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THE WEIRD GOVERNANCE OF FACT-CHECKING: FROM WATCHDOGS TO CONTENT MODERATORS

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Introduction

Fact-checking has undergone steady transformations of recent. Originally devised as a tool designed to verify public discourse and hold politicians to account, fact-checkers have increasingly upscaled their activities to moderate viral misinformation and promote media literacy initiatives (Çömlekçi, 2022; Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020). In the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential Election, policymakers and social platforms invested in fact-checking initiatives to restore truth and consensus reasoning in public debate (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). Substantive resources were allocated by social platforms, and Western industrialized countries developed local and regional strategies to tackle mis- and disinformation, a set of policies that placed fact-checkers in the position of unwitting online content moderators (EFCSN, 2022; States, 2022). Such efforts, however, clashed with a common standard for fact-checking and caused considerable tension with stakeholders (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022), a problem that continues to haunt the institutional mission and values of journalists and fact-checkers (Ananny, 2018). With social media hosting the ecosystem where much political deliberation occurs, unpacking the governance of fact-checking by social platforms is thus crucial to understanding the sociotechnical entanglements determining the digital infrastructure of knowledge and facts (Ford, 2022).

Beyond Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries, fact-checking initiatives follow inconsistent standards for acting as watchdogs of politicians and enforcing content moderation. Critical approaches to mis- and disinformation studies have shown that fact-checkers operating in non-WEIRD contexts must cope with various social forces eroding institutional trust and driving online harassment and physical violence (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). While these issues are

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global, the reliance on social platforms as news sources is higher in non-WEIRD countries, where much of the internet infrastructure is restricted to Meta's applications (Nothias, 2020). Additionally, fact-checkers beyond the US and Western Europe generally depend on partnerships and grants from tech companies to maintain their operations, as many initiatives evolved from informal journalism and online activism instead of developing from a liberal and profitable media market (Ababakirov et al., 2022). These conditions not only make the eroding potential of mis- and disinformation more effective beyond the WEIRD world (Tandoc, 2022); they also maximize the political ramifications of content regulation for local citizens and policymakers (Gillespie et al., 2020).

Method

We interviewed 37 fact-checkers from 35 organizations across 27 non-WEIRD countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted in three languages (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) between March and November of 2021. We used Duke Reporters' Lab global fact-checking database as our reference point to recruit participants and subsequently snowballed to organizations that matched the following inclusion criteria: 1) listed as an active organization on Duke Reporters' Lab fact-checking database; 2) current signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN); 3) declared a consistent commitment to editorial non-partisanship and financial independence on their websites, along with a detailed description of transparent fact-checking methodologies. We cease our recruiting process once we reached saturation across geographical areas and organization types. The interview questions revolved around three main topics: 1) social media moderation by fact-checkers; 2) the criteria implemented to identify false and harmful content; 3) the role of social platforms in regulating the public debate.

Our analysis relied on Braun and Clarke (2022) reflexive thematic analysis framework and was devised to address the following research questions: 1) How have non-WEIRD fact-checkers adapted their practices to meet the expectations of social media platforms? 2) What feedback do non-WEIRD fact-checkers receive from social media users? 3) What is the relationship between social platforms and efforts to address mis- and disinformation in non-WEIRD contexts? Iterative coding through NVivo was applied to the transcribed interviews to identify recurring topics that appeared in the data. Following the first round of semantic coding, we applied axial coding to interpret the data in line with literature on news and platformization. The processed data reveals the relationship (context, interactions, and consequences) between fact-checkers and social media platforms.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings detail three ways through which social platforms impinge on the scope, values, and institutional mission of non-WEIRD fact-checking organizations. Figure 1 shows the themes developed in the analysis that cataloged the methods, tools, and strategies fact-checkers implemented to produce pragmatic solutions to ward off the scourge of problematic content online.

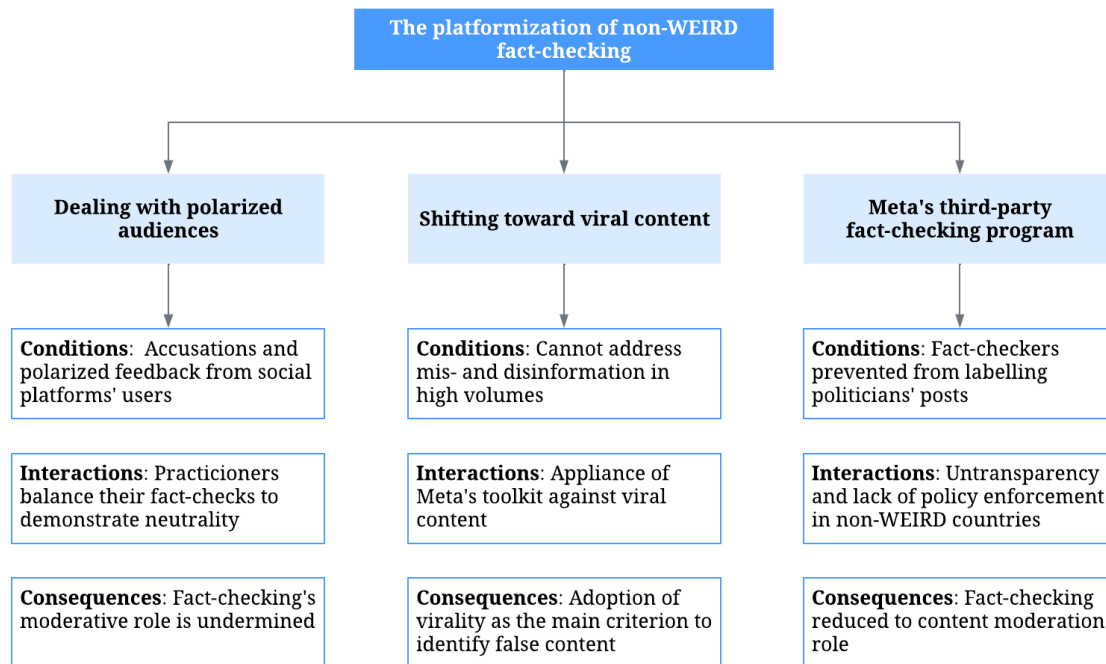


Figure 1: Conditions, interactions, and consequences of the platformization of fact-checking

Our themes shed light on how non-WEIRD fact-checkers have adapted their workflow to meet the expectations of cooperating with social media platforms. Firstly, accusations of bias and weaponization of fact-checks on social platforms compel fact-checkers to trade off their objectivity to balance fact-checking posts across partisan divides. As social platforms' affordances reward affective and identity-driven engagement with information over factual reasoning (Chadwick et al., 2022), they inherently disrupt the informative role of fact-checking organizations (Cotter et al., 2022). Secondly, to tackle mis- and disinformation in high volumes, fact-checkers are increasingly adapting their work to compete for visibility on social platforms (Petre et al., 2019). By adopting Meta's toolkit designed to verify viral content, fact-checking organizations embody Facebook's vision of problematic communication, where mis- and disinformation are reduced to a behavioral problem detached from contextual factors (Anderson, 2021). Thirdly, social platforms fail to apply their own community guidelines in non-WEIRD contexts, despite partnering with seasoned local fact-checkers speakers. Lastly, Meta's third-party fact-checking program prevents fact-checkers from labeling politicians on Facebook. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional watchdog mission of fact-checking. It is also at odds with evidence showing that falsehoods usually come from prominent public figures (Brennen et al., 2020).

Taken together, the platformization of non-WEIRD fact-checkers entails a convoluted process in which social media platforms gradually nudge fact-checkers into becoming part of the content moderation industry, a shift that runs counter to the democracy-building values underpinning the fact-checking movement (Amazeen, 2020). Indeed, by including non-WEIRD fact-checkers in their taskforces against mis- and disinformation, social platforms offer crucial funding for initiatives operating in contexts where fact-checking would rarely be sustainable. But fact-checkers have no input over the policies and day-to-day decisions determining what content should be removed or reduced, an arrangement that leaves them vulnerable to polarization and being scapegoated as censors in the platform. This is particularly the case for Meta, the most prominent funder of non-WEIRD fact-checking initiatives.

Given the above, we conclude that fact-checking in non-WEIRD countries is being deprived of its journalistic value as it is assimilated into the content moderation industry. The governance of non-WEIRD fact-checking by tech companies such as Meta and Google entails the strategic capture of third-party news practitioners (Papaevangelou, 2023) rather than the forging of asymmetrical but mutually-dependent partnerships (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2023). While our findings reflect the experiences of fact-checkers operating in non-WEIRD contexts, they nonetheless establish the groundwork for investigating their WEIRD counterparts. Western fact-checkers address similar threats that erode institutional trust and contend with the failure of social platforms to establish a multistakeholder framework to address mis- and disinformation, even if these problems remain more pronounced and widespread in non-WEIRD contexts.

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