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META'S 3PFC SPEECH GOVERNANCE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE FACT-CHECKING CONTENT MODERATION INFRASTRUCTURE

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Introduction

Social media play a pivotal role in managing the environments where political debate and public deliberation occur, and therefore must contend with the targets set by official bodies and policymakers to ward off harmful speech and mis/disinformation in their platforms. Following concerns about the spread of problematic information online, several government and multistakeholder policy frameworks have endorsed fact-checking to moderate content on social platforms (European Commission, 2022; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The establishment of fact-checking-as-content-moderation initiatives, particularly Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program (3PFC), has sparked controversies, as they impinge on fact-checkers' public-oriented principles to partake in social platforms' opaque bureaucracy (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022). Despite the mixed, if mostly positive, impact of fact-checking on information online (Graham & Porter, 2024; Walter et al., 2019), little is known about the criteria applied by social platforms' content moderation infrastructure to address problematic information.

Recent work has highlighted the role of social platforms in regulating online speech and noted that the content moderation of social platform operate within broader speech governance infrastructures responsible for distributing, promoting, categorizing, and restricting user-generated content (Douek, 2022; Gillespie, 2022; Iliadis & Ford, 2023). Rather than merely responding to bad user behavior associated with mis/disinformation, these infrastructures rely on normative parameters that anticipate the characteristics of speech ultimately subjected to moderation (Finn & Ananny, 2024). Nonetheless, internet scholars widely agree on the lack of operational transparency and hindered access to the criteria driving the content moderation policies of social platforms (Walker et al., 2019). Given the multilayered infrastructure of both human and automated tools administering speech and determining the visibility of content (McNally & Bastos, 2025), incoming research must develop methods that can shed light onto social platform's opaque infrastructures (de Keulenaar et al., 2023).

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This paper examines the speech governance parameters applied by Meta's 3PFC to moderate problematic information. Leveraging digital methods and approaches developed in journalism studies, it implements a series of manual and computational techniques to curate a comprehensive dataset combining fact-checking content commissioned by Meta's 3PFC program—available through the Facebook URLs Dataset (Meta, n.d.)—and fact-checks produced independently from Meta's program. We probe this database to identify the criteria applied by Meta's speech governance through the 3PFC program across five countries: Argentina, Philippines, Portugal, United Kingdom, and South Africa, with content spanning three languages (English, Spanish, and Portuguese).

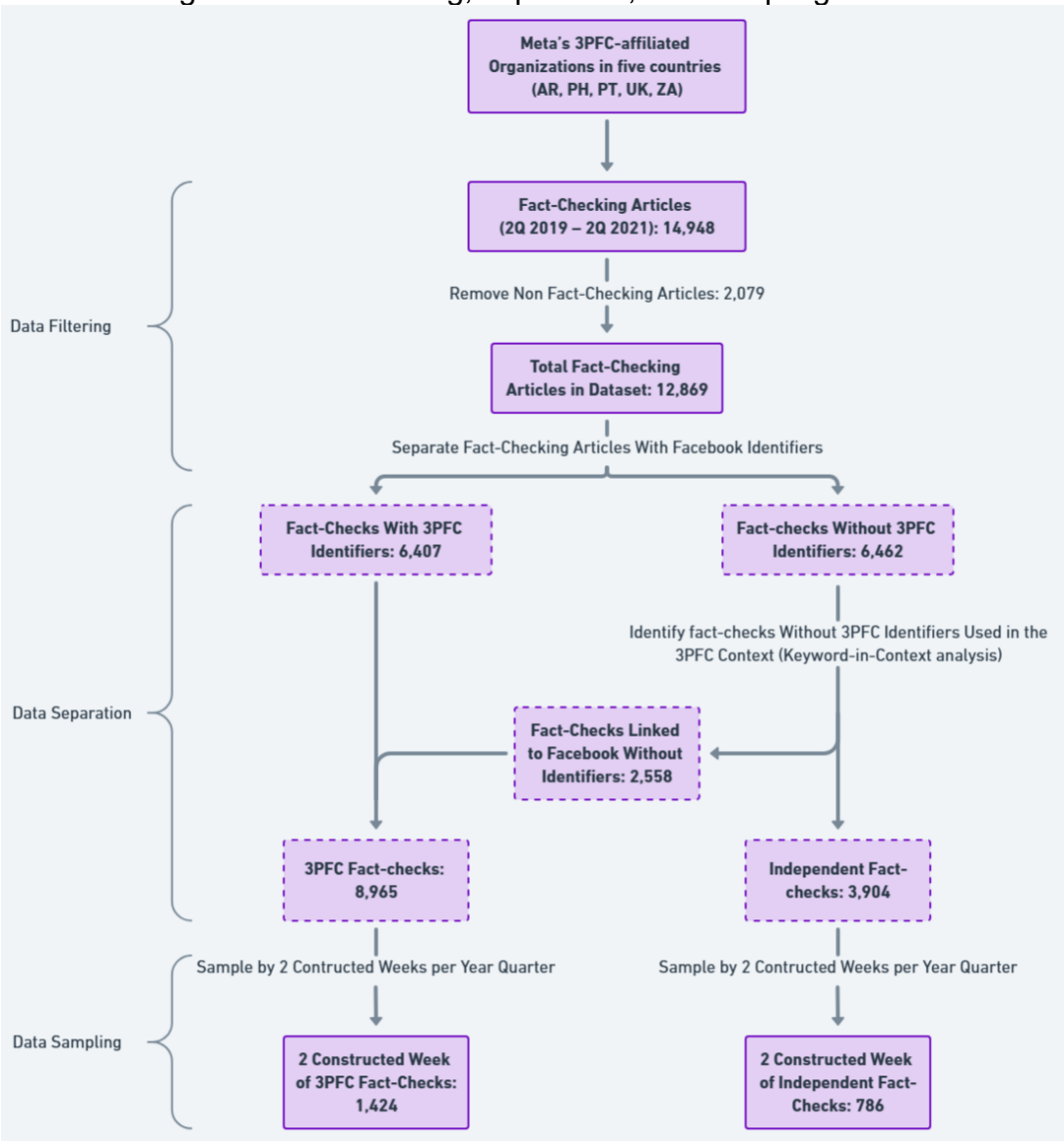
Considering the looming end of Meta's 3PFC system worldwide and the recently declared laissez-faire commitments of US-based tech companies to public speech (Silverman, 2025), this paper addresses the normative standards consolidated by Meta's content moderation infrastructure through outsourced fact-checking work. The findings contribute to developing platform governance policies in a context where countries like Australia, Brazil, India, and the European Union are designing or implementing regulatory frameworks to hold social platforms accountable (Anastácio, 2024; Liu, 2024; Ó Fathaigh et al., 2021).

Data & Method

The paper employs a quantitative content analysis on a sample of 2,210 fact-checking articles published by all fact-checking organizations affiliated with Meta's 3PFC in Argentina, Philippines, Portugal, United Kingdom, and South Africa between Q2-2019 and Q2-2021. This period covers the lion's share of fact-checked URLs that appear in the Facebook URLs Dataset (Evans & King, 2022). Data was collected by scraping all available fact-checking articles published in the websites of the organizations affiliated with the 3PFC program in the above countries. The selected organizations maintain a national editorial focus rather than an international one and therefore exclude organizations such as Reuters in the UK.

Next we used CrowdTangle and Facebook search queries to manually cross-check each URL marked as fact-checked in the Facebook URLs Dataset to identify the fact-checking article attached to posts labeled on the platform. We identified 778 unique fact-checking articles in the full period covered by the database, which served as a reference for identifying the formal attributes and common textual characteristics of fact-checks produced within the context of the 3PFC program. These parameters outline the fact-checking formats (fact-checks, debunking, explainers, etc.) produced by organizations in the context of the 3PFC program used to differentiate 3PFC fact-checks from independent fact-checks.

Figure 1. Flow diagram of data filtering, separation, and sampling



We employed a constructed week sampling (Monday to Friday) to extract a dataset conducive to manual quantitative content analysis. Constructed week sampling is considered more effective than random sampling as it accounts for topical variation of news-related content (Riffe et al., 2019), a feature that is particularly suitable to capture the seasonal nature of fact-checking trends (Singer, 2023). This method has been extensively used and validated, with six constructed weeks per year considered the best approach for news articles (Luke et al., 2011). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the distribution of fact-checking articles in our dataset.

Table 1. Distribution of Fact-Checking Articles in the Dataset per Organization

Organization	Country	Type	3PFC	Independent
AFP Argentina	Argentina	Global News Agency	68	2
Chequeado		Non-profit	177	212
AFP Philippines	Philippines	Global News Agency	38	1
Rappler		Digital News Media	112	42
VERA Files		Non-profit	89	72
Observador	Portugal	Digital News Media	112	27
Poligrafo		Independent Agency	206	150
Africa Check	South Africa	Non-profit	416	90
AFP South Africa		Global News Agency	21	2
Full Fact	UK	Non-profit	179	160
FactCheck.NI		Non-profit	6	28

The quantitative content analysis is effective at surfacing tangible differences between 3PFC and independent fact-checks. Three independent coders have undergone 35 hours of training and are in the final stages of achieving optimal reliability levels on 10% of the data. The analysis is conducted at both the article level, examining (a) theme, (b) author of the claim, (c) geographic scope of the claim, and (d) verification sources; and at the source level to determine the geographic location of sources. We build on previous research to develop a codebook (Cazzamatta, 2024; Leon et al., 2022; Mahl et al., 2024) that integrates a pre-analysis of the data conducted by the authors through inductive coding.

Preliminary Results

Descriptive findings from the data cataloging process highlight the disparity in the quantity of 3PFC fact-checks produced in comparison to independent fact-checks. With the exception of a few organizations (Chequeado, VERA Files, Poligrafo, and Full Fact), most organizations show a disproportionate reliance on the 3PFC program, particularly the national fact-checking units from AFP. This issue is more salient in South Africa, with all organizations working primarily on content sourced through Meta's fact-checking program. These results are consistent with previous findings from qualitative interviews that point to the development of two substantially distinct fact-checking regimes—one conducted independently in line with fact-checkers' public-oriented mission and the other aligned with Meta's speech governance through the 3PFC program (Graves et al., 2023; Vinhas & Bastos, 2023).

Our preliminary results also show that the vast majority of 3PFC fact-checks focus on viral posts authored by anonymous users on social platforms. Consistent with Meta's fact-checking framework (Meta, 2022), this approach prioritizes corporate guidelines that enforce a tiered content governance infrastructure (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020), a dimension that our dataset makes observable. It further elucidates that this speech governance regime assigns responsibility for problematic content to end-users by administering the visibility of their speech acts while exempting elite actors—such as politicians and influential accounts—from accountability (Cotter et al., 2022).

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