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WHAT IS FACT-CHECKING ETHICS? EXAMINING FACT-CHECKERS' ETHICAL
PRACTICES AND FACTORS OF INFLUENCE IN SEVEN COUNTRIES IN THE GLOBAL
NORTH AND SOUTH

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Abstract

This case study research investigated what constitutes excellence in fact-checking ethical practices through the perspectives of fact-checkers from 12 fact-checking organizations in North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslim-majority South Asia. Following interviews with 28 fact-checkers from seven countries – U.S., Canada, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Pakistan and Bangladesh – this study also investigates these fact-checkers’ perceptions on factors that influence their ethical decision-making and how these perceived factors of influence play different roles in fact-checking in three different cultural contexts. Guided by virtue ethics, MacIntyre (2007)’s theory of practice, Islamic ethics, and the African moral theory of Ubuntu, this study also analyzes documents of fact-checking organizations and the International Fact-Checking Network’s code of principles.

Analysis of interview data reveals eight themes capturing the interviewed fact-checkers’ normative commitments. Across these themes, the fact-checkers consistently emphasize core principles and key virtues needed for ethical practice in fact-checking. These themes of the standards of excellence in fact-checking are: verify the claim with diligence; be unbiased, neutral, nonpartisan and fair; be transparent about your practice; use sources and provide attribution to them; consider harm and virality; be skeptical and curious and search for truth; make corrections; simplify storytelling for clarity and ensuring democracy. The analysis also led to the emergence of the following overarching themes of influencing factors: audience, personal level, religion and morality, IFCN codes, influence from external factors such as state, social media platforms and partners, and Ubuntu. All the fact-checkers confirm the presence of one or the other influence in their ethical decision-making process and practice. The study finds that influencing factors operate at two primary levels: the *macro* or cultural level, and the *meso* or

organizational level. This study introduces an ethics-based claim selection framework, emphasizing harm-virality, for fact-checking. Findings from this study also reveal that fact-checking ethics is simultaneously convergent and culturally situated, with religious and moral frameworks such as Islamic ethics and Ubuntu demonstrating that geographical and cultural contexts continue to shape how ethical principles are understood and applied. A key contribution of the study is that it discusses some key concepts and character traits relevant to the fact-checking practice, contributing to the virtue ethics scholarship and MacIntyre's idea of practice.

Keywords: fact-checking, media ethics, virtue, Islamic ethics, Ubuntu

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of Study	5
Significance of Study	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS	7
Fact-Checking: A New Type of Journalism?	7
<i>Meaning and Brief Historical Development of Fact-checking.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Fact-checking Classification</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Professional Norms and Ethical Principles of Fact-checking.....</i>	<i>14</i>
Theoretical Frameworks	23
<i>Virtue Theory</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Excellence in Online Journalism</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Islamic Ethics for Communication and Journalism</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Islamic Ethics and Fact-checking.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Ubuntu for Journalism and Fact-checking.....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Research Questions.....</i>	<i>61</i>
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD	63
Multiple Case Study	65
Data Collection.....	66
<i>Interviews with Participants</i>	<i>66</i>

<i>Document Collection</i>	73
Data Analysis	73
Validity and Reliability	76
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	77
Research Question One	78
Research Question Two (a)	101
Research Question Two (b)	131
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	152
Virtues' Connection to Ethical Standards; and Fact-checking <i>Telos</i>	154
Internal Goods	155
External Goods	157
Findings' Connection to Literature	158
Influence on Ethical Practice	167
Differences of Influences	170
Conclusion	173
References	176
Appendices	199
Appendix A	199
Appendix B	202

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Scholars (Graves et al., 2015) argue that fact-checking is “a new type of journalism” (p. 1) aiming at assessing the accuracy of political leaders’ public statements, while some (Amazeen, 2019) argue public statements could come from any quarter of society. Fact-checkers, as opposed to traditional journalists, intend not to eliminate incorrect claims but rather publicize that the claims were found to be incorrect (Amazeen, 2013; Graves, 2016). Fact-checking of any information occurs after it reaches the public domain and not before, and therefore, Singer (2023, p. 332) argued that the process can be seen as “retroactive gatekeeping.”

Fact-checking is at present not limited to the United States and the Western world, but has reached a global level (Singer, 2021; Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Mena, 2019; Amazeen, 2015; Nieminen, & Rapeli, 2019). Fact-checking activities saw a rise in 2020 compared to previous years and played a significant role in debunking false narratives, misinformation and disinformation related to the Covid-19 virus (Siwakoti et al., 2021).

Researchers (Singer, 2021; Graves, 2018; Amazeen, 2015) stress that fact-checkers and journalists share similar normative characteristics; however, fact-checkers prefer to distinguish themselves from traditional journalists and believe that they repair the damage traditional media have caused to public trust in recent years (Graves, 2018), correcting the shortcomings of journalists (Amazeen, 2019). According to fact-checking scholarship, which is mostly focused on Western fact-checkers (Singer, 2021; Graves, 2017, 2018, Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Mena, 2019), fact-checkers believe that legacy media have fallen short in their role of providing information to audiences, and therefore, these media organizations and the information they disseminate should be corrected. Information can be described as fragments of assessed

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

knowledge and data that are accessible and exchanged among communicative actors (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Zúñiga, 2021).

Fact-checkers consider truth, impartiality, accountability, objectivity, independence, transparency, completeness in the information presented, and balance as normative responsibilities (Singer, 2021). They emphasize transparency and accountability (Singer, 2023), and also perceive themselves as educators for the public rather than just information suppliers (Singer, 2021; Graves, 2017). In September 2016, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, developed a code of principles for the growing movement of fact-checking (Poynter, 2019) in the absence of normative theoretical support (Singer, 2021; Graves, 2017; Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Mena, 2019; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019). These guidelines have also been nicknamed the fact-checkers' code of ethics (Poynter, 2019). The five-point code of ethics emphasizes transparency, nonpartisanship, and fairness (Mantzaris, 2016b). At present, a total of 100 fact-checking organizations are verified signatories of the IFCN code of ethics, according to the IFCN website (Poynter, n.d.).

Scholars have stressed that the journalism codes of ethics were linked to different philosophical and theoretical perspectives – for example, deontological, utilitarian, or virtue based (Bivins, 2014; Slattery, 2014 and 2016; Starr, 1983). This study on fact-checkers' perceived ethical practices is guided by virtue ethics, which can explain how professionals exercise their skills and talents within practices and social behavior (Cunningham, 1999). According to Borden (2013) virtue ethics is important for journalism, as both the individual journalist and the practice of journalism benefit from virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is also important for understanding the motivations behind professional practices (Quinn, 2007; Cunningham, 1999).

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

This study is also guided by MacIntyre's (2007) theory of practice, which is derived from virtue ethics and provides an ethical lens that can be applied to understand excellence in journalism (Craig, 2011). Besides, two other non-Western ethical perspectives – Ubuntu and Islamic ethical frameworks - are also important in this study as it investigates the ethical perspectives of fact-checkers from the non-Western world. According to Wasserman (2021), media ethics scholarship needs to discuss issues related to non-Western ethical frameworks. Ubuntu looks at journalists not as mere outsiders or observers in society, but as core members thereof (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2021). In Ubuntu journalism, the media “serve as a forum for thoughtful and constructive process for democratic deliberation” (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2021, p. 96). This African communitarian ethical framework (Wasserman, 2021) is now being explored and used as a normative theory of the press (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2021). Media ethics scholars – Malik (2021) Hamada (2016) – also emphasized the importance of including Islamic ethical principles in the journalism ethics discussion in an attempt at “de-Westernization of the field of journalism ethics” (Malik, 2021, p. 85). Some also argued that when it comes to ethics related to the communication field, the Western ethical frameworks were well researched and much more discussed in comparison to Islamic ethical frameworks (Malik, 2021; Hamada, 2016; Mowlana, 2007). Islamic ethical ideas, including justice, freedom, transparency, truth-telling, and public interest, are considered useful for continuing the discussion on fact-checking ethics (Alam et al., 2026).

Research (Kim & Buzzelli, 2022; Graves, 2018; Schuldt, 2021) on fact-checking investigated the organizational or institutional logic and funding (or business models) of these organizations and found that these affect fact-checkers' normative and professional practices. The organizational logic, based on key elements such as ownership, affiliation, and human

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

resources, illustrates the existence of various types of fact-checking organizations. These include organizations connected to legacy and non-legacy media, the NGO model, politically-affiliated, government-run, university or academia-founded, and independent or stand-alone organizations with no ties to other organizational types. Graves (2018) simplified the organizational logic and categorized fact-checkers into three major groups – journalistic, academic, and political. Kim and Buzzelli (2022) categorized fact-checking organizations into advocacy, non-profit and media. Researchers also categorized U.S.- based fact-checkers according to their business models and funding models. Fact-checkers mostly receive funding through their parent companies (primarily media), foundations or philanthropical organizations, government funding, foreign state aid, individual donors, selling their content to news outlets, and even advertisements. Fact-checking researchers also found that how fact-checkers carried out their professionalism and normative practices, including selecting claims or statements, independence, and transparency, was shaped by their organizational logic and business model. For example, Schuldt (2021) found that three South East Asian government-run fact-checkers shaped the political discourse in those countries, and Graves (2018) noted that Ukrainian StopFake was deliberately working against Russian propaganda. In addition, non-profit and stand-alone fact-checkers were found to be more transparent than fact-checkers housed in legacy news organizations (Kim & Buzzelli, 2022). Siebert et al. (1956) emphasized that every press norm was influenced and imbued with the social and political contexts in which it functioned. While their statement pertains to a broad normative framework, it highlights the crucial idea that the media institution and journalism profession in the U.S., Africa, and Asia are intimately connected with and molded by their unique realities.

Purpose of Study

The main objective of the study is to investigate what constitutes excellence in fact-checking ethical practices through the perspectives of fact-checkers at 12 fact-checking organizations in North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslim-majority South Asia. It also aims to explore fact-checkers' perception of how a range of factors influence their ethical decision-making and investigate how the perceived factors of influences play different roles in fact-checking at the *macro* (cultural) and *meso* (organizational) levels.

Thus, this study discusses whether fact-checkers at organizations in different social and cultural settings practice ethics differently and how the influencing factors of ethics act differently on these fact-checkers' professional practices. Studies on fact-checking (Kim and Buzzelli, 2022; Graves, 2018; Schuldt, 2021) have demonstrated that social, cultural, political, and organizational dynamics significantly shape the professional practices of fact-checkers. However, this body of work has not extensively explored the connection between fact-checkers' individual ethical understanding and practices. This study contributes to the fact-checking and journalism scholarship by analyzing fact-checkers' perceptions of both Western (virtue ethics) and non-Western (Ubuntu and Islamic) ethical frameworks, enhancing scholars' understanding of their ethical perspectives and practices across diverse cultural contexts. According to virtue ethics scholars (e.g. MacIntyre, 2007; Annas, 2007; Oakley & Cocking, 2001, Stole, 2001; Blackburn, 2003) this framework is not only an important tenet of recent philosophy but also helps researchers understand professionals' actions, practices, norms, and roles. Meanwhile, both the theoretical frameworks of Ubuntu and Islamic ethics are culturally relevant to some research participants in this study, namely fact-checkers from Muslim majority South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

This case study research applies qualitative in-depth interviews for data collection to explore fact-checkers' ethical practices, and influences of their ethical practices. The researcher interviewed fact-checkers from fact-checking organizations in the Global South and Global North or Western countries and analyzed the correction policies available on the fact-checking organizations' websites and the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) code of principles.

Significance of Study

Nieminen and Rapeli (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of fact-checking scholarship and found that available research on fact-checking heavily focused on the effects of fact-checking on audiences, fact-checking as a profession, and the fact-checkers' normative roles and practices. To the best of the author's knowledge, no scholarship has so far investigated fact-checking ethics in accordance with Western and non-Western ethical theories and frameworks to determine what constitutes excellence in fact-checking ethics. This study contributes to professional and scholarly understandings of fact-checking ethics, and excellence by bringing together theory and systematic discussion of practice through insights from interviews with individual fact-checkers. The study is significant in light of the relevance of fact-checking organizations in the current social realities of "post-truth" (Gade, 2011) when fact-checking emerged as a journalistic approach and began evaluating statements available in the public domain (Graves, 2017, 2018; Amazeen, 2013, 2015; Mena, 2019). The study also promotes the discussion of fact-checking ethics from countries of the Global South, which have not garnered much attention in scholarship on fact-checking. According to the researcher's reading of fact-checking scholarship, no study was found that focused on the comparative ethical practices of fact-checkers from different geographical and cultural contexts. From that perspective, this study also contributes to the fact-checking scholarship.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This chapter focuses on the discussion of fact-checking scholarship and the ethical theory frameworks that guide the study on fact-checking ethical practices and factors of ethical influence on fact-checkers. In the first part of the literature review, the discussion moves toward explaining several aspects related to fact-checking, including the meaning and history of fact-checking, fact-checking classification, as well as the normative and less-discussed ethical issues. The second part is divided into three ethical theoretical frameworks – virtue ethics, Islamic ethics and Ubuntu – and elaborates on how these three ethical frameworks may be useful in understanding the ethical practices of fact-checkers from the three continents relevant to this study.

Fact-Checking: A New Type of Journalism?

The words “fact-checker” and “fact-checking” first appeared in the English language in the 1930s. These words referred to an emerging role of journalists “that both reflected and helped to cement the modern, professional understanding of journalism as bound by an ethical commitment to report objectively” (Graves & Amazeen, 2019, p. 2). Fact-checking has now reached 100 countries and joined the movement of debunking political lies, hoaxes, misinformation and disinformation. This global movement has more than doubled since 2015, according to a Poynter report (Stencel et al., 2022). A Duke Reporters Lab estimate mentioned that 452 fact-checkers were active as of January 2026 (Duke Reporters’ Lab, 2026).

This section of the literature will discuss the root, meaning, classification, and professional norms and ethical principles of fact-checking with the help of available literature and meta-journalistic discourse on fact-checking.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Meaning and Brief Historical Development of Fact-checking

Fact-checking, according to Graves and Amazeen (2019), can be defined in three ways – first as a step during the news production process that aims to confirm the details in news stories; second, as a general verification function of reporters that emphasizes crosschecking the information collected from multiple sources, and thirdly, as an emerging journalism genre that checks the accuracy of the claims and information already circulated in the media and digital sphere. The latter is “external fact-checking,” while internal fact-checking verifies and corrects errors before publication (Graves & Amazeen, 2019; Graves, 2016). External fact-checking is also known as “post-hoc” or “political” (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). Scholars (Graves & Amazeen, 2019; Graves, 2016; Singer, 2019) look at fact-checking as an effort to combat misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news.” Thus, fact-checking is seen as a democracy-building tool where such tools are not strong and are “perceived to be weak” (Amazeen, 2020, p. 99). Fact-checking is also considered a reform movement within the journalism profession, and Amazeen (2020) thinks it is also a “superior form” of journalism as it involves correcting the factual errors journalism commits. Scholars (Amazeen, 2020; Graves & Amazeen, 2019) also think of fact-checking as an occupation that has three key goals – improving journalism, improving political discussion and behavior, and educating people. Graves et al. (2015) argued that, following the historical innovations in the journalism practices and profession, fact-checking was the latest innovation in journalism practice followed by other innovative practices such as interpretative journalism (which emerged in 1930s) and precision journalism of the 1970s. This innovation was aided by new techniques of reporting in the journalism profession by not following the “he said/she said” journalism (Graves et al., 2015, Amazeen, 2013). Fact-checking has evolved over the past half-century as political reporters have grown increasingly

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

skeptical of officials, becoming more willing to challenge and critically analyze their claims (Graves, 2016). This practice often pulls journalists away from the straightforward reporting of hard facts and into more complex territories involving evaluation, interpretation, and even subjective opinion. Graves (2016) also argued that fact-checkers see fact checks as an antidote to stenographic reporting which helped the Bush administration build its case for the Iraq invasion in 2002 and 2003.

Graves (2016) investigated the roots of fact-checking and found that it had some commonalities with journalism, all while having some distinct characteristics. This new form of journalism, external fact-checking (Graves, 2016; Amazeen, 2020; Singer, 2021), or a part of investigative journalism (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024) was working to hold people accountable and helping democracy flourish by asking questions about mainstream journalism. Singer (2023) argued that fact-checking was by nature a form of retroactive gatekeeping as fact-checkers were “retroactively assessing information that is already published” (p. 338). Fact-checking started its journey in the 20th century in American newsrooms, specifically in news magazines, which Graves and Amazeen (2019) termed as internal fact-checking. These scholars (Graves & Amazeen, 2019) argued that newspapers in the U.S. did not have internal fact-checking units in their newsrooms, although “the term broadly meant the verification routine and the professional concern with factual accuracy” (p. 1) of the news or non-fiction articles produced by those magazines.

The fact-checking movement that Graves and Amazeen (2019) thought of as external fact-checking has now spread globally as misinformation and disputed realities have expanded. Fact-checking organizations are now operating at the state or regional level as well as the national level. Some fact-checkers have also gone beyond the boundary of a nation state and

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

serve multiple countries and their people (Graves, 2016). For example, *Africa Check* started its journey from South Africa and is now serving Nigeria, Kenya and some other African countries while *Full Fact* from the United Kingdom is an example of a national level fact-checking organization that serves the British people.

Fact-checking Classification

Fact-checking organizations vary widely in their affiliations, funding models, structures, and levels of transparency. While many are embedded within legacy news outlets, others operate independently through NGOs, academia, or political movements, and some are even state-run (Graves, 2016; 2018; Schuldt, 2021; Alam et al., 2025). Funding ranges from advertising and donations to philanthropic grants and corporate support (Singer, 2019; Kim & Buzzelli, 2022). Organizational structure shapes both methodology and the practice of transparency among the fact-checking organizations (Kim & Buzzelli, 2022; Ye, 2023).

Graves (2016) also found that fact-checking organizations also operated from and with the affiliation of media outlets, mostly from legacy news outlets; for example, the *Washington Post*'s fact-checking unit is called *The Factchecker*. Some other fact-checking organizations were established and operated by non-governmental organizations, academia or universities, and independent journalists (Graves, 2016). For example, *Factchecker.org* was established at the University of Pennsylvania; *Chequedo* in Latin America is classified as an NGO-driven fact-checker; France's *Le Monde*, Chile's *El Mercurio*, Brazil's *O Globo*, and Germany's *Der Spiegel* are examples of journalistic core (Graves, 2018).

Fact-checkers operate online, and have common ethical commitments and overlapping methods, but the ones attached to a journalistic background assume their journalistic mission differently than sites with an NGO or academic background (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). For

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

example, fact-checking organizations with a journalistic core tend not to fact-check other news organizations (Graves, 2018). The NGO or academia-driven fact-checking organizations rely on researchers who have no journalistic background and apply social scientific approaches for selecting claims, while journalistic core fact-checking organizations rely on perceived newsworthiness (Graves, 2018).

Although fact-checking had once begun in journalistic organizations and was limited to professional journalism, it has now been taken up by political parties, campaigns, partisan media watchdogs (Graves, 2018); while Schuldt (2021) and Alam et al. (2025) found that the governments of five South Asian and South East Asian countries – India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore also run state-owned fact-checking services and shape the political discourse in those countries. Graves (2018) also pointed out that fact-checking organizations rooted in political axis were also developed out of a political movement; for example, India-based *FactChecker.in* emerged from an anti-corruption movement, and Turkey's *Dogruluk Payi* was launched during the Gezi Park protest in 2014.

Graves and Cherubini (2016) classified European fact-checking organizations into two categories — newsroom-affiliated and independently operated. Singer (2019), analyzing 126 fact-checking organizations globally, found 74 were affiliated with and financially supported by media outlets, while 52 followed an entrepreneurial model — mostly found in less democratic countries. Most media-affiliated fact-checkers were legacy organizations, though in some countries, such as Ireland and South Korea, fact-checkers were affiliated with digital-only outlets. In the U.S., Kim and Buzzelli (2022) organizationally categorized fact-checking organizations into three types: advocacy (stand-alone or embedded in non-news outlets), non-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

profit (non-legacy, stand-alone, or part of larger non-profits), and legacy news outlets (local/regional or national).

Graves and Cherubini (2016) found that newsroom-affiliated fact-checkers in Europe benefited from the financial, human, and infrastructural resources of their parent outlets, but were not financially independent. Independent fact-checkers, many of which were NGO-backed (e.g., Serbia's Istinomer), received support from direct charity funding despite having fewer resources. Singer (2019) found that entrepreneurial fact-checkers drew on diverse funding models — typically a combination of philanthropic grants, user donations, NGO support, media partnerships, university funding, and contributions from tech companies like Facebook and Google. Some fact-checkers from emerging democracies, such as Bangladesh's Fact-watch and Croatian startups, received grants from U.S. organizations like the Department of State and the National Endowment for Democracy. Kim and Buzzelli (2022) found that U.S. fact-checkers were funded through advertising (74%), user donations (49%), foundation grants (40%), and corporate support (28%). Fact-checkers not affiliated with media organizations often struggled with monetary crises and resource constraints, while media outlet-backed organizations received satisfactory support from parent organizations (Singer, 2018).

Graves and Cherubini (2016) noted that newsroom-affiliated fact-checkers enjoyed large audience bases but lacked editorial independence, as parent outlets controlled both their editorial autonomy and financial matters. Independent fact-checkers, by contrast, operated with greater autonomy despite smaller audiences and fewer resources. Kim and Buzzelli (2022) found that organizational structure influenced fact-checking methodologies. Stand-alone fact-checkers mostly followed *PolitiFact's* Truth-O-Meter scale for evaluating statements, while legacy-affiliated outlets such as *CNN* relied more on narrative-style judgment. A study of eight Latin

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

American fact-checking organizations similarly found that fact-checkers considered the *PolitiFact* as a “role model” (Gil et al., 2021; p. 255). The Latin American fact-checking organizations’ editors also agreed that they follow *The Washington Post’s Fact Checker* and *FactCheck.org* (U.S.); *Channel 4* and *Full Fact* (UK); and *Le Monde* and *Liberation* (France) (Gil et al., 2021).

Graves and Cherubini (2016) discussed the normative practices of fact-checkers. According to them (Graves & Cherubini, 2016) fact-checkers considered promoting truth in public discourse as their key role, with five salient missions: giving citizens information for political choices, improving public discourse, holding politicians accountable, and promoting accuracy and independence in journalism. Scholars (Kim & Buzzelli, 2022; Ye, 2023) also reported that the practice of transparency in fact-checking is shaped by the organizational and funding structures. Kim and Buzzelli (2022) found that stand-alone fact-checkers were the most transparent, followed by non-profit, legacy, non-legacy, and advocacy outlets. Fact-checkers receiving funds from multiple sources were more likely to disclose their sources, while ad-funded fact-checkers were less transparent than those backed by foundations or private companies. Non-profit fact-checkers were more transparent than legacy news fact-checkers, partly because legacy outlets tend to be opaque about funding, ownership, and political affiliations, while non-profits are more open due to their reliance on public charity and philanthropy. Ye (2023), investigating fact-checkers across six countries, found that South African and U.S.-based organizations were the most transparent. NGO-model fact-checkers consistently scored higher than newsroom-model counterparts in transparency of sources, funding, and methodology, and were more proactive in disclosing staff information, publicizing their fact-checking processes, and engaging with users.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

In summary, fact-checking organizations vary in terms of their affiliations, sources of funding, and operational structures. Many fact-checkers are connected to traditional news media, others are linked to NGOs, academia, operated independently, or were affiliated with a political entity (Graves, 2016; 2018), while some scholars (Schuldt, 2021; Alam et al., 2025) also traced the existence of government-affiliated or government-run fact-checking organizations. Funding models vary widely, with some fact-checkers relying on grants and donations, while others receive direct funds from their affiliated media outlets (Singer, 2019; Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Research also shows that difference in funding sources impact transparency levels, with NGOs and independent fact-checkers generally being more open about their processes and funding than those connected to legacy news outlets (Kim & Buzzelli, 2022). Research indicates that independent fact-checkers are also more transparent and engage more openly with the public about their methodologies (Ye, 2023).

Professional Norms and Ethical Principles of Fact-checking

Fact-checkers mostly disseminate their content through social media and online platforms, following basic normative practices that echo the norms of journalists (Singer, 2021). These normative principles include correcting misinformation, strengthening people's trust in information, improving the public debate with quality information, enabling citizens to be well-informed and maintaining transparency, accuracy and objectivity. Their routines include audience engagement, fact-selection, fact-evaluation, report writing, and publishing. Fact-checkers are heavily focused on the gatekeeping process as they follow a rigorous review and information gathering process that entails vetting from multiple persons and sources, and taking a stand for or against any claims with proof (Amazeen, 2015). Graves (2016) noted that fact-checking did not emphasize "horse race" journalism, a popular news pattern followed by

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

traditional legacy media for years, but rather fact-checking took readers behind the public facade of political figures, providing transparency while minimizing accusations of bias.

While discussing about normative roles of fact-checking, Graves and Cherubini (2016) examined the five salient missions or roles of fact-checkers, as perceived by fact-checkers themselves in European countries. These roles included giving citizens information to make political choices, improving the quality of public political discourse, holding politicians accountable, promoting accuracy and independence in journalism and seeking policy change. The same researchers also found that fact-checkers understood promotion of truth in public discourse but adopted methods different from journalists to check claims. According to Graves and Cherubini's (2016) study, fact-checkers also considered themselves to be political and media watchdogs. Other scholars (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Meirick et al., 2017) found that fact-checking is effective in reducing the misinformation in political campaigns in the U.S. Nyhan & Reifler (2015) found that the fact-checking activities could be helpful in altering legislators' behavior in spreading misinformation during the political campaigns, while Meirick et al. (2017) found indications that ad watches help political campaign ads to be more accurate.

Van Wyk (2017) investigated the normative aspects of three fact-checking organizations in the Global South – *Africa Check*, *Chequedo* and *FactChecker*. The author also evaluated whether the fact-checking organizations fulfilled the six media functions required by social responsibility theory (SRT). The research showed that four of the functions of SRT - to supply public affairs information and further debate on these matters; enlighten society; keep watch against government abuses; and ensure financial sustainability to avoid undue pressure from strong supporters – were followed by the three fact-checking organizations. Graves (2016), in his field study on fact-checking organizations, unearthed that fact-checkers received many claims

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

but could only work on a few of them. They selected claims by applying the “news sense” and mostly focused on policy matters (Graves, 2016). Their claim selection also depended on the importance of the issue, or the extent to which people were/would be interested in a claim (Graves, 2016). Like journalists, fact-checkers interviewed people related to the facts to understand the matter more closely. Graves (2016) also found that the fact-checkers’ news-sense was not the same as that of reporters, as they put less emphasis on timeliness, originality and exclusivity. The fact-checkers took a day or a week to investigate and share their verdict about the claims. They also published claims covered by other fact-checkers (Graves, 2016). In another study, Graves (2017) outlined five key phases in the fact-checking process: selecting claims to verify, contacting the claim’s source, tracing falsehoods, consulting experts and sources, and publishing findings with transparency. Gil et al. (2021) reported fact-checkers had small numbers of employees – journalism students, journalists, economists, people with a background in psychology, political science, sociology, among other fields. In most cases, one person carried out one verification. Fact-checking used open access digital tools such as *Google*, *Yandex* and *Tineye*, among others, for verification. Dierickx and Lindén (2024) conducted qualitative interviews with 14 fact-checkers in Nordic countries and found respondents see transparency as a key professional value for two reasons – to achieve accountability and credibility, and to “hold public figures accountable” (p. 1). One respondent shared that fact-checkers did not want to convince audiences with immediately available evidence, neither do they tend to focus on traditional reporting or breaking news (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024). This study also found that the fact-checkers’ ethical norms were centered around two elements – the code of principles developed by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a consortium of fact-checkers launched in 2015 by Poynter Institute, and the traditional journalistic norms, principles and

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

ethical codes. For example, these fact-checkers shared that their idea of professional identity connected to journalism, and the fact-checking ethical guidelines developed by the IFCN and the press rules of Denmark were found to be overlapping, as mentioned by an interviewee (p. 10). The fact-checkers saw accuracy, credibility and fairness as three components of transparency, and discussed the importance of transparent methods of fact-checking that reflected the idea of replication widely followed in scientific research. Provision of the transparent method of acquiring information in debunking any claims was seen as a public service, in which the audience “must be able to follow the methods to achieve the same results” (p. 11).

In September 2016, a year after its birth, the IFCN developed the code of principles, also dubbed “the code of ethics for fact-checkers,” to promote excellence in fact-checking (Poynter, 2019). On their website, the IFCN mentions that, to ensure accountability in journalism, nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking is highly needed as biased and unsourced fact-checking can create distrust among the public (Poynter, 2019). The IFCN also developed a five-point code of ethics for its member organizations (Mantzaris, 2016), with a focus on commitment to:

1. Nonpartisanship and fairness
2. Transparency of sources
3. Transparency of funding and organization
4. Transparency of methodology
5. Open and honest corrections.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

A total of 168 fact-checkers from around the world are now signatories to this code of principles (IFCN, n.d.a), and even the “small” fact-checkers, not affiliated with the IFCN, now follow its principles of nonpartisanship and transparency (Mahl et al., 2024). Besides, two recent studies on fact-checking (Alam & Alam, 2024; Alam et al., 2026) have added to the previous work on fact-checking ethics by developing ethical frameworks for fact-checkers guided by the Social Responsibility Theory of Press and Islamic ethics. Alam and Alam (2024) developed a Social Responsibility Theory for fact-checking that emphasized eight functions – maintaining objectivity; practicing transparency; avoiding pressures and influences from their donors; practicing accuracy; self-correcting the outcomes; nonpartisanship, and impartiality; acting as a public debate platform; and correcting political misinformation to safeguard democratic values. Alam et al. (2026) attempted to focus on four key values in the context of Islamic ethics – justice, truth telling, transparency, and public interest – that may have implications for fact-checkers’ ethical practices.

Following a web-based survey with 61 fact-checkers and journalists involved in fact-checking activities in the U.S., Mena (2019) investigated the principles and purpose of fact-checking. Three groups of journalists were included in this study: regular fact-checkers, occasional fact-checkers, and journalists who have not yet published a fact-check but are interested in fact-checking. The first group, who was involved in fact-checking full-time (compared to their colleagues who fact-checked occasionally), stressed transparency of methodology as a core principle of fact-checking while the occasional fact-checkers differed on the matter of transparency. However, the fact-checkers overall thought that fact-checking should not be seen as activism and should be distanced from partisanship. These fact-checkers also shared mixed opinions on providing judgement on any fact-checked content as “respondents had

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

no consensus on the use of the word 'lie' in fact-checking" (p. 668), although most of them wanted to advocate for or take a position on a certain issue. The fact-checkers shared two main purposes of fact-checking – evaluating the accuracy of public figures' statements and claims, and debunking false news on social media (Mena, 2019). Although fact-checking initially focused more on checking public officials'/political leaders' claims or statements than checking the spread of misinformation on social media, fact-checking norms have shifted its focus to a "debunking turn" (Graves et al., 2023). This debunking turn, which started following the surge of "fake news" centering around the 2016 U.S. national election (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020; Mantzarlis, 2018), was also facilitated by social media platform companies. As a result, platform partners raised concerns about the "autonomy" of fact-checkers (Graves et al., 2023, p. 17). These scholars argued that the debunking turn also took the fact-checkers away from their watchdog role in journalism – that was applauded for holding the powerful or public figures accountable – and situated them in a position to attend or manage audience behavior, widening the professional boundary (Graves et al., 2023).

According to Mena (2019), fact-checkers then challenged the idea of adversarial journalism, an approach that allows journalism to be more judgmental and share their values (Ceci & Williams, 2020). The scholarship on fact-checking also presented evidence for how the fact-checkers were engaged in partisanship but were not detaching their values from their professional activities (Feng et al., 2021; Graves, 2016; Tsang, 2023; Ceci & Williams, 2020). Fact-checkers with partisan background adhered to professional fact-checking practices (Feng et al., 2021) and were not distant from their non-partisan fact-checker counterparts (Tsang et al., 2023). Graves (2016) also claimed that the political fact-checkers were not distant from their political partisanship and values. Psychologists like Ceci and Williams (2020) echoed the

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

existence of partisan rooting of fact-checkers and advocated for adversarial fact-checking – that allowed fact-checkers from different political views to evaluate a claim – a system “that places the evidence for competing claims front and center” (Ceci & Williams, 2020, para. 10). The fact-checkers’ selection and evaluation methodology have been criticized as “subjective” by Ucinski and Butler (2013), while in response to these criticisms, Amazeen (2015) claimed that fact-checking as a type of journalism did not claim itself as a scientific method. A recurring concern in the field is whether fact-checkers apply consistent methods and reliable conclusions (Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019). Given this context, Alam and Alam (2024) advocated for fact-checking to practice pragmatic objectivity as suggested by Ward (1999). This asks fact-checkers to check not only the value judgements and interpretations of other people but also their own fact-checked contents for accuracy and credibility. Birks (2021), however, argued for abandoning objectivity from fact-checking journalism, and referred to fact-checking as a form of interpretive journalism that focused not only on the accuracy of the facts but also sought to uncover how they were framed within the broader context of a narrative or argument (Birks, 2021).

Despite these criticisms from scholars, fact-checking organizations have gained credibility among journalists in the U.S., as evidenced by the increase in fact-checked references in newspapers and broadcast media between 2001 and 2012 (Amazeen, 2013). Given the ongoing job cuts and staff reductions, newsrooms may increasingly rely on these organizations for accurate information to share with their audiences (Amazeen, 2015). Nieminen and Rapeli (2019), in a review of 48 studies on fact-checking, excluding research on automated methods and non-English texts, found that fact-checking scholarship primarily focused on two themes: the impact of fact-checking and its development as a profession. The studies showed that fact-checking could reduce public misperceptions, though sometimes corrections had limited impact.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Most of this research was concentrated on Western democracies, particularly on the U.S. (Neiminen & Rapeli, 2019). Some scholars (Mahl et al., 2024) attempted to compare fact-checking activities from two different cultures and political settings – the Global North (Germany) and the Global South (Brazil) – and found that the fact-checking cultures transcended the boundaries of organizations and nations. This phenomenon was termed *mimetic isomorphism* – a term used to explain a phenomenon where organizations follow each other and mimic the strategies taken by their established peers (Mahl et al., 2024). Dierickx and Linden (2026) found that fact-checkers in Nordic countries prioritized source transparency by avoiding anonymous sources. Humprecht’s (2020) study found that source transparency was also a key practice in fact-checking but the nature of source transparency depended on the information environment and type of fact-checking organization. Without focusing on source transparency, Vu et al. (2023) found that fact-checkers were focusing on reliable sources, including authorities, experts, scientific studies, and news media.

Other researchers (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018) investigated African fact-checkers’ professional norms, finding that these fact-checkers, whom scholars considered “non-journalistic” actors, were located at the periphery of the news media but their activities and goals were at the heart of the journalistic discourse. The fact-checkers assumed public service and holding the powerful accountable, informing the public, storytelling, and truth-seeking as their perceived professional norms and roles. Alam et al. (2025) showed how governments in two South Asian countries – India and Pakistan – undertook fact-checking and shaped the political discourse there. However, some others also conducted research on non-governmental fact-checking in South Asia. Haque et al. (2018) discussed how fact-checkers in three South Asian countries — India, Bangladesh and Nepal — worked and how audiences and users of these fact-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

checking organizations received, perceived and reacted to the content produced and shared by fact-checkers. This study revealed some of the challenges fact-checkers faced in these countries. It also highlighted certain issues related to fact-checkers' business model and financial issues, including a lack of resources and technologies, and political pressure. A qualitative content analysis of declarations published by seven Indian fact-checking organizations reveals that fact-checking followed systematic and transparent methods and transparency had become a central guiding principle for fact-checking journalism in India (Kumer, 2022).

In summary, scholars have been discussing fact-checking norms (Singer, 2021; Van Wyk, 2017; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018), routines (Singer, 2021; Graves, 2016; Graves, 2017), professional roles (Graves, 2016 & 2017), missions (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Mena, 2019) gatekeeping processes (Amazeen, 2015), fact-checkers' backgrounds (Gill et al., 2021), ethical and normative principles (Dierickx & Linden, 2026; Mahl et al; 2024, Mena, 2019) for nearly a decade. The scholarship has made significant contributions to the overall journalism and fact-checking research. However, these studies did not explicitly discuss and investigate fact-checking in relation to the ethical theories which originated both in Western and non-Western contexts. A few of the studies, for example, Alam and Alam (2024), Mahl et al., (2024) and Dierickx and Linden (2026) attempted to focus on fact-checking ethics, but none of them emphasized fact-checkers' ethical practices through the lenses of virtue ethics, Islamic ethics and Ubuntu. Ethical theories offer a structured approach to analyzing the ethical perspectives that can influence fact-checkers' practices. Incorporating non-Western perspectives into this body of knowledge is relevant for this study that focuses on diverse cultural contexts and supports previous arguments in media ethics scholarship that advocate for the broader application of non-Western ethical frameworks (Wasserman, 2021). This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the fact-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

checking research as it investigates the ethical practices and the motivators of ethical practices assumed by the fact-checkers.

Theoretical Frameworks

This section focuses on the three theoretical frameworks from ethical theory that guide the research on fact-checkers' ethical practices and factors of influence. The frameworks are virtue ethics, Islamic ethics, and Ubuntu ethics. Virtue ethics, based on Aristotle, is a framework situated in the Western philosophical tradition, and MacIntyre's (2007) theory builds out of this perspective. A virtuous individual is characterized by virtues including fairness, kindness, honesty, truth-seeking, patience and generosity. In contrast, Islamic ethics and Ubuntu are considered non-Western frameworks. Islamic ethics is based on religious principles and interpretations of Islamic scholars, emphasizing values such as truth, justice, transparency, and public service. Ubuntu, an African moral theory, places a strong emphasis on community. The latter two frameworks helped the researcher examine the ethical perspectives of fact-checkers from two Muslim majority South Asian countries and three Sub-Saharan African countries respectively. Virtue ethics was beneficial for understanding the ethical perspectives of not only Canada and U.S.-based fact-checkers but also fact-checkers from the other two regions because consideration of virtues is relevant across cultures. In addition, although virtue ethics has connections to the Western tradition, virtue-related scholarship in media is emerging, which is situated in non-Western perspectives. The Confucian ethical framework, rooted in Chinese tradition, is situated in a "virtue system" that Feng (2025) has applied to media ethics. However, the current study situates the virtue discussion in Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian perspectives of virtue theory.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Virtue Theory

A virtue is a commendable character trait. It is the deeply ingrained disposition in a person — something that is thoroughly integrated into their nature. It shapes how they perceive, anticipate, appreciate, feel, desire, decide, act, and respond in distinctive ways. To have a virtue means to embody a particular type of person with a specific, complex mindset (Hursthouse, 2022). For example, virtuous journalists report well; surgeons perform surgeries well, and fact-checkers verify information well. Aristotle, the best known proponent of virtue theory, argued that human desire must possess three essential qualities: self-sufficiency, finality, and attainability.. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he mentioned that happiness had all three elements (Aristotle, 1941). In traditional virtue theories, the central focus is on the type of person we ought to be or the character we should cultivate. According to traditional virtue theories, statements about the desired qualities of an individual or the essential character traits are considered fundamental to our understanding of morality (Copp, 2007). A virtuous individual embodies virtues including fairness, kindness, and generosity. These virtues propel them to engage in acts of wholehearted benevolence toward others (Annas, 2007). While describing the element of human virtues, Aristotle defined it in two ways – moral and intellectual virtue (Aristotle, 1941; Hursthouse, 2022; Quinn, 2007).

The contemplation of theoretical truths and the discovery of rational principles that control everyday actions give rise to intellectual virtue (Hursthouse, 2022; Aristotle, 1941). In other words, intellectual virtue helps people seek knowledge and truth through their rational actions. Some examples of intellectual virtues are curiosity, desire for truth and practical wisdom, which develop over time through practice, experience and learning (Aristotle, 1941). Aristotle (1941) thought moral virtue was like art and it could be acquired through corresponding

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

acts. When an agent experiences pleasure in conducting virtuous acts, it is a notion that the virtuous disposition has been attained. Moral virtue assumes that action was not taken under compulsion, but was rather undertaken with knowledge of the circumstances and by choice (Aristotle, 1941). Moral virtue is concerned with the human choices of actions in accordance with rational principles. Examples of moral virtues include generosity, honesty, courage, justice, temperance (Hursthouse, 2022; Aristotle, 1941), and care (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006). The end of intellectual virtue is knowledge, while the end of moral virtue is goodness (Borden, 2007).

Aristotle also discussed the Golden Mean, and asserted that a morally virtuous person always acts in accordance with the Golden Mean. Aristotle understood the mean to be a midpoint between deficiency and excess, for example with courage, deficiency being cowardice and excess being rashness. According to Cunningham (1999), some media scholars have misunderstood the Golden Mean. Truth seeking, neutrality and objectivity, for instance, are considered the golden means. Mean, which was often mistakenly thought of as a quantitative matter, is more qualitative than quantitative according to Cunningham (1999). Virtue, in this sense, is not a middle point but rather a reason-based behavior. The mean is derived from wisdom-enhanced judgment or intellectual virtues. Extreme feelings or acts, for example, pain-pleasure and praise-blame, are parts of the golden mean, and according to Cunningham's (1999) understanding of the golden mean, extremes are superior to the average or mean. The right thing is an important aspect of virtue theory, as a virtuous agent takes pleasure in doing the right thing. In this framework of ethics, good comes first before right (Quinn, 2007). Virtue ethics primarily does not emphasize duty or consequences. The deontological ethical framework is more concerned with duty, while consequentialist or utilitarian ethics focuses on end results or consequences. Consequentialists, unlike virtue ethicists, believe that the best action is the one

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

that makes the world a better place, while virtue ethicists argue that a good act should come before defining what is right (Plaisance, 2013). Utilitarian ethics prioritizes the aggregate happiness or good of society along with individual happiness (Greatest Happiness Principle, 1999; Elliott, 2007), whereas virtue ethics places more emphasis on knowledge and intrinsic goodness. The virtue theory, on the other hand, is less concerned with rightness or wrongness of discrete actions. Virtue theory suggests that the way to understand ethics is in terms of pursuing *telos* (the good of the whole human life) (Borden, 2007).

According to Annas (2004, p. 73), a major complaint against virtue ethics was that it could not be applied. She wrote:

It is not a theory that tells us what to do...it guides us by improving the practical reasoning with which we act. It directs us, as we are wondering what to do, toward emulating people who are braver, more generous and generally better than we are....

Annas (2007) would argue that virtue had become the central focus of recent philosophies and theories because a variety of theories emphasized “one or other forms of reduced virtue” (p. 533); these theories address the broad spectrum of issues associated with virtue; and it also challenges two dominant ethical forms – Consequentialism and Deontology, which assumed “action” was isolated from the “agents”. MacIntyre (2007) considered virtues as “acquired human quality” (p. 191). Possessing and exercising these acquired qualities enables us to attain the goods inherent to certain practices, while lacking them effectively prevents us from achieving such goods (MacIntyre, 2007). Oakley and Cocking (2001) showed virtue ethics was important for professionals in maintaining their professional roles in the 21st century, especially for media and legal professionals. They thought that the virtue ethics could be an alternative approach to utilitarian and Kantian approaches for understanding and evaluating the professional roles. Craig

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

(2011) assumed virtues were important for professionals and individuals as they shaped the practice of the professionals. He also expressed concern over the fact that understanding the virtue of professionals was a difficult job and might involve long observations to crosscheck what professionals said and did. However, he used virtue ethics as a guiding lens when he developed a framework for excellence for online journalists following interviews with online journalists in the U.S.

According to Blackburn (2003), agent-based virtue ethics was capable of discussing the professional roles and responsibilities of professionals. Two other agent-based virtue ethicists – Stole (2001) and Zagzebski (2004) – connected agent-based virtue ethics to professional elements such as professionals' motivation, disposition, and emotion.

Blackburn (2003) also listed out some virtues including honesty, beneficence, integrity, trustworthiness, courage and patience as virtues for teaching professionals. Radden (2007) provided rationales for using virtue ethics in the context of psychiatric professionals. Virtue ethics is important for these professionals as the virtuous traits could help psychiatrists deal with mental health of human beings, and provide “therapeutic effectiveness” to people (p. 116). Radden (2007) also pointed out four virtues – self-knowledge, self-unity, “unselfing”, and realism – for psychiatry practitioners. Researchers also highlighted other virtues for healthcare practitioners – for example benevolence, truthfulness, respect, friendliness, and justice (Drane, 1988), compassion, phronesis – or, in other words, practical wisdom, which was propounded by Aristotle, – fortitude, temperance, integrity (Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993), trustworthiness and respect for confidentiality (Dyer, 1988), compassion, humility, and fidelity (Christianson, 1995), and caring (Bloch & Green, 2006).

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

The applicability of virtue ethics was discussed in the context of business professionals by Blackburn and McGhee (2004). They pointed out that honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness were virtues, among others, that could shape a business professional's overall roles. Gran et al. (2018) found that virtue ethics was more useful in understanding corporate experiences than deontology or consequentialism. Nicolaides and Vettori (2019) emphasized that virtue ethics could help lawyers instill sound ethical legal conduct in their profession. Researchers like Dare (1998), however, rejected the idea that virtue ethics could be beneficial for legal practitioners; he rather emphasized code-based ethical frameworks for legal practitioners.

According to Borden (2007), virtue ethics plays a significant role in journalism. Drawing on the ideas of MacIntyre (2007), Borden (2007) discussed the relevance of virtue not only for the individual journalist but also for the broader practice of journalism. Virtue-based theoretical frameworks have been used in the journalism and communication scholarship for years. There are a significant number of studies (e.g. Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987; Steiner & Okrusch, 2006; Feng, 2022) which have so far used virtue ethics in the context of journalism as well as communication. Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) used virtue as a framework to analyze journalists' morality. They also pointed out that loyalty, honesty, and fairness were among the virtues required of journalists. Steiner and Okrusch (2006) argued that care was a virtue that could be essential for journalists when they practiced journalism and attempted to establish justice. Feng (2022) analyzed the award-winning movie, *Spotlight*, utilizing key concepts from virtue ethics — *arête* (virtue), *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) — to highlight the film's underlying ethical ideals. The article explored significant virtues depicted in the movie, the journalists' practical wisdom in their investigative work, and how the goals of the journalism profession could contribute to human flourishing.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

In summary, the theoretical framework of virtue ethics, reflected in research across different professions including journalism, provides a helpful lens for investigating the perceived ethical practices of fact-checking. Therefore, this study applies virtue ethics as a theoretical framework to guide the researcher in understanding excellent practices in fact-checking.

Excellence in Online Journalism

“It has never been easy to do excellent journalism” (Craig, 2011, p. 6). However, news organizations and journalists both ponder over the excellent practice of journalism (Craig, 2011). The emphasis on excellence in journalism has been put forward by scholars, journalism schools and professional bodies for years.

Journalism scholars like Merrill (1968) discussed some quality standards for journalism, dividing standards into two categories - subjective and objective. Merrill argued that integrity, social concern, good writing and editing, interpretive analysis, professionalism and intelligence, and the power to influence opinion leaders are the subjective standards for quality journalism, while the objective standards included independence and financial stability, world consciousness and emphasis on politics, international relations, public welfare, culture, education, and science.

Journalism schools in the U.S. emphasize training future journalists to be well-equipped with high standards of understanding and skills. For example, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) standards require journalism schools to teach professional and critical skills as well as to promote professional ethics. The standards also ask accredited schools to train future journalists in a way that they could be aware of certain values and competencies (ACEJMC, 2024). Professional bodies, for example the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), have started to bring journalists together with the aim

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

of raising the quality of journalism (SPJ, n.d.). Bertrand (1998) reported that critical review-based publications – *Nieman Reports* and *Columbia Journalism Review* - asked important questions about journalism practice.

MacIntyre's (2007) theory of practice, derived from virtue ethics, has significantly influenced discussions among media scholars regarding cultivating excellence in journalism. MacIntyre (2007) thought that virtues did not exist as unattached talents; these were exercised within practices, patterns of life's works, and social behavior. Lambeth (1992) was the pioneer in applying this theory to journalism, followed by scholars such as Aucoin (2005), Borden (2007), and Craig (2011). Craig (2011) applied the excellence of practice for online journalism, while Aucoin (2005) applied this theoretical framework for investigative journalism. Fact-checking has commonalities with both online and investigative journalism and according to Singer (2023), plays a retroactive role in investigative journalism. Therefore, MacIntyre's (2007) theoretical framework of excellence in practice would be appropriate for guiding research focusing on fact-checking ethics.

The philosophy of practice proposed by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) is the foundation of the theoretical framework of excellence applied in this study. MacIntyre (2007) asserts that excellence drives practice advancement and that entry into a "practice" is contingent upon adherence to its standards. MacIntyre's theory takes the pursuit of excellence into account, which also explains how practitioners' desire for excellence can raise standards of excellence in a sector. Based on the virtue theory, MacIntyre (2007) defined a practice as:

"Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” (p. 187)

MacIntyre (2007) also explained through examples how the throwing of a football was not the practice, but the game of football was. He explained internal goods as some specific activities identified by a practice and “experience of participating in the practice in question” (p. 189). Journalism meets MacIntyre’s (2007) idea of practice in that it “is widely recognized as a distinct human activity” (p. 26). MacIntyre’s (2007) idea has been applied to journalism by Lambeth (1992) and Borden (2007). Lambeth (1992) showed how excellence in journalism progressed and standards of the craft elevated in the latter half of the 20th century. He noted that the standard of journalistic excellence elevated by using survey research and computer-assisted reporting by journalists Philip Meyer, Donald Barlett and James Steele who provided powerful details on their reporting. In this theory, two key concepts are *internal goods*, which are achieved through the pursuit of excellence in a profession and bring good to all, and *external goods*, which focus on the achievements that come with the help of institutions. According to Borden’s (2007) thesis, both the internal and external goods are the results of competition but serve excellence and possession respectively. Internal goods are the intrinsic motivations that drive practitioners to engage in a specific practice. If a certain good can be attained through other means, it is not considered internal to that practice (Borden, 2007). Following Borden (2007), Craig (2011) listed knowledge, inquiry, originality, discovery, and newness as internal goods of journalism. MacIntyre (2007) found institutions to be double-edged swords which made the practice’s creativity and ideals vulnerable. External goods are characteristic objects of human desire and can only be achieved through an individual’s possession (MacIntyre, 2007). The external goods

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

act as elements of competition that make someone a winner and someone else a loser. Thus, they deliver benefits to individuals rather than the community, unlike internal goods. Both Lambeth (1992) and Borden (2007) considered salary, celebrity status, and power in journalism as *external goods* which can corrupt the professional and profession. We see that editors and news managers are now more involved in financial issues than journalistic activities. These activities were termed by MacIntyre (2007) as “semblance and simulacra” (p. 196) or counterfeit virtues. At the individual level, we now see that competition has become a powerful counterfeit virtue that pits even colleagues from the same organization against each other. It can also be argued that prizes/awards for journalists also push them towards external goods. Besides, journalists are now involved in multitasking to keep up their living and stay in competition.

Borden (2007) borrowed MacIntyre (2007)’s idea that a person’s happiness is connected to his/her community membership and joint action when she was explaining her idea of journalism practice. Based on the discussion of Aristotle, and MacIntyre (2007)’s neo-Aristotelian perspective, Borden (2007) explained that journalism’s ultimate *telos*, a key concept of MacIntyre’s (2007) idea of practice that discusses the purpose of a profession, is to serve the public with information so that they could act as a well-informed community and help democracy. Journalism, as Borden (2007) argued, must embrace a more morally ambitious goal of helping people flourish as human beings. Journalism is, thus, a civic practice which directs its activities outward toward the community rather than inward toward its practitioners. In promoting common goods, journalism should act as a partner of the community or the public. Excellent news should have three qualities or characteristics – surveillance (to play a watchdog role), interpretation (to explain the complex phenomenon of real life) and to reckoning or playing the role of accountability (Borden, 2007).

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Craig and Yousuf (2013) applied the theoretical framework of excellence, derived from MacIntyre's theory of practice, and found five types of excellence social media editors in the U.S. practice: commitment to the traditional standards of journalism and recognition of a new era, sophistication in verification practices, sophistication in engagement with audiences, tailoring use of social platforms, and adding value by being human in use of tools and in transparency.

Based on virtue ethics and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's (2007) theory of practice, and its application to journalism by ethics scholars like Borden (2007) and Lambeth (1992), Craig (2011) developed a framework for excellence in online journalism, consisting of four elements:

- using the Internet's speed and accuracy capabilities while delving deeper into the story than earlier media made possible by breaking news is known as speed and accuracy with depth;
- comprehensiveness in content is defined as utilizing a variety of storytelling mediums to the fullest, such as text, graphics, audio, photographs, and videos;
- open-endedness in storytelling is achieved when the story development occurs in multiple stages aligning with the life span of the story and incorporating feedback from the public. The open-endedness allows online news stories to use old media formats – text, photograph, video, and audio, and at the same time newer formats – blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, interactive map or graphics, among other things; and

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

- last but not the least, the centrality of conversation refers to promoting conversation with and among audiences from all walks of life. Conversation has been a key element for journalism and is connected to the history of the foundation of the U.S., First Amendment assurances of freedom of expression and even to ideas of free speech and intellectual marketplace.

Craig (2011) brought this traditional journalistic element onto the central stage of online focused journalism as it is still powerful to propagate discussion on public issues and serve democracy. This study adopted a similar approach based on MacIntyre (2007) to identify standards of excellence for fact-checking as fact-checkers, like online journalists, are part of a broader practice of journalism which is distinct from traditional journalism and undertakes retroactive gatekeeping (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020; Singer, 2023).

Islamic Ethics for Communication and Journalism

This section outlines how Islamic ethics — an ethical framework derived from Islam, one of the Abrahamic religions — has contributed to the overall ethical system, including media ethics. It also examines key ethical principles and their significance in understanding fact-checking practices. The current ethical system has been developed over centuries with the contribution of different civilizations and cultures, including Egyptian ethics, Indian ethics, Buddhist ethics, classical Chinese ethics, Jewish ethics, Christian ethics, Islamic ethics, and ethics from ancient Greece, the Medieval and Renaissance periods, and Western ethics (Callan & Callan, 2005). Some scholars (Malik, 2021; Hamada, 2016; Mowlana, 2007), however, argued that when it came to ethics related to the communication field, the Western ethical frameworks were well researched and much more discussed in comparison to Islamic ethical frameworks.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Early Islamic philosophers may have considered press freedom and media law in an implicit rather than explicit manner as they did not have any modern press or media at that time (inbetween the 9th and 12th centuries). Islamic philosophers' discussion of principles relevant to the press was based on *Quran* and *Sunnah*. Just like early Islamic philosophers Ibn' Arabi (Chittick, 2019), al-Ghazzali (Griffel, 2020), al-Farabi (Druart, 2020), and Ibn Khaldun (Mowlana, 2007), recent communication ethics scholars (Hamada, 2016; Malik, 2021) have credited these sources - the *Quran or Sharia* (Islamic Law) and *Sunnah* (Prophet Mohammed's sayings and practices of Islam) - relevant to media and journalism ethical principles.

Al-Aidaros et al. (2013) pointed to several core Arabic terms which are important in understanding Islamic ethics in general. These terms are - *ma'ruf* (approved), *khayr* (goodness), *haqq* (truth and right), *birr* (righteousness), *qist* (equity), *adl* (equilibrium and justice), *taqwa* (piety). Good actions are described as *salihat*, and *sayyi'at* is a term used to describe bad actions. Beekun (1996) emphasized the term *akhlak* (character), that is most closely related to ethics in the *Quran* (Beekun, 1996). Over the last two decades, some media ethics scholars started the discussion on the relationship between Islamic ethics and media ethics. They were able to show coherences and distinctions between Western media ethics concepts and Islamic ethical concepts. For example, Mowlana (2007), while discussing the Islamic ethical concepts for journalists, mentioned the key concepts of *tawhid* (unity of God) and *ilm* (knowledge), the meaning of *taqwa* (fear of God), the process of *adl* (justice), the notion of *ijma* (consensus), *shura* (consultation), the doctrine of *amanat* (public interest), and, last but not least, the concept of *ummah* (the larger Islamic community). According to Mowlana (2007), journalism is about truthful propagation and production, gathering, and dissemination of information and news. Mowlana (2007) addressed the key Islamic concept of *tabligh* which means truthful propagation, citing medieval Muslim

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (Issawi, 2022). A key concept from Mowlana (2007) is *tawhid* that ensures God's sovereignty over anything in the world. In essence, it advocates for a balanced system where no earthly authority or structure overshadows divine authority. In contrast, we see that Western media ethics emphasizes press freedom, even over God's divinity. The concept of *ummah* discusses that the sovereignty of a state belongs to God, not to the people or the rulers, in contrast with the Western idea of the state, while the social system of Islamic *ummah* emphasizes justice and equity over individualism, tribalism and race, among other things. Mowlana (2007) considered Ibn Khaldun as a forefront Muslim sociologist and argued for, as theorized by Ibn Khaldun, communication as a social institution that develops and works for the fulfillment of society, which is the extension of the concept of *tabligh*.

Malik (2021) saw the concept of *tawhid* as a basic Islamic ethical framework which is derived from the *Quran* and the Hadith or *Sunnah* (sayings and practices of Prophet Mohammed). Malik (2021) borrowed the meaning of *tawhid* or the oneness of Allah (Arabic meaning of God Almighty), from Taha (1987). She argued that every individual, according to Islamic philosophy, was rational and an individual's acts should be directed by his/her rational mind (Malik, 2021). Taha (1987) viewed *tawhid* as the alignment of an individual's thoughts and actions and it also influenced how individuals behaved, ensuring that their inner beliefs and outward actions were in harmony with Islamic principles. Malik (2021) countered the idea of an Islamic society as collectivist and argued that the Islamic society considers individual freedom and rational responsibilities as the core premises. Islamic philosophy "...calls for the reconciliation of the individual need for freedom and the society's need for total justice" (Malik, 2021, p. 90). While discussing the correlation between communication and *tawhid*, Malik (2021) argued that *tawhid* encouraged humans to become more self-observant and self-accountable.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Self-observation and self-accountability refer to an individual's constant awareness of God's presence, leading them to refrain from any thoughts, words, or actions that may displease Him. This mindfulness ensures that all aspects of a person's behavior align with moral and spiritual principles, fostering a deep sense of personal responsibility in all areas of life. This suggests a journalist or fact-checker guided by Islamic ethics will be obliged to remain mindful of the information they provide to the audience.

Hamada (2016) argued that divine revelations were not the only source of Islamic ethics and that we also needed to consider the rationality of an individual as the other source. Along with the *Quran* and Hadith, two other sources significant for Islamic ethics are human heritage, and reason and experiences (Hamada, 2016). These four sources, according to Hamada (2016), are important for global journalism ethics. He also went on to argue that “the divine revelation is not the only source guiding the global journalism ethics, but the contemporary rational man whenever and wherever he exists” (p. 7). He laid out the four guiding Islamic ethical principles for global journalism: respecting pluralism and cultural diversity, freedom of expression, justice and moderation. Moderation's aim, according to Hamada (2016), is to promote actions that are not “extreme” in all aspects of human life. The concept of moderation, according to Hamada (2016), reflects the idea of the Golden Mean of Aristotle and relates to the notions of impartiality and fairness – two significant ethical concepts for journalism and its practitioners. Hamada (2016) understood fairness and impartiality as “not endorsing political cause or supporting one side of the conflict over the other” (p. 16).

More than a decade ago, Steele (2011) investigated how journalists with Muslim identities from the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia and Indonesia perceived journalistic ethics and norms. These journalists practiced universal journalistic values but they “do so within

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

an Islamic idiom” (p. 533). She found several concepts – truth telling, verification, balance, independence from power and justice – were at the core of journalists’ ethical perceptions, and among these, justice was found to be the overarching Islamic ethical ideology (Steele, 2011). The journalists also shared how the concept of “transparency,” a method of knowing the truth, as discussed by Craft and Vos (2021), was important in the Islamic ethical framework of gathering and disseminating information and news (Steele, 2011). Steele argued that journalists in the Muslim-majority countries of Malaysia and Indonesia practiced journalism guided by some set of values rooted in Islam as well as the formal ethical codes available in these countries (Steele, 2013). Islam also prohibits participation in gossip and other forms of defamation (Steele, 2013). According to her, the Islamic ethical concept of *fitnah* (slander) strongly resembles the idea of trial by the press, or in other words, pretrial publicity. In the context of Malaysia and Indonesia, this idea of trial by the press was found to be an exceptionally powerful political tool.

Pintak (2014) conducted a survey on journalists from the Arab world, Southeast Asia and South Asian regions, and found that truth-telling, public interest, and justice were the three main concepts that shaped the mission and values of journalists working in Muslim majority regions. The study covered a total of 1,596 journalists based in 16 countries – 14 Arab countries, one Southeast Asian country (Indonesia), and one South Asian country (Pakistan). He also argued that truth and objectivity occupied two core places in the Islamic ethics of communication. The truth, however, was seen as a contextual matter to the journalists in the three regions. One journalist said, “Truth is the most important thing, but it depends on the media that you are working for” (p. 489). Journalists from these three regions thought that freedom of media was a continuous struggle over professionalism and that it was often hampered by corruption and the lack of ethics among journalists. They perceived the meaning of justice in three ways: change

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

agents (Arab), serving society (South Asia – Pakistan), and justice through consensus (Southeast Asia – Indonesia).

The journalists in Pintak (2014)'s study also shared that the Islamic values acted as a prism “through which journalists view what are generally accepted in the West as ‘universal’ values of journalism” (p. 499). A key finding from the study was that Islam as a religion acted as a “unifying factor” that mitigated other influencing factors which the journalists were exposed to. This study found that influencing factors such as identity, professional roles, journalistic ethical principles, and other socio-economic and political influences that shaped the worldview of journalists were overshadowed by Islamic values. Islamic values acted as a common thread among these surveyed journalists who were from different political systems and experienced a variety of influences from social, political and economic factors. These shared values shaped their efforts to (1) report truthfully in societies where information was historically suppressed, (2) advocate for social justice and political rights, and (3) balance international professional standards with their religious and cultural beliefs. Those journalists with secular values also shared that their ideals were shaped by the Quranic maxim – “The best form of jihad is to say a word of truth in the face of an oppressive ruler” (p. 500). According to this study, Arab journalists perceived themselves as “journalists” first, when they were asked about their identities, while journalists in Pakistan considered themselves to be Muslims, and the Indonesian journalists saw themselves in a balanced position between nationalism and religion.

Another survey by Pintak and Nazir (2013) on Pakistani journalists revealed that the participants identified themselves as Muslims. More than seventy percent of the respondents thought that believing in God was necessary for good moral value. This study, however, explicitly claimed that “Islam” was not the dominating factor that shaped the worldview of these

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

journalists, but nationalism triumphed over Islam here. This study also found that the Pakistani journalists' worldview was shaped by both Western journalistic norms and the economic and social realities of Pakistan. Rahman (2016) argued that the Islamic concept of *dawah*, which literally means invitation, was also considered an act of worship and was completed through inviting people to Islam by informing them about the religion and not by "manipulating or forcing them into it" (p. 15). In this process of dialogue or communication, persuasion took center stage, and unlike utilitarian ethics, it allowed communication without an end-result, argued Rahman (2016). The Islamic ethical framework of *dawah* also advocates that the process of persuasion should not be accompanied by any deception or imposition but should rather allow the freedom of sharing views (Rahman, 2016). According to Rahman (2016), this Islamic theoretical concept of persuasion and dialogue, which also advocates for mutual understanding, can be useful in investigative journalism and peace and conflict-based journalism. She argued that the Islamic ideas of dialogue and persuasion emphasize truthful and balanced information dissemination, which are important tools for peace and conflict journalism. The approach of dialogue helps to gather information to tell compelling stories about victims, while persuasion may help in assessing the conflict and in providing support to the victims (Rahman, 2016). In investigative journalism, dialogue helps participants in a news story to share their perspectives without any agenda. At the same time, it also helps build a relationship between the journalists and participants or sources who often put themselves at risk by sharing information on issues that require immediate attention. However, Rahman (2016) argued that this relationship should ensure balanced reporting. Persuasion, in Islamic principle, "favors accurate and complete information" (p. 22) on important issues which need to be unearthed.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Ghani (2004) categorized the Islamic communication-based character traits in two ways: praiseworthy and blameworthy. The praiseworthy traits advocate for virtues such as truthfulness, veracity, sincerity, honesty, justice, compassion, humility and gratitude to be practiced by anyone engaged in communication. He also argued that the market orientation and tight deadline pressures jointly put pressure on news media and journalists to practice truthfulness. However, the Islamic theoretical framework emphasizes upholding truth as truth is considered a “fabric of Islam” (p. 61). On the other hand, Ghani (2004) argued that, in Islam, blameworthy traits such as falsehood, lying, slander, backbiting and hatred are considered vices. Islam emphasizes public interest based on moral principles; for example, truthfulness, veracity, sincerity, honesty and justice (Ghani, 2004). A recent study by Farid et al. (2024) investigated news content and interviewed journalists in Muslim societies. It found that values such as justice, truth and compassion were consistent in news content and journalists’ perceptions. These scholars argued that the values were foundational to the Islamic ethical perspective. They also claimed that a balance was required between freedom of expression and avoiding harms to uphold journalistic integrity and prevent the spread of misinformation or prejudice (p. 7). Following Turkish Islamic philosopher Al Nursi’s (1873-1960) theory of God’s attributes/ characteristics, Azzi (2011) argued that *Al Nursi’s* idea could be instructive for journalists as well as media ethics scholars. He pointed to certain Islamic concepts of morality, derived from God’s attributes, which could be used as a guiding principle for journalists as well as fact-checkers:

- *Al Moamin* or Faithful – towards God. This prevents a journalist from engaging in privacy invasion or depiction of violence. Communicators’ core attribute is possessing religious faith, which underpins their ethical decisions (Azzi, 2011). A journalist who is faithful does not merely strive to be devoted to God but also commits to upholding

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

his/her responsibility toward humanity, God's creation. This means that a journalist who lives a life based on faith avoids intruding into the private lives of others and refrains from portraying violence, both of which can have profound consequences on human dignity and well-being.

- *Al Adel* or Fair or Balance – that stresses the role of journalists in balancing facts and opinions, by which journalism could allow voices to dissent and ensure social justice.
- *Al Saadiq* or Truthful – Truthfulness encompasses accurately representing both facts and opinions. A key aspect of truthfulness is grounding arguments and policies in verifiable information.
- *Al Hakam* or The Judge – *Al Hakam* discusses the action of journalists with an enlightened and independent mind, enabling them to ask questions to authority as well as separate themselves from governments, market interests, and audience demands.
- *Al Hasib* or Accountant – It argues that the media should also be vigilant about their own mistakes. They should be self-critical, as the media does little self-examination and tends to believe they are often “right” (p. 765). Since journalists work in the public domain, according to this ethical idea of Islam, “they should be held more accountable than others” (p. 765). According to Azzi (2011), the concept of *Al Hasib* is well-equipped to address ethical challenges journalists face in the changing social and technological environments. In today's fast-paced information age, where anyone can quickly share content using modern technology, journalists are often under pressure to produce and publish content within tight deadlines. This urgency has made it difficult to prioritize proper verification and fact-checking, contributing to the spread of misinformation and clickbait. *Al Hasib* emphasizes that journalism should be self-reflective and self-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

accountable (Azzi, 2011), ensuring a rigorous gatekeeping process to maintain the quality of news before it reaches wider audiences. It also reflects fact-checking's commitment to correction policy.

Islamic Ethics and Fact-checking

Many ethical concepts within the Islamic framework align with those found in fact-checkers' ethical codes and practices. Key principles such as transparency, truth-telling, independence from power, and fairness are central to the codes of ethics adopted by fact-checking organizations. The IFCN has established a five-point code of principles, which has been endorsed by 168 globally recognized fact-checking organizations (IFCN, n.d.a). Notably, some of these organizations are based in Muslim-majority countries like Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. Additionally, the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) heads the Arab Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN), which has also developed a set of principles like that of the IFCN. The AFCN has outlined seven fundamental principles, including transparency, fairness, balance, autonomy, impartiality, commitment to correction policy, and respect to intellectual property with the goal of establishing "professional rules" for fact-checking (AFCN, n.d.).

Alam et al. (2026) explored Islamic ethical principles in the context of fact-checking, noting that while Islamic ethics had been addressed in broader discussions of communication and journalism, their specific relevance to fact-checking had been largely overlooked. He proposed a framework for fact-checkers grounded in Islamic ethics, highlighting four core principles: justice, truth-telling, transparency, and public interest. Alam et al. (2026) argued that this framework could be beneficial for fact-checkers worldwide, not just those from Islamic cultures or societies.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

An Islamic ethical worldview, similar to other media ethics perspectives, addresses journalism's independence from power. For example, Hamada (2016), while elaborating on the Islamic ethical concept of moderation, advocated for fairness and impartiality for journalists. He thought journalists must be independent from associates and partners who could affect their credibility and objectivity, helping them to be fair and impartial. Hamada's (2016) framework of global journalism, in this regard, could also be useful in discussing fact-checking ethics in light of the Islamic worldview. Some scholars (Hamada, 2016; Malik, 2021) have identified a connection between press freedom and Islamic ethics.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to the present study, which examines how fact-checkers with Muslim identities perceive and navigate ethical practices in their work, offering a lens through which Islamic ethical values such as justice, truth-telling, and independence may inform and shape their professional conduct.

According to Ayish (2015), justice is a fundamental principle in Islamic morality, and Muslim individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, or governments are called upon to uphold justice in their interactions with others. Islamic ethics instruct Muslims to refrain from harmful communication practices such as spying, making false accusations, gossiping, and lying, as these behaviors undermine social harmony and these activities are considered a threat to "equilibrium in interpersonal and social relations in the community," and to justice in society in general (Ayish & Sadig, 1997; p. 117). The Islamic concept of justice, therefore, seeks to amend the imbalances in society created by harmful communication practices, and asks the media to transport knowledge and wisdom, piety and respect. Ayish (2015) observed that various journalism codes of ethics in predominantly Muslim Arab countries, including Jordan, Egypt, the U.A.E., Iraq, and Algeria, emphasize justice as a core value. Within the Islamic ethical

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

framework, justice encompasses concepts such as equivalence, rule of law, equality, and freedom (Hamada, 2016). Additionally, Ayish (2015) noted that the term justice was often used interchangeably with fairness, responsibility, balance, equality, and honesty in Islamic ethics.

In Islamic ethics, truth is considered a fundamental principle. The *Quran* contains approximately 138 references to “*naba*,” meaning “news,” which should be based solely on the truth and should be free from “willful falsehood” (Hamada, 2016). Citing Prophet Muhammad, Hussain (2019) emphasized the importance of trustworthy sources in the pursuit of truth. The Prophet stated, “Accept the truth from anyone who brings it to you—be he lowly or noble, even if he is detestable to you. And reject falsehood from anyone who presents it—be he lowly or noble, even if he is beloved to you” (Hussain, 2019). According to Steele (2011), Muslim journalists in Malaysia and Indonesia often highlighted the verification process, approaching their sources with care and skepticism, in line with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and the broader Islamic ethical framework. One journalist noted that the *Quran* instructs “faithful” individuals to verify claims when approached by unreliable sources, referencing the verse: “O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful” (49:6).

Upon closer examination of the verse, it becomes evident that Islam conveys specific principles related to journalism, particularly emphasizing the importance of the verification process in truth-telling (Alam et al., 2026). Islam also cautions when selecting sources for uncovering the truth, warning that any approach rooted in ignorance can lead to serious consequences. Fact-checkers, however, are often criticized for their ‘nontransparent’ methodologies, including the selective nature of their fact-checking and failure to provide adequate context (Ucinski & Butler, 2013; Ucinski, 2015). As a result, Alam et al., (2026)

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

emphasized that fact-checkers motivated by Islamic ethics should aim for the highest level of accuracy in distinguishing between the truth and falsehood.

The concept of transparency has not been explicitly addressed in media ethics scholarship focused on Islamic ethical frameworks (Alam et al., 2026). While scholars such as Malik (2021), Hamada (2016), Steele (2011), and Hafez (2002) explored Islamic ethical frameworks and journalism ethics, none of them specifically discussed transparency as a key issue. However, transparency can be inferred from the following verse in the *Quran*: “O you who believe! When you deal with each other in transactions involving future obligations over a fixed period, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully between the parties...” (2:282). Mikailu and Maishanu (2013) noted that this verse underscored the concept of transparency in transactions, which must be documented in writing to prevent injustice.

Another verse from the *Quran* states: “Indeed, Allah has blessed the believers by raising among them a messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and wisdom,” (3:164, as quoted in Madani, 2010). In this verse, Allah appoints Prophet Muhammad as a teacher to guide Muslims in understanding and contextualizing religious commandments (Madani, 2010). Alam et al., (2026) argued that the connection between Islamic ethics and transparency is evident here, showing how the Islamic approach to transparency aligned with one of journalism’s most contemporary and widely discussed principles — transparency (Koliska, 2021). To understand the connection, the Islamic ethical concept of *Isnaad* is useful. It is a process of narrating the *Hadith* where all the sources of any *Hadith* are mentioned and illustrated in the context of knowledge (Ghifari & Zakiyah, 2021, Shafi, 2017). According to these scholars, *Isnaad* allowed for the “criticism” of narrators to maintain the purity of the historical background of the *Hadith*. Journalists adhere to core ethical

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

principles including truth-telling, transparency, and privacy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; Craft & Vos, 2022). According to Craft and Vos (2021), transparency had gained prominence in the last few decades, with scholars viewing it as a potential replacement for the long-standing concept of objectivity. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) posited that transparency in journalism could include two aspects – a transparent method of verification and engaging the public in the journalistic process to develop a “collaborative” journalism. Advocates of transparency demanded that journalists tell and disclose their ways of knowing the truth (Craft & Vos, 2021).

The Islamic legal term *maslaha* captures the concept of public interest. This term has various interpretations, such as minimizing harm (Lobah, 2016), being a source of benefit (Opwis, 2005), promoting public good (Kamali, 1997), and seeking the best means for public welfare (Muchtar et al., 2017). A saying from Prophet Muhammad also reflects this idea: “Whosoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand. If he cannot, then with his tongue. If he cannot do even that, then with his heart, and that is the weakest of faith” (Muslim; Hadith 34). According to scholars (Lobah, 2016; Opwis, 2005; Kamali, 1997; Ramadan, 2016; Rifai, 2021), early Muslim scholars and jurists used *maslaha* as a legal tool. Hayat and Muhammad Shafiai (2019), in a comparative analysis of public interest by Muslim and non-Muslim writers, concluded that Muslim writers viewed public interest as a central goal of Sharia. Journalism scholarship has also explored how the Islamic ethical principle of *maslaha* relates to the roles and moral responsibilities of Muslim journalists. Muchtar et al. (2017) found that Muslim journalists across various countries considered *maslaha* to be a fundamental part of their profession, with many adopting an ‘interventionist’ role. This role differs from the adversarial and watchdog roles traditionally associated with journalism and is seen as an

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

embodiment of *maslaha*. The interventionist role enables journalists to engage in public discourse and advocate for social change (Muchtar et al., 2017, p. 560).

Public interest is also a key value in fact-checking ethics, though it is not explicitly stated as a principle in the IFCN code of ethics. However, the preamble of the code touches upon public interest issues. Therefore, Alam (2023) argued that public interest should be considered a core value for fact-checkers in Muslim dominant societies as well as other parts of the world. Walter et al. (2019) wrote that fact-checking was a popular innovation to tackle misinformation, as this practice systematically analyzed and evaluated the claims of people positioned in public offices. Thus, Seaton et al. (2020) considered fact-checking complementary to public interest investigative reporting. Fact-checking had the capacity to protect public interest, as “good fact checkers are on the side of the public interest” (p. 579).

Scholars have also investigated the role of Islam in relation to democracy and media freedom in Muslim-majority countries. Sakr (2003) provided evidence on how journalists in Muslim-majority countries faced repressive actions that created a hindrance for them to actively participate in democratic and political activities, while Potrafke (2012, 2013) concluded that the Muslim-majority countries were enjoying less freedom and democracy than those in Muslim-minority countries. Meanwhile, scholars like Rowley and Smith (2009) echoed Potrafke (2012; 2013) and argued that the lack of press freedom and democracy were not related to socio-economic issues but were rather related to Islam. Other scholars (Lewis, 1993; Bernholz, 1995; Midlarsky, 1998; Fish, 2002) also opined that Islam impeded democratic values and explored factors such as supreme values and female subordination which were behind Islam’s negative effect on democracy. Other scholars like Hamada (2022) and Hanusch (2012) contrasted the findings and idea that Islam impeded democracy as well as media freedom. Hanusch (2012), in

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

response to Potrafke (2013), found that Islam was not responsible for weak democratic practices in Muslim-majority countries, while Hamada (2022) argued that the Islamic worldview promoted democratic practices and emphasized the watchdog role of journalism or the media that helped ensure good governance. Hamada (2022) also claimed that the Islamic view of journalism advocated for truth and considered it as a core element of ensuring justice in society. Drawing support from Prophet Muhammad's saying, Hamada (2022) concluded that the "best form of political and social reform" relied on truth-telling against people in power or autocrats. Islam, according to Hamada (2022), did not allow autocracy and rather pointed to three concepts in Islam - *shura* or consultation, *ijtihad* or independent reasoning, and *ijma'* or consensus – which are derived from the Quran and can also be found in democracy.

Ubuntu for Journalism and Fact-checking

The Ubuntu ethical framework is an African moral theory that has been gaining attention in media ethics; for example, the *Journal of Media Ethics* has published a special edition on this theoretical framework about two decades ago (Christians, 2015). That edition published four articles focused on Ubuntuism's relationship with the media and journalism (Rodny-Gumede, 2015; Chasi, 2015; Metz, 2015; Mboti, 2015) to discuss media ethics beyond Western ethical theories. Other scholars like Rao and Wasserman (2007) and Christians (2004, 2015) also pointed out the necessity of Ubuntu as an ethical theory to discuss the complex aspects of media practices in Africa. Fourie (2008) traced back the root of Ubuntu and found that the term originated from the Zulu phrase "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," which translates to "a person is a person through other people" or "I am because we are" (p. 63). According to Christians (2004), Ubuntu comes from the Zulu and Xhosa languages. The term appears in most ethnic African languages, sharing similar construction, roots, phonetics, or underlying concepts (Chuwa, 2014).

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

In opposition to Western liberalism that emphasizes individualism, Ubuntu ontologically emphasizes the community, and in Ubuntu, humans are social beings, with human dignity as the central part (Christian, 2004). Metz (2015) argued that Ubuntu is also considered a salient African ethical perspective. Ubuntu “literally” means humaneness in the Nguni languages of southern Africa. This ethical idea informs us about a “true” human or person, “someone who lives a genuinely human way of life” (p. 76) and practices ethical traits in everyday life, making her/himself different from animals or plants (Metz, 2015). Yvonne Mokgoro, former South African Constitutional Court Justice, connected harmony with Ubuntu as she thought harmony was created through a human group’s close and supportive social connections (1998). She also listed some key social values of Ubuntu – conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, human orientation, collective unity, and group solidarity (Mokgoro, 1998).

Scholars such as Chikanda (1990), Christians (2004), Fourie (2008) and Ewuoso and Hall (2019) mentioned some elements of Ubuntu which may or may not be directly connected to media, journalism, and fact-checking ethics. Chikanda (1990) highlighted almsgiving, sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience, and kindness. Christians (2015) also noted public service and humanity and opined that Ubuntu, as a normative system, could be used to understand universal, regional, and local ethical issues. The community’s people are active rather than passive in this ethical system. Fourie (2008) thought that Ubuntu journalism emphasizes collectivity and community instead of individuality. Other key features of Ubuntuism are negotiation, inclusiveness, transparency, and tolerance, which may not emphasize objectivity, neutrality, and detachment. A systematic review by Ewuoso and Hall (2019) found Ubuntu to be fundamentally a relational ethic that values interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, community, harmonious interactions, and other-centered actions like compassion

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

and benevolence. Actions are considered morally right to the extent that they foster communal relationships, reduce conflict, or promote friendly connections with others, and view the physical and spiritual worlds as profoundly interconnected. Scholars like Ngondo and Klyueva (2023) highlighted inclusiveness, negotiation, tolerance, transparency, consensus-building, and mutual understanding as key principles of Ubuntu.

A number of scholars (Blankenberg, 1999; Christians, 2004; 2015; Fourie, 2008; 2011; Metz, 2015; Chasi, 2016; Rodny-Gumede, 2015; Mboti, 2015; Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2020; Chasi & Rodny-Gumede, 2016; 2021, 2022; Gondwe, 2024) have studied the connection between principles and values of Ubuntu and media and journalism, mostly within the Sub-Saharan African context. In one of his early works, Blankenberg (1999) saw Ubuntu as a resistance against the profit-driven Western media ideologies, questioning journalistic practices of balance, neutrality, and objectivity. Fourie (2008) reported that most South African journalism organizations followed libertarian ideas of ethics, whereas the South African government and like-minded intellectuals opted for African approaches to ethics, or Ubuntuism. Other scholars, for example, Wasserman and De Beer (2006), also pointed to a similar reasoning that called for a new type of ethical framework for journalism in South Africa. This process created a base for the idea of Ubuntu journalism: constructing a novel framework for journalism ethics and practices in South Africa, keeping aside Western liberalism (Fourie, 2011; Tomaselli, 2016).

Researchers like Christians (2004) tried to analyze the connection between communitarian ethics and Ubuntu, claiming they both opposed Western liberalism, in which individuals are seen as separate, autonomous atoms. He, however, warned that Ubuntu did not make individualism an opposition to collectivism. Christians (2004) went further and conceptualized Ubuntu as an antidote to prevalent normative ideas and practices of journalism

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

rooted in liberalism. Ndlovu and Sibanda (2020) found a similar idea in their research on Zimbabwean journalists' perspectives. The respondents discussed some key principles of Ubuntu, such as respecting the cultural practices of people being covered, minimizing harm, and public good. They considered Ubuntu as an “antidote” to unethical journalism practices (p. 60). The Western conception of truth relies heavily on facts, while values such as freedom, truth, and justice are interdependent in Ubuntu journalism (Fourie, 2008). In this process, the media's role also shifts from that of a watchdog to one of a guide dog, from that of an observer to one of a participant, and from that of an entertainer, educator, informant to that of a mediator (Fourie, 2008).

Contemporary fact-checking researchers like Singer (2021) and Amazeen (2013) could help in understanding how Fourie (2008)'s argument can be valid for fact-checking too. These researchers pointed out that fact-checkers, like journalists, tend to focus on truth-telling but went beyond their journalist counterparts in two ways: firstly, they moved to adjudicating roles from gatekeeping and practicing traditional objectivity (Singer, 2021) and secondly, they distanced themselves from the “he said/she said” journalism by rendering judgement (Amazeen, 2013). Blankenberg (1999) pointed out that journalism of this kind should enable discussion among citizens, citizens and reporters, and citizens and politicians, should not provide hurried conclusions, and most importantly, should consider the possible impact of a news report on the community.

Fourie (2008) found that Ubuntu and the ethics of care both resembled each other as they were hinged on care and collaboration. Fourie (2008, 2011) also shared that Ubuntu journalism heavily focuses on the idea of community, and this framework advocated for journalists to be active members of the community rather than neutral observers. The Ubuntu-based normative

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

framework empowers citizens to find consensus “on social problems and solutions among themselves rather than depending on the political elite or professional experts” (Fourie, 2011, p. 38). He also warned that Ubuntu should not be treated as an ethics code or viewed as a formal set of prescriptive norms or professional guidelines but rather as a deeply rooted moral philosophy that compelled journalists to act in alignment with the ethical values of the community. When a person exhibits traits of Ubuntu, they live harmoniously with others in the community. Chasi and Rodney-Gumede (2021) echoed Fourie (2011) and thought that journalists should join the discussion on this ethical framework and raise their voices and opinions about the community. As a result, they become mediators in community affairs.

According to Metz (2015), a key element of the ethical framework is to hold accountable the “elders” who are in positions of authority or hierarchy. Ubuntu, according to Metz (2015), considers respecting an older adult who is wise and upright, not merely because they were aged. Metz (2015) opined that Ubuntu is an African-communitarian ethic that recommended that the media help the public and maintain harmony. The media are responsible for both people and society as they themselves are core parts of society and have obligations to share “a sense of togetherness” (p. 82) with the people.

On some occasions, maintaining the obligation may have a financial impact on the media. The theoretical framework of Ubuntu also advocates for the media to provide factual information and a platform to express different thoughts and opinions or emphasize freedom of speech. These two key elements would allow people to make informed decisions about policies, institutions, and other people (Metz, 2015). The African value of harmony is established and strengthened by human communication practices such as journalism, argued Chasi (2016). Metz (2015) and Chasi (2016) argued that three of Ubuntu’s key elements – community, solidarity, and friendship

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

– are important for journalists to maintain in their ethical practices. Chasi (2016) mentioned that journalists could act as an adhesive in societies where people are increasingly growing apart. In his essay, Chasi (2016) argued that in Ubuntu, the sharing of news is a fundamental task for humans, allowing them to cooperate and allowing marginalized groups to have platforms to discuss complex social issues. Ubuntu urges journalists to respect others by establishing communication and relations (Chasi, 2016).

The philosophy of Ubuntu suggests that facts and values are deeply intertwined (Christians, 2015). In such settings, news reporting is not just about presenting facts but also about engaging with the community's values, traditions, and historical context. This dialectical approach between journalists and indigenous people can lead to more nuanced and culturally sensitive journalism (Christians, 2015). Chasi and Rodney-Gumede (2021) synthesized Ubuntu's role in peace journalism in the African region. According to them, to maintain a harmonious co-existence, many ethnic language speakers in Africa assume listening to be a key aspect of communication. Therefore, both scholars emphasized listening as a vital aspect of Ubuntu journalism, which journalists and practitioners should follow.

According to journalists motivated by Ubuntu, good news is conveyed in a way that engages viewers dialogically and encourages them to listen and, with other participants in the conversation, co-create the kinds of shared conceptual frameworks that result in peaceful societies (Chasi & Rodney-Gumede, 2021). A recent fact-checking study (Alam & Alam, 2024) found that fact-checkers should act as dialogue brokers and allow people to discuss issues. Other scholars (Amazeen 2013, 2015) echoed a similar thought about fact-checking. Alam and Alam (2024) also advised fact-checkers to not take sides on disputed knowledge, as sometimes knowledge could be riddled with uncertainties and more questions than answers. These scholars

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

also argued that combining peace journalism with Ubuntu values could help create a new journalistic ethos centered around human relationships and emphasizing participatory journalism, in which reporters collaborate with the communities they cover, in addition to reporting on and finding peaceful solutions to conflicts.

In their latest work on Ubuntu and public interest, Chasi and Rodney-Gumede (2022) argued that freedom of expression was not alien to Ubuntu or African moral values. Ubuntu provides a framework for how Africans can pursue journalism in the public interest. It aims to empower the public to make informed decisions on issues that may or may not affect them (Chasi & Rodney-Gumede, 2022). In another study, Gondwe (2024) investigated the importance of Ubuntu in the inclusion of artificial intelligence (AI) in journalism. The study, based on interviews with journalists from Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, introduces a normative framework inspired by Ubuntu philosophy, focusing on relationality, social progress, harmony, and human dignity as a guide for the ethical use of AI in journalism. The researcher put forth an idea to foster a technological landscape where individuals and communities are treated the same and emphasizes equitably, in line with the principles of interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and collective well-being – concepts at the core of the Ubuntu philosophy. Gondwe wrote, “...an Ubuntu robot proposes a communitarian framework that is sensitive to societal norms and at the same time friendly to individual freedom and creativity” (p. 15). He also reported that AI tools were not successful in explaining the complex realities of news stories on tribal conflicts, poverty, climate change, and political strife (Gondwe, 2024). Ndlovu and Sibanda (2020) interviewed 11 journalists in Zimbabwe and inquired about their ethical practices in their professional and social lives. The researchers found that Western liberalism was

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

dominant in the journalists' ethics, practice, and conception of journalism. However, these journalists valued Ubuntuism as a framework for journalism ethics.

Recently, Ubuntu has been used in other disciplines apart from journalism and news media; for example, Ngondo and Klyueva (2023) pointed out some key principles of Ubuntu (e.g. inclusiveness, negotiation, tolerance, transparency, consensus-building, and mutual understanding) and attempted to use them for progressing the discussion on public relations theory, research, and practice in Sub Saharan Africa. Qobo and Nyathi (2016) investigated the usage of Ubuntu in South African foreign policy while Ewuoso and Hall (2019) used this framework in the context of bioethics and found how Ubuntu principles of valuing interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, community, harmonious interactions, and other-centered actions like compassion and benevolence could be useful in this field of research.

Despite its acceptability beyond social science and media ethics, Ubuntu is rarely seen in the context of fact-checking, which is also considered to be a new type of journalism that aims to curb misinformation in both digital and mass media. Some scholarly discussions, however, could be useful for moving forward the attempt to use Ubuntu as an ethical framework for fact-checkers. These could potentially contribute to fact-checking scholarship and scholarship on the Ubuntu philosophy. From Metz's (2015) research it is clear that the theoretical framework also advocates for the media to provide factual information and act as a platform to express different thoughts and opinions or, in short, emphasize freedom of speech. These two key elements allow people to make informed decisions about policies or institutions, for example. Fact-checking organizations, precisely those that operate outside traditional newsrooms, also follow similar principles as they do not focus on profits but aim to provide factual information to society.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Metz (2015) also argued that the news media should not just focus on revenue and disseminate information riddled with sensationalism – sex or violence, for instance. They should rather go beyond the surface to make space for investigative activities. If media organizations focus too much on the surface, that may become problematic for other media outlets that operate from a different perspective. Fact-checkers also consider their jobs to go beyond the surface, or in other words, beyond “he said/she said” journalism (Amazeen, 2013). Another aspect of the ethical framework is that it also advocates for the media to cover the positive work done by the government, rejecting the idea that the watchdog role of questioning the government and unearthing its wrongdoing is sufficient. However, in Ubuntu, “revealing wrongdoing is to honor the value of community” (Metz, 2015, p. 84). Thus, by disclosing unwelcome truths, fact-checkers may become responsible for discontent in society, though this would be considered valuable to society.

The information obtained through an Ubuntu approach to journalism allows a reporter to put aside agendas and shed light on wrongdoing, even at the cost of a wrongdoer’s privacy. However, it also cautions journalists to remain alert so they do not violate an innocent person’s privacy for the public good. To establish a desirable community where people maintain harmonious relationships, according to Ubuntu, telling the truth is key. And this is what fact-checkers around the world advocate for. Christians’ (2015) understanding of how fact-checkers could implement Ubuntu in their ethical practice may help in this regard. According to him, both facts and values are deeply intertwined in the Ubuntu philosophy. News reporting is not merely reporting facts; it should also allow the engagement of the community’s values, traditions, and historical context (Christians, 2015).

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

The scholarship on fact-checking also provides evidence on how fact-checkers engage in partisanship without detaching their values from their professional activities (Feng et al., 2021; Graves, 2016; Tsang, 2023; Ceci & Williams, 2020). Fact-checkers with partisan background, demonstrated professional fact-checking practices (Fent et al., 2021) and were not distant from their non-partisan fact-checker counterparts (Tsang et al., 2023). Graves (2016) categorized fact-checking activities in three different institutional roots – academia, politics and journalism – and hinted that the political fact-checkers were not distant from political partisanship or their values. Psychologists like Ceci and Williams (2020) echoed the existence of partisan rooting of fact-checkers and urged the media to abandon objectivity and fact-checkers’ political disinterest and to embrace fact-checkers’ sociopolitical leanings. They highlighted that fact-checkers’ personal biases affected both their selection of statements to evaluate and their judgments of accuracy. Therefore, they also advocated for adversarial fact-checking – which would allow fact-checkers from different political views to evaluate a claim – a system “that places the evidence for competing claims front and center” (Ceci & Williams, 2020, para. 10). The balanced and debated presentation of facts would act as an antidote against audiences’ reliance on sources located in their social bubble.

Chasi and Rodny-Gumede (2022) argued that journalism practice, in African ethics, values accuracy “as a commitment to truthfulness” (p. 9). Here, we can also see that the fact-checking practice coincides with the African ethical value of accuracy, which helps audiences access factual information, make informed decisions, and engage with issues that emerge in the public domain. Scholars such as Ndlovu and Sibanda (2020) also discussed how Ubuntu had become an antidote to unethical journalism practices. Here, Ubuntu could be seen as more

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

relatable to fact-checking as the latter aims to curb misinformation in social and traditional media.

Despite its potential in helping journalism and fact-checking practices maintain ethical values, some scholars have noted the drawbacks of Ubuntu worthy of discussion. In this form of journalism, as Fourie (2008) critiqued, the news media act as mediators, active participants, advocates, negotiators, and guide-dogs instead of educators, gatekeepers, observers, and watchdogs. Fourie (2008) also considered Ubuntu journalism as a threat to the freedom of expression as it was used as a tool of repression by the ruling quarters of people in post-colonial Africa. He also pointed out the dangers posed by “intolerance” and “political correctness,” which may be proliferated by political misuse of Ubuntu. Mboti (2015) was critical of scholars who saw Ubuntu as an ethical framework presented to counter European frameworks emphasizing individualism. He also resisted the idea of connecting the community to Ubuntu. He offered a dynamic model characterized by collisions, messiness, subjectivity, and dispersal. These four, in combination, take the discussion of Ubuntu beyond many ethnic language speakers in Africa and evolving into a rigorous and systematically coherent ethical theory.

Rodny-Gumede (2015) asked South African journalists about their understanding of Ubuntu. Respondents could not provide any specific idea on either Ubuntu or Ubuntu journalism. Many of them explicitly said that they did not know what Ubuntu was. For example, one journalist said, “I am not sure what is meant by Ubuntu journalism and what is to be gained from it?” (p. 120). They did not have any clear sense of how to connect it to specific journalistic practices and struggled to envision it as an ethical framework for journalism. They even considered Ubuntu to be a tool of the South African government to put pressure on journalism.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

“...Ubuntu is just quoted as a way to try to enforce a particular form of journalism dictated by the current ANC-led government...” (Rodny-Gumede, 2015, p. 123).

Similarly, when Ndlovu and Sibanda (2020) asked journalists in Zimbabwe about their understanding of Ubuntu, they found that Western liberalism was dominant in the journalists’ ethics, practice, and conception of journalism; however, the journalists valued Ubuntuism as a framework for journalism ethics. Some journalists were also found critical of Ubuntu as they feared it may diminish journalists’ “autonomy” (p. 59). Objectivity was seen as a holy grail among the interviewed journalists; sometimes, they found themselves in a dilemma to practice their responsibility toward the community at the cost of objectivity (Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2020). Referring to Rodny-Gumede’s (2015) findings indicating that Ubuntu was being used as a tool of the South African government to put pressure on journalists, Chasi and Rodny-Gumede (2016) criticized Ubuntu journalism as it may do little to confront historical and ongoing inequalities, inherent racism and stereotyping. They labeled this journalism as development journalism, or at best, sunshine journalism, or even lapdog journalism, failing to tackle “corruption and maladministration” and challenge and expose practices that resist necessary change and perpetuate extreme exploitation (p. 738). Questions were also raised in the context of Ubuntu’s core value, harmony, by Chasi and Rodny-Gudembe (2022); these scholars raised the question that we needed to understand how to practice harmony in the face of violence or in situations where colonialism, apartheid, and their legacies have pitted people against each other in violent conflicts. They, however, contrasted the idea that “Ubuntu journalism” was merely a form of “sunshine” or “lapdog” journalism, which might fail to serve as a watchdog or inform citizens about politically inconvenient developments. Blankenberg (1999) also resisted the idea that Ubuntu did not value an individual journalist’s autonomy as he thought any individual in Ubuntu

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

journalism became a unique center of the shared life in society. We can also see the advocates of Ubuntu from different timelines; Blankenberg (1999) and Gondwe (2024) criticized the liberal values of objectivity, neutrality, balance, and unbiasedness, which often failed to explain the complex realities of tribal conflicts, poverty, climate change, and political strife, while Ubuntu, according to these scholars, was successful in doing that.

Virtue theory, Islamic ethics, and Ubuntu philosophy together provide a culturally inclusive ethical foundation for examining fact-checking practices and their influencing factors. Virtue theory highlights the moral character and excellent practices of fact-checkers, emphasizing honesty and intellectual courage, among other qualities relevant to assessing their practice. Islamic ethics reinforces this through the principle of verification and divine accountability (*taqwa*), which is particularly relevant in understanding faith-based influences on practice. Ubuntu philosophy, shifts focus to communal responsibility and collective trust, revealing how social relationships influence ethical decision-making in fact-checking. Together, these frameworks offer a triangulated, cross-cultural lens that enriches the analysis of both ethical standards and the personal, religious, and social factors shaping fact-checking behavior.

Research Questions

Fact-checking scholarship, along with the theoretical frameworks previously discussed, suggests that this field can be enriched by exploring the ethical practices of fact-checkers and the factors influencing these practices across diverse cultural and social contexts. While fact-checking research has made significant strides, it has yet to fully investigate how fact-checkers define excellence in their work. Thus, this study applies three research questions:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

RQ1: How do fact-checkers working in fact-checking organizations based in Muslim majority South Asian countries, North American countries and Sub-Saharan African countries understand excellence in fact-checking ethical practices?

RQ2a: How do fact-checkers at these organizations understand the ethical influences that shape their work?

RQ2b: How do perceived ethical influences differ for fact checkers from these organizations in different social and cultural contexts?

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

This study applied the case–study method as discussed by Robert K. Yin (2018) in his book titled *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. According to Yin (2018), case–study researchers focus on examining contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts when they have limited control over the environment or situation. In this research, fact-checkers from multiple fact-checking organizations, who live in different cultural environments, were recruited. The research asked “how” and exploratory “what” questions, Yin (2018)’s case–study method was appropriate to use. Yin (2018) pointed out categorically that “how” questions are helpful for the case study method because of their explanatory nature, while when the “what” questions are exploratory in nature, these questions are justifiable for exploratory case studies. The case study has been used in different disciplines of social sciences – sociology, psychology, social work, and political science (Yin, 2018). It helps researchers inform their knowledge on an individual, social, group, organizational, political, and related phenomena. This method also allows researchers to understand individual life cycles and organizational and managerial processes. The current study investigated both the individual and organizational aspects of ethical practices among fact-checkers. For example, two significant journalism research studies – White’s (1950) classic gatekeeping study on a single newsroom and Tandoc Jr. and Vos’s (2016) study are examples of case study research in journalism, with the latter study applying Yin’s (2018) case study framework.

According to Yin (2018), the case–study method is a combination of six overarching phases – research plan, research design, preparation, data collection, analysis of the data, and preparing or sharing the manuscript. Following the planning phase, a case study researcher needs to focus on designing the research. Yin (2018) describes the significant research design aspects in

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

a case study, including research questions, unit of analysis, single or multiple cases and findings analysis. In the case study method, the cases are considered the units of analysis (though secondary embedded units of analysis are permitted), and the unit of analysis should be aligned with or similar to those used in previous literature or studies. Researchers could also develop their units of analysis in innovative but “operationally defined” ways. In this study, the geographical contexts in which the fact-checking organizations are based are the main units of analysis because this study analyzed fact-checkers’ perspectives on ethical practice and decision making across culturally distinct geographic regions as well as the influencing factors that impact the fact-checkers’ ethical decision-making process.

This study also analyzed how ethical influences differed for the fact-checkers at these organizations. Therefore, the organization is an embedded unit of analysis. The main and embedded units of analysis enabled exploration of whether the influences have an impact on fact checkers from a macro (country) and/or meso (organizational) perspective. This study did not focus on how the influences impact fact checkers on the granular or micro levels because those were not relevant to the research questions. Thus, this study is developed in an innovative way as no research has studied the issue until now, to the best of the author’s knowledge.

Yin (2018) introduced two types of cases or units of research – concrete or less concrete. Think about a small group of multiple organizations, individuals, and partnerships in the concrete group. In contrast, an investigator can focus on communities, decisions, relationships, and projects in other less concrete groups. This research grouped fact-checking organizations into three geographical contexts — a less concrete unit of analysis — treating each context as a separate case to examine fact-checkers' ethics.

Multiple Case Study

This study, following the logic of replication (Yin, 2018), involved three cases. According to Yin (2018), multiple cases often make research more robust than a single case study. Yin (2018) argued that each case must be carefully chosen so that the individual case studies predict either (a) comparable outcomes or literal replication or (b) opposing results but for predictable causes or a theoretical replication. The replication in the case study is claimed when two or more cases support the theory and reject the rival or alternative theory. In this study, the theoretical replication framework was applied as the study findings were compared with the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier.

Fact-checkers from a total of 12 fact-checking organizations from three regions with similar social and cultural contexts (North America, Muslim majority South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa), were invited to participate in the research. Each regional context was treated as a case. According to Lester and Leenaars (1998), it is often assumed that Canadians and Americans are similar due to their geographical proximity, shared languages and cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, Munene et al. (2000) showed substantial cultural homogeneity among Sub-Saharan African nations, and Ahmar (2019) found that Pakistan and Bangladesh, two Muslim majority South Asian countries, shared commonalities, including a common religion, a joint struggle for a separate homeland for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, and socio-historical bonds, despite historical conflicts. It is not clear how many fact checking organizations are now active in the three regions but according to the Duke Reporters Lab at Duke University a total of 391 fact-checking organizations were actively working in 2021. Among them, 378 were operating in more than 100 countries in 2022 (Stencel et al., 2022), 446 were active in 2024, and 452 were active across the world (Duke Reporters Lab, 2026). According to the IFCN, 168 fact-checkers are (as

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

of February, 2026) active and have ratified the IFCN's code of principles. Sixteen more fact-checking organizations were waiting to renew their ratification of the IFCN code (IFCN, n.d.a). Most of the fact checkers recruited for the study were from 10 fact-checking organizations who had ratified the IFCN's code of principles because this code is considered as a guiding principle for fact-checkers across the world (Mahl et al., 2024; Dierickx & Linden, 2026). Two non-signatory fact-checking organizations from Bangladesh and Pakistan were also recruited, as both organizations are considered active and reputable independent fact-checking organizations in the countries.

Data Collection

Yin (2018) described six important data collection methods for case study research – document analysis, interview, direct observation, archival records, participant observation, and artifacts analysis. He also discussed the weakness and strengths of these methods. Among them, the researcher applied interview and document analysis methods for collecting data.

Interviews with Participants

Yin (2018) considered the strength of the interview method as it was insightful and focused directly on the case study. However, a weakness of this method is bias due to responses and poorly articulated questions and reflexivity (meaning interviewees told what the interviewer wanted to hear). This method is appropriate for studies that seek to “understand people's experience, knowledge, and worldviews” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 222). The researchers employ the interview method and select people for interviews when participants' experiences are “central to the research problem...” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 222), as is the case in this study. They also argued that although the face-to-face interview was the most-used method,

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

technological platforms made the process of interviewing easier for distant interviewers and interviewees (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). As the researcher of the study lives in the U.S., two digital video platforms (Zoom and Google Meet) were used.

The researcher interviewed 28 fact-checkers from 12 fact-checking organizations in seven countries across three regions and on three continents. The interviews were conducted between March 2025 and January 2026. The average length per interview was 70 minutes and interviews ranged between 55 and 107 minutes. Initially, the researcher planned to interview eight to nine fact-checkers from three relatively active and large fact-checking organizations: *Africa Check*, *PolitiFact* and *Soch Fact Check*.

The researcher, following an IRB approval from a public university in the U.S., contacted the editors of those organizations and requested interviews from eight to nine fact-checkers from each organization. However, the researcher was not successful in this attempt. The researcher later recruited eight participants from these organizations. Among them, four were recruited from *Africa Check*, two each from *PolitiFact* and *Soch Fact Check*.

Later on, the researcher also reached out to other fact-checking organizations based in the similar geographical or cultural context following the snowball sampling method. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2017), snowball sampling works well for studying people who share certain attributes or commonalities. It can be useful for reaching populations that are hidden or difficult to recruit. In this context some of the early interviewees helped the researcher contact other fact-checkers. In this process, 16 fact-checking organizations – six fact-checking organizations from North America (in the U.S. and Canada), five from Muslim majority South Asian countries in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and five from Sub-Saharan African countries – were contacted to take part in this research. Among them, fact-checkers from 12 organizations in seven countries agreed

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

to participate in the study. Among these organizations, one fact-checking organization from Sub-Saharan Africa wanted not to share its name, but others agreed to be named. These organizations were: *Africa Check* (South Africa), *Dubawa* (Nigeria), *Fact Space West Africa* (Ghana), *DismissLab* (Bangladesh), *Newschecker* (Bangladesh), *Soch Fact Check* (Pakistan), *iVerify* (Pakistan), *Politifact* (U.S.), *Factchequeado* (U.S.), *News Detective* (U.S.), and *Agence Science-Presse* (Canada).

These organizations have a range of funding affiliations with other organizations, mostly non-governmental organizations (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, National Democratic Institute, Internews); technology companies (e.g., Google, ByteDance Pte Ltd, Meta Platforms Inc.); educational institutions (e.g., MIT, Fojo Media Institute at the Linnaeus University, University of the Witwatersrand, Centre of Excellence in Journalism (CEJ) at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA)); governmental bodies (e.g., Quebec Ministry of Economy and Innovation, the Embassy of France in Ghana); international organizations (e.g., UNDP, UNICEF, the European Union); and grants from the IFCN. The one fact-checking organization that remained anonymous is a part of multinational news organization and receives fund sfrom that organization.

For the initial communication, the researcher used social media and official email services to contact the individual fact-checkers working in both managerial and non-managerial newsroom positions. In this process 36 fact-checkers were emailed, 10 were contacted through LinkedIn, and one was contacted through X.com (formerly Twitter).

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Table 1

Roles of Fact-checkers

Participant Number	Region	Designation	Role	Gender
Participant 1	Sub Saharan Africa (South Africa)	Copy Editor	Editing/Manage Relationship with META Platforms, Inc.	Female
Participant 2	Sub Saharan Africa (South Africa)	Researcher	Fact-checking/Research	Male
Participant 3	Sub Saharan Africa (South Africa)	Researcher	Fact-checking/Research	Female
Participant 4	Sub Saharan Africa (South Africa)	Acting Deputy Chief	Fact-checking/ Editing	Female
Participant 5	Muslim Majority South Asia (Pakistan)	Fact-checker	Fact-checking/Video Content Host	Female
Participant 6	Muslim Majority South Asia (Pakistan)	Project Supervisor	Leading team/Fact checking/ Editing/ Script writing for video content	Male
Participant 7	Muslim Majority South Asia (Pakistan)	Fact-checker	Fact-checking/Video Content Host	Female
Participant 8	Muslim Majority South Asia (Pakistan)	Fact-checker	Fact-checking	Female
Participant 9	Sub Saharan Africa (South Africa)	Fact-checker/Digital Investigation Journalist	Fact-checking/Editing	Female
Participant 10	Muslim Majority South	Team Lead	Fact-checking/Research/Editing	Male

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

	Asia (Bangladesh)			
Participant 11	Muslim Majority South Asia (Bangladesh)	Research Officer	Fact-checking/Digital Investigation/Editing	Female
Participant 12	North America (U.S.)	Managing Editor	Managerial/Editing	Female
Participant 13	North America (U.S.)	Fact-checker	Fact-checking/Research	Male
Participant 14	North America (U.S.)	Co-founder and CEO	Leading Team/Managerial	Female
Participant 15	North America (U.S.)	Politics & Migration fact- checker	Fact-checking/Research	Male
Participant 16	North America (U.S.)	Chief Reporter	Managerial/Fact-checking	Male
Participant 17	North America (U.S.)	Audience Engagement Producer	Fact-checking/Audience Engagement	Female
Participant 18	Muslim Majority South Asia (Pakistan)	Senior Fact- checker	Fact-checking/Open- source investigation	Female
Participant 19	Muslim Majority South Asia (Pakistan)	Senior Fact- checker	Fact-checking/Open- source investigation	Female
Participant 20	Sub Saharan Africa (Nigeria)	Fact-checker	Fact-checking/Research	Male
Participant 21	North America (U.S.)	Editor	Research/Fact- checking/Editing	Female
Participant 22	Sub Saharan Africa (Ghana)	Research Associate	Researching/Fact-checking	Female
Participant 23	Sub Saharan Africa (Ghana)	Director	Managerial/Fact-checking	Male

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Participant 24	Sub Saharan Africa (Ghana)	Editor	Managerial/Fact-checking	Male
Participant 25	North America (Canada)	Editor	Managerial/Fact-checking	Male
Participant 26	Muslim Majority South Asia (Bangladesh)	Founder	Managerial/Fact-checking	Male
Participant 27	Muslim Majority South Asia (Bangladesh)	Editor	Managerial/Editing/Fact-checking	Female
Participant 28	Sub Saharan Africa (Nigeria)	Assistant Editor	Managerial/Fact-checking	Female

Among the interviewed fact-checkers, 10 were from Sub-Saharan Africa (five from South Africa, three from Ghana, and two from Nigeria), 10 from Muslim majority South Asia (six from Pakistan and four from Bangladesh), and eight from the North American region (seven from the U.S., and one from Canada). A total of 17 interviewed fact-checkers were female and 11 were male. To hide the identity of the interviewed fact-checkers, this research assigned code names to each participant as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. The numbers were assigned on the basis the interview date, which means the first interviewee who was interviewed in March 2025 was assigned as Participant 1 and the last interviewee of January 2026 was assigned code name Participant 28.

A total of 11 participants were involved in managerial roles having diverse designations – co-founder, managing editor, team lead, chief reporter, editor, project supervisor, acting deputy chief, and copy editor (See Table 1). These fact-checkers shared that they were involved in regular fact-checking activities (editing) as well as in managerial activities – editorial decision

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

making, maintaining relationships with affiliated individuals and organizations including funders and social media partners. The rest of the fact-checkers – a total of 17 – were not involved in managerial roles. The non-managerial fact-checkers' designations were researcher, fact-checker, research officer, senior fact-checker, audience engagement producer, and digital investigation journalist. This group of fact-checkers, mostly involved in daily fact-checking activities – verification, maintaining sources, however, were not involve in managerial roles. A key reason for including both groups of fact-checkers as fact-checking organizations are comprised of small sets of professionals where all the employees of a fact-checking organization are involved in fact-checking activities on a regular basis. By interviewing both types of fact-checkers the researcher attempted to understand the holistic ethical practice of fact-checking.

A semi structured questionnaire (see Appendix A) were prepared and used during the interviews. The questionnaire consists of 16 questions divided into six categories: demographic information; understanding of excellence in fact-checking ethics; factors of influence; virtue; religion and morality; and Ubuntu. Apart from one question (Question 16) focused on fact-checkers' understanding of Ubuntu, all other questions were asked of all interviewees. The question (number 16) on Ubuntu was explicitly posed to fact-checkers from Sub-Saharan Africa, participants from other regions were expected to be less familiar with this moral theory.

The demographic question was designed to gain insight into interviewees' overall professional fact-checking journeys. The subsequent four questions on excellence in fact-checking ethics enabled the researcher to examine interviewees' perceptions of fact-checking ethics and their understanding of how excellence in this area is maintained. To explore how interviewees frame factors of influence, the researcher then asked 11 additional questions distributed across four categories: factors of influence; virtue; religion and morality; and Ubuntu.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

It should be noted that the questions related to virtue, religion and morality, and Ubuntu were designed to support the three ethical frameworks guiding this study.

Document Collection

As Yin (2018) discussed the necessity of triangulation for the case study method, this study collected the correction policies of fact-checking organizations from their websites as well as the IFCN code of principles from the IFCN website (see Appendix B). Following the collection of these documents, the researcher stored them in separate Microsoft Word files for analysis.

Data Analysis

The researcher applied a qualitative thematic analysis method in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, 2016). The interviews were transcribed and stored in Microsoft Word (MS Word) files. A total of 300,000 words were transcribed from 28 interviews, with each interview being about 10,000 words on average.

Yin (2018) and Wimmer and Dominick (2013) argued that data analysis is the case study method's most challenging part. Unlike quantitative methods such as surveys, it did not have a cookbook formula. Yin discussed different general ways of data analysis— theoretical propositions, rival explanations, or descriptive frameworks (2018). Yin (2018) also discussed that for an exploratory study theoretical proposition may not be required, instead the exploratory study should be guided by the purpose of the study. The researcher thought the purpose of the study should guide the latest exploratory research. According to Yin (2018), in this process the researcher analyzes data in accordance with the purpose of the exploration closely knitted with the research questions. Yin (2018) discussed five widely used strategic data analysis methods –

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case syntheses.

Wimmer and Dominick (2013), however, shortened the list of strategies and mentioned only the first three methods— pattern matching, explanation building, and time series analysis. For the current research, the researcher used the pattern matching method, which allowed him to compare the empirically found patterns with the predicted patterns. The researcher used the virtues and standards of excellence as the predicted pattern and compared them with what fact-checkers discussed during the interviews.

Braun and Clarke (2006) wrote that thematic analysis is a foundational method of qualitative research that allows researchers to conduct data analysis in two ways— a top-down method or theoretical thematic analysis and a bottom-up or inductive method of thematic analysis. This study followed the top-down method of thematic analysis guided by MacIntyre (2007) and virtue theory on standards of excellence and evidence of Islamic ethics and Ubuntu, as well as applied inductive method or bottom-up model to explore open-ended identification of influences, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Braun et al. (2023). The top-down model was helpful for this study because it aimed to explore a phenomenon discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was used by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) when they analyzed a single focus group study. A "bottom-up," or inductive approach in thematic analysis uses the data to guide the analysis exploring themes (Braun et al., 2016). Braun et al. (2023) also emphasized the combination of top-down and bottom-up models which provides methodologically flexible and reflexive positions for researchers.

Thematic analysis is an accessible and popular method of qualitative data analysis that can be useful when a researcher wants to analyze the data extracted from interviews and websites

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

(Braun & Clarke, 2012). These researchers showed how they used thematic analysis for one of their interview-based research projects on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) students' experiences of university life. Following storing the interview transcriptions in MS Word files the researcher followed the six steps of data analysis of the thematic analysis method discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps are as follows: become familiar with the data, develop initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes, and lastly write up the findings. Thomas-Meyer et al., (2017) used thematic analysis when analyzing readers' comments on 10 UK-based news websites. Slattery (2016) analyzed and compared the two versions of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) ethics codes from 1996 and 2014 following the method. At the very beginning of the method, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended a researcher should develop a data corpus and data set.

Data corpus refers to “all data collected for a particular research project, while data set refers to all the data from the corpus that are being used for a particular analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In this latest study, the researcher created a data corpus with the initial interview transcriptions, followed by a data set that included only the necessary verbatim transcriptions in regards to research questions and purpose of the study. To organize, code, and identify themes in the data, the researcher used Nvivo – a software used for qualitative data analysis. All the transcribed data of 300,000 words was exported into Nvivo for line-by-line analysis. Yin (2018) termed this kind of tool as a computer-assisted tool, which can be helpful for the large amount of textual data collected from interviews. Supported by Nvivo, the researcher for the current study found a total of 55 initial codes for all three research questions, which were later grouped into eight themes or categories for RQ1, and five themes for RQ 2a and RQ 2b respectively. The researcher also analyzed fact-checking organizations' correction policies and

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

the IFCN code of principles, which were then included in to the themes developed from the interview data. The data collected from the correction policies and the IFCN code of principles were deductively analyzed using themes generated during the initial interview analyses. The inductive thematic analysis of interview data generated key themes to address RQ2 and these themes subsequently guided the researcher to conduct a deductive analysis of the documents.

Validity and Reliability

Both Yin (2018) and Wimmer and Dominick (2013) suggested that data triangulation was crucial for addressing construct validity. Natow (2020), following an analysis of 120 peer reviewed articles that applied interview methods for data collection, reported that data triangulation, reflecting a postpositivist interpretative framework, is important for curbing validity threats. Data triangulation can be achieved in various ways – multiple data sources, multiple methodologies, multiple data analysis techniques, multiple researchers (Yin, 2018).

In this research, the data triangulation was achieved through collecting data from multiple sources – interviews with fact-checkers and analyzing documents (correction policies) related to fact-checking organizations and the IFCN code of principles. Yin (2018) mentioned that for achieving reliability in case study research, researchers need to have a case study database, which can be developed with the help of a computer-assisted data analysis tool. This study used Nvivo for developing a database for achieving reliability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This exploratory study examined fact-checking ethics across three regions — Muslim-majority South Asia, North America, and Sub-Saharan Africa — through interviews with fact-checkers from 12 organizations in seven countries and a document analysis of fact-checking organizations' correction policies as well as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)'s code of principles.

The first research question (RQ 1) explored how fact-checkers understand excellence in ethical practice. Analysis of interview data revealed eight themes capturing their normative commitments. Across these categories, fact-checkers consistently emphasized core principles and key virtues for ethical practice of fact-checking.

The first part of research question 2 (RQ 2a) examined the influences fact-checkers perceive in their ethical practice. From a close reading of interview transcripts, 20 initial codes were identified and grouped into five overarching themes. All participants acknowledged that at least one of these influences shape their ethical practice, indicating that fact-checking ethics is never formed in isolation but is instead shaped by a range of institutional, cultural, and personal influences. The second part of research question 2 (RQ 2b) asked how these perceived ethical influences differ across cultural contexts. The study found that influencing factors operated at two primary levels: the *macro* or cultural level, and the *meso* or organizational level.

Fact-checking ethics, as revealed across the three research questions, is simultaneously convergent and culturally situated. While fact-checkers share a commitment to truth, accuracy, and correction, moral frameworks such as Islamic ethics and Ubuntu demonstrate that geography and cultural context continue to shape how ethical principles are understood and applied. Virtue

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

ethics, among all the ethical frameworks applied in this research, emerges as the most universally relevant ethical theory according to the fact-checkers studied across all three regions.

Research Question One

The first research question (RQ1) asked how fact-checkers working in fact-checking organizations based in Muslim-majority South Asia countries, North American countries and Sub-Saharan African countries understand excellence in fact-checking ethical practices. In response to this research question, a total of eight categories emerged from the initial codes. The categories addressed how participants perceive their characteristics of excellence in maintaining ethical fact-checking practices. The fact-checkers emphasized many normative and ethical principles, which they consider to be key for fact-checking practices. The eight categories were: verify the claim with diligence; be unbiased, neutral, nonpartisan and fair; be transparent about your practice; use sources and provide attribution to them; consider harm and virality; be skeptical and curious and search for truth; make corrections; simplify storytelling for clarity and ensuring democracy.

Verify the Claim with Diligence

A total of 24 of the 28 interviewed fact-checkers emphasized the verification process of fact-checked content as an important ethical practice. They shared that to maintain excellence in fact-checking, fact-checkers are required to follow a diligent and persistent verification process.

They explained that the verification process had to include presenting broader analysis, attention to detail, finding the root of a claim, and validating the facts. According to participant 4 from an African fact-check organization, fact-checking on the surface might seem like a simple rating of something being true or false. However, when a fact-checker starts working through the

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

verification process, they realize that it is a process of presenting a much broader analysis or argument. They also realize that there are many other aspects of the topic that need to be discussed to present the audiences with an accurate understanding. Participant 4 shared that the process of verification in fact-checking is way more complex and broader than the verdict, explaining the complexities as follows:

...in the actual fact-checking process getting into something seems on the surface like a cut and dry True or False verdict. But once you get into it you realize that you have to actually present a much broader sort of analysis or argument than you thought and there's so many other aspects of this topic that you need to actually talk about to be able to give people an accurate understanding.

The fact-checkers also shared that they would not publish any content for their audiences where they injected their own assumptions or perspectives, as their main aim was to debunk any claims and provide the facts. In the process of checking any claim, the fact-checkers did not merely provide a conclusion. Participant 2 shared: "In a very practical sense. It means... doing more than just providing a conclusion. It means demonstrating the method, always demonstrating clearly the methodology that you use to reach that."

Several fact-checkers shared that the overall verification process took place through a gatekeeping collaboration in their newsrooms where at least two editors, apart from the author of any fact-checked claim, checked the content before it was published. Participant 12 said:

We need to make sure and have different eyes. For instance, all our texts are revised several times. And at least for two more people besides the person who writes it, so...

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

that means at least there are three points of view trying to understand the same issue before it gets published.

Meanwhile, participant 17 echoed this sentiment and shared that they have three editors to verify any single fact-checked content before it gets published. This fact-checker also said that they have a rigorous mechanism of scrutinization in the process of fact-checking. According to participant 17, who earlier worked as a journalist, this rigor in verification is a pillar of excellent fact-checking practice. The fact-checker also criticized the traditional newsrooms in the U.S. for not practicing such rigorous verification. She said:

That is not something that's happening in most American newsrooms today. Just, like, frankly, it's usually you have one editor reading a story and publishing it. So, the amount of scrutiny and attention to detail, I think, is a pillar of excellent fact-checking.

The fact-checkers also shared that they tried to maintain transparency in the verification process, or in other words, demonstrate a clear methodology against any fact-checked content. They explained how they acquired the information so that anyone among the readers could follow the same process and reach the same information and draw the same conclusion. Some of the participants explained the process as a social science research technique of replicability or reproducibility. As participant 1 explained:

I quite often say in early drafts of new research is that you actually have to show your workings. It's a little bit like you might have been asked to do by your math teacher back in high school, but you have to show how you came to a certain conclusion. So, I think that our research that we present in our reports has to be reproducible.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Participant 6 also pointed out that providing the full context of the debunked claim is important. He provided an example of a train hijacking in Pakistan by a separatist group in March 2025. Pakistani fact-checkers found that there were several distributed videos focusing on the incident, but that the majority were not from the latest incident but rather from similar incidents that happened earlier. The fact-checker argued that in this context they post those videos and label those videos as earlier videos. In this process of fact-checking, the fact-checker thinks excellence can be achieved by providing the full context of any claims. He explained:

There were a lot of videos emerging on social media claiming that this shows the video of this incident, this shows the attack. But our fact checking showed they were actually from prior order incidents. So, in that case, excellent practice would be to not only determine that this video old, but you also dig down into what those particular old incidents were from.

Some fact-checkers mentioned that the process of verification could be more time-consuming compared to the traditional journalistic job. Like any investigative work, it might take weeks or months to find the original source of a widely spread claim. Participant 19's testimony is important to understand in this regard. She shared that fact-checking requires diligence as well as attention to detail to become excellent practice. The excellent fact-checking process, in her view, is a slow process, as it requires lots of investigative skills and verification activities to make fact-checked content useful for people. Just like her, some fact-checkers found persistence and patience to be vital for the verification process.

In some occasions fact-checkers discussed that they rely on technological support from open-source tools – e.g. Google Lens, TinEye – for finding the source of any pictures, software for geospatial analysis on conflict-riddled regions, artificial intelligence or large language models

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

for the verification process. Participant 15 shared that they use publicly available technological tools or open-source tools for verification process in 90-95% of their fact-checked content as often they struggled to get information from the ground to verify. He explained that some time in 2025 they published a fact-checked piece about a claim that said Governor Greg Abbott from Texas was deporting a Mexican rescuer group that has helped in rescue missions during the Texas flood in July 2025. They deployed reporter who was then based in Texas, and found the information as not true. He then explained that they were lucky to have a reporter on the ground, but in most cases, they cover issues where they could not reach the story physically. He also shared that his organization was now experimenting with AI tools for verification process and for developing conceptual illustrations or images. He explained how he use AI as a research tool:

...if there are a lot of rulings from different courts, and I want to understand what those rulings mean, and so I put it all on Google NotebookLM. And it gives me a summary, but of course, I check whatever the summary is telling me...

Another finding from the study is that not all fact-checkers use AI or machine-learning tools. Half of fact-checkers interviewed for this study discussed using these tools. The U.S. based fact-checkers shared that they were not confident enough to use AI for checking a claim as it was lacking capabilities to provide accurate information. Participant 13 said he use AI tools for analyzing long textual documents, but not for checking a claim. He explained:

I tried it, and I know sometimes it makes mistakes. If you use it, let's say, to summarize 12-page PDF, right? You can use it to do that. But you also have to do your own check what it says, and make sure it's accurate, because sometimes it can make mistakes. So, it still needs the eye of the reporter.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Two participants (22 and 28) from Sub-Saharan Africa shared that they use AI for detecting audio, video and picture-based claims. Participant 22 shared that they use Hive Moderation Tool – a free tool to detect AI-generated pictures and videos. Another participant (27, from Bangladesh) shared they also use Sightengine and wasitAI for detecting images and videos available online. Participant 28 said they use open-source tools which have AI elements built in to detect deepfake and artificially generated content. She shared that they do not just rely on AI tools to make the final decision on any claims. They triangulate the information provided by AI tools with the information gathered from traditional journalistic methods - for example, interviewing people or checking available documents. She explained:

We don't base our verification on just what the tool has provided. So, we have a multiple sourcing theory. Where regardless of whatever source you're using, you have to triangulate it. For example, I'm verifying a visual content, I upload it to an AI tool, and it tells me this is what is wrong with it. I still do the regular journalism, speaking to people or comparing evidences available.

Irrespective of their designation, the organization they worked for and the nation they resided in, fact-checkers who participated in this study understand verification to be a key ethical aspect of fact-checking, without which the process might not be completed. They also emphasized that the rigorous verification process is compulsory for ensuring excellence in fact-checking practice.

Be Unbiased, Neutral, Nonpartisan and Fair

Following verification, another key theme emerged as 24 participants discussed their efforts to remain fair, non-partisan and neutral while acknowledging the inherent challenge of

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

personal bias. While the commitment to neutrality was a key principle addressed by several interviewees, some fact-checkers also explained their understanding of biases, fairness and non-partisanship and how these four principles could be navigated to maintain excellence in fact-checking practices.

The participants critically reflected on the limitations of presenting both sides of an issue equally, or following “he said, she said” reporting when one side was demonstrably false. This perspective illustrates the participants’ rejection of false equivalence. False equivalence is a journalistic practice that gives equal weight to both sides of a news story, although one side has established truth, explained journalist Margaret Sullivan (2012). She also stated that audiences and some journalists were criticizing this practice as it allows half-truths to be published (Sullivan, 2012). Applying this sentiment to the current study, participant 15 explained:

And I do believe that the he says, she says journalism...that’s the role of journalism? No. Some say the sky is blue, but these other people say the sky is red, and you're like, okay, so is that...I mean, you can get out there and see, oh, no. This sky is actually blue, and it's false that the sky is red...I don't believe in that kind of journalism, where everything is neutral, or for example, if you speak with a pro-immigrant activist, you also need to interview a neo-Nazi that hates immigrants.

For some, remaining neutral is a protection from the biases a fact-checker has. Comments from participant 2 are significant to understand the importance of neutrality in guarding fact-checkers from their own biases. He always questions himself before starting fact-checking – “Am I presenting this in a neutral way? I'm not letting my personal biases about a topic influence how I write or how I present a topic. And that's those sorts of things definitely are considerations...”

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Participant 3, who has a background in social science research prior to working as a fact-checker, emphasized the importance of providing data and facts in the fact-checked content, and avoiding opinion. She thinks fact-checkers maintain neutrality and tackle their biases by providing numbers or data – which she thinks never lies. She also said that fact-checkers are responsible for providing clean information which was never manipulated. That way, the audience will interpret the data on their own and take decisions on a certain issue.

Several other participants discussed that biases should be tackled carefully and echoed each other in exhibiting a tendency to remain non-partisan so as not to jeopardize their efforts to curb misinformation and disinformation. Participant 19 addressed the presence of bias as both an inevitable and, at times, a motivating factor in their line of work. They shared:

Everyone is subjective. Everyone has a bias. You just need to understand your biases and work really hard into mitigating them in your work. And sometimes you can even use your bias, for example, when I do stories or when I do investigative work against a military establishment. I am fueled by my bias against the military establishment. I personally feel that based on whatever information I have conceived in my life.

This comment underscores a reflective approach to bias wherein personal viewpoints are not denied but consciously acknowledged and critically assessed during the reporting process.

One of the most consistent sentiments among the interviewees was their commitment to fairness as a guiding principle both for fact-checking and as a personal virtue that every fact-checker should have. While explaining fairness, participant 12 shared that they allowed the author or the source of the claim to explain their views and then they check the explanations before publication. Participant 1 thinks fairness is a key ethical principle for fact-checkers who

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

endorsed the IFCN code of principles as IFCN put emphasis on fairness. Participant 16 opined that fact-checkers are now facing challenges in maintaining traditional journalistic values like fairness as he thinks press freedom is at an all-time low across the world.

A total of 20 fact-checkers who participated in this study explicitly mentioned that fact-checkers should not be following any political ideas or be affiliated to political parties so as to maintain their ethical practice. Many of the fact-checkers shared that they tended to be non-partisan, just like their organizations, following the IFCN code of principles. To their understanding, their non-partisan role helps them to be fair to people from all walks of life. Some also considered it important not to use politically charged language to maintain fairness. For example, in Africa, a fact-checking organization does not use gender neutral language which might cause confusion among their “rural audiences,” and another fact-checker in America avoided using “Latinos or Latinx,” as these words are not necessarily used by people of all political ideologies. For example, participant 14 explained why they remain careful about the language they use:

We try not to use ways of presenting topics with the slang that some of the parties are using. For example, we don't refer as Latinos or Latinx. Because that is more what Democratic Party do, and are not necessarily used by Republicans, and we are looking to better inform everyone.

Participant 16 used the metaphors of a football referee or a baseball umpire when explaining their non-partisan role. He said fact-checkers need to ask questions to all the political actors irrespective of their choice or inclination to certain ideologies. He also claimed that they neither “overzealously” criticize any political actor or parties if they do not find any factual support, nor do they attempt to protect any political entities.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Meanwhile participant 10 opined that the non-partisan identity of fact-checkers reflects their independence, which has been declining in traditional journalism. He also said that traditional journalism, due to its business model, often leans toward political parties or media owners, which is not seen in the case of fact-checkers because fact-checking organizations mostly have independent business models.

Be Transparent About Your Practice

Transparency emerged as a key ethical principle of excellence in fact-checking practices. 23 fact-checkers discussed what they understood by transparency as well as its importance for any individual fact-checker. It was understandable that all fact-checkers would put heavy emphasis on transparency as all the interviewees shared that they followed the IFCN code of principles, which focuses on the issue of transparency. Transparency, in fact-checkers' view, was connected to their own trust and credibility.

These fact-checkers referred to transparency in fact-checking as a multifaceted process. They discussed that transparency was about telling the audience how the verification was done, what sources were used and how they were communicated with, and what methods were employed to assess the accuracy of claims. Fact-checking organizations also published the basic information (for example name, designation, roles, email address) on their staffers and editorial structures on their website. Transparency also referred to presenting on organizations' websites fact-checkers' sources of funding, political or business affiliations.

Participant 1 shared:

So, that is also something that we disclose where our funding comes from. It does happen fairly often, we work on something that mentions one of our funders. For example, there's

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

a lot of misinformation around Bill Gates. The Gates Foundation have historically have been one of our big funder (sic) of ours. We'll always disclose that they are. I would say that transparency both in the way that we work. Kind of editorial practices as well as our organizational practices. I'd say that is a kind of a core principle of the organization.

The fact-checkers said they maintain transparency through the consistent application of fact-checking practices by citing the original sources and distinguishing between confirmed and unverified information. They said that anonymous sources were brought into consideration only after assessing their credibility and motives. When the information could not be fully verified, these practitioners still documented the gaps and provided disclosures on issues and claims which fact-checkers could not verify fully. Such disclosures ensure that the audience was aware of the limits of the evidence and the decisions behind how a fact-check was framed.

According to the interviewed fact-checkers, transparency has a key place in building trust and establishing the credibility of fact-checking organizations among their audiences. By showing how organizations implement the fact-checking process, fact-checkers allow their audiences to independently assess the reliability of their work. Participant 2 noted “making it clear sort of how we work and where we get our information from and so on. And that essentially ensures that people can check our work and confirm that we're trustworthy...”

The interview data suggest that transparency is an ongoing commitment embedded in both fact-checking routines and institutional practices. For some fact-checkers, transparency is considered a protection from being attacked as a non-credible source of information. Meanwhile, some fact-checkers think transparency ensures the replicability in their verification process as it allows audiences, even if they do not agree with fact-checked content, to check all the information and all the sources used in the content. Participant 16 explained replicability –

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

“...we want the person who's reading us, if they don't agree with our article, they can look back at the original sources, the same ones that we saw and they can understand where we're coming from.”

Use Sources and Provide Attribution to Them

The fact-checkers interviewed in this research mentioned directly or at least hinted that they did not use any anonymous sources when they practice ethical fact-checking. They also thought that the use of anonymous sources was a hindrance in achieving excellence in ethical fact-checking practice. 25 fact-checkers shared the importance of attributing sources, while several others shared that they relied on original sources from diverse backgrounds for checking claims. Participant 13 emphasized the importance of using original sources for fact-checking – “...we cannot just say, according to the New York Times, or according to NBC, or according to Fox News or anything like that, we have to go and see and go to the original source of the information...”

As fact-checkers interviewed for this research follow the IFCN code of principles, which speaks about the transparency of sources, it was understandable that they emphasized the importance of not using anonymous sources. In terms of source types, the fact-checkers shared mostly four key types – open-source documents, government or official sources, experts, and credible scientific studies. The experts were mostly professionals (who dealt with the topics investigated) or researchers.

17 interviewees also shared that they maintain a database of sources so they could reach out to those sources who wished to be named. They also mention the time of the interviews/interactions with sources and they make available on their websites the data or

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

information collected from sources so this is accessible to a wider public. Participant 16 noted – “Every article we write, fact checked article or any kind of article we write has a source list and it lists sources by the name, title, and date of the interview...”

22 interviewees explicitly said they do not rely on one single source but rather triangulated their findings by reaching out to multiple sources. Some fact-checkers shared that they always rely on at least three credible sources who want to be named. In cases where they could not find that many sources and their sources wish to remain anonymous, they do not pursue the fact-checking claim or they look for alternative options.

Some fact-checkers thought that as is the case when they practice journalism or do stories, they do not use anonymous sources for fact-checking. They indicated that “off the record” sources have the potential to harm the trust between the audience and fact-checkers. Since fact-checking is a reactive process, some fact-checkers thought they do not need to protect their sources. Participant 9 said:

Most times I haven't needed to protect anyone, because a lot of the things I work with are reactive, remember? It is online already, it is already public, and if there's someone who's already been named in a claim. I mean, their name's already out there.

Participant 28 noted how fact-checking is different from journalism:

...in investigative journalism, you can see anonymity, you grant anonymity. But in fact-checking, I think you cannot, because you need to be able to say, this person said this. We don't fabricate things in fact checking, we only work reports on the ground.

Some fact-checkers, such as Participants 23 and 25, reported relying on publicly available data and scientific research as key sources of information when verifying claims. Participant 25

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

noted that they frequently rely on systematic reviews and other well-established scientific publications for fact-checking rather than preliminary or early-stage scientific studies. At first glance, the fact-checking process may resemble traditional journalistic practices in its reliance on similar sourcing strategies. However, interviewees shared that fact-checkers tend to adopt more transparent sourcing practices in their verification processes, a level of transparency that is often less visible in journalism.

Consider Harm and Virality

A key aspect in ethical fact-checking relies on how fact-checkers choose or select claims for checking. The fact-checkers interviewed for this study center their decisions around two key elements – harm and virality. Twenty-two of the fact-checkers shared that they focus on a claim’s potential harm and how widely a claim had spread. Rather than focusing solely on the spread or virality of the content, they assess the broader consequences of false information, particularly how it impacted vulnerable communities and public decision-making.

“We actually look at the harm this content causes more than how much it spreads. If it causes more harm even if it spreads less, then we try to debunk it” shared Participant 10. If fact-checkers find that either potential harm or virality was missing, they might not focus on the claim. According to the interviewees, virality depends on the key metric relating to how quickly misinformation or disinformation spreads on the internet, mostly on social media platforms. On the other hand, fact-checkers understand harm to be a multifaceted concept that includes issues of severity of harm, the potential negative impact on society and an individual, whether the impact is social, political, financial or related to conflict and violence. Participant 2 emphasized how they focus on harm when they select a claim –

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Is this a harmful claim that we think about often. Like, is this a claim that might financially or like health wise have an impact on someone's life Because if so, then we have almost an ethical imperative to report on it and say something about it or try and verify it.

Interviewees also indicated that they did not select a claim if they found the claim was spreading widely (e.g. claims about celebrities, gossip, and issues that may not have any societal, health, or any other type of harm). They realize that they can not focus on all misinformation or disinformation spreading on social media and chose claims that might cause more harm to society. For example, Participant 12 shared that they always tend to emphasize misinformation and disinformation somehow related to the Hispanic community in North America but if the claim was about a celebrity from a Latino background, they would put less importance on checking the claim.

I mean, we don't care so much if we see disinformation about Shakira (Colombian singer), for instance. Of course, I mean, if people say, Shakira got married again and it's false, all right, probably it's false, and probably we can spend our time, our resources debunking that. But this is not doing any harm, at least not for the community.

Interviewees shared that they often found that people from marginalized communities are the targets of disinformation campaigns by the state and the dominant and powerful sectors of society. Some health misinformation campaigns had a tendency of spreading more widely, potentially having a direct impact on human lives. Interviewees indicated that they always prioritize these misinformation and disinformation campaigns. By doing so, they believe they ensure “empowerment of information.”

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

In conclusion, from the data collected from the interviewees for this study, harm serves both as an evaluative lens and a guiding framework in fact-checking practices. Decisions about what to verify are informed by the potential consequences of misinformation. These decisions are influenced by assessments of individual, communal, and systemic impact, revealing the integral role that harm analysis plays in fact-checking work.

Be Skeptical and Curious and Search for Truth

More than half of participants in this study (16) emphasized skepticism and curiosity as two key elements of excellence. They shared that they needed to be skeptical and curious before choosing any claims and while checking it. The meaning of these traits, their operationalization in professional practice, and their implications for the accuracy of information verification clearly emerged from the interview data.

Curiosity in fact-checking is described by the interviewed fact-checkers as an active pursuit of information beyond the initial claim. Maintaining curiosity requires critical thinking and openness to perspectives beyond one's own. Participant 10 shared that he tends to remind future fact-checkers that a prerequisite in fact-checking is to ask, "Why does something happen and how does it happen?" They think it is imperative for a good and critical fact-checker's mind to work like that.

A fact-checker needs to genuinely ask questions about the authenticity of any claim they see or read online or offline and they also need to be able to look at the claim deeply and with an open mind. Participant 2 shared:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

But I think that curiosity is very helpful. A willingness to sort of look deeper into claims that you see and try and sort of like really keep asking questions until you have thoroughly exhausted the sort of um sort of the claim that you're interrogating.

Skepticism operates as a complementary practice to curiosity. It involves withholding immediate acceptance of claims and applying critical evaluation. One participant (4) described it as “a sense of not taking anything at face value. Making sure that whatever you encounter. You actually want to break down and sort of not trust immediately.” This illustrates skepticism as a systematic hesitation toward accepting information without thorough examination. As participant 12 explained:

I think we always have to, in order to do fact checking, doubt about everything. You have to doubt. If you hear something, you have to double-check. You really hear that? Did the person actually said (sic) that? I mean the transcription is not enough, and you have to go to the original source, listen, and then you can quote.

Across organizations, fact-checkers discussed how the virality and speed with which “lies” spread makes their approach of truth-telling difficult. Participant 12 elaborated and explained that “...telling a lie doesn't cost anything, but telling the truth takes time, it's costly, and resources, and knowledge. We are not as fast as the disinformers.”

Participant 19 explained that a fact-checker should be the one telling the truth. But a fact-checker should also be very logical and rational in how they explain it to the audience. Participant 4 noted that access to truthful information is a human right, and a fact-checker's responsibility is to fight to ensure that right, which allows citizens to make important decisions in their personal and social lives.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Interviewees also echoed that skepticism and curiosity both help a fact-checker in their quest for the truth. Therefore, they also emphasized that fact-checkers should be truthful in their professional roles. However, some participants warned that fact-checkers should not act as arbitrators of the truth in their pursuit of the truth, as fact-checkers, like any human, can also make mistakes. They rather perceive fact-checkers to be facilitators of conversations on various issues in society. Participant 2 explained:

Fact-checkers aren't sort of the ultimate authority on what is true or not. We are a part of that discussion. We are... people who have sort of the time and the resources to spend every day trying to verify information. But we're also in conversation with other people who are doing this.

Make Corrections

When asked about their ethical excellence, more than half of the interviewees (17) echoed that they maintain a correction policy which helps them to maintain credibility and transparency. The fact-checkers consider the correction policy to be an ingrained element of their written editorial policy which helps them to uphold the ethical fact-checking practices. The correction policy was also being discussed in the ethical principles or policy formulated by each organization in compliance with the IFCN code of principles.

Fact-checking organizations have correction policies which are also accessible on their websites. Following an analysis of interviewees' organizational correction policies, this researcher found that the organizations have similar correction policies and that those policies also reflect the IFCN code of principles. The correction policies outline that fact-checking organizations make corrections when they or the audience find any errors on the fact-checked

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

content. The erroneous content is then replaced with corrected content on both their websites and on social media posts. The organizations then use notifications or labels, for example, “CORRECTION”, asterisk (*), “Corrections and updates”, “UPDATES” at the top or the bottom of the corrected content. While PolitiFact make the erroneous content accessible side-by-side for their audiences, others, for example Factchequeado and Dismislab, delete the erroneous content. The latter group, however, keeps the erroneous version in their own databases but do not publish it with corrected content.

The interviewees largely discussed that they were “human” and, therefore, did not deny the fact that they could make mistakes despite being vigilant in their verification processes. While discussing the correction policy implementation, interviewees stated that they resort to retracting and updating information to amend for the mistakes made in the fact-checked content. Secondly, across organizations and contexts, the interviewees shared that they also openly declare when they had made corrections to any of their content.

Several interviewees elaborated on how correction policies functioned in practice. A fact-checker from a South Asian country (Participant 5) outlined the process by saying that her organization emphasizes taking responsibility when corrections were necessary. She said, “We make correction. We were not like those type of organizations who think like story has been published, now there will be no change.” Participant 2 described a comprehensive and proactive standard for dealing with errors:

In terms of the other principles, we have a very strict corrections policy. If we make an error that someone spots, then we are very diligent about correcting those errors and updating or retracting—not redacting—reports. Not that that happens very often; we’re pretty rigorous. But we try and set a good standard and we want other people to retract

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

claims that they've made that turn out to be incorrect. So, if we publish something that contains an error, then we try and be diligent and set a good example in that way. A lot of it is just about being careful and rigorous, though ideally, we follow a process that is careful enough that those errors never make it to print. And everything that we publish is very well verified and very defensible.

This description combines two elements: the corrective process itself and preventive measures designed to reduce errors occurring in the first place. The emphasis on setting a standard for others reflects an understanding that journalistic credibility extends beyond a single newsroom. Participant 20 from a non-western fact-checking organization noted openness involved in acknowledging mistakes “and in situations where maybe we need to make corrections. We do the correction, and we come out open to say that to our audiences.”

This interviewee shared that the straightforwardness of this approach proves their aim to remain transparent and credible to their audiences. In this process, interviewees from Western countries emphasized the participatory role of the audience in finding the mistakes and commenting on published content. Participant 13 noted – “If we have to actually retract one of our pieces, a couple of our pieces, we will do that, and... We will also allow people to talk about it. And there should be some sort of open correction policy.”

Simplify Storytelling for Clarity and Ensuring Democracy

A central theme across the interviews was the need for fact-checking outputs to be presented in clear, plain, and accessible language. 21 interviewees described how technical language, complex sentence structures, or misleading terminology could undermine the purpose of fact-checking by alienating the audience or creating misunderstandings. They also agreed that

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

fact-checking is a practice that served democratic functions by supporting informed citizenship, protecting rights, and ensuring equal access to accurate information.

Participant 2 gave a detailed example of how health-related claims often presented specific challenges for fact-checkers because they are rooted in technical scientific language that was easily misinterpreted by the public.

Health claims can be very, very complicated because they often rely on very technical language and jargon and so on... This isn't a specific claim, but this is an explainer or a fact sheet that I wrote a while ago about antioxidants. Because very often we see claims that say something like blueberries contain antioxidants and that can prevent cancer or cure this health issue or whatever it is. And it's very, very complicated... In those cases, we explain very carefully in a way that is accessible to as general an audience as possible... Those are kinds of things that are quite challenging.

Participant 12 explained the importance of avoiding terms that may misrepresent describing people, illustrating how careful language choices could prevent the misrepresentation of subjects.

The word illegal to refer to an undocumented person, a person without papers... is not the best word to refer someone... If you say that this is a person without papers, or without documents, or that is undocumented, so this is a person that is in a status right now, that can be changed. So this is the kind of thing that we take care in order to be correct with the language.

Several participants summarized this priority with simple guiding principles. Participant 3 stated, “plain language is one of the biggest criteria that we have to do. When you're writing a

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

report, you need to use plain language.” While Participant 1 said, “we also very much aim write in plain English, in plain language and that's because we have a sort of very wide readership. Most of our readership, English is not their first language.” Others added that plain language does not mean oversimplifying, but rather ensuring that the information is conveyed without unnecessary complexity. A participant shared that storytelling in fact-checking “should be like in a very simple language. Not big soup words or something that goes above your head... you tell those details, but in a very simple manner. The common man understands something of that.”

Interviewees also stressed the importance of clarity in headlines and story framing. Participant 12 noted that unlike some traditional journalistic forms where clickbait headlines created ambiguity and were used to bring more traffic to websites, fact-checking focuses on directness:

...news websites try to have titles, headlines that are very catchy. And you don't know exactly what the story is about. Then you click, it's actually about something else. You can't do that in fact checking... you shouldn't have gray areas in fact checking. You shouldn't have anything that leaves time to understanding something that is not there.

Some interviewees described fact-checking as a practice committed to democracy and public interest by supporting informed citizenship, protecting rights, and ensuring equal access to accurate information. Participant 1 explicitly connected their work to democracy and equal opportunities:

I think we also see part of our work as kind of supporting democracy and democratic principles. So, I think a kind of a commitment to democracy, which also for me is very much like equal opportunities, is quite a core value.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Several interviewees suggested that fact-checking helps to preserve democracy as well as the political arena of any society by challenging false claims that could distort public debate. That is why fact-checkers from various countries focus more on political misinformation and disinformation than any other topic. For example, participant 19 highlighted the need to focus on claims with political significance because of their potential to influence democratic outcomes and said, “I do focus on misinformation of political significance... So I think fact-checking should be focused on what would be most beneficial to the most number of people consuming information on social media platforms.”

Participant 7 shared that although they tend to focus more on the claims made by political figures, they try to remain careful when they see any doctored videos of politicians, specifically female politicians, circulating online. They discussed with colleagues in their newsroom whether to work on those visuals, often “compromising” and “explicit” in nature, which they assume could significantly harm a politician’s life and privacy.

These participants also framed fact-checking as a form of public service, particularly in its potential to address misinformation affecting communities. Interviewees also described public service as a matter of timing and relevance — ensuring that fact-checks reach audiences when the information was still impactful. As participant 14 opined, “fact-checking that deserves a Pulitzer Prize today needs to be something that is impactful. On the way to being impactful, probably, is reaching the ones that need that information timely.”

Some participants framed public service as intrinsic to the act of fact-checking itself. They believe in selecting fact-checking topics not just for accuracy’s sake but also because of their potential to produce tangible benefits for audiences. Participant 19 said they focus on

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

information that could potentially change public opinion and advised the younger generation of fact-checkers to prioritize checking that type of misinformation and disinformation.

The first research question aimed to determine how fact-checkers from different countries perceive excellence in ethical fact-checking practices. The researcher explored the above eight categories from the data to reflect on how fact-checkers from various fact-checking organizations emphasize several normative and ethical principles maintaining their ethical fact-checking practice.

Research Question Two (a)

The first part of research question two focuses on the influences fact-checkers perceive in their ethical practices. A total of 20 initial codes emerged after the researcher read the interview transcripts. The researcher categorized these 20 codes into five overarching themes – audience, personal level, religion and morality, IFCN codes, and influence from external factors (state, social media platforms and partners). All the interviewees discussed that they had one or the other influence present in their ethical decision-making process and practice.

Influence From Audience

21 interviewees shared that their audiences or readers influence them in their ethical fact-checking practice. This influence works in two phases: both when they select a claim and during the writing phase. They collectively shared that concern and demands from the audience were an integral part of their fact-checking practice. Another key aspect interviewees shared was how audiences reach out to them and which form of channels or modality audiences use to communicate with them. However, the interviewees referred to an imagined audience whom they

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

perceived as readers of their fact-checked content and who engaged with them through various forms of communication.

Topic selection in fact-checking was identified as a key way through which the audience play a role in fact-checkers' ethical decision making. Irrespective of which organizations they worked for, some interviewees shared that they select a claim for fact-checking on the basis of how relevant or important their audience would perceive the claim. Participants from the U.S. and Canada shared that their perceived audiences are primarily those living in the U.S and Canada, although they also have some international audience.

Participant 13 imagined that their audience was primarily Hispanic people residing in the U.S. and who rely on the news organization to provide fact-checked content on issues important and relevant to immigrants. His colleagues from the same organization echoed this belief: "You know, most of our audience, I mean, I imagine, like, most of them are Hispanic. They may know immigrants, or they might be immigrants themselves. So that guides our decision making."

Participant 13 also explained that if they saw two types of misinformation spreading - those that may have a direct impact on immigration and those that pertain to gun control - they would select the claim on immigration for fact-checking and not focus on gun control, as the latter would have less impact on their imagined audiences.

Fact-checkers from outside the U.S. also had mixed understandings of how they perceive their audiences. Fact-checkers from Africa think their audiences are not confined by borders or states, while fact-checkers in Pakistan and Bangladesh perceive their imagined audiences to be mostly people who consume information either related to these two countries and their contexts

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

or the local languages spoken by people there (e.g. Urdu for Pakistan and Bengali for Bangladesh). For example, participant 2, based in Sub-Saharan Africa shared:

It's often just that you don't know who will be reading your reports. Um... you know, you don't... you can't always... predict what kinds of context someone is going to come to report with. And so, trying to write for as broad an audience as possible is often the biggest challenge.

Participant 6 noted: “so, we look at something if something is very viral in the Pakistani context or not. In Pakistani social media circles or not.” He, however, shared that when they see any misinformation that may not directly impact people in Pakistan, but could be interesting to the broader society, they may pick it up to fact-check. For example, in Pakistan’s context, Muslims are the majority and any issues that may not directly impact Pakistanis but could be of interest to the broader Muslim community may be selected based on its relevance in the broader societal context. “If Islamophobes abroad spread a video about Muslims, then we might take that even though Pakistani citizens might not be discussing it because Islamophobia, Islam, Muslims. That is a topic of interest to our Pakistani community”, shared participant 6.

Another key aspect regarding audience influence on ethical fact-checking was reflected through fact-checkers’ linguistic choices. Interviewees from different parts of the world shared that they carefully decide what language they use or do not use based on the background of their audiences. To do this, they ignore the issue of editorial autonomy and inclusivity on some occasions. Participant 1 shared:

...sometimes I think that we will, for example, we don't always use entirely gender-neutral language because we kind of judge that our audience particularly are kind of

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

fairly... in some cases...fairly unsophisticated rural audience. Sometimes, we do we change our tone for our intended audience.

A similar technique was also used for fact-checking misinformation on scientific or health-related issues to facilitate better understanding among audiences from different backgrounds. Besides, some claims on health issues and other scientific issues could be debated or even lack enough substantial scientific evidence. Therefore, interviewees stated that they often try to explain these claims in a way that their audiences do not misunderstand the message but also obtain a better understanding of it. To explain these issues, participant 2 referred to one fact-checked content he wrote about a claim that said blueberries contain antioxidants that do not only have health benefits but that also prevent cancer.

If someone says blueberries contain antioxidants and that prevents cancer and you do a Google search for antioxidants cancer, you might find a scientific study that found that antioxidants decreased cancer markers in human cells in a test tube or something like that. And that can seem at first like evidence of the claim. But you know, that's not necessarily proof. One test is not necessarily proof that if you eat blueberries every morning, you are immune to cancer or your cancer will be cured or something like that. In those cases, explaining very carefully in a way that is accessible to as general an audience as possible.

Participant 25 (from Canada) also shared a similar idea that they often rely on systematic review type journal articles rather than studies containing preliminary data. He stated that findings from one study cannot be considered conclusive, especially for fact-checking on health-related claims:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Solid research is something like a meta-analysis or a systematic review because in those kinds of research you have a synthesis or a compilation, if that is the word of tens of research. So, for us, it's more solid than one research. Frequently in the research about so-called natural treatments like carrot will be a remedy of something, people will say, well, there is this study and this study proves that carrots are efficient. We are looking at the study and it's on few mice or it's on 15 people. So, these are not solid studies. These are not enough to be conclusive.

Interviewees also shared that their audiences voice their expectations on the social media channels fact-checkers use. Participant 12, based in the U.S., described how her organization uses WhatsApp as a central tool to reach audiences and communicates with them using a chatbot. The audience often asks the chatbot to fact-check certain claims:

We use WhatsApp as one of our important ways to communicate with our audience. So, we have this chatbot. And the chatbot is an open space where people can ask us about everything. Oh, is this true? Is this false, or what do you think? So, the chatbot without automatically connects with the content we have already produced. Give them a response, and if we haven't actually developed anything about that specific information, then we put it on our queue and decide to write a story about that.

Another fact-checker shared that the audience might have influence on how they select any claim to be fact-checked by asking fact-checkers to verify it through social media. However, this fact-checker also said that they remain careful to manage audience expectations when they receive any requests coming from partisan groups.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

...if someone suggests something through our chatbot, doesn't mean that we are forced to do it, because we also don't want to be able to... I mean, let's say a Republican or a Democrat wants us to publish a bunch of stories about someone. They could just manipulate us by sending us links.

Some interviewees, however, perceive how the audience influences ethical fact-checking practice in a positive way. They shared that the audience had now changed compared to few years ago, as they now read and become engaged with fact-checking activities. The audience also helps the fact-checked content to reach more people by sharing the fact-checked content on their social media handles, hence collaborating in debunking misinformation,. Interviewees also saw collaboration from the audience in another form: audiences provide fact-checkers with tips over email or even on social media. In this regard, participant 16 shared:

So, I saw every email sent to us for 10 years and there would be you know suggestions for us there and we would sometimes pursue fact-checking things that our readers want to know about. So, you know, if we get a tip from a reader about a claim, we'll be, you know, more likely to pursue that.

These verbal testimonies from interviewees demonstrate that audiences are embedded in the fact-checking practice and that they exert their influence on ethical fact-checking. The audience also shapes topic selection, communication tools, and language use. They contribute to the fact-checking process with tips and suggestions that guide fact-checkers' decision making process. Thus, we see a portrayal of fact-checking as a collaborative and participatory practice where both the audience and fact-checkers interact and participate directly through various

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

channels. However, fact-checkers also seem to ensure that responsiveness to the audience does not compromise their independence.

Personal Level Influence

Interviewees echoed that their personal values have a direct or indirect impact on their ethical fact-checking practices. Interviewees shared that their personal values impacted how they choose claims for fact-checking, verify a claim, and navigate ethical dilemmas. The personal values include values derived from family, parents, partners, ethnic and social backgrounds, and political views. These values are different than those derived from religion and morality because the latter group is based on religious doctrines, scriptures, practices, or moral philosophies.

According to the interviewees, their personal values often align with their professional standards. Some participants also shared how they tackle the tension between their professional obligations. For example, participants 5 and 17 acknowledged that their personal values were directly aligned with their professional values and the expectations set by their organizations. Therefore, they do not face any conflict in practicing ethical fact-checking. Participant 5 shared:

...my personal values are also the same as of my work values, because in our professional work, we have to follow the accuracy. We have to provide the accurate, transparent and fair information to the public and this is my personal value as well to practice the truth, accuracy, fairness as I am accountable to the public and to my organization as well.

Echoing her, participant 17 from a U.S.-based fact-checking organization shared that her personal values comfortably align with her colleagues' personal values. As a result, her journey as a fact-checker had been easier as she does not face any conflicts at work. While discussing

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

where her personal values had originated from, she discussed that her family played a significant role in this process:

I would say my parents, primarily, and then also, I would say, like, my grandparents in different ways...My parents are very... we're very much caring about minimizing harm, caring about, like being conscientious and, like, really, like, being precise. I think that's something that, like comes from my family.

Participant 1 highlighted how her parents' commitment to democracy and her upbringing in a country with a history of racial divisions, had shaped her moral outlook and commitment to equality. She said:

I was born in the 80s you know before South Africa was a democratic state. And I had parents who were very committed to a democratic South Africa ... that wasn't based on racial division. I do actually think that quite a lot of my sense of morality comes from a belief in equality between people and that there should be equal opportunity for people and that it shouldn't be based on particularly race... That is quite central to my sense of ethics.

Other fact-checkers, for example, participant 12, acknowledged that, while their values influence their work, they also try to remain aware of how much their personal preferences shape their choices in selecting the claims for fact-checking. This participant noted that her work sometimes requires her to focus on topics she might not personally choose:

Well, sometimes I have to, of course, work on topics that are not probably the topics that I would love to. I try to be very fair in terms of in the way we approach things. This is

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

how I try not to be unfair with my personal values. So, well research can give you some light about the things that probably are too close to your own values.

Participant 14 reflected on how her upbringing in a diverse household had influenced her to be open to diversity. Therefore, she tries to remain cautious about maintaining diversity in her fact-checking practices. As her parents came from different religious backgrounds, she had learned how to be respectful to a diverse range of ideas and values, which she thought was also reflected in her professional life.

Some of the fact-checkers shared how their personal life experiences and relationships influence the selection of claims and their practices of fact-checking. For example, participants 11 and 18 shared that their expertise and academic backgrounds on certain issues and identity play a role in their fact-checking practice. Participant 11 shared:

I researched on women and gender issues, and always being drawn to misinformation on those issues. Even my colleagues also reached out to me when they cover any of such misinformation. They do not do that because of my identity as a woman, rather for my academic background and expertise.

Participant 18, who is from Pakistan, shared that her interest in marginalized people's struggle and ethnic identity guides her in choosing topics for fact-checking. "As a fact checker, I'm drawn to stories from Balochistan, which is a multi-ethnic community and I've written various fact checks on the human rights activists who are being targeted like deep fakes are created."

Participant 19 discussed how values and perspectives from close personal relationships could directly influence her professional work. She said that she and her partner, who also

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

worked as a fact-checker at her organization, would have long discussions about their work every day. Thus, she thought her discussions with her partner influence her fact-checking approach.

Some fact-checkers, irrespective of their countries and newsroom positions, admitted that they sometimes face dilemmas in practicing ethical fact-checking due to their personal biases. For example, participant 16 shared that, as a political fact-checker, he finds it difficult to prevent his own biases from creeping into his work as he thinks he might have some blind spots. Despite this, he said he tries to remain neutral and avoid biases which could be reflected in the blind spots in someone's work. He employs a technique of self-checking his fact-checked content every two years to evaluate the verdicts he made on different claims.

Another participant (10) also admitted – “What has happened in my case is that my political views sometimes create a kind of resistance in me to doing something, which I cannot deny...The priority becomes different. This has happened to me...”

Participant 2 shared that he could not find any specific instances where his work had been heavily influenced by his personal values, but he did not discard the fact that he is aware of his own biases on certain issues. He provided another example of how he tackles his potential conflicts of interest:

I think that is something that I have a topic that I have a very strong personal bias on. And I can just choose to not write that report. I have co-workers who can verify a claim if I feel like there would be a conflict of interest there.

Three other interviewees (participants 23, 24, 25 from Ghana and Canada) shared that identity, certain personal traits and characteristics as well as political ideologies also shape fact-checkers' ethical decision making. For example, according to participant 24, “...someone who

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

actually supports a certain political ideology holding onto that ideology very strongly” and “these are ideological leanings often could affect” what one fact-checker’s decision making on claim selection process as well as verifying the claim.

For others, collaboration was also seen was a way to manage personal values. Participants 11, 4 and 10 all shared that they practice editorial collaborations in newsrooms so that the blind spots of one could be detected by others before any fact-checked content was published. Collaboration had become a mechanism for ensuring that no single person’s values dominate the fact-checking practice:

So, there's checks and balances that Ideally should sort of yeah help to minimize the influence of any of those personal values. And I think the sort of collaborative aspect of our work probably plays a really big role in this as well. Because as you say, you know, everyone comes with their own different values and biases...

Meanwhile, some fact-checkers (participants 23 and 28) try to skip fact-checking a certain claim if that goes against their personal values. In those cases, they try to find someone neutral among their colleagues to finish the task, or they focus on the “middle ground.” Participant 28 explained:

If you think you are invested, or this particular topic triggers something around your beliefs, your fate, then let someone who is neutral work on it. If there is no one neutral available, we just try to maintain the middle goal as much as possible.

These interviews showed that ethical fact-checking is a process of verifying claims that is shaped by the personal values and biases of those who conduct it. These values influence individual fact-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

checkers' decision-making and ethical professional conduct, while collaborative practices and other newsroom strategies guard fact-checkers from becoming victims of personal bias.

Religion and Morality

After analyzing the participants' interviews, the researcher found that religion was a key influence in interviewees' ethical fact-checking practices, for example, telling truth, being fair and accountable. A total of 14 fact-checkers explicitly shared that they are either religious or follow one religion, and that religious values could intersect with the principles of truth-telling, fairness, accountability, and harm reduction that guide fact-checking. Some of the participants also shared that their religious beliefs align with their commitment to accuracy and transparency. For others, religion is a key constituent of their upbringing or cultural context, which in turn, influences how they perceive their ethical fact-checking practice.

Among all the participants, three fact-checkers explicitly shared that they did not want to talk about religion. Others – a total of 11 participants - shared that they were neither practicing any organized religion nor did it have any influence on their ethical fact-checking practice.

The self-declared religious participants were generally following two Abrahamic religions – Islam and Christianity. Nine participants described themselves as Muslims and five others were following Catholicism and other denominations of the Christian faith. All these participants shared that their religious understandings and practice have direct or indirect impact on their ethical fact-checking practices. Some shared that their religious values, personal values and professional values almost merge.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Participant 5 explained how her religious values shape her approach to fact-checking: “We know what our religion taught us. We know that we have to be honest we have to be transparent. I guess, yes. And... we always have to speak about truth.”

For her, truth-telling is not just a professional standard but also a religious one. She also described how lying was prohibited in her religious values and her faith in Islam provided the moral foundation for her values that align with her work as a fact-checker. “I’m trying to say is our religious values or our personal values are almost same. And my faith definitely that definitely influences how I approach both my personal life and professional life” she added.

Participants 23 and 24 shared that Islamic values of justice, truth-telling, fairness, and saving humanity always guide them to practice their fact-checking work, and they think these values supplement their work and do not create any obstacles in their ethical decision making. They also think their excellent fact-checking practices could set examples that Muslims can be good journalists and humans.

Participant 12 shared that she has never shared her religious identity as a Catholic to many of her fact-checker colleagues. However, she described that some religions share similar principles and those principles also strengthen her and help professionally.

So, if you see the basic principles of all many religions, Muslim, Jewish, Catholicism, or Christianity have the same principles, and those same principles are principles that connected to the principles of democracy, the principles of being respectful and in peace with, others, and with your environment.

She also shared that she personally found it sensitive and hurtful when her organization was fact-checking a claim that had surfaced about Pope Leo XIV and his alleged mishandling of

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

sexual abuse cases while he was a former bishop in Peru. However, she said her organization eventually ran the fact-checked content following a thorough investigation.

One Muslim interviewee (participant 7) echoed the previous discussion that all religious teachings ask human beings to be respectful to others and not conceal the truth. She also mentioned that her own professional and personal values, therefore, directly align with Islamic ethical principles. She, however, believes she had never faced any conflict in maintaining ethical fact-checking due to her religious identity.

Participant 10 explained how his belief in Islam and Islamic teachings on truth-seeking influence his outlook as a fact-checker:

I was studying in a religious school as a child. I had this idea that in fact, truth seeking is a very important thing in religious morality. Truth can be of many kinds. I don't know exactly where the center point of truth is. This truth-seeking journey is happening on its own, or is it a religious journey? I think this religious morality has always helped me in this place.

He also shared that due to his religious beliefs, he had sometimes felt biased toward his religion when he wrote about Islam and other religions. He had noticed a tendency in himself of using adjectives before the *Quran*, which he noticed he did not do when he was writing about other scriptures. He shared that this innate bias was normal for any human being but it could be problematic if it reflected in his published works. Echoing on Islam's emphasis on truth seeking, another Muslim participant (interviewee 6) also described the close connection between his religion, Islam, and his practice of ethical fact-checking. He explained that religion informs his mental structure and thus, influence his own moral understanding:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Islam's insistence on speaking about the truth, and always being truthful in your daily matters... not spreading falsehood or misleading the people, all of those aspects certainly inform my personality and obviously informs a large part of our fact checking process because again the search for the truth no matter what it may be.

He also highlighted the importance of verification in Islam. Referring to the Islamic teachings of Prophet Muhammad or the Hadith, he said that Islamic teachings correlate with verification. Hadith stresses the importance of verification and corroborating information. And Islam also asks its followers to gain knowledge which directly helps fact-checkers in maintaining their ethical practices:

They say that if you hear something from another person, you should not immediately spread it around. You should always verify and corroborate it. And also, Islam tells you to, you know, read, gain knowledge, inform yourself make better versions of yourself by gaining up as much as knowledge and that is also similar, I guess, to the fact checking process of, you know, going in depth as much as possible from a wide variety.

On the other hand, 10 participants, a little more than one third of those interviewed, discussed their moral understanding and how that shapes their ethical fact-checking practices. Among these 10 participants, some identified family upbringing or philosophical readings as the primary source of their ethics. In all of these cases, moral understanding guides how they think about truth, fairness, accuracy, and responsibility to the public.

Among the participants who spoke to morality, several referenced a range of ethical theories, frameworks, and principles that inform both their personal and professional lives. The ethical theories and principles include secular-humanist framework, egalitarian principles,

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

utilitarian theory, duty-based ethics, freedom of press or the First Amendment (pillars of the American democracy), understanding of philosophers like Judith Butler and Arundhati Roy, Sufism (a mystical perspective in the religion of Islam), virtues of courage, compassion, truthfulness and human rights.

Participants 14, 18 and 15 shared that their moral understandings are influenced by human rights. Therefore, they always tend to be committed toward ensuring human rights through their professional activities. “I’m very biased towards human rights. Very biased towards, um, wanting to live in a...free society in a democratic country,” Participant 15 said.

This participant also shared that his grandmother had a great influence on his life, shaping his moral understanding when he was young. His grandmother taught him to ask tough questions to people in power to ensure human rights, which he thought he was now following every day by practicing ethical fact-checking. For participant 14, the ideals of human rights were connected to her former profession as a lawyer. She also believed that her family background might have some connection with her leaning toward human rights. Her father had emigrated to her country from Poland after World War II and her mother had emigrated following the Spanish Civil War.

Two other participants (1 and 17) discussed egalitarianism when explaining the moral understandings that might shape their professional practice. Both participants, who claimed to be not religious, shared that they had always aimed to practice care to ensure equality in society. They do this through their individual and professional acts, hence, fact-checking. Participant 17 shared that her ideals of egalitarianism were rooted in her family background as she was from the U.S. Midwest, where she thought most people believed in egalitarianism and were community-centric. Participant 1 reasoned that she had grown up in apartheid South Africa which had shaped

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

her morality for establishing equality for everyone irrespective of their race and other identity. She, however, shared that her family connection to a Jewish extraction had put her into a dilemma while performing fact-checking on claims specific to the Palestine-Israel conflict:

I'm not religious but I come from a Jewish extraction...For a year and a half would it be difficult for me? To edit and be objective on the Israel-Palestine conflict...I didn't think it would be... It's not my own ethics you know it's kind of more my identity. I think I'm sure I have blind spots here.

Two participants (3 and 4) also mentioned how utilitarian and duty-based ethical frameworks had influenced their moral understanding and their ethical fact-checking practices. Participant 4 explicitly mentioned that the utilitarian views had helped her seek justice through her everyday professional activities. On the other hand, participant 3, hinted that she considered truth telling to be a duty of every fact-checker as well as every human being, despite the consequences. Participant 3 shared:

...everybody in the world should have the ability to know the truth and make up their opinion from the truth. And then, however, they move with that information. Whatever consequences, good, bad, neutral they then have to live with them. I think that's kind of my morality.

For some, the legal foundations of free expression and the press, for example the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution, laid the groundwork of moral values for fact-checkers. One of these participants (16) shared that the free press had always helped him practice fact-checking, as he thought this constitutional protection was starting to fade away due to the continuous pressures and challenges from the authorities. Others drew heavily on philosophical traditions

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

rather than religious guidance. One such participant (2) explained that his moral understanding was influenced by writers and philosophers such as Judith Butler and Arundhati Roy. He shared that this intellectual engagement provided him with a framework for approaching questions of justice, truth, and responsibility during ethical fact-checking practice.

At the same time, participant 19, who does not follow any organized religion, highlighted how her Shia Muslim family upbringing had introduced her to Sufism. This has, in turn, contributed to her moral grounding. She clarified, however, that Sufism did not directly shape her fact-checking practice. She also explained that Sufism influenced her moral ideas not as a religious framework, but as a moral philosophical framework.

IFCN Codes

All the fact-checkers in this study, from different organizations, shared how the code of principles developed by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) (See Appendix B) shaped their decision making in situations that raised ethical concerns. The IFCN code of principles has emerged as a standardized framework for fact-checkers to practice ethical fact-checking. According to the interviewees, irrespective of whether their organization officially adheres to the IFCN code or not, they still follow it. Interviews also revealed the similarities and differences between the IFCN code and interviewees' own codes of principles in the organizations they work for. This shows that the IFCN code functions both as an external framework of accountability and an internal guide shaping editorial decisions.

Except for two – Dismisslab and iVerify, all other fact-checking organizations were now signatories of the IFCN code of principles, according to the fact-checkers. Interviewees from the two non-signatory organizations, however, shared that they too follow this code as it had become

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

a global standard for fact-checking. As such, one participant shared that her organization had yet to become a signatory of the IFCN code of principles, but it still has a significant impact on all fact-checkers' ethical practices.

According to another participant (18), her organization had become a signatory of the IFCN code of principles and therefore, they had to abide by this code:.

...to become a signatory, there is a criteria you have to follow and abide by. So, some of these considerations are how you have to be nonpartisan, how you have to like transparent about your funding, and how you have to explain what your methodology is in the fact-checking process. IFCN is our guide. Like the resource that we follow at our own organization.

Others also shed light on how the IFCN code of principles requires them to practice fairness, transparency about sources, technologies, and techniques they used for fact-checking. Participant 1 stated:

I mean, we are a signatory of the IFCN code of principles and so you know that is a commitment to non-partisanship and fairness a commitment to standards and transparency of sources...Another thing is a commitment to transparency of funding and organization.

Another participant (14) added that part of that transparency in the IFCN code was to make those principles available on the organization's websites so that anyone could find what rules the fact-checkers had set for themselves and what standards they followed. This process, she thought, helped address doubts, if any, in people's minds. The IFCN code, in general,

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

provided answers to all the questions an audience could have about fact-checkers and their credibility, she added.

Some fact-checkers, for example, participant 18, shared that the IFCN code also guided fact-checkers to conduct ethical journalism as it aligns with the ethical qualities of journalism as well as other journalism codes of ethics, for example, the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

I can say that virtually every single point in our code of practice, in our code of conduct, follow the IFCN code of principle. And also... we realized that most of this code of principles are actually in line with the general journalist.

One participant (19) considered the IFCN code of principles to be a set of general rules for good journalism, but she could not say whether any specific parts of the code were significantly more important than others. A participant (18) from Pakistan shared that she was a journalist and she use the SPJ code of ethics, which she claimed shared a lot of similarities with the IFCN code.

For some of the fact-checkers from Politifact, Africa Check, Dubawa, and Soch Fact, the IFCN code of principles is foundational to their organizations' ethical conduct codes, with overlaps between the two. According to interviewees, all the fact-checking organizations represented in this research have their own codes of principles. However, interviewees stated that their organizations had developed other codes on some occasions which went beyond what the IFCN code covers. For example, one participant (15) shared how their own system of labeling stories goes beyond the scope of what had been discussed in the IFCN code:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

I think it's not copy and paste. I think there has to be some overlap with IFCN, but for example, the labeling of the story is not an IFCN thing. We are the ones who...decided what our labels are, and we are the ones who decide when to use them...because all the different fact-checking organizations, they have different labels and different ways of using it, and they are all members of the IFCN.

Participant 15 also shared that his organization uses different color codes and labels for different claims they fact-checked. Another participant (14) shared that the IFCN asks fact-checking organizations to provide the basic information on who funded the organizations. However, the IFCN code does not provide guidance on what to do when fact-checkers work on a claim that had direct connections to an entity that provides funds to their organization. Therefore, her organization had added a guideline to its own code to mention the funders along with the fact-checked content. This participant (14), who was also involved in developing the first draft of IFCN code, shared that this code provides a framework to fact-checkers that emphasizes certain core issues such as methodology, funding, and correction policy. However, it does not provide exhaustive or specific recommendations about those core issues. Her explanation is reflected in the fourth principle of the IFCN code – “commitment to standards and transparency of methodology.” This principle requires that all IFCN affiliated fact-checking organizations explain their methodology of selecting, researching, writing, editing, publishing, and even correcting their fact-checked content. However, it does not explicitly discuss any particular form of methodology or tools that should be used. The fifth principle of the IFCN code also requires that fact-checkers to publish their correction policies on their websites and follow it carefully, but does not specify any particular method or form for corrections.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Another participant (19) criticized the IFCN as an organization for not simplifying its policies to allow a fact-checking organization, especially from the Global South, to become a signatory. Therefore, she thought there was only one IFCN signatory in her country. Another participant (9) added that any fact-checking organization was required to obtain the IFCN's accreditation if they wanted to be a credible organization, and the IFCN had the sole authority to allow accreditation for fact-checkers. Participant 26, who is also a founder of a fact-checking organization shared that fact-checking organizations around the world want to get affiliated with the IFCN so they get partnered with social media platforms. He thought that this process affects global fact-checking practice as it may push fact-checking organizations to focus more on misinformation available on their partner social media organization. A participant (18) shared that although the IFCN principles guide them in ethical decision making, they could not apply those to some cases as they were not specific enough and vague in nature.

The IFCN invites new fact-checking organizations to become signatories three times a year (IFCN, n.d.b). These signatories have to apply and pay a non-refundable \$350 fee. The IFCN staff checks the eligibility of the application, and sends eligible applications to independent external assessors for more thorough review. Assessors use a 31-page guideline to evaluate whether applicants operate as non-partisan, legally recognized fact-checking organizations. Assessors "recommend their approval or rejection to the IFCN Advisory Board members (who) ... vote on a final approval" (para.4, IFCN, n.d.b).

Some participants also shared that they do not check the IFCN codes every day but rather try to internalize the codes so these could guide them whenever necessary. Sharing information that the IFCN and his organization have close ties, participant 16 remarked on this matter:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

It's not like I look at it every day. I just internalize them. IFCN ethics are based on the ones that we use. So, I don't think there's a lot of difference. I can't imagine it's like dramatically different for the IFCN particular rules...

Two fact-checkers from Bangladesh and Pakistan noted a growing trend among fact-checking organizations to become signatories to the IFCN code of principles, as this is often a primary requirement for partnering with social media companies. Such partnerships allow fact-checking organizations to operate as third-party fact-checkers for these platforms. In return, the organizations receive monetary grants from the social media companies, according to these participants.

For some other participants, the IFCN code, despite criticism against it from their colleagues, has a reputation of standardizing global fact-checking activities. These participants considered the IFCN code to be high quality due to its near universality and global acceptance among fact-checkers worldwide. For example, participant 10 hailed the IFCN code as “globally acclaimed” given it had stood the test of time. Another participant (3) shared similar thoughts – “...that is basically the highest level of standards and ethics for fact-checking globally. That's the standards that we hold ourselves accountable to as well. Otherwise, we wouldn't be signatories anymore.”

Partnerships With Social Media, News Outlets and Threats From Governments

The interviewees described their ethical practice as something shaped not only by the IFCN code but also external factors such as social media platforms, news outlets, the state, and organizational partners. These factors create challenges for how fact-checkers conduct their work and make ethical decisions in practice. 16 participants acknowledged the fact that these external

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

factors might have influenced their ethical decision making in some way or another (see Table 2 below).

Table 2

Fact-checking Organizations and Their Social Media Partnerships

Organizations	Social Media Partnerships
PolitiFact	TikTok
Factchequeado	TikTok
News Detective	Blue Sky
Agence Science Presse	None
Africa Check	Meta
One Int'l Fact-checking Org	Meta
Dubawa	Meta
Fact-space	None
Dismislab	None
Soch Fact	Meta
iVerify	None
News Checker	TikTok

Interviewees discussed two types of partnerships with social media platforms and other news outlets. On the one hand, they have non-financial partnerships with the news media and mostly in redistribution of the fact-checked content. At times, they also help in verifying information. Their partnerships with social media are financial and fact-checkers receive grants from social media companies to check misinformation and disinformation available on the platforms. Five fact-checking organizations based in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are still

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

affiliated with Meta, while six organizations based in North America and Sub-Saharan Africa have partnerships with TikTok, according to interviewees.

One participant (12) explained her organization's relationship with TikTok. She emphasized transparency through disclaimers regarding their affiliation to the social media company and how they maintain transparency in their relationship with TikTok:

...when we talk about TikTok, about the company itself. We put a disclaimer. We said we have a grant with them...and we say that what the grant is about. Basically, they (TikTok) asked us to identify videos that we consider disinformation and we do it...

She also clarified the limits of the fact-checking organization's control over the fact-checked content: "...but in the case of TikTok, what we provide them, they don't put necessarily down, unless they think that it's causing them harm...". She said social media platforms and companies – for example, Meta – also have affiliations with fact-checking organizations and the social media platforms often do not respond to the findings of fact-checking organizations. This outlines a limited form of gatekeeping on fact-checked content. Fact-checkers investigate and provide information to platforms, but it is the companies who decide what to remove or keep.

Interviewees shared that their organizations are affiliated with social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram, Threads, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Blue Sky. However, interviewees from the U.S. shared that they had recently lost their contract with Meta – which owned Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp – following a decision by Meta in early 2025. Four organizations in South Africa, Nigeria and Pakistan have affiliations with Meta-owned social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Threads, WhatsApp) and three fact-checkers from Bangladesh and the U.S. have affiliations with TikTok. One fact-checking organization from the U.S. has

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

partnerships with Blue Sky and four other fact-checker organizations had no partnerships with social media platforms at the time of this study.

Interviewees confirmed these findings. For example, participant 2 shared that they still have an affiliation with Meta and discussed how the social media company influences their ethical decision making and practices when they checked misinformation on Meta-owned platforms. She shared:

It does influence what we can rate on their platform. So, for example, to be part of that program, we agree that, for example, we can't rate what they call political speech, which is anything posted on their platform by someone who currently holds a political office. And that's just sort of a standard rule of theirs.

She also explained that Meta has no control over how they publish any fact-checked content on their own website, especially stories related to political misinformation, which were initially found on Meta-owned social media platforms. But the control from the social media company on fact-checking was evident when they rate political content on Meta's social media platforms.

A second participant (19) provided an example from the Israeli–Palestinian coverage on Facebook to demonstrate how social media platforms react to politically sensitive misinformation:

So, for example, I'll give you an example...Facebook did not allow us to really fact check Israeli propaganda about 7th October. And Meta was very much... you know offended every time we published a fact check...it was basically that they did not want us to fact check anything that the IDF was spreading.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

She also shared that they kept fact-checking issues, which Facebook would not want them to flag on their own platforms, on the fact-checking organization's own website to maintain their responsibility to their audiences. Following this, the fact-checking organization's relationship with Facebook became complicated, and they had risked its third-party partnership with the social media company.

Another participant (16) pointed to how third-party affiliation with Meta was an important factor for fact-checking. Losing such affiliation with social media companies like Meta could be harmful for any fact-checking organization's growth. He also shared how his organization had been impacted following Meta's decision to not continue with third party fact-checking for its social media platforms: –

We shrunk a bit because of the Facebook program going away. I don't know how much you know about that but we lost a bunch of contractors. So, like part-time freelancers and one full-timer. So, we're a little bit smaller than we were six months ago.

Participant 1 mentioned they were suspecting that partnerships with social media platforms would end with a change in political scenarios, and that it would be unwise to think such partnerships last forever. He explained that social media companies follow political powers. For example, Meta severed ties with American fact-checkers to keep a good relationship with the current U.S. government.

For some fact-checkers, their partnerships with other media outlets and expert sources shape their ethical decision making. They shared that their organizations had partnered with some media outlets, some of which used their fact-checked content and republished it through paid subscriptions, while others did not pay for content. In most cases, the media partners asked

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

them to cover certain issues which they found would be important for audiences. Participant 13 shared:

So, we have partners, and sometimes they tell us, you know, this is what's been discussed in this community, so we base our decisions like, through that, too. We focus on content based on the needs of the Hispanic community, uh, the immigrant community. And...then we just go with that.

Participant 12 stated that their partners have grassroots networks across the country who would conduct surveys on audiences to assess which type of content were in demand for fact-checking. Admitting the fact that they could be influenced by their partners in their ethical decision making regarding the selection of claims for fact-checking, she also shared that the partners help them reach more audiences. However, the fact-checkers always remain vigilant about their partners' background and political affiliation, according to participant 12:

We have 122 allies at this moment that are spread out in the U.S, and...they can take our content for free, and distribute it in their own audiences as a way we can reach more people. So, every time we reach a new ally, a new partner, we check are these people nonpartisan?

Meanwhile, participant 16 shared that his organization has partners who also produce their content for free while some of their partners pay for republishing their content. This source of income is also considered a source of funding for fact-checkers. He, however, said that they do not observe any influence from their partners. Echoing this, another participant (5) shared that their partnership with a large newspaper in her country helps them find expert sources for fact-checking on issues related to newer technology.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

According to participant 10, his organization is affiliated with some of the popular news outlets in his country who republished their content but who did not attempt to influence them in any way. He, however, added that they would reach out to the same expert sources used by their partner news outlets, and sometimes, these expert sources attempt to influence them through their opinionated findings, leaving aside the context about a complex issue. He also shared how other external factors such as the government and its policies influence their ethical decision making. According to him, many existing laws and policies in his country directly go against the values of free speech and hinder open and free fact-checking practices. He referred to the Digital Security Act, which is often criticized as a tool to repress free journalism practice in Bangladesh.

Government and state influence was also reflected in discussions with other participants. Participant 18, for instance, directly addressed the threats from powerful state actors by saying:

...you know, there are going to be certain threats when you undertake this kind of works but that shouldn't like stop you from holding those in powerful accountable. So, if the army chief, if the army officials or if the politicians are making statements you have to hold them accountable. You have to fact check them.

Three participants from a Sub-Saharan African country shared that their government is formulating a new policy to regulate fact-checking. However, these participants think the policy was made to “gag” fact-checkers. These interviewees stated that their government was attempting to bar fact-checking initiatives that operate outside traditional newsrooms and without government-provided training. A fourth fact-checker from another Sub-Saharan African country echoed similar sentiments that fact-checking is challenging people in power by holding them accountable, which made governments and ruling parties negative about fact-checking practices in general.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Participant 19 alleged that the state influences fact-checking by concealing information about important public issues and using law-enforcement agencies and the military to hide information. Pointing to government-run fact-checking units in different countries, a third participant (14) opined that these fact-checking units are not doing fact-checking but are rather facilitating the government by acting as public relations liaisons and producing narratives the government want to spread. She also said that as a female fact-checker, she is often harassed by different role players in society but that she was resilient to such harassment:

I think in my career, I have governments from right and left, just criticizing and saying that I'm a hooker or whatever, but I don't mind... Like, it's not that I don't mind. I understand that after years of suffering, that is for sure, we need to take that seriously.

Another participant (16) also reflected on the issue of personal attacks. He shared that until recently, he had thought that he was protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution. He was unsure whether the idea of the free press would change, as he had been seeing a new level of personal attacks on journalists and fact-checkers in general in his country. A second participant (15) explicitly shared that the Trump administration was not happy with fact-checkers, threatening them to stop working on certain issues. This interviewee stated that fact-checkers now feel they have to be more cautious about what they fact-checked, as mistakes could be devastating for fact-checking in general.

This research question found that fact-checkers were experiencing influences from some outside factors while they work to maintain ethical fact-checking practices. The influences were categorized in five overarching groups – the audience, personal level, religion and morality, the IFCN code, and influence from external factors (state, social media platforms and partners). These influences, as the fact-checkers discussed, sometimes create pressures on fact-checkers. In

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Cultural/Regional Context	Organization & Country	Religion & Morality	Audience	State, government pressure and social media partners	Ubuntu
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other cases, outside influences shape fact-checkers' understanding of ethical fact-checking practices. For example, the study found fact-checking to be a collaborative and participatory practice where both the audience and fact-checkers interacted and participated directly.

Interviewees also shared that religion and morality shape their understanding of ethical practices and decision making, while in some cases external factors such as social media companies and state policies impede the fact-checking process.

Research Question Two (b)

This research question looked into how perceived ethical influences differ for fact-checkers from organizations in different cultural contexts. This research question assessed fact-checking on two levels – macro or cultural level, and the meso or organizational level. Only on one occasion, the discussion on Ubuntu was restricted to the Sub-Saharan countries, as fact-checkers from countries in the other two regions – U.S., Canada, Pakistan and Bangladesh – have less orientation of this African moral theory. Two influencing factors – personal values and the IFCN code – were not included in the discussion as the personal values focused only on the micro level and could not be categorized into the macro or meso levels. Meanwhile, in the context of the IFCN code of principles, the fact-checkers were unanimous on how the code influences them in their ethical decision making. Therefore, no differences were to be reported.

Table 3

Influences on Macro and Meso Level

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Cultural/Regional Context	Organization & Country	Religion & Morality	Audience	State, government pressure and social media partners	Ubuntu
Sub-Saharan Africa	Africa Check <i>South Africa</i>	Not influenced	Influenced	No state threats; partial social media influence	Aware, not consciously applied
Sub-Saharan Africa	Dubawa <i>Nigeria</i>	Not influenced	Influenced	Some government challenges; no social media influence	Aware, limited elaboration
Sub-Saharan Africa	Fact Space West Africa <i>Ghana</i>	Influenced	Influenced	Legislative threat; no social media partnerships	Aware
Sub-Saharan Africa	One Int'l Fact-checking Org. <i>South Africa</i>	No Influence	Influenced	No Threats	Aware
Muslim majority South Asia	Disimslab <i>Bangladesh</i>	Partial Influence	Influenced	Direct threats; no social media partnerships	Not asked
Muslim majority South Asia	Newschecker <i>Bangladesh</i>	Partial Influence	Influenced	No Threats	Not asked
Muslim majority South Asia	Soch Fact Check <i>Pakistan</i>	Not Influenced	Influenced	Severe state pressure; editorial pressure from social media	Not asked
Muslim majority South Asia	iVerify <i>Pakistan</i>	Influenced	Influenced	Severe state pressure; no social media partnerships	Not asked
North America	PolitiFact <i>USA</i>	Not influenced	Influenced	Political hostility; no influence from social media	Not asked
North America	Factchequeado <i>USA</i>	Partial Influence	Influenced	Political hostility; media partners influential	Not asked
North America	News Detective <i>USA</i>	Not influenced	Influenced	Political hostility; no social media influence	Not asked
North America	Agence Science-Presse <i>Canada</i>	Not influenced	Influenced	No state pressure; no social media partnerships	Not asked

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

The table (3) illustrates how the perceived factors of influence play different roles in fact-checking at the *macro* (cultural) and *meso* (organizational) levels.

Religion and Morality

Although 14 interviewees indicated that they consider themselves religious, 11 shared that their religious belief systems directly or indirectly shape their ethical fact-checking practices. The fact-checkers' discussions also revealed that they were believing and practicing two branches of two Abrahamic religions – Christianity (Catholicism) and Islam (Sunni). At the macro level, the fact-checkers, who were mostly from Bangladesh and Pakistan in South Asia, and Ghana in Sub-Saharan Africa, shared how their ethical practices were influenced by their Islamic religious beliefs. Seven out of the nine participants shared that their religion – Islam – has an influence on their ethical fact-checking practice. For example, one participant (5) explained that her personal values of being honest and transparent have both been transmitted to her through Islam, which was now shaping her ethical fact-checking practice. “We know what our religion taught us. We know that we have to be honest we have to be transparent. And my faith definitely influences how I approach both my personal life and professional” – she said.

Another participant (6) also reflected on how the Islamic value of gaining knowledge was shaping his ethical fact-checking practice of investigating to the core of an issue or claim:

...Islam tells you to, you know, read, gain knowledge, inform yourself, make better versions of yourself by gaining up as much as knowledge and that is also similar, I guess, to the fact checking process of, going in depth as much as possible...

According to another participant (10), truth-seeking is a core value of Islamic ethics, which he was taught from his early childhood, and he now searches for the truth every day in his

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

professional life. Meanwhile, the other two fact-checkers were from one United States-based fact-checking organization who also shared that their religious belief of Catholicism has direct or indirect influence on their ethical decision making and practice of fact-checking. According to participant 13, his background in Catholicism helps him when he fact-checks issues related to the election of the Pope and other religious claims:

I'm Catholic, I know more about the Pope and things like that. In a way, that helps me, because I'm more familiarized with the terms. I think if somebody from a different religion probably didn't know about that...Because I have this background, so I knew where to look for the information.

However, five of the other fact-checkers from the United States shared that they do not experience any influence from religion as they claimed to be non-religious. Most of the fact-checkers from Sub-Saharan African countries – South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana – echoed that religion does not influence their ethical decision making and practice. These fact-checkers, however, discussed that their moral understandings might influence their ethical fact-checking practice.

For example, one fact-checker (participant 14) from the U.S. shared that she is agnostic. She said that religion does not influence her in her ethical fact-checking practices. She, however, pointed out that her moral understanding had been shaped by human rights, as her parents had been victims of displacement from their birth countries and had immigrated to a third country.

Meanwhile, another participant (4) from South Africa shared that her moral understanding had been more or less shaped by values like equality and justice:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

I don't have any particular strong religious affiliation...I think my sort of more ethical moral views are sort of probably most closely aligned with a sort of utilitarian kind of view so kind of view you know generally steering towards what is the thing that will benefit for most people the most...

At the meso level, fact-checkers from four organizations – iVerify Pakistan, Dismisslab in Bangladesh, Fact Space in Ghana and Factchequeado in the U.S. – discussed that their religion influences them in their ethical fact-checking practice. They, however, shared that they remain vigilant about that influence so that it does not negatively affect the content they produce. Some of them explained that the diversity in the identities of fact-checkers working in their newsrooms helps curb the infiltration of such influence in their fact-checked content. One participant (10) shared that his organization employs fact-checkers from different backgrounds and religions and that he often sends the fact-checked content related to his practiced religion to his colleagues so they can provide unbiased evaluation before it was published on the website. The fact-checkers from Pakistan-based fact-checking organizations, however, can not implement this strategy as they lack religious diversity in their newsrooms. The fact-checkers from this organization also shared a common strategy that they can not just publish any fact-checked content that reflects the religious biases of the individual fact-checkers since they are also affiliated to a university and are supported financially by an international organization. According to them, such religious biases, if reflected in fact-checked content, would cause their ties to that international organization to be cut off. Meanwhile, Ghana-based fact-checkers shared that they have a diverse newsroom which also helps them tackle issues regarding religion.

The other fact-checkers who shared that they are not influenced by religious ideas were from Africa Check in South Africa, Dubawa in Nigeria, PolitiFact in the U.S., Agence Science

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Presse in Canada, and News Detective in the U.S. They, however, reflected that their organizations always try to remain unbiased toward ethnic, religious or other groups. These fact-checkers discussed that their moral understanding in some cases align with their organizational mission. One participant (4) elaborated:

We are minimizing harm and maximizing good by minimizing false information and therefore the harm caused by false information and anatomizing accurate information... that's sort of quite clear in terms of alignment what we sort of do organizationally and the overall mission of the organization...

Audience Influence

Audience influence emerged as one of the most significant influencing factors of ethical considerations in fact-checking. Twenty one participants described how their imagined or actual audiences were different from each other and how the audiences shape fact-checkers' ethical decisions about which claims to verify and what language to use. This influence operated both directly—through audience requests and feedback—and indirectly, through assumptions about audience needs and values.

At the macro level, the fact-checkers from Sub-Saharan Africa and Muslim majority South Asia have distinct understandings of their perceived audiences. According to the South African, Ghana and Nigerian fact-checkers, their perceived audiences are broad and not confined by borders or states. Rather, they are based in both the African region and other parts of the world. It is understandable as all three Africa-based fact-checking organizations operate in multiple countries across Africa and have a more diverse range of audiences from different countries. For example, participant 2, shared:

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

It's often just that you don't know who will be reading your reports. Um... you know, you don't... you can't always... predict what kinds of context someone is going to come to report with. And so trying to write for as broad an audience as possible is often the biggest challenge.

The fact-checkers in Pakistan and Bangladesh, however, shared that their perceived audiences are mostly those who consume information either related to these two countries and their contexts or the local languages spoken by people there (Urdu for Pakistan and Bengali for Bangladesh). All three fact-checking organizations from these two countries also produce content in English, as they have a large diaspora living abroad. In some cases, they try to fact-check international issues that have some level of connection with the countries and their people. A participant from Pakistan (participant 6) noted – “So, we look at something if something is very viral in the Pakistani context or not. In Pakistani social media circles or not.”

For the U.S.-based fact-checkers, audiences in general are perceived as people in the U.S. and North America, while the U.S. and Canadian fact-checkers shared that they have international audiences as well. They also echoed that since both countries house immigrants from across the world and global politics have a direct correlation with U.S. politics, therefore, they have some international audience members as well.

One such participant (17) explained – “It is so broad...I know we have international readers, but I think primarily our audience, we think, is in the U.S...and everyone in the world is affected by U.S. politics...”

At the macro level, the majority of the fact-checkers in all regions and cultural orientations agreed that their audiences have a direct or indirect influence on how they select a

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

claim and what language they use. However, they highlighted different kinds of influences in this regard. Fact-checkers in North America emphasized claims on political issues and ethnicity, in Muslim majority South Asia, fact-checkers focused on societal issues – religious minorities and gender violence, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, fact-checkers remain very careful about language and explanations used in their content. For example, one participant from the U.S. (13) shared that they primarily focused on immigration issues in the U.S. as they have a large Hispanic audience base within and outside the U.S. Therefore, they provide their content in both Spanish and English. According to the U.S.-based fact-checkers, their audiences mostly communicate with them through social media or electronic media, asking them to cover or fact-check claims and issues.

Fact-checkers from other countries also echoed that their audiences communicate with them mostly over social media and electronic media. At the macro level, Pakistan and Bangladesh-based fact-checkers shared that they tend to focus on misinformation regarding religion and marginalized communities, as their audiences are mostly Muslim and these two countries often see misinformation campaigns against minority groups from other religions and ethnicities. A fact-checker from Pakistan explained:

It comes to like the nature of the claim and then we see how much is it damaging, what's the potential harm and what is the targeted audience. And how is it going to make a social impact and affect particular group of people and how is it going to create the tension...

Another fact-checker from Bangladesh (11) corroborated, sharing that, in Bangladesh, a key misinformation issue was related to gender. As a result, their organization tends to focus on such claims. She also explained that a majority of their audience members are social media users and therefore, the majority of the claims they fact-checked are selected from social media. She

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

also shared that they remain cautious against vulgar and sexually-sensitive language on their fact-checked content as she thinks her audiences may not like the use of such language. She shared: “We used to see the traditional media used vulgar languages on news content, now it is being stopped as our audiences have changed and now are not comfortable to those languages. We strictly maintain the language issues.”

Their colleagues in South Africa also shared how their audiences exert influence on the fact-checked content, especially on language. Two fact-checkers (participants 1 and 2) shared that they are required to remain careful about language and explanations used in their content. They do not use any gender sensitive language, fearing that their rural audiences might not like it. On the other hand, they tend to be more explanatory for scientific fact-checking as they have a broad range of audience who have very diverse understandings of scientific issues. The fact-checkers from Ghana and Nigeria also shared similar ideas.

At the meso or the organizational level, the audience, to some extent, have similar influences, as most of the organizations are independent in nature and not affiliated with any media outlets, except for one African fact-checking organization. The fact-checking unit of this news media is funded by another country for which this organization followed the journalistic guidelines set by the mother organization. This organization also perceives its audiences as a global entity and not as a regional or state one. Although this organization mostly focuses on issues related to Africa, they occasionally cater fact-checked content to their broader audiences.

At the meso level, another key difference was found among two U.S.-based fact-checkers. PolitiFact and Factchequeado fact-checkers have different understandings of their perceived audiences. The former considers everyone in the U.S., as well as some international audiences to be their perceived audience, while the latter rigidly focuses on Hispanic

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

communities. Factchequeado focuses more on immigration issues compared to gun-control issues, as one fact-checker (participiant 13) shared that Hispanic audiences want to know more about immigration issues than gun control. This fact-checking unit uses WhatsApp more than any other social media to communicate with their audiences, as they found this platform was more used among the Hispanic community in the U.S. Meanwhile, the Canadian fact-checker *Agence Science Presse* focuses mostly on scientific, environmental and health related claims for fact-checking.

State, Media and Social Media Partners

The fact-checkers discussed the external influences they face from the state or government and media partners and their social media partner companies. According to interviewees, these influences were distinctive, while on some occasions they shared some commonalities at both the macro and meso levels. The relationship between the fact-checkers and the state varies dramatically across countries. In democratic contexts, the state is expected to uphold press freedom. In this study, all countries included are considered democratic countries. However, the fact-checkers reported a growing dissatisfaction of press freedom issues in these countries. They shared that their collaboration with media outlets often helps them reach out to more audiences and amplify their presence. However, they admitted that the media outlets often shape their ethical decision making on fact-checking practice. The fact-checkers also described how their partnerships with social media companies have a distinct influence at the macro and meso levels.

At the macro level, U.S.-based fact-checkers shared that despite having constitutional protection for journalism in general, they now face challenges at the state level. They echoed that the current administration has created a situation of fear for journalists and fact-checkers,

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

challenging the long-cherished protection of freedom of press. A participant (16) shared: “We have a First Amendment. We have a freedom of the press. Until recently, we haven't really had to deal with these sorts of personal attacks on us.” He also shared that fact-checkers traditionally attempt to uphold the journalistic values of fairness toward everyone but the current threats on press freedom were creating tensions in journalism as a whole.

Echoing this, another participant (15) blamed the Trump administration for specifically attacking fact-checkers. As a result, U.S. fact-checkers are trying to exercise more caution in their reporting. According to this fact-checker, the current administration is “anti-facts” and does its best to find flaws in fact-checked content to tarnish fact-checkers’ credibility:

Since there's this new environment of anti-facts from the Trump administration and more attacks on fact-checkers, what we aim to be even more confident when we publish. There's no way that they can find a flaw in our story if they decide to come after us.

He also shared that he had been questioned by the White House on why he had investigated some sensitive claims related to the current administration:

I've been told before by the White House, like. Why are you working on this? You should get out more and touch some grass and things like that...You know, it can be only one awful mistake can undermine our credibility in general, in this environment.

One participant (14) emphasized the issue that some governments and state administrations are setting up their own fact-checking units to serve their political ideas and narratives. She thought that these fact-checking units are nothing but public relations offices that are not independent of state power. These communication strategies, according to her, often create a camouflage for the mass audiences, preventing them from being able to detect false

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

information from an ocean of misinformation. This veteran fact-checker also shared that she had often been verbally abused by different governments officials. She said – “I think in my career, I have government from right and left, just... criticizing and saying that I'm a hooker or whatever...”

Meanwhile, fact-checkers from Pakistan shared that they face both direct and indirect threats from the army, which is considered to be a major stakeholder of power in the country. Although Pakistan is officially a democracy, this fact-checker (participant 19)said:

We don't have a democracy. We don't have a democratic system. It's mostly that the chief of Army staff decides what goes on in the country and the chief of Army staff is at the liberty to decide which party gets to rule.

She thought that, in the context of Pakistan, the state concealed information from citizens, especially when the information was related to the army. Another Pakistani fact-checker shared that these pressures from the army were very much likely, but that fact-checkers' duty was to go beyond these threats:

...if the Army chief, if the army officials or if the politicians are making statements you have to hold them accountable. You have to fact check them. If they threaten you, there's a threat. Yes, you have to tackle that and you have to be safe, but you have to be courageous...

Agreeing with the others on the severe pressure on fact-checking from the army and the state, another participant (6) explained that his organizational structure might have played a role in addressing those threats. At the meso level, he thought that his organization has ties to international development organizations which might have shielded them from those threats till

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

now. He also shared that as his organization is relatively smaller in size and that they tend to not focus significantly on sensitive issues. As a result, they receive fewer threats compared to other fact-checkers in the country.

His Pakistani colleague, participant 7, discussed that, at times, international politics might have a direct influence on fact-checking in general. Referring to Meta's decision to stop working with fact-checking organizations in the U.S., she shared that her organization had been unsure whether their funding ties with some organizations would be cut when the Trump administration assumed power. Her organization receives grants from international organizations to continue operation.

The fact-checkers from Bangladesh shared that their challenges come from multiple sources – political parties, state machinery and intelligence agencies. A fact-checker from Bangladesh (participant 10) shared that they often find the aforementioned actors creating bots or fake accounts on social media to spread misinformation to control the public opinion in general. When fact-checkers debunk these misinformation campaigns, the actors who produced it directly or indirectly attack them on social media and attempt to tarnish the reputation of their organizations or the individuals themselves. Besides, Bangladesh as a state still has some laws related to the digital world which are often seen as a barrier to the freedom of the press, he shared.

The Sub-Saharan Africa-based fact-checkers also shared that they face threats and challenges from the state/ government and how their partnerships with social media companies influence their ethical decision making in fact-checking. For example, all three Ghanaian fact-checkers shared that the government in the country attempts to formulate a law to control free fact-checking practices. Although their Nigerian colleagues talked about similar challenges from

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

the government, their South African counterparts did not mention having faced challenges from their government. However, fact-checkers at the four Sub-Saharan fact-checking organizations indicated the influences from partnerships with social media differed at meso levels. Most importantly, one fact-checker shared that they do not have any official partnerships with any social media platforms, but the other three have direct ties with only Meta. Fact-checkers from Nigeria shared they had never faced any influences from their social media partners about claim selection. However, the fact-checkers from one South African organization shared that they could not rate political misinformation on partner social media platform.

At both the macro and meso levels, fact-checkers from the U.S. shared that they currently have no partnerships with Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, following a decision by Meta announced in January 2025. Although PolitiFact and Factchequeado use social media platforms owned by Meta, they currently have no partnerships with the company. According to one fact-checker (participant 16), his organization began facing financial issues when Meta severed ties with them. Fact-checkers from both the organizations also shared that they now perform third-party fact-checking for the social media platform TikTok. *Agence Science Press* also uses social media platforms to get better reach on their fact-checked content, however, they do not have any official partnerships with any social media companies.

Meanwhile, the fact-checkers from South Africa, Nigeria and Pakistan shared that Meta's decision did not have any effect on them, as fact-checkers from Africa Check, Dubawa, and Soch Fact Check shared that their partnerships with Meta are still intact. While discussing the influences on their ethical decision making, fact-checkers from the U.S. and other countries had different accounts to share.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Interviewees from the U.S. shared that they found misinformation for TikTok and informed the platform, after which TikTok had the authority to either take the misinformation down or have it flagged. However, TikTok does not respond to the fact-checkers evaluations every time. On one occasion, one participant (12) remembered that TikTok had listened to and responded to their findings. Her organization had detected that a fake account had been involved in spreading misinformation related to immigration issues. The account was suspended after the fact-checking organization flagged it and informed TikTok. The U.S.-based fact-checkers shared that they never had a situation where social media platforms asked them to not fact-check certain issues or topics.

In Pakistan, however, fact-checkers shared that Meta officials directly asked them to not fact-check certain issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. A participant (19) shared –

I'll give you an example. Facebook did not allow us to really fact check Israeli propaganda about 7th October. And Meta was very much offended every time we published a fact check. And once we started flagging those accounts, they got even more offensive.

While discussing this matter, fact-checkers from Bangladesh said they do not experience such level of influence from social media platforms as they do not have any ties to or are being funded by such platforms.

In Africa, Meta still has a partnership with Africa Check to fact-check content available on Meta-owned social media – Facebook and Instagram – and related to the African region. According to Africa-based fact-checkers, when platform users report any content as false, third-party fact-checkers (like those from Africa Check) would evaluate its authenticity. If the third-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

party also find it to be false or misinformation, they rate it that way. When it comes to this type of content, Meta does not remove it from the platform directly and rather slows down the spread of the content among the audiences, shared participant 1.

However, a colleague of hers explained that Meta's policy regarding political fact-checking reflected what fact-checkers from Pakistan had shared. This participant (2) shared that agreements with social media partners also affect their ethical decision-making process on what and how to fact-check content available on their partner social media platform.

It does influence what we can rate on their platform. So, for example, to be part of that program, we agree that, for example, we can't rate what they call political speech, which is anything posted on their platform by someone who currently holds or is running for political office.

He further explained that such agreements create limitations for fact-checkers, leading to frustrations. According to this fact-checker, they have the freedom to fact-check this type of content and publish it on their own websites. In this context, they do not face any influence from the partnering social media platform company.

So, it affects our work in that like we have agreed to certain limitations there and even though that might be frustrating to us, even though we might want to rate content posted on their platform whoever it comes from. We still have the freedom to do that on our own website and do that within our own capacity.

Fact-checkers from studied countries also discussed that they have partnerships and affiliations with news media outlets. On some occasions, their partners might have influenced the fact-checkers' ethical decision-making process, according to some of the fact-checkers. The

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

influence from the media partners had significant differences on the fact-checkers at the meso level.

At the macro level, fact-checkers shared mixed experiences of receiving influences from their media partners. For example, the U.S.-based fact-checkers from *Factchequeado* shared that they face influence from their partners, while fact-checkers from *PolitiFact* and *News Detective* said they experience no influence from their partners. *Agence Science Presse* from Canada also shared that they experience no influence from their media partners.

The *Africa Check* fact-checkers also shared that they see no influence from their media partners, while a fact-checker (participant 9) from another fact-checking organization, which is a sister concern of an international news media, shared that they might have experienced influence from the mother organization. This fact-checker shared that they need to rely on their network of journalists and fact-checkers based in other countries across the world. They often rely on their colleagues for topic selection as well as for contextualization of a claim that might have surfaced online and in a different language. The fact-checker explained:

...because of our network of journalists, not just fact-checkers, I have access to stringers and freelancers, obviously, that are in each country around me...Because of the limitations of language, I'll have conversations with the stringers, um, whilst they're working on news stories.

Meanwhile, two fact-checkers (12 and 13) from *Factchequeado* shared that their organization has media partners who reproduce their content and provide grassroots information from across the U.S. They also reflected on the fact that their media partners often influence them in selecting certain issues for fact-checking.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

On the other hand, a fact-checker (participant 4) from *Africa Check* emphasized the collaboration with other fact-checkers and news organizations to amplify fact-checked content more quickly in response to the quick spread of misinformation and disinformation among bigger groups of people. However, she and her colleagues from Africa Check as well as a fact-checker from the Nigerian fact-checking organization *Dubawa* shared they had not been subjected to any influence from their media partners.

The fact-checkers from *PolitiFact* in the U.S., *Soch Fact* in Pakistan, and *Dismisslab* in Bangladesh also echoed that they have partnerships with news media but were not influenced in their ethical decision making by their partners.

Ubuntu

The fact-checkers from South African fact-checking organizations discussed their understanding of the African moral theory of Ubuntu and shared whether it shapes their ethical decision making in fact-checking practice. They shared a divergent understanding of Ubuntu although they were from the same country. Four fact-checkers from Ghana and Nigeria shared that they have heard of Ubuntu but could not elaborate whether it has any influences on their fact-checking practices. One fact-checker from Nigeria-based *Dubawa* skipped the interview questions on the moral philosophy as he was not aware of it. Meanwhile, fact-checkers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Canada and the U.S. were not asked questions about this moral philosophy. A total of seven fact-checkers from two South Africa-based and two Ghana and Nigeria-based fact-checking organizations agreed to the fact that they had heard of Ubuntu. In a general sense, they shared a common understanding of collectivity and humanity about this moral philosophy. Some of the fact-checkers also reflected that, in their minds, the meaning of Ubuntu was commonly misunderstood.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

One such participant (4) shared that Ubuntu focuses on the communal values and collective well-being in African societies. She also shared that despite Ubuntu being a well-known concept in South Africa, it had lost its meaning, in her opinion. She opined that the concept had become a societal imagination of South Africa as a democracy and is being used for disingenuous reasons.

She observed that the core aspects of Ubuntu have parallels with the core values of fact-checking and her organization's goals. The moral philosophy focuses on communal and collective well-being, similar to fact-checkers serving their communities by debunking misinformation. She shared:

I think fact-checking work in general is quite aligned, as it is trying to sort of serve the community and be a force for collective well-being. Promoting collective well-being by addressing false information that's causes harm to democracy... I think as a moral philosophy that's how I understand it and how it sort of relates to what we do.

She also connected the moral philosophy of Ubuntu with some of the practical strategies of fact-checking. She explained that *Africa Check* wrote in plain language to reach all sectors of society. Collaboration across sectors—civil society, government, education—was also framed as an extension of Ubuntu's ethic of collectiveness. Echoing her, another participant (1) explained that Ubuntu was a principle of equality and collective freedom, rooted in South Africa's journey towards democratic society after 1994. She explains – “I see it as the concept of really the collective. We are only free if we are all free. And I mean, to me, it is also a cornerstone of this sort of you know a commitment to equality.” For her, Ubuntu resonates strongly with the democratic journey of post-apartheid South Africa, where access to accurate information was central to equality and freedom. However, she admitted that she did not consciously apply

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Ubuntu in her daily fact-checking work and the philosophy had no influence on her ethical fact-checking practice. “I would be lying if I said that I’ve ever thought about Ubuntu in terms of my work. But I do think that it informs a sense of particularly South Africanness...” she said.

According to participant 2, Ubuntu has a principle of shared humanity that can directly inform the practice of fact-checking. He thought that for any fact-checker, having good faith for engaging in discussion was required, and Ubuntu facilitates such discussion in society as it is also seen as “brotherhood.” He emphasized that a fact-checker guided by Ubuntu would focus on misinformation rather than the actor of misinformation. He explains –

We never assume that when we do a report that someone is acting in bad faith, we treat any mistake as a mistake or any errors or mistake. And we don't assume that someone is going to be is automatically malicious...I think that's probably a sort of one connection...

He also shared that this moral philosophy provides a shared ground for dialogue even when consensus was not possible. Fact-checking, in general, could play a role in providing a platform for such dialogue. For participant 3, Ubuntu is not about eliminating disagreement but about recognizing coexistence. She further explained the meaning of the moral philosophy:

...it means everything about us is interdependent, right? We're going to have disagreements because it's normal. But in the end, we're going to learn something from each other because that's how life works.

Participant 9 acknowledged the importance of Ubuntu in the South African society. However, she thought that the traditional quality of togetherness in the country had been lost due to globalization. She also criticized Ubuntu as it was being used for the nation rather than the people of the nation, and raised the question whether the spirit of Ubuntu was capable of

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

stopping the conflict among African neighboring countries. She said: “Is Ubuntu for people, or is then going to be for a nation? I live in a country where our next-door neighbors are persecuted, or the battles between the neighboring countries does not give the spirit of Ubuntu.”

For two Ghanaian fact-checkers, Ubuntu’s idea of community and serving others coincides with the purpose of fact-checking as a profession. Participant 22 shared that as fact-checking is aiming at curbing misinformation that affects people and society, it reflects the spirit of Ubuntu. Another participant (24) explained how both fact-checking and Ubuntu attempts to benefit the community: "...you are doing something to help the community. So, essentially, for me, I get that connection. The work I do, is supposed to benefit my community directly and indirectly. It's actually even supposed to benefit my community.”

In summary, the ethical influences on fact-checking practice vary across national, organizational, and individual contexts. While the IFCN principles provide a common global framework, fact-checkers’ ethical choices are also shaped by local factors such as religion, audience expectations, state control, and partnerships with media and technology platforms. The study found evidence that Islamic ethics shaped the navigation of professional boundaries for some participants in the Muslim majority South Asian countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as in the Sub-Saharan country of Ghana. Whereas in the United States, constitutional protections coexist along with political hostility. In South Africa, collaborative traditions and moral philosophies like Ubuntu contribute to collective approaches to truth-seeking and information integrity.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This qualitative exploratory study investigated how fact-checkers from three distinct geographic and cultural regions — North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslim-majority South Asia — understand excellence in ethical fact-checking practice. It also looked at fact-checkers' perception of how a range of factors influences their ethical decision-making. In addition, it explored how the perceived factors of influences play different roles in fact-checking at the macro (cultural) and meso (organizational) levels. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with 28 fact-checkers from 12 organizations across seven countries in these regions, and guided by the theoretical frameworks of virtue ethics, including MacIntyre's (2007) theory of practice, the African moral philosophy of Ubuntu, and Islamic ethics, the findings contribute toward a multidimensional and globally inclusive understanding of fact-checking ethics that extends beyond previous scholarship.

The discussion section, hence, presents the key findings in relation to the three research questions, contextualizes these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and engages with existing literature on journalism and fact-checking norms and professional ethics. The last stage of the discussion addresses the limitations of the study and draws out the broader scholarly and practical implications of the results. The discussion is organized around the major findings of the study, beginning with the overarching question of what it means to practice fact-checking ethics with excellence, and progressing toward the complex ecosystem of internal and external influences that shape the practice in markedly different environments.

This study attempted to understand how fact-checkers from different geographical and cultural contexts understand excellence in the ethical practice of fact-checking. Its findings suggest that fact-checkers in the three studied regional contexts have a degree of consensus

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

regarding the content of ethical excellence in fact-checking. Despite operating in different socio-political environments, organizational structures, and cultural settings, the fact-checkers interviewed in this study converged on a common set of ethical commitments.

These included:

- rigorous verification;
- being nonpartisan and showing fairness in fact-checking;
- transparency in all aspects of fact-checking including methodology, funding, organizational structure;
- using sources and provide attribution to them;
- selecting claims on the basis of virality and harm;
- characteristics of skepticism and curiosity;
- robust correction policies and accessible plain-language communication and storytelling.

According to the fact-checkers, these ethical commitments are important for maintaining the excellent ethical practice of fact-checking. Taken together, these categories paint the picture of fact-checking ethics as a deeply intentional practice — one that demands both intellectual rigor and a strong moral orientation toward public service.

The fact-checkers shared some of the virtues they understand as the key elements in maintaining excellence in practicing fact-checking. These virtues include persistence, fairness, skepticism, curiosity, intellectual humility, transparency, courage and compassion.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Virtues' Connection to Ethical Standards; and Fact-checking *Telos*

The fact-checkers, though not using the word “virtue”, identified several intellectual or moral qualities as motivators of their work. These qualities would, according to contemporary virtue theory (Borden, 2007; Baehr, 2021; Quinn, 2007), commonly be regarded as virtues. This study also found that the virtues were connected to the ethical standards shared by fact-checkers. These virtues, for example persistence and fairness, both serve to achieve excellence in the verification process of fact-checking; skepticism, curiosity, and intellectual humility are paramount in reaching excellence in truth-seeking; the virtue of transparency serves fact-checkers in attaining an excellent practice in correction procedures and source attribution in the fact-checked content. The virtue of courage is significant for holding powerful people accountable, while by attempting to achieve the ethical standards of minimizing harm and establishing human rights, fact-checkers aim toward virtue of justice and compassion.

The fact-checkers shared that in the verification process, they have to demonstrate the utmost level of patience to investigate a claim and determine whether it is factual or not, while they always attempt to be as fair as possible by dissociating themselves from any sort of political partisanship. According to fact-checkers, as they aim to search for the truth, they try to remain skeptical by not believing any claim on face value. They practice critical thinking and openness to maintain curiosity – which propels their active pursuit of truth beyond the initial claim. Meanwhile, the fact-checkers shared that when it comes to people in power, they apply their courage to hold them accountable. Courage drives them towards minimizing harm and establishing human rights in society by telling the untold stories of minority groups who face repression both on and offline. These actions by fact-checkers also reflect what Borden (2007),

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

in her application of MacIntyre's (2007) theory to journalism, explained in the teleological structure of practices that "Standards of excellence express virtues..." (p. 23).

By maintaining these ethical standards, it becomes clear that fact-checkers attempt to reach the ultimate purpose of journalism. This is connected to promoting both democracy and humanity (see Borden, 2007; Craig, 2011) and building on the concept of the *telos* in Aristotelian virtue ethics. The study found that these fact-checkers perceive themselves to be serving democracy by providing accurate information to their audiences and supporting an informed citizenry. In doing so, they provide fact-checked content developed with a clear, simple, easily understandable language for their readers and avoiding misleading terminologies and complex sentence structures. Thus, this study found evidence that fact-checkers pursue the *telos* or purpose of the journalism profession. Or as Borden (2007) called it helping "citizens know well in the public sphere" (p. 50).

Internal Goods

This study also found how pursuit of standards of excellence led fact-checking to achieve some key internal goods, in MacIntyre's (2007) terms. Such achievement of internal goods "is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 190).

Following Borden (2007), Craig (2011) identified inquiry, knowledge, originality, discovery, and newness as internal goods of journalism, and he applied them specifically to online journalism.

The work of fact-checkers in this study also reflected pursuit of each of these, as follows:

- **Inquiry:** The fact-checkers shared that they provide all the key sources and methods along with their fact-checked content so their audiences can use these and replicate the process of fact-checking. By carrying out this replication, the

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

audience also achieves the same findings as the fact-checkers on any claim.

Besides, the fact-checkers also apply a method of sourcing where they employed multiple original human and non-human sources. They also do not use any unnamed sources, according to this process. This sourcing method also strengthens their inquiry about a claim.

- **Knowledge:** The fact-checkers also apply multiple forms of information – videos, social media posts, document analysis, and pictures - in their fact-checked content to provide better context, background, analysis, and interpretation. All these can assist to better develop the fact-checked content and help the audience learn new information.
- **Newness:** Fact-checking is not like online journalism or other formats of journalism that provide breaking news, as it focuses on a reactive process. It only debunks or verifies a claim when it is published or is being discussed. Fact-checking is a practice that aims at debunking misinformation, disinformation, and providing factual information. In doing so, fact-checkers provide some new information with accuracy and diligence and enrich the online information-sphere.
- **Discovery:** Fact-checking is a practice that allows professional fact-checkers to use open-source tools and crowd-sourced information, which is often gathered from members of the public. Fact-checkers, driven by curiosity and skepticism, aim to unearth new information on any claim. This crowd-sourced information gathering is an important tool for fact-checking in general as fact-checkers often do not visit the physical locations of events, unlike journalists.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

- **Protecting democracy:** It is an additional internal good that emerged in the study in relation to the work of fact-checkers that was not included in previous research (Borden, 2007; Craig, 2011) on internal goods in journalism practice. It is a key way in which fact-checking serves democracy by helping people become media literate because they receive factual information instead of relying on misinformation. Fact-checkers also aim for minimizing harm as they select claims on the basis of the harm-virality framework. This framework allows them to systematically determine which claims are to be selected to fact-check from the significant amounts of misinformation and disinformation available online. Afterwards they verify those claims and share their findings with their audiences in a transparent manner. In this process of continued practice, fact-checkers not only achieve excellence for themselves, but also achieve an internal good for the fact-checking community.

External Goods

According to MacIntyre (2007) external goods are characteristic objects of human desire and can only be achieved if an individual possesses them. The external goods act as elements of competition that makes one person a winner and another a loser. Thus, they deliver benefits to individuals rather than the community, unlike internal goods. External goods, as opposed to internal goods, can corrupt professionals, as discussed by Lambeth (1992) and Borden (2007). They identified salary, power and celebrity status as external goods in the journalism profession. This study also revealed an external good was present in the fact-checking practice which could create constraints in maintaining an excellent ethical practice for fact-checkers. Fact-checkers shared that their partnerships with social media companies in some capacities control their

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

gatekeeping roles. They check the claims and flag claims as misinformation; however, social media companies take the ultimate decisions regarding those flagged claims. This affiliation with social media platforms, termed as the “debunking turn” of fact-checking (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020; Mantzarlis, 2018), raises concerns on the “autonomy” of fact-checkers from their platform partners and curtails their watchdog role – that had been applauded for holding the powerful or public figures accountable. This also puts them in a position that demands attending to or managing the audiences’ behavior (Graves et al., 2023). Hence, this study conceptualized platform partnerships with social media companies as an external good that intensifies competition between fact-checking institutions and social media platforms for the gatekeeping role in identifying and flagging nonfactual information.

Findings’ Connection to Literature

As the fact-checkers relied on a retroactive gatekeeping process, echoing Singer (2003), they check published claims online. These fact-checkers described the verification process, a central tenet of fact-checking process, not as a mere mechanical process of rating a claim as true or false. Instead, they look at verification as a sustained, rigorous practice of inquiry that draws on multiple sources, open-source documents, official data, and expert consultation. In the process of verification, the fact-checkers always remain alert about the practice of providing objective information gathered through various sources, and employ a collaborative gatekeeping process where multiple gatekeepers check all the checked claims before they are published. In most cases, these fact-checkers use three editors as gatekeepers to check every fact-checked claim, unlike the traditional news media where sometimes newsrooms employ only one gatekeeper for checking the news before publication. These fact-checkers, irrespective of their organizational and geographical or other differences, echoed that they follow a method of “replicability” just

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

like that practiced in social science research. This enables their audience or anyone who would read their fact-checked content to reach the same conclusion. It can be argued that this approach of “replicability” to verification helps to elevate the standard of excellence in verification in the practice of fact-checking as well as in journalism. As Lambeth (1992) said in describing MacIntyre’s theory: the pursuit of standards of excellence in a practice “sets in motion a dynamic by which a practice’s very capacity to achieve excellence can be systematically elevated and extended. As a result, new concepts of the goods and ends involved in a practice emerge” (pp. 73-74).

Fact-checkers in this study also strongly emphasized neutrality, fairness, nonpartisanship and unbiasedness as key components of excellence for the fact-checking practice. However, some also acknowledged that their personal biases inevitably inflect their professional decision making. The fact-checkers did not claim to be bias-free, but rather described institutional and collaborative practices — editorial oversight, peer review within newsrooms, voluntary recusal from topics where personal investment was too strong — through which they could manage and minimize bias. This self-reflexive approach to mitigate personal biases could be seen as an objective standard of journalism as discussed by Merrill (1968). Durham (1998) termed it as “strong objectivity” that addresses the different types of biases present among journalists and news production. The self-reflexive practice was also reflected in the idea of constructive journalism (Van Antwerpen & Fielding, 2023) that encourages journalists to be ethical and transparent with regard to addressing different levels of biases – institutional and personal. This can be argued that these fact-checkers practiced independence by voluntarily detaching themselves from certain topics while addressing their own biases. Meanwhile, scholars consider

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

fact-checkers' practice of fairness as a virtue for journalism practitioners (Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987).

The fact-checkers in this study frequently discussed transparency as a key ethical strength in a multidimensional sense. It included the disclosure of sourcing practices and the publication of information about organizational funding and editorial structure. According to the interviewed fact-checkers, transparency has a key place in building trust and establishing the credibility of fact-checking organizations among their audiences. By showing how they implement the fact-checking process, fact-checkers allow their audiences to independently assess the reliability of their work. This functional dimension of transparency is consistent with Craft and Vos's (2021) argument that transparency in journalism allows audiences to assess the reliability of reporting and participate meaningfully in public discourse.

A total of 25 of the 28 participants emphasized the Importance of attributing sources, and 22 explicitly stated that they triangulate their findings across multiple named sources rather than relying on any single source. This near-universal commitment to source attribution is not incidental; it is embedded in fact-checkers' ethical practice and directly reflects the IFC's second code of principle — the commitment to transparency of sources — which all participants described as central to their professional practice.

The rejection of anonymous sourcing is perhaps the most striking finding within this standard of excellence. This is grounded in the reactive and publicly accountable nature of fact-checking. Because fact-checkers are assessing claims already circulating in the public domain, granting anonymity in this context would undermine the replicability that is central to fact-checking's ethical credibility — the assurance that any audience member could independently follow the same evidentiary trail and arrive at the same conclusion.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

This emphasis on traceable, named sourcing connects directly to the broader virtue of transparency that the fact-checkers in this study described as foundational to their practice. They also shared that they use multiple original sources when fact-checking a claim. They mostly rely on four different types of sources – open-source documents, government or official sources, experts, and scientific studies. This finding supports the results from earlier studies (e.g. Craft & Vos, 2021; Dierickx & Lindén, 2026; Vu et al., 2023; Humprecht, 2020). It is also consistent with Grave's (2017) outline of fact-checking's five key phases, which places consulting experts and sources as a central procedural commitment.

The fact-checkers also discussed a crucial element of the claim selection process. The harm-and-virality framework that most of the interviewed fact-checkers applied in their claim selection process is one of the most ethically distinctive findings of this research. The fact-checkers described a two-part evaluative criterion. They select the claims for verification on the basis of both the severity of the harm that false information might cause and the speed or breadth with which that false information could spread. Harm was understood broadly to encompass physical, psychological, social, political, and financial harm, with particular sensitivity to the vulnerability of marginalized communities. Virality refers to the speed and breadth with which misinformation or disinformation spreads online, primarily on social media platforms. It is measured as a metric of reach — how widely and how quickly a false claim circulates. In the fact-checkers' claim selection framework, virality functions as a necessary (but not the only) criterion. The fact-checkers would prioritize selecting a claim for verification when they perceive such claim to be harmful and spreading online.

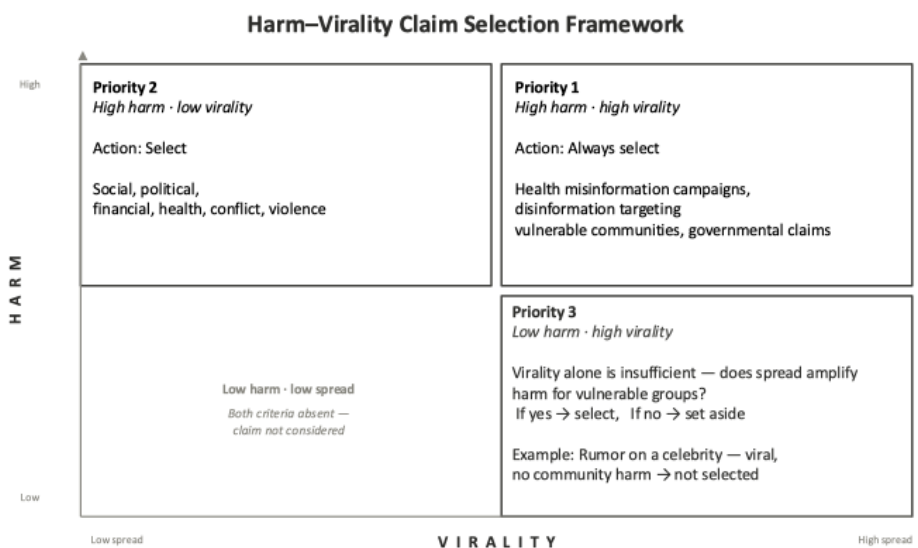
In this framework, if fact-checkers would find a claim with high harm and low virality, they would also select the claim for verification, they would put less emphasis on the claims that

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

have high virality with low harm. For example, misinformation regarding celebrities. Since the amount of misinformation is vast, fact-checkers often do not attempt to verify claims that cause low harm and spread slowly. Graves (2016) discussed that fact-checkers selected claims, unlike their traditional journalist colleagues, applying a news-sense dependent on a framework – the importance of the issue, or how many people were/would be interested in a claim. Through this harm-virality framework of claim selection, the fact-checkers interviewed in this study could respond to the criticism of Uscinski and Butler (2013) that fact-checkers rely on the subjective and nontransparent methods of claim selection.

Figure 1

Harm-Virality Framework of Claim Selection



The fact-checkers emphasized skepticism and curiosity as two key virtues that help them in truth-seeking. They shared that they need to be skeptical and curious both before choosing any claim and also while checking it. They described skepticism as not selecting any claim on face value and withholding immediate claims critically evaluating it. This idea reflected a notion

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

similar to what Le Morvan (2019) termed as virtuous skepticism, defined as withholding belief while being genuinely motivated by the desire to know the truth and avoid error. Le Morvan (2019) identifies virtuous skepticism as proper withholding of belief or in other words mean between excessive belief withholding (closedmindedness) and deficient belief withholding (gullibility). It suggests that, as fact-checkers attempt to find the truth, they withhold their belief in a claim to practice virtuous skepticism.

According to the interviewed fact-checkers curiosity was an active pursuit of information beyond the initial claim. Maintaining curiosity requires critical thinking and openness to perspectives beyond one's own. Philosopher Baehr (2021) listed nine intellectual virtues, including curiosity and open-mindedness, required for attaining knowledge. According to him, these intellectual virtues are personal qualities or character strengths a good thinker should develop through practice. Baehr also mentioned that these intellectual virtues are not natural cognitive abilities like raw intelligence or IQ. Journalism scholars (Craig & Yetter, 2023) also used these nine intellectual virtues in their exploration of intellectual virtues in digital journalism. Plaisance and Medina (2025) argued that curiosity is a virtue which is imperative for journalists and media educators and when journalism and digital architects fail to foster curiosity, misinformation thrives and social fragmentation deepens.

More than half of the interviewed fact-checkers described their organizations' correction policies as a core element of ethical excellence. An analysis of organizational correction policies published on the fact-checker organizations' websites confirmed a pattern of shared practice consistent with the IFCN's fifth code of principle—the commitment to open and honest corrections. This practice aligns with Borden's (2007) argument that excellence in journalism

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

requires practitioners to subordinate self-interest to the standards of the practice itself. Publicly acknowledging error is a concrete expression of that subordination.

The findings also reveal meaningful variation in how correction is practiced institutionally. For example, *PolitiFact* preserves erroneous content alongside its correction, making the organization's reasoning process fully visible, while *Factchequeado* and *Dismislab* remove erroneous content from public platforms while retaining it internally. This study also found that audience collaboration is a key component of a correction policy, a dimension that has received little attention in prior fact-checking research. For instance, Singer (2021) is one of the few scholars to note audience engagement in correction procedures within fact-checking.

Overall, the correction practices of fact-checking organizations point toward a form of accountability in fact-checking. Guided by the concept of reflective practice in journalism (Niblock, 2007), this study conceptualizes fact-checking correction practices as a form of "accountability journalism," which advocates that fact-checkers and journalists critically examine their decisions and actions, thereby holding themselves accountable to the audiences they serve. Four decades earlier, Christians (1985) argued that corrections made by news media constitute an important mechanism for holding journalists accountable to the public. More recently, Karlsson et al. (2017) provided evidence that correction practices also benefit online journalism, as audiences appreciate journalists who acknowledge mistakes and correct them transparently. By maintaining correction policies, fact-checkers demonstrate intellectual humility, which involves acknowledging one's own knowledge limitations and appreciating other's intellectual contributions (Porter & Schumann, 2018). Thus, fact-checkers may increase their credibility among the audience, as scholars (Porter et al., 2026) argue that people show favorable

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

attitudes toward online information providers and social media users who admit their mistakes and correct themselves.

A majority of fact-checkers—21 in total—identified the use of plain, accessible language as a key criterion of ethical fact-checking, explicitly linking it to the democratic function of their work. This finding is significant because it positions storytelling language not as a stylistic preference but as a moral commitment to ensure equal access to accurate information.

Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) similarly found that fact-checkers placed informing the public at the center of their perceived professional norms. This emphasis is echoed by the fact-checkers in three different contexts in this study. They described plain-language communication as a tool for supporting democracy and promoting equal opportunity for a diverse range of audiences.

Some of the fact-checkers also shared that they remain careful in using gender neutral language and terms connected to ethnicity and political connotations so that their audiences would perceive them to be balanced. For example, in Africa, a fact-checking organization does not use gender neutral language which might cause confusion among “rural audiences,” and another fact-checker in the U.S. avoids using “Latinos or Latinx,” as these words were not necessarily used by people of all political ideologies. This practice raises a question about the maintenance of audience expectation relating to whether fact-checkers have distanced themselves from improving the quality of public political discourse – a key component of fact-checking and traditional journalistic norms. Scholars like Graves and Cherubini (2016), Singer (2021) and Dierickx and Lindén (2026) all agreed that a primary responsibility of professional journalistic and fact-checking practice is to serve the public political discourse. However, some

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

fact-checkers in this study may have prioritized audience expectation over this professional practice.

Some scholars (Mahl et al., 2024) found that the fact-checking cultures transcended the boundaries of organizations and nations. This phenomenon was termed *mimetic isomorphism* – a term used to explain a phenomenon where organizations follow each other and mimic the strategies taken by their established peers (Mahl et al., 2024). The current study also found evidence that fact-checking organizations mimic each other in different stages – claim selection, verification strategy, sourcing policies of fact-checking practice. This supports Mahl et al.’s (2024) findings. Such *isomorphic practices* were also evident in Koliska and Robert’s (2025) study that explored the epistemology of 40 fact-checking organizations serving more than 50 countries on six continents.

This study echoes Craig’s (2011) framework of excellence in online journalism, which was developed based on MacIntyre’s (2007) idea of practice. Craig’s (2011) excellence in online journalism discussed four key points for maintaining excellence in online journalism – applying online speed and accuracy with depth for breaking news, providing multiple storytelling formats for ensuring comprehensiveness, maintaining open-endedness in story development by drawing on contributions from the audience, and providing a platform for people to have conversation online. The findings from this study partially echoed this framework, as fact-checking as a journalistic process does not focus on breaking news but rather emphasizes retroactive gatekeeping (Singer, 2023). Apart from the breaking news part of Craig’s (2011) framework, this study found that fact-checkers apply multiple storytelling formats – photos, videos, social media posts – to provide a comprehensive context to the fact-checked content. They also incorporate publicly available audience-provided content in their verification and correction process. Often

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

their corrections were made when the audience members pointed out flaws in their verified content. The fact-checkers also allowed their audiences to have conversations on their social media handles as well as on their websites and other formats; for example, chatting through messaging apps, emails.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in traditional journalism has been gaining popularity, as increasing amounts of research found that journalists had started using AI for some years. The fact-checkers were not different in this regard, as half of the interviewees shared that they use AI tools for various reasons and on various occasions. They also suggested that a major reason behind their use of AI tools was to debunk the audio-visual deepfake content spread across online media (social media, websites).

Influence on Ethical Practice

The findings pertaining to the first part of the second research question (RQ 2a) reveal five perceived categories of influence on fact-checkers' ethical practice: audience, personal values, religion and morality, the IFCN code of principles, and external factors including state pressure, social media platforms, and media partners. These findings both confirm and extend the existing fact-checking literature in various ways.

The influence of the imagined audience on claim selection and language choice confirms Graves' (2016) observation that fact-checkers select claims based on perceived audience interest and importance. It also aligns with Singer's (2021) account of audience engagement as a core normative routine. Singer (2021) also reported that fact-checkers consider ordinary citizens to be their audiences, while journalists were found to be a secondary audience. However, in this current study the understanding of audience is much wider and more multilayered. Fact-checkers

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

consider audience on the basis of locality or geographical context, ethnicity, religiosity and language. The present study extends this scholarship by demonstrating that audience influence operates at the individual practitioner level. The audience might have influence on how fact-checkers select any claim to be fact-checked by asking the fact-checkers to verify a claim through social media. Fact-checkers shared that the audience now emerged as a collaborator in fact-checking practices: from providing tips to garner reach on fact-checked content to correcting fact-checked content. These findings also reflect on Singer's (2021) research that the audience emerged as "daunting" as they engage with fact-checkers in various ways, mostly for correcting fact-checked content.

The finding that personal values, biographical histories, and political ideologies shape fact-checkers' ethical practice confirms Ceci and Williams' (2020) argument that fact-checkers' personal biases influence both claim selection and verdicts. However, the present findings disagree with Ceci and Williams' (2020) recommendation that fact-checkers embrace their partisan positions through adversarial fact-checking. The participants in this study consistently treated personal bias as a professional hazard to be managed through editorial collaboration, self-recusal, and deliberate self-auditing rather than as a legitimate editorial stance. The scholarship on fact-checking provides evidence that fact-checkers were engaged in partisanship but were not detaching their values from their professional activities (Feng et al., 2021; Graves, 2016; Tsang, 2023; Ceci & Williams, 2020). However, this study did not support this finding, as fact-checkers shared that ideological leanings could affect fact-checking practice.

The current study also found that religion is a key influence on fact-checking ethics. Particularly Islamic principles of truth-telling, verification, and public interest — shape the ethical practice of Muslim fact-checkers in Muslim majority South Asia and some from a sub-

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Saharan country. This provides empirical confirmation of arguments advanced by Alam et al. (2026), Hamada (2016), and Steele (2011, 2013) that Islamic ethics is compatible with and supportive of professional journalistic standards. Alam et al. (2026) argued that Islamic principles of truth-telling, justice, transparency, and public interest were compatible with fact-checking ethics. Participants' accounts on connection of the Hadith's verification process to fact-checking methodology provide partial empirical confirmation to Alam et al. (2023)'s argument. As Hamada (2016) argued, four sources – the Quran and Hadith, human heritage, and reason and experiences – are important for Islamic ethics. This study partially confirms this idea as Muslim fact-checkers discussed the Quran and Hadith as two key Islamic ethical sources. Mowlana (2007) addressed the key Islamic concept of *tabligh* which means truthful propagation, citing medieval Muslim historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (Issawi, 2022), which was also reflected through the findings of this study. The current study also found that several fact-checkers said they practice in the Catholicism denomination of Christianity. A further original finding is the diversity of secular moral frameworks fact-checkers draw upon — including references to philosophers such as Judith Butler and Arundhati Roy, and to Sufism as a moral philosophical rather than a religious framework.

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) code of principles turned out to be a paramount influence on fact-checking ethical practices as all 28 participants said they follow these guidelines regardless of formal signatory status. This confirms Mahl et al.'s (2024) concept of *mimetic isomorphism* in global fact-checking. Besides, this study also aligns with Dierickx and Lindén's (2026) finding that transparency was seen as a key professional value anchored in the IFCN code.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

The finding that external influences from state actors and social media platforms operate across contexts partially confirms Graves et al.'s (2023) arguments about social media platform influence on fact-checkers' autonomy. The differential impact of Meta's 2025 decision to terminate its U.S. fact-checking partnerships, and the documented instance of Meta directly instructing Pakistani fact-checkers to not rate Israel-Palestine content, demonstrate how social media platforms affect fact-checking activities in both the global North and South. Besides, fact-checkers from all three regions echoed that they face some level of pressure from governments in practicing ethical fact-checking. Particularly in the U.S., Bangladesh and Ghana, fact-checkers shared that governments were directly influencing fact-checking works by either threatening fact-checkers, or formulating draconian policies.

Differences of Influences

The second part of second research question (RQ2b) examined how the identified ethical influences operated differently across the three regional cases of North America, Muslim-majority South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, analyzed at both the macro and meso levels. The findings reveal that while certain influences — most notably the IFCN code of principles — produced convergent ethical orientations across all contexts, others operated in contextually specific ways that reflect the distinct social, political, religious, and organizational environments of each region. This affirms Siebert et al.'s (1956) foundational argument that press norms are always shaped by the social and political contexts in which they function. This study's findings also refuted the idea of Koliska and Roberts (2025) that fact-checkers who operate in various political, social, economic, and informational contexts, share a common practice and norms.

In Muslim-majority South Asia, Islamic ethical values — particularly truth-telling, verification, and the pursuit of public interest — function as active moral orientations at both the

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

macro and meso levels. These fact-checkers do not experience their religious commitments as separate from or in tension with their professional obligations; rather, Islamic principles and professional standards are perceived as mutually reinforcing. This convergence is consistent with Steele's (2011, 2013) findings among Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia. These journalists similarly understood their religious and professional roles as complementary rather than conflicting. Pintak's (2014) study found that Islam as a religion acted as a "unifying factor" for Muslim journalists and that this mitigated other influencing factors that journalists were exposed to. This study also supports Ayish's (2015) argument that Islamic journalistic values of justice and truth are inherently compatible with democratic accountability. It also directly challenges Potrafke's (2012, 2013) position that argued that Islamic values were associated with weaker democratic practices. It demonstrated that Muslim fact-checkers drew on their faith as a resource for more rigorous and accountable professional conduct rather than as a constraint upon it.

At the meso (organizational) level, fact-checkers from Pakistan and Bangladesh also developed similar institutional strategies — such as routing religiously sensitive content to colleagues from different backgrounds for evaluation prior to publication — to prevent personal religious bias from infiltrating published content. This finding aligns with Hamada's (2022) contention that Islamic principles of truth, justice, and shura — consultative deliberation — actively support accountability journalism.

By contrast, the majority of North American and sub-Saharan African fact-checkers reported that religion plays little or no role in shaping their ethical practice. Instead, these participants draw on secular moral frameworks — including egalitarianism, utilitarian ethics, human rights, and duty-based reasoning — as the foundations of their professional conduct. This

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

diversity of secular moral foundations is consistent with Bivins's (2014) observation that journalism ethics has historically drawn on multiple philosophical traditions. The divergence in religious influence across regions ultimately reflects what Wasserman (2021) described as the pressing need for media ethics scholarship to move beyond its Western secular assumptions and acknowledge the plurality of moral traditions.

The influence of state actors and platform partners varied most dramatically across the three contexts of this study. North American fact-checkers face growing political hostility within a formally free press environment, South Asian fact-checkers navigate direct institutional pressure from state and military actors, and sub-Saharan African fact-checkers confront emerging regulatory threats. Haque et al. (2018) provided evidence that fact-checkers in Muslim majority Bangladesh face political pressure, which was partially supported by this study. Fact-checkers from Bangladesh shared that the government in their country applies some policies and laws that hinder free fact-checking practice.

A number of scholars (Blankenberg, 1999; Christians, 2004; 2015; Fourie, 2008; 2011 Metz, 2015; Chasi, 2016; Rodny-Gumede, 2015; Mboti, 2015; Ndlovu & Sibanda, 2020; Chasi & Rodny-Gumede, 2016; 2021, 2022; Gondwe, 2024) have studied the connection between Ubuntu's principles and values in relation to media and journalism mostly focused in the Sub-Saharan African context. Although Ubuntu would not be expected to have significant influence beyond its regional context, its centrality in scholarly discussions of sub-Saharan Africa indicates that it may nonetheless shape practice or thinking within that region.

On the other hand, the latest study revealed important limitations in the relationship between Ubuntu and professional fact-checking practices. Several participants, all from sub-Saharan Africa, acknowledged that while they recognize Ubuntu's philosophical relevance, they

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

do not consciously apply it in their daily work. In a general sense, fact-checkers shared a common understanding of collectivity and humanity about this moral philosophy. Some of them also reflected on the fact that the contemporary meaning of the moral philosophy was misunderstood. According to a fact-checker from *Africa Check*, Ubuntu now functions largely as a symbolic or rhetorical idea—a way of imagining or presenting South Africa as a democratic, unified society—rather than as a philosophy actively guiding behavior or institutions. The participant also suggests that this idealized image has sometimes been used disingenuously, meaning it may be invoked for political or social legitimacy without genuine commitment to the values Ubuntu represents. The findings of this study also reveal a practically significant connection between Ubuntu's ethic of collectivity and the collaborative structures of fact-checking practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. Multiple participants described extensive networks of collaboration with other fact-checkers, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and community partners. This practice reflects an organizational ethos that resonates strongly with Ubuntu's emphasis on collective agency and shared responsibility.

Conclusion

This study examined how fact-checkers working in North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslim-majority South Asia understand excellence in ethical fact-checking practice and how perceived ethical influences shape their professional decision-making. Drawing on qualitative interviews and document analysis, and guided by virtue ethics, including MacIntyre (2007)'s theory of practice, African moral theory Ubuntu, and Islamic ethics, the study addressed three research questions concerning ethical excellence, ethical influences, and contextual variation.

Findings related to the first research question (RQ 1) show a high degree of convergence across regions. Fact-checkers consistently emphasized rigorous verification, transparency,

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

fairness, nonpartisanship, skepticism, curiosity, correction practices, and harm minimization as central to ethical excellence. These shared commitments indicate that fact-checking operates as a recognizable professional practice with broadly agreed-upon standards, despite differences in political, cultural, and organizational contexts. These commonalities and differences also suggest that fact-checkers share certain resemblances to their journalist colleagues in traditional newsrooms (Graves, 2017; Amazeen, 2020), in the ways that journalism ethics scholarship (Siebert et al., 1956) also suggests the presence of such commonalities and differences exists among journalists situated in different political, cultural, and organizational contexts.

The first part of second research question (RQ 2a) revealed that ethical practice is shaped by multiple influences operating at individual, organizational, and contextual levels. Audience expectations, personal values, religious or moral frameworks, the IFCN code of principles, and external pressures from states and platform companies all influence ethical decision-making. While the IFCN code functions as a shared professional reference point across regions, other influences were mediated by local conditions. The audience now emerged as a collaborator in fact-checking practices in many ways, from providing tips to garner reach on fact-checked content to correcting such content.

Findings related to the research question RQ 2b demonstrate that ethical influences operate differently across contexts. Islamic ethical principles play an active role in shaping ethical reasoning among fact-checkers in Muslim-majority South Asia, while most North American and sub-Saharan African fact-checkers rely primarily on secular moral frameworks. At the same time, some African fact-checkers frequently described collaborative practices that align with Ubuntu's emphasis on collectivity, even when the framework was not explicitly invoked.

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

External pressures from governments and platform partners are present across all regions but vary in intensity and form.

This study is limited by its reliance on interview data and a relatively small sample size. Future research could combine interviews with content analysis to examine how stated ethical commitments are reflected in published fact-checks, expand comparative analysis to additional regions, and explore how ethical practices evolve in response to technological change and platform governance. The distinctiveness of the impact by the ethical influencing factors on fact-checking were discussed mostly on two levels – macro or cultural level and meso or organizational level, as the scope of the second part of the second research question (RQ 2b) is limited to investigation at these two levels. Future research could also investigate whether and how the micro level factors play a role in ethical fact-checking practice and individual fact-checkers' ethical decision making. For example, future research may explore the level of influence individual fact-checkers face from their audiences and how they maintain independence and authority in their professional work despite such influences.

The current study also found evidence that fact-checking organizations mimic each other in different stages of fact-checking practice, while also hinting that Western ethical understanding, as reflected through IFCN codes, has a dominant influence on fact-checkers across countries. Therefore, future studies may also explore how Western ethical understanding influences fact-checkers based in non-Western societies. Future studies may also investigate whether Islamic ethics and the ethical framework of Ubuntu exert influence on the ethical practices of fact-checkers and journalists beyond Muslim majority South Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographic question

1. Could you please share your journey as a professional fact-checker? How did you start, where have you worked, and in what years?

Understanding of fact-checking ethics and excellence

2. What are the key ethical principles you follow during fact-checking? (Ask for elaboration on meaning if needed.) Why are these important to you?
3. Please explain how you apply those ethical principles in fact-checking activities. (Ask for examples.)
4. Do you follow any ethical codes in your work or does your fact-checking organization follow any ethical principles or codes? Could you please explain these and share why you or your organization follow them?
5. What do you think excellent practice means in fact checking? (Ask for examples.) What is necessary to maintain excellent practice? What makes it difficult to maintain excellent practice in fact checking?

Factors of influence

6. What influences play a role in your ethical decision-making during fact-checking?
7. How do your personal values influence your ethical decision-making in fact-checking? Have you ever faced a conflict between your personal values and professional ethical standards? How did you resolve this conflict?

Virtues

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

8. What personal strengths or virtues do you think are needed to do excellent work as a fact-checker? What personal strengths or virtues have enabled you to do well as a fact-checker?
9. (For each strength mentioned) What is a specific instance or event in your professional fact-checking career in which you exhibited this strength or virtue? Please describe what happened in this event.

Religion and morality

10. Could you briefly describe your religious beliefs and values, if these are important to you? Whether you are religious or not, please describe your overall ethical or moral approach to life. What or who in your life influenced the development of your ethical or moral approach? How did they influence it?
11. (If participant said religion is important.) How do your religious beliefs shape your professional fact-checking activities, if at all? Could you provide an example of when your religious understanding influenced your ethical decision-making during fact-checking and how? (If participant did not say religion was important.) How has your ethical or moral approach shaped your professional fact-checking activities, if at all? Could you provide an example of when it influenced your ethical decision-making during fact checking and how?

Ubuntu

12. What would you identify as the community you are serving as a fact-checker? What do you see as the role of fact checking in that community? How important do you think the work of fact checking is to that community? Why?
13. How does your understanding of your community influence your ethical decision-making in fact-checking? (Ask for example.)
14. Are there particular social or community issues about which you feel strongly? Please explain.
15. How do your concerns about these issues shape your ethical decision-making in fact-checking? (Ask for example.)
16. (Ask about Ubuntu directly to fact-checkers from Africa Check) Are you familiar with the African moral theory – Ubuntu? If yes, could you elaborate on your understanding of

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

it or explain its key elements? How significant do you think Ubuntu and its principles are for practicing fact-checking?"

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

Appendix B

IFCN Code of Principles

The commitments of the Code of Principles

This Code of Principles is for organizations that regularly publish non-partisan reports on the accuracy of statements by public figures and prominent institutions and other widely circulated claims related to public interest issues. It is the result of consultations among fact-checkers from around the world.

A commitment to Non-partisanship and Fairness: Signatory organizations fact-check claims using the same standard for every fact check. They do not concentrate their fact-checking on any one side. They follow the same process for every fact check and let the evidence dictate the conclusions. Signatories do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues they fact-check.

A commitment to Standards and Transparency of Sources: Signatories want their readers to be able to verify findings themselves. Signatories provide all sources in enough detail that readers can replicate their work, except in cases where a source's personal security could be compromised. In such cases, signatories provide as much detail as possible.

A commitment to Transparency of Funding & Organization: Signatory organizations are transparent about their funding sources. If they accept funding from other organizations, they ensure that funders have no influence over the conclusions the fact-checkers reach in their reports. Signatory organizations detail the professional background of all key figures in the

What is Fact-checking Ethics?

organization and explain the organizational structure and legal status. Signatories clearly indicate a way for readers to communicate with them.

A commitment to Standards and Transparency of Methodology: Signatories explain the methodology they use to select, research, write, edit, publish and correct their fact checks. They encourage readers to send claims to fact-check and are transparent on why and how they fact-check.

A commitment to an Open & Honest Corrections Policy: Signatories publish their corrections policy and follow it scrupulously. They correct clearly and transparently in line with the corrections policy, seeking so far as possible to ensure that readers see the corrected version.