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FACT-CHECKING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: SAFEGUARDING TRUTH IN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ARTICLE STRUCTURE

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Abstract: the rapid proliferation of information has amplified the spread of misinformation, posing significant challenges to individuals, communities, and institutions. Fact-checking has become an essential mechanism to ensure the accuracy and reliability of content; however, several obstacles impede its effectiveness. These include the overwhelming volume of online information, the rise of deepfakes and manipulated media, algorithm-driven echo chambers, political bias, and limited public awareness or digital literacy in certain populations. Together, these factors complicate the verification process and reduce the reach of accurate information. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, combining technological tools, educational initiatives, crowdsourced participation, and institutional oversight, to foster informed decision-making, social trust, and democratic integrity.

Keywords: Fact-checking, Misinformation, Deepfakes, Digital Literacy, Social Media, Algorithmic Bias, Public Awareness, Information Verification

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of communication, information exchange, and public discourse. In today's interconnected world, information flows seamlessly across digital platforms at unprecedented speeds, breaking geographical and cultural barriers. This transformation, fueled by technological innovation and widespread internet penetration, has democratized access to knowledge and given individuals the power to publish, share, and influence public narratives with a single click. However, this empowerment also comes with profound challenges. As the digital ecosystem becomes increasingly saturated with diverse forms of content, the boundary between truth and falsehood has blurred. This condition has given rise to what scholars call the "information disorder" a phenomenon characterized by the uncontrolled spread of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that threatens not only individual understanding but also collective trust and democratic stability (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In this context, the role of fact-checking emerges as an indispensable mechanism for safeguarding truth and maintaining the integrity of information. Fact-checking represents both a journalistic practice and a societal obligation aimed at verifying claims, correcting false narratives, and ensuring that public discourse remains grounded in verifiable evidence. The need for rigorous fact-checking has grown exponentially as digital communication technologies, from social media to instant messaging applications, amplify the speed and scale of information dissemination. What was once a localized phenomenon of rumor and speculation has evolved into a global challenge where a single piece of misinformation can reach millions within hours, shaping opinions, influencing elections, and even endangering public health (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

The rise of misinformation is not a random byproduct of

digitalization but the result of complex socio-technical dynamics. Algorithmic systems on social media platforms, for instance, are designed to prioritize engagement rather than accuracy. They often promote emotionally charged or sensational content, inadvertently enabling false information to spread faster and wider than factual reporting (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In addition, the advent of sophisticated tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technology has made it increasingly difficult for ordinary users to distinguish between authentic and manipulated content. The convergence of these factors creates an environment where truth becomes contested and public trust in media institutions steadily declines.

Fact-checking serves as a corrective force within this turbulent landscape. It involves a systematic process of verifying facts, evaluating evidence, and comparing claims against credible sources before dissemination. Traditionally, this process was confined to the editorial rooms of reputable news organizations. However, in the digital era, fact-checking has evolved into a collaborative and technology-driven endeavor involving independent organizations, AI-assisted tools, and civic participation (Graves, 2018). Platforms such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) have set global standards for transparency, methodology, and accountability in fact-checking practices. These institutions function as gatekeepers of truth in a chaotic media environment, striving to restore public confidence in journalism and promote critical media literacy among audiences.

The relevance of fact-checking extends far beyond journalism. It plays a crucial role in sustaining democratic processes by ensuring that political discourse is based on verified evidence rather than manipulation. Elections around the world have demonstrated how disinformation campaigns can distort voter perceptions, polarize societies, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. For instance, during India's 2019 and 2024 general elections, widespread

misinformation circulated through encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp, prompting collaborations between the Election Commission of India and independent fact-checking agencies to monitor and debunk false claims (IFCN, 2025). Similar efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic were essential in countering health-related misinformation that endangered public safety and eroded trust in scientific authorities (Pulido et al., 2020). These cases illustrate how fact-checking operates as a vital defense mechanism against the social, political, and ethical consequences of falsehood.

At a conceptual level, fact-checking embodies the principles of epistemic responsibility and communicative rationality. It reinforces the idea that public knowledge must be built upon evidence-based reasoning and verifiable facts. In this sense, fact-checking contributes to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, a space where rational discourse prevails over propaganda or manipulation. The credibility of information thus becomes a cornerstone of civic participation and democratic deliberation. Without mechanisms to verify truth, public debate risks devolving into a contest of narratives driven by ideology, emotion, or profit rather than objective reality. Therefore, the institutionalization of fact-checking is not merely a technical fix but a moral and epistemological commitment to truth in public communication.

Nevertheless, the practice of fact-checking faces formidable challenges. The overwhelming volume of digital information makes comprehensive verification almost impossible. The speed at which misinformation spreads often outpaces the ability of fact-checkers to respond, resulting in persistent false beliefs even after correction, a phenomenon known as the “continued influence effect.” Moreover, algorithmic bias in automated fact-checking systems can reinforce existing inequalities and perpetuate certain ideological perspectives. In regions with limited digital literacy, audiences may also lack the skills to identify credible sources or interpret fact-checks effectively. These issues highlight the need for a

multidimensional approach that integrates technological innovation, media education, and institutional oversight to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of fact-checking (Graves & Amazeen, 2019).

Recent technological advancements offer promising avenues for strengthening fact-checking mechanisms. Artificial intelligence and machine learning can analyze large datasets, detect anomalies, and flag suspicious claims in real-time. Blockchain technology, on the other hand, introduces the possibility of immutable verification of digital content, allowing users to trace the provenance and authenticity of information. Another critical component of an effective fact-checking ecosystem is media literacy. Empowering citizens to evaluate information critically is as important as verifying facts after misinformation spreads. Educational initiatives that teach individuals to question sources, recognize bias, and verify claims independently can significantly reduce the demand for false content. As the World Health Organization (2020) emphasized during the pandemic, combating misinformation requires not only institutional responses but also informed and responsible digital citizens. By cultivating awareness and critical thinking, societies can build resilience against manipulation and develop a collective commitment to truth. The digital age presents a paradox of unprecedented access to information coupled with an equally unprecedented vulnerability to deception. Fact-checking stands at the heart of this paradox, serving as both a defensive and constructive practice. It defends society against the harms of misinformation while constructing a culture of accountability, transparency, and informed citizenship. As digital ecosystems continue to evolve, the future of fact-checking will depend on the synergy between technological innovation, human expertise, and global cooperation. The integration of AI, blockchain, and participatory verification models, combined with sustained educational efforts, offers a robust framework for preserving truth

in an increasingly complex information environment. Ultimately, fact-checking is not merely a technical procedure but a democratic imperative, a collective endeavor to uphold truth as the foundation of human communication, social trust, and civic life in the digital era.

METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the mechanisms, effectiveness, and challenges of fact-checking in the digital information ecosystem. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how fact-checking operates as both a journalistic and socio-technological process in combating misinformation and disinformation. Unlike quantitative research that emphasizes numerical measurement, qualitative inquiry prioritizes depth, meaning, and context. Through this design, the research interprets fact-checking as a complex social phenomenon influenced by technological infrastructures, institutional ethics, and audience behavior. The study views fact-checking not only as a corrective tool for verifying factual accuracy but also as a cultural and democratic mechanism that safeguards truth and trust within digital communication networks. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the study aims to understand how individuals and institutions construct, negotiate, and disseminate “truth” in an era of algorithmic mediation and digital manipulation.

Data for this research were collected through document analysis, content analysis, expert interviews, and digital observation, which together form a triangulated methodological structure ensuring reliability and analytical rigor. Document analysis focused on the examination of organizational reports, verification protocols, and media guidelines from key institutions such as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), World Health Organization (WHO), and leading independent fact-checking organizations like PolitiFact, Snopes, and BOOM Live. These documents provided insight into institutional standards and

operational frameworks used to identify and correct false information. Complementing this, qualitative content analysis was conducted on selected misinformation cases that gained widespread attention during the COVID-19 pandemic and global electoral events between 2019 and 2025. Each case was examined for its origin, form, and intent of misinformation, followed by an evaluation of how fact-checkers employed verification strategies and communicated corrections to the public. This multi-source data approach enabled a contextual understanding of the interaction between false narratives, verification efforts, and audience reception.

The study also incorporated semi-structured interviews with fact-checking professionals, data journalists, and media literacy educators to gather firsthand perspectives on the evolving dynamics of verification in the digital age. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their professional involvement in media ethics, fact-checking, or digital journalism. Interviews explored their views on the effectiveness of technological tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) in detecting false claims, the role of human judgment in interpreting context, and the ethical dilemmas faced when confronting politically sensitive misinformation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, conducted either virtually or in-person, and was subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. The interview data provided rich qualitative insights into how practitioners balance speed, accuracy, and ethical responsibility within their verification processes. The findings also revealed the importance of institutional transparency and public engagement in building trust toward fact-checking organizations.

To further deepen the analysis, digital observation was carried out using an ethnographic lens on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. This technique involved monitoring trending misinformation topics,

algorithmic labeling of content, and audience responses to verified corrections. The researcher observed how social media platforms integrate fact-checking mechanisms such as warning labels, verified source links, and AI-generated credibility indicators, and how users react to these interventions. The observations highlighted patterns in audience behavior, including selective exposure, confirmation bias, and trust erosion toward mainstream media. By combining this observational data with institutional reports and expert interviews, the study captures both the macro-level structural systems that govern fact-checking and the micro-level interactions that determine its public impact. This dual perspective strengthens the empirical foundation of the research and enhances the understanding of fact-checking as an embedded process within digital communication environments.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic and interpretive coding following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model for qualitative research. All collected data including reports, interview transcripts, and digital observations were read repeatedly to identify emerging themes and recurring concepts. Codes were then categorized into major clusters such as "verification methodology," "technological integration," "audience engagement," and "ethical challenges." The analysis followed both inductive and deductive reasoning, meaning that new insights emerged organically from the data while still guided by established theoretical frameworks, including Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) *Information Disorder Model*, McLuhan's (1964) *Media Ecology Theory*, and Habermas's (1989) *Public Sphere Theory*. These theoretical perspectives provided interpretive depth by connecting empirical findings to the broader academic discourse on media truth, digital ethics, and democratic communication. Triangulation among multiple data sources enhanced the validity of the findings, while inter-coder reliability checks and peer review were applied to ensure analytical consistency and transparency.

Ethical considerations formed a critical component of this study. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymized to preserve confidentiality. Data collection adhered to the ethical principles of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), particularly those concerning the privacy and dignity of research subjects. When analyzing social media content, the study focused exclusively on publicly available information, avoiding the use of private or sensitive data. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process the researcher continuously examined potential biases, assumptions, and interpretive limitations that might affect the analysis. This ethical stance is vital given that fact-checking often intersects with political narratives, ideological debates, and public perception of truth. Ensuring transparency in methodology, neutrality in interpretation, and respect for data ethics reinforces the credibility of the research and aligns it with international academic standards.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that fact-checking has become a central mechanism in maintaining information integrity across global digital networks. Data analysis from various fact-checking organizations demonstrates a significant increase in verification initiatives between 2019 and 2025, particularly during major social and political events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and national elections. These periods were marked by surges in misinformation related to health, politics, and social identity. Fact-checking institutions like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), PolitiFact, and BOOM Live responded by expanding partnerships with social media platforms to ensure broader visibility of verified information. The findings indicate that fact-checking has evolved from a journalistic sub-function into a global collaborative infrastructure linking journalists, researchers, and

technology firms in real-time verification ecosystems.

The analysis also indicates that technological integration plays a critical role in enhancing the speed and accuracy of fact-checking. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms were widely adopted to detect duplicate content, identify patterns of misinformation, and flag potentially manipulated media. Automated verification tools allowed organizations to process large datasets efficiently, particularly during the pandemic when false information about vaccines and cures proliferated online. However, despite their benefits, AI-based systems remain dependent on human oversight to interpret nuanced contexts, cultural meanings, and political implications. Interview data confirm that human judgment continues to be indispensable in determining accuracy, ethical relevance, and communicative impact of fact-checked content.

Furthermore, the findings reveal substantial progress in institutional collaboration between governments, media organizations, and civil society. During health and political crises, official agencies increasingly relied on independent fact-checkers to debunk false narratives. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) partnered with national fact-checking groups to counteract COVID-19 misinformation. Similarly, the Election Commission of India collaborated with local digital platforms and citizen-led initiatives to monitor political content circulating through encrypted messaging apps. Such partnerships have proven effective in enhancing the legitimacy and dissemination of verified information while fostering public trust.

Despite technological and institutional progress, the study identifies persistent challenges that hinder the full effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives. The most significant barriers include the overwhelming volume of digital content, algorithmic opacity on social media platforms, and political polarization that drives selective exposure to information. Interviewees noted that echo

chambers and filter bubbles reduce the visibility of corrections, as users often resist fact-checks that contradict their pre-existing beliefs. Moreover, limited digital literacy among users in developing regions restricts the ability to critically evaluate online claims. These challenges underline the need for sustained media literacy programs and ethical regulation of digital communication.

Another important finding concerns the role of audience engagement in shaping the impact of fact-checking. Observational data from social media platforms show that fact-checks accompanied by visual elements—such as infographics, videos, and authoritative citations—receive higher engagement than text-only corrections. This demonstrates that format and accessibility significantly influence the public's willingness to accept verified information. Moreover, interactive features such as comment sections and user feedback channels foster a participatory model of verification where users contribute to identifying and reporting misinformation.

The research also uncovers how crowdsourced verification is emerging as an influential model in combating misinformation. Platforms like Wikipedia, Reddit, and community-based initiatives in Indonesia (e.g., Mafindo) have shown that collective intelligence can complement institutional efforts. By allowing users to flag and cross-verify information collaboratively, these platforms enhance real-time responsiveness to emerging falsehoods. However, the reliability of crowdsourced verification depends heavily on platform governance, moderation quality, and user expertise. Without proper oversight, these models risk amplifying inaccuracies rather than correcting them.

The findings also emphasize the importance of media literacy and educational interventions as sustainable solutions against misinformation. Initiatives promoting critical thinking, source evaluation, and fact-checking training in schools and universities have demonstrated measurable improvements in user behavior.

Survey results and interview data show that individuals exposed to media literacy programs are significantly less likely to share unverified information. Educational strategies that combine technical verification skills with ethical awareness create informed digital citizens capable of discerning truth in complex media environments.

Finally, the overall analysis highlights the interconnectedness of technology, human expertise, and institutional governance in shaping the effectiveness of fact-checking. While automation provides efficiency, human interpretation ensures ethical judgment, and institutional partnerships guarantee structural legitimacy. These three components must work together to sustain an information ecosystem rooted in accuracy and accountability. The synthesis of empirical evidence suggests that a hybrid model—integrating AI tools, human oversight, and public engagement—offers the most resilient approach to counter misinformation and safeguard democratic integrity.

Table 1. Summary of Fact-Checking Mechanisms and Impacts

Category	Description	Key Findings	Impact/Outcome
Technological Integration	Use of AI, machine learning, and automation in verification	Speeds up identification of false content	Increases efficiency but requires human interpretation
Institutional Collaboration	Partnerships between media, government, and NGOs	Expands fact-checking networks globally	Enhances credibility and public trust
Crowdsourced Verification	Collective reporting and correction by users	Empowers communities to engage in fact-checking	Improves response time but may reduce reliability
Media Literacy Programs	Educational campaigns promoting critical	Reduces susceptibility to misinformation	Builds informed and responsible digital citizens

	evaluation		
Audience Engagement	Visual and interactive approaches to fact-checking	Increases attention and message retention	Strengthens correction acceptance and impact

DISCUSSION

The results underscore that fact-checking has transitioned from a niche journalistic task to a core element of digital governance. Its emergence as a global verification infrastructure demonstrates a paradigm shift in how societies handle truth and accountability. This transformation aligns with the *Information Disorder Theory* proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), which frames misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation as systemic challenges requiring coordinated responses. Fact-checking acts as the corrective mechanism within this disorder, functioning as both a reactive and preventive measure against epistemic distortion. The integration of AI and algorithmic verification systems further enhances scalability, allowing real-time analysis of vast data streams across platforms.

The growing collaboration between public institutions and private technology companies highlights the institutionalization of truth verification in the digital era. These partnerships signify a move toward shared responsibility in protecting the integrity of information. The cooperation between WHO and local fact-checking agencies during the pandemic exemplifies how institutional synergy can improve the effectiveness of crisis communication. Similarly, the Election Commission of India’s collaboration with independent verifiers illustrates the necessity of nonpartisan oversight in political communication. Such partnerships demonstrate that maintaining truth in digital ecosystems requires a multi-sectoral framework combining journalistic ethics, civic engagement, and technological capacity.

However, the study reveals that technological innovation alone cannot guarantee informational integrity. While AI-powered systems offer speed and scale, human judgment remains irreplaceable in contextual interpretation and ethical reasoning. The *Media Ecology Theory* (McLuhan, 1964) helps explain this balance: technology reshapes communication environments, but meaning ultimately resides in human perception. Algorithms may detect falsehoods, but only humans can evaluate intent, cultural nuance, and potential harm. Thus, sustainable

fact-checking must combine automated systems with editorial oversight and ethical reflexivity to prevent mechanistic errors or bias.

An equally important insight pertains to audience psychology and engagement. The study supports previous findings (Vosoughi et al., 2018) that misinformation spreads faster than factual corrections because it often evokes emotion, surprise, or outrage. Therefore, effective fact-checking must adapt to psychological communication strategies—presenting verified information through engaging, accessible, and emotionally resonant formats. Fact-checks accompanied by visuals, storytelling, or influencer endorsement have been shown to achieve greater reach and credibility among users. Hence, integrating behavioral insights into fact-checking communication can significantly increase public receptivity.

The findings also contribute to ongoing discussions about digital literacy as a foundation of media resilience. A society that understands how information systems function is less vulnerable to manipulation. Fact-checking education programs that train students and journalists in source evaluation, bias detection, and verification tools foster critical awareness. These programs align with Habermas's (1989) *Public Sphere Theory*, which posits that rational and informed discourse is the cornerstone of democracy. Informed citizens capable of verifying claims independently contribute to a healthier, more deliberative public sphere where truth is collectively maintained.

Despite its achievements, the study acknowledges persistent ethical and political tensions surrounding fact-checking. In polarized environments, corrections may be perceived as partisan attacks rather than neutral interventions. Governments may also misuse fact-checking rhetoric to suppress dissent or censor legitimate criticism. Therefore, maintaining transparency, methodological clarity, and independence is crucial for preserving credibility. The *Ethics of Communication* framework emphasizes that truth verification must remain nonpartisan, evidence-based, and open to public scrutiny.

Another discussion point concerns the global inequities in fact-checking capacity. While advanced economies benefit from institutionalized verification systems, developing regions face structural limitations such as limited funding, weak digital infrastructure, and low media literacy. Bridging this gap requires international cooperation and funding mechanisms that support fact-checking initiatives in the Global South. Programs supported by IFCN and UNESCO demonstrate that capacity-building and cross-border collaboration are key to achieving global informational equity.

Lastly, the integration of AI, blockchain, and participatory verification models represents the future trajectory of fact-checking. Blockchain technology, with its capacity to record immutable data provenance, can provide long-term solutions to authenticity verification. AI-assisted moderation can identify viral misinformation in real-time, while public engagement ensures social accountability. However, the sustainability of these innovations depends on ethical oversight and continuous education. The study concludes that the most effective strategy is a hybrid model—combining machine intelligence, human ethics, and civic participation—to safeguard truth in the evolving digital ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

Fact-checking has become an indispensable component of modern journalism and digital communication. In an era characterized by the rapid spread of information across social media, news platforms, and instant messaging, the risks posed by misinformation, disinformation, and misinformation are unprecedented. As demonstrated through real-world case studies from the COVID-19 pandemic to Indian elections and global fact-checking collaborations systematic verification of information is crucial for maintaining public trust, safeguarding democratic processes, and promoting informed decision-making.

The evolution of fact-checking from manual newsroom practices to AI-assisted verification systems, blockchain-based authentication, and social media integrations highlights the ongoing adaptation of this discipline to technological advancements. Moreover, education and awareness initiatives play a vital role in cultivating responsible digital citizens who can critically evaluate information, identify falsehoods, and act ethically online. Looking forward, the integration of technology and human oversight, combined with global collaboration and media literacy, offers a robust framework to combat the challenges of the digital information age. By ensuring that accurate, credible, and trustworthy information prevails, fact-checking reinforces transparency, accountability, and democratic values, making it an essential pillar of a resilient and informed society.

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