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An Exploratory Study of Fact-Checking Practices in Conflict and Authoritarian Contexts

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Abstract

This study explores fact-checking practices in Ethiopia and Mali in times of conflict and in a context marked by increasing restrictions to press freedom. The objective is to understand how, in this hostile environment, fact-checkers in these two countries manage to carry out their activities. Our findings reveal that fact-checkers are often victims of online bullying and harassment and fear reprisal from governments. This pushes them to self-censor, avoiding working on sensitive topics, such as military issues in Mali. In addition, fact-checking organizations in both countries highlight the difficulty of accessing reliable sources. Consequently, they focus more on debunking viral social media content, thus effectively becoming content moderators who have turned away from the mission of holding leaders accountable, one of the primary functions of fact-checking. Regarding their role conception, fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali see themselves more as guides helping navigate the information disorder than "guardians of truth" or "truth keepers."

Keywords

disinformation; Ethiopia; fact-checking; information disorder; journalism; Mali; media

1. Introduction

In April 2024, the Malian High Authority for Communication asked all media to stop all broadcasting and publication of political parties' activities and all events of a political nature (Randrianarimanana, 2024). This announcement came following the Malian government's decision to suspend "until further notice" the activities of political parties and political associations ("Mali: Suspension des activités," 2024). This new set

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of restrictions imposed by an increasingly authoritarian military government dealt a serious blow to press freedom. In August 2020, a group of soldiers overthrew civilian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, adding a new layer to a multifaceted crisis that started in 2012 with a demand for northern Malian independence by a Tuareg rebellion. It then spread to the center of the country while becoming a jihadist insurgency in which intercommunity violence and politico-institutional instability have become rife (Keita, 2021). Since they seized power, the military has repressed dissident voices, with journalists being among the main victims (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2023). For instance, several media outlets have been suspended for reporting stories that the government disliked (Amnesty International, 2022), and journalists have been subjects of attacks and illegal arrests; others have been abducted and even killed (Bocande et al., 2023; Media Foundation for West Africa, 2021). This oppressive atmosphere has pushed some journalists into exile (Daizey, 2023). The same repressive trends are also observed in Ethiopia, where a civil war broke out in November 2020 between the Ethiopian central government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the leadership of the autonomous Tigray region ("Key events," 2022). Although the warring parties signed an agreement in November 2022, complete peace is not yet established (Mekonen et al., 2023). The conflict in Ethiopia is considered by the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International one of the deadliest in the 21st century ("En Éthiopie, la guerre oubliée du Tigré," 2023). It also marked an authoritarian turn of government that has serious repercussions on press freedom (Moges, 2022; Mumo, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). According to Amnesty International (2023), since the outbreak of the Tigray war in November 2020, journalists have been victims of regular attacks from all parties to the conflict. From 2020 to 2022, more than 60 journalists were arrested and two were killed in Ethiopia (Moges, 2022). These attacks and threats frustrate journalism's role in keeping authoritarian power in check.

The conflicts in Ethiopia and Mali are marked by a large digital component with social media playing an important role in spreading disinformation, hate speech, and ethnic tension (Scott, 2021; Togola & de Bruijn, 2023). Thus, Ethiopia and Mali, representing two regions of ongoing conflicts in Africa (The Horn of Africa and the Sahel), are interesting case studies to gather empirical evidence on what fact-checking means so as to contribute new knowledge on development in specific contexts marked by conflict or restrictions to press freedom.

To this end, this study addresses the following question: How do fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali understand their work in a context marked by increasing restrictions to press freedom?

The deterioration of press freedom in Ethiopia and Mali is illustrated by the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. Between 2023 and 2024, Ethiopia moved from 130th to 141st place out of 180 countries, and Mali moved from 113th to 114th place (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2024). Doing journalism in authoritarian regimes is challenging and dangerous (Sosa, 2022), as is fact-checking (Funke, 2018).

In this article, drawing from content analysis, individual interviews, and focus group discussions, we explore the main challenges facing organizations involved in fact-checking activities in Ethiopia and Mali amid ongoing armed conflicts and obstacles to journalism practice. Our findings unpack how these organizations negotiate and navigate threats, harassment, and funding problems to run their activities. This study also sheds light on how, in the face of linguistic diversity and low access to the internet, these organizations strive to find alternative solutions to reach as wide an audience as possible.

More specifically, this study seeks to answer the four following questions:

> RQ1: What are the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali?
>
> RQ2: How do fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali perceive their role?
>
> RQ3: What are the challenges facing fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali?
>
> RQ4: What do Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers consider as benefits and limitations of their work?

This research, situated within journalism and media studies, contributes to enriching the knowledge of fact-checking practices by gaining an in-depth understanding of how fact-checkers negotiate and navigate press freedom restrictions.

This article is organized as follows: After the literature review, we present the theories and methods before the findings and the discussion. But first, let us examine the rise of fact-checking in African journalism.

2. The Rise of Fact-Checking in African Journalism

In a 2013 *The New York Times* article (Lyman, 2013), Peter Cunliffe-Jones, the founder of the fact-checking organization Africa Check, said:

> Something that I became increasingly frustrated with is what I call statement journalism, where a minister has said something ridiculous, the opposition said something equally ridiculous, and no one knows where the truth lies—and certainly, the journalist does not tell the reader where the truth lies between them.

These words partly illustrate the motivations behind the introduction of fact-checking into African journalism. Often stuck between financial insecurity and a long tradition of state control, the media in many African countries generally offer poor-quality production (Kamga, 2019). As Kamga (2019) points out, the African press, including private media, which was born in alienation and a context of disguised journalism, has not been able to create the conditions for its emancipation. Furthermore, the introduction of digital technology has caused unprecedented upheavals in African media, particularly in terms of content production, dissemination, and engagement with the audience (Madrid-Morales & Ireri, 2021). One of these upheavals is the emergence of new "non-professional" actors in the media ecosystem, whether they are influencers, bloggers, web activists, or simple citizens with a smartphone connected to the internet. Even if it has largely contributed to democratizing production and access to information, digital technology strongly favors the proliferation of false information, thanks to the sharing facilitated by social media and private messaging platforms, plunging the world into what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) call information disorder. This concept refers to all types of false, misleading, manipulated, and fabricated content polluting the information ecosystem. In this study, disinformation refers to all forms of false, inaccurate, misleading, or fabricated information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit, as defined by the European Commission High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (European Commission, 2018).

Fact-checking is the journalistic tool par excellence in the fight against disinformation (Kyriakidou et al., 2022). It was originally performed as part of journalistic internal procedures for verifying facts before the publication of an article (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). The practice originated in the United States in the 1920s, notably with *Time* magazine whose fact-checking team was responsible for verifying the smallest details—names, dates, figures, facts—of the content of all articles before publication (Bigot, 2017). It was a sort of quality control before publication (Mantzarlis, 2018) with the objective of making articles as error-free as possible (Schäfer, 2011). The type of fact-checking that is the focus of this article, also known as modern fact-checking (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022), happens only when something is published and becomes of public relevance (Mantzarlis, 2018). Appearing in the United States during ex-President Ronald Reagan's years (Dobbs, 2012), modern fact-checking has developed rapidly across the globe since the 2000s. According to the 2023 Duke Reporters' Lab census, the number of fact-checking organizations grew from 11 in 2008 to 417 that are active in more than 100 countries, and publishing in 96 languages in 2023 (Stencel et al., 2023). Fact-checking has also quickly developed in the African continent (Funke, 2019). In 2012, there was only one fact-checking organization, Africa Check, based in South Africa; 11 years later, the continent has around 40 across several countries (Africa Check, 2023).

However, unlike the United States, a precursor country for this practice, where traditional media played a fundamental role in its rise (Graves, 2016), in Africa, fact-checking was born outside legacy media newsrooms. For instance, Africa Check, the first fact-checking organization established on the continent, even though initiated by a journalist, was founded as a nonprofit organization in 2012 in South Africa and was established in the School of Journalism of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (Lyman, 2013). Africa Check was followed a few years later by other organizations such as PesaCheck. Launched in 2016 in Kenya, PesaCheck covers several African countries and publishes its content in English, French, and Kiswahili (Endert, 2020). Another active fact-checking organization on the continental level is AFP Factuel (AFP Fact Check for the English version), the fact-checking section of the French press agency Agence France Press. Since 2018, several fact-checking organizations have been established in several countries, such as Dubawa in Nigeria, Congo Check in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana Fact in Ghana, Namibia Fact Check in Namibia, and ZimFact in Zimbabwe (Jamlab, 2022).

3. Literature Review

In recent years, fact-checking has gained interest in the field of journalism and media studies. A range of the research focuses on the rise of fact-checking (Graves, 2016), how fact-checking became a global movement (Graves, 2018), how it has grown as a transnational field (Lauer & Graves, 2024), the institutional logic, and the diversity of the fact-checking landscape (Lowrey, 2015) as well as the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of fact-checking (Amazeen et al., 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Porter et al., 2018; Weeks & Garrett, 2014; Young et al., 2018). Another part of the research is dedicated more specifically to the practice of fact-checking, with Graves (2017) describing the five steps of a fact-check and Steensen et al. (2023) examining the benefits and limitations of live fact-checking. Graves et al. (2023) analyzed the "debunking turn" of global fact-checking, which shifts from checking claims by politicians and other public figures to policing viral misinformation on social networks.

As we can see, the research on fact-checking is dominated by Western-centered literature, mostly from the United States (Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019), leading to a lack of diversity in the knowledge produced on the

topic (Dias & Sippitt, 2020). Nevertheless, there is an increasing academic interest in fact-checking in the Global South, including Africa, where the practice is gaining momentum. Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) examined how three data-driven and fact-checking organizations in Africa—Code for Africa, Open Up, and Africa Check—advocate for a process of verification that is not exclusive to news media but should be replicable by citizens. In addition, they argue that the notion of transparency is put into practice in a way that tries to empower citizens to also fact-check media organizations. This means, as Çömlekçi (2022) argues, that the fight against disinformation is not just the business of fact-checkers and that it is necessary to equip the public so they can contribute to it. This can be achieved by providing media literacy tips to encourage audiences to be their own fact-checkers (Tully & Singer, 2023). While emphasizing the importance of the use of media literacy among fact-checkers outside the Western world, Vinhas and Bastos (2024) highlight the challenge of linguistic diversity. For instance, they argue that while shaping their practices after the information disorder framework (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), fact-checkers struggle to translate concepts of disinformation and misinformation into their languages.

Mare and Munoriyarwa (2022) shed light on fact-checking in times of crisis with a focus on Covid-19, noting that the pandemic has favored the emergence of a trend of collaborative fact-checking services involving platform companies, fact-checkers, mainstream media, supra-national bodies, and government departments. However, the authors concluded that the flood of disinformation that accompanied the pandemic stretched the operational capacities of fact-checkers, especially in the first three months, arguing that there is no silver bullet on how fact-checkers could deal with the massive proliferation of mis- and disinformation in a context characterized by what they call a "crowded and chaotic news media ecology" (Mare & Munoriyarwa, p. 76).

Researching political fact-checking in the Middle East, Fakida (2021) found that while prioritizing human interest topics in their news selection process, fact-checkers in the region rarely verify or refute claims made by Arab rulers. This finding is similar to that of Liu and Zhou (2022), on fact-checkers in China, who focus on health issues while avoiding topics such as politics, economics, and current affairs. While the Covid-19 pandemic favored the production of abundant literature on fact-checking in times of crisis (Carey et al., 2022; López-García et al., 2021; Siwakoti et al., 2021), less is known about fact-checking in conflict and authoritarian contexts. Building on the previous literature, this research fills the gap by using Ethiopia and Mali as case studies.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by role conceptions, role performance, and innovation theories.

Role conceptions have gained considerable interest since the work of Cohen (1963) and Johnstone et al. (1976). Journalistic role conceptions refer to norms and standards defining the work of journalists and media (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), on the other hand, role performance relates to how journalists' conception of their role is reflected in practice. In other words, while role conception is at the abstract level, role performance is an empirical construction (Mellado, 2014).

Taking a cue from Mellado et al.'s (2016) theorization of role conception, role perception, role enactment, and role performance, Bengtsson and Schousboe (2024) identify three characteristics of the perception of fact-checkers' role: (a) the goal of creating an informed citizenry; (b) an understanding of "facts" as verifiable,

objective, and always already available; (c) reliance upon a consistent methodology as the means to attain accurate and impartial knowledge (Bengtsson & Schousboe, 2024, p. 5).

Following the six models of journalistic roles developed by Mellado (2013), fact-checking work relates to the watchdog role of journalism, seeking to hold power accountable, and the civic model of journalism, which aims to educate ordinary citizens (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013). Examining the watchdog role of fact-checking by studying four fact-checking organizations in four different countries (the United States, Italy, Germany, and Brazil), Ferracioli et al. (2022) argue that even though fact-checkers share common standards, local contexts play an important role in how they perform their role. Furthermore, Mellado and Van Dalen (2013) found a large gap between watchdog and civic-oriented roles conceptions and performance, two roles that best illustrate the professional ideal of journalism. Role conception and performance theories allow us to analyze the extent to which fact-checkers' practices align with their perception of their role.

Innovation is about change (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013). The change does not necessarily need to be something new but must be perceived as such (Rogers, 2003). Applied to media, the concept of innovation has been defined under different approaches highlighting organizational, content-related, social, and technological perspectives (Pérez-Seijo & Silva-Rodríguez, 2024). Theorizing innovation, more specifically in online journalism, Steensen (2010) argues that it relies on newsroom autonomy, newsroom work culture, the role of the management, the relevance of new technology, and innovative individuals. Innovation in journalism also refers to the way news organizations adapt to new circumstances (Arafat & Porlezza, 2023). Fact-checking itself is considered a significant innovation in journalistic practice in recent years (Graves et al., 2016). However, fact-checking as an innovation "is not only an adaptation of technology but also an example of a creative response to new socio-political challenges" (Grassl & Meier, 2024, p. 294). According to Grassl and Meier (2024, p. 300), fact-checking is "a reaction of innovative journalism to the rapid spread of fake news, especially in social media." Innovation theory is relevant to understanding how fact-checkers develop new ideas and tools to adapt to the local context and how they find innovative solutions to overcome the challenges they face.

5. Methods

This qualitative study uses a multi-method research approach combining content analysis, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. Combining methods allows researchers to take advantage of their individual strengths and compensate for their limitations (Brewer & Hunter, 2006). Thus, different methodological tools compensate for each other's weaknesses (Beach, 2020).

First, following the model used by Vizoso and Vázquez-Herrero (2019) in their study of fact-checking platforms in Spanish, an analysis sheet was applied to all the organizations as follows: name of the publication, country, type of media, ownership, year of foundation, fact-checking methods, rating methods, language, and transparency policy. For this study, the authors first targeted all the organizations involved in fact-checking activities in the two countries (two in Ethiopia and seven in Mali) at the start of the research project in October 2022. For Ethiopia, these organizations are HaqCheck and Ethiopia Check. The seven fact-checking organizations in Mali are Benbere Verif, Association des Blogueurs du Mali, Mali Check, Studio Tamani, Wuya, Sahel Check, and Mopti Check. Some of these organizations are known to one of the authors, who encountered them while working as a fact-checking practitioner and trainer.

Secondly, focus group discussions were organized with participants in fact-checking activities in Ethiopia and Mali. Focus groups are a good method to collect relevant information in a short time (Acocella, 2012). The focus group discussions in Ethiopia were organized in English and took place in Addis Ababa in March 2023. There were 10 participants chosen from five organizations (two are fact-checking organizations, and three are organizations that support fact-checking activities). These participants were purposively selected since they are directly and indirectly involved in the fact-checking activities in the country. First, the organizations were identified, and invitations were sent, asking them to send two participants. The focus group discussions were moderated by one of the project researchers. One of the authors of this article took notes and summarized the most important points. Due to geographical constraints, we resorted to online-based focus group discussions for Mali, using the platform Teams. The online focus group discussions in French took place between March and April 2024 with a total of 10 fact-checkers. The participants were selected using snowball sampling, meaning we initially identified two participants, who then led us to others through referrals. Online focus groups are an excellent option when it is difficult to organize them in person, but some considerations, such as usability of the online platform, interactivity between participants and researchers, privacy, etc., must be considered (Willemsen et al., 2023). In addition, given that the participants do not always remain attentive and engaged throughout the conversation (Willemsen et al., 2023), online focus group interviews tend to be shortened with the possible consequences of not being able to address certain aspects. To avoid this pitfall, we split participants into three groups of three, three, and four. Another challenge to organizing online group discussions in Mali is disruptions in the supply of electricity occurring in the country, combined with the poor quality of the internet that affected the ability of participants to connect.

We also did individual interviews with seven decision-makers—editors or executive directors—of fact-checking organizations. These are the two Ethiopian organizations cited above and five fact-checking organizations in Mali. For security reasons, we have decided not to disclose the names of the five Malian organizations involved in the individual interviews. With the ongoing media crackdown in the country, we believe that they could be identified and targeted.

The objectives of focus group discussions were to gather information on fact-checkers' understanding of their role and the challenges they face. Individual interviews aimed to collect data on the challenges and strategies to overcome them.

The analysis of the data from the focus groups and the individual interviews was conducted manually using thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data (Liebenberg et al., 2020). After focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed, the data were analyzed following the six-step process of thematic data analysis outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). These steps are: (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) selecting keywords by identifying recurring patterns and terms, (c) coding, (d) developing themes, (e) conceptualizing by defining concepts emerging from the data, and (f) developing a conceptual model that encapsulates all the findings and insights derived from the data (Naeem et al., 2023).

For this study, we use Participant to refer to those who took part in the focus group discussions, and Informant to refer to those involved in the individual interviews. We use numbers for identification. For instance, Participant 1 in Ethiopia, or Informant 2 in Mali.

6. Findings

Our findings can be grouped into four major themes: the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali, the fact-checkers' perceptions of their role, the challenges facing fact-checkers in both countries, and the fact-checkers' perceptions of the benefits and limits of their work.

6.1. The Characteristics of the Fact-Checking Landscape in Ethiopia and Mali

Since 2020, Ethiopia and Mali have seen a significant development of fact-checking organizations. Some of them, like Benbere Verif, a fact-checking platform initiated by Doniblog, a Community of Malian Bloggers, were launched as a response to disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Internews, 2020). All fact-checking activities in both countries were born outside legacy media. Even those launched by established newsrooms are part of small news websites such as HaqCheck in Ethiopia, Mali Check, and Mopti Check in Mali. HaqCheck started as a fact-checking section inside Addis Zeybe's newsroom, then became a dedicated fact-checking website affiliated with the non-profit organization Inform Africa (HaqCheck, n.d.-a). While operating in Ethiopia, Ethiopia Check is registered in Kenya as an independent trust organization (Ethiopia Check, n.d.). Mali Check, established in 2020, and Mopti Check, launched in 2022, and the fact-checking section of Studio Tamani are, respectively, inside Le Jalon's newsroom, La Voix de Mopti's newsroom, and the newsroom of the radio station Studio Tamani, sponsored by the Swiss NGO Fondation Hirondelle. Le Jalon and La Voix de Mopti are two news websites in Mali. Benbere Verif and An k'a sègèsègè (meaning let's verify in Bambara, the most spoken language in Mali) are also fact-checking sections inside websites, respectively benbere.org and assoblog.org. These are not legacy media websites but websites belonging to two associations of bloggers: Doniblog, Communauté des Blogueurs du Mali (Community of Malian Bloggers), and Association des Blogueurs du Mali (Association of Bloggers of Mali) which are registered as non-profit associations. Wuya, a fact-checking platform initiated by the Malian civic tech non-profit organization Tuwindi, has the particularity of being a mobile application downloadable from the App Store and Google Play.

Even if these organizations are not signatory members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), some of them, like HaqCheck and Mopti Check, disclose on their websites that their verification procedures follow IFCN's Code of Principles:

> HaqCheck follows the best practices in fact-checking, recognized by the world's leading nonpartisan fact-checking organizations. We adhere to the International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) code of principles of commitment to impartiality, transparency, and accuracy. (HaqCheck , n.d.-b)

A similar statement is made by Mopti Check in French: "Our independence is based on the transparency of our sources and respect for IFCN's Code of Principles (without being a signatory at this stage) in our articles" (La Voix de Mopti, n.d.; Authors' translation).

Without referring to IFCN's Code of Principles, Ethiopia Check also discloses on its website its policy of non-partisanship. Furthermore, HaqCheck publishes a budget transparency report where it discloses details regarding its source of income and expenses; the latest publication was for the year 2021/2022. Being a signatory to the IFCN is, however, a goal for this organization, as demonstrated by Respondent 1 in Ethiopia:

> We applied for the first time, but our application was rejected for not complying with the major criteria related to the use of sources. I think they overlook the challenges we face, such as eliciting responses from disinformation actors to discern their intentions and securing primary sources in countries like Ethiopia, where access to information is evidently restricted. After raising these issues, they allowed us to reapply, and we are preparing to do so.

The same interest in the IFCN is displayed by Participant 8 in Mali, who indicates that his organization is in the process of preparing its application file. As for Respondent 1 in Mali, he believes that his organization is not yet ready to meet all the necessary requirements for certification.

The IFCN's role is to bring together fact-checkers worldwide, promote best practices among its members, and set norms and standards of non-partisanship, fairness, transparency, and open and honest corrections for its signatories (Pavleska et al., 2021).

Apart from their websites, fact-checking organizations publish their content on social media, especially Facebook. Ethiopian fact-checking organizations publish their articles directly in national languages such as Amharic, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo, and Somali. In addition, HaqCheck has English versions of its articles.

In Mali, all fact-checking organizations publish their articles in French. In addition, some translate these articles into the most spoken national languages in the country, Bambara, Fulfulde, Sonraï, and Tamaschek, and share the content in audio or video format on WhatsApp and Facebook. Sahel Check, launched in 2022, do not have a significant production and did not publish any content since July 2023.

All these organizations operate with very small teams of two to four fact-checkers. Those who do not have permanent staff work with freelancers paid per fact-check published. Some of these fact-checkers benefited from fact-checking training sponsored by media development organizations such as Internews or Deutsche Welle Akademie. Others, in Mali for instance, most of which are mostly journalists and bloggers working also as freelance fact-checkers, benefited from immersion training with Africa Check, a signatory of IFCN's Code of Principles:

> I received my training in fact-checking with Africa Check. I also have a degree in journalism. The other two fact-checkers already had basic notions of fact-checking, but I also supervised them. We have a continuing training system which, for example, allowed team members to participate in training in May 2023 in Niamey, Niger. (Respondent 3)

6.2. The Ethiopian and Malian Fact-Checkers' Perception of Their Role

Considering that disinformation has increased, compared to the situation before ongoing conflicts in Ethiopia and Mali, all participants in the focus group interviews admit that it is their responsibility as fact-checkers to help the public access reliable information. Believing also that the extent of disinformation is worsening due to the low level of media and digital literacy among a large segment of the population, participants contended that fact-checkers must intervene in these two areas to allow the public to have the tools to deal with misinformation:

> When we verify a claim, we provide background related to that claim, and by giving the correct answer, we make people aware of the accurate information. But at the same time, we educate people through media literacy activities. We give media literacy tips on our social media platforms. (Participant 5 in Ethiopia)

Participant 6, in the focus group interviews in Mali, sees the role of fact-checkers as mine clearance or sanitation work in a context where the information ecosystem is polluted by new actors who share content that he considers harmful to the audience:

> We are doing mine clearance. Doing this work is also doing cleaning work. Because we have influencers called "videomen" who make videos on social media, and there is a lot of false information circulating, and it is this false information that will condition certain positions.

This is also the opinion defended by Respondent 1 in Ethiopia, who insists on the difference between fact-checking work and that of legacy media: "Our work is somehow different from what the other media are doing. Media would cover current affairs, and we see ourselves as the ones cleaning the mess and the confusion."

As such, some fact-checkers see their work as a contribution to the consolidation of democracy. According to Participant 9 in Ethiopia: "It is an indirect contribution to democracy. I would say that it is a catalyst for democracy by empowering people to participate in the public debate."

Participant 8 in Ethiopia argues:

> By helping people access the right facts and verified information, fact-checking empowers them and makes them able to question their leaders. And I think this is a first step to bringing accountability, which is, in a way, what brings democracy.

6.3. The Challenges Facing Fact-Checkers in Ethiopia and Mali

Restrictions to press freedom and the polarization of society linked to socio-political security crises are among the main challenges mentioned by fact-checkers from both countries. In both group and individual interviews, participants and informants indicated that it is increasingly difficult for the media, including fact-checkers, to carry out their work properly. Respondent 2 in Ethiopia states: "It is not only challenging but also dangerous; if you report the truth, do fact-checking—or pro-government or anti-government activists will target you."

While recognizing the existence of a hostile environment, Respondent 1 in Ethiopia said that the worst he had faced so far was online bullying and harassment. The same testimony was made by Participant 1 during the focus group discussion in Ethiopia, noting that online bullying and harassment come from all sides.

The same accounts of online harassment have been made by participants in focus group discussions in Mali. Furthermore, most of them emphasize that with the increasing restrictions to press freedom since the military takeover in August 2020, they prefer to self-censor on all topics related to the government and the army. Some even specify that it is for fear of reprisals from the military authorities that they have decided to no

longer verify the claims made by government officials, preferring to focus on the content shared by Internet users on social media:

> We are a bit afraid to work on some topics. Because the restriction of freedom of expression is, unfortunately, a reality in Mali. Many media outlets have been suspended, especially Western media. So, it is self-censorship; everyone is afraid, even if we see doubtful information that we can prove to be false; we worry first about our own safety. So, sometimes we ignore it. So, that is the situation: self-censorship and fear. (Participant 7 in Mali)

Self-censorship for fear of reprisals is mentioned by almost all participants in focus group discussions and Respondents 1, 3, and 5 in Mali. However, Participant 8 and Respondents 2 and 4 in Mali provide nuance by emphasizing that the lack of verification of claims, especially those made by the government and the army officials, is more linked to the difficult access to reliable sources. In addition, Participant 8 gives two other reasons for the predominance of viral content in fact-checking articles compared to political claims. First, he said, Malian fact-checkers are paid on a freelance basis, and as verifying social media content is quicker, they prefer to focus on that to maximize their earning. Secondly, he added, those who are doing fact-checking in Mali are mostly trained in debunking social media content rather than verifying claims. The problem of access to sources has also been raised as a challenge by participants and respondents in Ethiopia.

Another challenge that emerged from the individual and focus group interviews is the lack of funding, which threatens the sustainability of fact-checking organizations in the two countries. Fact-checking organizations mainly depend on foreign donors, including foundations, media development organizations, or embassies to get financial resources. For instance, Ethiopia Check acknowledges on its website that the last time it received funding was in December 2022. It was a sub-grant running until the end of March 2023 received from the media development organization Internews (Ethiopia Check, n.d.). However, all fact-checking organizations selected for this study said that they experience problems related to lack of funding: “We were obliged to downsize our team due to a lack of funding” (Respondent 1 Ethiopia).

According to Respondent 1 in Mali, his organization was obliged to withdraw from a project financed by the French media development agency CFI Développement Médias, when the Malian government banned Malian civil society organizations from receiving funding from French NGOs. He added that this decision had a serious impact on their fact-checking operations.

Another challenge listed by all respondents is that of having and keeping skilled staff to perform fact-checking. According to respondents, after getting training, some fact-checkers prefer joining media outlets that pay better or working as consultants.

6.4. The Fact-Checkers’ Perception of the Benefits and Limitations of Their Work

Fact-checkers from both countries believe that their work has contributed to raising awareness on disinformation. As evidence, they cite the fact that many people contact them to ask them to verify information or content they receive via social networks.

However, some participants in Mali counter this by believing that this awareness is more present among educated populations, recalling that a large majority of the population is either poorly educated or does not have access to reliable sources of information.

According to Participant 10 in Ethiopia:

> I am not sure that the impact means that disinformation or hate speech will go away from the public; for me, the impact should be making people aware that there is an intention to weaponize information they come across their social media engagement. So, for me, the impact of fact-checking is more about the awareness it creates.

A major limitation of fact-checking in Mali is the language barrier since fact-checking articles are published in French, whereas in Ethiopia, they are published directly in the main languages spoken in the country. For Participant 5 in Mali, publishing fact-checking reports in French is a huge limitation:

> We are in a country where people are not very literate in French, and we produce a lot in French. And above all, what complicates things even more is that our production is text-based, with a large part of the population living in rural areas that even don't often have access to the internet.

To compensate for this, some fact-checking organizations in Mali have started to translate their articles into the most spoken languages in the country, broadcast them in podcast form, and share them on different platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The content is also presented in video format.

Another limitation noted by Participant 9 in Ethiopia is related to the fact that fact-checking organizations still fail to have a large reach. These organizations focus on digital platforms—their websites and social media—to publish their content, while radio is still the most popular medium in both countries. By doing so, a large segment of the population of the two countries is not covered due to low internet penetration.

For some participants and respondents, one of the reasons for the low reach of fact-checking is the lack of collaboration with mainstream media. According to them, most mainstream media are not interested in fact-checking content and are not open to collaboration:

> Collaboration with mainstream media is not easy; attempts to do so have failed. When it comes to public state/media, they are not interested in fact-checking work because they are part of the problem of disinformation. They distort facts and disseminate false information coming from the government. For the private media, fact-checking is considered a luxury, as they do not have enough human and financial resources to invest in fact-checking. (Participant 8 in Ethiopia)

However, in Mali, some organizations involved in fact-checking activities are collaborating with radio stations, targeting community radio stations, in particular, to broaden their audience and reach populations in remote areas of the country where internet access is limited: "We understood very early on the importance of reaching the widest possible audience, particularly the inclusion of poorly or not connected communities. Therefore, we collaborate with community radio stations that translate our fact-checking content into local languages" (Respondent 1 in Mali).

7. Discussions

This study aimed to answer questions related to the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali (RQ1), Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers' perceptions of their work (RQ2), the challenges facing fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali (RQ3), and Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers' perception of the benefits and limitation of their work (RQ4)

Regarding the characteristics of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali (RQ1), we found that the fact-checking landscape is dominated by the "NGO Model" with fact-checking platforms operating outside of traditional mainstream media's newsroom (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Fact-checking in both countries is mainly initiated by non-profit organizations, bloggers associations, and small media organizations. Most of these organizations are comparable to what Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) call peripheral actors to journalism adopting a journalistic discourse.

Another characteristic of the fact-checking landscape in Ethiopia and Mali is that none of the organizations involved in this activity are signatories of the IFCN Code of Principles. However, they show a commitment to these principles, as shown by statements published by HaqCheck and Mopti Check on their respective websites. They also strive to follow fact-checking standards and norms of transparency and non-partisanship in their verification procedures. However, obtaining IFCN certification is very challenging for all organizations operating in both countries since they do not meet the very selective criteria of the network. Thus, we believe that the IFCN, while maintaining its rigorous criteria for selecting signatories, should consider having a program to support fact-checking organizations operating in hostile environments to help foster an efficient fact-checking ecosystem.

Regarding how Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers perceive their role (RQ2), we found that they see themselves as people cleaning the information ecosystem polluted by false content spread by bad actors. In this sense, they consider that their work is different from that of mainstream media. They also consider that mainstream media are either part of the disinformation problem or not doing enough in the fight against disinformation. Ethiopia and Malian fact-checkers believe that their work is not only correcting false information but also equipping audiences with tools and knowledge, enabling them to address disinformation by themselves. Some even believe that their work contributes in a certain way to democratic construction as it allows populations to have access to the right information, which allows them to participate in an informed manner in public debate and hold the leaders accountable. This could be considered a benefit from the performance of the civic model of journalism (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013).

Fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali see themselves less as "guardians of truth" (Mare & Munoriyarwa, 2022) than guides helping people navigate information disorder. This is why, apart from their fact-checking work, they also include media and information literacy in their activities. They organize regular workshops to train people in verification tools and techniques as well as awareness-raising campaigns on disinformation and its effects. In this sense, they go beyond fact-checking (Çömlekçi, 2022) by including media and information literacy activities to be more effective (Hameleers, 2022). This resonates with the findings of Tully and Singer (2023) regarding fact-checking in Sub-Saharan Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic, showing that fact-checkers add a media literacy component to their work and encourage audiences to be their own fact-checkers. By doing so, they perform the civic model of journalism, which is concerned with educating

the ordinary citizen on complex and controversial topics (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013). However, it should be noted that the increasing place of media literacy in the activities of fact-checking organizations is a global trend and not specific to the organizations in Mali and Ethiopia. As the latest IFCN report on the state of fact-checkers in the world shows, most fact-checking organizations around the world carry out media literacy activities (IFCN, 2024).

Regarding challenges (RQ3), our findings show that the context of conflict and its corollary, press freedom restrictions, are among the biggest challenges hampering fact-checking activities in Ethiopia and Mali. In Ethiopia, fact-checkers say to be regularly subject to online bullying and harassment from all sides of the conflict. Fearing reprisals from government officials, some fact-checkers in both countries admit to refraining from fact-checking certain topics. In Mali, fact-checkers say that they self-censor on topics relating to the military because they do not feel safe addressing them. This self-censorship to avoid reprisals in this context must not be seen as an abdication but rather a self-defense strategy in an insecure work environment, as stressed by Walulya and Nassanga (2020) regarding Ugandan journalists. For fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali, self-censorship on certain sensitive subjects is a lesser evil that allows them to continue operating. Thus, even though these fact-checkers claim to be independent and non-partisan, they refrain from holding those in power accountable to some extent. As such, our findings show that in Ethiopia and Mali, there is a gap between the ideal of the watchdog role conception of fact-checking and its performance (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013). This gap could be explained by the local context in Ethiopia and Mali, where fact-checkers say they are subject to online harassment and fear government reprisals. It also can be explained by the fact that, in both countries, fact-checkers say that they lack access to reliable sources and data to properly check claims made by political figures and government officials. As Ferracioli et al. (2022) argued, watchdog orientation in fact-checking is not uniform and, above all, it is hard to perform in some instances, such as authoritarian contexts, as shown by Fakida (2021) regarding fact-checkers in Middle Eastern countries who rarely fact-check Arab leaders or refute their claims. Therefore, fact-checking in Ethiopia and Mali is mostly focused on viral social media content, resulting in a "weakened form of fact-checking" (Liu & Zhou, 2022, p. 4307), and illustrating what Graves et al. (2023) call a "debunking turn." Vinhas and Bastos's (2023) and Cazzamatta (2024) also noted that fact-checkers are increasingly prioritizing online content at the expense of political claims. However, while these authors link this trend to the Meta (ex-Facebook) third-party fact-checking program, where selected fact-checking organizations verify viral content on the Facebook platform, the Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers cite two reasons: the fear of reprisal from government officials and lack of access to reliable sources and data. Regarding access to sources, it should be noted that during the height of the war in the Tigray region, the Ethiopian government cut off communications and internet access in the region (Zelalem, 2022). This made it difficult for fact-checkers to reach people on the ground to verify all information on what allegedly happened there.

Access to funding is another major challenge for fact-checking organizations in Ethiopia and Mali. In terms of funding, fact-checking is between non-profit journalism (Carvajal et al., 2012) and foundation-financed journalism (Nisbet et al., 2018). However, as these organizations are not IFCN signatories, they cannot benefit from grants available in this network in addition to being not eligible for the Meta's third-party fact-checker program, which is a significant source of income for several fact-checking organizations (Meta, 2021). Therefore, fact-checking organizations in both countries rely on some media development organizations, NGOs, and Western embassies that have specific projects related to the fight against disinformation in Africa. For this reason, organizations in both countries have difficulty obtaining long-term

funding, in addition to not having a sustainable business model. Furthermore, relying on donors can sometimes pose ethical problems (Rosenstiel et al., 2016) and may lead them to impose their agenda on the fact-checking organizations that benefit from their funding. As an example, funding partners may be interested in Russian influence, while in Ethiopia and Mali, the priority may be disinformation that feeds hate speech and fuels intercommunity violence. For instance, organizations involved in fact-checking activities in Mali have been accused, by some activists supporting the Malian government, of bias and of pushing the agenda of Western powers, France in particular, due to their funding from the European Union (Laplace, 2022).

Regarding the perception of the benefits and limitations of their work (RQ4), fact-checkers in Ethiopia and Mali insisted more on the limitations. However, they believe that their work is useful. They state that it has contributed to raising awareness of disinformation and its effects among a segment of the population. In this sense, some consider that the impact of fact-checking should not necessarily be evaluated based on its capacity to stop the circulation of disinformation, which is impossible, but on its capacity to raise awareness of the existence of disinformation and its effects while cultivating in the public the reflex of verification.

Among the limitations, Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers have listed the low reach of their work. This is because fact-checking content is primarily published on digital platforms in countries where Internet access is still quite low, even if it is constantly growing. This means that a large portion of the population is not covered by fact-checkers. The situation is even more striking in Mali, where fact-checking articles are published only in French, unlike in Ethiopia where they are published in the main national languages. Focusing on French as the language of dissemination of fact-checking content means that a good part of the public in Mali, where an important portion of the population is not schooled in French, does not have access to this content. This highlights the challenges of fact-checking in the context of linguistic diversity, as language plays a crucial role in legitimizing the practice among local audiences (Vinhas & Bastos, 2024). In addition, in countries with an oral tradition and where radio remains the most popular media, focusing on online platforms, such as social media, to detect false information means that fact-checkers will only be able to identify a portion of disinformation content that circulates. At the beginning of 2023, Ethiopia had 21 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of nearly 16.7% of the population, estimated to be 113 million (Kemp, 2023a). For the same period, Mali had 7.91 million internet users, representing 34.5% of the population, estimated to be 22.94 million (Kemp, 2023b).

Some fact-checking organizations in Mali are adopting innovative approaches by translating fact-checking articles into the country's most widely spoken languages, such as Bambara, Fulfulde, Sonraï, and Tamashek, and disseminating them on digital platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp. Others work with community radio stations, these being closer to grassroots communities. By sharing fact-checking and media literacy content in national languages on WhatsApp groups, fact-checking organizations are innovating not by creating something new but by adopting new technology and adapting it to a local context and specific needs, as well as adapting to new circumstances (Arafat & Porlezza, 2023). Furthermore, by working with radio stations, they are innovating by adapting an older technology to a new context. By adopting an audience-centered innovation approach and not falling into a technological determinism (Pérez-Seijo & Silva-Rodríguez, 2024), Ethiopian and Malian fact-checkers are able to develop strategies that take into account their local contexts marked by low access to the internet, low digital literacy, and language diversity. However, considering that in sub-Saharan Africa, word of mouth plays a huge role in the spread of disinformation (Sey et al., 2022),

journalistic fact-checking is not enough to tackle disinformation, as stated by Cunliffe-Jones (2020) who recommended a holistic approach that goes from church and mosque to WhatsApp.

8. Conclusion

This exploratory study highlights the practice of fact-checking in Ethiopia and Mali, two countries that are the scene of socio-political and security crises. Even though the organizations selected for this study are not signatories of IFCN's Code of Principles, they borrow its standards and adapt them to their local context. They navigate between restrictions to press freedom, lack of funding, linguistic diversity, and difficult access to sources and data.

Even if our results cannot be generalized because they are focused on two countries where fact-checking is still a relatively new practice, this study lays the foundations for in-depth research on the relevance of fact-checking in a context where press freedom is not guaranteed. It also brings important insights into how fact-checking organizations that are non-IFCN signatories are striving to adapt its norms to their contexts. Other studies could also focus more on the challenges and opportunities linked to linguistic diversity for fact-checking. Other avenues of future research could be examining the impact of fact-checking in a polarized context.

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Conflict of Interests

One of the authors worked as an editor and trainer for the fact-checking organization Africa Check. He trained in fact-checking some of the participants in the focus group discussions in Mali.

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