highlight faults and discrepancies in a field, in order to improve it. Antagonistic *relationships*, on the other hand, are adopted by actors or institutions who take up an inimical stance against the field itself, with the intention of disrupting the field’s practices. Their approach is “destructive” (Eldridge, 2019) and hostile, and the methods they employ include mal-appropriation of identity, manipulating information, sharing disinformation, and sowing the seeds of doubt in the broader public towards the institutional actors.

### 1.1. *Tensions Between the Institutionalization and the “Fringe” Areas of Fact-Checking*

Recent literature suggests that the field of fact-checking has embraced the varied collection of non-journalistic organizations and civic actors intervening in the verification of complex narratives and embarked on a path leading towards the field’s “deliberate institutionalization” (Graves, 2018; Lauer & Graves, 2024). The growth of this “network of actors,” in the words of Lauer and Graves (2024), is based on recognizing the work and rules of operations who are willing to differentiate themselves as legitimate actors through accreditation by IFCN (Lauer & Graves, 2024; Mantzaris et al., 2019). At the core of assessing, approving, and validating these organizations’ verification practices is a wide range of institutions involved in legitimization processes (academia, civic organizations, start-ups, etc.). Some authors (e.g., Beaudreau, 2024) have recognized the early activities of independent “general interest” (p. 43) organizations and “debunkers” of shareable online content, operating prior to the creation of social media platforms. This general interest construct of fact-checking encompasses general interest practices that include the verification of internet misinformation such as “online rumors and chain mails” (Beaudreau, 2024, p. 45)

in addition to traditional political fact-checking. Large platforms are indirect stakeholders in this global interest construct.

Given that the principal aim of fact-checking as a movement has historically been to restore the flags of objectivity and factual discourse (Beaudreau, 2024; Graves, 2016), fringe areas and actors who are able to take advantage of existing ambiguity have emerged. “General interest” fact-checking organizations have been threatened by the incursion of new special interest groups and organizations who use fact-checking for particular purposes. These new actors engage in continuing battles for legitimacy and weaponize the practice of fact-checking, destabilizing the “demarcation” trajectories that fact-checkers have established (Marres, 2018). New actors may also dispute, operate, and maintain the borders of closed national media and political systems that they are embedded in. These tensions are comparable with the broader crisis in the news media ecosystem and the rise of alternative media and hyper-partisan sources of media who claim to be “alternative” outlets (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Holt et al., 2019; Palau-Sampio, 2023). Many have argued that although these pseudo-media outlets claim to be distinct from mainstream media outlets, they all strive to be perceived as legitimate in the field and criticize mainstream media outlets in attempts to delegitimize them (Chadha & Bhat, 2022; Mayerhöffer, 2021). This spectrum of entities has adopted recognized practice patterns characterized by the mass production of opinion pieces, the use of emotional language, and the “skew” of particular conservative sources, as well as the amplification and production of clickbait-style content to augment platform and online visibility (Palau-Sampio, 2023). Alternative media and their discourses are often deployed as part of foreign information influence, as, for example, in the case of Russian state-controlled outlet RT (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2024).

## **1.2. The Instrumentalization of Government-Led and State-Endorsed Fact-Checkers**

In addition to general interest fact-checkers, a number of government-operated or government-led, state-sponsored or state-endorsed fact-checkers have recently emerged in many countries including those associated with at least some features of authoritarian governance. While this trend has accompanied fact-checking’s expansion worldwide, government-led entities are usurping the roles of fact-checkers at a time when they have consolidated their authority and credibility to verify politicians’ speeches, educate citizens, and moderate social media content (Graves et al., 2023; Vinhas & Bastos, 2023). In contrast to earlier instances documented in countries like Turkey (Yesil, 2021) and Malaysia (Schuldt, 2021), the latest wave of entities launched by governments showcases a more diverse and sophisticated array of practices that mimic accredited verification and debunking efforts (Lim, 2020; Yesil, 2021). These new operations are more than official or unofficial agencies aimed at securitizing domestic dissent or influencing international opinion on local and regional issues. They simulate the recognized fact-checking terminology of the field and integrate it as part of state-supported strategies to manage the perceived “fake news” problem (Neo, 2022). From the perspective of fact-checkers, the increasing number of government-led entities has signaled incoming novel challenges for establishing legitimate, independent fact-checking operations in many countries (Meseret, 2024).

Very often, government-led fact-checkers and other long-term operations implemented by the state focus on rumor corrections (Liu & Zhou, 2022) in their own media systems. Nevertheless, their practices are considered to weaken or distort the principles and procedures that IFCN-accredited fact-checkers adhere to, particularly because these operations avoid political controversy, criticism, or oversight of those

representing national political power structures—instead focussing on health issues (Liu & Zhou, 2022). While in some cases it has been found that state-operated fact-checking services do not promote pro-government information in explicit ways and might follow similar verification processes in themes such as health misinformation, they often avoid controversial political or economic verification (Chen et al., 2021; Liu & Zhou, 2022; Schuldt, 2021). State-sponsored fact-checking can also be deployed as one of the tools to spread government propaganda and disguise disinformation, especially in authoritarian regimes with restricted press freedom and/or strong censorship.

### **1.3. From “Public Interest” to “Special Interest” Fact-Checkers: The Spectrum of the Fringe Areas**

It would be an essentialist and reductionist task to simply categorize any fact checker not recognized by a professional accrediting institution or network, such as the IFCN, as problematic. However, the professional norms and standards set by such networks could act as a normative starting point, guiding the work to categorize fact-checkers and develop the spectrum described in this article. Therefore, as a starting point, we propose a spectrum of special-interest, or “fringe” fact-checkers. The conception of “fringe,” we argue, does not necessarily and automatically connote a negative or problematic stance. Rather, it merely connotes a level of distance, for various reasons, from the normative standards of a field. One can think of various degrees of “fringe-ness,” in the fashion of concentric circles, in which the very center is populated by the normative core (e.g., IFCN in this case), and different actors of varying distances from the center forming the different degrees of “fringeness.” A non-accredited or fringe fact-checker, for instance, could still follow the institutional norms and practices of the profession without seeking or gaining accreditation. This is why our conception of a spectrum proves worthwhile. In the case of a fringe fact-checker following institutionalized norms, this would place them much closer to the core of the network, compared to an entity that self-identifies as a fact checker, but is clearly sponsored by partisan actors, does not have a systematic methodology, and performs its operations in an opaque, propagandistic, or even hostile manner.

The spectrum of fringe fact-checkers introduced in this article envisages, at the one extreme, hyper-partisan (sponsored by or actively supporting specific political actors) and propagandistic (delegitimizing specific discourses and targeting certain actors, while pursuing non-journalistic purposes) operations. At the other end of the spectrum, we position fact-checkers mostly aligned with the norms of recognized institutional networks, such as the IFCN, working for the public interest. To position fringe fact-checkers on the spectrum, we develop a methodology that interrogates the operations and content covered by these actors. In this study, we aimed to assess the operations and content of groups and organizations that self-identify as fact-checkers but who are not recognized as legitimate independent fact-checkers by the IFCN or other accrediting bodies, or, in some instances, have been flagged by accredited fact-checkers for spreading problematic content. The article describes our efforts to create and test a framework specifically designed for these purposes. Taking into account these objectives, our main research questions are:

RQ1: How do entities who self-identify as fact-checkers differ from each other and IFCN-accredited fact-checkers in terms of their operations?

RQ2: How do entities who self-identify as fact-checkers differ from each other and IFCN-accredited fact-checkers in terms of the content they create and disseminate?

## 2. Methodology

To examine the operations and content covered by a range of fringe fact-checking actors, we first reviewed the existing research and industry literature to identify the “fringe” fact-checkers who would become the focus of this study. We identified entities that were flagged by accredited fact-checkers as malicious actors impersonating accredited fact-checking organizations. Some of the flagged organizations were already inactive at the time of data collection (e.g., the case of Newtrola, Bendita in Spain, and the discontinued Verificado Notimex led by the Mexican government; EU Disinfo Lab, 2021; Tardáguila, 2019). However, we were able to identify a number of potential candidates for the study that were still operating and self-identified as fact-checkers, and that were not recognized as legitimate fact-checkers according to the IFCN and the Duke Reporters Lab (Stencel et al., 2023). Our final list consisted of nine “fringe,” standalone fact-checking or governmental/partisan groups that had an identifiable political purpose. These nine fringe fact-checkers (two from Brazil, two from Russia, two from India, two from China, and one from Singapore) are listed in Table 1. More information on these organizations and the rationale for their selection for this study are provided in the Supplementary File, Appendix 1.

For each fact-checker, we identified all of the online spaces where they had active accounts and recorded the audience sizes on their most popular social media platforms, also taking account of their national platform ecologies (e.g., VKontakte and Yandex in Russia and Weibo and WeChat in China). We identified each entity’s main operational space, which we defined as the space where the most detailed content was posted. For most groups on our list, this main space constituted the entity’s website. For each entity, we collected the last 30 posts published between 6 September and 31 October 2023.

We then developed an initial codebook drawing on the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) codebook (Srinivasan, 2019) and drawing on IFCN key definitions stated in their Code of Principles. This codebook guided coders to consider each entity based on two pillars: (a) an Operations Pillar, which identified the general operational mechanisms of the entity, such as its mode of practice, transparency, and operation spaces; and (b) a Content Pillar, which identified the dynamics of content creation, such as the labeling or rating system, the presence of targeting, and the use of emotive language. In terms of the labeling or rating

**Table 1.** The list of fringe fact-checking organizations investigated in this study, their affiliated country, and date established.

Name	Country	Date established
Brasil contra Fake	Brazil	2023
Verdade dos Fatos	Brazil	2019
Война с фейками (War on Fakes)	Russia	2022
Lapsha Media (Noodles Media)	Russia	Not identifiable
OpIndia	India	2014
PIB Fact Check	India	2019
中国互联网联合辟谣平台 (Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform)	China	2018
有据 (Youju China Fact Check)	China	2020
Factually	Singapore	2019

system, recognized fact-checking organizations typically employ a multi-level system of verdicts signaling the accuracy and credibility of information (Stencel et al., 2023). For example, the IFCN-accredited organization, PolitiFact uses a six-level rating system ranging from *true* to *pants on fire* (for inaccurate “ridiculous” claims), with more nuanced ratings such as *mostly true*, *mostly false*, or *half true* between the extremes (Holan, 2018). This rating system has been commended by other fact-checkers for demonstrating fact-checking professionalism and independence. The Operations and Content Pillars considered 22 variables in total and qualitatively explored how these fringe fact-checkers operated for comparison purposes (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2).

The coders, having in-depth knowledge of the specific regions and the political and social contexts of the studied cases in the project, met regularly to discuss the codes and variables. Through various rounds of coding and double-coding, if needed, we reached an agreement in accordance with the process of consensus coding (see Cascio et al., 2019). To assess the degree of self- or special-interestedness (in contrast to public-interestedness) and to position these actors on the spectrum, we allocated negative scores (–1 per criterion that was not met) in the Operations Pillar, based on factors that could impact a fact-checker’s adherence of professional norms of operation and by considering the IFCN principles (IFCN, n.d.). These operational factors included: operational transparency (in standards and sources); whether the owners of these operations or funding sources were listed, publicly known, or findable; if they published sponsored content; and whether the fact-checker had been flagged as problematic by the IFCN.

### 3. Findings

In terms of their operations, the fringe fact-checkers we investigated in this study operated in similar ways to fact-checkers accredited by the IFCN. However, none of these fact-checkers provided a sufficient level of transparency information as required by IFCN’s Code of Principles. In particular, we found a lack of disclosure of the organizational structure, a lack of sufficient information about those in charge of the editorial output, and no evidence of a clear and detailed methodology of verification. Some of these organizations had also been flagged as problematic by the IFCN. None of the entities published results of verifications showing that claims were true. And rather than providing nuanced ratings, the fringe fact-checkers predominantly labeled claims as false, or used alternative labels such as “fake” or “rumor.” The majority of fringe fact-checkers incorporated sources of information to verify claims, but the quality of these sources varied, demonstrating particular pro- and anti-government stances. The majority of the studied operations also demonstrated clear political alignments either by explicitly stating these alignments (e.g., identifying the government as an owner of the fact-checking operation) or by strongly favoring one perspective and/or disseminating partisan political narratives. We report details of these varied operational and content practices below and discuss the implications for developing a framework for better understanding fact-checkers on the fringe.

Like IFCN-accredited fact-checkers, the entities in this study mostly maintained a website presence but operations varied widely in terms of the other online spaces they were operating in and the sizes of their audiences in these spaces. To give an indication of the extent of these operations, Table 2 provides detailed information on these digital spaces and respective audience sizes (where possible to determine).

**Table 2.** The digital platforms used by each fact-checker and their audience size measured in number of followers (as of September 2023).

Fact-Checker's Name	Website	X (formerly Twitter)	YouTube	Instagram	Meta	Telegram	Weibo	WeChat	Koo	Odnoklassniki	Pikabu	RuTube	VK	Yandex Dzen	Total Spaces
Brasil contra Fake	*	284,700	27,400	210,000	135,000										5
Youju China Fact Check	18,600							*							2
Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform	106,000						225,000	*							3
Lapsha Media	37,100		4,960			16,065				441,336	105	140	739,105	2,000	8
OpIndia	5,600,000	654,571	419,000	135,000	433,000										5
PIB Fact Check	5,900,000	300,842		86,700	61,000	18,188			287,100						6
Factually	*	*	*	*	*	*									6
Verdade dos Fatos		70,200	2,052	3,086											3
War On Fakes	8,900					622,187									2
<b>Total Fact-Checkers</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	

Note: \* metrics not available for the digital space.

Some government-owned and operated spaces (e.g., Brazil and Singapore) used existing online governmental websites to post content, and did not separate governmental website content from fact-checking content, so website visits for them were not recorded. Unsurprisingly, Chinese fact-checkers did not have a prominent presence on Western social media platforms, confining their activities to debunking rumors within their own media and platform systems. Russian fringe fact-checkers actively used Telegram and VK. Lapsha Media accounted for a small audience on YouTube. Factually limited their activities to producing corrections for users of the government website. In contrast, the Brazilian and Indian groups were actively operating on a number of mainstream social media platforms (X [formerly Twitter], Meta, Instagram, and YouTube). For OpIndia, YouTube was a central distribution node with 419,000 subscribers.

### 3.1. Operations Pillar

The fringe fact-checkers in our sample mimicked well-established organizations and entities in their operations. However, differences emerged when we scrutinized the inner workings of these entities. All studied entities received negative scores in at least one of the factors we coded for in the Operations Pillar (see Table 3), but these scores placed them differently on the spectrum, which indicates, at least operatively, that entities who might be considered questionable or flagged by accredited fact-checkers operated in similar ways to those who were recognized within institutionalized terrain.

The source with the highest negative score was the Russian pro-Kremlin Telegram channel War on Fakes, which was created at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This organization (predominantly operating as an anonymous Telegram channel) has been flagged as problematic by the IFCN and all of the content required to demonstrate transparency in their operations was missing. War on Fakes

**Table 3.** Scoring methodology for Operations Pillar.

Fact checker's name	Flagged by IFCN	Funding source disclosed	Funding source findable	Owners findable	Owners listed	Sponsored content	Transparency commitment information	Total negative scores
War on Fakes	Yes *	No *	No *	No *	No *	No	No *	-6
Verdade dos Fatos	No	No *	No *	No *	No *	No	No *	-5
OpIndia	Yes *	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes *	No *	-3
Brasil contra Fake	Yes *	No *	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No *	-3
Factually	No	No *	No *	Yes	Yes	No	No *	-3
Lapsha media (Eng. Noodles' Media)	No	No *	No *	Yes	Yes	No	No *	-3
Youju China Fact Check	No	Yes	No *	Yes	No *	No	No *	-3
Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes *	No *	-2
PIB Fact Check	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No *	-1

Note: \* = Negative scores.



did not disclose their funding sources and their owners were not listed or findable. This organization has been repeatedly reported for spreading pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation on the war under the guise of fact-checking (e.g., Dickinson, 2022; Romero, 2022). Also ranking high on the list was the Brazilian X account Verdade dos Fatos. While this organization has not been flagged as problematic by the IFCN, all of the content required to demonstrate transparency was missing. The organization, which self-proclaims to “fact-check the fact-checkers” (Charpentrat, 2022), tends to dismiss information from mainstream media outlets and accredited fact-checkers while promoting dubious verifications that are favorable to Brazil’s former government.

In regards to the level of transparency of the studied entities, six out of nine (with the exceptions of Verdade dos Fatos, War on Fakes, and Youju China Fact Check) explicitly listed their owners. In particular, four fact-checkers in our sample (PIB Fact Check, Brasil contra Fake, Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform, and Factually) declared their ownership by the governments. For example, the Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform claimed that they were fully hosted by government agencies in affiliation with the official news agency (Xinhua) as an extension of internet governance. Their methodology, however, was unrepeatable, as it frequently relied on using “source tells” to perform fact-checking. Singapore’s Factually supported debunking content that was in breach of Singapore’s Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act.

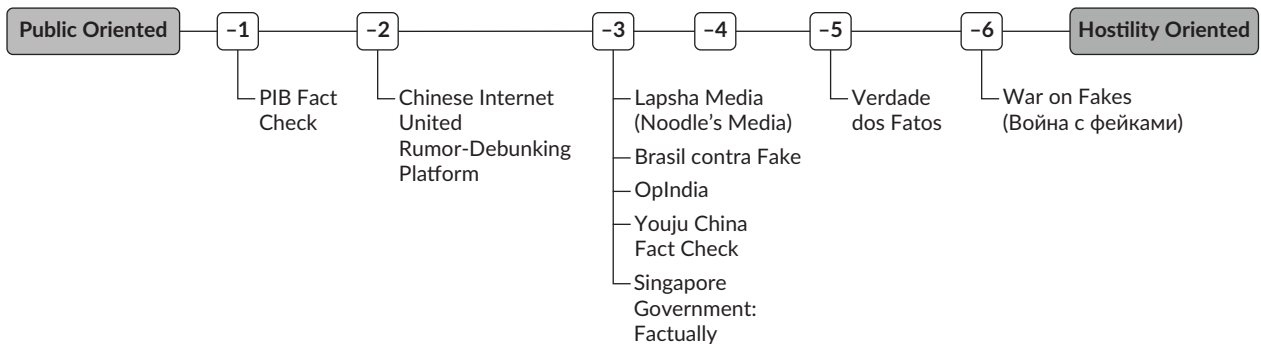
Some fringe fact-checkers made efforts to appear independent to support their legitimacy. For example, the Russian organization (Lapsha Media) described itself as a project of an “autonomous non-commercial” entity (“Dialog Regions”). However, investigations of the publicly available sources revealed that the organization listed was operating as government-controlled. This circumstance is not unusual in Russia, given that many non-governmental organizations are funded or created by the government (Toepler et al., 2020); alternative and independent non-governmental organizations are mostly either liquidated or labeled as foreign agents, undesirable or extremist organizations. War on Fakes tried to purport its independence by claiming that it did not “do politics.” Although not revealing its ties to the government explicitly, the channel has been a subject of journalistic investigations, which connect it to a government-controlled organization (notably, the same one operating the other Russian fringe fact-checker in this study, Lapsha Media; Zholobova et al., 2023).

One Chinese organization (Youju China Fact Check) asserted its autonomy and professionalism by adhering to the IFCN’s standards and by involving volunteers and academic institutions with journalism programs in its operations. However, its practices, including the selection of topics and targets, were subject to government moderation and censorship to avoid crossing official “red lines,” which confirms evidence of previous research that characterizes the Chinese case as “weak” and “fragmented” fact-checking (Liu & Zhou, 2022). OpIndia’s application for IFCN recognition was rejected on the basis of its lack of commitment to non-partisanship and fairness; it was found to consistently use biased language while attacking other media outlets and the oppositional political party leaders in India. Similarly, journalists in Brazil have identified the pro-Bolsonaro X account Verdade dos Fatos, which mimics fact-checking posts from a far-right standpoint, as an initiative that co-opts the mission of accredited fact-checkers to enhance disinformation tactics.

Finally, at least three entities in our sample—War on Fakes, Brasil contra Fake, and OpIndia—have been flagged as problematic entities by the accredited IFCN fact-checkers because of spreading misinformation and/or bias in their reporting (Mantas, 2020; Menezes, 2023; Romero, 2022). In the case of War on Fakes,

PolitiFact reviewed more than 380 publications and found that many of them contained falsehoods, specifically related to the war in Ukraine (Romero, 2022). In a similar vein, Agência Lupa examined the first 168 articles published by Brasil contra Fake, finding that 52% of these pieces were rumor-debunking notes without reliance on any externally verifiable sources (Tardáguila, 2023). While Verdade dos Fatos has not been flagged by IFCN or the Poynter Institute, a number of IFCN members have described it as a fact-checking impersonator (Charpentrat, 2022).

We have used the Operations Pillar scores provided in Table 3 and oriented them alongside the factors associated with public-oriented fact-checkers, to develop a framework of fringe fact-checkers (Figure 1). The framework places actors with special interests at one extreme and hostility-oriented operations at the other extreme.



**Figure 1.** The spectrum of fact-checking from public good-oriented to politically-motivated, based on operational features.

### 3.2. Content Pillar

With the exception of Verdade dos Fatos, all of the fact-checkers we examined were actively producing content at the time the study was conducted. Over the two-month data collection period (6 September and 31 October 2023), these operations published between 10 and 407 unique posts, with Russian fringe fact-checkers having the highest number of publications (Lapsha Media,  $n = 407$ ; War on Fakes,  $n = 331$ ). Table 4 provides information on publishing activity during that period.

#### 3.2.1. Labeling System and Sources

We first examined how the entities label the claims they investigated. While some of the fringe fact-checkers (e.g., Youju China Fact Check and PIB Fact Check) in our sample employed a scale with intermediate options (e.g., “misleading” or “no proof” for the Chinese entity or “fake,” “misleading” and “true” for the Indian entity), these cases were rare. One of the Brazilian entities, Verdade dos Fatos, operated as a far-right, hyperpartisan social media profile on X and used “ideologically false” as one of the labels, thus challenging information with a different political leaning. However, this label was not used in the 30 latest posts published by the entity. Verdade dos Fatos, also employed emotive language when presenting spurious claims as fact-checking content, often including signs and emojis of urgency (⚠️) and other labels such as “rampant lie,” “masks falling,” and “truth prevails.” In contrast, the majority of the fringe fact-checkers in this study either did not have a defined labeling scheme (e.g., Factually) or, rather than providing nuanced

**Table 4.** Number of publications for each fact-checking during the data collection period (6 September and 31 October 2023).

Fringe fact-checkers	Number of publications in the collection period
Lapsha media	407
War On Fakes	331
PIB Fact Check	68
Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform	62
OplIndia	30
Brasil contra Fake	29
Factually	14
Youju China Fact Check	10
Verdade dos Fatos	0*

Note: \* We examined the latest 30 posts published by this entity before it became inactive.

ratings, predominantly labeled claims as false using such signifiers as “fake” (e.g., War on Fakes) or “rumor” (Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform).

The second alignment we identified was that, like reputable fact-checking organizations, the majority of fringe fact-checkers incorporated reputable sources (or presented their sources as such) in their debunks. However, we also identified instances where verification sources were absent. For example, the Indian fact-checker, PIB Fact Check, only included sources to verify claims in approximately 20% of their fact-checking posts and OplIndia used sources in only half of their fact-checking posts. The sources used by fringe fact-checkers included politicians (official statements), government departments (including information from government websites and reports), other media, other fact-checkers, scientific bodies or articles, unofficial web pages and social media accounts, and anonymous sources; some entities also conducted reverse video or image searches for their verifications.

Some sources used to support verification leaned towards distinct political alignments. In the case of the Brazilian entity Verdade dos Fatos, the frequent usage of words like “leftist” and other value-laden expressions including “freedom still breathes” revealed a right-wing political alignment. Similarly, the Indian entities disseminated posts that defended Prime Minister Modi or attacked the political opposition and media outlets critical of the government. For instance, PIB Fact Check would either cite confidential sources or include statements that were not attributed to a source while attacking the opposition politicians. Chinese government-owned fact-checkers and Singapore’s Factually used information sources provided by agencies within the government body itself. In the case of Singapore, this included Statistics Singapore and the World Health Organization. Similarly, Russian pro-government fact-checkers “debunked” information related to the war in Ukraine or domestic politics by citing official statements of the Russian government.

### 3.2.2. Topics, Political Leaning, and Targeted Groups

To determine what might distinguish fringe fact-checkers from accredited fact-checkers in terms of the content they produce and disseminate, we identified the topics covered by the entities in their posts, the political leaning expressed in the posts, and the groups or individuals frequently or exclusively targeted (i.e., sources of allegedly false claims). The fringe fact-checkers rarely focused on one single topic and rather

addressed claims from different domains. The most common topics were domestic politics and health-related (mis)information (covered by seven and six out of nine fact-checkers, respectively); other topics included international politics, war and conflict, elections, non-political domestic news, and conspiracy theories. The Brazilian fact-checker, Brasil contra Fake, had a stronger thematic focus that was integrated into the government's official communication channels; it predominantly covered domestic politics. The Russian channel, War on Fakes, was focused mainly on the war in Ukraine, framing it from the perspective of the Russian government.

The majority of the studied entities demonstrated evident political alignments by strongly favoring one perspective in claim selection and/or disseminating partisan political narratives. For instance, Verdade dos Fatos's content expressed a clear leaning in favor of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his allies. Within this sample, we observed that the entity published Bolsonaro's fact-checking posts, shared news favorable to his administration, and reposted messages from politicians associated with the former Brazilian government. The content also demonstrated antagonization towards accredited fact-checkers by pejoratively labeling them as "left-checking." Likewise, both Russian sources strongly supported pro-Kremlin and anti-opposition narratives in their content.

Finally, we examined which actors were typically subjected to debunks by these fringe fact-checkers and we found no distinct patterns. Chinese entities did not have obvious targets and posts were aligned with people making claims related to current events. In contrast, in several instances, the fact-checkers targeted opposition or those making government-critical claims in their content. This was especially the case for the government-owned fact-checkers (e.g., PIB Fact Check and Factually). Singapore's Factually focussed on opposition groups or activists, international media, and social media users who were presented as making false claims about government policy and practices.

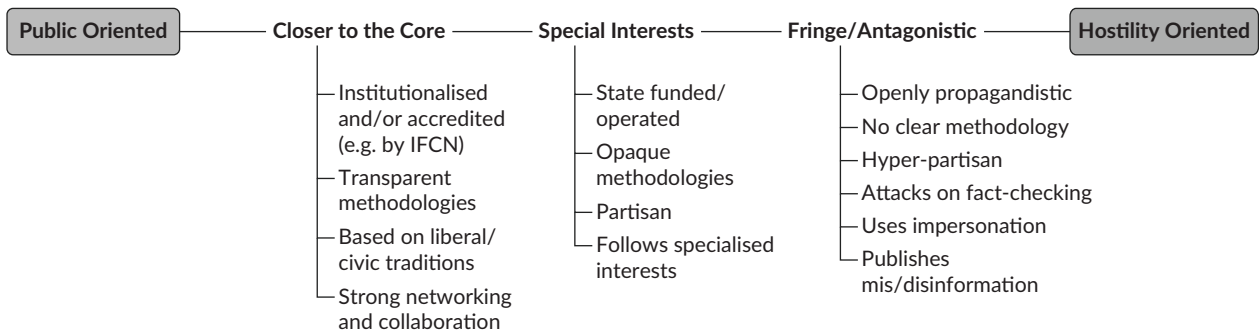
Russian entities targeted foreign actors in particular, such as Ukraine and the US (governments as well as other actors, e.g., media and public figures). The War on Fakes channel commonly targeted Ukraine as a source of disinformation while deploying mocking and diminishing language (e.g., *feykomety*, roughly translated as "fake tossers"). Often, these allegations were attributed to generalized actors (e.g., "Ukrainian propagandists"), rather than specific actors, and used to deny information contradicting pro-Kremlin narratives (specifically related to Russia's attacks on Ukraine).

Other targeted actors observed in our sample of fringe fact-checking posts included other media and fact-checkers, pharmaceutical companies, and social media users. For instance, we observed that Verdade dos Fatos verified claims made by accredited Brazilian fact-checkers, like Aos Fatos, and claims made by mainstream journalists and members of the judiciary, particularly judges who were prosecuting allies of Bolsonaro. Strategically, this fringe fact-checker classified all targeted actors as aligned with the "left" and accused them of acting to undermine the credibility of Brazil's democratic institutions by showing political bias and partisanship.

While all fact-checkers could potentially be seen as targeting particular actors by merely selecting specific claims for verification, in some cases, singling out an actor and targeting their credibility appears to be the primary aim of the operation. The language used for this targeting was highly emotive, deviating from the professional, neutral tone used by accredited fact-checkers when referring to the sources of particular

claims. It is clear that targeting actors in fact-checking takes different forms and that these problematic content practices contribute to what can be considered hostility-oriented fact-checking.

Based on our analysis of the operations and content practices of the entities selected for this study, we developed a framework of fact-checking where organizations operating outside of the IFCN code of principles may be located (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The spectrum of fact-checking from core to fringe based on operations and content practices.

Those that are nearer to the “core” of public-oriented fact-checking (as recognized by the IFCN code of principles) are at one extreme, and those we might call hostility-oriented fact-checkers are at the other extreme. However, it is clear that independent and IFCN-accredited fact-checkers share their professional space with organizations and groups who may not be able to claim independence but may still value correcting content in the public interest. Other actors may claim independence but operate in hyperpartisan and openly propagandistic ways.

## 4. Discussion

In this project, we set out to create and test a framework that could be used to assess the operations and content of groups and organizations that self-identify as fact-checkers but who are not recognized as legitimate independent fact-checkers by the IFCN or other accrediting bodies. To this end, we selected nine entities that represent different types of fringe fact-checking—from public-oriented actors, who generally adhere to the fact-checking standards promoted by the IFCN, to hostility-oriented actors who weaponize and mimic institutionally-recognized fact-checking practices. While acknowledging that the selected cases neither fit into one single category nor represent the whole landscape of fact-checkers or entities impersonating them, this study captures some of the diversity of actors operating under the fact-checking label. It provides a methodological approach for locating this diversity across a spectrum of peripherality, studying how close or far an entity is to the core of the institutionalized fact-checking field.

As a reference point for our spectrum, we consider accredited (e.g., by the IFCN), independent fact-checkers. Although they are greatly supported by digital platforms (Beaudreau, 2024), and the same organizations denounce the risk of losing their independence, they belong in the public-oriented core. Independent fact-checkers follow journalistic ideals rather than state or business interests, and they emphasize the need to diversify their support schemes and business models to avoid excessive funder influence. Additionally, third-party models (i.e., Meta program) and platform allocation schemes are also mediated by the IFCN and

only IFCN signatory organizations are funded by the platforms. Our findings show that non-accredited public-interest fact-checkers and some of the state-sponsored and state-endorsed fact-checkers frame their activities in line with IFCN's code of principles and align their activities alongside independent public-interest fact-checking to at least some degree. Independent fact-checking has become a central institutionalized practice, used and often trusted by audiences to evaluate the information they consume on a daily basis. Yet, the fact-checking tenets that function to promote increased levels of trust in audiences are prone to be exploited or weaponized by problematic actors. Not all of the fringe fact-checkers investigated in this study could be considered problematic within their national contexts or in the same ways. While some may promote propaganda in practice, others present partisan bias in terms of the topics they choose to focus on, the groups they target for criticism, or the sources they use to debunk claims.

The proposed spectrum of fact-checking presented in this article helps audiences navigate the intricacies associated with evaluating the operations and practices of non-accredited fact-checkers. As our findings show, it is quite possible for non-accredited fact-checkers to align with the institutional norms of fact-checking in terms of their operations, particularly those who were observed to impersonate fact-checkers. At least two of the fact-checkers investigated in this study could be considered relatively transparent in their operations according to the scoring methodology. In terms of content, however, such observations start to diverge, and problematic practices start to emerge. Eldridge's (2019) formulation of antagonistic voice versus antagonistic stance/relationship is illuminating here; the number of compounding problematic content practices observed in our study included low levels of transparency in methodologies, directly targeting of political opponents (e.g., opposition, sources sharing different political leaning, or foreign actors), criticizing mainstream media and other fact-checkers and, in the most extreme cases, spreading mis- and disinformation.

Avoiding particular topics places entities within the special-interest fact-checking areas on the proposed spectrum or on more extreme parts of the spectrum. Hyperpartisan, state-media operations in the Chinese cases, for instance, base their work on the contextual media logics of China, which contrasts them with public fact-checkers who can challenge government narratives. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, we locate hostility-oriented actors who either impersonate fact-checkers (e.g., EU Disinfo Lab, 2021) or use fact-checking as a guise to mask a hyperpartisan or propagandistic agenda. This group is characterized by low transparency, clear ideological alignment, and the use of problematic practices, such as the spread of disinformation and propagandistic narratives, or explicit verbal attacks on opponents. From a normative perspective, such actors may not be regarded as fact-checkers *per se*, yet by mimicking specific operations and practices, they may appear as such to their audiences.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This study focused on developing a framework for capturing the spectrum of fringe fact-checkers. It is based on an analysis of the operations and content of nine non-IFCN entities, representing government-led initiatives, far-right partisan groups, weaponizing state propaganda agents, and other entities flagged by independent and institutionalized fact-checking organizations. We can summarize our findings into two main arguments. Firstly, our study provides evidence of strategically opaque operational forms, which entities might deploy to usurp standardized fact-checking practices or use instrumentally to achieve hostile goals. We observed opaque operations mainly through a lack of transparency for verification methodologies and governmental and partisan alignments when tackling corrections or attacks on independent fact-checkers.

This operational analysis provided the basis for our nuanced spectrum of fringe actors. Secondly, these actors' imitational and mimicking behaviors associated with their operations, online positioning on specific social media platforms, and content tactics are most apparent in instances where these organizations target a narrow range of sources to fact check, target political opponents exclusively, use extreme ratings with the amplification of the "fake" discourses and language, and select cherry-picked topics to fact-check (as described in previous work e.g., Dehghan & Glazunova, 2021; Palau-Sampio, 2023). These identified features, addressing RQ2, align with the current disinformation practices and attributes identified by researchers investigating alternative media and pseudo-media (Palau-Sampio, 2023). Based on our findings, it is clear that the damage associated with these forms of weaponization, which fringe fact-checkers may claim serves the public good, increases when guaranteed democratic conditions cannot be met.

While these findings and the framework we have developed from them contribute towards a better understanding of phenomena such as pseudo-fact-checkers and "fake" fact-checkers, which have been a growing preoccupation for researchers (Lim, 2020; Neo, 2022; Yesil, 2021), our study has some limitations. Firstly, given the exploratory scope of this study, it necessarily focuses on a limited number of organizations and uses small samples of publications collected over a short time frame to evaluate content-related practices of the fringe fact-checkers. Hence, it cannot fully represent the range of fringe fact-checking entities currently operating or the entirety of the content produced by these entities. We may not have uncovered all of the problematic practices associated with the range of these fringe organizations. Secondly, while the coding scores we assigned were largely indicative of the operations of particular actors, future studies might undertake a comprehensive analysis of the content of these entities, to provide a complete picture. For example, an actor may appear to be transparent and unbiased in its operations, while at the same time targeting particular groups or disseminating misleading information. These complexities would need to be explored in future research as a priority because these problems are already recognized by coders working with the Global Disinformation Index codebook (Srinivasan, 2019). Taking these limitations together, we suggest that future research focus on a large-scale detailed analysis of content published by fringe fact-checkers, taking international scope and the variety of approaches that self-defined fact-checkers adopt into account.

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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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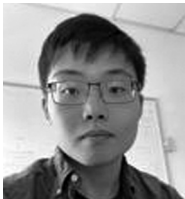
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