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Truth in the Crossfire: The Case of Ethiopia and Fact-Checking in Authoritarian Contexts

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Abstract

Fact-checking in Ethiopia is doubly challenged. First, because Ethiopia is ruled by an authoritarian government, which restricts the information environment, and second, because the conflict in northern Ethiopia that erupted in November 2020 has made disinformation more rampant, and its implications deadly. But fact-checking in Ethiopia is the product not only of the work of Ethiopian organizations: local fact-checkers' international allies and funders also play important roles. This article explores the practice of fact-checking by local organizations and the challenges they encounter in this work in an authoritarian, conflict-affected context. It also serves as a case study shedding light on the interplay between Ethiopian fact-checking organizations and their allies in the international development sector. Local and international organizations have distinct positions within the fact-checking ecosystem and within funder-grantee relationships, and funders at times compound local organizations' challenges. This research reflects information gathered through semi-structured interviews with local fact-checkers and their international allies, as well as a qualitative content analysis of publicly available materials and social media channels. Its findings imply that local fact-checking organizations, their funders, and allied international organizations interact in complex ways in challenging environments.

Keywords

disinformation; Ethiopia; fact-checking; international development; journalistic practice

1. Introduction

Fact-checking has emerged as a central element bolstering confidence in public discourse in countries that are seen as democratizing. Questions of control and power—the state's ability to control information available

to the public and its power to circumscribe the boundaries of fact-checking practices aiming to counter false narratives—are central to what is at stake for people living in authoritarian countries.

Scholars writing about fact-checking have turned the spotlight increasingly toward local fact-checking organizations in the Global South (Amazeen, 2019, 2020; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Graves, 2018). They have pointed out the importance of examining fact-checking organizations as NGOs in cases where they operate outside the bounds of traditional journalistic models. Yet local fact-checking organizations operate within a complex ecosystem alongside international organizations, including powerful Western aid agencies, private foundations, UN agencies, and international NGOs, with these relationships being underexplored.

This study concerns fact-checking organizations in Ethiopia as a case that sheds light on the dynamics between local and international organizations concerned with fact-checking in the Global South, especially in authoritarian and conflict contexts. It seeks to understand what particular challenges face fact-checking in non-democracies and countries facing authoritarianism, conflict, and high polarization, and how fact-checking is understood and practiced in such contexts. During this inquiry, I have also been attuned to what characterizes the relationships and discourses of local fact-checking organizations and their international allies. Due to the intensification of conflict in Ethiopia since November 2020 and the emergence of new fact-checking organizations there, Ethiopia is a particularly productive case to explore these questions.

Based on eight in-depth interviews with fact-checkers and allies and a content analysis of 44 fact-checks by the two key independent fact-checking organizations operating in Ethiopia, I show that fact-checkers face significant challenges due to state repression at all stages of their work: from deciding which claims to select, to seeking to access information and to verify claims. At the same time, funding structures put in place by international funders and the impact of international politics on funding streams can compound their challenges.

Focusing on Ethiopia as an emblematic case of a country facing both authoritarianism and conflict is important not just to fill in the gaps when it comes to how fact-checking is conducted in non-Western contexts, but because it may ask us to revise our understanding and expectations of fact-checking itself and what it can achieve in non-democracies.

Even before the crisis that had erupted in the Tigray region of Ethiopia (a northern region of the country) in November 2020 turned into an all-out civil war, the country had faced frequent political upheavals and was characterized by exceptionally repressive government policies towards critical journalists and activists. According to Freedom House (2024), journalists repeatedly come under government pressure over their coverage of the internal conflicts in the Tigray, Oromo, and Amhara regions, as well as other political dynamics. In 2023, journalists faced arrests, were physically assaulted, or had their outlets' licenses revoked. The war in Tigray from 2020–2022 between the central government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front left at least tens of thousands dead and millions displaced, while at the same time giving rise to rampant disinformation campaigns both on the part of the government and on the part of pro-Tigrayan actors (Pilling & Schipani, 2023; Wilmot et al., 2021).

Scholars have called this state of affairs an "information disorder" (Mutsvairo et al., 2023). Their work shows that in an information environment where the media is censored, and information from government sources

is often patently false, information and disinformation are no longer antonyms since audiences are likely to distrust both the narratives that the government deploys, and the counter-narratives deployed against it. As a corollary, for fact-checking organizations to persuade their audiences that they provide credible information and that they have the authority to debunk disinformation is a significant challenge. In this study, I examine fact-checking organizations' practices, activities, and strategies, as well as the wider context of their relationships with their international allies, to further researchers' understanding of the opportunities and limitations for information actors in authoritarian and conflict contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fact-Checking in an Authoritarian, Conflict-Affected Country in the Global South

A rich body of literature about fact-checking, including its proliferation in the Global South, has evolved over the past decade. Scholars have come to define political fact-checking simply as the verification of political claims, or grounding it theoretically as a professional reform movement resulting from journalism's diminishing legitimacy and crisis of public trust (Amazeen, 2019; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Graves, 2016). Its rise coincided with the social media era, and it also came to be associated with a set of digital verification skills.

Graves (2017) and others have provided accounts of "objective practice" among fact-checkers and examined the epistemology of fact-checking, with research initially focusing primarily on the US and other Western countries. Reflecting on its ethos of transparency, Graves distilled fact-checking practice in the US into five steps or characteristics that form its basis: choosing claims to check, contacting the speaker, tracing false claims, working with experts, and showing one's work.

Fact-checking has often been identified as a key antidote to misinformation (Tully et al., 2022), and its study has coincided with a growing scholarly interest in disinformation, especially since the 2016 election of Donald Trump and elite concerns about polarization risks in its wake (Bernstein, 2021; Lenoir & Anderson, 2023). More recent scholarship has described a "debunking turn" in the practice of fact-checking, where fact-checking focuses more on debunking viral misinformation on social media rather than on political speech, partly due to the growing role of platforms (Graves et al., 2023; Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020).

As the number of fact-checking organizations expanded around the world, scholarship evolved to examine how and why the practice came to be compelling for journalists and others across so many different contexts. Reflecting on fact-checking as a professional and organizational international practice at a more meso level, Graves (2018, p. 623) points to the practice of fact-checking outside of institutional journalism, which is often conducted by NGOs seeking to promote "transparency, effective governance, democratic dialogue, and civic engagement." Amazeen (2019), too, writes about the global spread of political fact-checking, emphasizing that technological change, socio-political conflict, and public calls for politicians' accountability have been important in countries where fact-checking gained prominence. Like Graves (2018), Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), in their account of prominent data journalism and fact-checking organizations in Africa, explore themes of the boundaries between journalistic and non-journalistic actors and how novel practices seek to renew journalistic practices. In their recent study of fact-checkers operating across 27 non-Western countries, Vinhas and Bastos (2023) show how country context shapes concepts such as authority, objectivity, and factuality, arguing that disinformation threatens social cohesion in many

of the countries they examined, and should not be viewed through an individual behavioral lens. In a rare study related to fact-checking in an authoritarian context, Liu and Zhou (2022) have shown that repressive conditions in China have led to a weakened form of fact-checking that shies away from playing a political watchdog role.

Despite this impressive body of work, research that explores how fact-checking operates in repressive and authoritarian environments has yet to be widely conducted. Moreover, the interactions between fact-checking, misinformation, and public discourse often rest on assumptions related to democratic public sphere theory (Graves et al., 2023). To illuminate the case of Ethiopia, an understanding of both the disinformation landscape and the media context would be beneficial.

Workneh (2019) has written about the rise of hate speech in Ethiopia in the era of social media and societal disagreements about the appropriate responses to it, as well as about the way that outrage communication on social media became a vehicle for political dissatisfaction and identity-based rifts (Workneh, 2021). Skjerdal and Moges (2021) have shown how the 2018 liberalization of the Ethiopian media environment ironically led to its further ethnification. They show that media reforms from 2018 significantly increased press freedom but, at the same time, intensified the media's ethnification process, making the media both more pluralistic and more polarized. State and regional media structures became more significant, and journalists began to form alliances along ethnic fault lines (with separate associations for Amhara, Oromo, and Tigrayan journalists, for example). Trust in one's ethnic media among audiences was high, alongside mistrust of other sources of information (Workneh, 2021). This media polarization was one of the factors that led to the establishment of fact-checking organizations. Detailed analyses of social media campaigns show how hate speech spread and how active and deliberate both the government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front were in disseminating political disinformation during the Tigray war (Chala, 2020; Wilmot et al., 2021).

In light of this scholarship, I, therefore, pose my first research question to guide my examination of fact-checkers' work:

> RQ1: What are the challenges and constraints related to authoritarianism and the conflict environment that face fact-checkers in Ethiopia, and how do they contend with those challenges?

2.2. The Political Economy of Fact-Checking

While the political economy of journalism and economic analysis of media industries have longstanding roots in the study of communication, the political economy of fact-checking has been underexplored. Highlighting that many fact-checking organizations have been set up as NGOs outside of journalistic bounds, Graves (2018), Amazeen (2019, 2020), and Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) pointed to the important role that foundations and funders play in shaping fact-checking work by such actors. However, the implications of funding structures have not yet been fully developed.

To help further illuminate the implications of donor-grantee relationships, I suggest drawing not only on media studies scholarship but also on critical international development studies, whose scholars have long explored how international aid agencies support and shape projects in the Global South, including media development programming and other democratization aid. Researchers examining foreign aid in the context

of media have demonstrated that many media aid projects fall short due to their top–down, "magic-bullet" conceptualization of democratization (Mattsson, 2022; Workneh, 2018). Claims by Western governments that they aim to promote democracy and human rights come up against complex realities in places where repressive regimes and local elites are resistant to these aims. Hagmann and Reyntjens (2016) write about the compromises aid agencies are pushed to make when they operate in authoritarian countries where government elites have an interest in maintaining the status quo and how aid may end up entrenching authoritarian rule rather than promoting its stated aims (see Brown & Fisher, 2020). Christensen and Weinstein (2013) similarly explore the dynamics between authoritarian regimes and Western governments that provide foreign aid to local NGOs, showing that repressive governments at times move to restrict foreign support if it is seen as too threatening to their interests.

A key debate in the international development sector in the past decade has centered on aid localization, which the Inter-Agency Standing Committee defines as getting "more means into the hands of people in need," an effort closely linked to an attempt to increase resources for local expertise and locally embedded NGOs instead of parashooting internationals (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.). A "grand bargain," between large aid donors and aid organizations in 2016 made a series of commitments for streamlining aid, some of the most relevant of which include more support for local and national responders, reducing duplication between donors, improving joint needs assessments, reducing earmarking, and increasing multi-year, predictable funding. While the "grand bargain" started as, and remains, most relevant for the humanitarian aid sector, the localization discussions it sparked apply to international development more broadly and are central to discussions and practices related to the relationships between international and national actors (Barakat & Milton, 2020; Koch & Rooden, 2024; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021; US Agency for International Development, 2022).

Other researchers have addressed the role of foreign aid and development assistance in shaping media systems in developing nations, including specifically in Africa. Paterson et al. (2018) argue that the research field would do well to move beyond old dichotomies encouraged by reductionist press freedom and democracy indicators to allow for a deeper understanding of the roles of media in society. They write that "there has been little critical research to date concerning how international development aid in particular and development assistance in general has impacted upon journalism" (Paterson et al., 2018, p. 4). Brownlee (2017), also observes that "not enough rigorous research and scholarship exists about the integration of new media and information assistance by development actors (EU countries and the US) as part of their democracy promotion programs" (as cited in Paterson et al., 2018, p. 2). As fact-checking organizations become an important element of media ecosystems, an exploration of how international development aid affects them would add an important element to this inquiry into journalism-adjacent institutions and initiatives.

In light of this scholarship, I pose my second research question to guide my examination of fact-checkers' work:

> RQ2: What are the challenges and constraints related to their funding environment that face fact-checkers in Ethiopia, and how do they contend with those challenges?

While I have proposed two distinct research questions, it is important to note that authoritarian conditions and international aid funding structures cannot be neatly separated as factors: International development aid

is fundamentally political and intersects with authoritarian politics in complex ways. Ethiopia is a productive case study for this examination not only because authoritarianism, conflict, and international aid interact in it in a unique way, but also because the consequences of unchecked disinformation in Ethiopia are directly linked to widespread risks of violence.

3. Methods

This study's findings are based on a qualitative analysis of eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews and an in-depth content analysis of 44 fact-checks published in 2023 by two Ethiopian organizations: Ethiopia Check and Haq Check, the fact-checking desk of the non-profit Inform Africa. The interviewees included current and former employees from the two Ethiopian organizations as well as people from international organizations and human rights experts who could comment on the organizations or the information ecosystem in the country and digital rights. Interviews were conducted from February–August 2024. The initial interviewees were identified by contacting employees at the two organizations and consulting with other researchers. Others were identified through snowball sampling by asking interviewees for suggestions about others to contact for the study. All identifying information, including the names of individuals, has been removed to protect study participants. I received institutional review board approval from Rutgers University before beginning this study.

The interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom and lasted approximately 40–65 minutes. In each interview, I began by asking about the background of the organization where the person works or worked, as well as how teams are structured, and then continued by asking how decisions are made about what information to fact-check. Next, I asked how fact-checking in Ethiopia differs from this work in other African countries, following up with a question about specific challenges that arise in this work in Ethiopia. Then, I asked interviewees about the relationships between national and international organizations in this space (for more information, see Supplementary File).

To construct the dataset for the qualitative content analysis of fact-checks, I gathered the fact-checks published by one of the organizations over a three-month period, from early January to early April 2023, by referring to the organization's weekly roundups published on its Facebook page. I complemented these fact-checks with several other fact-checks in its Facebook feed that were not included in the weekly roundups to create as complete a list as possible of fact-checks published during those three months. I then conducted an in-depth analysis and coding of the fact-checks published over this period, of which there were 29 in total. The materials were originally published in Amharic, Tigrinya, or Oromo and were reviewed in translation by working with professional translators. It is important to mention that during this process, I observed that the organization also published more than 40 pieces of content that were not fact-checks during this period, such that readers following its social media feed saw a blended flow of different types of materials. The pieces of content that were not fact-checks included explainers, educational content, media literacy content, and monitoring related to digital information policies and developments locally, regionally, and internationally. This initial dataset of 29 fact-checks was complemented with 15 additional fact-checks that were posted by the other organization in English translation to expand the dataset to a total number of 44 fact-checks. The content analysis also included an analysis of website documents, annual reports, and other relevant materials. These materials were open-coded in Nvivo to identify concepts and categories related to the organizations' fact-checking practices and self-definitions (Miles & Huberman, 2020). In the

next phase of analysis, several themes that arose from open coding were identified and explicated. The same open coding process was then undertaken for the interview transcripts. The cycle of observation, analysis, and reflection continued in an iterative process until observations from both the content analysis and the interviews could be integrated into a consistent picture and theoretical formulations about fact-checking in this authoritarian and conflict-affected context could be articulated.

3.1. The Fact-Checking Organizations Examined

Ethiopia Check and Haq Check were selected to be the focus of this research because they are the two key independent Ethiopian fact-checking organizations currently operating in Ethiopia. Both organizations are new. Ethiopia Check was run as an individual volunteer initiative starting in 2019, first receiving international funding that enabled it to expand beyond its founder journalist Elias Meseret's work in August 2020. Haq Check, meanwhile, was founded by Abel Wabela, a former blogger and pro-democracy activist, inside the media house Addis Zeybe in November 2020, moving to operate under a non-profit organization registered in Ethiopia, Inform Africa, in March 2021. Both organizations are relatively small: Ethiopia Check had seven staff members at the height of its funding, while Haq Check had no more than 10. Due to Ethiopia's language diversity, both organizations operate in multiple languages; Ethiopia Check fact-checked claims in Amharic, Tigrinya, and Afaan Oromo, while Haq Check covered Amharic, Tigrinya, Afaan Oromo, Somali, and English. Both were strongly assisted in getting off the ground by significant founding funding grants, from the international NGO Internews in the case of Ethiopia Check (whose funding for this project originally came from the US Agency for International Development), and the Open Society Initiative for East Africa, followed primarily by UNESCO in the case of Haq Check, which enabled them to operate for several years, with shortfalls following this initial funding putting their ability to sustain fact-checking in jeopardy.

4. Findings

4.1. Key Challenges Encountered by Fact-Checking Organizations

Participants described significant challenges to the practice of fact-checking in Ethiopia, which can broadly be divided into two categories: challenges related to the political and media environment and challenges related to resources and funding structures. While the two categories are not separate, since Ethiopia's political context is a factor in international funding flows for media development and can influence funders' trust that fact-checking organizations can fulfill their missions, I describe them in turn in this section because they are both significant forces that shape fact-checking organizations' professional practices and activities (further elaborated in Section 4.2).

4.1.1. Challenges Related to the Local Political and Media Environment

Since the two fact-checking organizations work openly and publicly to verify and publish information, their staff—many of whom have a professional background in journalism—are acutely aware of the freedom of speech constraints limiting the scope of what claims they can fact-check and what fact-checks they can publish. While it is not always clear when fact-checking a government official will raise ire and when it will be passed over, interviews make it clear that the government's general attitude towards the fact-checking organizations is antagonistic and that their social media channels are monitored. It did not escape

fact-checkers that Meseret was severely threatened and ended up having to leave Ethiopia, and therefore they were assuming a level of security risk by undertaking their work. As one fact-checker put it: "One of the challenges in deciding what to fact-check or not is, am I able to survive it after I fact-check the prime minister, or after I fact-check some official? We have that in the back of our minds."

The media environment is significant not only in defining the scope of what claims to select to work on but also in that it creates obstacles in verification processes when the veracity of claims is being researched. Access to information while trying to confirm or debunk claims is often severely limited due to factors such as localized conflicts and insecurity, states of emergency declared in different regions, and internet shutdowns. Assessing the reliability, credibility, and affiliation of information sources in a highly politicized and polarized environment requires a high level of expertise and professional judgment. One fact-checker explained that if "there is an internet shutdown, we can't even find what's going on there online…and the government is saying everything is okay, but we know that it's not okay." Especially on issues related to conflict dynamics, fact-checkers said that independent primary sources are hard to come by.

The government plays an important role in fact-checkers' work, not only as a regulator of freedom of speech but also as a source of information. For fact-checkers in the West, government officials, and government agencies are often an important source of data used to verify information or debunk mis- and disinformation (Graves, 2016). In Ethiopia, fact-checkers said they could not necessarily rely on government-issued information, not just due to politicization, though that is undoubtedly a concern, but also due to possibly improper data collection methods, for example. When approaching government offices for information, one issue is that fact-checking is not a recognizable profession to many government officials. However, according to one participant, another issue is fear associated with providing information following the increasing centralization of information by the prime minister's office since the beginning of the conflict in Tigray.

A final challenge that was identified by participants is related to the audiences for which their fact-checks are produced. Low media literacy in general and low awareness of fact-checking as a genre, particularly, were mentioned as obstacles to the usefulness of fact-checking in the Ethiopian context. Within Ethiopia's highly polarized media environment, where distrust is high and media sources are seen as either being on one group's side or another's, members of the audience "will just label you because they don't have the information or the awareness about fact-checking" without even reading the fact-check that organizations post, according to one fact-checker.

4.1.2. Challenges Related to Resources and International Funding Structures

While non-profit organizations in the Global South are frequently plagued with funding challenges, the case of Ethiopia's two leading independent fact-checking organizations is particularly stark. Dramatic changes in Ethiopia's political context and geopolitical standing created funding opportunities and then a resource collapse within a relatively short period of time. At the time most of the interviews for this project were conducted in early 2024, less than four years after Ethiopia Check and Haq Check received the founding grants that launched their trajectories as professionalized organizations; the former organization had no funding at all, with former staffers contributing some of their time to issuing fact-checks as volunteers, and the latter used limited grants for specific projects, especially fact-checking training for different constituencies to stay afloat, but had no dedicated funding for its fact-checking activities per se.

One expert who has familiarity with the media development funding landscape in Ethiopia explained how international funding changed in tandem with the political context:

> 2018–2019 was the height of many civic spaces opening up, media, legal reforms, and everything….There was a lot of money coming in as well, with a lot of donors from different countries, and development partners. There was a lot of interest…so that made it easier to access more funds.

During the conflict in Tigray from November 2020 to November 2022, the need to combat conflict disinformation was still seen as high. However, fact-checking organizations report that since the peace agreement was signed, Ethiopia has been seen by many donors as being in a post-conflict phase even though localized conflicts were continuing in regions like Oromia and Amhara. At the same time, the country is seen as having tightened control over the civic and media space, which may not be conducive to media development work. The downstream effects on fact-checking organizations were dramatic. "There's no interest in fact-checking in Ethiopia at the moment," one staff member said. Another participant explained the extent to which media development funding follows international political priorities: "The money that comes is almost always tied to other political structures and foreign policy and diplomacy…from that particular country. And I know a lot of media development organizations have also been closing up, finishing up their projects."

In addition, local fact-checking organizations in Ethiopia experienced all key challenges highlighted in the "grand bargain," with particularly salient themes being project-based funding and lack of support for core organizational budgets, lack of certainty and predictability, the absence of long-term funding, and duplication and lack of donor coordination. On project-based funding, one participant explained:

> Media development organizations will come up with specific projects. They may not have the funding for the main job…they might give you [funding] to do a workshop on fact-checking or to do some training, but they will not [give] you money for the actual job: fact-checking.

Another participant said they approached their funder to ask for clarity on the length of their grant to enable organizational planning, but the funder was not able to provide concrete answers. A third participant expressed their frustration that fact-checking training for journalists, funded by different organizations, trained many of the same journalists multiple times, most of whom were based in Addis Ababa, and said that there is a "deep duplication between the [funding] organizations…and most of their projects are short term projects," adding "unless we work on it in a more organized way, just giving training to the journalists is not enough."

4.2. Fact-Checking Processes, Practices, and Activities

Key practices and activities described by fact-checkers and their allies can be seen as a response to the constraints of authoritarianism and the international funding environment described in sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2.

The qualitative content analysis indicates that most of the claims checked were derived from social media posts on Facebook (28), X (6), both Facebook and X (1), and YouTube (2), whether from the accounts of traditional media, individual journalists, politicians or political parties, or prominent users, usually those with

many thousands of followers. Six additional fact-checks were based on general rumors described by the fact-checkers, but their specific origin was not mentioned, while one fact-check was based on a story in a traditional media outlet. While fact-checking organizations did not shy away from checking claims made by traditional media such as the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, or Oromia Media Network (mostly claims made by these outlets on their social media channels), most of the claims checked were made by popular social media users, not by traditional media. Consistent with the "debunking turn" in fact-checking (Graves et al., 2023; Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020), claims checked predominantly consisted of rumors, conspiracies, and biased stories rather than of politicians' speech. Several themes were identified by the content analysis, with fact-checks covering the following themes: conflict-related (16), Ethiopian politics (10), religious (6), disasters and aid (5), the impact of the conflict (3), geopolitics/international (3), and scams (1). Fact-checks were published on the organizations' websites and social media channels. By 2024, Ethiopia Check had more than 257,000 followers on Facebook, 13,000 on X, and 25,000 on Telegram. Meanwhile, Haq Check had more than 8,900 followers on Facebook, 1,500 on X, and a small number on Telegram. While Ethiopia Check published its fact-checks in the relevant local languages (Amharic, Tigrinya, or Afaan Oromo, depending on the context), Haq Check also published its fact-checks in English. The organizations also published information about impersonator accounts of prominent figures and accounts that spread misinformation. Fact-checks were generally categorized as being true, misleading, or false, though the "true" categorization was not present among the fact-checks that I reviewed (note that since this is a qualitative content analysis and the sample is not presumed to represent the organizations' fact-checks more broadly, as explained in Section 3, numbers are provided here for illustrative purposes).

Fact-checkers described their work routines as having "an editorial cycle like any newsroom." Potential pieces of disinformation to consider debunking were collected not only by monitoring social media and mainstream media but also by soliciting suggestions from their audience via social media, messaging apps, email, phone, and text, and by cultivating informal relationships with allied journalists in various outlets. After pitching claims to work on, fact-checking teams in both organizations met regularly in person or corresponded via group chat to select the claims to work on. Decisions were deliberated and made in a group as a risk mitigation strategy. One organization in particular mentioned making decisions unanimously because the broad linguistic and ethnic diversity at the fact-checking desk meant that the potential reception by various audiences would be better understood by including everyone's viewpoints. As one participant explained:

> If someone [at the desk] has a reservation, we will not do that [fact-check], because if it goes out…the audience will be divided….Because of the problem I mentioned—the polarization of Ethiopian politics—everybody will target us, so we have to be careful to do something professional and factual.

Criteria used to decide what pieces of disinformation to fact-check included reach or potential reach (including the prominence of the poster), potential harm, and whether the content is "fact-checkable" in the first place. Regarding reach, one fact-checker said: "Just by experience, we know what kind of content becomes viral and has an impact." However, unlike many other fact-checking organizations in Africa and worldwide, Ethiopia's limited media environment created severe limitations when deciding which pieces of information to fact-check. This was first at the level of risk assessment around constraints on freedom of speech. One fact-checker suggested that the bar for deciding to fact-check a piece of content in Ethiopia is higher than in other countries due to this risk. Fact-checkers would not take the risk of fact-checking a government official issuing wrong GDP figures, but they would assume higher personal and organizational

risk in the case of more dangerous disinformation that would have life-and-death consequences. At a second level, as explained in Section 4.1.1, the limiting media environment impeded fact-checkers' ability to conduct reporting that would debunk disinformation.

While organizations were keenly aware of international standards and best practices, such as those of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), they were also aware that these practices were not always applicable in Ethiopia. Although the IFCN principles call fact-checkers to bring to bear external evidence that can be transparently shown to the reader to convince them of the reliability of the fact-checkers' conclusions, this was not always possible in the Ethiopian context. Fact-checkers in Ethiopia (often using their journalistic background to exercise professional judgment about source reliability and take advantage of preexisting contacts) often did their reporting to confirm or debunk stories in a way that could not be fully transparent to the reader.

Interview participants mentioned various reporting practices that were undertaken to verify information, including attempting to contact eyewitnesses and using at least two preexisting local contacts to cross-check information. While fact-checkers were aware of the IFCN criterion recommending reliance on primary sources, they said at times they could not confirm information based on primary sources and had to rely on secondary sources such as locally-based local and international journalists.

The content analysis of the fact-checks themselves also provided information regarding the process of fact-checking claims. Fact-checks mention staff contacting officials and government sources to confirm information, reaching out to residents in rural areas, and relying on sources who wish to remain anonymous to confirm information.

Despite these efforts, security threats placed definite limits on the organizations' ability to do their work. One research participant closely familiar with organizational practice said of one of the organizations, while not faulting them for it, that security risks for the staff "makes the work sometimes a bit shallow, because they can't really fact-check the bigger things, not only because of…feared upsets, but also because of lack of access to information [in certain regions]." Another interviewee said, "unless there is access to information and unless…you tried your best to use your resources to verify the information, what's the point?" The same interviewee added, "I think the solution is to work on media literacy hand-in-hand with the fact-checking…and we need some kind of policy change."

Another practice that fact-checkers sometimes undertook to contend with the difficulty of confirming some information was letting readers decide. In one instance, a fact-checker described reaching out to a government-owned company to request evidence to back up a claim it had made in the media. When the company rebuffed the fact-checker, they went on to interview experts and contextualize the claim for their readers, so that they could come to their conclusions about whether or not the claim was reasonable, but without labeling it one way or another. The content analysis also indicates that in some cases, fact-checkers go through the fact-checking process but end up publishing the results as "explainers" rather than labeling them as false or misleading, and at times quote both a government official and other stakeholders and mention contesting narratives, leaving the ultimate conclusion of the takeaway for their readers to make. For example, in a fact-check essentially reporting air travel restrictions for some passengers from Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, fact-checkers conducted reporting (having spoken directly to passengers who faced

travel restrictions because they had not met certain conditions), but at the same time, they reported that the airline was unaware of cancellations and that a government spokesperson had said that the matter had been resolved. The fact-check is framed as an explainer and not labeled.

Openness to their audiences in accepting and soliciting information to fact-check via multiple channels, and technological innovations, such as a Telegram bot, are not only practiced to comply with the IFCN principles but also to increase legitimacy with their audiences. At the point of publication, the two organizations have also gone to great lengths to disseminate the information they produce in innovative ways, including ways that reach audiences who are not tuned into social media. Once their fact-checks have been finalized, they are not only posted to the organizations' websites and multiple social media channels but also converted to other formats, including formats that reach audiences who are not social media users. Haq Check had a weekly television program to discuss the week's fact-checks and disinformation-related issues (discontinued due to lack of funding), and Meseret had a popular hour-long weekly radio program discussing disinformation and hosting politicians and experts. Despite its popularity, the radio show could not attain commercial sponsors due to fears of government repercussions for the sponsors.

Finally, in response to both funding pressures and a genuine attempt to affect the wider media literacy context of their work, the two organizations undertake a wide range of activities beyond fact-checking. Africa Check notes on its website that in addition to fact-checking, its mission also includes media literacy education training and capacity building. Haq Check and the NGO within which it is housed, Inform Africa, also conduct media literacy programming, including training journalists, journalism students, and civil society activists, aiming to produce research into and analysis of disinformation trends. The content analysis indicates that fact-checking organizations also lightly "educate" their readers and enhance their media literacy through their fact-checks themselves by taking readers through the process of verifying information with credible sources, instructing them about ways to report hate speech to platforms, issuing warnings about sharing unverified information, and identifying accounts that spread disinformation. They also publish a range of materials on their social media channels in addition to fact-checks, including explainers, media literacy content, videos offering guidance on information verification, and monitoring of local and global developments. In that sense, they try to do more than fact-checking organizations in the West with far less.

5. Discussion: What Fact-Checking Organizations in Authoritarian States Can and Cannot Do

The primary goal of this study was to make observations about some of the key challenges facing Ethiopian fact-checking organizations due to their particular environment in the hope that we can use their case to learn about the conditions for countering disinformation in authoritarian, conflict-affected contexts and for fact-checking organizations funded as NGOs. The findings presented in the previous sections illustrate how these challenges, in turn, shape fact-checking practices and activities.

The first theme related to the challenges fact-checking organizations encounter due to authoritarian and conflict conditions. These conditions constrained their work through each step of the process: choosing claims, tracing claims, contacting experts, and showing their work (Graves, 2016). What claims they could check and what fact-checks they could publish were significantly limited by the bounds of freedom of expression in Ethiopia. The contextual limitations on checking political speech, fact-checkers' deep concern

with viral disinformation online, and a focus on verifiable claims have meant that fact-checking in Ethiopia operates mostly in a debunking mode, in a manner consistent with Graves et al. (2023) and Westlund et al. (2024). Ethiopia's repressive environment for freedom of expression has created challenges for the ethos of transparency characteristic of fact-checking elsewhere, as described by Graves (2018) and in the IFCN guidelines. While often constrained in their freedom to choose which claims to check without hindrance and being challenged in implementing certain transparency practices such as contacting the person who issued the original claim or making their process replicable to their readers, fact-checkers in Ethiopia are nonetheless aware of international standards and try to follow them to the extent possible, such as by showing their work in a way that has a secondary educational value to their readers (similarly to fact-checkers in Turkey, as shown by Çömlekçi, 2020). In terms of their relationship with the media sphere, like the data journalists and fact-checkers interviewed by Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), fact-checkers see themselves as renewing journalistic practices: Journalists are an important part of their constituency and audience, and they strongly articulate their concerns with the ethnification and polarization prevalent in the Ethiopian media. But since their organizations are still nascent, with their roots and practices firmly planted in journalistic modes of work, they have yet to fully define a separate sphere from journalism. On the contrary, establishing independent fact-checking organizations may be a way to enable "objective practice" that has not currently found a space within Ethiopia's media ecosystem.

The second theme related to the challenges fact-checking organizations encounter due to their incorporation as NGOs dependent primarily on international development funding. Ethiopian fact-checking organizations are not autonomous from international actors that often circumscribe their material conditions. While fact-checkers have said that resources for their work were relatively plentiful in the aftermath of media reforms in Ethiopia in 2018–2019, the ebbs and flows of foreign aid funding for media development have meant they have lacked the consistency of resources they need to maintain their work. Foreign aid, despite the lip service it pays to the importance of localization, is plagued by broader problems in aid dynamics that are not easily solved (Koch & Rooden, 2024). In conflict-affected countries in particular, aid strategies and foreign policy considerations can shift frequently and significantly. While the organizations see incorporating themselves as non-profit organizations as the best option available to them, this spells vulnerability both to government threats and to funding shortfalls. Like fact-checkers elsewhere (Çömlekçi, 2022), one key strategy they have adopted to cultivate support from funders is to expand their activities beyond fact-checking to include media and information literacy education, including training journalists and journalism students.

In the context of viral disinformation and Ethiopia's outrage communication (Workneh, 2021), an important emerging finding from this research is the prominent role platforms play in disinformation dynamics and the role fact-checkers think platforms ought to play in protecting their society from harm. While the interview questionnaire did not explicitly address the organizations' relationships with platforms, this issue, especially the role of Meta's Facebook, was frequently raised by participants, making this an important theme in the research. As Nothias (2020) has shown, in many countries in Africa, Facebook is the internet. Several participants expressed disappointment and anger at Facebook's role, saying that fact-checking organizations essentially clean up Facebook's platform for them for free since much of the most harmful disinformation they observed was on Facebook. One participant said Facebook operates "like a gangster" in that they only show up in Ethiopia around elections or internationally visible conflicts such as the civil war in Tigray. While one of the organizations was a "trusted partner" of Facebook's, that had not translated into resources

(except in the form of in-kind resources to help promote content). Facebook routinely contacted the fact-checkers to ask for unpaid assistance verifying claims, translation, and other tasks. As one fact-checker said, major technology companies have been "a total disappointment," adding, "I believe they are failing countries like Ethiopia."

This study has several important limitations. First, the small number of interviewees, which resulted both from the limited number of potential interviewees in these small organizations and a perceived reluctance to hold recorded interviews due to the generally repressive environment, despite a detailed plan in place to ensure confidentiality. Second, the study's scope as a case study means that it explored contextual particularities that may not be relevant to other authoritarian contexts. Nonetheless, I believe it expands our knowledge of what fact-checking may mean in non-democracies in important ways.

The political economy of fact-checking and alternative journalism in the Global South, more broadly, is an important future research direction in both journalism and media studies and international development studies. International foreign aid funding for media development in the Global South has a profound effect on media ecosystems, and we do not yet know enough about what funding constraints require or enable journalists and adjacent professions to do.

6. Conclusion

Mano (2019, p. 115) has written that "media development in Africa is most likely to be driven by initiatives and efforts that feature African agency, focus on social change, and are embedded in technological innovation." This seems like a particularly apt description of the Ethiopian fact-checking organizations examined in this article. My research has been animated foremost by the curiosity to understand what it is like to practice fact-checking in a context as difficult and critical as Ethiopia. While the challenges fact-checkers face are formidable, they have sought to carve out a space for fact-checking practices despite significant limitations, spurring some sense of hope in their compatriots (Mutsvairo et al., 2023). This case study seems to suggest that Ethiopian fact-checking organizations, though nascent and small, may represent not just professional reform movements seeking to renew journalistic practices, but social reform actors in a broader sense. Founded by an independent journalist and a former blogger and pro-democracy activist, their efforts to combat polarizing disinformation within Ethiopian society can be seen as reflective of a social change impulse, akin to the practices observed by Mano (2019).

This study has demonstrated that fact-checking in non-democratic contexts can be profoundly challenged by the dual forces of authoritarianism and the political-economic forces resulting from the complexities of foreign aid. Given the size of fact-checking organizations and the limitations they face relative to the enormity of the disinformation challenges they try to tackle, Western expectations that they should be the key actors in stemming the tide of disinformation seem unrealistic and unfair. Authoritarian politics constantly shift as political dynamics evolve, while foreign policy and foreign aid priorities also shift. But fact-checking organizations that are able to carve out a space for their work in repressive countries provide so much more to their societies than individual stories debunking false claims one by one: They communicate with large audiences about the value of "objective practice," remind journalists of professional standards, and provide practical know-how that others can implement in their interactions with a disorderly and untrustworthy information environment.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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