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When Fact-Checking Is Not WEIRD: Negotiating Consensus Outside Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic Countries

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Abstract

This study unpacks the emerging framework of detection, verification, and correction of falsehoods developed by fact-checkers outside Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic countries. We explore a series of semistructured interviews carried out in several languages with thirty-seven fact-checking experts from thirty-five organizations in twenty-seven countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Our findings emphasize the contextual nature of the falsehoods that these professionals deal with on a daily basis, and the many strategies they employ to navigate cultural and political obstacles while strengthening social cohesion locally. We review these findings against the literature in the area and argue that the prevailing framework of fact-checking, where misinformation and disinformation are reduced to individual and behavioral problems, underplays the social and historical dimensions driving disinformation and propaganda.

Keywords

fact-checking, non-WEIRD countries, misinformation, metajournalistic discourse, interviews, thematic analysis

Introduction

A growing body of research on mis- and disinformation cautions that despite the many developments in the field, the ontological boundaries of what constitutes problematic

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information have remained unclear (Camargo and Simon 2022). This critical assessment argues that scholarship is overly focused on portraying mis- and disinformation (and the ideologically inflected notion of “fake news”) as behavioral problems that need to be corrected, a perspective that underplays the social and historical dimensions driving disinformation and propaganda (Anderson 2021). By downplaying how knowledge and truth are put together through political and cultural tension, this narrowly defined framework may compound biases that reinforce institutional oppression of marginalized communities (Kuo and Marwick 2021). Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2022) observed a similarly exclusionary logic in the number of studies examining Western and non-Western contexts. As a result, mis- and disinformation studies are steadily consolidating a normative claim in the field, particularly concerning fact-checking’s contribution to policymaking and regulatory frameworks, with limited research dedicated to gauging how falsehoods undermine social cohesion outside the normative framework focused on individual behavior.

Fact-checking experts outside Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries are keenly aware of behavior-driven models of information influence supporting information correction, a framework that owes much to Western-liberal thought that separates individual behavior from wider social malaises (Abhishek 2021; Hanitzsch 2018). This speaks to the assumption that cultural and psychological processes observed in WEIRD countries are universal, and in fact they may constitute an exception in the greater canvas of social experiences (Arnett 2008). Instead of foregrounding individual behavior, case studies in India, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Brazil show the extent to which misinformation and disinformation are indelibly attached to local and communal rituals and practices that make sense of the world (Cavalcanti de Arruda et al. 2022; Pohjonen 2022; Pype and Makaya 2022; Udupa 2019). While these examples are not exclusive to non-WEIRD countries, they feature cultural traits underpinning how communities manage controversial claims and the idiosyncrasies of national media ecosystems that fact-checkers must navigate to be perceived as trustworthy (Ferracioli et al. 2022).

The set of strategies devised by non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations also call for a renewed understanding of how mis- and disinformation manifests socially, as their work consistently extends beyond gauging the accuracy of individual information and promoting factual reasoning (Wardle 2023).

In this article, we seek to contribute to this body of work by exploring a series of semistructured interviews that unpack the inherently contextual features of falsehoods (and the organizations created to fight them) outside WEIRD countries. We interviewed thirty-seven fact-checking experts from thirty-five organizations located in twenty-seven countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. We analyzed the metajournalistic discourse of fact-checkers that base their strategies in addressing various social, political, and cultural challenges intrinsic to their geopolitical context. The metajournalistic research framework proposed by Carlson (2016) argues that journalism is a context-reliant practice in which actors from both journalistic and nonjournalistic backgrounds participate. As such, it lends analytical focus to

the rationale underpinning the creation and production of journalism—and for the purposes of this study, the production of fact-checking.

In the following, we examine several strategies developed by fact-checking organizations in non-WEIRD countries and their relationship with the local press. The interview protocol was designed to explore three key research questions centered on the relationship between fact-checkers and the local mainstream media (RQ1); the strategies developed by fact-checkers to maximize the impact of their work locally (RQ2); and the definition and classification of mis- and disinformation in their national contexts (RQ3).

Literature Review

Fact-Checking Organizations Outside the WEIRD World

The explosive growth of fact-checking organizations in the West was also observed in non-WEIRD countries, but the events that kickstarted such development vary considerably. While the fact-checking industry in the West took off in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (Kumar 2022; Lelo 2022; Rodríguez-Pérez et al. 2021), a catalyst event to the ensuing third-party partnerships with tech companies (Stencel and Luther 2021), organizations outside the West have long contended with insufficient or inappropriate resources and the political backlash that jeopardize their operations (Haque et al. 2019). Indeed, many initiatives evolved from informal journalism and social media activism rather than developing from a liberal and profitable media market (Ababakirov et al. 2022), a development that resulted in the number of fact-checkers in non-WEIRD countries to be commonly misrepresented (Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones 2022).

Research on fact-checking outside the West has grown substantially of late. This body of work often unpacks the political and cultural dependencies orienting fact-checking practices outside Western contexts (Dias and Sippitt 2020). Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) described how fact-checkers in Africa present themselves as peripheral actors separated from mainstream media journalists and conspicuous in their advocacy for data transparency and journalistic integrity. In Latin America, Moreno-Gil et al. (2021) and Lelo (2022) pointed out that fact-checkers describe their work in line with journalism's social commitment and in opposition to political polarization. Similarly, Kumar (2022) and Rahmawan et al. (2022) described the collaborative nature of fact-checking in Asia as a strategy to maximize transparency and engagement with audiences. Santos (2021), finally, argued that fact-checking in non-WEIRD countries embodies a culture-centered approach dedicated to warding off disinformation and changing the way citizens engage with information.

The institutional memory of fact-checking organizations outside WEIRD countries differs in fundamental ways from the newsroom model consolidated in the United States and dominant in Western Europe (Graves and Cherubini 2016). Data from Duke Reporter's Lab show that the vast majority of such initiatives remain attached to traditional news outlets, while most fact-checkers in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern

Europe operate as independent organizations (Stencel et al. 2022). Nongovernmental organizations such as Chequeado in Argentina and Africa Check in South Africa—along with the UK-based Full Fact—led the so-called second generation of fact-checking, a movement that added advocacy for structural changes to the core mission of fact-checking (Cunliffe-Jones 2020; Riera and Zommer 2020). Volunteer-driven initiatives such as Mafindo support distributed approaches to fact-checking where the work of citizen journalists is coordinated to distribute fact-checks (Satyawati et al. 2019). Fact-checking in non-WEIRD countries may, therefore, appear unorthodox in comparison with that practiced in the West, not least because fact-checkers often engage in marginal journalistic discourse (Medeiros and Badr 2022).

Mis- and Disinformation Beyond WEIRD Countries

Current approaches to the mitigation of mis- and disinformation highlight the role of gender, race, history, and geography in accounting for the underlying aspects driving the production and spread of falsehoods (Anderson 2021; Camargo and Simon 2022; Kuo and Marwick 2021). This body of work calls for a review of hegemonic theoretical frameworks in communication studies toward De-Westernization and favoring scholarship that can bridge disciplinary and geographical perspectives (Waisbord 2022; Willems 2014). To this end, Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2022) argue that misinformation and disinformation are contextually driven concepts that emerge from the intrinsic power relations within national information ecosystems. The definition of what constitutes mis- and disinformation would, therefore, require greater scrutiny of what drives local propaganda, a theoretical shift that is at odds with the behavioral framework overly focused on identifying the intention of actors and quantifying media effects (Abhishek 2021; Mare et al. 2020). Contextualizing mis- and disinformation also put in sharp relief the perennial problem of double standards applied in the West, where non-WEIRD disinformation is unceremoniously linked to undemocratic or antidemocratic practices, whereas falsehoods distributed in the West are framed as exceptional events stemming from untruthful politicians and foreign powers (Albuquerque 2020).

Case studies outside the West show that falsehoods can have devastating effects on social cohesion in various overlapping combinations. These studies highlight macro-level problems driving misinformation locally, including (a) partisan media ownership (Lanuza and Arguelles, 2022), (b) sociodemographic inequalities (Tully et al. 2021), (c) religious and cultural conflicts (Bhatia and Arora 2022), and (d) authoritarian regimes (Akser and Baybars 2022). Taken together, these factors undermine authoritative sources that could guide the citizenry in identifying which actors, institutions, and sources are trustworthy. As a result, the boundaries between misinformation and genuine narratives that make sense of the world, but are not factually congruous, become blurred and truth is rendered a fragmented notion (Cavalcanti de Arruda et al. 2022; Ncube and Mare 2022; Pohjonen 2022; Udupa 2019).

In contexts where the facticity of events is contentiously disputed, the very framing of what constitutes mis- and disinformation is a matter of political alignment. Examples

from Asia, Africa, and Latin America show that governments can resort to their vast propaganda resources to incite moral panics about mis- and disinformation and exert control over speech (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021; Neo 2021). A key challenge for fact-checkers operating in such adversarial contexts is to win the trust of their audiences while avoiding stretching their nonpartisanship too far (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). Conversely, independent journalists and fact-checkers not rarely have to contend with what Lugo-Ocando and Martinisi (2022) termed “statistical warfare:” the state where official data are weaponized or distrusted by political leaders, ultimately undermining the authority of institutional knowledge. Additionally, governments and partisan groups may launch their own fact-checking initiatives, which, rather than distributing disinformation, may in fact operate as subtle propaganda outfits (Schuldt, 2021). It is against this backdrop that non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations define their work around threats to social erosion. This perspective adds nuance to the canonical framework of mis- and disinformation consolidated by Western experts, whereby fact-checking is largely dedicated to warding off individual pieces of problematic information and holding politicians’ statements to account.

Data and Methods

We conducted semistructured, in-depth interviews with thirty-seven fact-checkers from thirty-five organizations operating across twenty-seven non-WEIRD countries located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe—including Brazil, Chile, South Africa, India, and Indonesia. Interviews were carried out in English, Portuguese, and Spanish between March and November 2021. The interview sessions run between thirty and ninety minutes and took place via Zoom, except for one occasion where Zoom access was restricted in the country of the interviewee, and therefore, WhatsApp video call was used. Interview data were fully transcribed, and interviews conducted in languages other than English were further translated. On two occasions, we interviewed more than one employee from the same organization, and therefore, the questions were directed to their area of expertise. Due to the vulnerability of independent journalists in some countries, we opted to keep our participants anonymous, even though most participants made no such request.

Our recruiting process combined purpose and snowball sampling (Bryman 2012). We used Duke Reporters’ Lab global fact-checking database as our primary point of reference for recruiting fact-checking organizations operating in non-WEIRD countries (Stencel et al. 2022). This cohort was subsequently snowballed to organizations that matched the following criteria: (1) listed as an active organization on Duke Reporters’ Lab fact-checking database, (2) current signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), and (3) declared a consistent commitment to editorial nonpartisanship and financial independence on their websites, along with a detailed description of transparent fact-checking methodologies. In total, we contacted 101 organizations through their institutional email or via social media when their websites listed no such information. From this cohort, thirty-five organizations agreed to partake in the study and provided written consent to participate, yielding a response rate

of 34.65 percent. The recruiting process ceased after we reached saturation regarding geographical area and organization type.

We aimed to collect in-depth data about the various techniques through which fact-checking is practiced in political and cultural contexts beyond the West (see Table 1). We achieved substantial diversity in our sample with respect to three key aspects of the interviewed population: (a) geographical context, (b) professional role (directors, editors, and fact-checkers), and (c) organization structure (mainstream media, digital news media, nongovernmental organization). The interview data includes participants with various backgrounds who have worked in different fields prior to or in parallel with their involvement with fact-checking. Although most share a journalistic background ($n=26$), a considerable number of participants ($n=11$) had a background in political science, computer programming, history, linguistics, economics, or engineering.

Our interview protocol is part of a larger project aimed at identifying the various social, linguistic, cultural, and political dimensions influencing fact-checking standards in non-WEIRD countries. The theoretical framework of this study draws from previous research detailing the limitations of fact-checking in countering the misinformation landscape in Western and non-Western countries (Vinhas and Bastos 2022).

Research Design and Objectives

We relied on the reflexive thematic analysis framework devised by Braun and Clarke (2022) to examine the interview data using NVivo, a data analysis software for the management and coding of qualitative data. This approach facilitated an iterative process of extracting meaning from the data and emphasizing generative insights aligned with our research questions (rather than simply identifying recurring information). The diversity within our sample proved to be immensely valuable, as it enabled us to acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of our participants and interpret their responses while considering the influence of language differences. The multicultural and multilingual dimension of the data proved important in identifying relevant themes raised by the interviewee cohort that were circumscribed by cultural and linguistic variations.

Familiarity with the data occurred during the manual transcription of the interviews and the interview data were coded following an inductive approach (Saldaña 2016). Our coding process focused on the semantic level of responses and on distancing our analysis from established assumptions of how fact-checking is practiced. As such, we started by generating the initial set of codes open-endedly, using a pattern coding approach to catalog processes reported by the interviewees in relation to their fact-checking work (e.g., “improving,” “collaborating,” etc.) We continued by exploring the interview topics and refining the initial set of codes through an iterative process. These codes were then synthesized into broader coding categories, which were then clustered into subthemes based on their thematic similarity such as “fact-checking and mainstream media” and “media literacy initiatives.”

Our analysis themes were developed to describe not only the commonalities but also the many conflicts reported by interviewees in their fact-checking work. These

Table 1. Breakdown of Participants.

Number	Position	Date	Region	Organization type	Journalist
1	Director	03/03/2021	Latin America	Digital news media	Yes
2	Editor	11/05/2021	Europe/Asia	NGO	Yes
3	Director	18/05/2021	Europe/Asia	NGO	Yes
4	Fact-checker	28/05/2021	Latin America	Digital news media	Yes
5	Director	04/06/2021	Asia	Digital news media	Yes
6	Editor	04/06/2021	Asia	Digital news media	No
7	Director	24/06/2021	Asia	NGO	Yes
8	Fact-checker	01/07/2021	Latin America	NGO	Yes
9	Editor	05/07/2021	Latin America	NGO	Yes
10	Editor	06/07/2021	Europe / Asia	NGO	Yes
11	Director	09/07/2021	Asia	NGO	No
12	Director	15/07/2021	Latin America	NGO	Yes
13	Director	19/07/2021	Asia	NGO	No
14	Director	20/07/2021	Latin America	NGO	No
15	Editor	20/07/2021	Latin America	NGO	Yes
16	Editor	20/07/2021	Asia	NGO	Yes
17	Fact-checker	29/07/2021	Asia	Digital news media	No
18	Editor	04/08/2021	Latin America	Digital news media	Yes
19	Editor	04/08/2021	Asia	NGO	Yes
20	Editor	04/08/2021	Asia	Mainstream media	No
21	Editor	10/08/2021	Africa	Mainstream media	Yes
22	Editor	11/08/2021	Africa	NGO	Yes
23	Fact-checker	12/08/2021	Asia	NGO	Yes
24	Editor	12/08/2021	Latin America	Mainstream media	Yes
25	Editor	14/09/2021	Latin America	Digital news media	Yes
26	Director	14/09/2021	Latin America	NGO	No
27	Editor	15/09/2021	Africa	NGO	Yes
28	Editor	16/09/2021	Asia	NGO	No
29	Editor	17/09/2021	Africa	NGO	Yes
30	Director	21/09/2021	Asia	Digital news media	Yes
31	Fact-checker	22/09/2021	Africa	NGO	No
32	Editor	04/10/2021	Asia	Digital news media	Yes
33	Director	07/10/2021	Asia	NGO	Yes
34	Editor	16/10/2021	Asia	Digital news media	No
35	Fact-checker	08/11/2021	Africa	NGO	Yes
36	Fact-checker	17/11/2021	Latin America	Mainstream media	Yes
37	Fact-checker	20/11/2021	Eastern Europe	NGO	No

Note. NGO = nongovernmental organization.

themes emerged by identifying recurring patterns within the subthemes that reflect interpretative processes of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016). We focused on foregrounding the struggles faced by participants to establish trust and credibility with

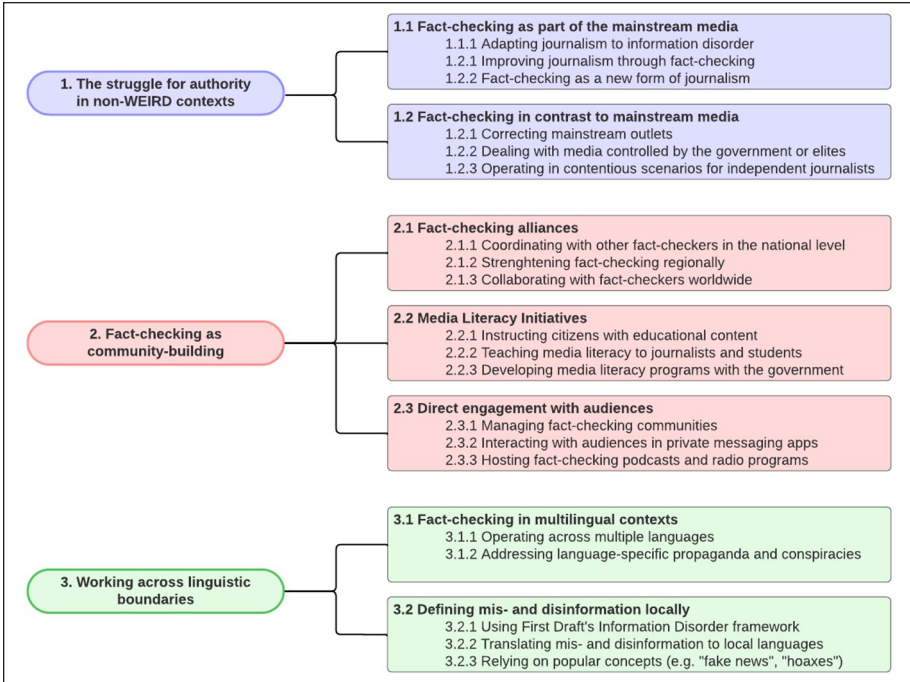


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes identified in the data.

local communities, the measures they put in place to achieve their institutional mission, and the formal definitions devised by their organizations to identify problematic content in their local contexts and languages. While our themes were circumscribed by the research questions driving this study, they are connected to a range of salient topics that emerged during the interview, including false news on social media platforms, limited access to reliable sources, legal threats from disinformation laws, and perceptions on automated fact-checking. Figure 1 shows a range of themes, subthemes, and the main codes produced during the analysis.

Results

RQ1: The Struggle for Authority in Non-WEIRD Countries

Our first theme highlights how fact-checkers position themselves as independent, non-partisan actors who may be at odds with the national mainstream media. Most participants perceived themselves as journalists or members of the mainstream media, describing their work as an extension of the authority of mainstream media to promote trustworthy information. This cohort advocated for the principles of transparency and truthfulness that typically orient professional newsrooms: "I think [fact-checking]

tries to bring back those values that got a little lost over time in [mainstream media's] search for a better business model," said a Director from a Latin American digital news media outlet.

For the Director of a digital news media organization in Asia, fact-checking is basically a tool to reinforce the authority of mainstream media: "it's very, very interesting that when hoaxes and fake news are rampant on social media, people come back to us, the mainstream media, to find accurate information (. . .) Fact-checking helps us win people's trust." Affiliation to mainstream media is vital in some contexts. The Editor of an African nongovernmental organization (NGO) explained that in contexts marked by low media literacy levels, contributing to a known news outlet with formalized journalistic culture is key to securing fact-checkers authority among lay people, which ultimately contributes to tackling potential sources of viral falsehoods.

But some interviewees described their work in isolation from traditional journalism. These participants worked in contexts where the government controlled the media partially or wholly, and therefore, situating fact-checking away from mainstream media was necessary to be perceived as independent and win the trust of their audiences. Indeed, a sizable number of fact-checkers highlight their nonaffiliation with the mainstream media within their national context. A fact-checker from an African NGO mentioned that "there's a perception that because it's white-owned, the media has a particular agenda, which is anti-Black people." An executive committee member of an NGO in Asia explained that their organization seeks to improve the trust in the press and that fact-checking inaccurate news is one way to achieve it, with the admitted caveat that "we are being sued by one media outlet because we tried to correct them."

These fact-checkers distance themselves from the perceived authority of mainstream media sources and position themselves as an alternative channel detached from the government and the influence of local elites. As the Director of an Asian NGO remarked, participants working under these circumstances tend to act strategically and avoid taking sides to remain as objective as possible. But developing a neutral perspective limited to facts can be difficult in information ecosystems dominated by partisan, ethnic, or religious practices. The Director of another Asian NGO described a situation where journalists of opposing religious groups take sides and fail to ground the public debate "because it comes from their faith and beliefs; these journalists have been supporting one ethnic group, which is sectarianism." Flexibility in managing these contending forces becomes imperative to the work of local fact-checkers. Indeed, the Director of an African NGO emphasized that strategic partnerships with mainstream media to broaden the distribution of fact-checks is vital. The Director nonetheless underscored the importance of being perceived by local audiences as entirely independent from mainstream media:

People worry about the media ownership in these countries. For our country in particular, the ownership structure is dominated by politicians and the elites who are politically connected, which in some ways do influence the editorial decisions of the newsrooms. This raises questions about the independence of their work. It also brings into question whether they are doing PR for interest groups or doing actual journalism.

Another perspective that recurrently emerged from the interviews is the understanding that fact-check publication, albeit part of mainstream media, is a correction to the failures of professional journalism. “I will say that fact-checking shouldn’t exist, and the reason for that is that journalists should do their job and fact-check their news,” said the Director of an Asian NGO. For a few interviewees, finally, the differences between fact-checking and mainstream journalism are dwarfed by the challenges of producing reliable information in authoritarian contexts. A Director in an Asian digital news media organization described how fake news laws put every news practitioner in a vulnerable position: “they passed an anti-terror law, and the definition of terror is so vague that they call a terrorist anybody who undermines the government, so we’re all opposing that.” Fact-checking under authoritarian regimes was described as a legally marginal practice. The Editor of a digital news organization in Latin America described a scenario where accessing reliable sources, whether official data or expert assessments, may be difficult if at all feasible:

Understanding the media in our country is a complex question because we are talking about the official press, we are talking about the independent press, and we are also talking about media channels created abroad. (. . .) It’s an information wild west and our work takes place in the midst of this, both with respect to the media and in relation to official sources and access to information.

Some participants run their organizations from abroad as they cannot fact-check national politicians without submitting to state censorship. Interviewees in countries under military conflict often choose to remain editorially cautious to avoid personal threats and to ensure their business operations can continue. Reflecting on the increasing difficulties of establishing independent, nonpartisan journalism in contentious political contexts, the Director of an Asian NGO described what these developments might represent to fact-checkers in the future:

Fact-checking is entirely based on transparency, independence, integrity, and credited content. My worry is that when the day comes companies will start building their own fact-checking sites, and big media organizations will fact-check content with a lens, with a bias. (. . .) You go back to square one, no one trusts it, no one trusts fact-checkers and then another industry will be made to solve those two problems. It’s not a question of whether it will happen. It’s a question of when it’s going to happen.

RQ2: Maximizing Impact Locally

The second theme speaks to the strategies employed by fact-checkers to successfully operate locally. We found that fact-checkers in non-WEIRD countries are often involved in activities beyond the bread-and-butter of verifying political claims and moderating problematic content on social media. They form national or cross-national alliances with other fact-checking organizations to engage with audiences directly, particularly through social media and messaging apps. These strategies are employed

regionally and nationally to increase the impact of their operations through culturally appropriate approaches. Most participants reported participating in at least one national or regional alliance designed to maximize the distribution of fact-checks and publicize the mission of the fact-checking movement.

These collaborations are independent from the IFCN and bring together organizations and media outlets interested in collaborating to ward off mis- and disinformation. Participants listed several reasons for establishing fact-checking alliances, including sharing expertise and tools, exchanging fact-checking databases, and coordinating efforts during critical periods (e.g., elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, etc.). Collaborations are a typical development in non-WEIRD countries with multiple fact-checking organizations. The Director of an Asian digital news organization coordinated with other fact-checkers nationally to put together a “war room” during the last election. Participants view alliances as crucial to increasing their operational efficiency and improving the quality of their work by sharing resources and coordinating tasks.

Media literacy initiatives are also integral to fact-checkers in non-WEIRD countries and emerged as one of the most salient strategies to maximize their fact-checking work. Most participants incorporate teaching media literacy skills into their daily work, while others also provide training, internships, and workshops mostly directed to journalists, students, and sometimes government officials. An African Editor from an NGO said that journalists from prominent media outlets have attended their workshops, even though their objective was the promotion of fact-checking to “grassroots” linguistic communities that their organization cannot directly cover. While fact-checkers have primarily taken the lead in developing media literacy programs independently, a number of participants have stressed the significance of advocating for integrating media literacy into journalism courses and basic education on a national scale.

Indeed, a small group of participants mentioned collaborating with the government to promote national education programs. An Asian Editor mentioned that their organization obtained “carte blanche” from their government after joining a project to introduce media literacy to the curricula of secondary schools. In other quarters, however, participants questioned the feasibility of promoting media literacy initiatives in contentious contexts. A fact-checker from an Asian digital outlet contended that “it’s critical for people to see who is teaching them and it’s difficult to have neutral actors who everybody trusts. (. . .) And if it’s a government program, people will have conspiracies over it.”

Participants described media literacy programs as a fundamental component in their work, particularly in the fight against high-volume disinformation on social media. For the Director of a digital news organization in Latin America, fact-checks and the labeling of social media content are only mitigation efforts, whereas improving media literacy skills in the population brings long-term benefits in the fight against mis- and disinformation:

Fact-checking and delivering verified information to people is like bailing out a sinking boat. (. . .) That’s why media education is so important. Just providing fact-checks to people is not enough.

Participants often expressed mixed feelings regarding media literacy informed by the many challenges they face locally. An Asian fact-checker from post-Soviet country argued that even though the local population has excellent literacy skills, they have historically lacked exposure to critical thinking and are particularly vulnerable to propaganda. But these initiatives are costly and often have to contend with low Internet penetration. The Editor of a Latin America digital news organization experienced this first-hand: Internet access came late and the local population was ill-equipped to understand the nuances in how information circulates online. A fact-checker from an African NGO argued that these scenarios require individuals to cross-reference information from multiple sources, especially when audiences are constantly exposed to false information about COVID-19 and other seasonal diseases, in addition to the regular slew of job and financial scams.

Another distinctive strategy employed by non-WEIRD fact-checkers is the centrality of engagement with the audience, with various organizations having developed a system for audiences to join in the fact-checking process. Our interviewee cohort resorts to multiple messaging apps, private groups, radio programs, and social networks to connect directly with their audiences. Participants believe that creating a sense of community around fighting falsehoods is instrumental in maximizing the impact of fact-checking locally. Indeed, interviewees mentioned that it is in private groups on WhatsApp, Telegram, or Facebook that their monitoring is most needed, and where they observe most of the impact of their work.

The Director of a digital news media organization in Asia described managing a “fact-checking ecosystem” spread across fifteen WhatsApp groups, each counting around 2,000 members. Similarly, the Editor of an African NGO called members of their messaging app groups “truth ambassadors” who can amplify their message and influence people. The Editor of a news outlet in Africa also run a radio program: “apart from social media, we are also on air and request our listeners to send us information they are doubting about, so we can fact-check it for them.” The Director of an NGO in Asia mentions that half of the content they verify are direct requests from followers, who are spread across groups on Facebook and WhatsApp that they manage.

RQ3: Misinformation Across Linguistic Boundaries

Our third and last theme refers to the challenges faced by fact-checkers working across multiple linguistic boundaries. The Editor of an Asian NGO mentioned that their team alone is ill-equipped to fact-check every false claim they track on social platforms, especially when it is propaganda targeting speakers of specific languages: “we work with different languages, but the same narratives, so collaborating with colleagues from neighboring countries means you can have more people working together.”

The need to bridge the linguistic gap often means collaborating with news outlets, which tend to be better equipped to translate and broadcast fact-checks to a broader range of communities. The Editor of an NGO in Africa said that “publishing in English was simply not enough to reach the majority of the population. [By collaborating] we were able to reach, I think between 10 and 20, they were publishing in between 10 and

20 local languages. So we were able to reach all these people via traditional media platforms in these languages.”

Fact-checkers working in contexts of high linguistic diversity are largely spread across Africa and Asia, but also Latin America. Most practitioners model their practices by reproducing the informational disorder framework (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), but due to linguistic and cultural differences, some fact-checkers explained they could not draw a clear distinction between misinformation and disinformation for their audiences. The Editor of an Asian digital news organization described their commitment to distribute fact-checks in as many languages as possible throughout the whole region:

We realized that there is very little or absolutely no fact-checking in our regional languages. (. . .) You’re addressing misinformation only for the English-speaking people or the Hindi speaking people, but what about the people who are speaking languages like Marathi? People who are speaking a language called Malayalam or Tamil? These languages have millions of speakers, not even counting the diaspora that is part of our audience.

Participants also mentioned that language diversity may provide an opportunity for bad actors to introduce harmful messages targeting specific populations with little to no countermeasures. A fact-checker from an NGO in Eastern Europe highlighted that a sizable amount of the content they verify originates and circulates between speakers of a foreign language: “We have some pro-Russia politicians that repeat these narratives and translate them from Russian propaganda.” A fact-checker from an NGO in Latin America described how their organization produced fact-checks for an indigenous community in a small region of their country after they noticed a trending COVID-19 conspiracy theory.

Participants acknowledged the usefulness of adopting conceptual frameworks capable of identifying the many types of falsehood circulating in their own contexts. The majority mentioned the scheme offered by First Draft News—a U.S.-based non-profit coalition formed by journalists, academics, tech companies, and fact-checkers that was initially sponsored by Google News Lab—and followed orientations from their ‘information disorder’ report (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) to employ mis- and disinformation as their primary working concepts: “there has been a consensus among fact-checkers to adhere to their classifications,” said the Director of a digital news organization in Latin America. The Editor of an NGO in Asia said that this framework helped their organization define problematic information while also avoiding using the term “fake news.”

But words like misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are rarely found in languages other than English, an issue that perplexed some participants. The Director of an NGO in Latin America cautioned that transposing conceptual frameworks across languages create ambiguities: “the Spanish word that stands for disinformation is a bad translation from English, particularly because in some political cultures disinformation is also viewed as the absence of information.” Similarly, a fact-checker

from an Asian NGO exemplified how languages are culturally and socially situated by mentioning how these terms have come to mean something else locally: “if it’s content continuously repeated, we call it propaganda. If it’s just false information or fake news, we call it disinformation mostly.”

An African fact-checker searched for suitable words in their own language for key terms in fact-checking and luckily managed to find equivalent terms. The Editor of an African NGO described how much work goes into translating and standardizing their working frameworks across newsrooms with various languages:

We have a team that works with linguistic experts just to find out what would be the best terms, what would be generally acceptable. (. . .) Because what we realize is, if you change the definition per country, or per context, the actual definition of the term will get lost in translation, so we try our best to standardize across the different languages. We standardized what is misinformation, disinformation, satires, misleading claims . . . there’s a broader category of seven different classes of misinformation and disinformation.

In the end, participants noted that the definition of problematic information is often based on the contextual circumstances where the contention arises, as opposed to relying on predefined markers or conceptual frameworks. The editor of an African NGO explained that their approach entailed classifying claims in categories based on the potential social impact of the content. These categories include information that can cause harm to individuals, threats to social cohesion, or risks to political stability. These participants also emphasized that trying to judge or identify the intentions of those spreading the content is ineffective and counterproductive, particularly in contentious situations related to identity or religion, where such judgments could rapidly escalate to physical violence or armed conflicts. This is particularly the case in instances of “communal misinformation,” a term employed by Asian fact-checkers to refer to false information deliberately spread to target individuals based on their religion or caste.

Discussion

The interviews with thirty-seven fact-checkers in twenty-seven countries show that while the missions and objectives of fact-checking organizations in non-WEIRD countries are broadly aligned, there is nonetheless substantial difference in how they shape their strategies in the fight against mis- and disinformation. Although some of these differences stem from the type of organization and professional background of our participants, much of the variance found in the data is cross-sectional and persists not only across different geographical but primarily different political contexts. These findings are broadly consistent with theoretical frameworks where misinformation and disinformation are defined as context-dependent (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2022), a theoretical blueprint that can also be applied to fact-checking practices. As such, the three themes generated from our interviewees’ metajournalistic discourse describe key characteristics of how non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations base

their practices with respect to social, political, and cultural challenges locally defined. This set of features not only entails a fresh take on mis- and disinformation globally; these features are largely at odds with the established framework where misinformation and disinformation are treated as a behavioral problem that can be addressed at the individual level.

Our first theme showed that non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations must often contend with an adversarial relationship with the national mainstream media. Some interviewees described their work as an extension of traditional journalism practice, where fact-checking is primarily a journalistic genre that counters untrustworthy online information by both reinforcing and reforming newsroom standards. These results are consistent with findings from U.S. fact-checkers (Graves 2016a). However, a sizable number of interviewees from Africa, Asia, and to some extent Latin America described their work in opposition to or as an alternative to mainstream media and journalism (Medeiros and Badr 2022). This is particularly salient in contentious political contexts where local elites and governments have historically controlled or held the press financially or legally captive (Akser and Baybars 2022; Cheruiyot et al. 2022; Lanuza and Arguelles 2022; Mesquita and de-Lima-Santos 2023), a development that compels journalists to refrain from confronting domestic powers (Ong and Tapsell 2022). Consistent with findings from Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), fact-checkers in these circumstances have to paradoxically situate their practices at the periphery of journalism to avoid partisanship and political polarization. Many fact-checkers in non-WEIRD countries find themselves in a very different position with respect to mainstream media compared with their WEIRD counterparts. This often requires them to go beyond the advocacy of their work to challenge the limits of public discourse in their local contexts.

Our second theme unpacked how non-WEIRD fact-checkers developed a range of community-building strategies to maximize the impact of their work nationally and regionally. These include collaborations with other fact-checkers, the promotion of media literacy initiatives, and liaising with audiences directly. The collaborative nature of fact-checking in non-WEIRD countries allows for channeling their long-running aspiration of being a social movement (Amazeen 2020). But differently from Western contexts, the focus on educational projects is often attached to larger projects supported by big tech that are critical to securing resources for fact-checking in financially untenable media markets (Çömlekçi 2022). And despite the controversies surrounding media literacy solutionism (Abhishek 2021), our participants argued that it remains essential to educate citizens about different forms of literacy behaviors (including media literacy, information literacy, and digital literacy) to fulfill the mission of fact-checking in regions where there is a noticeable lack of critical engagement with online content. Finally, as Rossini et al. (2020) have argued, the intimate nature of WhatsApp communication makes social corrections more effective than exposure to corrective posts on Facebook, a dimension that is critical in non-WEIRD contexts where messaging apps are de facto gateways to news. By incorporating community-building practices and social corrections into their strategies, fact-checkers can circumvent the scarcity of trustworthy sources and address falsehoods in the primary

channels where they are distributed (Fakida 2021; Kligler-Vilenchik 2021; Lugo-Ocando and Martinisi 2022).

Our third and last theme highlighted the many challenges fact-checkers face when working across linguistic boundaries, with language itself being a key component in legitimizing fact-checking practices to local audiences. The many examples described by interviewees unpack how the fight against mis- and disinformation across linguistic boundaries defies Western normative assumptions about political deliberation, whereby the public debate is assumed to result from a single unifying national language (Fraser 2016). In the end, most non-WEIRD fact-checkers seem to shape their practices after the information disorder framework (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), even though words such as misinformation and disinformation are rarely found in languages other than English. Many fact-checkers in non-WEIRD countries thereby resort to rudimentary or partial adaptations of the information disorder framework, while others create concepts that can translate the theoretical import of mis- and disinformation onto their own languages. These shortcomings are particularly apparent in how non-WEIRD fact-checkers may reluctantly use terms misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news” somewhat interchangeably, whether because the latter is more appealing to audiences (Tandoc and Seet 2022), or because the terms misinformation and disinformation rarely coexist or have equivalent words in many widely spoken languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili, Hindi, or Mandarin to effectively allow for distinguishing false content based on the intentions of the sender.

Conclusion

This article examined how fact-checkers operating in non-WEIRD countries make sense of their fight against mis- and disinformation by considering cultural, political, and societal challenges that underpin their practices locally. By extending the meta-journalistic discourse framework to fact-checking experts, we approached fact-checking as a culturally embedded practice in which normative parameters of authority, objectivity, and factuality are contextually constructed. Our study builds on a growing body of work on fact-checking practices outside WEIRD countries and it contributes to a framework where misinformation and disinformation are context-driven social malaises (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2022), as opposed to the “informational-agentic” (Anderson 2021) account heralded by social platforms where misinformation is a behavioral problem that needs to be rectified. Although falsehoods may spread from individual to individual, the threats to social cohesion stem from their potential to escalate extant cultural and political tensions that are invariably local. Mis- and disinformation campaigns, therefore, are hardly extrinsic information disorders linked to the collapse of the welfare state (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) or campaigns coordinated by external powers (Bennett and Livingston 2018); these concepts, as such, would lend no theoretical import that has not been previously conveyed by propaganda, social rumors, and conspiracy theorizing.

The challenges of rebuilding social cohesion through factual and consensual information may differ in fundamental ways from the prospect of restoring the status of experts

in the public debate, reestablishing trust in the press, or rebuilding trust in democratic institutions (Humprecht 2023). Experimental studies focused on mitigating individual false beliefs often rely on authoritative fact-checking solutions (van der Meer et al. 2023). However, emerging findings from non-WEIRD samples challenge these assumptions, suggesting that horizontal strategies based on social corrections may be more effective in contexts where the drivers of misinformation and disinformation extend beyond political partisanship (Badrinathan and Chauchard 2023). While our research highlights the importance of media literacy programs, it aligns with existing literature arguing that the factors contributing to misinformation and disinformation in non-WEIRD contexts go beyond individual literacy in online content consumption (Bhatia and Arora 2022; Tully et al. 2021; Valenzuela et al. 2022). Comprehensive approaches to media literacy and content moderation must consider the cultural and political tensions inherent to specific geographical settings (Shahid and Vashistha 2023), an undertaking that requires reevaluating the local interplay between mainstream media, public institutions, and national politics (Mare et al. 2020; Rossini et al. 2023).

Fact-checkers in non-WEIRD countries routinely challenge the trustworthiness of mainstream media and the reliability of official data, a development that is still relatively uncharted in the West, notwithstanding the clear resemblance with the work of fact-checkers in the United States during the Iraq invasion (Graves 2016b). Non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations choose instead to strategically rely first and foremost on educational initiatives and social corrections devoted to community practices of fact-making. The impact of such strategies will ultimately depend on the resilience of these communities to distribute counter narratives to that which is popularly termed “fake news” (Cover et al. 2022). These remain significant challenges, and further research should explore the competing frameworks that identify, correct, and remove falsehoods across different linguistic boundaries and that also legitimize fact-checking—including those funded by governments and corporate initiatives.

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