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EDITORIAL

Editorial: Fact-Checkers Around the World—Regional, Comparative, and Institutional Perspectives

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Abstract

This thematic issue explores the global fact-checking field, focusing on its organizations, practices, and institutional dynamics. Over the past decade, fact-checking has expanded to over 400 organizations, with approximately half operating in the Global South. Fact-checkers have built a solid institutional framework featuring annual conferences, regulatory bodies, and partnerships with big techs and public organizations. Even with this cohesion, the fact-checking movement remains deeply heterogeneous. Organizations range from small local outlets to global media giants, operating within varied media and political systems. These differences shape how fact-checkers define their mission and approach misinformation, and offer a valuable lens for journalism and political communication studies to analyze evolving media systems and digitalization effects worldwide. Given such diversity, our issue addresses the need for research to observe regional and comparative perspectives on fact-checking alongside studies of broader global trends. Recent scholarship has focused on how fact-checkers adapt to diverse environments, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and how the field is evolving. It also examines fact-checkers' relationships with platform companies, policymakers, and transnational institutions combating misinformation. Contributions employing diverse methodologies, from case studies to large-scale content analyses, are included, with a particular emphasis on understanding organizational and contextual specificities in this crucial area of media and political communication.

Keywords

debunking; fact-checking; fact-checking roles; journalism; media literacy; media systems; political communication; verification of war and conflicts

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the fact-checking field has grown from a few dozen outlets based mainly in the United States and Europe, to include some 439 organizations active in more than 100 countries, with nearly half in the Global South (Stencel et al., 2024). Fact-checkers have built a cohesive and coherent global movement, with its own annual conference, professional association, standards bodies, and growing ties to platform companies as well as public institutions. Recent collaborations such as #UkraineFact and #CoronaVirusFacts have involved fact-checkers in dozens of countries working together to track and counteract global misinformation flows. The 11th annual Global Fact conference drew 580 participants to Sarajevo last summer to discuss how fact-checkers can confront growing threats to their movement, from funding challenges to online harassment, legal intimidation, physical violence, and state repression (Holan, 2024).

Even as fact-checkers increasingly act together, their movement remains strikingly diverse. It spans professional newsrooms as well as community-based groups, private commercial services as well as sites run by student volunteers, and small local outlets as well as global media giants operating in dozens of countries. Crucially, fact-checkers work in a wide variety of media and political systems. Even when practices converge, they understand their own mission—and the wider problem of misinformation—in very different ways. This thematic issue brings together an equally diverse range of new scholarship on the state of the global fact-checking field today, with in-depth studies of fact-checkers' practices and perspectives in Africa, Asia, South America, and Europe. What unites these studies is their comparative, organization-centered focus, through structured comparisons across fact-checking outlets or with textured case studies that place these groups in the context both of their region and of the global fact-checking movement, highlighting their relationships to key field-building institutions like the International Fact-Checking Network as well as to the platform companies that have fueled its growth.

The surge in fact-checking across the Global South has taken place during a field-wide shift from correcting public political statements to policing social media content (Graves et al., 2023), and the tension between these two forms of fact-checking emerges as a key theme in this issue. Riedlinger et al. (2024) take two major drivers of the so-called "debunking turn"—platform partnerships and the Covid-19 pandemic—as the starting point for their study of role performance among fact-checkers in Africa and South America. Focusing on six Meta partner organizations that also engage in political fact-checking, the authors show that a professional self-understanding as "civic service providers," epitomized by heavy reliance on "explainer" pieces, prevailed over a role as political or media watchdogs in their efforts to combat false claims about Covid-19 vaccines. This was true even though in interviews fact-checkers highlighted the dangers of top-down political propaganda about vaccines, and despite the fact that explainers and debunking pieces appeared to interest audiences less than fact-checks of public figures. Some fact-checkers deployed humor and satire in their explainers, and the authors speculate that the format offers a way to diversify coverage and attract wider audiences—while also depoliticizing their work during a global health crisis.

Such professional tensions take on a different valence in authoritarian contexts. In Ethiopia, Leeam Azoulay's (2024) study of two fact-checking outlets finds they operate "mostly in debunking mode" due to three factors: practitioners' genuine concern over the dangers of viral misinformation, but also the difficulty of finding sources to verify political claims, and the wider "repressive environment" for freedom of expression. One informant explained that the risk of drawing a negative reaction from the state is too high to justify, for

instance, checking a routine economic claim from a government official; content analysis indicates that here too "explainers" offer a way to manage political risk by avoiding direct confrontations with officials. Studying fact-checking practices in Ethiopia and Mail, Badji et al. (2024) make the point even more starkly: Reporting obstacles, online bullying, and fear of state reprisal push fact-checkers to "focus more on debunking viral social media content, thus effectively becoming content moderators who have turned away from the mission of holding leaders accountable" (p. 1). Particularly in Mali, in the wake of 2020's military coup, fact-checkers say "self-censorship" is the rule when it comes to the military and government officials. It is worth noting that research about fact-checking also reflects the turn to debunking: Only two of the articles in this thematic issue focus primarily on political fact-checking.

A second important theme concerns the different scales and contexts in which fact-checkers operate: Beyond the national level, that continues to be a primary focus for both practitioners and researchers, initiatives have proliferated at the regional, subnational, and global levels, raising new questions about the challenges fact-checkers face. Wouters and Opgenhaffen (2024), for example, point out that the local level is particularly prone to the spread of misinformation due to the decline of smaller media and local news coverage. In these news deserts, they suggest, social media becomes a more vital source of information for local audiences, leaving politicians and other actors more often unchecked. Comparing six local or regional areas, such as Bavaria, Catalonia, or Flanders, the authors find both subdivisions of national news media and dedicated non-government organizations utilizing fact-checking to serve local audiences. While these initiatives are less involved in the international fact-checking community, their relations with national peers are often well-developed, as their focus is complementary in nature and offers an opportunity for collaboration. Moreover, and surprisingly, they do not seem at a disadvantage in terms of funding, since the local level can also provide additional sources of financial support and grants.

By contrast, Badji et al. (2024) demonstrate how fact-checking initiatives in authoritarian environments rely primarily on international funding—for instance, from Western embassies—which can conflict with local news values and undermine the projects' legitimacy with their intended audiences. Azoulay's (2024) Ethiopian case study echoes these concerns, demonstrating how the focus on project funding by international donors and their lack of coordination adds another level of uncertainty. This situation not only undermines long-term planning, as Azoulay (2024) shows, but also emphasizes training without funding the actual implementation of fact-checking projects. As noted, both articles provide a rare window into the fact-checking practices employed in authoritarian, post-conflict environments, where collecting information heavily relies on government agencies whose trustworthiness and cooperation are questionable, to say the least.

Fact-checkers who operate in or cover regions affected by war and conflict face a similar set of challenges, as shown by the cases of Badji et al. (2024) as well as in Dierickx and Lindén's (2024) study of fact-checkers covering the Russia–Ukraine war. While these obstacles are numerous—such as excessive reliance on foreign aid, complicated relationships with international donors, language barriers, geographic distance, threats, harassment, and, in some cases, extremely low internet penetration—innovative solutions are emerging. Creative strategies include, for instance, the use of open-source intelligence, international cooperation, and partnerships with radio stations. Dierickx and Lindén (2024) identify discrepancies in the information landscape and the challenges of verifying information about the Russia–Ukraine conflict, with fact-checkers in Greece, Hungary, and Poland being among the most at risk. Despite these challenges,

fact-checkers have been recognized as part of a global movement characterized by a commitment to accuracy, even when constrained by the availability of reliable resources, a strategic use of technology to enhance professional practices, and a dedication to collaboration with institution-building organizations such as the International Fact-Checking Network, European Fact-Checking Standards Network, and European Digital Media Observatory (Lauer & Graves, 2024) to share evidence and data.

Finally, this thematic issue also highlights emerging research trends and previously unexplored aspects of the fact-checking field. For example, despite the frequent debunking of online misinformation in Spain, fact-checking organizations like Newtral maintain a database to track problematic recurring political claims. A content analysis conducted by Larraz et al. (2024) of over 1,200 claims revealed that more than 24% of false statements resurface with subtle variations, appearing approximately four times, highlighting the extent of the problem. Another troubling trend is the rise of "fake" fact-checkers—organizations that mimic the practices of reputable units to promote propagandistic goals, particularly in countries with high political polarization and populist communication, such as Brazil, India, Russia, China, and Singapore. Equally problematic is the emergence of state-sponsored fact-checking, which can potentially undermine the credibility of serious organizations (see the article by Montaña-Niño et al., 2024). Aware that fact-checking alone might not counteract all the strategies bad actors employ to achieve political goals, fact-checkers are expanding their roles beyond verification. They are increasingly focusing on their educator roles and involvement in media literacy projects. Fact-checkers view media and information literacy as essential to their mission. In the face of rampant misinformation and even fake "fact-checkers," it is clear that merely verifying facts is insufficient. Organizations such as Agência Lupa in Brazil, Chequeado in Argentina, Demagog in Poland, and Verificat and Maldita in Spain have effectively incorporated media and information literacy into their business strategies and organizational frameworks, as demonstrated by Mesquita et al. (2024).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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