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EDITORIAL

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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

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).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

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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 Krippendorf'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.

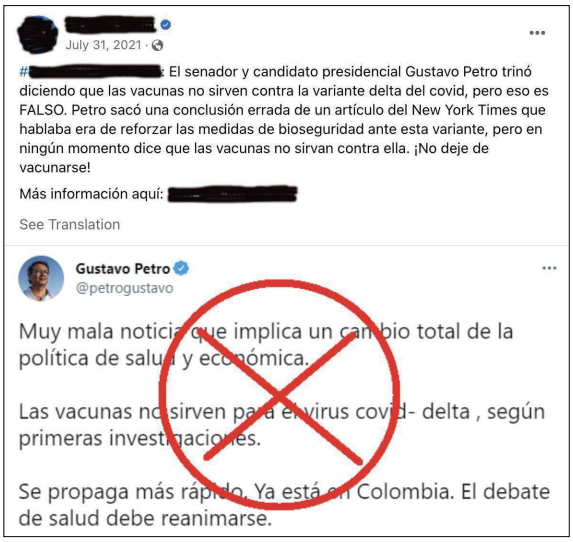

Figure 2. Example of political fact-checking based on a claim published on X.

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.

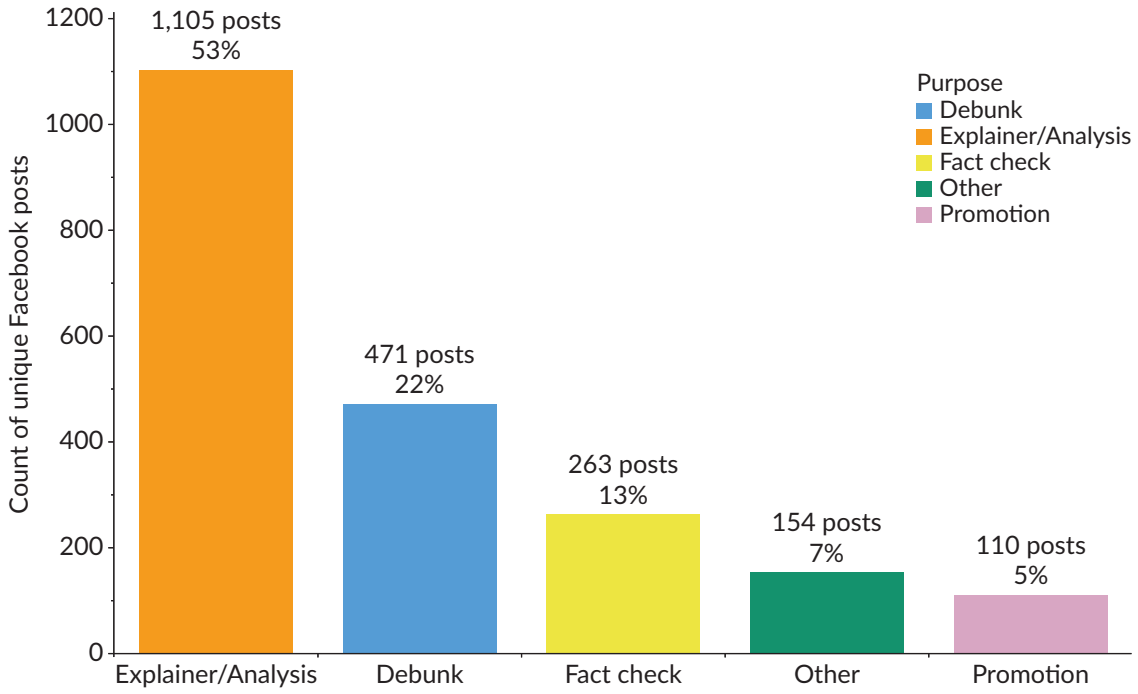

Figure 4. Volume and proportion of Covid-19 vaccine content on fact-checkers' Facebook pages.

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 ($X^2 = 566.543$, $df = 30$, $p < 0.001$).

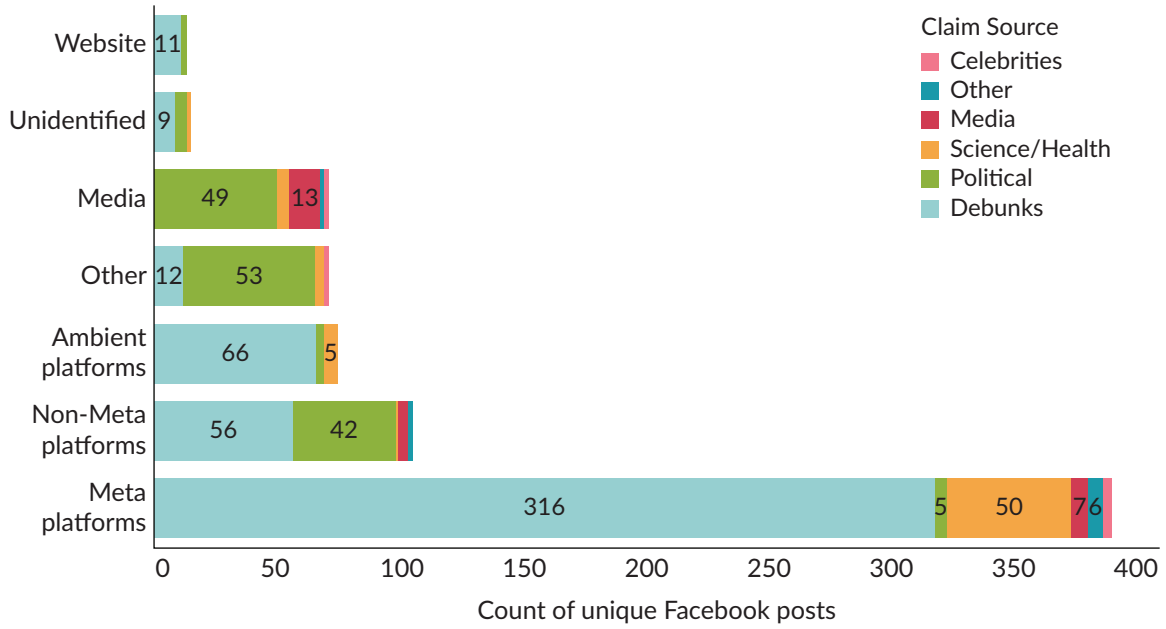

Figure 5. Volume of Facebook posts by source of claim and the platform where claims were identified.

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 Standardized residuals	– –0.510	1 (1) –0.628	77 (67) –0.926	– –0.807	6.8 (6) –1.270	15 (13) 4.352	100 (87)
Media	% (*N*) Standardized residuals	2.2 (2) 3.546	26.9 (24) 16.754	1.1 (1) –19.524	1.1 (1) 0.470	61.7 (55) 15.577	6.7 (6) 0.774	100 (89)
Meta platforms only/ included	% (*N*) Standardized residuals	0.7 (3) 1.879	1.7 (7) –0.622	78 (324) –1.263	1.6 (7) 2.652	3.1 (13) –5.715	14 (58) 9.442	100 (412)
Other	% (*N*) Standardized residuals	0.9 (1) 1.239	– –1.590	12 (13) –19.131	0.8 (1) 0.232	75 (84) 22.150	11.6 (13) 3.303	100 (112)
Website	% (*N*) Standardized residuals	– –0.201	– –0.549	78 (11) –0.216	7 (1) 2.868	14 (2) 0.383	– –0.861	100 (14)
Non-Meta platforms only	% (*N*) Standardized residuals	– –0.635	9 (12) 5.803	41 (55) –11.811	3.8 (5) 4.336	42 (56) 11.851	3 (4) –1.069	100 (132)
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.

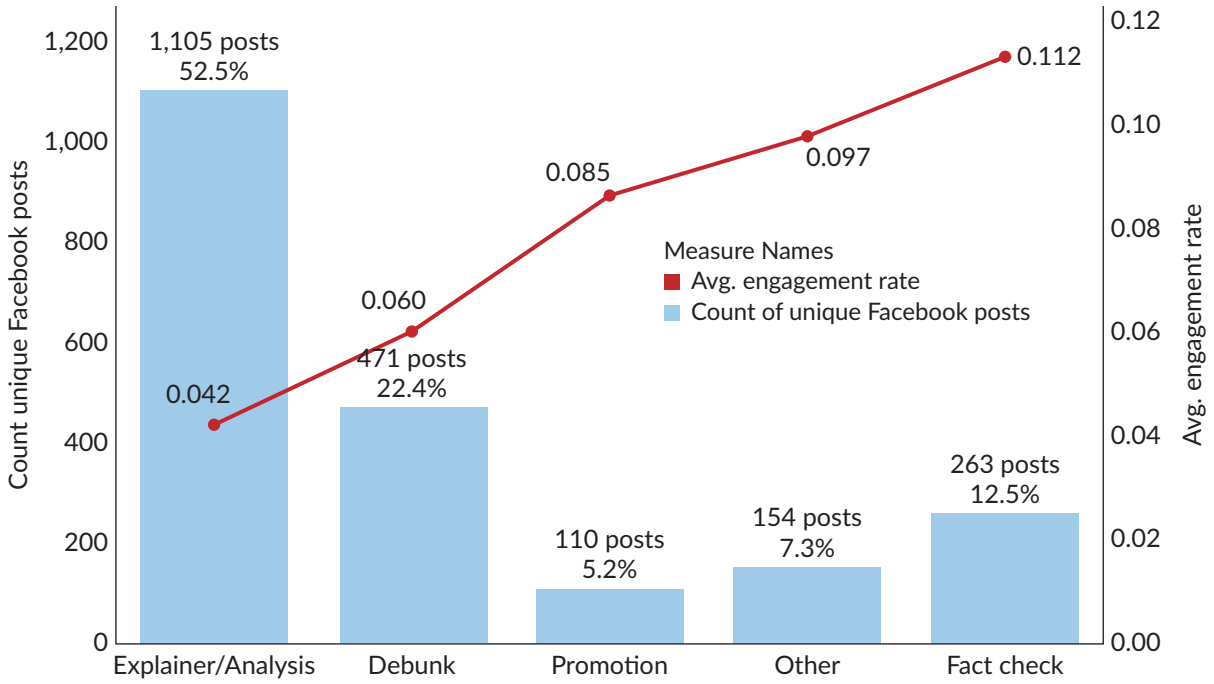

Figure 6. Type of fact-checking content compared by unique post count and average engagement rate.

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

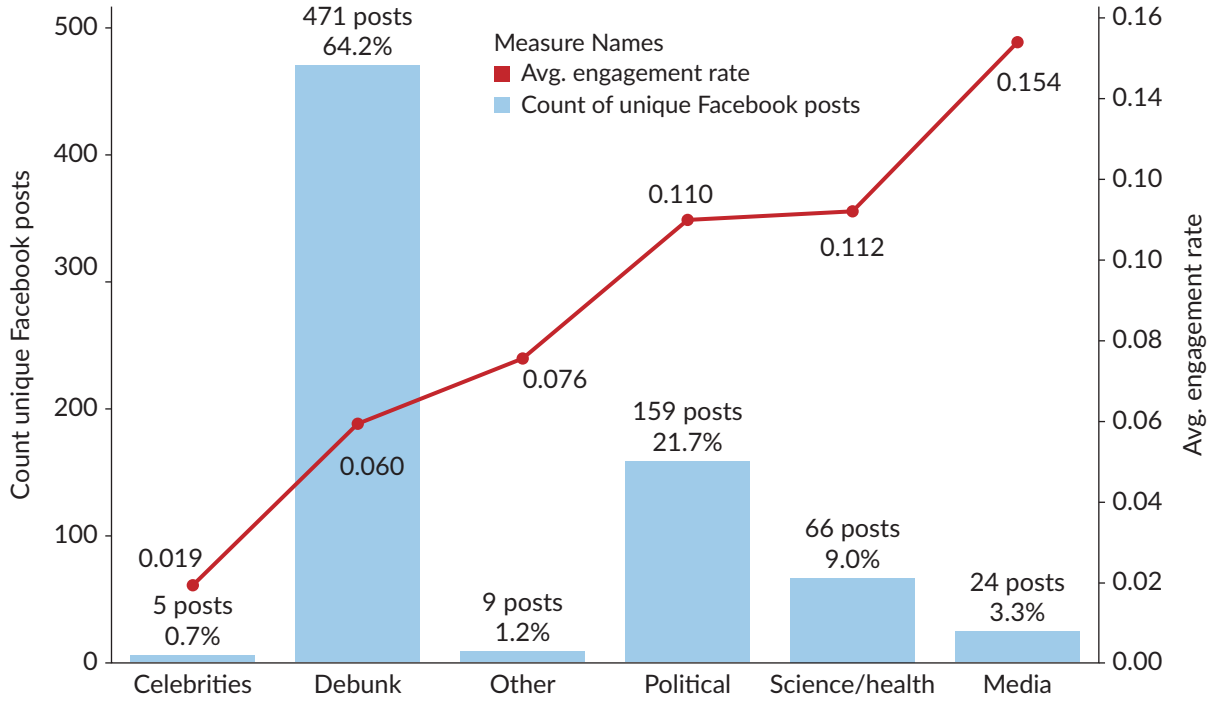

Figure 7. Claim sources compared by unique post count and average engagement rate (in red).

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 focussed 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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Regional Facts Matter: A Comparative Perspective of Sub-State Fact-Checking Initiatives in Europe

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Abstract

After a significant surge of active fact-checking organisations over the past decade, fact-checkers now operate in more than 100 countries. Although the fact-checking movement is diverse, the majority of organisations function at a national level. However, some organisations operate on a sub-state scale, based either on community or geographic region. These fact-checkers investigate statements relevant to specific populations that might otherwise go unaddressed. In Europe, signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network are active in regions with federal or devolved power. This study brings a comparative analysis of regional fact-checkers in Europe, combining qualitative interviews with editors and managers of these organisations with complementary document analysis. Our findings highlight how organisational formats influence fact-checking motivations, the difference in scope between political fact-checking and debunking routines, and the collaborative relations regional fact-checkers maintain with national and international organisations. This article contributes to the debate surrounding the global fact-checking movement by raising awareness of regional and local fact-checking, which helps address so-called fact deserts.

Keywords

boundary work; Europe; fact-checking; journalistic practices; local misinformation; regional media

1. Introduction

Fact-checking, as a specialised practice of assessing the truth of public claims, has grown into a genre more widely practised than ever before. Today, there are more active projects in more countries than ever: an increase from 96 in 37 countries in 2016 to 417 in 108 countries in 2023 (Stencel et al., 2023).

Fact-checking initiatives have adopted similar, transnational practices (Verhoeven et al., 2024), tailored to specific contexts (Lauer, 2024). The field is "related to but distinct from traditional journalism" (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020, p. 585), and also encompasses civil society practices (Cheruiyot et al., 2019). In line with this, Cherubini and Graves (2016) distinguish two organisational models. In the "newsroom model," fact-checking units are integrated into the existing newsrooms of established media organisations. The second, the "NGO model," includes newly created non-profit organisations dedicated to fact-checking, as well as projects from existing NGOs and universities. These are independent organisations that do not always identify as journalists. Meanwhile, meta-organisations like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) emerged as gatekeepers of the credibility of fact-checking, by developing a Code of Principles, and representing fact-checkers to the outside world (Lauer & Graves, 2024).

Another development is the so-called "debunking turn" (Graves et al., 2023). While fact-checking initially focused primarily on investigating political claims, efforts now predominantly target social media content (T. Van Damme, 2021), with an emphasis on debunking viral hoaxes from anonymous sources.

A final element highlighting the field's diverse nature is the geographical focus of fact-checking. According to Duke Reporter's Lab (Stencel et al., 2023), more organisations are active in multiple countries compared to 2016. Large media agencies, such as Agence France-Presse and non-profits like Africa Check, have expanded the scope of their fact-checking activities. For instance, Africa Check started in South Africa but now also has fact-checkers in Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal. Agence France-Presse is arguably the biggest provider of fact-checks, producing content for more than 80 countries through its partnership with Meta.

Conversely, there are also sub-state fact-checking initiatives focusing only on a part of a country. Based on either community or geographic region, such initiatives investigate statements that are relevant for a specific population. Examples include NewsMeter, which fact-checks in the Indian regions of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, while Décrypteurs in Canada and El Detector in the USA focus on French and Spanish language communities, respectively.

The geographical scope is important for studying the profession of fact-checking, as previous research indicates that political and media spheres shape how the transnational practice of fact-checking adapts to different places in the world (Lauer, 2024). Amazeen (2020) found that the number of active fact-checkers is associated with highly democratic regimes. Fact-checking is often a response to political and journalistic failures in such countries. Moreover, the degree of journalistic professionalism in a country predicts a higher use of source transparency by fact-checkers (Humprecht, 2020). The diversity of the media landscape also matters. In diverse media systems, new organisations take a complementary role, whereas organisations in less diverse landscapes tend to adopt leading roles (Cheruiyot et al., 2019). Lastly, technology, such as internet accessibility (Amazeen, 2020), can affect the presence of fact-checking.

This study focuses on such regional fact-checking endeavours in Europe, which, to the best of our knowledge, have not previously appeared in the literature on fact-checking. We examine regional fact-checkers in Europe, where many regions possess varying degrees of devolved power, influencing important decisions that impact citizens' lives. While there are differences in political and media cultures between European countries, there are also many pan-European institutions. Studying the practices of regional fact-checkers is important due to the potential issue of so-called local fact deserts—regions without active fact-checkers, where local authorities face limited accountability for their statements. We explore the

prospects for regional fact-checking in Europe by examining the motivations for fact-checking within regional contexts, funding opportunities, and relationships with other fact-checkers at different geographical levels. This analysis is conducted through a literature review, document analysis, and interviews with existing regional fact-checking initiatives. Our findings suggest that regional fact-checking can complement the transnational fact-checking field. While regional fact-checkers have a unique approach in terms of the scope of their work, they are not significantly different from national fact-checkers in other respects.

2. Fact Deserts

Regional elections and parliaments are often overlooked by national fact-checking organisations. In the past, concerns have arisen over so-called "local fact deserts" (Stencel & Iannucci, 2017). A report by Duke Reporter's Lab (Ryan et al., 2022) found that there are many states in the USA without active fact-checkers. As a result, politicians and officials in these states are rarely held accountable for the accuracy of their statements.

The lack of fact-checkers at a sub-state level is concerning. It can be argued that precisely the local level is particularly prone to misinformation for at least three reasons: Firstly, a decline in local media leaves certain communities without access to local news—a phenomenon known as "news deserts" (Abernathy, 2018); secondly, social media increasingly serve as sources for local news; and thirdly, local authorities often lack the resources to tackle such problems.

In Europe, local media face issues due to greater media centralisation, a more digital information environment, and a low willingness among the public to pay for local news (Verza et al., 2024). The digital transition has not yet compensated for the decline in traditional local media (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018), as social media platforms are often more appealing to advertisers than local media by offering targeted reach (Ardia et al., 2020).

At the same time, we know that social media have become a dominant channel for finding local news (Barclay et al., 2022). Since social media can spread unreliable local news, it leaves communities vulnerable (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022). For example, Barclay et al. (2022) found that community members in the UK often mistrust unverified local news posts on social media, such as rumours circulating in hyperlocal Facebook groups. In the USA, concerns emerged over so-called "pink slime" journalism: websites that mimic traditional local news outlets yet publish highly partisan, often algorithmically generated articles intended to gain traction on social media (Moore et al., 2023).

A report from the European Committee of the Regions (Zamparutti et al., 2022) warns against disinformation at the local level, as it is less frequently addressed in EU disinformation policy. At the same time, regional authorities generally have fewer resources to respond to disinformation compared to the national level. Consequently, the report recommends establishing local networks of fact-checkers. Other researchers have also proposed collaborations between fact-checking organisations and local journalists (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022). This collaboration could benefit fact-checkers, as local journalism tends to be more proximate, trusted, and connected to its audience—qualities that may benefit tackling disinformation (Fernández-Barrero et al., 2024; Park, 2021). In this way, regional and local fact-checkers can assume the role of local watchdogs (d'Haenens et al., 2019) by confronting and holding local elites accountable (Ferracioli et al., 2022). Indeed, evidence suggests that the mere presence of fact-checkers deters politicians and other powerful actors from making unfounded statements (Lim, 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

Since small-scale fact-checking has the potential to overcome local fact deserts, the objective of this study is to focus on the prospects of such regional fact-checking initiatives, considering their motivations, areas of focus, and sustainability. Accordingly, the following research questions will guide this study:

> RQ1: What are the motivations for starting fact-checking at a regional level, and how do they relate to regional political and media contexts?
>
> RQ2: What content is relevant to fact-checking at a regional level?
>
> RQ3: Are regional organisations viable: where do they get funding, and how can they position themselves in the fact-checking field?

3. Case-Selection

3.1. Selection of Regional Fact-Checking Initiatives in Europe

European regions in this study refer to the meso level (see Keating, 2017), situated between the state and local levels. This study looks at active signatories of the IFCN Code of Principles (n.d.) at this regional level, as listed on the IFCN website. We counted 73 organisations based in the continent of Europe that are listed as verified signatories, or in the process of renewal. Only six of them (8%) specifically focus on a particular region within a country. For regions with multiple signatories, the longest-running initiative was selected, which was only the case for Flanders. We further included a region where an organisation was in the process of becoming a verified signatory for the first time. As a result, six European regions with active signatories were identified.

Two initiatives are regional public service media. #Faktenfuchs is the fact-checking unit of BR24, the digital news platform of the Bavarian public broadcaster Bayerische Rundfunk (BR). Faky is the unit of Radio-télévision belge de la Communauté française (RTBF), the public broadcaster for the French-speaking community in Belgium. In Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, the magazine *Knack*, owned by the Roularta Media Group, has a dedicated fact-checking section. All three initiatives fall under the "newsroom model" typology. FactCheckNI (Northern Ireland) and Verificat (Catalonia) are independent non-profits dedicated to fact-checking. Both are clear examples of the "NGO model." The Scottish investigative journalism platform The Ferret has its own Fact Service section. The organisation is more akin to the civic "NGO model," being a not-for-profit cooperative owned by its reader members.

Details of the organisations are summarised in Table 1. The initiatives came into being between 2012 and 2021. *Knack* has the longest track record, followed by FactCheckNI, while Faky is the latest addition. The number of employees involved with fact-check activities, part- or full-time, ranges from two to seven, which is in line with the global median of recognised fact-check initiatives (IFCN, 2024). All organisations publish fact-checks on a regular basis. *Knack* and Verificat are the biggest in terms of employees and fact-check output, publishing an average of four to five fact-checks per week, compared to one by FactCheckNI, Faky, and The Ferret.

The following sections provide background information regarding the political context and media systems in the selected regions.

Table 1. Overview of regional fact-checking initiatives in Europe.

	Parent organisation	Region	Country	Founding year	Organisational model	Employees in fact-checking	Main publication language	Average fact-checks per week (2023)
#Faktenfuchs	BR	Bavaria	Germany	2017	Newsroom: public broadcaster	7	German	2.2
Verificat	—	Catalonia	Spain	2019	NGO model	7	Spanish, Catalan	4.3
Knack Factcheck	Roularta Media Group	Flanders	Belgium	2012	Newsroom: for profit	7	Dutch	5.2
FactCheckNI	—	Northern Ireland	UK	2015	NGO model	2	English	1
The Ferret Fact Service	The Ferret	Scotland	UK	2017	NGO model	2	English	1
Faky	RTBF	Belgian French-speaking Community	Belgium	2021	Newsroom: public broadcaster	5	French	1.2

3.2. Power Devolution

All six regions where the selected organisations operate have a degree of administrative and cultural autonomy. Belgium and Germany have federal systems, whereas Spain and the UK are decentralised states. The six regions have political jurisdiction, interest groups, and a party system that differs from the state level (Fitjar, 2010). However, they vary in terms of wealth, regional identity, and ideological leanings (see Keating & Wilson, 2014).

In Germany's federal state, power is shared between a central government and federal states, Länder, which have a high degree of autonomy (Loughlin et al., 1999, pp. 63–90). Power is divided into centralised federal matters, regional devolved matters, and competing matters between the two levels (Burgess, 2006, pp. 95–97). Länder negotiate their joint interests in the Bundesrat, the legislative body with elected representatives of the 16 states. Belgium has been a federal state since 1993, following multiple constitutional reforms (Burgess, 2006). Power is devoted to three territorial regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), and three language communities (Flemish, French, and German). Regions and communities overlap, but hold distinct powers and governments (Keating, 2007), except in Flanders, where the region and Dutch-language community are merged. Centralised powers are limited to essential state-building matters, such as finance and justice.

In these federal states, power is devolved symmetrically: Regions or communities share the same powers. This is not the case in Spain and the UK. Spain is a decentralised unitary state where 17 autonomous regions and two cities have devolved matters. Devolution is asymmetric, meaning that transferred powers differ between regions. Following the Spanish Constitution of 1978, the "historic nations" with distinct languages,

like Catalonia, have more autonomy (Keating, 2007). The Spanish state can limit devolved powers through framework laws. The UK is considered a union of nations rather than a unitary state (Loughlin et al., 1999), where Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales have had independent legislatures since 1999. As in Spain, power devolution is asymmetric, with each region holding different devolved powers. The Scottish Parliament holds the most extensive powers.

3.3. Media Systems

The way power is devolved also determines the level at which media regulation occurs. German public service media in Germany are entirely decentralised (Verza et al., 2024). Media legislation there is managed by individual federal states, resulting in distinct media laws with inter-state arrangements (Medienstaatsvertrag, 2020), which ensures that media regulation across Germany is not fragmented, and beholds independence. In Belgium, media legislation and public broadcasting are devolved matters for language communities. The Belgian media landscape is entirely split into a French-speaking and Dutch-speaking market. Both language communities have a different duopoly for the newspaper publishers and broadcasting industry (K. Van Damme, 2017).

In Northern Ireland and Scotland, the situation is different, as media regulation remains with the UK parliament (McNair, 2007). The BBC and ITV are UK-wide broadcasters, but have local branches in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, local titles compete with regional editions of UK newspapers (Blain & Hutchison, 2016). According to Ofcom (2024), Scots are particularly interested in news about their own region. Northern Ireland has a mixture of (partisan) local newspapers, UK titles, and press from the Republic of Ireland (Ramsey & McDermott, 2020).

The Catalan media market is rather hybrid, with popular Catalan and Spanish brands, regulated by both Catalan and Spanish media regulators (Alonso, 2016). Regional media, with its own languages and cultures, was a high priority for Catalan reformers during the democratic transformation (Gunther et al., 2000). Financial support for media comes from the region, rather than the state. The most-read newspapers in Catalonia, in print and digital, are a mixture of Spanish and regional publications (López López et al., 2023). Some of the most popular newspapers publish dailies in both Spanish and Catalan.

Table 2 indicates the media system categorisations for the countries involved, based on Hallin and Mancini's (2017) classical typology. Germany's media landscape is categorised under the democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), characterised by a high reach of the press market, significant political parallelism, high regulation, and strong professionalism. Meanwhile, Spain is an example of the polarised pluralistic model, with a low reach of the press, high political parallelism, high regulation, and lower journalistic professionalism.

For Belgium and the UK, the models are less clearly defined. The UK was first categorised within the liberal model, featuring a strong press with a small role of the state. Later analyses (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016) consider the UK media system democratic corporatist like Germany. Media in Belgium were originally classified as democratic corporatist as well, but later moved to the liberal model, after deregulations and less parallelism. A recent analysis (Humprecht, Castro Herrero, et al., 2022), which included aspects of digitalisation, reaffirms the corporatist landscape of Germany and pluralist model of Spain, and places Belgium and the UK in a hybrid cluster between these two ideal types.

While indicative for the regions, it should be noted that these classifications are based at the national level. For instance, the press in Catalonia is stronger than in other Spanish communities, with a wide range of media outlets (Prado, 2015). There can also be differences within linguistically segmented markets, such as Belgium (Bonin et al., 2020). And, for some regions, media boundaries are blurred by a significant penetration of outlets from other countries, such as French news media in Wallonia and Irish media in Northern Ireland.

3.4. Political Context

While the six regions have a distinctive regional party system, the political agendas and the levels of distinctiveness differ. Historically, there have been tensions between German Länder based on geography (north and south) and economy (east and west), but contrary to other countries in this study, Germany is not considered a nationally divided society (Keating, 2007). In Bavaria, the political party landscape is dominated by the Christian Social Union, the sister party of the national Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU), but secessionism is not part of its agenda (Sturm, 2018).

In Belgium, political parties run in distinct language groups, except for one bilingual party. Most French-speaking parties operate in the federal parliament within political families alongside their Flemish counterparts. In Flanders, two major parties are considered separatist. However, secessionism in the Flemish population is limited compared to Scotland and Catalonia (Liñeira & Cetrà, 2015).

The Catalan party system consists of a mixture of both instances of Spanish national parties and a plurality of Catalan nationalist parties. The independence question is a central issue in the Catalan political debate (Keating & Wilson, 2014; Liñeira & Cetrà, 2015). Tensions particularly increased around the contested independence referendum in 2017.

In Northern Ireland, politics are shaped by a divide between nationalists, who seek unification with Ireland, and unionists, who wish to remain part of the UK. The 1998 peace agreement introduced power-sharing (see Lijphart, 1996), requiring the Northern Ireland executive to have majority support from both blocs. Meanwhile, Scotland has a mixture of UK parties, and a well-established independence movement, politically dominated by the Scottish National Party, which campaigned for Scottish independence during the 2014 referendum, ultimately won by the “no” side. Unlike in England and Wales, a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU during the Brexit referendum.

3.5. Concerns About Fake News

To assess levels of concern about fake news, trust in news media, and the use of social media as the primary news source in the selected regions, we used data from the 2024 Digital News Report of the Reuters Institute (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al., 2024). We have summarised the population proportions for these indicators in Table 2. The survey data show different concerns between regions. In Bavaria, the share of the population that is concerned is, similar to the German national average, relatively low, while trust in news is high. Broadcasting media remain a stable source for news consumption, with BR, the parent organisation of #Faktenfuchs, playing an important role (MedienNetzwerk Bayern, n.d.).

Table 2. Proportion of the population concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet, overall trust in news media, and use of social media as the primary news source.

Region	Country	Media system categorisation	Concerned about fake news	Overall trust news media	Social media as the primary news source
Bavaria (*N* = 320)	Germany	Democratic corporatist	43.4% (38.0%—49.0%)	48.0% (42.4%—53.5%)	14.3% (10.5%—18.4%)
Catalonia (*N* = 328)	Spain	Polarised pluralistic	67.9% (62.6%—72.7%)	29.3% (24.5%—34.3%)	25.6% (20.8%—30.6%)
Flanders (*N* = 1171) *	Belgium	Hybrid	45.8% ▼ (42.9%—48.6%)	50.8% ▲ (47.9%—53.7%)	14.7% (12.7%—16.9%)
Northern Ireland (*N* = 50) **	UK	Hybrid	69.5% (56.1%—80.1%)	46.8% (34.5%—60.3%)	19% (9.9%—32%)
Scotland (*N* = 170)	UK	Hybrid	73.1% (66%—79.3%)	31.9% (25%—39.1%)	14.4% (9.7%—21%)
French-speaking community (*N* = 854)*	Belgium	Hybrid	57.4% ▲ (54.1%—60.7%)	35.4% ▼ (32.3%—38.7%)	15.9% (13.6%—18.7%)

Notes: Proportions that differ at < .05 with the rest of the country are indicated with an arrow; * = for Belgian regions, the variable for language is used; ** = low sample size for Northern Ireland (*N* < 100). Source: Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al. (2024).

In Belgium, there are stark differences between the Flemish and the French-speaking communities. Trust in news is lower within the French-speaking community than in Flanders, while concerns about fake news are higher. However, trust in both Flemish and French-speaking public broadcasters remains relatively high (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al., 2024). The French-speaking market experiences a strong penetration of news media from France, especially television (Van Leeckwyck et al., 2017). This can make the French-speaking part susceptible to disinformation originating from France (Alaphilippe & EU DisinfoLab, 2023).

Catalonia particularly stands out. The relatively low trust and high social media usage in Catalonia reflect Spain's political pluralist model (Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020). In Scotland and Northern Ireland, concerns about fake news are also high. Data from Ofcom (2024) indicate that social media consumption is higher in Scotland than in other UK regions. It has been documented that both the Catalan and Scottish independence referendums sparked misinformation on social media (Vicente & DisinfoLab, 2023). The Brexit referendum also exemplified a case in which the Scottish public often felt ill-informed, due to a lack of facts (Baxter & Marcella, 2017). According to the Reuters Institute, the sharing of news stories on social media peaked during these key events (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, et al., 2023). Lastly, in Northern Ireland, digital media in the past decades amplified inflammatory content from dissident unionist and nationalist voices (Young & Reilly, 2015). Initially channelled to fringe websites, these voices later gained traction through social media (Reilly, 2020).

4. Methodology

To answer the research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of the selected fact-checking initiatives. For each organisation, we interviewed two people in an editorial or management

position. Table 3 provides an overview of their positions. The sample is limited due to the small target population. As the research population is very specific, and the sample relatively homogeneous, research suggests that saturation is reached faster in identifying common themes, as they share similar experiences related to the research topic (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017).

Table 3. Overview of interviewees.

	Role participant 1	Role participant 2
#Faktenfuchs	Journalist, former lead	Lead fact-checking
Verificat	Head of projects, co-founder	Head of content, co-founder
Knack Factcheck	Editorial coordinator	Lead fact-checking
FactCheckNI	Editor	Managing director, co-founder
The Ferret Fact Service	Lead fact-checking	Journalist director
Faky	Lead fact-checking	Head of news and sports

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a short topic guide with predefined questions. The primary themes addressed were: (a) the motivations behind establishing a new fact-checking section within an existing organisation or creating a standalone fact-checking entity (RQ1); (b) the content selection process, such as determining what is relevant for their region and readership (RQ2); and (c) organisational aspects, including funding sources, relationships with other fact-checkers, and partnerships (RQ3).

A qualitative descriptive method was used to analyse the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), which emphasises active listening and allows respondents to elaborate on their responses. All interviews were conducted by the first author, whose own background in fact-checking facilitated the interview set-up and interpretation of the data (O'Reilly, 2012). The interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes, were conducted online, and recorded with permission. They were then transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method provides a structured approach to derive meaningful insights from the data while offering sufficient flexibility. The analysis process involved identifying relevant passages, assigning initial codes to segments, refining these codes, and selecting representative quotes that illustrate key findings. Thematic patterns and subthemes were then identified by comparing similarities and differences, and organised into a coherent framework, as presented in the findings section. Additionally, data from the interviews were supplemented by publicly available secondary sources, such as website content, policy reports, and documents from fact-checking and media organisations like the IFCN.

5. Findings

5.1. Motivations to Start Fact-Checking

The non-profits' motivations for starting their fact-checking activities are related to controversial events specific to the region. FactCheckNI was established in 2015, first as part of the NGO Northern Ireland Foundation, later becoming a non-profit organisation on its own. The co-founders conceived the idea as a response to the experiences of the current director's own academic research. Interviews with community workers, regarding young people rioting, revealed that "social media became a real issue." Online rumours and misinformation exacerbated tensions between republican and unionist communities:

> We were being told that paramilitaries and people with nefarious intentions were effectively kind of misleading people on Facebook….And then we had a period of very protracted tensions around parades and protests at that time. So there was a parading issue up in North Belfast and it was being tweeted, like the whole thing was being tweeted. It was based on updates again, people misleading people or indeed just generating kind of heat on them and getting people out in the streets. So myself and my husband were sitting in East Belfast and said what can you do about this? How can you get people to think more critically? (FactCheckNI2)

Elsewhere in the UK, The Ferret started its Fact Service in 2017, following the referenda on Scottish independence (2014) and EU-membership (2016) and online misinformation circulating during these events. They felt there was a gap to be filled in an environment with only partial or partisan coverage of the Scottish context: "A lot of the misinformation and disinformation in Scotland surrounds Scottish independence, and that is barely reported" (TheFerret1).

The co-founders of Verificat noticed a similar gap in Catalonia surrounding the tensions during and after the contested independence referendum in 2017. The organisation was founded two years later, in 2019, anticipating the City Council elections in Barcelona. At the same time, the political organisers of the referendum, considered illegal by the Spanish government, were facing detention. The idea was born to establish a Catalan-specific fact-checking organisation, publishing bilingual fact-checks in Spanish and Catalan:

> The most important element was that the City Council election of Barcelona was coming up at the very same time. So was the political tension. And these elections were funnily interesting in a sense. They were an All Star team of candidates, with really big names….The point is that the big Madrid fact-checkers were covering the conflict, you know, more on the side of daily disinformation, especially when there was a lot of unrest in the streets….But like political fact-checking that specialised on Catalan politics was not there. (Verificat1)

Thus, fact-checkers of the NGO model wanted to fill the gap for region-specific, non-partisan reporting. The foundation of new non-profits reflects discontent with regional journalism and political discourse as a motivation to start fact-checking (Amazeen, 2019). Such initiatives understand fact-checking as a more civic resource (Lauer, 2024, p. 118), which is also expressed in the extensive training programs that FactCheckNI and Verificat provide in addition to their fact-checking work.

The situations for fact-checking organisations in Belgium and Bavaria, regarding setting up their fact-checking units, are different. The reasons are, in the words of the lead fact-checking of *Knack*, more "mundane," coming down to "a management decision" (Faktenfuchs2), following a more general awareness of the problem of misinformation. Table 4 shows the different motivations and rationales according to the different organisational models, in line with previous research (Graves, 2018; Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020).

BR24 launched #Faktenfuchs in 2017. The fact-checking team in part emerged from Factfox, a tool developed for a hackathon, for the newsroom to have easy access to answers to frequently asked questions and then to react in online communities. They note that their newsroom felt the need to react to events like the US elections of 2016, and were looking for a way to respond: "BR kind of thought 'OK, we have to react before it happens here, we have to get in touch with people who might believe in disinformation, at least encounter disinformation'" (Faktenfuchs1).

Table 4. The causes and rationales of fact-checkers by organisation type.

	Cause	Objective	Rationale
NGO model	Events surrounded by misinformation: local elections (Verificat), independence referenda (Verificat, The Ferret), Brexit referendum (The Ferret, FactCheckNI), protests, communal tensions (FactCheckNI, Verificat)	Feed public discourse with factual information, stimulate critical thinking	Peace-building (FactCheckNI), fill gap in non-partisan region-specific reporting (Verificat, The Ferret)
Newsroom model	Organisational reshuffle, growing awareness of problems related to misinformation (#Faktenfuchs, Faky), inspiration from other media (*Knack*)	Feed public discourse with factual information, stimulate critical thinking	Duty of public media (#Faktenfuchs, Faky), democracy-building (*Knack*)

At RTBF, the realisation of "large information manufacturing plants or troll factories" (RTBF2) led the board to launch their fact-checking project Faky. First, the idea was to create a platform to share fact-checks from all the French-speaking media in Belgium, but it eventually resulted in their own fact-checking section at the RTBF news site. Fact-checking is one of the achievements put forward in the contract that the broadcaster has with The government of the French Community: "Fact-checking is written in the document, so this is something we need to do (RTBF1)."

Knack has an online fact-checking team since 2019, after it partnered with Meta's third-party fact-checking program. But the magazine has already published a weekly fact-check column in print since 2012:

> At the time, there was a reshuffle planned for *Knack* magazine….And so I was asked "of the new things that are going to come here, is there any of that that you would like to do?" And the fact-check section actually came about that way, which was an idea we had then borrowed from elsewhere. (Knack2)

Regional news media see their fact-checking activities as an extension of their journalistic duties and practices. When existing regional media organisations add a fact-checking section to their newsroom, fact-checking at a regional level is a logical outcome. This is not to say that it arises as a matter of course. All organisations stress that it is also a matter of having the right people at the right time. For instance, all German states have their own public broadcaster, but only in Bavaria did the public broadcaster introduce a dedicated fact-checking team. According to #Faktenfuchs "it's a very personal thing, you know, whether you have somebody who pushes that for a broadcaster, if you don't have that, it doesn't happen" (Faktenfuchs1).

5.2. Scope of Fact-Checking Work

5.2.1. Regional Statements vs. Borderless Hoaxes

RQ2 focused on what kind of content is relevant to fact-checking at a regional level. In other words, what makes a fact-check regional? Being a regional unit does not necessarily seem to make a difference in *how*, but rather on *what* gets fact-checked. Most respondents indicate that the boundaries to decide when content

is relevant at a regional level "most of the time is clear" (Faktenfuchs2) or "are obvious if you are familiar with the region" (FactCheckNI1). However, in strategies for choosing topics, we can distinguish three types of fact-checked content related to this scope: political content, hoaxes on social media, and a hybrid of the former two.

The first type of content consists of political speech or statements made by other public figures. Here, fact-checkers investigate statements made by people *from* the region, such as a member of the regional parliament, or *related to* the region, such as a statement about the local economy. For this kind of content, the regional angle is straightforward. A second type of content consists of hoaxes on social media. This concerns more global disinformation, like anti-vax claims or AI-generated photos of Donald Trump. This kind of misinformation can be shared all over the world, and is harder to determine as regional. According to the interviewees, topics with an international angle can also have a regional relevance, as "disinformation doesn't care that much about geographical boundaries" (Knack2). Fact-checkers will investigate such content if they assess that it also circulates among citizens in the regions, for example in local groups on Facebook.

These two types of content reflect the distinction made by Graves et al. (2023) between political fact-checking and debunking. We also identified a third option, where both types overlap. In these cases, an international hoax adapts itself with a regional twist, which makes it relevant to be fact-checked. Such content can have a different loading depending on the region:

> A bit of misinformation might be really linked to the right in the UK but then might be slightly linked to more people on the left in Scotland, just because of the context being different….Recently, a bit of misinformation about [people identifying as cats] was happening at a school in Aberdeen, in Scotland. And you know, so that sort of stuff is obviously like international in some ways, but has Scottish context. (TheFerret1)

All respondents indicate the importance of political fact-checking: "It's our DNA and we believe that our representatives are accountable for what they say" (Verificat2). The reviewed organisations also fact-check content on social media platforms, although to different degrees. The difference between statements made by officials and viral posts on social media not only requires different skills, it also differs in *scope*. While political statements are mostly limited to the regional or national level, viral content has an international, cross-border character, as was the case with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic in 2020 marked a shift towards debunking more global hoaxes, e.g., about vaccines. At its start, #Faktenfuchs concentrated on more everyday topics and "urban legends," with the criterion that it had to be really rooted in Bavaria. That changed during the pandemic: "It was so dominant as a disinformation topic, but it was definitely not regional anymore….We couldn't exclude topics anymore that weren't Bavarian. So we had to broaden our field" (Faktenfuchs1).

At RTBF, the pandemic triggered the start of their dedicated fact-checking section Faky because it "highlighted the fact that we needed…to try to get the right information to people that are more on social media" and "raised awareness among RTBF leaders and also, I think, among political leaders" (RTBF2).

The non-profit organisations also debunked "borderless" misinformation about Covid-19, but for them it was more of a temporary exceptional period, than a permanent shift in their scope. The Ferret "still kept up kind

of quite broad focused looking at different Scottish political issues and stuff like that as well" (TheFerret2). For FactCheckNI the Covids-19 period marked the importance of international fact-checking collaborations, "because we were all fact-checking similar things" (FactCheckNI2).

5.2.2. Language-Bounded Misinformation

In multilingual regions or countries, the distinction between political claims and viral hoaxes manifests itself in yet another way. Here, misinformation on social media seems to be more language-specific. In Belgium, fact-checking political statements might sometimes overlap with the other language community. But when it comes to debunking social media content, it has more in common with neighbouring countries that share the same language. Flemish fact-checkers of *Knack* detect claims from the Netherlands, as "disinformation circulating in the Netherlands that also concerns Flemings will sooner or later also start circulating in Flemish or Belgian Dutch-language Facebook groups. And then it will also come on our radar" (Knack1). For RTBF, on the other hand, there is a link with France. This can also make things complicated, "because French-speaking people on social media, you don't always know if they are French or Belgian" (RTBF1).

Misinformation on social media in Catalonia seems to mainly circulate in Spanish, rarely in Catalan, because "if you're a disinformer, you want to work in Spanish because it's the second most spoken language in the word" (Verificat1). In line with this, Verificat points to a report (Plataforma per la Llengua, 2023) showing that those who speak Catalan as their first language tend to do online searches more in Spanish than in Catalan. Language thus plays a role in the different types of fact-checking content. The kind of content determines the language in which it is shared. In turn, this affects where disinformation comes from, and which audience a fact-check is relevant for.

5.2.3. Audiences

Fact-checking content that circulates beyond borders can also attract audiences beyond borders. FactCheckNI has seen some articles reaching readers in the US, Verificat in Latin America, and RTBF in French-speaking African countries. On the other hand, #Faktenfuchs reaches a specific Bavarian audience, which might be a reason to fact-check something that is already being investigated by national organisations.

Fact-checking organisations have been trying out and developing new formats to present their fact-checks, and ways to engage with the public. FactCheckNI, for instance, shares visuals on their social media channels showing the claim and the fact-check's verdict. Fact-checks from *Knack*, RTBF, and other fact-checkers in Belgium, are collected and disseminated by deCheckers, a non-profit organisation that is founded by *Knack*'s fact-check lead. deCheckers tracks down misinformation on social media, and responds to such posts with relevant fact-checks. They also have a WhatsApp tip line by which users can ask questions or send suggestions, which deCheckers passes on to Belgian fact-checking outlets.

From its start, Faktenfuchs has been using BR's social listening tool to monitor online information that is trending in the region: "We train the program to only look topics that people in Bavaria are discussing. Basically, we do that by feeding the tool with the towns and villages and regions in Bavaria and with Bavarian politicians and so on" (Faktenfuchs1). Its fact-checks are also disseminated by BR's other channels, like radio.

Verificat collaborates with regional newspapers that publish their fact-checks and data stories. The organisation is also the Spanish coordinator of the Teen Fact-Checking Network, in which high school students actively participate in their newsroom. Lastly, The Ferret has its podcast "For Fact Sake" which dives into fact-checks, disinformation stories, and feature interviews with fact-checkers from other organisations.

5.3. Funding and Collaborations

5.3.1. Sources of Funding

RQ3 examined whether regional initiatives are viable in terms of funding and their position in the international fact-checking landscape. Based on the interviews and analyses of available material, four different forms of funding can be distinguished: (a) direct government donations, (b) public or private grants, (c) partnership with Meta, and (d) subscriptions.

As public broadcasters, RTBF and BR are financed by the regional governments through licence fees. The general news budgets are also the resources for their fact-checking work. This can be considered a sustainable funding source, although budgets can change by government reforms, and can restrict access to other funding. BR is not allowed to receive external funding. RTBF also has a small additional project-related budget.

The most common sources are public or private grants, especially non-profit organisations that rely on this funding source. Verificat receives funding from several private and public institutions for their fact-checking activities. In addition, they offer consulting work and write for other Catalan media. To apply for funding in Northern Ireland's context, FactCheckNI positions itself on its peace-focused work, receiving funds for cross-community building, including a fund from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. Finding grants can be challenging, as it often relies on projects that are limited in time, which requires organisations to find new grants on a regular basis. A possible advantage for regional organisations is that grants can be found on multiple levels: "We so far managed to get funding pretty well, both from the regional side and the European level. We don't work at state level, but there's not much funding work in Spain anyway" (Verificat1). On the other hand, Verificat and The Ferret mention the presence of "bigger brothers" in their country, i.e., established fact-checking organisations in Spain and the UK that operate at a national level. This reduces the need for funders to invest in regional organisations:

> If you're a big company or a big foundation and you want to work and have visibility and you're working with disinformation in Spain, you'd rather go with Newtral and Maldita because they have much bigger audiences and community. (Verificat1)

Only FactCheckNI and *Knack* are part of Meta's external Fact-Checking Program. At the time Meta was expanding the program, they were the only verified signatories of IFCN of the six initiatives we spoke to. Meta was not specifically looking to include regional initiatives, but rather "wanted to cover the geographical map a bit" (Knack2). By now, all languages of the six regions, including Catalan, are covered by other organisations in Meta's program.

Meta's partnership constitutes the main part of the fact-checking budget of *Knack*. *Knack*'s owner Roularta Media Group receives the partnership's funds, and in turn, pays *Knack*'s fact-checking work. But their fact-checking work is not paid directly from that budget. It also includes government funding and Roularta's general turnover. The partnership is a relatively sustainable funding source, but there are concerns expressed by *Knack* that if Meta stops their program, their fact-checking section might fade out. Another disadvantage is that it limits the content of fact-checks, as no political content is allowed. For FactCheckNI, that is the reason that they keep their input for Meta minimal: "They don't allow us to do political speech, and I would say 90% of our work is political speech. So it's very hard for us" (FactCheckNI2).

Finally, The Ferret Fact Service is funded by a mix of funding from philanthropic grants, from contributions to other media, and from membership fees. As a cooperative, members pay to become part owners, which gives them a consulting role and the right to appoint board members. They also get access to all the investigative journalism without the paywall. But paywalls are not used for fact-checks. They are freely accessible to the public, which "is one of the standards for fact-checking of the IFCN" (TheFerret2).

5.3.2. Relations With Other Fact-Checkers

All selected initiatives maintain contact with other fact-checkers in their country and beyond. However, the extent of partnerships between organisations varies. *Knack* and Verificat, the largest organisations in terms of fact-check output, seem to be more involved in international fact-checking projects and explore various ways to enhance the impact of their work. In Spain, for example, fact-checkers collaborate to fact-check general elections:

> We've been working with all of them on different projects and we're in a very good relationship with all of them. I think we're also liking this situation. We don't really compete in the same space and that makes a lot of sense, actually trying to do things together. (Verificat1)

Likewise, various media and fact-checking organisations from Belgium and the Netherlands collaborated to fact-check campaigns ahead of the June 2024 elections. However, both organisations see no need for a formal merger between French- and Dutch-speaking fact-checkers.

Other organisations are less involved in formal partnerships but maintain informal relations with other fact-checkers. In Germany, fact-checkers hold bi-monthly meetings online to discuss shared issues, "like hate mail we receive, about dealing with AI-generated content. It's more on a meta-level" (Faktenfuchs2). The Ferret and FactCheckNI also consulted existing organisations before launching their own fact-checking services, and noted that they have a sort of unwritten agreement with UK-wide fact-checkers who do not often fact-check content specific to Scotland and Northern Ireland. FactCheckNI is also in contact with fact-checkers from the Republic of Ireland and anticipates cross-border fact-checks on the debates related to a possible referendum on Irish reunification:

> We don't need another Brexit, we don't need another ill-informed debate….Everybody's claiming there's going to be a referendum in the next 10 years. So yeah, I think that we need to steel up or toughen up for that one….Misinformation doesn't stop at the border and you have this now real creeping of you know issues of migrants and all in Dublin and that's been reflected in discourse in the North. (FactCheckNI2)

The fact-checking movement is generally regarded as an international movement open for inter-organisational collaborations and learning through practice (Brookes & Waller, 2023). Alongside the aforementioned IFCN, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), founded in 2022, serves a similar meta-institutional role at the European level. There are also local hubs of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), launched by the European Commission, that enable fact-checkers to collaborate with each other and with other relevant stakeholders. Table 5 shows that network membership varies between organisations.

Table 5. Overview of membership for different international fact-checking networks.

	IFCN signatory	EFCSN signatory	Part of EDMO network
#Faktenfuchs	Yes	No	No
Verificat	Yes	Yes	Yes
Knack Factcheck	Yes	Yes	Yes
FactCheckNI	Yes	Yes	N/A
The Ferret Fact Service	Yes	Expressed interest	N/A
Faky	Expressed interest	Expressed interest	Yes

#Faktenfuchs and RTBF also work together with other public broadcasters on fact-checking via the European Broadcasting Union. And The Ferret regularly invites international fact-checkers to appear in its podcast. These international gatherings are seen as invaluable for fact-checkers. However, some participants noted that smaller organisations find it challenging to attend due to limited resources and staffing.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides a comparative perspective from six fact-checking initiatives operating in six different regions in Europe. The study explores the prospects of fact-checking at a smaller scale level, and builds on existing literature regarding the profession, adding an angle that goes beyond state or interstate levels.

Although regional fact-checking in Europe is rare, it is not a new phenomenon. The organisations examined in this study have been active for between three and 12 years, successfully positioning themselves as established players within a transnational fact-checking landscape. This study indicates that fact-checking at a regional scale does not require different practices, attitudes, or skills compared to national-level fact-checking. Regional fact-checkers adhere to the same international standards and maintain both informal relationships and formal partnerships with national and international organisations. This suggests that the presence of multiple fact-checkers within a single country does not create competition, but rather complements each other. Funding can be challenging, but this is not unique to regional initiatives. According to an annual survey of the IFCN, securing funds to sustain operations is a widespread issue for fact-checkers (IFCN, 2024). In this regard, the organisational differences—between the NGO models and Newsroom models—seem to outweigh the regional aspect. However, regional fact-checking differs in terms of the scope of its content, which must be locally relevant, ranging from political speech in the region to hoaxes circulating in local social media networks.

While the sample size limits the ability to make broad generalisations, the findings echo those of Stalph et al. (2023) on local and regional data journalism in Germany. Indeed, data journalism and fact-checking share similarities in how they challenge traditional journalistic boundaries by embracing broader civic objectives

(Cheruiyot et al., 2019). In this sense, fact-checking aligns with certain aspects of local journalism that audiences value (Meijer, 2020), such as addressing topics of local significance, fostering regional awareness, and engaging with audiences. If local news deserts continue to expand in Europe—resulting in further declines in the quality and quantity of local news, and with social media becoming primary sources of local information (Verza et al., 2024)—it seems likely that the NGO model will emerge as the dominant model for new regional fact-checking initiatives. This is particularly true in regions with polarised political and media systems, where new initiatives could arise to fill the void left by a lack of reliable, region-specific information. Indeed, this was an important driver for the non-profit organisations interviewed. However, addressing the gap left by traditional local media does not happen automatically (d'Haenens et al., 2019), factors such as having the right people at the right time are equally crucial.

The goals of the fact-checking organisations studied indicate a democracy-building approach (Amazeen, 2020). However, assessing the actual impact of such regional initiatives on local communities and political accountability is beyond the scope of this study. Research has shown that fact-checking positively influences the accuracy of statements made by politicians (Lim, 2018) and can help reduce polarisation (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). Yet, others have noted that fact-checking sometimes risks taking a confirmatory role, where its findings reinforce beliefs already held rather than challenging political elites (Steensen et al., 2024). Further research might explore how fact-checking can effectively act as a local watchdog. For example, by replicating Nyhan and Reifler's (2015) experiment in other, regional contexts.

On a broader scale, previous research by Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst (2020) examined the relationship between different media systems and the level of resilience to misinformation. Countries with a polarised pluralist model tend to be less resilient due to high levels of societal polarisation, populist communication, and reliance on social media for news consumption. Since these factors may vary across regions within a single country, future research could delve deeper into the differences in media systems at the regional level, particularly in relation to online misinformation.

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ARTICLE

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An Exploratory Study of Fact-Checking Practices in Conflict and Authoritarian Contexts

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Abstract

This study explores fact-checking practices in Ethiopia and Mali in times of conflict and in a context marked by increasing restrictions to press freedom. The objective is to understand how, in this hostile environment, fact-checkers in these two countries manage to carry out their activities. Our findings reveal that fact-checkers are often victims of online bullying and harassment and fear reprisal from governments. This pushes them to self-censor, avoiding working on sensitive topics, such as military issues in Mali. In addition, fact-checking organizations in both countries highlight the difficulty of accessing reliable sources. Consequently, they focus more on debunking viral social media content, thus effectively becoming content moderators who have turned away from the mission of holding leaders accountable, one of the primary functions of fact-checking. Regarding their role conception, fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali see themselves more as guides helping navigate the information disorder than "guardians of truth" or "truth keepers."

Keywords

disinformation; Ethiopia; fact-checking; information disorder; journalism; Mali; media

1. Introduction

In April 2024, the Malian High Authority for Communication asked all media to stop all broadcasting and publication of political parties' activities and all events of a political nature (Randrianarimanana, 2024). This announcement came following the Malian government's decision to suspend "until further notice" the activities of political parties and political associations ("Mali: Suspension des activités," 2024). This new set

of restrictions imposed by an increasingly authoritarian military government dealt a serious blow to press freedom. In August 2020, a group of soldiers overthrew civilian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, adding a new layer to a multifaceted crisis that started in 2012 with a demand for northern Malian independence by a Tuareg rebellion. It then spread to the center of the country while becoming a jihadist insurgency in which intercommunity violence and politico-institutional instability have become rife (Keita, 2021). Since they seized power, the military has repressed dissident voices, with journalists being among the main victims (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2023). For instance, several media outlets have been suspended for reporting stories that the government disliked (Amnesty International, 2022), and journalists have been subjects of attacks and illegal arrests; others have been abducted and even killed (Bocande et al., 2023; Media Foundation for West Africa, 2021). This oppressive atmosphere has pushed some journalists into exile (Daizey, 2023). The same repressive trends are also observed in Ethiopia, where a civil war broke out in November 2020 between the Ethiopian central government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the leadership of the autonomous Tigray region ("Key events," 2022). Although the warring parties signed an agreement in November 2022, complete peace is not yet established (Mekonen et al., 2023). The conflict in Ethiopia is considered by the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International one of the deadliest in the 21st century ("En Éthiopie, la guerre oubliée du Tigré," 2023). It also marked an authoritarian turn of government that has serious repercussions on press freedom (Moges, 2022; Mumo, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). According to Amnesty International (2023), since the outbreak of the Tigray war in November 2020, journalists have been victims of regular attacks from all parties to the conflict. From 2020 to 2022, more than 60 journalists were arrested and two were killed in Ethiopia (Moges, 2022). These attacks and threats frustrate journalism's role in keeping authoritarian power in check.

The conflicts in Ethiopia and Mali are marked by a large digital component with social media playing an important role in spreading disinformation, hate speech, and ethnic tension (Scott, 2021; Togola & de Bruijn, 2023). Thus, Ethiopia and Mali, representing two regions of ongoing conflicts in Africa (The Horn of Africa and the Sahel), are interesting case studies to gather empirical evidence on what fact-checking means so as to contribute new knowledge on development in specific contexts marked by conflict or restrictions to press freedom.

To this end, this study addresses the following question: How do fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali understand their work in a context marked by increasing restrictions to press freedom?

The deterioration of press freedom in Ethiopia and Mali is illustrated by the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. Between 2023 and 2024, Ethiopia moved from 130th to 141st place out of 180 countries, and Mali moved from 113th to 114th place (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2024). Doing journalism in authoritarian regimes is challenging and dangerous (Sosa, 2022), as is fact-checking (Funke, 2018).

In this article, drawing from content analysis, individual interviews, and focus group discussions, we explore the main challenges facing organizations involved in fact-checking activities in Ethiopia and Mali amid ongoing armed conflicts and obstacles to journalism practice. Our findings unpack how these organizations negotiate and navigate threats, harassment, and funding problems to run their activities. This study also sheds light on how, in the face of linguistic diversity and low access to the internet, these organizations strive to find alternative solutions to reach as wide an audience as possible.

More specifically, this study seeks to answer the four following questions:

> RQ1: What are the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali?
>
> RQ2: How do fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali perceive their role?
>
> RQ3: What are the challenges facing fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali?
>
> RQ4: What do Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers consider as benefits and limitations of their work?

This research, situated within journalism and media studies, contributes to enriching the knowledge of fact-checking practices by gaining an in-depth understanding of how fact-checkers negotiate and navigate press freedom restrictions.

This article is organized as follows: After the literature review, we present the theories and methods before the findings and the discussion. But first, let us examine the rise of fact-checking in African journalism.

2. The Rise of Fact-Checking in African Journalism

In a 2013 *The New York Times* article (Lyman, 2013), Peter Cunliffe-Jones, the founder of the fact-checking organization Africa Check, said:

> Something that I became increasingly frustrated with is what I call statement journalism, where a minister has said something ridiculous, the opposition said something equally ridiculous, and no one knows where the truth lies—and certainly, the journalist does not tell the reader where the truth lies between them.

These words partly illustrate the motivations behind the introduction of fact-checking into African journalism. Often stuck between financial insecurity and a long tradition of state control, the media in many African countries generally offer poor-quality production (Kamga, 2019). As Kamga (2019) points out, the African press, including private media, which was born in alienation and a context of disguised journalism, has not been able to create the conditions for its emancipation. Furthermore, the introduction of digital technology has caused unprecedented upheavals in African media, particularly in terms of content production, dissemination, and engagement with the audience (Madrid-Morales & Ireri, 2021). One of these upheavals is the emergence of new "non-professional" actors in the media ecosystem, whether they are influencers, bloggers, web activists, or simple citizens with a smartphone connected to the internet. Even if it has largely contributed to democratizing production and access to information, digital technology strongly favors the proliferation of false information, thanks to the sharing facilitated by social media and private messaging platforms, plunging the world into what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) call information disorder. This concept refers to all types of false, misleading, manipulated, and fabricated content polluting the information ecosystem. In this study, disinformation refers to all forms of false, inaccurate, misleading, or fabricated information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit, as defined by the European Commission High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (European Commission, 2018).

Fact-checking is the journalistic tool par excellence in the fight against disinformation (Kyriakidou et al., 2022). It was originally performed as part of journalistic internal procedures for verifying facts before the publication of an article (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). The practice originated in the United States in the 1920s, notably with *Time* magazine whose fact-checking team was responsible for verifying the smallest details—names, dates, figures, facts—of the content of all articles before publication (Bigot, 2017). It was a sort of quality control before publication (Mantzarlis, 2018) with the objective of making articles as error-free as possible (Schäfer, 2011). The type of fact-checking that is the focus of this article, also known as modern fact-checking (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022), happens only when something is published and becomes of public relevance (Mantzarlis, 2018). Appearing in the United States during ex-President Ronald Reagan's years (Dobbs, 2012), modern fact-checking has developed rapidly across the globe since the 2000s. According to the 2023 Duke Reporters' Lab census, the number of fact-checking organizations grew from 11 in 2008 to 417 that are active in more than 100 countries, and publishing in 96 languages in 2023 (Stencel et al., 2023). Fact-checking has also quickly developed in the African continent (Funke, 2019). In 2012, there was only one fact-checking organization, Africa Check, based in South Africa; 11 years later, the continent has around 40 across several countries (Africa Check, 2023).

However, unlike the United States, a precursor country for this practice, where traditional media played a fundamental role in its rise (Graves, 2016), in Africa, fact-checking was born outside legacy media newsrooms. For instance, Africa Check, the first fact-checking organization established on the continent, even though initiated by a journalist, was founded as a nonprofit organization in 2012 in South Africa and was established in the School of Journalism of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (Lyman, 2013). Africa Check was followed a few years later by other organizations such as PesaCheck. Launched in 2016 in Kenya, PesaCheck covers several African countries and publishes its content in English, French, and Kiswahili (Endert, 2020). Another active fact-checking organization on the continental level is AFP Factuel (AFP Fact Check for the English version), the fact-checking section of the French press agency Agence France Press. Since 2018, several fact-checking organizations have been established in several countries, such as Dubawa in Nigeria, Congo Check in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana Fact in Ghana, Namibia Fact Check in Namibia, and ZimFact in Zimbabwe (Jamlab, 2022).

3. Literature Review

In recent years, fact-checking has gained interest in the field of journalism and media studies. A range of the research focuses on the rise of fact-checking (Graves, 2016), how fact-checking became a global movement (Graves, 2018), how it has grown as a transnational field (Lauer & Graves, 2024), the institutional logic, and the diversity of the fact-checking landscape (Lowrey, 2015) as well as the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of fact-checking (Amazeen et al., 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Porter et al., 2018; Weeks & Garrett, 2014; Young et al., 2018). Another part of the research is dedicated more specifically to the practice of fact-checking, with Graves (2017) describing the five steps of a fact-check and Steensen et al. (2023) examining the benefits and limitations of live fact-checking. Graves et al. (2023) analyzed the "debunking turn" of global fact-checking, which shifts from checking claims by politicians and other public figures to policing viral misinformation on social networks.

As we can see, the research on fact-checking is dominated by Western-centered literature, mostly from the United States (Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019), leading to a lack of diversity in the knowledge produced on the

topic (Dias & Sippitt, 2020). Nevertheless, there is an increasing academic interest in fact-checking in the Global South, including Africa, where the practice is gaining momentum. Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) examined how three data-driven and fact-checking organizations in Africa—Code for Africa, Open Up, and Africa Check—advocate for a process of verification that is not exclusive to news media but should be replicable by citizens. In addition, they argue that the notion of transparency is put into practice in a way that tries to empower citizens to also fact-check media organizations. This means, as Çömlekçi (2022) argues, that the fight against disinformation is not just the business of fact-checkers and that it is necessary to equip the public so they can contribute to it. This can be achieved by providing media literacy tips to encourage audiences to be their own fact-checkers (Tully & Singer, 2023). While emphasizing the importance of the use of media literacy among fact-checkers outside the Western world, Vinhas and Bastos (2024) highlight the challenge of linguistic diversity. For instance, they argue that while shaping their practices after the information disorder framework (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), fact-checkers struggle to translate concepts of disinformation and misinformation into their languages.

Mare and Munoriyarwa (2022) shed light on fact-checking in times of crisis with a focus on Covid-19, noting that the pandemic has favored the emergence of a trend of collaborative fact-checking services involving platform companies, fact-checkers, mainstream media, supra-national bodies, and government departments. However, the authors concluded that the flood of disinformation that accompanied the pandemic stretched the operational capacities of fact-checkers, especially in the first three months, arguing that there is no silver bullet on how fact-checkers could deal with the massive proliferation of mis- and disinformation in a context characterized by what they call a "crowded and chaotic news media ecology" (Mare & Munoriyarwa, p. 76).

Researching political fact-checking in the Middle East, Fakida (2021) found that while prioritizing human interest topics in their news selection process, fact-checkers in the region rarely verify or refute claims made by Arab rulers. This finding is similar to that of Liu and Zhou (2022), on fact-checkers in China, who focus on health issues while avoiding topics such as politics, economics, and current affairs. While the Covid-19 pandemic favored the production of abundant literature on fact-checking in times of crisis (Carey et al., 2022; López-García et al., 2021; Siwakoti et al., 2021), less is known about fact-checking in conflict and authoritarian contexts. Building on the previous literature, this research fills the gap by using Ethiopia and Mali as case studies.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by role conceptions, role performance, and innovation theories.

Role conceptions have gained considerable interest since the work of Cohen (1963) and Johnstone et al. (1976). Journalistic role conceptions refer to norms and standards defining the work of journalists and media (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), on the other hand, role performance relates to how journalists' conception of their role is reflected in practice. In other words, while role conception is at the abstract level, role performance is an empirical construction (Mellado, 2014).

Taking a cue from Mellado et al.'s (2016) theorization of role conception, role perception, role enactment, and role performance, Bengtsson and Schousboe (2024) identify three characteristics of the perception of fact-checkers' role: (a) the goal of creating an informed citizenry; (b) an understanding of "facts" as verifiable,

objective, and always already available; (c) reliance upon a consistent methodology as the means to attain accurate and impartial knowledge (Bengtsson & Schousboe, 2024, p. 5).

Following the six models of journalistic roles developed by Mellado (2013), fact-checking work relates to the watchdog role of journalism, seeking to hold power accountable, and the civic model of journalism, which aims to educate ordinary citizens (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013). Examining the watchdog role of fact-checking by studying four fact-checking organizations in four different countries (the United States, Italy, Germany, and Brazil), Ferracioli et al. (2022) argue that even though fact-checkers share common standards, local contexts play an important role in how they perform their role. Furthermore, Mellado and Van Dalen (2013) found a large gap between watchdog and civic-oriented roles conceptions and performance, two roles that best illustrate the professional ideal of journalism. Role conception and performance theories allow us to analyze the extent to which fact-checkers' practices align with their perception of their role.

Innovation is about change (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). The change does not necessarily need to be something new but must be perceived as such (Rogers, 2003). Applied to media, the concept of innovation has been defined under different approaches highlighting organizational, content-related, social, and technological perspectives (Pérez-Seijo & Silva-Rodríguez, 2024). Theorizing innovation, more specifically in online journalism, Steensen (2010) argues that it relies on newsroom autonomy, newsroom work culture, the role of the management, the relevance of new technology, and innovative individuals. Innovation in journalism also refers to the way news organizations adapt to new circumstances (Arafat & Porlezza, 2023). Fact-checking itself is considered a significant innovation in journalistic practice in recent years (Graves et al., 2016). However, fact-checking as an innovation "is not only an adaptation of technology but also an example of a creative response to new socio-political challenges" (Grassl & Meier, 2024, p. 294). According to Grassl and Meier (2024, p. 300), fact-checking is "a reaction of innovative journalism to the rapid spread of fake news, especially in social media." Innovation theory is relevant to understanding how fact-checkers develop new ideas and tools to adapt to the local context and how they find innovative solutions to overcome the challenges they face.

5. Methods

This qualitative study uses a multi-method research approach combining content analysis, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. Combining methods allows researchers to take advantage of their individual strengths and compensate for their limitations (Brewer & Hunter, 2006). Thus, different methodological tools compensate for each other's weaknesses (Beach, 2020).

First, following the model used by Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero (2019) in their study of fact-checking platforms in Spanish, an analysis sheet was applied to all the organizations as follows: name of the publication, country, type of media, ownership, year of foundation, fact-checking methods, rating methods, language, and transparency policy. For this study, the authors first targeted all the organizations involved in fact-checking activities in the two countries (two in Ethiopia and seven in Mali) at the start of the research project in October 2022. For Ethiopia, these organizations are HaqCheck and Ethiopia Check. The seven fact-checking organizations in Mali are Benbere Verif, Association des Blogueurs du Mali, Mali Check, Studio Tamani, Wuya, Sahel Check, and Mopti Check. Some of these organizations are known to one of the authors, who encountered them while working as a fact-checking practitioner and trainer.

Secondly, focus group discussions were organized with participants in fact-checking activities in Ethiopia and Mali. Focus groups are a good method to collect relevant information in a short time (Acocella, 2012). The focus group discussions in Ethiopia were organized in English and took place in Addis Ababa in March 2023. There were 10 participants chosen from five organizations (two are fact-checking organizations, and three are organizations that support fact-checking activities). These participants were purposively selected since they are directly and indirectly involved in the fact-checking activities in the country. First, the organizations were identified, and invitations were sent, asking them to send two participants. The focus group discussions were moderated by one of the project researchers. One of the authors of this article took notes and summarized the most important points. Due to geographical constraints, we resorted to online-based focus group discussions for Mali, using the platform Teams. The online focus group discussions in French took place between March and April 2024 with a total of 10 fact-checkers. The participants were selected using snowball sampling, meaning we initially identified two participants, who then led us to others through referrals. Online focus groups are an excellent option when it is difficult to organize them in person, but some considerations, such as usability of the online platform, interactivity between participants and researchers, privacy, etc., must be considered (Willemsen et al., 2023). In addition, given that the participants do not always remain attentive and engaged throughout the conversation (Willemsen et al., 2023), online focus group interviews tend to be shortened with the possible consequences of not being able to address certain aspects. To avoid this pitfall, we split participants into three groups of three, three, and four. Another challenge to organizing online group discussions in Mali is disruptions in the supply of electricity occurring in the country, combined with the poor quality of the internet that affected the ability of participants to connect.

We also did individual interviews with seven decision-makers—editors or executive directors—of fact-checking organizations. These are the two Ethiopian organizations cited above and five fact-checking organizations in Mali. For security reasons, we have decided not to disclose the names of the five Malian organizations involved in the individual interviews. With the ongoing media crackdown in the country, we believe that they could be identified and targeted.

The objectives of focus group discussions were to gather information on fact-checkers' understanding of their role and the challenges they face. Individual interviews aimed to collect data on the challenges and strategies to overcome them.

The analysis of the data from the focus groups and the individual interviews was conducted manually using thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data (Liebenberg et al., 2020). After focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed, the data were analyzed following the six-step process of thematic data analysis outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). These steps are: (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) selecting keywords by identifying recurring patterns and terms, (c) coding, (d) developing themes, (e) conceptualizing by defining concepts emerging from the data, and (f) developing a conceptual model that encapsulates all the findings and insights derived from the data (Naeem et al., 2023).

For this study, we use Participant to refer to those who took part in the focus group discussions, and Informant to refer to those involved in the individual interviews. We use numbers for identification. For instance, Participant 1 in Ethiopia, or Informant 2 in Mali.

6. Findings

Our findings can be grouped into four major themes: the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali, the fact-checkers' perceptions of their role, the challenges facing fact-checkers in both countries, and the fact-checkers' perceptions of the benefits and limits of their work.

6.1. The Characteristics of the Fact-Checking Landscape in Ethiopia and Mali

Since 2020, Ethiopia and Mali have seen a significant development of fact-checking organizations. Some of them, like Benbere Verif, a fact-checking platform initiated by Doniblog, a Community of Malian Bloggers, were launched as a response to disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Internews, 2020). All fact-checking activities in both countries were born outside legacy media. Even those launched by established newsrooms are part of small news websites such as HaqCheck in Ethiopia, Mali Check, and Mopti Check in Mali. HaqCheck started as a fact-checking section inside Addis Zeybe's newsroom, then became a dedicated fact-checking website affiliated with the non-profit organization Inform Africa (HaqCheck, n.d.-a). While operating in Ethiopia, Ethiopia Check is registered in Kenya as an independent trust organization (Ethiopia Check, n.d.). Mali Check, established in 2020, and Mopti Check, launched in 2022, and the fact-checking section of Studio Tamani are, respectively, inside Le Jalon's newsroom, La Voix de Mopti's newsroom, and the newsroom of the radio station Studio Tamani, sponsored by the Swiss NGO Fondation Hirondelle. Le Jalon and La Voix de Mopti are two news websites in Mali. Benbere Verif and An k'a sègèsègè (meaning let's verify in Bambara, the most spoken language in Mali) are also fact-checking sections inside websites, respectively benbere.org and assoblog.org. These are not legacy media websites but websites belonging to two associations of bloggers: Doniblog, Communauté des Blogueurs du Mali (Community of Malian Bloggers), and Association des Blogueurs du Mali (Association of Bloggers of Mali) which are registered as non-profit associations. Wuya, a fact-checking platform initiated by the Malian civic tech non-profit organization Tuwindi, has the particularity of being a mobile application downloadable from the App Store and Google Play.

Even if these organizations are not signatory members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), some of them, like HaqCheck and Mopti Check, disclose on their websites that their verification procedures follow IFCN's Code of Principles:

> HaqCheck follows the best practices in fact-checking, recognized by the world's leading nonpartisan fact-checking organizations. We adhere to the International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) code of principles of commitment to impartiality, transparency, and accuracy. (HaqCheck , n.d.-b)

A similar statement is made by Mopti Check in French: "Our independence is based on the transparency of our sources and respect for IFCN's Code of Principles (without being a signatory at this stage) in our articles" (La Voix de Mopti, n.d.; Authors' translation).

Without referring to IFCN's Code of Principles, Ethiopia Check also discloses on its website its policy of non-partisanship. Furthermore, HaqCheck publishes a budget transparency report where it discloses details regarding its source of income and expenses; the latest publication was for the year 2021/2022. Being a signatory to the IFCN is, however, a goal for this organization, as demonstrated by Respondent 1 in Ethiopia:

> We applied for the first time, but our application was rejected for not complying with the major criteria related to the use of sources. I think they overlook the challenges we face, such as eliciting responses from disinformation actors to discern their intentions and securing primary sources in countries like Ethiopia, where access to information is evidently restricted. After raising these issues, they allowed us to reapply, and we are preparing to do so.

The same interest in the IFCN is displayed by Participant 8 in Mali, who indicates that his organization is in the process of preparing its application file. As for Respondent 1 in Mali, he believes that his organization is not yet ready to meet all the necessary requirements for certification.

The IFCN's role is to bring together fact-checkers worldwide, promote best practices among its members, and set norms and standards of non-partisanship, fairness, transparency, and open and honest corrections for its signatories (Pavleska et al., 2021).

Apart from their websites, fact-checking organizations publish their content on social media, especially Facebook. Ethiopian fact-checking organizations publish their articles directly in national languages such as Amharic, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo, and Somali. In addition, HaqCheck has English versions of its articles.

In Mali, all fact-checking organizations publish their articles in French. In addition, some translate these articles into the most spoken national languages in the country, Bambara, Fulfulde, Sonraï, and Tamaschek, and share the content in audio or video format on WhatsApp and Facebook. Sahel Check, launched in 2022, do not have a significant production and did not publish any content since July 2023.

All these organizations operate with very small teams of two to four fact-checkers. Those who do not have permanent staff work with freelancers paid per fact-check published. Some of these fact-checkers benefited from fact-checking training sponsored by media development organizations such as Internews or Deutsche Welle Akademie. Others, in Mali for instance, most of which are mostly journalists and bloggers working also as freelance fact-checkers, benefited from immersion training with Africa Check, a signatory of IFCN's Code of Principles:

> I received my training in fact-checking with Africa Check. I also have a degree in journalism. The other two fact-checkers already had basic notions of fact-checking, but I also supervised them. We have a continuing training system which, for example, allowed team members to participate in training in May 2023 in Niamey, Niger. (Respondent 3)

6.2. The Ethiopian and Malian Fact-Checkers' Perception of Their Role

Considering that disinformation has increased, compared to the situation before ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia and Mali, all participants in the focus group interviews admit that it is their responsibility as fact-checkers to help the public access reliable information. Believing also that the extent of disinformation is worsening due to the low level of media and digital literacy among a large segment of the population, participants contended that fact-checkers must intervene in these two areas to allow the public to have the tools to deal with misinformation:

> When we verify a claim, we provide background related to that claim, and by giving the correct answer, we make people aware of the accurate information. But at the same time, we educate people through media literacy activities. We give media literacy tips on our social media platforms. (Participant 5 in Ethiopia)

Participant 6, in the focus group interviews in Mali, sees the role of fact-checkers as mine clearance or sanitation work in a context where the information ecosystem is polluted by new actors who share content that he considers harmful to the audience:

> We are doing mine clearance. Doing this work is also doing cleaning work. Because we have influencers called "videomen" who make videos on social media, and there is a lot of false information circulating, and it is this false information that will condition certain positions.

This is also the opinion defended by Respondent 1 in Ethiopia, who insists on the difference between fact-checking work and that of legacy media: "Our work is somehow different from what the other media are doing. Media would cover current affairs, and we see ourselves as the ones cleaning the mess and the confusion."

As such, some fact-checkers see their work as a contribution to the consolidation of democracy. According to Participant 9 in Ethiopia: "It is an indirect contribution to democracy. I would say that it is a catalyst for democracy by empowering people to participate in the public debate."

Participant 8 in Ethiopia argues:

> By helping people access the right facts and verified information, fact-checking empowers them and makes them able to question their leaders. And I think this is a first step to bringing accountability, which is, in a way, what brings democracy.

6.3. The Challenges Facing Fact-Checkers in Ethiopia and Mali

Restrictions to press freedom and the polarization of society linked to socio-political security crises are among the main challenges mentioned by fact-checkers from both countries. In both group and individual interviews, participants and informants indicated that it is increasingly difficult for the media, including fact-checkers, to carry out their work properly. Respondent 2 in Ethiopia states: "It is not only challenging but also dangerous; if you report the truth, do fact-checking—or pro-government or anti-government activists will target you."

While recognizing the existence of a hostile environment, Respondent 1 in Ethiopia said that the worst he had faced so far was online bullying and harassment. The same testimony was made by Participant 1 during the focus group discussion in Ethiopia, noting that online bullying and harassment come from all sides.

The same accounts of online harassment have been made by participants in focus group discussions in Mali. Furthermore, most of them emphasize that with the increasing restrictions to press freedom since the military takeover in August 2020, they prefer to self-censor on all topics related to the government and the army. Some even specify that it is for fear of reprisals from the military authorities that they have decided to no

longer verify the claims made by government officials, preferring to focus on the content shared by Internet users on social media:

> We are a bit afraid to work on some topics. Because the restriction of freedom of expression is, unfortunately, a reality in Mali. Many media outlets have been suspended, especially Western media. So, it is self-censorship; everyone is afraid, even if we see doubtful information that we can prove to be false; we worry first about our own safety. So, sometimes we ignore it. So, that is the situation: self-censorship and fear. (Participant 7 in Mali)

Self-censorship for fear of reprisals is mentioned by almost all participants in focus group discussions and Respondents 1, 3, and 5 in Mali. However, Participant 8 and Respondents 2 and 4 in Mali provide nuance by emphasizing that the lack of verification of claims, especially those made by the government and the army officials, is more linked to the difficult access to reliable sources. In addition, Participant 8 gives two other reasons for the predominance of viral content in fact-checking articles compared to political claims. First, he said, Malian fact-checkers are paid on a freelance basis, and as verifying social media content is quicker, they prefer to focus on that to maximize their earning. Secondly, he added, those who are doing fact-checking in Mali are mostly trained in debunking social media content rather than verifying claims. The problem of access to sources has also been raised as a challenge by participants and respondents in Ethiopia.

Another challenge that emerged from the individual and focus group interviews is the lack of funding, which threatens the sustainability of fact-checking organizations in the two countries. Fact-checking organizations mainly depend on foreign donors, including foundations, media development organizations, or embassies to get financial resources. For instance, Ethiopia Check acknowledges on its website that the last time it received funding was in December 2022. It was a sub-grant running until the end of March 2023 received from the media development organization Internews (Ethiopia Check, n.d.). However, all fact-checking organizations selected for this study said that they experience problems related to lack of funding: “We were obliged to downsize our team due to a lack of funding” (Respondent 1 Ethiopia).

According to Respondent 1 in Mali, his organization was obliged to withdraw from a project financed by the French media development agency CFI Développement Médias, when the Malian government banned Malian civil society organizations from receiving funding from French NGOs. He added that this decision had a serious impact on their fact-checking operations.

Another challenge listed by all respondents is that of having and keeping skilled staff to perform fact-checking. According to respondents, after getting training, some fact-checkers prefer joining media outlets that pay better or working as consultants.

6.4. The Fact-Checkers’ Perception of the Benefits and Limitations of Their Work

Fact-checkers from both countries believe that their work has contributed to raising awareness on disinformation. As evidence, they cite the fact that many people contact them to ask them to verify information or content they receive via social networks.

However, some participants in Mali counter this by believing that this awareness is more present among educated populations, recalling that a large majority of the population is either poorly educated or does not have access to reliable sources of information.

According to Participant 10 in Ethiopia:

> I am not sure that the impact means that disinformation or hate speech will go away from the public; for me, the impact should be making people aware that there is an intention to weaponize information they come across their social media engagement. So, for me, the impact of fact-checking is more about the awareness it creates.

A major limitation of fact-checking in Mali is the language barrier since fact-checking articles are published in French, whereas in Ethiopia, they are published directly in the main languages spoken in the country. For Participant 5 in Mali, publishing fact-checking reports in French is a huge limitation:

> We are in a country where people are not very literate in French, and we produce a lot in French. And above all, what complicates things even more is that our production is text-based, with a large part of the population living in rural areas that even don't often have access to the internet.

To compensate for this, some fact-checking organizations in Mali have started to translate their articles into the most spoken languages in the country, broadcast them in podcast form, and share them on different platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The content is also presented in video format.

Another limitation noted by Participant 9 in Ethiopia is related to the fact that fact-checking organizations still fail to have a large reach. These organizations focus on digital platforms—their websites and social media—to publish their content, while radio is still the most popular medium in both countries. By doing so, a large segment of the population of the two countries is not covered due to low internet penetration.

For some participants and respondents, one of the reasons for the low reach of fact-checking is the lack of collaboration with mainstream media. According to them, most mainstream media are not interested in fact-checking content and are not open to collaboration:

> Collaboration with mainstream media is not easy; attempts to do so have failed. When it comes to public state/media, they are not interested in fact-checking work because they are part of the problem of disinformation. They distort facts and disseminate false information coming from the government. For the private media, fact-checking is considered a luxury, as they do not have enough human and financial resources to invest in fact-checking. (Participant 8 in Ethiopia)

However, in Mali, some organizations involved in fact-checking activities are collaborating with radio stations, targeting community radio stations, in particular, to broaden their audience and reach populations in remote areas of the country where internet access is limited: "We understood very early on the importance of reaching the widest possible audience, particularly the inclusion of poorly or not connected communities. Therefore, we collaborate with community radio stations that translate our fact-checking content into local languages" (Respondent 1 in Mali).

7. Discussions

This study aimed to answer questions related to the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali (RQ1), Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers' perceptions of their work (RQ2), the challenges facing fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali (RQ3), and Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers' perception of the benefits and limitation of their work (RQ4)

Regarding the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali (RQ1), we found that the fact-checking landscape is dominated by the "NGO Model" with fact-checking platforms operating outside of traditional mainstream media's newsroom (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Fact-checking in both countries is mainly initiated by non-profit organizations, bloggers associations, and small media organizations. Most of these organizations are comparable to what Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) call peripheral actors to journalism adopting a journalistic discourse.

Another characteristic of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali is that none of the organizations involved in this activity are signatories of the IFCN Code of Principles. However, they show a commitment to these principles, as shown by statements published by HaqCheck and Mopti Check on their respective websites. They also strive to follow fact-checking standards and norms of transparency and non-partisanship in their verification procedures. However, obtaining IFCN certification is very challenging for all organizations operating in both countries since they do not meet the very selective criteria of the network. Thus, we believe that the IFCN, while maintaining its rigorous criteria for selecting signatories, should consider having a program to support fact-checking organizations operating in hostile environments to help foster an efficient fact-checking ecosystem.

Regarding how Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers perceive their role (RQ2), we found that they see themselves as people cleaning the information ecosystem polluted by false content spread by bad actors. In this sense, they consider that their work is different from that of mainstream media. They also consider that mainstream media are either part of the disinformation problem or not doing enough in the fight against disinformation. Ethiopia and Malian fact-checkers believe that their work is not only correcting false information but also equipping audiences with tools and knowledge, enabling them to address disinformation by themselves. Some even believe that their work contributes in a certain way to democratic construction as it allows populations to have access to the right information, which allows them to participate in an informed manner in public debate and hold the leaders accountable. This could be considered a benefit from the performance of the civic model of journalism (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013).

Fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali see themselves less as "guardians of truth" (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022) than guides helping people navigate information disorder. This is why, apart from their fact-checking work, they also include media and information literacy in their activities. They organize regular workshops to train people in verification tools and techniques as well as awareness-raising campaigns on disinformation and its effects. In this sense, they go beyond fact-checking (Çömlekçi, 2022) by including media and information literacy activities to be more effective (Hameleers, 2022). This resonates with the findings of Tully and Singer (2023) regarding fact-checking in Sub-Saharan Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic, showing that fact-checkers add a media literacy component to their work and encourage audiences to be their own fact-checkers. By doing so, they perform the civic model of journalism, which is concerned with educating

the ordinary citizen on complex and controversial topics (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013). However, it should be noted that the increasing place of media literacy in the activities of fact-checking organizations is a global trend and not specific to the organizations in Mali and Ethiopia. As the latest IFCN report on the state of fact-checkers in the world shows, most fact-checking organizations around the world carry out media literacy activities (IFCN, 2024).

Regarding challenges (RQ3), our findings show that the context of conflict and its corollary, press freedom restrictions, are among the biggest challenges hampering fact-checking activities in Ethiopia and Mali. In Ethiopia, fact-checkers say to be regularly subject to online bullying and harassment from all sides of the conflict. Fearing reprisals from government officials, some fact-checkers in both countries admit to refraining from fact-checking certain topics. In Mali, fact-checkers say that they self-censor on topics relating to the military because they do not feel safe addressing them. This self-censorship to avoid reprisals in this context must not be seen as an abdication but rather a self-defense strategy in an insecure work environment, as stressed by Walulya and Nassanga (2020) regarding Ugandan journalists. For fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali, self-censorship on certain sensitive subjects is a lesser evil that allows them to continue operating. Thus, even though these fact-checkers claim to be independent and non-partisan, they refrain from holding those in power accountable to some extent. As such, our findings show that in Ethiopia and Mali, there is a gap between the ideal of the watchdog role conception of fact-checking and its performance (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013). This gap could be explained by the local context in Ethiopia and Mali, where fact-checkers say they are subject to online harassment and fear government reprisals. It also can be explained by the fact that, in both countries, fact-checkers say that they lack access to reliable sources and data to properly check claims made by political figures and government officials. As Ferracioli et al. (2022) argued, watchdog orientation in fact-checking is not uniform and, above all, it is hard to perform in some instances, such as authoritarian contexts, as shown by Fakida (2021) regarding fact-checkers in Middle Eastern countries who rarely fact-check Arab leaders or refute their claims. Therefore, fact-checking in Ethiopia and Mali is mostly focused on viral social media content, resulting in a "weakened form of fact-checking" (Liu & Zhou, 2022, p. 4307), and illustrating what Graves et al. (2023) call a "debunking turn." Vinhas and Bastos's (2023) and Cazzamatta (2024) also noted that fact-checkers are increasingly prioritizing online content at the expense of political claims. However, while these authors link this trend to the Meta (ex-Facebook) third-party fact-checking program, where selected fact-checking organizations verify viral content on the Facebook platform, the Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers cite two reasons: the fear of reprisal from government officials and lack of access to reliable sources and data. Regarding access to sources, it should be noted that during the height of the war in the Tigray region, the Ethiopian government cut off communications and internet access in the region (Zelalem, 2022). This made it difficult for fact-checkers to reach people on the ground to verify all information on what allegedly happened there.

Access to funding is another major challenge for fact-checking organizations in Ethiopia and Mali. In terms of funding, fact-checking is between non-profit journalism (Carvajal et al., 2012) and foundation-financed journalism (Nisbet et al., 2018). However, as these organizations are not IFCN signatories, they cannot benefit from grants available in this network in addition to being not eligible for the Meta's third-party fact-checker program, which is a significant source of income for several fact-checking organizations (Meta, 2021). Therefore, fact-checking organizations in both countries rely on some media development organizations, NGOs, and Western embassies that have specific projects related to the fight against disinformation in Africa. For this reason, organizations in both countries have difficulty obtaining long-term

funding, in addition to not having a sustainable business model. Furthermore, relying on donors can sometimes pose ethical problems (Rosenstiel et al., 2016) and may lead them to impose their agenda on the fact-checking organizations that benefit from their funding. As an example, funding partners may be interested in Russian influence, while in Ethiopia and Mali, the priority may be disinformation that feeds hate speech and fuels intercommunity violence. For instance, organizations involved in fact-checking activities in Mali have been accused, by some activists supporting the Malian government, of bias and of pushing the agenda of Western powers, France in particular, due to their funding from the European Union (Laplace, 2022).

Regarding the perception of the benefits and limitations of their work (RQ4), fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali insisted more on the limitations. However, they believe that their work is useful. They state that it has contributed to raising awareness of disinformation and its effects among a segment of the population. In this sense, some consider that the impact of fact-checking should not necessarily be evaluated based on its capacity to stop the circulation of disinformation, which is impossible, but on its capacity to raise awareness of the existence of disinformation and its effects while cultivating in the public the reflex of verification.

Among the limitations, Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers have listed the low reach of their work. This is because fact-checking content is primarily published on digital platforms in countries where Internet access is still quite low, even if it is constantly growing. This means that a large portion of the population is not covered by fact-checkers. The situation is even more striking in Mali, where fact-checking articles are published only in French, unlike in Ethiopia where they are published in the main national languages. Focusing on French as the language of dissemination of fact-checking content means that a good part of the public in Mali, where an important portion of the population is not schooled in French, does not have access to this content. This highlights the challenges of fact-checking in the context of linguistic diversity, as language plays a crucial role in legitimizing the practice among local audiences (Vinhas & Bastos, 2024). In addition, in countries with an oral tradition and where radio remains the most popular media, focusing on online platforms, such as social media, to detect false information means that fact-checkers will only be able to identify a portion of disinformation content that circulates. At the beginning of 2023, Ethiopia had 21 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of nearly 16.7% of the population, estimated to be 113 million (Kemp, 2023a). For the same period, Mali had 7.91 million internet users, representing 34.5% of the population, estimated to be 22.94 million (Kemp, 2023b).

Some fact-checking organizations in Mali are adopting innovative approaches by translating fact-checking articles into the country's most widely spoken languages, such as Bambara, Fulfulde, Sonraï, and Tamashek, and disseminating them on digital platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp. Others work with community radio stations, these being closer to grassroots communities. By sharing fact-checking and media literacy content in national languages on WhatsApp groups, fact-checking organizations are innovating not by creating something new but by adopting new technology and adapting it to a local context and specific needs, as well as adapting to new circumstances (Arafat & Porlezza, 2023). Furthermore, by working with radio stations, they are innovating by adapting an older technology to a new context. By adopting an audience-centered innovation approach and not falling into a technological determinism (Pérez-Seijo & Silva-Rodríguez, 2024), Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers are able to develop strategies that take into account their local contexts marked by low access to the internet, low digital literacy, and language diversity. However, considering that in sub-Saharan Africa, word of mouth plays a huge role in the spread of disinformation (Sey et al., 2022),

journalistic fact-checking is not enough to tackle disinformation, as stated by Cunliffe-Jones (2020) who recommended a holistic approach that goes from church and mosque to WhatsApp.

8. Conclusion

This exploratory study highlights the practice of fact-checking in Ethiopia and Mali, two countries that are the scene of socio-political and security crises. Even though the organizations selected for this study are not signatories of IFCN's Code of Principles, they borrow its standards and adapt them to their local context. They navigate between restrictions to press freedom, lack of funding, linguistic diversity, and difficult access to sources and data.

Even if our results cannot be generalized because they are focused on two countries where fact-checking is still a relatively new practice, this study lays the foundations for in-depth research on the relevance of fact-checking in a context where press freedom is not guaranteed. It also brings important insights into how fact-checking organizations that are non-IFCN signatories are striving to adapt its norms to their contexts. Other studies could also focus more on the challenges and opportunities linked to linguistic diversity for fact-checking. Other avenues of future research could be examining the impact of fact-checking in a polarized context.

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Truth in the Crossfire: The Case of Ethiopia and Fact-Checking in Authoritarian Contexts

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Abstract

Fact-checking in Ethiopia is doubly challenged. First, because Ethiopia is ruled by an authoritarian government, which restricts the information environment, and second, because the conflict in northern Ethiopia that erupted in November 2020 has made disinformation more rampant, and its implications deadly. But fact-checking in Ethiopia is the product not only of the work of Ethiopian organizations: local fact-checkers' international allies and funders also play important roles. This article explores the practice of fact-checking by local organizations and the challenges they encounter in this work in an authoritarian, conflict-affected context. It also serves as a case study shedding light on the interplay between Ethiopian fact-checking organizations and their allies in the international development sector. Local and international organizations have distinct positions within the fact-checking ecosystem and within funder-grantee relationships, and funders at times compound local organizations' challenges. This research reflects information gathered through semi-structured interviews with local fact-checkers and their international allies, as well as a qualitative content analysis of publicly available materials and social media channels. Its findings imply that local fact-checking organizations, their funders, and allied international organizations interact in complex ways in challenging environments.

Keywords

disinformation; Ethiopia; fact-checking; international development; journalistic practice

1. Introduction

Fact-checking has emerged as a central element bolstering confidence in public discourse in countries that are seen as democratizing. Questions of control and power—the state's ability to control information available

to the public and its power to circumscribe the boundaries of fact-checking practices aiming to counter false narratives—are central to what is at stake for people living in authoritarian countries.

Scholars writing about fact-checking have turned the spotlight increasingly toward local fact-checking organizations in the Global South (Amazeen, 2019, 2020; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Graves, 2018). They have pointed out the importance of examining fact-checking organizations as NGOs in cases where they operate outside the bounds of traditional journalistic models. Yet local fact-checking organizations operate within a complex ecosystem alongside international organizations, including powerful Western aid agencies, private foundations, UN agencies, and international NGOs, with these relationships being underexplored.

This study concerns fact-checking organizations in Ethiopia as a case that sheds light on the dynamics between local and international organizations concerned with fact-checking in the Global South, especially in authoritarian and conflict contexts. It seeks to understand what particular challenges face fact-checking in non-democracies and countries facing authoritarianism, conflict, and high polarization, and how fact-checking is understood and practiced in such contexts. During this inquiry, I have also been attuned to what characterizes the relationships and discourses of local fact-checking organizations and their international allies. Due to the intensification of conflict in Ethiopia since November 2020 and the emergence of new fact-checking organizations there, Ethiopia is a particularly productive case to explore these questions.

Based on eight in-depth interviews with fact-checkers and allies and a content analysis of 44 fact-checks by the two key independent fact-checking organizations operating in Ethiopia, I show that fact-checkers face significant challenges due to state repression at all stages of their work: from deciding which claims to select, to seeking to access information and to verify claims. At the same time, funding structures put in place by international funders and the impact of international politics on funding streams can compound their challenges.

Focusing on Ethiopia as an emblematic case of a country facing both authoritarianism and conflict is important not just to fill in the gaps when it comes to how fact-checking is conducted in non-Western contexts, but because it may ask us to revise our understanding and expectations of fact-checking itself and what it can achieve in non-democracies.

Even before the crisis that had erupted in the Tigray region of Ethiopia (a northern region of the country) in November 2020 turned into an all-out civil war, the country had faced frequent political upheavals and was characterized by exceptionally repressive government policies towards critical journalists and activists. According to Freedom House (2024), journalists repeatedly come under government pressure over their coverage of the internal conflicts in the Tigray, Oromo, and Amhara regions, as well as other political dynamics. In 2023, journalists faced arrests, were physically assaulted, or had their outlets' licenses revoked. The war in Tigray from 2020–2022 between the central government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front left at least tens of thousands dead and millions displaced, while at the same time giving rise to rampant disinformation campaigns both on the part of the government and on the part of pro-Tigrayan actors (Pilling & Schipani, 2023; Wilmot et al., 2021).

Scholars have called this state of affairs an "information disorder" (Mutsvairo et al., 2023). Their work shows that in an information environment where the media is censored, and information from government sources

is often patently false, information and disinformation are no longer antonyms since audiences are likely to distrust both the narratives that the government deploys, and the counter-narratives deployed against it. As a corollary, for fact-checking organizations to persuade their audiences that they provide credible information and that they have the authority to debunk disinformation is a significant challenge. In this study, I examine fact-checking organizations' practices, activities, and strategies, as well as the wider context of their relationships with their international allies, to further researchers' understanding of the opportunities and limitations for information actors in authoritarian and conflict contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fact-Checking in an Authoritarian, Conflict-Affected Country in the Global South

A rich body of literature about fact-checking, including its proliferation in the Global South, has evolved over the past decade. Scholars have come to define political fact-checking simply as the verification of political claims, or grounding it theoretically as a professional reform movement resulting from journalism's diminishing legitimacy and crisis of public trust (Amazeen, 2019; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Graves, 2016). Its rise coincided with the social media era, and it also came to be associated with a set of digital verification skills.

Graves (2017) and others have provided accounts of "objective practice" among fact-checkers and examined the epistemology of fact-checking, with research initially focusing primarily on the US and other Western countries. Reflecting on its ethos of transparency, Graves distilled fact-checking practice in the US into five steps or characteristics that form its basis: choosing claims to check, contacting the speaker, tracing false claims, working with experts, and showing one's work.

Fact-checking has often been identified as a key antidote to misinformation (Tully et al., 2022), and its study has coincided with a growing scholarly interest in disinformation, especially since the 2016 election of Donald Trump and elite concerns about polarization risks in its wake (Bernstein, 2021; Lenoir & Anderson, 2023). More recent scholarship has described a "debunking turn" in the practice of fact-checking, where fact-checking focuses more on debunking viral misinformation on social media rather than on political speech, partly due to the growing role of platforms (Graves et al., 2023; Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020).

As the number of fact-checking organizations expanded around the world, scholarship evolved to examine how and why the practice came to be compelling for journalists and others across so many different contexts. Reflecting on fact-checking as a professional and organizational international practice at a more meso level, Graves (2018, p. 623) points to the practice of fact-checking outside of institutional journalism, which is often conducted by NGOs seeking to promote "transparency, effective governance, democratic dialogue, and civic engagement." Amazeen (2019), too, writes about the global spread of political fact-checking, emphasizing that technological change, socio-political conflict, and public calls for politicians' accountability have been important in countries where fact-checking gained prominence. Like Graves (2018), Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), in their account of prominent data journalism and fact-checking organizations in Africa, explore themes of the boundaries between journalistic and non-journalistic actors and how novel practices seek to renew journalistic practices. In their recent study of fact-checkers operating across 27 non-Western countries, Vinhas and Bastos (2023) show how country context shapes concepts such as authority, objectivity, and factuality, arguing that disinformation threatens social cohesion in many

of the countries they examined, and should not be viewed through an individual behavioral lens. In a rare study related to fact-checking in an authoritarian context, Liu and Zhou (2022) have shown that repressive conditions in China have led to a weakened form of fact-checking that shies away from playing a political watchdog role.

Despite this impressive body of work, research that explores how fact-checking operates in repressive and authoritarian environments has yet to be widely conducted. Moreover, the interactions between fact-checking, misinformation, and public discourse often rest on assumptions related to democratic public sphere theory (Graves et al., 2023). To illuminate the case of Ethiopia, an understanding of both the disinformation landscape and the media context would be beneficial.

Workneh (2019) has written about the rise of hate speech in Ethiopia in the era of social media and societal disagreements about the appropriate responses to it, as well as about the way that outrage communication on social media became a vehicle for political dissatisfaction and identity-based rifts (Workneh, 2021). Skjerdal and Moges (2021) have shown how the 2018 liberalization of the Ethiopian media environment ironically led to its further ethnification. They show that media reforms from 2018 significantly increased press freedom but, at the same time, intensified the media's ethnification process, making the media both more pluralistic and more polarized. State and regional media structures became more significant, and journalists began to form alliances along ethnic fault lines (with separate associations for Amhara, Oromo, and Tigrayan journalists, for example). Trust in one's ethnic media among audiences was high, alongside mistrust of other sources of information (Workneh, 2021). This media polarization was one of the factors that led to the establishment of fact-checking organizations. Detailed analyses of social media campaigns show how hate speech spread and how active and deliberate both the government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front were in disseminating political disinformation during the Tigray war (Chala, 2020; Wilmot et al., 2021).

In light of this scholarship, I, therefore, pose my first research question to guide my examination of fact-checkers' work:

> RQ1: What are the challenges and constraints related to authoritarianism and the conflict environment that face fact-checkers in Ethiopia, and how do they contend with those challenges?

2.2. The Political Economy of Fact-Checking

While the political economy of journalism and economic analysis of media industries have longstanding roots in the study of communication, the political economy of fact-checking has been underexplored. Highlighting that many fact-checking organizations have been set up as NGOs outside of journalistic bounds, Graves (2018), Amazeen (2019, 2020), and Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) pointed to the important role that foundations and funders play in shaping fact-checking work by such actors. However, the implications of funding structures have not yet been fully developed.

To help further illuminate the implications of donor-grantee relationships, I suggest drawing not only on media studies scholarship but also on critical international development studies, whose scholars have long explored how international aid agencies support and shape projects in the Global South, including media development programming and other democratization aid. Researchers examining foreign aid in the context

of media have demonstrated that many media aid projects fall short due to their top–down, "magic-bullet" conceptualization of democratization (Mattsson, 2022; Workneh, 2018). Claims by Western governments that they aim to promote democracy and human rights come up against complex realities in places where repressive regimes and local elites are resistant to these aims. Hagmann and Reyntjens (2016) write about the compromises aid agencies are pushed to make when they operate in authoritarian countries where government elites have an interest in maintaining the status quo and how aid may end up entrenching authoritarian rule rather than promoting its stated aims (see Brown & Fisher, 2020). Christensen and Weinstein (2013) similarly explore the dynamics between authoritarian regimes and Western governments that provide foreign aid to local NGOs, showing that repressive governments at times move to restrict foreign support if it is seen as too threatening to their interests.

A key debate in the international development sector in the past decade has centered on aid localization, which the Inter-Agency Standing Committee defines as getting "more means into the hands of people in need," an effort closely linked to an attempt to increase resources for local expertise and locally embedded NGOs instead of parashooting internationals (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.). A "grand bargain," between large aid donors and aid organizations in 2016 made a series of commitments for streamlining aid, some of the most relevant of which include more support for local and national responders, reducing duplication between donors, improving joint needs assessments, reducing earmarking, and increasing multi-year, predictable funding. While the "grand bargain" started as, and remains, most relevant for the humanitarian aid sector, the localization discussions it sparked apply to international development more broadly and are central to discussions and practices related to the relationships between international and national actors (Barakat & Milton, 2020; Koch & Rooden, 2024; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021; US Agency for International Development, 2022).

Other researchers have addressed the role of foreign aid and development assistance in shaping media systems in developing nations, including specifically in Africa. Paterson et al. (2018) argue that the research field would do well to move beyond old dichotomies encouraged by reductionist press freedom and democracy indicators to allow for a deeper understanding of the roles of media in society. They write that "there has been little critical research to date concerning how international development aid in particular and development assistance in general has impacted upon journalism" (Paterson et al., 2018, p. 4). Brownlee (2017), also observes that "not enough rigorous research and scholarship exists about the integration of new media and information assistance by development actors (EU countries and the US) as part of their democracy promotion programs" (as cited in Paterson et al., 2018, p. 2). As fact-checking organizations become an important element of media ecosystems, an exploration of how international development aid affects them would add an important element to this inquiry into journalism-adjacent institutions and initiatives.

In light of this scholarship, I pose my second research question to guide my examination of fact-checkers' work:

> RQ2: What are the challenges and constraints related to their funding environment that face fact-checkers in Ethiopia, and how do they contend with those challenges?

While I have proposed two distinct research questions, it is important to note that authoritarian conditions and international aid funding structures cannot be neatly separated as factors: International development aid

is fundamentally political and intersects with authoritarian politics in complex ways. Ethiopia is a productive case study for this examination not only because authoritarianism, conflict, and international aid interact in it in a unique way, but also because the consequences of unchecked disinformation in Ethiopia are directly linked to widespread risks of violence.

3. Methods

This study's findings are based on a qualitative analysis of eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews and an in-depth content analysis of 44 fact-checks published in 2023 by two Ethiopian organizations: Ethiopia Check and Haq Check, the fact-checking desk of the non-profit Inform Africa. The interviewees included current and former employees from the two Ethiopian organizations as well as people from international organizations and human rights experts who could comment on the organizations or the information ecosystem in the country and digital rights. Interviews were conducted from February–August 2024. The initial interviewees were identified by contacting employees at the two organizations and consulting with other researchers. Others were identified through snowball sampling by asking interviewees for suggestions about others to contact for the study. All identifying information, including the names of individuals, has been removed to protect study participants. I received institutional review board approval from Rutgers University before beginning this study.

The interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom and lasted approximately 40–65 minutes. In each interview, I began by asking about the background of the organization where the person works or worked, as well as how teams are structured, and then continued by asking how decisions are made about what information to fact-check. Next, I asked how fact-checking in Ethiopia differs from this work in other African countries, following up with a question about specific challenges that arise in this work in Ethiopia. Then, I asked interviewees about the relationships between national and international organizations in this space (for more information, see Supplementary File).

To construct the dataset for the qualitative content analysis of fact-checks, I gathered the fact-checks published by one of the organizations over a three-month period, from early January to early April 2023, by referring to the organization's weekly roundups published on its Facebook page. I complemented these fact-checks with several other fact-checks in its Facebook feed that were not included in the weekly roundups to create as complete a list as possible of fact-checks published during those three months. I then conducted an in-depth analysis and coding of the fact-checks published over this period, of which there were 29 in total. The materials were originally published in Amharic, Tigrinya, or Oromo and were reviewed in translation by working with professional translators. It is important to mention that during this process, I observed that the organization also published more than 40 pieces of content that were not fact-checks during this period, such that readers following its social media feed saw a blended flow of different types of materials. The pieces of content that were not fact-checks included explainers, educational content, media literacy content, and monitoring related to digital information policies and developments locally, regionally, and internationally. This initial dataset of 29 fact-checks was complemented with 15 additional fact-checks that were posted by the other organization in English translation to expand the dataset to a total number of 44 fact-checks. The content analysis also included an analysis of website documents, annual reports, and other relevant materials. These materials were open-coded in Nvivo to identify concepts and categories related to the organizations' fact-checking practices and self-definitions (Miles & Huberman, 2020). In the

next phase of analysis, several themes that arose from open coding were identified and explicated. The same open coding process was then undertaken for the interview transcripts. The cycle of observation, analysis, and reflection continued in an iterative process until observations from both the content analysis and the interviews could be integrated into a consistent picture and theoretical formulations about fact-checking in this authoritarian and conflict-affected context could be articulated.

3.1. The Fact-Checking Organizations Examined

Ethiopia Check and Haq Check were selected to be the focus of this research because they are the two key independent Ethiopian fact-checking organizations currently operating in Ethiopia. Both organizations are new. Ethiopia Check was run as an individual volunteer initiative starting in 2019, first receiving international funding that enabled it to expand beyond its founder journalist Elias Meseret's work in August 2020. Haq Check, meanwhile, was founded by Abel Wabela, a former blogger and pro-democracy activist, inside the media house Addis Zeybe in November 2020, moving to operate under a non-profit organization registered in Ethiopia, Inform Africa, in March 2021. Both organizations are relatively small: Ethiopia Check had seven staff members at the height of its funding, while Haq Check had no more than 10. Due to Ethiopia's language diversity, both organizations operate in multiple languages; Ethiopia Check fact-checked claims in Amharic, Tigrinya, and Afaan Oromo, while Haq Check covered Amharic, Tigrinya, Afaan Oromo, Somali, and English. Both were strongly assisted in getting off the ground by significant founding funding grants, from the international NGO Internews in the case of Ethiopia Check (whose funding for this project originally came from the US Agency for International Development), and the Open Society Initiative for East Africa, followed primarily by UNESCO in the case of Haq Check, which enabled them to operate for several years, with shortfalls following this initial funding putting their ability to sustain fact-checking in jeopardy.

4. Findings

4.1. Key Challenges Encountered by Fact-Checking Organizations

Participants described significant challenges to the practice of fact-checking in Ethiopia, which can broadly be divided into two categories: challenges related to the political and media environment and challenges related to resources and funding structures. While the two categories are not separate, since Ethiopia's political context is a factor in international funding flows for media development and can influence funders' trust that fact-checking organizations can fulfill their missions, I describe them in turn in this section because they are both significant forces that shape fact-checking organizations' professional practices and activities (further elaborated in Section 4.2).

4.1.1. Challenges Related to the Local Political and Media Environment

Since the two fact-checking organizations work openly and publicly to verify and publish information, their staff—many of whom have a professional background in journalism—are acutely aware of the freedom of speech constraints limiting the scope of what claims they can fact-check and what fact-checks they can publish. While it is not always clear when fact-checking a government official will raise ire and when it will be passed over, interviews make it clear that the government's general attitude towards the fact-checking organizations is antagonistic and that their social media channels are monitored. It did not escape

fact-checkers that Meseret was severely threatened and ended up having to leave Ethiopia, and therefore they were assuming a level of security risk by undertaking their work. As one fact-checker put it: "One of the challenges in deciding what to fact-check or not is, am I able to survive it after I fact-check the prime minister, or after I fact-check some official? We have that in the back of our minds."

The media environment is significant not only in defining the scope of what claims to select to work on but also in that it creates obstacles in verification processes when the veracity of claims is being researched. Access to information while trying to confirm or debunk claims is often severely limited due to factors such as localized conflicts and insecurity, states of emergency declared in different regions, and internet shutdowns. Assessing the reliability, credibility, and affiliation of information sources in a highly politicized and polarized environment requires a high level of expertise and professional judgment. One fact-checker explained that if "there is an internet shutdown, we can't even find what's going on there online…and the government is saying everything is okay, but we know that it's not okay." Especially on issues related to conflict dynamics, fact-checkers said that independent primary sources are hard to come by.

The government plays an important role in fact-checkers' work, not only as a regulator of freedom of speech but also as a source of information. For fact-checkers in the West, government officials, and government agencies are often an important source of data used to verify information or debunk mis- and disinformation (Graves, 2016). In Ethiopia, fact-checkers said they could not necessarily rely on government-issued information, not just due to politicization, though that is undoubtedly a concern, but also due to possibly improper data collection methods, for example. When approaching government offices for information, one issue is that fact-checking is not a recognizable profession to many government officials. However, according to one participant, another issue is fear associated with providing information following the increasing centralization of information by the prime minister's office since the beginning of the conflict in Tigray.

A final challenge that was identified by participants is related to the audiences for which their fact-checks are produced. Low media literacy in general and low awareness of fact-checking as a genre, particularly, were mentioned as obstacles to the usefulness of fact-checking in the Ethiopian context. Within Ethiopia's highly polarized media environment, where distrust is high and media sources are seen as either being on one group's side or another's, members of the audience "will just label you because they don't have the information or the awareness about fact-checking" without even reading the fact-check that organizations post, according to one fact-checker.

4.1.2. Challenges Related to Resources and International Funding Structures

While non-profit organizations in the Global South are frequently plagued with funding challenges, the case of Ethiopia's two leading independent fact-checking organizations is particularly stark. Dramatic changes in Ethiopia's political context and geopolitical standing created funding opportunities and then a resource collapse within a relatively short period of time. At the time most of the interviews for this project were conducted in early 2024, less than four years after Ethiopia Check and Haq Check received the founding grants that launched their trajectories as professionalized organizations; the former organization had no funding at all, with former staffers contributing some of their time to issuing fact-checks as volunteers, and the latter used limited grants for specific projects, especially fact-checking training for different constituencies to stay afloat, but had no dedicated funding for its fact-checking activities per se.

One expert who has familiarity with the media development funding landscape in Ethiopia explained how international funding changed in tandem with the political context:

> 2018–2019 was the height of many civic spaces opening up, media, legal reforms, and everything….There was a lot of money coming in as well, with a lot of donors from different countries, and development partners. There was a lot of interest…so that made it easier to access more funds.

During the conflict in Tigray from November 2020 to November 2022, the need to combat conflict disinformation was still seen as high. However, fact-checking organizations report that since the peace agreement was signed, Ethiopia has been seen by many donors as being in a post-conflict phase even though localized conflicts were continuing in regions like Oromia and Amhara. At the same time, the country is seen as having tightened control over the civic and media space, which may not be conducive to media development work. The downstream effects on fact-checking organizations were dramatic. "There's no interest in fact-checking in Ethiopia at the moment," one staff member said. Another participant explained the extent to which media development funding follows international political priorities: "The money that comes is almost always tied to other political structures and foreign policy and diplomacy…from that particular country. And I know a lot of media development organizations have also been closing up, finishing up their projects."

In addition, local fact-checking organizations in Ethiopia experienced all key challenges highlighted in the "grand bargain," with particularly salient themes being project-based funding and lack of support for core organizational budgets, lack of certainty and predictability, the absence of long-term funding, and duplication and lack of donor coordination. On project-based funding, one participant explained:

> Media development organizations will come up with specific projects. They may not have the funding for the main job…they might give you [funding] to do a workshop on fact-checking or to do some training, but they will not [give] you money for the actual job: fact-checking.

Another participant said they approached their funder to ask for clarity on the length of their grant to enable organizational planning, but the funder was not able to provide concrete answers. A third participant expressed their frustration that fact-checking training for journalists, funded by different organizations, trained many of the same journalists multiple times, most of whom were based in Addis Ababa, and said that there is a "deep duplication between the [funding] organizations…and most of their projects are short term projects," adding "unless we work on it in a more organized way, just giving training to the journalists is not enough."

4.2. Fact-Checking Processes, Practices, and Activities

Key practices and activities described by fact-checkers and their allies can be seen as a response to the constraints of authoritarianism and the international funding environment described in sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2.

The qualitative content analysis indicates that most of the claims checked were derived from social media posts on Facebook (28), X (6), both Facebook and X (1), and YouTube (2), whether from the accounts of traditional media, individual journalists, politicians or political parties, or prominent users, usually those with

many thousands of followers. Six additional fact-checks were based on general rumors described by the fact-checkers, but their specific origin was not mentioned, while one fact-check was based on a story in a traditional media outlet. While fact-checking organizations did not shy away from checking claims made by traditional media such as the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, or Oromia Media Network (mostly claims made by these outlets on their social media channels), most of the claims checked were made by popular social media users, not by traditional media. Consistent with the "debunking turn" in fact-checking (Graves et al., 2023; Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020), claims checked predominantly consisted of rumors, conspiracies, and biased stories rather than of politicians' speech. Several themes were identified by the content analysis, with fact-checks covering the following themes: conflict-related (16), Ethiopian politics (10), religious (6), disasters and aid (5), the impact of the conflict (3), geopolitics/international (3), and scams (1). Fact-checks were published on the organizations' websites and social media channels. By 2024, Ethiopia Check had more than 257,000 followers on Facebook, 13,000 on X, and 25,000 on Telegram. Meanwhile, Haq Check had more than 8,900 followers on Facebook, 1,500 on X, and a small number on Telegram. While Ethiopia Check published its fact-checks in the relevant local languages (Amharic, Tigrinya, or Afaan Oromo, depending on the context), Haq Check also published its fact-checks in English. The organizations also published information about impersonator accounts of prominent figures and accounts that spread misinformation. Fact-checks were generally categorized as being true, misleading, or false, though the "true" categorization was not present among the fact-checks that I reviewed (note that since this is a qualitative content analysis and the sample is not presumed to represent the organizations' fact-checks more broadly, as explained in Section 3, numbers are provided here for illustrative purposes).

Fact-checkers described their work routines as having "an editorial cycle like any newsroom." Potential pieces of disinformation to consider debunking were collected not only by monitoring social media and mainstream media but also by soliciting suggestions from their audience via social media, messaging apps, email, phone, and text, and by cultivating informal relationships with allied journalists in various outlets. After pitching claims to work on, fact-checking teams in both organizations met regularly in person or corresponded via group chat to select the claims to work on. Decisions were deliberated and made in a group as a risk mitigation strategy. One organization in particular mentioned making decisions unanimously because the broad linguistic and ethnic diversity at the fact-checking desk meant that the potential reception by various audiences would be better understood by including everyone's viewpoints. As one participant explained:

> If someone [at the desk] has a reservation, we will not do that [fact-check], because if it goes out…the audience will be divided….Because of the problem I mentioned—the polarization of Ethiopian politics—everybody will target us, so we have to be careful to do something professional and factual.

Criteria used to decide what pieces of disinformation to fact-check included reach or potential reach (including the prominence of the poster), potential harm, and whether the content is "fact-checkable" in the first place. Regarding reach, one fact-checker said: "Just by experience, we know what kind of content becomes viral and has an impact." However, unlike many other fact-checking organizations in Africa and worldwide, Ethiopia's limited media environment created severe limitations when deciding which pieces of information to fact-check. This was first at the level of risk assessment around constraints on freedom of speech. One fact-checker suggested that the bar for deciding to fact-check a piece of content in Ethiopia is higher than in other countries due to this risk. Fact-checkers would not take the risk of fact-checking a government official issuing wrong GDP figures, but they would assume higher personal and organizational

risk in the case of more dangerous disinformation that would have life-and-death consequences. At a second level, as explained in Section 4.1.1, the limiting media environment impeded fact-checkers' ability to conduct reporting that would debunk disinformation.

While organizations were keenly aware of international standards and best practices, such as those of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), they were also aware that these practices were not always applicable in Ethiopia. Although the IFCN principles call fact-checkers to bring to bear external evidence that can be transparently shown to the reader to convince them of the reliability of the fact-checkers' conclusions, this was not always possible in the Ethiopian context. Fact-checkers in Ethiopia (often using their journalistic background to exercise professional judgment about source reliability and take advantage of preexisting contacts) often did their reporting to confirm or debunk stories in a way that could not be fully transparent to the reader.

Interview participants mentioned various reporting practices that were undertaken to verify information, including attempting to contact eyewitnesses and using at least two preexisting local contacts to cross-check information. While fact-checkers were aware of the IFCN criterion recommending reliance on primary sources, they said at times they could not confirm information based on primary sources and had to rely on secondary sources such as locally-based local and international journalists.

The content analysis of the fact-checks themselves also provided information regarding the process of fact-checking claims. Fact-checks mention staff contacting officials and government sources to confirm information, reaching out to residents in rural areas, and relying on sources who wish to remain anonymous to confirm information.

Despite these efforts, security threats placed definite limits on the organizations' ability to do their work. One research participant closely familiar with organizational practice said of one of the organizations, while not faulting them for it, that security risks for the staff "makes the work sometimes a bit shallow, because they can't really fact-check the bigger things, not only because of…feared upsets, but also because of lack of access to information [in certain regions]." Another interviewee said, "unless there is access to information and unless…you tried your best to use your resources to verify the information, what's the point?" The same interviewee added, "I think the solution is to work on media literacy hand-in-hand with the fact-checking…and we need some kind of policy change."

Another practice that fact-checkers sometimes undertook to contend with the difficulty of confirming some information was letting readers decide. In one instance, a fact-checker described reaching out to a government-owned company to request evidence to back up a claim it had made in the media. When the company rebuffed the fact-checker, they went on to interview experts and contextualize the claim for their readers, so that they could come to their conclusions about whether or not the claim was reasonable, but without labeling it one way or another. The content analysis also indicates that in some cases, fact-checkers go through the fact-checking process but end up publishing the results as "explainers" rather than labeling them as false or misleading, and at times quote both a government official and other stakeholders and mention contesting narratives, leaving the ultimate conclusion of the takeaway for their readers to make. For example, in a fact-check essentially reporting air travel restrictions for some passengers from Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, fact-checkers conducted reporting (having spoken directly to passengers who faced

travel restrictions because they had not met certain conditions), but at the same time, they reported that the airline was unaware of cancellations and that a government spokesperson had said that the matter had been resolved. The fact-check is framed as an explainer and not labeled.

Openness to their audiences in accepting and soliciting information to fact-check via multiple channels, and technological innovations, such as a Telegram bot, are not only practiced to comply with the IFCN principles but also to increase legitimacy with their audiences. At the point of publication, the two organizations have also gone to great lengths to disseminate the information they produce in innovative ways, including ways that reach audiences who are not tuned into social media. Once their fact-checks have been finalized, they are not only posted to the organizations' websites and multiple social media channels but also converted to other formats, including formats that reach audiences who are not social media users. Haq Check had a weekly television program to discuss the week's fact-checks and disinformation-related issues (discontinued due to lack of funding), and Meseret had a popular hour-long weekly radio program discussing disinformation and hosting politicians and experts. Despite its popularity, the radio show could not attain commercial sponsors due to fears of government repercussions for the sponsors.

Finally, in response to both funding pressures and a genuine attempt to affect the wider media literacy context of their work, the two organizations undertake a wide range of activities beyond fact-checking. Africa Check notes on its website that in addition to fact-checking, its mission also includes media literacy education training and capacity building. Haq Check and the NGO within which it is housed, Inform Africa, also conduct media literacy programming, including training journalists, journalism students, and civil society activists, aiming to produce research into and analysis of disinformation trends. The content analysis indicates that fact-checking organizations also lightly "educate" their readers and enhance their media literacy through their fact-checks themselves by taking readers through the process of verifying information with credible sources, instructing them about ways to report hate speech to platforms, issuing warnings about sharing unverified information, and identifying accounts that spread disinformation. They also publish a range of materials on their social media channels in addition to fact-checks, including explainers, media literacy content, videos offering guidance on information verification, and monitoring of local and global developments. In that sense, they try to do more than fact-checking organizations in the West with far less.

5. Discussion: What Fact-Checking Organizations in Authoritarian States Can and Cannot Do

The primary goal of this study was to make observations about some of the key challenges facing Ethiopian fact-checking organizations due to their particular environment in the hope that we can use their case to learn about the conditions for countering disinformation in authoritarian, conflict-affected contexts and for fact-checking organizations funded as NGOs. The findings presented in the previous sections illustrate how these challenges, in turn, shape fact-checking practices and activities.

The first theme related to the challenges fact-checking organizations encounter due to authoritarian and conflict conditions. These conditions constrained their work through each step of the process: choosing claims, tracing claims, contacting experts, and showing their work (Graves, 2016). What claims they could check and what fact-checks they could publish were significantly limited by the bounds of freedom of expression in Ethiopia. The contextual limitations on checking political speech, fact-checkers' deep concern

with viral disinformation online, and a focus on verifiable claims have meant that fact-checking in Ethiopia operates mostly in a debunking mode, in a manner consistent with Graves et al. (2023) and Westlund et al. (2024). Ethiopia's repressive environment for freedom of expression has created challenges for the ethos of transparency characteristic of fact-checking elsewhere, as described by Graves (2018) and in the IFCN guidelines. While often constrained in their freedom to choose which claims to check without hindrance and being challenged in implementing certain transparency practices such as contacting the person who issued the original claim or making their process replicable to their readers, fact-checkers in Ethiopia are nonetheless aware of international standards and try to follow them to the extent possible, such as by showing their work in a way that has a secondary educational value to their readers (similarly to fact-checkers in Turkey, as shown by Çömlekçi, 2020). In terms of their relationship with the media sphere, like the data journalists and fact-checkers interviewed by Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), fact-checkers see themselves as renewing journalistic practices: Journalists are an important part of their constituency and audience, and they strongly articulate their concerns with the ethnification and polarization prevalent in the Ethiopian media. But since their organizations are still nascent, with their roots and practices firmly planted in journalistic modes of work, they have yet to fully define a separate sphere from journalism. On the contrary, establishing independent fact-checking organizations may be a way to enable "objective practice" that has not currently found a space within Ethiopia's media ecosystem.

The second theme related to the challenges fact-checking organizations encounter due to their incorporation as NGOs dependent primarily on international development funding. Ethiopian fact-checking organizations are not autonomous from international actors that often circumscribe their material conditions. While fact-checkers have said that resources for their work were relatively plentiful in the aftermath of media reforms in Ethiopia in 2018–2019, the ebbs and flows of foreign aid funding for media development have meant they have lacked the consistency of resources they need to maintain their work. Foreign aid, despite the lip service it pays to the importance of localization, is plagued by broader problems in aid dynamics that are not easily solved (Koch & Rooden, 2024). In conflict-affected countries in particular, aid strategies and foreign policy considerations can shift frequently and significantly. While the organizations see incorporating themselves as non-profit organizations as the best option available to them, this spells vulnerability both to government threats and to funding shortfalls. Like fact-checkers elsewhere (Çömlekçi, 2022), one key strategy they have adopted to cultivate support from funders is to expand their activities beyond fact-checking to include media and information literacy education, including training journalists and journalism students.

In the context of viral disinformation and Ethiopia's outrage communication (Workneh, 2021), an important emerging finding from this research is the prominent role platforms play in disinformation dynamics and the role fact-checkers think platforms ought to play in protecting their society from harm. While the interview questionnaire did not explicitly address the organizations' relationships with platforms, this issue, especially the role of Meta's Facebook, was frequently raised by participants, making this an important theme in the research. As Nothias (2020) has shown, in many countries in Africa, Facebook is the internet. Several participants expressed disappointment and anger at Facebook's role, saying that fact-checking organizations essentially clean up Facebook's platform for them for free since much of the most harmful disinformation they observed was on Facebook. One participant said Facebook operates "like a gangster" in that they only show up in Ethiopia around elections or internationally visible conflicts such as the civil war in Tigray. While one of the organizations was a "trusted partner" of Facebook's, that had not translated into resources

(except in the form of in-kind resources to help promote content). Facebook routinely contacted the fact-checkers to ask for unpaid assistance verifying claims, translation, and other tasks. As one fact-checker said, major technology companies have been "a total disappointment," adding, "I believe they are failing countries like Ethiopia."

This study has several important limitations. First, the small number of interviewees, which resulted both from the limited number of potential interviewees in these small organizations and a perceived reluctance to hold recorded interviews due to the generally repressive environment, despite a detailed plan in place to ensure confidentiality. Second, the study's scope as a case study means that it explored contextual particularities that may not be relevant to other authoritarian contexts. Nonetheless, I believe it expands our knowledge of what fact-checking may mean in non-democracies in important ways.

The political economy of fact-checking and alternative journalism in the Global South, more broadly, is an important future research direction in both journalism and media studies and international development studies. International foreign aid funding for media development in the Global South has a profound effect on media ecosystems, and we do not yet know enough about what funding constraints require or enable journalists and adjacent professions to do.

6. Conclusion

Mano (2019, p. 115) has written that "media development in Africa is most likely to be driven by initiatives and efforts that feature African agency, focus on social change, and are embedded in technological innovation." This seems like a particularly apt description of the Ethiopian fact-checking organizations examined in this article. My research has been animated foremost by the curiosity to understand what it is like to practice fact-checking in a context as difficult and critical as Ethiopia. While the challenges fact-checkers face are formidable, they have sought to carve out a space for fact-checking practices despite significant limitations, spurring some sense of hope in their compatriots (Mutsvairo et al., 2023). This case study seems to suggest that Ethiopian fact-checking organizations, though nascent and small, may represent not just professional reform movements seeking to renew journalistic practices, but social reform actors in a broader sense. Founded by an independent journalist and a former blogger and pro-democracy activist, their efforts to combat polarizing disinformation within Ethiopian society can be seen as reflective of a social change impulse, akin to the practices observed by Mano (2019).

This study has demonstrated that fact-checking in non-democratic contexts can be profoundly challenged by the dual forces of authoritarianism and the political-economic forces resulting from the complexities of foreign aid. Given the size of fact-checking organizations and the limitations they face relative to the enormity of the disinformation challenges they try to tackle, Western expectations that they should be the key actors in stemming the tide of disinformation seem unrealistic and unfair. Authoritarian politics constantly shift as political dynamics evolve, while foreign policy and foreign aid priorities also shift. But fact-checking organizations that are able to carve out a space for their work in repressive countries provide so much more to their societies than individual stories debunking false claims one by one: They communicate with large audiences about the value of "objective practice," remind journalists of professional standards, and provide practical know-how that others can implement in their interactions with a disorderly and untrustworthy information environment.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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Screens as Battlefields: Fact-Checkers' Multidimensional Challenges in Debunking Russian-Ukrainian War Propaganda

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges fact-checkers face when dealing with war propaganda and how their socio-professional contexts influence these obstacles. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research identifies common difficulties such as time constraints, resource limitations, and the struggle to find reliable information amidst language barriers and geographical distances. The findings highlight the impact of socio-professional contexts on investigative methods, ranging from traditional journalism to advanced open-source intelligence methods. The study underscores the importance of international cooperation and support networks in addressing these challenges and also in mitigating the impact that exposure to violent content and harassment has on well-being and professional integrity.

Keywords

fact-checking; information warfare; professional practices; Russia–Ukraine war; war propaganda

1. Introduction

Twenty-four February, 2022. Russia has invaded Ukraine. Since the war began, more than 3,000 fact-checks have been published by professional fact-checking organisations worldwide, according to the #UkraineFacts database (www.ukrainefacts.org), which brings together signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Outside the armed conflict, social media platforms have become a battleground for propaganda campaigns supporting the Kremlin's narrative, which is not new in a conflict that traces its origins back to the annexation of Crimea eight years ago (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017).

One definition of *propaganda* is the dissemination of messages designed by powerful actors to target audiences through mass media and various communication channels (Oleinik & Paniotto, 2023). As such, it is a strategic tool to advance political goals by selectively highlighting or omitting information, privileging certain sources and perspectives, and using textual and visual elements to construct compelling narratives (Boyd-Barrett, 2017). A hallmark of propaganda is its ability to blur the lines between fact and fiction, confusing the distinction between truth and falsehood. Its purpose is not to inform but to persuade by manipulating public perceptions and distorting truths (Arendt, 1951; Sarmina, 2018).

For fact-checkers, the challenges go beyond disentangling the truth. They must navigate a conflict deeply rooted in a complex historical and geopolitical context in which propaganda has always played a central role, and is now exacerbated by the spread of propaganda on social media. The recent development of AI technologies has added layers to this abundant availability of textual and audiovisual disinformation, enabling the rapid creation of persuasive propaganda (Goldstein et al., 2024) or sophisticated deepfake videos that are increasingly difficult to debunk (Twomey et al., 2023).

With social media, war propaganda travels from one country to another, as demonstrated by the collaborative efforts of the IFCN network or the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network, which brings together fact-checking organisations, academics, and experts to combat information disorder in Europe. Both organisations highlight fact-checking as an international movement, where fact-checkers may have different backgrounds and motivations (Graves, 2018). For example, over a third of IFCN-certified fact-checkers worldwide rely on media and news agencies for their work, suggesting that this role is likely to be undertaken by any organisation, whether public, private, or not-for-profit (Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022). The global growth of fact-checking can also be seen as driven by a convergence of factors, including declining journalistic standards, public disempowerment, technological advances, and socio-political tensions (Amazeen, 2019).

The study of fact-checking practices in the context of Russian propaganda and information warfare is a relatively under-explored area, particularly given the global reach and speed of information dissemination on social media. This research aims to address this knowledge gap by comprehensively examining fact-checking practices during the Russia–Ukraine war from a global perspective. Therefore, it seeks to identify common patterns in fact-checking practices, including the (re)sources and digital tools used and how social and professional contexts influence these patterns. Particularly, the study focuses on two key research questions:

RQ1: What are the common difficulties that fact-checkers face when dealing with war propaganda?

RQ2: To what extent do their social and professional contexts influence these challenges?

Using a robust mixed-methods approach involving fact-checkers working mainly in Europe but also in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, this article explores how social dynamics and professional environments influence fact-checkers. Social dynamics include political and societal attitudes, perceptions, and cultural norms related to the conflict that shape how fact-checkers counter propaganda. The professional environment includes organisational structures and resources that influence or support fact-checkers in their practices. This comprehensive exploration aims to highlight the diverse challenges and contexts that fact-checkers navigate to address the complexities inherent in information warfare.

2. Literature Review

Russia has a well-documented history of employing sophisticated propaganda strategies, using social media platforms on a massive scale to polarise public discourse, destabilise democracies, and incite hostility towards the West (Geissler et al., 2023; Soares et al., 2023). Russian propaganda is part of information warfare as a military strategy, where the mechanisms of information and emotional appeals are used to influence public opinion, manipulate the masses, and disrupt reliable information exchange (Konstankevych et al., 2022; Sarmina, 2018). Paid bloggers, trolls, and social bots are integral to the Kremlin's social media plan (Helmus et al., 2018; Hodgson, 2021). Moreover, while the Kremlin can count on its supporters, disinformation about Russia and Ukraine is also spread by citizens who actively promote their individual opinions to gain authority (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). Spreaders of disinformation can also be found among "useful idiots," a term used to describe naive and credulous people who spread fake news (Gotiu, 2023; Munteniță, 2021).

In the context of the war, pro-Kremlin disinformation portrays Russia as the protector of Russians in Ukraine against an alleged "Nazi" regime, while the West is portrayed as conspiring to dismantle the Russian state (Mick, 2023). Conversely, Ukrainian authorities have made use of propaganda to garner sympathy or promote war heroes such as the Ghost of Kyiv, a pilot credited with shooting down Russian planes (Baptista et al., 2023). These narratives transcend borders and show how propagandists take advantage of the globalised world of information. Russian propaganda started with a strategy to destabilise Ukraine (Sarmina, 2018). It then evolved to create panic, discredit Ukrainian officials, and threaten the country's independence and democracy (Konstankevych et al., 2022).

Russian propaganda uses various techniques to shape public opinion and influence perceptions. These tactics include the use of euphemisms, negative labelling, and the creation of a media vacuum, which can leave audiences without access to accurate information (Sarmina, 2018). Furthermore, media manipulation strategies can include using influential figures to promote a particular agenda and rewriting history by highlighting inconsequential issues and creating a sense of urgency. In addition, sensationalism and psychological shock are often used to undermine people's psychological stability, while the creation of a virtual reality in which myths, images, and stereotypes are constructed can also be used to manipulate perceptions. By combining these techniques, Russian propaganda can create a powerful and effective manipulation strategy (Konstankevych et al., 2022).

Fact-checking political information involves verifying claims against authoritative sources using various channels, including government statements, media reports, and social media content. Fact-checkers evaluate claims based on criteria such as verifiability and plausibility (Savolainen, 2024). A study conducted in the fact-checking service of the French newspaper *Le Monde* showed that disinformation about the war in Ukraine is primarily multimodal, combining text and images (Zecchinon & Standaert, 2024). Similarly, research in Iberian countries highlighted that videos are the main format subject to fact-checking and that fact-checking focuses mainly on pro-Ukrainian content, as disinformation is also used on the Ukrainian side as a defensive strategy against Russian propaganda (Baptista et al., 2023).

Similar to the Covid-19 pandemic, social media platforms play a crucial role in amplifying and disseminating disinformation, which spreads in response to current events and often leads to polarisation of opinion (Sánchez

del Vas & Tuñón Navarro, 2024). A study of six Spanish fact-checking organisations during the first year of the war showed a shift in Russian disinformation tactics from using bots to spreading credible stories through real social media profiles. The study found that Russian propaganda initially targeted countries supporting Ukraine but later shifted to polarising public debate on NATO enlargement, demonstrating its adaptability to real news information (Magallón-Rosa et al., 2023). Research conducted in Poland during the first months of the war in Ukraine also demonstrated the potential of fact-checking organisations to contribute to the development of a more informed and engaged society (Urbaś, 2023).

Despite well-documented research on the development of Russian propaganda and information warfare, the role of socio-professional context in shaping fact-checking practices in the specific context of war remains relatively unexplored. A limited amount of research provides empirical material on how fact-checkers approach their professional practices or standards outside the US, where most research is concentrated (Lelo, 2022a; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019). For example, research has shown that in sub-Saharan Africa, the role of non-journalistic actors in fact-checking and data-driven journalism is helping to redefine how news is produced and consumed (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018). Studies of fact-checking activities from a national or regional perspective in Brazil have highlighted the influence of the socio-political context in explaining the growth of the movement and the effectiveness of fact-checking (Lelo, 2022a, 2022b).

The influence of the socio-political context was also addressed in Bangladesh, where political pressures and scarce resources put a strain on fact-checkers (Haque et al., 2020). In Colombia, the benefits of fact-checking were highlighted in terms of civic empowerment in a silenced and polarised environment (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2021). Fact-checking initiatives can also emerge despite corruption and political instability, albeit with varying degrees of difficulty (Amazeen, 2020). This complexity highlights the need to consider additional factors, such as press freedom, internet accessibility, and a country's overall democratic governance, in order to understand the dynamics at play.

From a professional practice perspective, depending on the context in which they operate, fact-checkers are likely to face difficulties accessing public data, limited resources, limited financial support, a need for training, and a need to reach a wider audience, as observed in Latin America and Spain (Moreno-Gil et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023). Transparent methodologies and consistent processes were highlighted in Mediterranean countries, where fact-checkers made extensive use of open-access digital tools (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). These observations are echoed in a study of the user needs of fact-checkers in Western and Nordic European countries, where professional fact-checking practices showed a solid adherence to international standards that prioritise the transparency and accountability of the fact-checking process, in line with core journalistic principles (Dierickx & Lindén, 2023).

As a sub-genre of journalism, fact-checking is deeply rooted in shared values and professional norms. Journalists and fact-checkers alike seek to play a normative role in society, holding public figures to account while prioritising accuracy and transparency (Singer, 2021). Fact-checkers and journalists share a commitment to respecting the truth and adhering to a professional ideology centred on values such as impartiality, objectivity, and accuracy (Deuze, 2005, 2019; Zelizer, 2019).

The inherently investigative nature of fact-checking and the digital environment that favours the spread of information disorders explain why digital technologies are part of fact-checkers' apparatus to solve problems

such as verifying images or locating events (Westlund et al., 2022). Fact-checkers can combine traditional journalistic skills with data or computational skills, recognising that their experience with technology may also depend on their educational, professional, or even organisational background (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022; Micallef et al., 2022; Samuelsen et al., 2023). However, from the perspective of a global movement, fact-checking practices can be defined by four core components: an unwavering commitment to accuracy, the strategic use of technology, collaborative verification and information sharing, and contributions to public education (Amazeen, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This approach was chosen because it allows for triangulation across different perspectives and data types, enabling a nuanced and robust understanding of the research topic (Graff, 2016; Whitehead & Day, 2016). The iterative research design draws on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods while addressing their respective limitations and analytical challenges. The design of this research was inspired by the method used by Singer (2021) in research examining the role of fact-checkers in relation to other journalistic enterprises, which consisted of interviews with fact-checkers followed by the distribution of an online questionnaire via the IFCN. Of the 161 questionnaire recipients, 34 responded, with 26 completing all questions, yielding a response rate of between 16% and 21%. The sample included fact-checkers from four continents, with all responses collected anonymously.

This research started with exploratory interviews conducted in March and April 2022 with seven fact-checkers from Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden as part of a broader research project on fact-checkers' user needs. The goal was to understand the potential challenges in resources and tools they faced soon after the beginning of the war. Based on our initial findings, which highlighted difficulties related to language barriers and access to reliable sources from both sides of the war, we created an online questionnaire. This was distributed during the Global Fact 9 Conference, held in Oslo, Norway, from 22–25 June 2022. Global Fact is an annual fact-checking conference organised by the US-based Poynter Institute for Media Studies, which coordinates the IFCN. It is considered a key event within the fact-checking community, bringing together different organisations and stakeholders from around the world to share and discuss their practices (Graves & Lauer, 2020; Lauer & Graves, 2024).

The survey included 12 questions aimed at understanding the experiences and challenges faced by professionals when fact-checking the Russian-Ukrainian war. It was structured with a combination of open and closed questions to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, there were five closed questions focusing on demographic and organisational information, four closed questions to explore difficulties encountered in terms of resource sufficiency and accessibility (results collected through a score from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale or through a Boolean yes or no), and three open questions to elaborate on the answers. The average time to complete the survey was estimated to be between 10 and 15 minutes.

We received 85 responses from fact-checkers based in 46 countries, with the majority from Europe (39 respondents), followed by Asia (31), Africa (8), North America (5), and South America (2). Based on the data available on the event website, the estimated response rate is between 17.5%, which can be considered

an acceptable response rate compared to the Singer study. Regarding the type of organisation, 68 respondents indicated that they work for a fact-checking organisation, 33 for a news media organisation, and 6 for an open-source intelligence (OSINT) organisation. As multiple answers were possible, two respondents reported working for all three types of organisations and 18 for both news media and fact-checking organisations. The way respondents described themselves also reflected the diversity of respondents: 35 journalists and fact-checkers, 29 journalists, 18 fact-checkers, one disinformation expert, one researcher, and one editorial manager. Respondents ranged in age from early 20s to mid-60s, with the majority aged between 20 and 29 (37) and 30 and 39 (28). They reported working for large organisations (44%), with an equal proportion working for medium and large organisations (28%).

Respondents were given the option to provide their email addresses. The 19 people who did so were contacted for a qualitative interview, of which six agreed. We also contacted European fact-checkers through the EDMO network. Through this network, we successfully contacted 14 fact-checkers. The final phase of our research involved conducting 20 semi-structured interviews with fact-checkers from 20 countries, including Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hungary, India, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Serbia/Croatia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. These interviews were conducted online between September 2022 and August 2023, with a similar mean and median duration of 33 minutes.

The interview guide explored various aspects, including fact-checkers' profiles, sources of information, tools used for verification, specific skills required, types of content typically fact-checked, challenges faced, and networking practices. All interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of the interview with the French fact-checker, which was conducted in French and subsequently translated. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis software designed for tagging and analysing textual data (Rampin & Rampin, 2021).

Eight respondents were aged between 20 and 29, seven were between 30 and 39, four were between 40 and 49, and one was over 50, including 10 women and 10 men. Gender was not considered in this research on the assumption that professional activities related to this topic are likely to present similar challenges and issues for individuals regardless of gender. The responses on the psychological aspects of war reporting supported this assumption, as there was no evidence to suggest that one gender was more exposed to harassment or violent content than the other. The results presented in this article are anonymised, i.e., all identifying information has been removed except for the name of the country, which is disclosed only to identify the fact-checker. Such a level of anonymity is common in social science research for privacy and ethical reasons (Crow & Wiles, 2008; Wiles et al., 2008), and it is particularly useful when the goal is to capture diverse perspectives, not to essentialise. Although fact-checking organisations are anonymised, they can be identified because of their affiliation with well-established networks such as the IFCN or EDMO, especially in countries with a very limited number of organisations.

4. Results

Preliminary interviews aimed at identifying the challenges associated with fact-checking in wartime informed the subsequent phases of this research. As detailed in the methodology section, this process included the development of an online survey distributed during the Global Fact 9 Conference, which

focused on the difficulties faced by fact-checkers in dealing with war propaganda. Qualitative interviews further explored the socio-professional factors influencing these challenges. This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the findings, structured across the three stages of this research to reflect its iterative nature. It provides a nuanced analysis of the multiple challenges that underpin the practice of fact-checking in wartime.

4.1. From Pandemic to War

As the preliminary interviews were conducted shortly after the start of the war, the fact-checkers mainly emphasised the differences between fact-checking the pandemic and fact-checking the war. The Covid-19 pandemic corresponded to a period when fact-checkers relied heavily on scientific and expert sources to verify information (Denmark, Norway). The outbreak of war prompted them to adopt alternative methods, including the use of OSINT tools for geolocation and satellite imagery and international collaboration through initiatives such as the #UkraineFacts platform (Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), ensuring a continuity in the collaborative efforts deployed during the pandemic.

Fact-checkers acknowledged the challenge of finding reliable information without compromising the integrity of reporting. One participant noted, "You can still report what's out there and explain the steps you've taken to verify the images or stories" (Norway). They highlighted the increasing difficulty in identifying trustworthy sources, with the observation that "It seems to be getting harder and harder to find out who is trustworthy and who is not" (Denmark). Respondents also underscored challenges to presenting truthful content in misleading contexts (Norway) and language barriers (Denmark). Given these complexities, one Danish fact-checker admitted: "It was easier to work on misinformation about the pandemic than the war." In addition, interviews revealed the resurgence of Russian troll factories and the shift of disinformation disseminators from pandemic to war-related issues (Sweden, Norway).

4.2. The Challenge of Resources and Tools

The survey results showed that fact-checkers focused mainly on checking videos (41.2%), followed by images (37.6%), and text (20%). In addition, one-third of the respondents found that fact-checking the war was more difficult than fact-checking the pandemic (29.4%), while one-third found that both presented the same difficulty level (30.6%). Furthermore, 23.5% considered it not much more complex, and 16.5% could not make a comparison.

The survey included a comprehensive set of statements that participants answered on a five-point Likert scale (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The statements related to the challenges they face in providing context, accessing reliable sources, having relevant tools, understanding the languages, finding experts, identifying trolls or provocateurs, and stating *true* or *false*. Access to reliable sources emerged as the biggest challenge for fact-checkers, with 75% of respondents rating it as difficult. This difficulty was closely followed by language barriers and the experts' availability (72% and 66%, respectively). Conversely, the availability of relevant tools received the lowest score, with 57% of respondents finding it challenging. This finding is noteworthy as it represents a 5% increase in the number of respondents who explicitly cited insufficient access to resources for effective fact-checking.

Linear regression analysis was used to explore relationships with the Statement variable (related to stating *true* or *false*), and significant patterns emerged. The variables Sources, Languages, Expertise, and Context showed positive relationships ($p < 0.001$), indicating that higher scores in these areas correlated with a more remarkable ability to determine the truth of a claim. Conversely, Trolls and Tools showed negative associations, suggesting that these two variables did not significantly affect the ability to determine the veracity of claims.

Looking at the correlation matrix used to examine the relationships between multiple variables (Figure 1), we found that Context and Sources were most highly correlated with Statement. The variables Tools and Trolls showed weaker positive correlations. These findings are consistent with the results of the linear regression analysis and highlight the challenges associated with the accessibility of sources, language barriers, and the provision of context in determining the veracity of claims.

Our analysis found no significant differences between continents, except for the eight African respondents who reported more significant challenges in providing context, finding reliable sources, and accessing appropriate tools. In Europe, we found that countries closer to Ukraine generally faced fewer difficulties, particularly in terms of language barriers and access to reliable sources and expertise.

Forty-one respondents used the open-ended section to highlight additional challenges. They emphasised the complex political dynamics of the war, which led to controversial positions among actors, the complicated use of authentic content in manipulated contexts, and the significant influence of Kremlin propaganda. Distance from the front line emerged as a practical obstacle. In Africa, one participant noted that this often leads to encountering disinformation that has already been verified. Beyond geographical and language barriers, fact-checkers stressed the need for deep contextual understanding, as a South American fact-checker noted: "[The war] requires knowledge of the socio-cultural context and guidance from specialists who are often hard to find." European respondents echoed this sentiment, with an Albanian fact-checker citing the lack of expertise on Russia and Ukraine as a notable obstacle. A Ukrainian

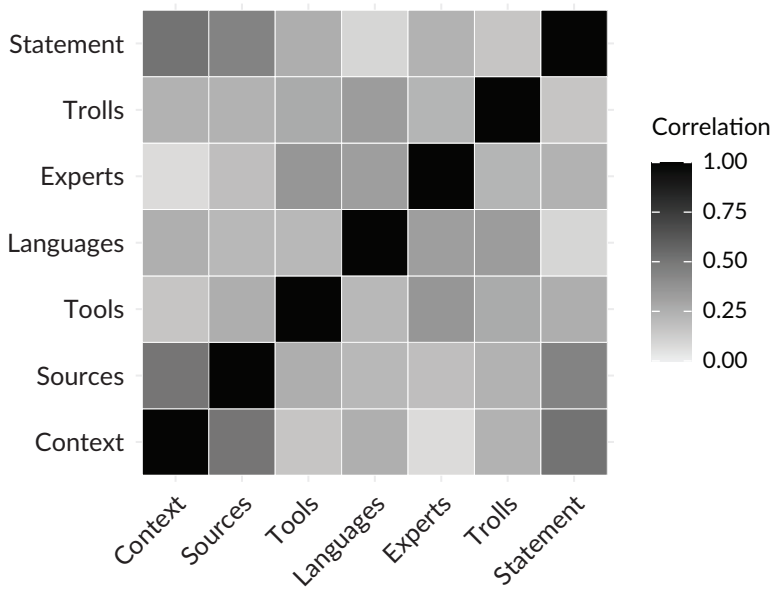

Figure 1. Correlation heatmap of the challenges identified by the fact-checkers.

fact-checker stressed the importance of understanding the context and the history of relations between Ukraine and Russia.

The lack of reliable and independent sources in Ukraine and Russia was widely recognised as a significant challenge, particularly distinguishing between selective information from Ukrainian officials and the flood of disinformation. Telegram channels posed additional difficulties, as a respondent from the Czech Republic articulated: "Since a lot of Russian dis/misinformation comes from Telegram, it is often difficult to trace the source of the information." A Turkish fact-checker highlighted the media monitoring challenge: "Because it is difficult to find reliable sources due to military pressure on the media." Similarly, in India, the difficulty of obtaining reliable information is compounded by unresponsive sources.

Language barriers were a recurring concern in the comments of fact-checkers from Europe and Asia, affecting their ability to communicate effectively with Ukrainian sources and challenging the accurate translation of claims. Fact-checkers who relied on machine translation tools stressed the critical need for confidence in the accuracy of the results they provided. Respondents also highlighted the need for more robust technological tools to support fact-checking efforts, including access to satellite imagery and advanced social media monitoring platforms. Moreover, as one German fact-checker pointed out, addressing the multifaceted challenges of disinformation goes beyond the context of war, as it requires additional human resources, not just tools.

4.3. The Influence of Professional and Social Factors

The third stage of the research process involved 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 fact-checkers from 20 different countries to understand the interplay between socio-professional factors and the complexities of fact-checking the Russia–Ukraine war. To facilitate understanding of these interactions, the analysis is divided into three complementary parts: the technological limitations and dependencies, the complexities of fact-checking war propaganda, and the psychological aspects associated with harassment and exposure to violent content.

4.3.1. Technological Constraints and Dependencies

The professional context encompasses the expertise, skills, and specialised knowledge that fact-checkers bring to their work, which significantly influences their investigative methods and use of technology. In this regard, fact-checkers acknowledged that the most important skills needed are open-mindedness (Greece), critical thinking (Hungary), and having a contextual awareness and nuanced understanding of historical narratives and propaganda mechanisms (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia). Traditional journalistic skills and experience were valued by the fact-checkers, who presented a profile of experienced journalists who referred to journalistic investigative methods to counter an over-reliance on technology: "These open-source tools make people lazy because sometimes they think that they can only do this job through open-source research….It is so easy to do the job without additional tools because I used to work as a journalist" (Georgia).

Geographical distance exacerbates language barriers, making accessing and understanding information difficult. In Denmark, for example, several automated translators are used to interpret Ukrainian and Russian content. Similarly, in Germany, fact-checkers use Google Translate for primary search results to identify

patterns of disinformation circulating online, particularly from Russian sources. Language skills allow fact-checkers to directly interpret Ukrainian and/or Russian content without relying solely on technology. The use of fact-checking networks and colleagues fluent in these languages also provides alternatives. In countries where smaller languages are spoken, such as Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Finland, fact-checkers emphasised the need for more accessible, accurate, and reliable language translation tools.

Not all organisations are experimenting with OSINT methods and techniques, as in Latvia and Sweden, where fact-checkers rely primarily on standard journalistic methods: "I tried to do such a story…which was…not funny, but it was a good experience" (Sweden). Fact-checkers tended to use the same geolocation tools, such as Google Maps and Google Earth, recognising the importance of being able to authenticate places using technology:

> It's a handicap to be so far away from the field and in the end, you realise that if we had a video that was shot in Paris, we would not need many details to locate it because we have all lived in Paris for several years. (France)

The use of satellite imagery became more present in fact-checking practices in the context of the war. However, it refers to manipulations that are considered time-consuming (Denmark), while access to satellite imagery may be limited without a paid subscription (Germany). Nevertheless, access to tools does not make geolocation easier:

> Because whoever publishes tries to hide the location….As a result, it is really hard to verify….There's not a lot of good satellite imagery, street view imagery, or user-generated content. It's much harder than dropping in Washington DC where you have thousands of images and updated user-generated images, and the satellite imagery is up to date. (Norway)

Several fact-checkers (Afghanistan, Estonia, Georgia, and Slovenia) highlighted the challenges they face when relying on manual methods for image verification and information retrieval. They also underscored the limitations of reverse image search tools, as social media platforms systematically remove valuable metadata information such as time and location. These difficulties illustrate the resource constraints and technical challenges associated with fact-checking activities. It may, therefore, require additional time-consuming manual work that can be usefully supported by community-driven contributions, as in Spain: "We have…the 'Superpower' programme. The basic idea is that we have community with…people…who are involved in our work….We ask them to help us…in the verifications that we do" (Spain). Time pressure is also a challenge in "hard news," limiting the possibilities for effective fact-checking with only a handful of hours available (France).

Meta's monitoring tool for organisations in its third-party fact-checking programme is often opaque and provides unsatisfactory results, leaving fact-checkers to rely on manual social media monitoring instead: "The Facebook tool…has not always been super helpful and does not always pick up all the relevant things" (Germany). The discontinuation of CrowdTangle, another data access tool provided by Meta, has left several fact-checkers without viable alternatives (Afghanistan, Estonia, Georgia, and Slovenia). The challenges of monitoring disinformation on social media were underlined by almost all interviewees, demonstrating the difficulties of balancing the availability of human resources and time in smaller organisations such as in Sweden: "You do more with a lot more of people."

The emergence of generative AI technologies has raised awareness among fact-checkers of their potential to produce convincing disinformation. Fact-checkers from Italy and Greece expressed concern about the expected increase in the difficulty of debunking such AI-generated content. However, this issue was not the focus of their immediate concerns, nor was the use of deepfakes seen as an immediate threat. Furthermore, fact-checkers did not explicitly mention the use of these technologies, although they recognised their potential to assist fact-checkers in the future.

4.3.2. Dealing With War Propaganda

Fact-checking war propaganda requires an understanding of complex issues beyond the scope of the conflict and its historical roots, including geopolitical issues and international governance. The fact-checkers agreed that tackling war propaganda requires scrutiny of sources, which is complicated by the difficulty of relying on trustworthy sources from both sides because they are actively involved in the war. They also distinguished between Ukrainian "soft" propaganda, used, for example, to support troops, and the Kremlin's "hard" disinformation campaigns, which have led to an unprecedented flow of disinformation that is not easy to follow (Greece, Serbia). Moreover, in the context of geopolitical narratives, fact-checkers acknowledged that providing a definitive truth remains a challenge, mainly because of their complexity.

War propaganda transcends borders, permeating domestic and international politics and posing a constant challenge to fact-checkers. For example, narratives about bio-labs in Ukraine were repurposed in Georgia, demonstrating how misinformation can adapt and spread across regions. Other examples include the politicisation of narratives about Ukrainian refugees receiving more benefits than locals and recurring accusations of Nazism against the Ukrainian people. In Sweden, false claims about stolen speed cameras, allegedly for use in Ukraine, sparked local debates. The focus of disinformation also evolved over months, as in Poland, where narratives shifted from military disinformation to concerns about the presence and impact of Ukrainian refugees in the country. The polarisation resulting from disinformation, which in some cases was fed by political agendas (e.g., Georgia, Hungary, and Poland), complicated fact-checking efforts: "Our government is using this Russian troll factory to turn against dangerous or political opponents" (Georgia).

Several European countries with Russian-speaking populations, such as Finland, Latvia, and Estonia, faced the challenge of Russian-language disinformation due to language barriers and different media consumption patterns when these populations rely on Russian news media and channels. Fact-checkers also noted that pro-Russian sentiments among sections of the population often overlapped with the spread of pro-Russian propaganda (Hungary, India, Greece). The Greek fact-checker observed an overlap in narratives between far-right and far-left media in Greece, both of which have pro-Russian tendencies, highlighting the complexity of media influences on public opinion.

At the same time, fact-checkers from countries with common historical ties to Russia said that being more discerning or "immunised" against Russian propaganda gave them a deeper understanding of the broader geopolitical strategies at play: "We were occupied, we lived under the Soviet regime for so many years. If we know them, we are protected in this way, we are immunised" (Latvia). As a result, Russian propaganda in these countries is often perceived as using "old recipes" aimed at emotional triggers rather than substantive arguments. Furthermore, proximity to Russia makes fact-checkers more aware of disinformation: "We are

Latvians, we follow the war closely, it is very close to us, we feel this problem, we are on the border with Russia, and we are afraid, so we follow it very closely" (Latvia).

4.3.3. Psychological Effects

Fact-checking the war from behind a screen does not shield professionals from psychological challenges that can affect their mental well-being, even when they are physically distant from the actual battlefields. Irrespective of their location, fact-checkers are likely to experience secondary trauma and emotional distress because of their exposure to violent content, which is often linked to authentic content: "I have to say that it doesn't really translate into disinformation" (Poland); "Most of the time, the videos of killings and bombings are true. It's horrifying….I told my editor-in-chief that I needed to take a mental break because it was mentally torturing" (Ghana).

Confronting the violence of war may be unavoidable for fact-checkers, especially those monitoring Telegram, as in Serbia and Hungary, which is deemed the most problematic platform in the context of the war. Violent content does not only concern images but can also refer to descriptions that are offensive to the fact-checker, such as references to rapes (Hungary) or homophobic content (Georgia): "It's very irrational, emotional….When we're dealing with belief-based approaches, it's difficult to deal with this problem with just a factual approach" (Georgia).

Fact-checkers use different strategies to protect themselves from trauma: maintaining professional distance to build resilience (France, Italy, Norway), muting audio and limiting exposure time to audiovisual content (India, Italy, France, Germany, Poland), rating content according to its level of violence (Norway), seeking collective support through fact-checking networks (Serbia), and participating in training to deal with secondary trauma (Italy, Serbia). The national context can also play a role in how fact-checkers deal with violence, such as in Poland, where the fact-checker said being more emotionally attached to the situation than to the images per se. In Afghanistan, exposure to a constant context of war led the fact-checker to think that violence was "normal."

In Germany, the fact-checker noted that the harassment experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic had diminished but not disappeared. In Georgia, journalists critical of the government faced targeted harassment on social media, including homophobic language, in a tense political context. Unfortunately, the platforms where this hate speech circulated did not provide an adequate response to address the problem. The Hungarian fact-checker reported struggling to reach polarised audiences, which led to online harassment. In Estonia, Latvia, and Spain, fact-checkers also faced significant harassment and criticism: "I don't think I've ever done a fact-check that didn't upset someone" (Estonia)—which is likely to have a solid psychological impact—"One of my colleagues, who was a very talented young journalist, couldn't take it anymore" (Latvia). In Poland and Greece, fact-checkers found several harassers who had switched from the pandemic to the war in Ukraine.

The harassment can take on huge proportions, as the Greek fact-checker reported: "A pro-Russian elected in the parliament who filed a lawsuit against me….It is annoying, you have to spend time, resources. I have five or six lawsuits. It could lead to self-censorship." In Poland, the most serious cases of harassment reported by fact-checkers are not taken seriously by the police. In India, journalists face multiple threats, particularly

when they criticise government policies or work on sensitive issues such as religion, leading one fact-checker interviewed to self-censor. All these testimonies show that the social context often significantly impacts how fact-checkers respond to the psychological strain of their work and is also likely to affect their personal safety and freedom of expression.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research has shown that the social and professional contexts in which fact-checkers operate significantly impact the scope of their work. The analysis of the survey and the interviews converge and complement each other in many ways. In response to RQ1, which focuses on identifying common difficulties, our findings reveal several challenges, including time constraints, inadequate human resources, and reliance on technology. In the specific context of war, the challenge of obtaining reliable information is pervasive, compounded by language barriers and geographical distances that hinder direct engagement in conflict zones. The findings also highlight the importance of understanding the complex historical and geopolitical context in which propaganda is disseminated, as well as the impact of socio-professional contexts on investigative methods.

When considering RQ2, which relates to the influence of the socio-professional context on these challenges, it becomes clear that context significantly shapes investigative methods, ranging from traditional journalistic approaches to sophisticated techniques such as OSINT. Smaller organisations often struggle to strike a balance in the claims they fact-check, leading to the neglect of war-related issues, particularly if they do not have a significant negative impact on the country. Access to previous fact-checks from other countries can help maintain this balance, given the adaptability of war propaganda to different national contexts. The social context plays an important role in shaping the nature and spread of disinformation, as it is influenced by different media consumption patterns and ideological factors, making these findings consistent with previous research on fact-checking in national or transnational contexts. At the same time, the findings reflect three characteristics of fact-checking as a global movement (Amazeen, 2020): a commitment to accuracy challenged by access to reliable resources, a strategic use of technology to support professional practice, and a commitment to collaboration through the IFCN and EDMO networks to share evidence and information.

Dealing with war propaganda has psychological implications for fact-checkers, exposing them to violent content and harassment. In this context, collaboration within international networks not only helps to overcome technological limitations and navigate complex propaganda mechanisms but also provides support to mitigate the impact on well-being and professional integrity. These results highlight another important reason to see fact-checking as a global movement: Professionals have once again demonstrated their ability to self-organise and join forces, especially in times of crisis. However, ensuring the safety of fact-checkers requires more than just peer-to-peer cooperation. It should also address the responsibilities of policymakers, particularly in countries where press freedom or public debates are under pressure. The results also showed disparities across Europe, with fact-checkers in Greece, Hungary, and Poland among the most vulnerable.

While this study contributes significantly to understanding information warfare strategies and their impact on professional practice and psychological well-being, it acknowledges several limitations. First, the sample size, while diverse, may not fully capture all regional differences and specific challenges faced by fact-checkers in different parts of the world. In addition, our reliance on self-reported data may introduce

bias, as participants may present their experiences in a socially desirable way. Future research could prioritise expanding sample sizes to include a greater diversity of regions, which would improve our understanding of the different dynamics influencing fact-checking practices in times of war. However, the collective perspective, which is important and observed here through collaborative spaces, should not be neglected.

The implications of these findings go beyond mere fact-checking in times of conflict. They underline the urgent need for robust policies to protect fact-checkers from harassment and threats, particularly in the European context where inequalities are evident. This emphasis on policy aims to provide a sense of security and reassurance to the fact-checking community. It also raises the issue of integrating mental health aspects into the training of fact-checkers so that they are equipped to deal with the psychological strain of their work.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The results of the quantitative survey can be viewed on this page: https://ohmy.shinyapps.io/globalfact

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ARTICLE

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Combating Repeated Lies: The Impact of Fact-Checking on Persistent Falsehoods by Politicians

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Abstract

The rise of repeated false claims within political discourse is undermining fact-checking efforts. By reiterating similar statements that perpetuate previous falsehoods, political actors shift from misinformation to deliberate disinformation and even propagandistic tactics. Through an analysis of 1,204 political fact-checks conducted by the Spanish fact-checking organization Newtral, this study quantifies and characterizes the prevalence of repeated false claims in political discourse, revealing that a substantial 24.8% of false statements are repeated, with each being repeated an average of four times. By delving into the nature and types of claims most susceptible to recurrence, the study identifies five primary patterns employed by political actors: nuanced variations, data manipulation, multilateral attacks, discourse qualification, and cumulative repetition. These tactics blur the lines between deception and self-correction. The annotated database of these repeated false statements can serve as a valuable resource for exploratory qualitative analysis as well as claim-matching research in automated fact-checking.

Keywords

disinformation; fact-checking; falsehoods; political discourse; propaganda

1. Introduction

The recurrence of false claims has become increasingly prevalent in political discourse. During the campaign for the Spanish regional elections of May 28, 2023, the fact-checking organization Newtral identified false claims repeated more than 30 times, even after having been debunked on multiple occasions (Real, 2023b). In 2021, *The Washington Post* tallied over 55 false claims made by former President Donald Trump that were repeated at least 20 times, with one instance reaching a staggering 493 repetitions (Kessler & Fox, 2021).

Numerous studies have focused on measuring how fact-checking can influence or correct the public perception of a given issue (Fridkin et al., 2015; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan, 2020, 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Porter & Wood, 2021). However, few have assessed the impact of fact-checking on actual political discourse, particularly in terms of compelling the author of a false claim to correct themselves or, at the very least, to cease its propagation (Lim, 2018). This is of particular significance, given that the repetition of a false assertion can have a higher detrimental effect on its recipients and may imply a greater level of intentionality on the part of the speaker (Garrett et al., 2013; Kessler, 2018).

Fact-checking organizations have devised various strategies to combat frequently repeated false claims, from increasing the visibility of such cases to pursuing greater impact through editorial strategies or even running campaigns publicly urging politicians to rectify their claims (Full Fact, n.d.-b). Another line of work revolves around artificial intelligence models based on claim matching to facilitate early detection of repeated claims and assist fact-checkers in responding more swiftly (Larraz et al., 2023).

Following these insights, the primary objective of this study is to quantify the prevalence of false claim repetition in political discourse through an analysis of the database of political fact-checks published by Newtral. In doing so, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how these recurrent ideas are articulated through narratives and persuasive techniques. The second objective is to analyze what common elements these repeated phrases share to provide possible reasons why some political arguments persist over time despite evidence against them. Lastly, the article has an exploratory aim regarding the potential impact of fact-checking in making certain falsehoods disappear from political discourse or, conversely, endure despite being exposed numerous times. However, it is crucial to clarify that our exploration regarding fact-checking influences in the correction or modulation of political discourse aims to understand the potential implications and effects of this phenomenon, rather than seek definitive proof to either support or refute it.

To accomplish this analysis, we review the fact-checking database from Newtral up to September 15, 2023, including 1,204 fact-checks from the political discourse. We employ a quantitative approach to measure the repetition rate and ascertain how many of these repetitions can be attributed to the same individual or political party. In the revision of this exploratory dataset, two key limitations were identified. First, the Newtral policy regarding repetitions likely results in an undercount of the actual number of repeated claims. Second, the database depends on the political claims selectively chosen by Newtral, which may exhibit a heightened sensitivity to repetitions. Despite these limitations, almost one out of four of the political claims checked by the Spanish organization are repetitions. Furthermore, we utilize a qualitative approach to characterize the repeated falsehoods and classify them into different types. In this way, the research aims to shed light on the impact of fact-checking and propose effective approaches for countering the repetition of falsehoods in political rhetoric.

2. Theoretical Framework

In a classic study on the transmission of rumors, Allport and Lepkin (1945) observed that the most significant factor in predicting belief in war-related rumors was simple repetition. The “illusory truth effect” or “repetition effect,” which posits that people are more likely to believe a message that has been repeated to them many times (McIntyre, 2018), has been supported by numerous studies (Begg et al., 1992; Corneille et al., 2020; Fazio, 2020; Hasher et al., 1977; Hawkins & Hoch, 1992; Unkelbach et al., 2019). Together, these findings

demonstrate that in the absence of additional information, people tend to base their beliefs on the apparent familiarity of a statement, under the assumption that if they've heard it before, it's probably true (Festinger, 1954; Horne & Adalı, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Reber & Schwarz, 1999).

This is compounded by the "continued influence effect," which refers to the tendency of misinformation to continue influencing people's thinking and decision-making even after it has been corrected or discredited (Garrett et al., 2013). In more recent times, this effect has been exacerbated by the proliferation of bots and the widespread use of social media to disseminate messages, contributing to the broader phenomenon of misinformation (Pennycook et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018).

This study emerges from detecting the actions undertaken to address the repetition of false claims. Since the primary purpose of fact-checking is to promote truth in public discourse (Graves & Cherubini, 2016), it is essential to hold politicians accountable for correcting their statements or, at the very least, avoid the repetition of false information that has already been fact-checked. If this does not occur, fact-checks lose effectiveness (Amazeen, 2013; Schwarz et al., 2007), and misinformation transitions into a form of propaganda (Kessler, 2018; Rashkin et al., 2017).

Existing literature has placed greater emphasis on analyzing the effects on people, providing various evidence regarding its ability to correct ideas or positions (Fridkin et al., 2015; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan, 2020, 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Porter & Wood, 2021). The analysis could be divided between those who see limited effects on changing beliefs and correcting misinformation (Nyhan et al., 2020) and those who observe strong effects (Carnahan & Bergan, 2021). These discrepancies are likely due to the operational context of fact-checking organizations, as noted by Walter et al. (2020). Effects on both political discourses and fact-checking resonate with research on post-truth, which emphasizes that the popularity of an idea among supporters often outweighs its factual accuracy (McIntyre, 2018).

However, fewer studies have examined the impact on political discourse itself (Mattozzi et al., 2022; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019), and even fewer have attempted to measure its effect in preventing the repetition of false claims (Lim, 2018). As Amazeen (2013) points out, it is impossible to document all the lies that have not been repeated thanks to fact-checking, so it cannot be compared to the prevalence of repeated falsehood as a measure of its effectiveness.

In this context, several authors have sought to measure both the political cost of lying (Banks, 1990; Callander & Wilkie, 2007) and the effects of fact-checking on politicians' decision to resort to misinformation (Lim, 2018; Ma et al., 2022; Mattozzi et al., 2022; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). For example, Callander and Wilkie (2007) suggest that there is a different predisposition to lie and establish that candidates can be of two types: liars with a cost or free liars. This model contrasts with the arguments of Banks (1990), who assume that the cost of lying is the same for all candidates, and therefore, all are equally willing to lie about their intentions. Most of these studies focus on analyzing the impact on the politician and their followers (Prike et al., 2023; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020), rather than a content analysis of the lie itself (Tandoc, 2019; Wintersieck et al., 2021).

On the other hand, Gaber and Fisher (2021), in their analysis of messages during the 2019 UK general election campaign, identified that the Conservative Party deliberately employed falsehoods as a strategy to set the agenda. Therefore, in situations where it is crucial to assert a position, counter criticisms, or oppose other

narratives, politicians are more likely to be willing to bear the political cost of falsehoods to contribute to the mentioned repetition effect (Shenhav, 2015). A final branch of studies has examined the automation of detecting recurrent falsehoods through the use of artificial intelligence via models of claim matching or pairing similar claims (Corney, 2021; Larraz et al., 2023).

To the best of our knowledge, no study has assessed the prevalence of repeated false claims in political discourse or examined why some false claims are repeatedly made while others are not. Additionally, there is a lack of research on whether fact-checking has a differential effect on certain false messages in preventing politicians from repeating falsehoods. Academics have not pursued this research because of two main reasons. First, it is impossible to determine causality without experimental methods, and second, the dataset is based on fact-checkers' subjective news judgment.

Despite these limitations, this study opens up interesting avenues for research, such as comparing claim-repetition statistics in the databases of different organizations. This could shed light on differences among fact-checkers and/or variations in media–political systems. In a subsequent stage, we reviewed the actions undertaken by Newtral to deepen our understanding of its limitations and establish the methodology used to measure repetitions.

2.1. Strategies to Prevent the Repetition of Falsehoods

As part of our preliminary analysis, we sought to determine whether the recurrence of falsehoods poses a challenge for fact-checking organizations as it demonstrates its significance to practitioners and their active efforts to address it. We examined Newtral's strategies to develop a robust methodology for our study, drawing insights from their publications and discussions with the organization's fact-checkers.

Newtral does not maintain a comprehensive record of every instance in which it identifies the repetition of false claims in political discourse. Typically, when detecting nearly identical repetitions by the same political actor, they publish a message on X (formerly Twitter), providing a link to the corresponding previous fact-check. This practice is not unique to Newtral; other organizations such as FactCheck.org, Full Fact, and Politifact also note in their messages when a false statement is reiterated.

If the assertion introduces a new nuance or is combined with other relevant data, the retrieval of the previous publication is discarded. Newtral's decision to conduct a new fact-check depends on factors such as the relevance of the claim's author, political context, and degree of falsehood. A new fact-check also occurs if values or data change due to new information or if the claim arises during crucial moments like electoral debates. In other cases, references to previous fact-checks are made in the text, citing instances of prior checks (Cadenas, 2022; Pascual, 2022; Real, 2022a, 2022b).

In some cases, a different journalistic approach has been taken, including special reports or other journalistic products to highlight the recurrence of false claims. For example, when a falsehood is repeated several times, Newtral produces a compilation article (Cadenas & Alonso, 2023; Newtral, 2021; Pascual & Real, 2022; Real, 2023a, 2023b; Real & Larraz, 2022). Additionally, since 2022, Newtral has been developing ClaimCheck, an internal automated solution designed to detect similar claims and assist journalists (Larraz et al., 2023). This helps streamline the process of identifying and addressing repeated false claims.

Special reports are also done by other organizations such as Aos Fatos in Brazil, which tracked the falsehoods made by former President Jair Bolsonaro, or by *The Washington Post* with former President Donald Trump. This last created the "Repetition Observatory" column to highlight statements repeated by politicians even after debunking, and a panel to monitor these falsehoods (Kessler, 2017; Kessler & Fox, 2021). Kessler emphasized that highlighting the repetition of falsehoods aligns with the idea that "we need to seek corrections and hold people accountable" (Cox, 2019).

These editorial strategies can escalate, such as increasing the rating of a claim or even introducing a new one. Michael Dobbs, who founded *The Washington Post*'s Fact Checker in 2007, noted that candidates rarely admit mistakes. At most, they may stop repeating falsehoods, "depending on the level of embarrassment" (Dobbs, 2012, p. 3). He also increased the rating assigned to a politician for repeated falsehoods "for recidivism." In 2018, *The Washington Post* introduced the Bottomless Pinocchio category to measure the persistence of repeated falsehoods, "when a politician refuses to drop a claim that has been fact-checked," explained Glenn Kessler (2018, director of *The Washington Post* Fact Checker.

Some civil society organizations may even intervene directly to seek correction from politicians. This occurs among the so-called "second fact-checking generation," such as Full Fact in the UK and Chequeado in Argentina. These organizations track deceptive claims after each fact-check to identify repetitions (Corney, 2021) and maintain records of politicians contacted about misinformation who have not corrected their statements (Full Fact, 2022). The rationale is that fact-checks alone are insufficient to combat misinformation, and additional steps are needed (Africa Check et al., 2019; Full Fact, n.d.-a; Team Full Fact, 2022a). Occasionally, these organizations run campaigns urging lawmakers to improve the correction system in parliament, aiming to restore trust in the political sphere (Full Fact, n.d.-b; Team Full Fact, 2022b).

In any case, some fact-checkers from Newtral have noted an impact when underlining falsehoods that are repeated, as explained in Box 1.

Box 1. Case analysis: Increased exposure and direct confrontation.

The issue of pension revaluation played a crucial role in the context of the pre-election campaign leading up to the Spanish general elections on July 23, 2023. Alberto Núñez Feijóo, leader of the Popular Party (PP), emphasized multiple times that his party, in contrast to the Socialist Party (PSOE), had consistently revalued pensions in line with the Consumer Price Index. Newtral published a fact-check on June 23 (Mejía, 2023). On July 17, the PP leader repeated this assertion on national public television (RTVE, 2023). This time, the program host responded live that this claim was "incorrect." Feijóo maintained his position, insisting it was "absolutely correct." The confrontation between the two continued and the clip became viral on social media. The politician did not retract or acknowledge his error at that moment but later altered his stance and, through a social media message, expressed the following: "I reiterate that the PP never froze pensions, and the PSOE did, with Sánchez's vote. The PP increased pensions every year, and the PSOE did not." This statement significantly differed from his initial claim.

This case raises questions about whether real-time correction would have been possible without a prior fact-check and whether it indeed had the desired impact as it might have changed people's opinion, but it didn't make the politician correct himself. However, it highlights that media exposure and direct confrontation can exert considerable influence, enhancing the effectiveness of the fact-checking process.

2.2. Research Questions

Fact-checkers' actions highlight the importance of addressing the repetition of falsehoods, a topic not fully explored in academic literature. While they combat this issue, more information is needed about the magnitude and characteristics of repeated false claims in political discourse after being debunked. Previous research emphasizes fact-checking's role in reducing false information spread, but it is unclear if some false claims resist correction more than others. This foundation allows us to extend the understanding of misinformation dynamics in the political discourse, providing a nuanced perspective on fact-checking effectiveness, leading to the formulation of the following research questions:

> RQ1: How many of the fact-checks address repeated falsehoods, and what is the repetition rate of these claims?
>
> RQ2: How are these repetitions characterized, considering the presence of nuances, involvement of different political actors, and the timeframes within which these repetitions occur?

It is essential to note that the questions proposed in this study are exploratory in nature, designed to uncover potential relationships and patterns within the data rather than validate predetermined theories or make definitive predictions. Ultimately, the study seeks to gauge the prevalence of false claim repetition in discourse as a means to evaluate the efficacy of fact-checking.

3. Methodology

To conduct this study, we employed quantitative content analysis, evaluating all fact-checks published by the Spanish fact-checking organization Newtral since its inception. Our primary goal was to identify and quantify instances of repeated false claims. This analysis allowed us to collect data on the number of times fact-checked claims were repeated, the intervals between repetitions, the frequency of repetition, and whether they were made by the same political actor or party. This comprehensive dataset provides invaluable insights into the patterns of misinformation dissemination and repetition.

The choice of Newtral as the data source was based on several important criteria. Firstly, Newtral offers an extensive and well-organized database of fact-checks on political discourse, enabling in-depth analysis. Additionally, as a member of the International Fact-Checking Network, Newtral ensures the quality and reliability of its data. This selection also allows us to observe temporal diversity, providing a comprehensive perspective on the repetition of false claims across different times and political contexts.

3.1. Data Collection

The fact-checks published by the organization Newtral were obtained through Google's Fact Check Explorer, which aggregates verifications from media outlets using the structured data system of ClaimReview (Google, n.d.).

To narrow our selection to fact-checks related to political discourse, we conducted a data-cleansing process. This involved excluding publications focused on misinformation from non-political actors, and those falsely

attributing phrases to political actors. Additionally, repeated fact-checks in both individual publications and compilation articles were removed. After this process, we obtained a total of 1,204 results spanning almost five years, from October 3, 2018, to September 15, 2023 (refer to the annotated database in Supplementary File 1).

3.2. Procedure

To tally repetitions, a record was implemented that identifies how many times a specific claim appears in other fact-checks published, both in previous and subsequent fact-checks. For instance, if a false claim is verified in three different fact-checks, it is counted as three repetitions. For each assertion, the following classifications were carried out: (a) similar fact-checks considered repeated claims; and (b) analysis of repeated statements.

In regards to similar fact-checks considered repeated claims (a), we identified whether statements had been previously fact-checked within the same organization by conducting keyword searches across the entire database. For an assertion to be considered a repetition, it had to address the same topic or data concerning a claim with the same sense, regardless of numerical variations. For example, claims about the number of companies needed to pertain to the *loss* of companies to qualify as repetitions. When a match was found, we recorded the identification number of the repeated phrase in a new column, indicating how frequently it had been reiterated, whether by the same or different authors.

As for the analysis of repeated statements (b), to better understand the patterns and context of these repetitions, we analyzed the time interval between them, and whether they came from the same author. For repetitions by different authors, we noted how often they were from the same political party. The analysis also examined whether new repetitions introduced any nuance or modulation into the original discourse by examining their ratings of veracity.

3.3. Validation and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, an external reviewer conducted a review process. A random sample of 10% of the instances from the database was selected, and the process of identifying and tallying repetitions was repeated. The agreement between the original results and the review results was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, used for assessing inter-rater agreement. A Weighted Quadratic Cohen's Kappa value of 0.902 was found, indicating almost perfect agreement between the two sets of data (see Supplementary File 2).

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Out of the 1,204 verifications subjected to analysis, 24.8% of them, equivalent to 299 verifications, were related to similar claims. In 13.6% of cases, which amounts to 164 verifications, false claims had been repeated at least three times. Additionally, in 9.1% of cases, equivalent to 109 verifications, assertions had been repeated four times or more (Figures 1 and 2). In those claims that are repeated, the average repetition rate of each assertion is close to four (3.7 times).

Repetitions	Number	Percentage
Total number of fact-checks analyzed	1,204	100%
Two or more	299	24.8%
Three or more	164	13.6%
Four or more	109	9.1%
Five or more	78	6.5%
Six or more	54	4.5%
Seven or more	45	3.7%
Eight or more	22	1.8%
Nine or more	13	1.1%
Ten or more	17	1.4%

Figure 1. Number and percentage of repeated phrases by repetition rate.

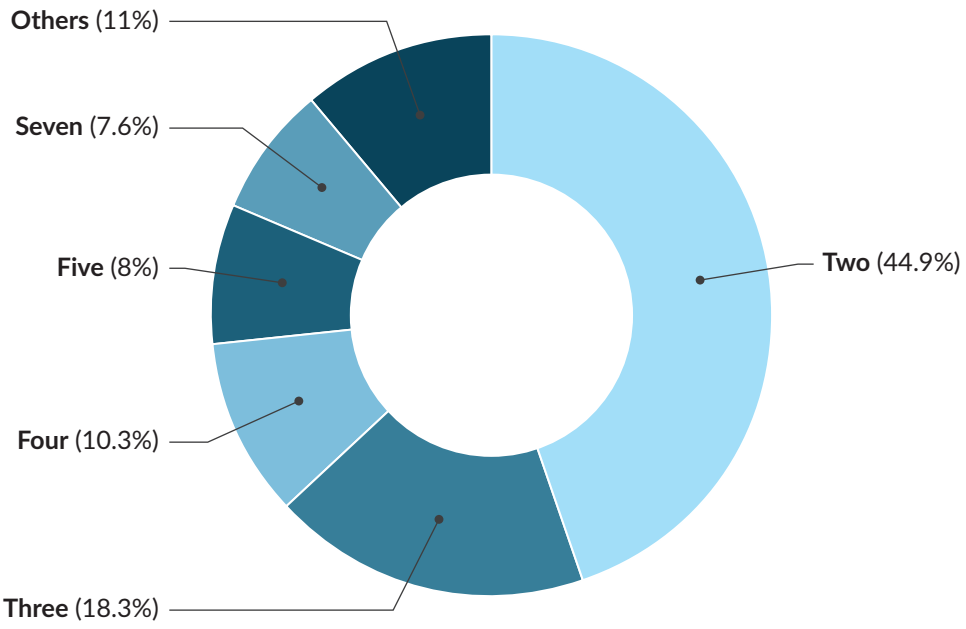

Figure 2. Repetition rate among repeated claims.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Regarding the results related to RQ2, when categorizing and characterizing repeated false claims, a mix of occurrences is evident. Political actors often employ alternative strategies, blurring the line between deception and self-correction. These strategies include introducing nuances in their claims or involving other party members in spreading the same assertion, among others. Five main patterns have been identified where, despite minor changes, the underlying argument remains constant. The numbers that appear in the following paragraphs are references to fact-checks in the database (see Supplementary File 1).

In regards to variation in numbers or locations and their adaptation to the context (see also Table 1), for example, for months, members of the PP repeated figures such as "seven million Spaniards who want to work and cannot" (434), "we have five million unemployed" and "six million unemployed" (both in 564), or "four million people unemployed" (686).

As for the manipulation of data to present them in different modalities, the same figure is repeated through different calculations. For example, the data on the increase in public debt has been presented using various units of time, such as hours ("nine million euros every passing hour" [779]), days ("200 million euros in new debt every day" [1190]), or months ("6,000 million euros every month" [1018]). The same occurs when different time periods or reference dates are taken into account.

A multilateral attack from different angles occurs when different aspects related to the same topic are criticized to reinforce a central idea. For example, representatives of the Vox party stated that "false accusations (of gender violence) affect millions of Spaniards" (55), "the EU gives more money to those regions that have registered a higher number of (gender violence) complaints" (335), or that "out of all the complaints of gender violence, 80% are dismissed because there is no evidence or clues" (539). These cases have not been counted as similar in the database, but it is important to highlight them as a strategy.

Table 1. Examples of repeated assertions regarding the loss of companies.

Claim	Claimant	Date
100,000 companies have closed in this country	Cuca Gamarra	2020-12-16
We have lost 207,000 companies in the last six months	Inés Arrimadas	2021-02-24
You have been the minister of economy for more than three and a half years, and during this period almost 104,000 companies have been forced to close	Cuca Gamarra	2022-02-23
[There are] 30,000 companies that disappeared in Spain from January to March 2022	Jorge Buxadé	2022-05-09
If we talk about companies, it turns out that since the pandemic we have lost 53,000 companies, and since Mr. Sánchez has been in office, 79,000 companies	Juan Bravo	2023-01-03
In terms of productive fabric, Spain is doing poorly, because 70,000 companies have disappeared since the pandemic and have not recovered	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	2023-03-08
If things are going so well for them, why did company closures in Spain set records in 2022 with more than 26,200 companies dissolved?	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	2023-04-19
Today we have, sir, 68,000 fewer companies than before the pandemic	Iván Espinosa de los Monteros	2023-04-19
We are in a phase of deterioration of the business fabric: We have lost 100,000 self-employed workers in the last year and 87,000 companies since Mr. Sánchez became president of the government	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2023-05-03
55,000 fewer companies during Sánchez's government	Isabel Díaz Ayuso	2023-09-18

Concerning the qualification of the discourse, over time, some repeated statements become more specific, focusing only on specific aspects or points of the initial statement (Table 2). For example, criticisms of inflation have diversified to include core inflation, a specific type of price increase (972, 1021).

As for repetition through accumulation, some statements contain multiple verifiable claims that accumulate over time. For example, it has been repeated that the right wing has voted "against everything," with various claims ranging from "the revaluation of pensions or voting against the minimum income guarantee or voting against scholarships" (721) to "against aid for the self-employed, mortgage moratoriums, rent suspensions, utilities (electricity, water, and gas), against ERTEs (Temporary Employment Regulation Files), and against the minimum income guarantee" (395). The ultimate concept aligns with the same perspective: The conservative faction opposes any societal enhancements. Many of these claims have already been subject to individual fact-checks.

The database reveals another strategy, which consists of certain ideas that have a national scope being replicated at the regional level (698, 883, and 1108). Furthermore, for certain content, there are repetitions of assertions in both directions. For instance, regarding the increase or reduction of youth unemployment (692, 1,215 vs. 728, 955) or fiscal pressure (1,076 vs. 1,097). The repetitions occur both in defense of one's own actions and to construct an orchestrated argument of attack.

Regarding the topic, the content analysis also reveals that statements with higher repetition rates are associated with current affairs and occur in a shorter period of time, whereas those with lower recurrence are typically aimed at establishing a party's identity or position.

Another approach to ascertain whether statements are moderated or attenuated in their falsehood through new nuances was to check if the truth rating or classification of similar statements varied. On average, 52.4% of the fact-checks maintained the same rating, while changes occurred in the rest (Figure 3). However, this could be attributed to other factors, such as phrases encompassing additional assertions besides the one that is repeated.

Table 2. Examples of repeated assertions regarding Inflation.

Claim	Claimant	Date
We are the country with the highest inflation in the European Union, now at 5.5%	Pablo Casado	2021-12-07
We are the country with the highest inflation in the European Union	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2022-03-27
Spain is the country with the highest inflation in the European Union	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2022-04-20
Spain is once again, in July, the country in the EU where prices are rising the most	Sergio Sayas	2022-08-18
[Mr. Sánchez] has boasted of containing inflation, after leading it for months and having two points more core inflation than the EU average	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2022-10-18
And the real inflation, the one felt in mortgages, housing, electricity bills, groceries…that is at 7.5%, which is two points higher than the European average	Alberto Núñez Feijóo	2023-02-03
Inflation affects all countries in the European Union, but the one suffering 16% inflation month after month in food is Spain	Cuca Gamarra	2023-04-19

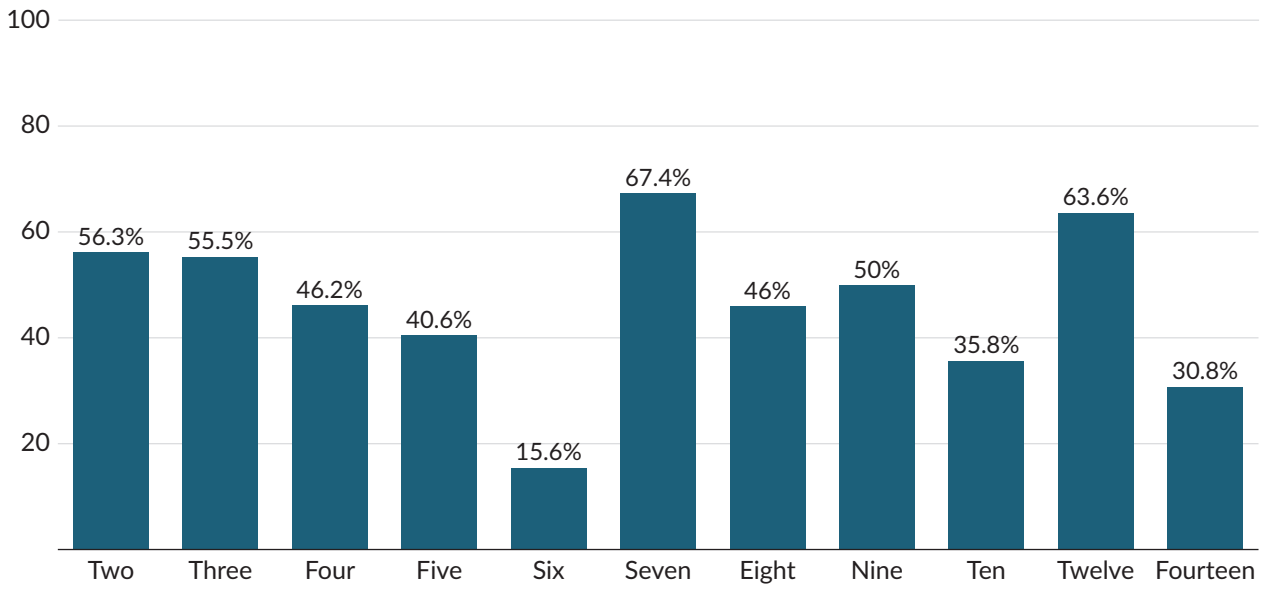

Figure 3. Rating consistency per number of repetitions.

There are notable instances where political actors adopt a hoax and widely disseminate it. For example, various Vox leaders claimed that unaccompanied foreign minors receive a "monthly allowance" (507) provided "until the age of 25" (660) by regional governments such as Catalonia and Andalusia. Another example is the alleged destruction of dams (1110, 1148, 1191).

Regarding the number of political actors involved in the repetitions, our observations indicate that in 80.9% of cases, a different person repeats the false claim compared to the original author. The original author reiterates their false claim in only 19.1% of cases, while repetitions within the same party rise to 57.6%. Although these results pertain to the average of the analyzed cases, there are instances where the same claim is repeated by a single person or a limited number of political actors over an extended period, sometimes spanning years.

These assertions persistently recur over time. On average, these statements tend to reoccur approximately every 193 days. However, this frequency decreases in cases with a higher number of repetitions. For instance, the claim that Spain has the "highest inflation in the European Union" (810) recurs every 70 days, and data related to the increase in self-employed individuals in Andalusia (684) is recorded every 64 days.

When comparing repeated and non-repeated phrases, no definitive conclusion differentiates them. Repeated issues often refer to controversial aspects such as economic recovery, post-pandemic, or identity issues. However, a firm criterion to separate them beyond pointing to the potential self-interest of each party or political actor depending on the topic has not been established.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Research on fact-checking has traditionally focused on its role in shaping public perceptions, yet it often overlooks its significant impact on politicians themselves. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the prevalence of repeated false claims in political discourse and investigating the strategies used by political actors to manage the recurrence of debunked disinformation. Examining 1,204 fact-checks from Newtral,

the study provides insights into how fact-checking initiatives detect and highlight persistent falsehoods in politics. It reveals that nearly one out of four fact-checks address repeated false claims, with each assertion being repeated approximately four times on average, underscoring the widespread nature of the problem.

As indicated in the literature review, documenting all unspoken falsehoods prevented by fact-checking is impractical (Amazeen, 2013), making it challenging to measure its effectiveness solely by comparing prevalence with repeated falsehoods. However, this research sheds light on their correlation and underscores the importance of addressing repeated falsehoods due to their prevalence and detrimental impact.

Political actors employ various strategies that blur the line between deception and self-correction. These include tweaking claims with nuances and engaging other party members to propagate the same assertions to mitigate the political costs of repetition. While original claimants rarely repeat their false claims directly (about 20% of the time), repetitions within the same party occur at a much higher rate. Moreover, false claims are often echoed by different individuals within political parties, highlighting their broad dissemination.

This repetition pattern supports the notion that it serves as a deliberate strategy within political parties, aligning with existing literature that suggests politicians may prioritize maintaining a false narrative even at the cost of being signaled for it (Gaber & Fisher, 2021; Shenhav, 2015). Unlike occasional errors or deceptions, repeatedly asserted false claims contribute to a coordinated narrative strategy aimed at solidifying a stance. This aligns with findings from post-truth research (McIntyre, 2018), and the acceptance of an idea among its adherents surpassing its factual veracity. Consequently, these repetitions persist over extended periods. When false claims persist despite fact-checking efforts, it may indicate an intent to deceive or manipulate, transforming misinformation into a propagandistic tool.

The results also reveal that the strategies deployed by fact-checkers yield a positive effect in terms of unveiling propagandistic rhetoric. While this study's primary objective does not directly address political motivations to disinform, its findings could contribute to a better understanding of how false claims are disseminated. This could be achieved by evaluating the political cost associated with exposing falsehoods in contrast to the consolidation of positions and ideologies. This analysis also helps delineate the boundaries between rhetoric and propaganda. Furthermore, the data obtained largely elucidate how disinformation strategies are orchestrated within political parties and their potential role in fostering political polarization.

The study identifies five primary patterns of repeated falsehoods, showing how these claims adapt over time while maintaining their core arguments. Strategies include adjusting numerical figures or geographic locations to fit different contexts, presenting data in various formats, launching multi-faceted attacks on topics, refining discourse to focus on specific aspects, and accumulating multiple verifiable claims to reinforce narratives. Finally, the dataset can serve as a base for the development of claim-matching training in the field of automated fact-checking with artificial intelligence.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The analysis of repeated false claims has certain limitations. Firstly, the variability in methods used by the organization under study to expose repeated claims may affect the database and influence the results. For instance, claims about budget approvals "in a timely manner" were found only twice in the database,

while one of them accounts for 22 repetitions mentioned in the article. Efforts were made to understand the organization's policies on repetitions to mitigate this effect.

Secondly, the classification of similar claims is not limited to cases where the claims are formulated in the same way, adding complexity to identifying related phrases (see section 3.2). Despite measures to address this in the methodology, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Another limitation is resource constraints within the fact-checking organization. Statements from less-represented political groups may have lower repetition rates in the database but still significantly impact their followers. For example, Bildu's leaders' statements about the Basque Country rejecting the Constitution and various statements on the Catalan referendum reflect ideological positions rather than current events. These repetitions are tied to the party's identity, unlike more frequent claims related to current events. Additionally, the results are derived solely from fact-checks, assuming fact-checkers monitor other platforms like social media for repeated false claims. Finally, there is a limitation in comparing repeated false claims with non-repeated ones due to the lack of a clear differentiation. An alternative methodological approach could be considered for this purpose.

Future research should explore why fact-checking sometimes fails to prevent falsehoods from being repeated and assess its overall impact on political discourse. A subsequent inquiry would focus on identifying effective strategies for fact-checkers to increase their impact and deter the propagation of false claims effectively. Further exploration could extend into other domains, investigating whether the frequency of false claim repetition intensifies during electoral campaigns, and exploring thematic patterns across different political parties would provide valuable insights for future studies on combating misinformation effectively in public discourse.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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Beyond Verification: The Evolving Role of Fact-Checking Organisations in Media Literacy Education for Youth

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Abstract

This research investigates the crucial role of fact-checking organisations in promoting media and information literacy (MIL) amid the challenges of widespread misinformation. By educating and empowering individuals, these organisations and their educational branches are identified as emerging components within MIL ecosystems, particularly focusing on engaging youth. Using qualitative research methods, our study analyses the activities of seven prominent fact-checking organisations and two university-affiliated projects across Spain, Catalonia, Poland, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Argentina, and Brazil. Thus, our study aims to understand why fact-checking organisations have become involved in MIL education and training for youth and what types of MIL, approaches, and subjects fact-checking organisations employ in their MIL education and training initiatives for this audience. Our findings reveal a shift in these organisations toward actively promoting MIL education through dedicated divisions and teams driven by mission-oriented action and peer collaboration. Various institutions and political and educational policies support or hinder this transformation. A significant issue observed is the limited availability of open-access materials and general opacity regarding their pedagogical approaches. Although these organisations have integrated educational components into their models, achieving financial sustainability remains challenging.

Keywords

education; educational policies; fact-checking; media and information literacy; misinformation; youth training

1. Introduction

As media and information literacy (MIL) garners increasing attention from governments and institutions worldwide, there is a noticeable surge in actions and policies to elevate discussions and address their

significance (Flores Michel et al., 2017; Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023). Within this dynamic landscape, a new actor has emerged, offering promising opportunities for the field, particularly concerning education and training: the increasing participation of fact-checking organisations (Çömlekçi, 2022; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020).

UNESCO defines MIL as encompassing a range of essential skills for navigating the complex information and communication landscape. MIL empowers individuals to critically evaluate information and media, fostering informed and ethical participation in digital content and services. It integrates media literacy, news literacy, information literacy, and digital empowerment (among other terms) into a unified concept, equipping citizens for critical thinking and active, responsible engagement in the digital world. Other authors also emphasise the importance of critical media literacy in fostering democracy and developing critical thinking. They advocate for a shift from consumption-driven MIL to a more engaged and creative approach that promotes active citizenship and empowerment. This perspective aligns with the role of MIL in upholding democratic principles, addressing digital challenges, and supporting lifelong learning and ethical media use (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Carlsson, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2007).

MIL has been interpreted and implemented in various forms across different contexts due to linguistic, cultural, social, and political differences. Despite its long presence in education worldwide, the recent surge in misinformation has renewed interest in MIL. Scholars recognise MIL as a tool to build resilience against misinformation and to empower citizens with critical thinking. Frau-Meigs (2022) highlights that fact-checking and MIL have emerged as key strategies against misinformation while cautioning that reducing MIL to merely news literacy could be detrimental. As pointed out by Frau-Meigs (2022), fact-checking has been institutionalised and professionalised within the MIL ecosystem. Thus, our study argues that fact-checking is pivotal in enhancing MIL, ensuring this momentum is well-spent by examining how these initiatives shape MIL education and training.

While fact-checking organisations have been involved in media literacy, the renewed interest shown by governments, supranational organisations, and other institutions in leveraging MIL policies in various countries emphasises the potential importance of these organisations in the broader MIL ecosystem. These fact-checking organisations have been playing a crucial role by providing essential services to the public, disseminating quality and truthful information, and contributing to the foundation of democratic discussions (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). The value of these organisations, particularly in the battle against spreading misinformation on virus-related topics in the "infodemic," was observed during the health crisis. Additionally, it is unquestionable that dwindling trust in the media and global political instability further amplify the prevalence of fake news (Ceron et al., 2021). However, fact-checking organisations have also faced challenges, needing help maintaining their existence amidst an overcrowded and crisis-ridden media environment (Lelo, 2022).

At the same time, according to reports, young people are the least interested in the news (see Newman et al., 2023; Tamboer et al., 2023). Therefore, a critical aspect of MIL's development is educating and training the new generations, teachers, and other stakeholders within the education systems, such as school staff, librarians, and other educational institutions (e.g., Kajimoto et al., 2020).

Fact-checking agencies' increasing participation in MIL educational and training initiatives also poses interesting questions about MIL motivations, sustainability, and which factors might influence the decision

to establish educational verticals or teams within their structures. Thus, we have chosen to concentrate our analysis on offerings for youth, as prior studies have indicated a need for improvement in this area (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that this demographic has grown increasingly distrustful of news sources and has decreased their consumption habits (Newman et al., 2023). Hence, the study aims to shed light on current affairs by posing the following research questions:

> RQ1: Why have fact-checking organisations become involved in MIL education and training for youth?
>
> RQ2: What approaches, types, and subjects do fact-checking organisations employ in their MIL education and training initiatives for this audience?

This study endeavours to ascertain whether substantial evidence supports the claim that there has been a transformative shift in the primary services provided by fact-checking organisations, transitioning from mere fact-checking and debunking to actively providing MIL education and training to a broader and more diverse audience. At the same time, the possible influence of MIL educational policies, offers, and curricula that these organisations provide and are influenced by in the field prove to be valuable stakeholders in the MIL ecosystem.

This study concludes with recommendations for the current global developments surrounding MIL and the increased involvement of fact-checking organisations in education and training initiatives, especially for youth. These developments underscore the urgency of further exploring these emerging trends. The findings from this study have the potential to contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on MIL and the evolving role of fact-checking organisations in shaping a more informed and media-literate society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. A MIL-Based Solution to Mis- and Disinformation

As we endeavour to understand, map, and define MIL training and education provided by fact-checking organisations, it becomes crucial to conceptualise MIL. Despite the efforts by numerous public bodies and researchers to harmonise the understanding of MIL globally, many participants within the MIL ecosystem still need help with its concept due to varying languages and cultural contexts. We adopt UNESCO's comprehensive framework as our foundational conceptualisation, which describes MIL as a set of interlinked competencies essential for accessing, analysing, evaluating, and creating media. This education enhances critical skills necessary for informed, empowered citizenship in democracies founded on principles of equity and justice. Key MIL topics include critical thinking, misinformation, media modalities, news and information literacy, digital safety, and technological proficiencies (Mesquita, Pranaityte, & Castellini da Silva, 2023; UNESCO, 2013).

Moreover, as many recent studies have pointed out, media literacy education is essential for fostering resilient media among young citizens (e.g., McDougall, 2019). According to McDougall (2019), incorporating critical media literacy as a mandatory school subject and teaching it dynamically would better prepare young citizens

to handle ”information disorder” than reactive measures like fact-checking tools. Critical media literacy fosters resilience against misinformation by enhancing analytical and critical thinking skills. However, most global MIL approaches have adopted reactive, cross-disciplinary methods rather than establishing MIL as a standalone subject, often neglecting the focus on critical thinking (Mateus, 2021; Mesquita, Pranaityte, & Castellini da Silva, 2023). While it is challenging to prove that MIL enhances resilience to information disorders definitively (Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023), there is a recognised correlation between media literacy and increased trust in scientific discourse and journalism (see Lessenski, 2021).

Despite the growing momentum behind MIL education and training, a significant gap exists in ownership and the overall scarcity of national-based curricula and educational programmes designed to educate and train the youth. In this context, diverse organisations' increasing participation in formal and non-formal education and training for all audiences (Oliveira et al., 2024; Van Audenhove et al., 2018), even if some EU documents on tackling disinformation provide evidence of an aggregation of generations into a homogeneous group, not explicitly recognising their heterogeneity (Brites et al., 2021).

Recent studies have acknowledged the expansion of MIL education and emphasised the crucial roles of collaborative educational efforts, adaptation to socio-political environments, and sustained funding in enhancing the success and impact of these initiatives (see Çömlekçi, 2022; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020). However, these studies often need to be broadened to incorporate other analysis instances, such as educational systems and policies that influence the MIL environment in the countries examined. Although they provide some contextual information, they need more detailed knowledge about the MIL ecosystems and the specific criteria that define a training or educational programme as MIL-focused.

In many parts of the world, the rapid growth of social media and digital technologies has fueled the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Misleading or false information can influence public opinions, create divisions among different social groups, and erode trust in institutions and the media. These issues are often amplified in polarised political environments, leading to increased societal tensions and challenges in maintaining a healthy democratic discourse (Li & Chang, 2023). MIL education is seen as a potent tool to address these challenges.

Young people's lack of critical engagement with news (Tamboer et al., 2022) underscores the importance of new literacies (a subset of MIL) in empowering individuals to navigate the abundance of information and make informed decisions as citizens in a democracy. The recent scholarly work extensively explores the topic of media literacy in youth, focusing mainly on specific subsets like college students and, more specifically, those studying in fields like media, communications, or journalism. However, these studies predominantly evaluate literacy levels, and more attention needs to be paid to the necessity of applying these skills in practical settings. Studies indicate a significant shortfall in this area, with few investigating how and when young people practically utilise their media literacy skills (Amat et al., 2022).

2.2. Overview of the Literature on Fact-Checking in MIL Education and Training

The increasingly evident spread of disinformation has created new opportunities, bringing journalism, fact-checking, and MIL closer together to counter foreign interference, disruptive platform models, and user-driven amplification (Frau-Meigs, 2022). The author also noticed that while journalists have a long

tradition of self-governance and a model that has privileged commercial enterprises, MIL practitioners often come from non-profit, civil society organisations, often being educators and activists that historically have been fighting a fight that nobody sees (Caprino & Martínez-Cerdá, 2016). Thus, both saw the recent development as an opportunity to foster their relationship and address their problems. New entities like fact-checking networks, data analytics firms, and news literacy associations have emerged alongside initiatives connecting journalism and MIL.

These developments impact these fields as participants provide feedback to developers, and journalists share their investigative methods (Frau-Meigs, 2022). More specifically, fact-checking organisations have been branching out into MIL initiatives, which include online courses and in-person training in schools (Çömlekçi, 2022; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020). Çömlekçi (2022) points out that these groups are enhancing their traditional roles by offering tools and methods to help people identify false information effectively. They strive to equip various demographics, such as teenagers, seniors, and professionals from different sectors, with skills to recognise and refute misinformation. According to the author, effective collaboration with educators is vital, as these organisations work closely with teaching centres and educational networks to spread MIL knowledge. However, they face challenges like internet accessibility, high data costs, and language diversity, which they attempt to mitigate through partnerships with media, training for local journalists, and multilingual programme offerings. Increased funding during the Covid-19 era has supported these efforts, particularly to counter health-related misinformation, with diverse funding sources helping to preserve their neutrality and independence. The political and cultural context also significantly impacts these initiatives. The author also suggests that varying political climates and cultural values can affect public trust and perceptions of bias in these organisations. These factors are crucial for tailoring effective MIL strategies, and understanding them can lead to more effective fact-checking operations.

In another strand of MIL research analysis in Poland, Kuś and Barczyszyn-Madziarz (2020) analyse how Polish fact-checking entities have adopted MIL initiatives to overcome challenges like limited resources and media presence. They describe two main educational strategies: an indirect approach through media-led fact-checking that promotes critical thinking and a direct approach by civil society groups that involves active teaching and workshop activities to enhance media literacy. Both strategies foster a critical mindset and improve public understanding of information authenticity.

While research indicates a growing participation of fact-checking organisations within the MIL ecosystem, more studies are still needed on these initiatives. Furthermore, many such efforts need recognition from audiences and other stakeholders. Similarly, other non-formal MIL educators, such as NGOs and non-profit organisations, struggle with recognising, scaling, and evaluating their efforts. As integral components of the broader MIL ecosystem, fact-checking organisations dedicated to promoting MIL face challenges in enhancing the impact of their activities (Mesquita, Pranaityte, & Castellini da Silva, 2023; Pranaityte et al., 2024).

3. Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating desk research, interviews, and observations of secondary data from seven prominent fact-checking organisations and two university-affiliated projects in Spain, Catalonia, Poland, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Argentina, and Brazil. The research began with snowball

sampling to identify high-profile fact-checking agencies involved in young people's MIL training, focusing on diverse geographical regions and varying levels of experience in MIL education.

The study investigates the opportunities and challenges fact-checking organisations face in implementing MIL strategies and their pathways. To contextualise the data, the research also includes an analysis of the political landscape, educational policies, and regulatory environments surrounding MIL education, incorporating policy analysis (Browne et al., 2019; Simons et al., 2009) and an examination of the host countries' political, social, and economic contexts. This analysis addresses the need for comparative research, emphasising the role of political landscapes in shaping MIL education approaches (Çömlekçi, 2022).

To answer RQ1, desk research on publicly available secondary data was conducted to (a) contextualise the MIL environment, educational policies, and regulatory frameworks (e.g., media regulator policies and ministries of education) in the relevant countries and regions and (b) understand MIL ecosystems and their impact on organisations, focusing on their involvement in MIL education and training, particularly for youth. Additionally, informal and unstructured interviews with practitioners and stakeholders were used to understand organisations' motivations and goals in introducing MIL education, identify how these organisations perceive and integrate MIL, and explore the challenges and opportunities they face in advocating for and implementing MIL education.

The interview process combined unstructured interviews with numerous informal conversations with practitioners. While these interactions could be ethnographic, the characterisation may be too formal, given that one researcher had pre-existing access to many participants through informal fact-checking networks. According to Bernard (2012), informal interviews are unstructured, relying on the researcher's recall. These were supplemented with unstructured interviews to enhance the reliability of the information collected. Bernard (2012) describes unstructured interviews as flexible, occurring in a formal context without predefined questions, allowing a more natural dialogue. This approach enabled an inductive thematic analysis, identifying key themes such as youth, media literacy, motivation, audiences, context, MIL in education systems, networks, pedagogy, and funding. The transition from informal to more formal interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of these themes, ensuring the analysis captured the participants' nuanced perspectives. This approach also extended to engaging with individuals beyond the selected organisations, including entities like MediaWise and International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), which are integral to fact-checking networks (see Table 1).

To address RQ2, an exploratory content analysis was conducted to examine the target audiences, multimedia platforms, resources, collaborations, and educational methods the selected fact-checking organisations employed. This analysis involved reviewing the organisations' websites, materials, and other publicly available documents. Exploratory content analysis, an empirically driven method, emphasises inquiry and discovery over classification and normative argumentation. It is suitable for interpreting complex communication dynamics, especially in contexts where traditional scientific methods may be insufficient (Krippendorff, 1989).

This analysis is the first of its kind on these organisations. While their involvement in MIL was known, little information was available about the practical aspects of their offerings. The lack of previous academic research and comparative studies on fact-checking organisations' MIL education and training for youth

Table 1. Interviews.

Organisation	Country
IFCN	Global
MediaWise	US
Demagog	Poland
VERA Files	The Philipines
ANNIE	Hong Kong
Pravda	Poland
Verificat	Catalonia (Spain)
Maldita	Spain
University of the Philipines	The Philipines
Agência Lupa	Brazil
Chequeado	Argentina

made this analysis more exploratory, necessitating a flexible methodology. Additionally, challenges in accessing publicly available content and documents further complicate the research, as will be discussed in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussion

While examining the MIL initiatives that organisations offer young people, we recognised the need to analyse the broader operational contexts to assess MIL integration within fact-checking organisations. This includes assessing the organisations' motivations and missions, the educational and political environments in which they operate, funding, and other potential challenges. Understanding these factors highlights the barriers and facilitators to MIL integration within organisational models. To achieve this, we focused on key themes identified in the interviews and integrated them with findings from the exploratory content analysis.

4.1. Mission and Motivation for MIL Integration

According to an IFCN representative, fact-checking organisations have developed educational branches to enhance public engagement in critical thinking and analytical skills. This approach is crucial for empowering individuals to evaluate information effectively. The evolution from mere fact-checking to educational engagement recognises that combating misinformation involves more than just verifying texts; it requires training the public to adopt the thorough, sceptical approach of fact-checkers. To this end, several organisations within the network have established dedicated teams to conduct workshops on media literacy and fact-checking.

As our interviewees described, MIL is essential to fact-checking organisations' initiatives and actions. Fact-checkers see MIL as integral to these organisations' mission and operations. As organisations struggle with the wild spread of misinformation, more than information verification is required. Some entities, such as Agência Lupa in Brazil, Chequeado in Argentina, Demagog in Poland, and Verificat and Maldita in Spain, have successfully integrated MIL into their business models and organisational structures. Nevertheless, some organisations encounter challenges in fully incorporating MIL initiatives despite being invited to engage in

such efforts. This is evident in the cases of Pravda in Poland and VERA Files in the Philippines. Both organisations initiated their involvement in education upon invitation—Pravda during the Covid-19 pandemic and VERA Files before that. However, their progress remains gradual as they prioritise securing funding and expanding their operational capacities. Others, such as the two universities studied here, rely on collaboration to make their work accessible.

Agência Lupa in Brazil exemplifies how an organisation can successfully integrate MIL into its business model and structure—over 40% of revenue stems from media literacy activities (Lupa, 2015). This success is attributed to multiple factors, including the organisation's active involvement on national and international fronts, strengthening its standing in the field. Additionally, Agência Lupa benefits from the growing acknowledgement of MIL's significance within governmental initiatives and its incorporation into national education curricula. Notable developments include the introduction of a media literacy framework and the establishment of a dedicated media literacy office within the Secretariat of Social Communication, a federal cabinet-level ministry. These advancements reflect a significant shift towards embracing MIL in public education and policy in the country (Mesquita, Pranaityte, & Castellini da Silva, 2023).

Another organisation that emphasises the importance of integrating MIL education as its second pillar is Demagog. Recognising the surge of misleading and false information circulating, particularly since the term "fake news" became prominent in 2016–2017, Demagog realised that merely providing reliable information through their fact-checking website was insufficient. Given the overwhelming volume of information on social media, they decided to engage in MIL to empower their audience with the necessary skills to verify information independently.

4.2. Collaboration and Network Building

Chequeado emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts that extend beyond individual institutions, involving a network that includes journalists, educational bodies, and scholars across Latin America. Notably, Chequeado has spearheaded one of the region's most innovative educational initiatives, collaborating with 40 educational institutions to advance MIL and mis- and disinformation training in journalism schools. This initiative exemplifies Chequeado's long-standing commitment to partnership, a cornerstone of its operations since its inception 15 years ago, peaking with the establishment of LatamChequea and solidifying Chequeado's collaborative mission (Garcia et al., in press).

Collaboration and network building are emerging trends in the field, as exemplified by Maldita's partnership with institutions in Catalonia to work on a project with primary school teachers. This initiative aims to better understand the needs of younger students, particularly given that, by the age of 10, many children in Spain have smartphones and use social media. The goal is to develop appropriate educational materials for primary students, recognising that starting these initiatives in secondary school may be too late.

On another approach to collaboration, in Hong Kong, our interviewee described how the political landscape in Hong Kong shifted; it became increasingly challenging to continue using the university's name. Additionally, many potential funders were reluctant to support projects associated with a public university in China. To address these challenges, the interviewee registered an independent NGO, which now manages many of the projects previously conducted through the university, albeit still in close collaboration with it.

The NGO functions independently, while the interviewee holds a full-time position at the university, where the flagship programme, a fact-checking media outlet, remains part of the journalism school. This arrangement allows the projects to continue operating within the university framework while mitigating legal and political concerns, thus ensuring ongoing collaboration and support for the initiatives. These types of collaborations were also spotted in other studies, which highlight partnerships as the primary forms of continuing work and pursuing their goals under authoritarian regimes (Mesquita, 2023).

According to MediaWise, ongoing efforts to strengthen partnerships between fact-checking organisations and media literacy educators. These groups are forming a non-formal network to enhance their impact through mutual support and shared strategies. Networks aim to consolidate a community of practice that could significantly advance media literacy. These developments were particularly emphasised during the first-ever media literacy track at the Global Fact Conference in 2022, reflecting a recognised need within the community for a more cohesive and structured approach to media literacy initiatives. This effort underscores the growing acknowledgement of the importance of collaborative efforts in strengthening the fight against misinformation.

4.3. Educational Approaches and Pedagogical Strategies

A point of concern that gets momentum within the structures of the educational verticals is the pedagogical approaches to training and educational materials and the overall educational and political contexts surrounding these organisations. We have noticed that organisations with more structured verticals tend to have more mixed teams, with teachers and pedagogists, while others rely more on the experiences of practitioners, fact-checkers, and journalists. Maldita, for instance, has a diverse team composed of professionals from various backgrounds, including teachers with secondary school experience and journalists. Chequeado also has teachers among its professionals, and Demagog counts on a large team of around 20 trainers from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, VERA Files rely mostly on experienced fact-checkers from within the organisation, ensuring they bring practical knowledge and credibility to the training sessions.

In the Philippines, MIL is a compulsory academic subject in secondary schools. However, when the subject was made mandatory, it became evident that many teachers needed to be adequately prepared to teach it. With no formal structure in place for teacher training, the government initially turned to journalism schools, nonprofit organisations, and media research institutes to provide the necessary training. This led to organisations and media professionals, including journalists, transitioning to education and becoming responsible for equipping teachers with MIL skills despite not being directly employed by the government or public schools.

The University of the Philippines interviewee highlighted that while incorporating MIL into the national curriculum offers valuable guidelines, the courses often need updating, focusing too much on ancient history and neglecting contemporary issues. Additionally, because MIL is not required for teacher certification, educators often rely on self-directed learning and workshops to improve their MIL teaching abilities. This gap has allowed organisations like VERA Files to step in and provide non-formal MIL training. At the University of the Philippines, journalism students engage with MIL through initiatives led by seasoned journalists, who use social media platforms, particularly YouTube, to connect with and educate younger audiences.

In Hong Kong, recent political and legal changes, particularly the replacement of the liberal studies curriculum with citizenship and social development following the 2019 political movement and the National Security Law in 2020, have significantly restricted MIL education in formal settings (Yam, 2020). Despite these challenges, the organisation ANNIE has advanced fact-checking education by collaborating with the University of Hong Kong. ANNIE provides students with hands-on training in a newsroom environment, guided by experienced journalists from major media outlets like Agence France-Presse (AFP), Radio Television Hong Kong, and the *South China Morning Post*. The programme operates with 13 to 20 student reporters working in shifts, complementing their academic schedules. Additionally, ANNIE offers a specialised fact-checking course, initially part of a journalism class, which has evolved into a comprehensive training programme for future fact-checkers and students from diverse disciplines. This dual approach underscores ANNIE's commitment to developing critical media literacy skills among students, preparing them to navigate and contribute to the contemporary media landscape.

In contrast, the US has seen significant engagement in MIL education at the school level, supported by local laws. However, as noted by MediaWise, a media literacy branch of IFCN, these local initiatives, while innovative, need more uniformity and scalability for widespread application. This is confirmed by the *US Media Literacy Policy Report 2023*, which highlights that media literacy education laws vary significantly across the country. While some states have passed comprehensive laws mandating media literacy instruction across K-12 curricula, others have more limited requirements or integrated media literacy into subjects like civics or social studies (McNeill & Duff, 2023).

Several challenges emerge as we examine the range of educational materials, resources, and courses provided by fact-checking organisations. One notable issue is the limited availability of these materials for open access. Furthermore, specific organisations, including Pravda and Agência Lupa, are reticent about disclosing details concerning their course content and pedagogical strategies. This lack of transparency may be intricately linked to their business models. Organisations that derive revenue from educational offerings are more inclined to withhold information about their resources and methodologies.

It is crucial to underscore the dual approach of fact-checking organisations in addressing disinformation. These entities directly engage young individuals and connect with influential intermediaries, such as educators and trainers. By developing comprehensive educational resources—including curricula, lesson plans, and ready-to-use presentations enriched with practical examples—these organisations aim to foster a collaborative learning environment. These resources are tailored for students, journalists, and educators specialising in journalism and communications, as is the case of Maldita and Verificat.

These educational initiatives strategically target parents, which is vital in extending their reach to the younger generation. To facilitate this, organisations provide various guides designed to stimulate family discussions and heighten awareness about disinformation and online safety. This corroborates the idea that the media and its changes influence family dynamics and are appropriated by them (Ponte et al., 2019).

4.4. Innovative Educational Tools

These initiatives' notable features are integrating multimedia tools like images, infographics, videos, and audio content, which enhance the learning experience. A particularly innovative strategy employed is

gamification, with escape room games being the most prevalent. In these games, participants assume the role of journalists working against the clock to debunk disinformation by verifying facts and sources. This format promotes critical thinking and fosters independent and engaging learning. The design of these games encourages participants to engage critically with real-world issues through an entertaining framework.

Moreover, using platforms such as TikTok and YouTube to disseminate video content on disinformation and fact-checking illustrates the strategic adaptation to contemporary media consumption habits (Newman et al., 2023). Often, these videos feature young people, further aligning the content with the interests and lifestyles of the target audience.

The thematic focus of these initiatives predominantly revolves around disinformation, but there has been a noticeable expansion to include digital security and, more recently, the implications of artificial intelligence. Collaborations are not limited to large organisations like Google; they also include local entities such as councils, libraries, and foundations, which help extend the educational reach to a broader audience, as in Maldita.

Notably, specific organisations prioritise news literacy, which encompasses understanding news production, content, and impact, and developing the requisite skills to apply this knowledge instead of focusing more on MIL (Yeoman & Morris, 2023). This trend is particularly prevalent among entities closely associated with journalism studies, including the universities examined in our analysis. Moreover, organisations like Demagog and Agência Lupa, which have extensive and varied involvement in MIL education and ecosystems, also demonstrate this emphasis. This approach underscores the subtle variations in educational strategies designed to address disinformation.

4.5. Challenges and the Path to Sustainability

According to scholarly research (Çömlekçi, 2022), numerous challenges hinder those needing help implementing MIL fully. These challenges include financial constraints and adverse political conditions, which complicate the effectiveness of MIL verticals and teams within organisational frameworks. One of our interviewees in Poland emphasised that, although there are initiatives and support from ministries and the public broadcasting authority, especially regarding internet safety and digitalisation, obtaining financial support from these entities often proves difficult due to the political alignment expected from organisations. Nevertheless, Demagog and other NGOs and entities have advocated for MIL education at Poland's national and policy levels, and they have received financial support from the US Embassy in Poland to carry out many of their initiatives, such as the Fact-Checking Academy, which focuses on students and teachers.

In contrast, Spain, for example, may experience a lack of coordination between the various authorities involved in the MIL ecosystem (Pranaityte et al., 2024). However, they are more confident in obtaining financial support from government and public grants and funding schemes, such as those designed by the EU to support research and the development of diverse initiatives like the European Media and Information Fund, Erasmus Plus, Creative Europe, etc.

Another factor that has led fact-checking organisations to MIL, as Kuś and Barczyszyn-Madziarz (2020) noted, is the example of Polish fact-checking organisations which have embraced MIL initiatives to address challenges

such as limited resources and media visibility. Similarly, Çömlekçi (2022) suggests that developing educational divisions and launching MIL projects can enhance an organisation's public image and funding by promoting their educational efforts as serving the public good. In regions with less developed media systems or countries where authoritarian and non-democratic regimes populate, as we could analyse from our online observations and conversations with organisations, such as in the Philippines, MIL initiatives might not present the same effects. Our interviewee from VERA Files explains that although MIL is included in the senior high school curriculum under the K-12 education system, teachers are not adequately prepared to teach these classes. This lack of preparation has heightened public interest in MIL training, presenting an opportunity for the organisation. VERA Files has specialised its offerings to address this demand, targeting university students, educators, and overseas Filipino workers.

However, sustainability remains a paramount concern, and amidst this, the dependency on big tech platforms for funding, such as Meta and Google, raises additional concerns. This reliance illustrates a growing trend where fact-checking organisations are compelled to engage with these platforms to sustain their operations, as many have become dependent on revenue from platforms like the Google News Initiative and Meta to maintain their initiatives (see Lelo, 2022; Mesquita, de-Lima-Santos, & Muthmainnah, 2023). This complex scenario underscores the need for a deeper analysis of the evolving relationships between MIL initiatives in fact-checking organisations, financial sustainability, and public reputation in diverse geopolitical contexts. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many organisations began participating more actively in MIL, often spurred by invitations from schools and other entities, such as Pravda in Poland. This period also highlighted the dual nature of sustainability challenges.

Similarly, Verificat highlights the continuous challenge of securing financial support in Spain and plans to rely more on public financial support for the following year. Similarly, Maldita also relies on partnerships with local authorities and aims to expand its initiatives through collaborations with supranational entities such as the European Commission and Parliament. These collaborations include delivering training and participating in campaigns, enhancing their visibility and impact within the MIL ecosystem.

Therefore, understanding the interplay between context, political climate, educational systems, and policies is crucial. These factors directly affect the ability of fact-checking organisations to implement MIL effectively on the ground. Our findings suggest that navigating these constraints, alongside leveraging existing opportunities, is vital for advancing MIL initiatives within these organisations.

5. Conclusion

This study has embarked on a journey to explore the integration of MIL education and training within fact-checking organisations. Our findings indicate a significant transformation in these organisations, transitioning from primarily debunking misinformation to actively fostering MIL education, with a particular focus on youth. We examined organisations actively involved in the MIL ecosystem, engaging in formal and non-formal networks such as the Media Literacy Network initiative sponsored by Poynter and MediaWise. This exploration also extends to entities noted in the few academic studies and reports analysing this trend. We contextualised the MIL environment, educational systems, and political landscapes to understand their possible impacts and influences on the organisations' commitment to MIL initiatives, particularly for young audiences.

In direct response to RQ1, our research examines the growing integration of fact-checking within MIL education and training. Our study yields the following conclusions based on the analysed experiences. First, fact-checking organisations engage in MIL education and training because, according to practitioners, merely providing verified information is insufficient to combat the pervasive spread of mis- and disinformation in society. Second, as suggested by previous studies, many organisations view MIL education and training development as an additional or complementary revenue stream within their business models. And, third, while many organisations investigated in this study have successfully developed educational branches focused on MIL, sustainability remains a significant challenge. This is particularly evident in organisations that, due to limited resources, cannot establish dedicated verticals but instead rely on teams, groups, or individuals to address MIL. The challenge is further exacerbated for those operating in politically unstable contexts.

Regarding RQ2, our research highlights the diverse educational approaches fact-checking organisations use in their MIL initiatives. Organisations with structured educational frameworks, like Maldita and Chequeado, incorporate professional educators, while others, such as VERA Files, rely on experienced fact-checkers, focusing on practical, real-world knowledge. Challenges include outdated and non-standardised MIL curricula, particularly in regions like the Philippines, where formal education systems fall short.

Innovative strategies, including multimedia tools and gamification, enhance engagement and learning. Platforms like TikTok and YouTube are leveraged to reach younger audiences, aligning with contemporary media habits. While disinformation remains the primary focus, there is a growing emphasis on digital security and the implications of artificial intelligence.

Collaborations with local entities further extend the reach of these educational efforts. Some organisations prioritise news literacy over broader MIL, reflecting variations in educational strategies. Overall, our findings underscore the adaptability and innovation within fact-checking organisations as they work to enhance public literacy and combat misinformation.

Our analysis reveals that these organisations face diverse challenges that vary significantly across regional media, educational, and political contexts. For instance, while Spain and Catalonia are witnessing a growing integration of MIL into their educational systems, Poland faces political obstacles that necessitate external support. In Brazil, MIL programmes have notably influenced legislative and educational reforms. These regional variations underscore the complex landscape in which these organisations operate.

As our interviewees have helped us understand, many factors have contributed to integrating MIL education and training branches within their operations. These factors include the provision of grants and funds from various institutions and the growing public interest in MIL. However, the primary driver is the organisations' understanding that providing the public with verified information alone is insufficient; they must also equip the public with the tools to combat mis- and disinformation.

Moreover, the Covid-19 crisis marked an inflexion point for many organisations. Public entities increasingly invited them to support the general population in navigating the "infodemic" (Moussa et al., 2022). Our research also discovered that the teams in these branches are diverse, with no clear pattern emerging. Many organisations have reported the need to professionalise their teams of educators and trainers by including pedagogists and teachers. However, this is not a reality for organisations with limited funding.

All organisations involved in this study identified financial considerations as a primary concern. Some have incorporated educational verticals within their business models as a revenue stream. However, others still need more numbers and scalability, but all, to our knowledge, rely heavily on external support, including government assistance, platform partnerships, donations, and various funding grants. This dependence on external funding affects their capacity to deliver training and limits our ability to conduct a thorough micro-analysis of their resources, training courses, and target demographics. Consequently, our desk research could only document a limited scope of their activities, highlighting the need for future studies to employ more comprehensive analytical methods and observational techniques to gain deeper insights.

Similarly, our capacity to analyse the materials, approaches, and subjects that fact-checking organisations employ in their MIL education and training initiatives for youth was also limited. Although these organisations are deeply invested in MIL as part of their mission to safeguard socially-oriented journalism and combat misinformation, our access to detailed assessments of their materials and pedagogical approaches was constrained. This limitation can be attributed to the strategic inclusion of MIL educational verticals in their business models, which may deter them from disclosing proprietary methodologies. However, there is an apparent willingness among these organisations to share experiences and collaborate through established non-formal networks, peer-to-peer exchanges, and broader engagements with local authorities and other stakeholders in the MIL ecosystem.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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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; Mantzarlis 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
Total Fact-Checkers	8	5	5	5	4	4	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	

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 disguise 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.

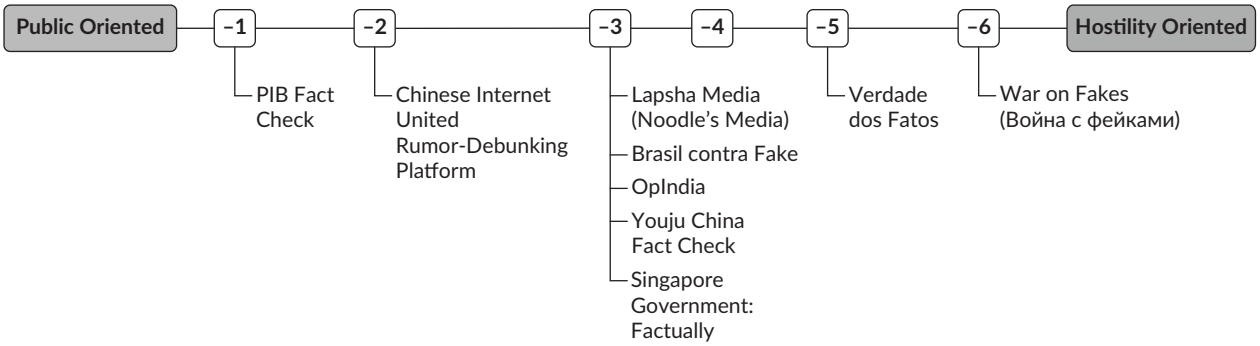

Figure 1. The spectrum of fact-checking from public good-oriented to politically-motivated, based on operational features.

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
OpIndia	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 OpIndia 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).

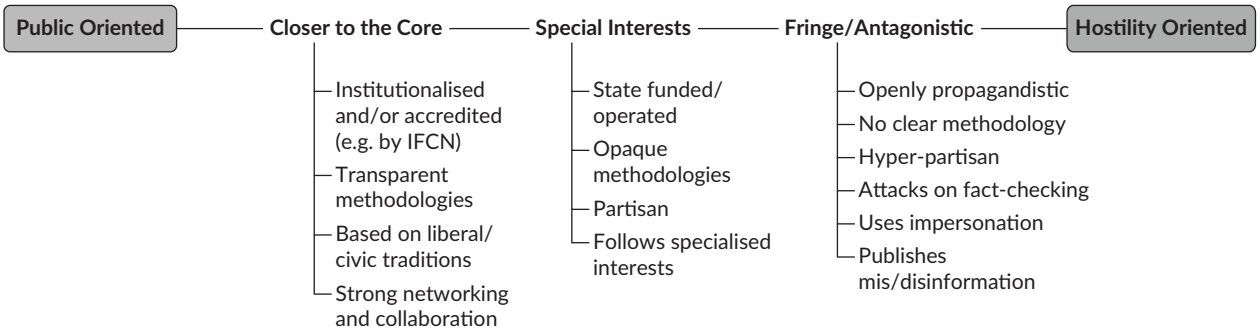

Figure 2. The spectrum of fact-checking from core to fringe based on operations and content practices.

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-recognised 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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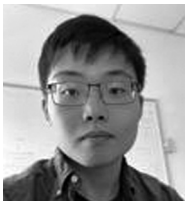

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