

Fact-Checkers as New Journalistic Mediators: News Agencies' Verification Units and Platform Dynamics

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Abstract

This article examines how European international news agencies—Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa), and EFE—engage with the emerging subgenre of external fact-checking journalism in response to (dysfunctional) hybrid media systems. Through a content analysis of 860 verification articles published between January and December 2022 and interviews with seven experts, the study demonstrates that (external) fact-checking practices are deeply embedded in these agencies' operations, leveraging extensive global communication networks to deliver timely and accurate verifications, reinforcing journalistic authority in the digital age. Partnerships with tech platforms were viewed as a strategic opportunity, a sustainable digital-age revenue stream at the time, enabling the creation of dedicated fact-checking units to combat disinformation. Nonetheless, these agencies prioritize verifying content from ordinary social media users over domestic political claims stated by public figures, with 90% to 100% of their articles focusing on online rumors, except for dpa. Key selection criteria include virality, particularly on Meta platforms, timeliness, and social impact. Despite criticisms, the collaboration between historically influential global news agencies and tech platforms offers critical insights into the workings of (dysfunctional) hybrid media systems.

Keywords

disinformation; external fact-checking; fact-checking; gatebouncers; global news agencies; hybrid media systems; information disorder; journalism

1. Introduction

Much has changed since Chadwick's (2013) seminal work on hybrid media systems, which highlighted the interplay between traditional and digital media logics in newsmaking, political communication, and activism.

Initial optimism about the democratization of public communication through digital infrastructures—enabled by broader citizen participation unattainable in the mass media era—was quickly overshadowed by what Chadwick later termed “dysfunctional hybridity” (Chadwick, 2017; Russell, 2020). Hybridity has also empowered regressive social movements, including white supremacists, racists, misogynists, and other forms of conservative backlash (della Porta, 2023). In response, the second edition of Chadwick’s (2017) book includes a chapter on Trump’s 2016 campaign strategies and the intensification of hybrid media systems, where disinformation, social media bots, and politically motivated hacking take center stage. Against this backdrop, Chadwick (2017) highlights the rise of fact-checking units (Graves, 2016, 2022) as a key feature of hybrid journalism. Unlike traditional fact-checking, where journalists verify information before publication, external fact-checking assesses content already public (Graves, 2022). Nonetheless, familiarity and acceptance of fact-checking practices vary. In the US, for instance, Republicans have significantly more negative perceptions of fact-checkers (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). In Europe, studies have found broad acceptance across six member states despite political and geographical differences shaped by conservatism, attitudes toward the EU, and satisfaction with democracy (Lyons et al., 2020). Further analysis indicates that a fact-checking source’s credibility influences its effectiveness (Liu et al., 2023).

In the US, Graves (2016) interprets fact-checking as a journalistic reform aimed at challenging procedural objectivity (Schudson, 2001) and the uncritical “he said/she said” style of reporting. Over time, however, fact-checking practices have evolved. With the rise of dysfunctional hybridity (Chadwick, 2017), information disorder (Wardle, 2020), and disrupted public spheres (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018), fact-checkers are increasingly focusing on debunking social media rumors rather than addressing official claims from public figures and politicians (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Cazzamatta, 2025d). This shift, partly spurred by collaborations with digital platforms to counteract disinformation, has been termed the “debunking turn” by leading scholars in the field (Graves et al., 2023). Within this intensified hybrid media landscape, the number of fact-checking initiatives has expanded significantly, increasing from 11 projects in 2008 to 424 by 2022 (Stencel et al., 2023).

This article explores how reputable international news agencies, embodying traditional media values of accuracy, authority, and influence, have incorporated fact-checking units into their operations. Fact-checking has become appealing to financially constrained news outlets—a challenge that global news agencies face due to digitalization (Cazzamatta, 2022; Rantanen et al., 2019)—because it can be assembled quickly and at low cost, often utilizing fragments of online data such as social media posts or government charts (Chadwick, 2017). Despite the growing number of studies on fact-checking, systematic analyses of practices by global news agencies remain relatively rare. The international news agencies selected for this study are generally seen as credible sources, which influences the reception of fact-checking efforts, and they operate across European countries with differing levels of endorsement for fact-checking practices (Liu et al., 2023; Lyons et al., 2020).

Through quantitative content analysis ($N = 860$), this article examines the differences in verification practices among the fact-checking units of European international news agencies—Reuters, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa), EFE, and Agence France-Presse (AFP). It examines the topics chosen for debunking, the types of falsehoods addressed, verdicts, selection criteria, and the actors under scrutiny. Additionally, we complement our findings with seven expert interviews to explore the motivations behind news agencies investing in this new journalistic subgenre. International news agencies, particularly those based in the US

and the UK, have garnered significant scholarly attention. Even within the Western context, research has primarily concentrated on a limited number of agencies, such as Reuters and The Associated Press (Rantanen et al., 2019; Surm, 2020). By including the German dpa and Spanish EFE alongside the extensively studied British Reuters, we extend the analysis beyond liberal systems. We also incorporate the French AFP's work in Latin America—specifically Brazil, Argentina, and Chile—broadening the focus beyond Western democracies.

Before detailing the methodological procedures and findings, this manuscript examines the emergence and evolution of fact-checking journalism and the financial challenges faced by global news agencies due to the internet and their involvement in this new journalistic subgenre. This article builds on the concept of hybrid media systems, contributing to the study of fact-checking, news agencies, and platforms.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. *Fact-Checkers as Gatebouncers Amidst Disrupted Public Spheres*

With the rise of the internet and the networked public sphere, political actors and interest groups are increasingly circumventing traditional gatekeepers to communicate directly with their target audiences. Since anyone can now publish content online, some scholars argue that gatekeeping has become irrelevant (Bruns, 2003; Vos, 2019). Electoral campaign teams no longer assume they can reach a mass audience through a single channel. Instead, political actors produce content for multiple segments and distribute it across various platforms (Chadwick et al., 2017). Social media act as “irresponsible” mediators in the global network, fostering new connections and, through the rapid multiplication of interactions, initiating and amplifying unpredictable discourses that fundamentally alter public communication (Habermas, 2021).

In light of such a disintermediated media landscape, new forms of journalistic mediation (Neuberger, 2022), such as external fact-checking, are emerging. While traditional internal fact-checking—dating back to the 1920s and 1930s—has emphasized the importance of reporters correcting mistakes and verifying details before publication according to objectivity standards, external fact-checking operates differently. It evaluates the accuracy of third-party information already released to the public (Graves, 2022; Rodríguez-Pérez & Seibt, 2022). Instead of traditional journalistic gatekeeping, these actors function as “gatebouncers” (Vos, 2019), a term describing the retroactive selection process in which fact-checkers highlight specific pieces of information as illegitimate and symbolically remove them from public debate (Vos, 2019). Fact-checkers, acting as gatebouncers, have grown significantly, particularly since 2016, focusing on mitigating the effects of global disinformation. At this point, we analyze which topics and types of (false) information—such as manipulation, fabrication, impersonation, misleading content, and, eventually, accurate content (Wardle, 2020)—are selected for verification by fact-checkers within international news agencies.

Fact-checkers align their practices with established journalistic news values, albeit with certain adaptations. However, before engaging with specific news factors, two key selection criteria must be fulfilled: checkability and virality (Graves, 2016; Mantas & Benkelman, 2020). First, a claim or rumor must be verifiable, meaning it cannot be based on opinion, and publicly accessible data must be available. Fact-checkers rely on public data and expert analysis for evaluations; in the absence of such resources, verification is not viable (Graves & Wells, 2019). Second, fact-checkers prioritize claims that have gained notable traction in public discourse (virality)

or that demonstrate potential for significant societal impact. This approach reduces the risk of inadvertently spreading falsehoods through correction, as fact-checkers focus on verifying content that has already gone viral. Unlike traditional journalism, fact-checkers are not concerned with originality or being scooped by other organizations. The more a falsehood is corrected, the better (Graves, 2016).

Relevance is a decisive factor. Fact-checkers closely monitor trending topics in the media to remain timely and pertinent. Statements made by politicians are particularly noteworthy due to their significant impact on public debate. The same logic applies when prominent figures are targeted by disinformation campaigns. The prominence of the source or target of falsehoods—similar to journalism—can influence the selection of verifications. Generally, fact-checkers prioritize relevant policy issues, statements regarding political candidates, or claims that have sparked public controversy (Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Palau-Sampio, 2018; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022). Most fact-checking projects provide channels for reader inquiries and verification suggestions, incorporating what ordinary citizens care about and what their audiences deem important. Therefore, we are interested in the clear communication of these news factors within their verification articles (Humprecht, 2019).

By providing truth assessments and evaluating the weight of evidence, fact-checkers move away from Schudson's (2001) concept of "procedural objectivity"—which involves neutral and almost uncritical "he said/she said" reporting—toward a more rigorous form of scientific objectivity (Cazzamatta, 2025b; Lawrence & Schafer, 2012). This approach draws upon expert insights, relevant documentation, empirical evidence, and advanced technological tools (Graves, 2016). Consequently, the fact-checking process requires methodological transparency and the ability to replicate findings, both essential for building trust and establishing credibility (Brandtzaeg & Følstad, 2017). In light of this discussion, we present the following questions:

RQ1: Which topics and types of falsehoods are most commonly selected for verification by international news agencies?

RQ2: Which selection criteria are conveyed in the articles?

2.2. Platforms Partnerships and Social Media Policing

Organizational structures and objectives within the fact-checking community are varied, encompassing established news organizations, digital-native startups, independent civil society NGOs, university initiatives, and collaborative efforts (Graves, 2018; Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Newsroom entities—such as global news agencies—benefit from the ability to reach a broad audience and receive substantial financial backing from their media affiliations. In contrast, NGO models typically enjoy greater editorial independence. Generally, newsroom models view fact-checking as a practice that complements and is closely associated with journalism, whereas NGO models may perceive it as an alternative to traditional journalism (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022).

Recently, partnerships with technology platforms have significantly influenced the field of fact-checking, regardless of organizational structure, leading to a transformation in verification practices. A prominent example of such cooperation is Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, which collaborates with

fact-checkers accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Signatories commit to the principles of non-partisanship and fairness, to transparency regarding funding, sources, and methodology, and to establishing a clear and honest correction policy (Orsek & Ozsoy, 2020). The Meta program has grown substantially, currently encompassing over 110 organizations worldwide. Meta identifies potential misinformation by analyzing user feedback and factors such as virality and linguistic patterns, generating a pool of claims that may be false (IFCN, 2025). Fact-checkers then examine these claims, selecting those that can be verified—meaning they are based on factual statements rather than personal opinions—and have the potential to cause harm. The verification process follows rigorous standards of scientific reproducibility, requiring fact-checkers to back their conclusions with documentary evidence, interviews, and forensic analysis, allowing readers to either replicate the findings or critically assess the methodology (Cazzamatta, 2025a, 2025b). Once content is deemed inaccurate, Meta typically reduces its visibility.

Such collaborations with platforms have diminished the scrutiny of politicians' statements while emphasizing the monitoring of online rumors from anonymous sources and potentially misleading coordinated actions associated with these accounts (Graves et al., 2023). Fact-checking has become vital for content moderation on social media platforms (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022). Research shows that funding from these platforms is crucial for organizations in the Global South, with smaller units increasingly reliant on these partnerships (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023). Other studies suggest that smaller organizations are more susceptible to content homogenization (Cazzamatta, 2025d).

Fact-checkers often welcome partnerships with platforms for the valuable AI tools and funding they provide. However, they raise concerns about the platform's approach, particularly regarding the veto on verifying political advertisements and the focus solely on user-spread falsehoods (Full Fact, 2020). While interpretations of the "debunking turn" vary among organizations, some suggest that paid debunking practices could subsidize political fact-checking (Graves et al., 2023). Despite criticisms, these partnerships offer essential funding and automated tools that enhance the fact-checking process. In this context, we present our next research question:

RQ3: Which actors are most frequently scrutinized by fact-checkers in global news agencies' articles, and what verdicts are assigned to them?

2.3. Global News Agencies in a Changing Media Landscape and Their Involvement in the Fact-Checking Movement

European national news agencies have historically served as key media organizations, providing essential wire services to domestic outlets. As established players, they have adapted to technological changes from the telegraph to the platform era. However, in a globalized world where national media can access information directly via the internet, the indispensability of these agencies has come into question (Rantanen et al., 2019). Consequently, the value of their wholesale general news support—a core service—has diminished (Bielsa, 2008; Boyd-Barrett, 2010; Rantanen et al., 2019). "The crisis of traditional media organizations became, for several reasons, a crisis of news agencies" (Rantanen et al., 2019, p. 8), as these institutions are currently navigating significant changes as their media clients face financial distress and audiences access news without traditional gatekeeper mediation in a hybrid media system.

Despite dysfunctional hybridity (Chadwick, 2017), agencies do not view social media platforms as their main competitors. Instead, social media logics legitimize the significance of their journalistic work. With a reputation for high standards of accuracy (Rantanen et al., 2019), international news agencies position their services as a counter to information disorder (Wardle, 2020), which includes fake news (imitations of established outlets), misinformation, and disinformation (the unintentional and intentional spread of falsehoods). The latest comprehensive study on the future of global news agencies, conducted by the London School of Economics in 2019 (Rantanen et al., 2019; Surm, 2020; Vyslozil & Surm, 2019), indicates that these agencies are innovating to compensate for declining media client subscriptions. Key strategies include designing new services like visual productions, expanding into new markets and languages—particularly in Asia and Latin America—and implementing IT strategies, including new sales channels.

dpa, a privately owned agency formed by a consortium of 170 German media outlets (Surm, 2020), began publishing fact-checks during the 2013 Bundestag elections and has since expanded its efforts in this area. Currently, it has a team of 30 fact-checkers, making it one of the largest in the German-speaking world (dpa, n.d.-a). In 2019, dpa partnered with Meta to verify content on its platforms in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Through the Faktencheck21 project, dpa has trained over 70 daily newspapers, radio, and television stations in digital forensics and verification practices (Thiel, 2023).

AFP, an independent publicly owned French organization (Surm, 2020; Vyslozil & Surm, 2019), began its fact-checking efforts in early 2017 with the CrossCheck project during the French presidential elections. The agency launched its fact-checking website in French later that year, expanding to English, Spanish, and Portuguese by 2018. Six years later, AFP offers fact-checking in 26 languages, supported by a team of 150 journalists (AFP Fact Check, n.d.-a). Two-thirds are local reporters from over 30 AFP bureaus globally, while one-third are editors. AFP also collaborates with Meta and is contracted by TikTok in various countries to verify videos for the platform's internal moderation, removing content deemed inaccurate by its fact-checkers (Bigot, 2024).

EFE, a Spanish state-owned commercial entity (Surm, 2020; Vyslozil & Surm, 2019), started producing fact-checks in Spain in March 2019 and expanded to Latin America in 2020. Its fact-checking team now includes nine professionals: five in Spain, one in Brussels, and three in Latin America. In May 2020, EFE began verifying content for Meta (da Fontoura, 2024; EFE Verifica, n.d.-a). Reuters Fact Check, part of Thomson Reuters Corporation, and recognized as a primary competitor to dpa, AFP, and EFE (Surm, 2020; Vyslozil & Surm, 2019), launched its fact-checking operations in January 2020. Before this, Reuters routinely fact-checked claims as part of its newsgathering. The establishment of its fact-checking desk was a natural extension of its user-generated content verification team, which authenticates social media content (Batra, 2024). The team consists of 32 members, including a head of fact-checking, regional editors, and producers (Reuters, n.d.-a). As noted by the IFCN assessor, Reuters primarily targets claims circulating on digital platforms (Batra, 2024). All European international agencies, excluding Reuters, are members of the European Fact-Checking Standard Network (EFCSN) and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). In light of the evolving media landscape and the expanding fact-checking efforts of these agencies, we pose the final question:

RQ4: What are the key motivations for European international news agencies to invest in fact-checking units?

3. Methodology

Our selection of organizations was guided by two primary criteria. First, we focused on identifying international agencies involved in fact-checking initiatives, which are the central focus of this study. By “international agencies,” we mean organizations that provide news services domestically and internationally in multiple languages, with correspondent networks in at least 100 countries, serving around 10,000 media clients worldwide (Rantanen et al., 2019; Surm, 2020). Second, we faced language constraints within the research group. Despite these limitations, we aimed to include a diverse range of international news agencies with different media systems and ownership structures, including Reuters, dpa, AFP, and EFE, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected fact-checking units operating within international news agencies.

News Agency	Country of Origin	Ownership	Fact-Checking Team	Meta	IFCN	EFCSN	EDMO
Reuters	UK	Thomson Reuters	32	Yes	Yes	No	No
AFP	France	Publicly owned	150	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
dpa	Germany	Privately owned by media stakeholders	30	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
EFE	Spain	State-owned	9	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

3.1. Data Collection, Sampling, and Reliability

Using the Feeder extension, we collected data from the fact-checking websites of the news agencies from January to December 2022, yielding a total of 3,500 links. While misinformation related to Covid-19 continued, other significant topics emerged in 2022, such as the regional elections in Germany and Spain, political turmoil in the UK, characterized by frequent changes in prime ministers, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the death of Queen Elizabeth, and the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, which notably influenced the misinformation landscape. For Reuters (n.d.-b), EFE Verifica (n.d.-b), and dpa (n.d.-b), we selected links from their main fact-checking websites in their respective original languages. For AFP, we gathered links from its services in Brazil (AFP Checamos, n.d.), Argentina (AFP Factual, n.d.), and Chile (AFP Fact Check, n.d.-b), specifically from AFP Checamos, AFP Factual, and AFP Fact Check Chile. Although Reuters and EFE publish content in their own languages, dpa occasionally includes Dutch articles, so we filtered the data to retain only German-language publications. We then drew a sample of 25% by selecting every fourth article in the order of publication, resulting in a total of 860 articles for manual coding.

Eight research assistants, all native speakers with extensive knowledge of the countries where these news agencies operate, coded the data over six months after having completed 40 hours of training. Reliability tests were conducted within language groups—German, English, Portuguese, and Spanish—to ensure that any misunderstandings identified during the tests were due to flaws in category definitions rather than the language proficiency of the coders. We also aimed to train the coders using materials from the agencies and languages they would be working with. Krippendorff’s alpha coefficients are provided in Table 2, accompanied by a brief explanation of the analyzed categories. For more detailed instructions and nuances, please refer to the codebook in the Supplementary Material.

Table 2. Summary of operationalized categories.

Targeted RQs	Overarching Categories	Description	Krippendorff's alpha
RQ1	Topics	(1) Domestic politics; (2) Economic-political; (3) Society, cultural wars, and zeitgeist; (4) Science, technology, and environment; (5) Health; (6) International affairs; (7) Human interest (single choice)	0.93–0.97
RQ1	Type of Falsehoods*	(1) Satires; (2) All types of fabrication, including fabrication, manipulation, imposter, and decontextualization, (3) Sensationalism & bad journalism, (4) Misleading & cherry-picking, (5) Fabrication + conspiracy theories (6) Fabrication + hate speech, (7) Genuine mistakes, (8) Online scams (single choice)	0.97–1
RQ2	Selection Criteria	(1) Social media viralization; (2) Prominence of disinformation sources; (3) Prominence of disinformation targets; (4) User requests; (5) Timely media events; (6) Social relevance and public impact (yes/no choice for each subcategory)	0.80–0.97
RQ3	Target of Fact-Checking	(1) Verification of falsehoods circulating on social networks mostly spread by bots, anonymous sources, and unknown social media users/profiles; or (2) inspection of claims made by political actors and public figures (single choice)	0.801
RQ1–RQ3	Corresponding Verdicts	(1) True; (2) Partially true; (3) Partially false; (4) False; (5) No evidence; (6) Satire & jokes; (7) Mixed; (8) No labels or scales, only narrative verdicts	0.78–0.97

Source: * Adapted from Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), House of Commons (2018), Humprecht (2018), and Wardle (2020).

3.2. Expert Interviews as a Complementary Method

To address RQ4, which explores the reasons why news agencies choose to invest in (external) fact-checking practices, we conducted seven expert interviews with fact-checkers from these agencies. These conversations also provided insights into our content analysis results. Among the interviewees, four hold editorial roles. The online interviews were conducted via Webex from August 2024 to January 2025, lasting between 35 and 100 minutes. With the interviewees' consent, all conversations were recorded and subsequently anonymized. To protect their identities, which could be inferred from context or countries of operation, we did not upload the transcriptions to the Supplementary Material in compliance with the general data protection regulation. The interviews were conducted in the preferred language of each participant. Given the difficulty of obtaining a representative sample from all organizations, regional bureaus, and hierarchies, we view these interviews as a complementary method for exploratory qualitative insights.

Experts possess specialized knowledge that combines technical, process-related, and interpretive skills pertinent to their field, integrating various approaches and broader social perspectives (Bogner, 2002). In the context of this study on fact-checking within global news agencies, expert interviews serve as a method to access this specialized knowledge (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). Meuser and Nagel (2002) differentiate expert interviews from other open interviews by emphasizing that the focus is not on the individual interviewee but on the specific organizational or institutional context. Consequently, only certain aspects of

personal experience are deemed significant, with priority given to the shared organizational knowledge of the experts.

3.3. Qualitative and Quantitative Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed for qualitative textual analysis, supported by comparative methods using NVivo software for data management. While the assessment focused on RQ4 and key theoretical concepts from the literature review, the analysis remained flexible, allowing for inductive insights to emerge from the data through a hierarchical coding framework (Tracy, 2013). To investigate quantitative trends across international news agencies regarding topics and types of falsehoods selected for verification, we employed correspondence analysis, a statistical method designed to explore relationships between categorical variables. Correspondence analysis effectively analyzes large contingency tables by reducing data to a lower-dimensional space, facilitating the visualization of patterns and key associations, thereby aiding in the interpretation of complex datasets. The approach illustrates point placement on a scatter plot, where proximity indicates stronger associations (Beh & Lombardo, 2014; Greenacre, 2017).

4. Findings

4.1. Verified Topics and Types of Falsehoods (RQ1)

When analyzing the topics of misinformation selected for debunking by news agencies, a distinct thematic distribution emerges. Reuters and EFE verify international affairs more frequently than expected, with standard residuals of 2.9 and 2, respectively, positioning them in the upper-left quadrant of the correspondence analysis (Figure 1). Additionally, Reuters focuses significantly on societal and zeitgeist topics—such as gender, religion, social polarization, animal protection, and social media—as well as health misinformation, with standard residuals of 2.3 and 1.6, respectively. In contrast, dpa emphasizes human interest topics, particularly online scams and phishing, with a notable standard residual of 3.3.

All three agencies—Reuters ($SR = -6.8$), dpa ($SR = -0.2$), and EFE ($SR = -1.6$)—exhibit a lower-than-expected focus on domestic politics, whereas dpa verifies domestic political issues more frequently than its counterparts. Moreover, dpa's relatively higher focus on verifying political statements is also reflected in its attributed labels. While other agencies primarily label verified statements as “false” or “partially false”—ranging from 89.7% of Reuters' articles to 100% in AFP Chile—dpa labels only 54.6% of its verifications as such. Due to its focus on political issues and the more frequent scrutiny of public figures (see Section 4.3), dpa also issues a higher number of narrative corrections without labels (30%) and indeterminate verdicts (13.7%). These results can be interpreted in two ways. First, an international focus is expected for global news agencies such as Reuters and AFP, and the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022 likely prompted platforms to circulate falsehoods. Second, issuing political verdicts on the accuracy of (domestic) political claims may conflict with their traditional operationalization of objectivity—detached, neutral, and impartial—since providing such labels can be perceived as editorializing (Graves, 2016). Thus, dpa adopts a more careful approach due to its relatively higher focus on domestic politics, offering a comparatively higher number of corrections through narrative explanations (see Table 4 of the Supplementary Material). This challenge is also faced by public service broadcasters, who tend to avoid accuracy labels, opting instead for narrative explanations of why a particular piece of information is incorrect (Graves, 2018). Notably, Reuters

verified only 1.3% of domestic political misinformation during a year characterized by political turmoil in the UK, including rapid leadership changes and party divisions, particularly within the Conservative Party. It seems implausible that the internet and social media did not react with misinformation regarding the resignations of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, as well as the appointment of Rishi Sunak.

Although dpa's focus on domestic politics is limited (16.4%), it surpasses those of the other agencies. In 2022, regional elections occurred in Germany, notably in North Rhine-Westphalia, the most populous state, and in Saarland, where the Social Democratic Party secured a significant victory after the Christian Democratic Union had governed since 1999. However, these elections lacked the crisis atmosphere characteristic of the UK's frequent prime ministerial changes. dpa's ownership structure, with 70 media outlet stakeholders across various platforms, strengthens its ability to verify domestic political events effectively.

AFP differs from other agencies due to its regional bureaux with dedicated websites. AFP Checamos in Brazil and AFP Fact Check in Chile exhibit a strong focus on domestic politics ($SR = 8.8$ and $SR = 3.5$), driven by the

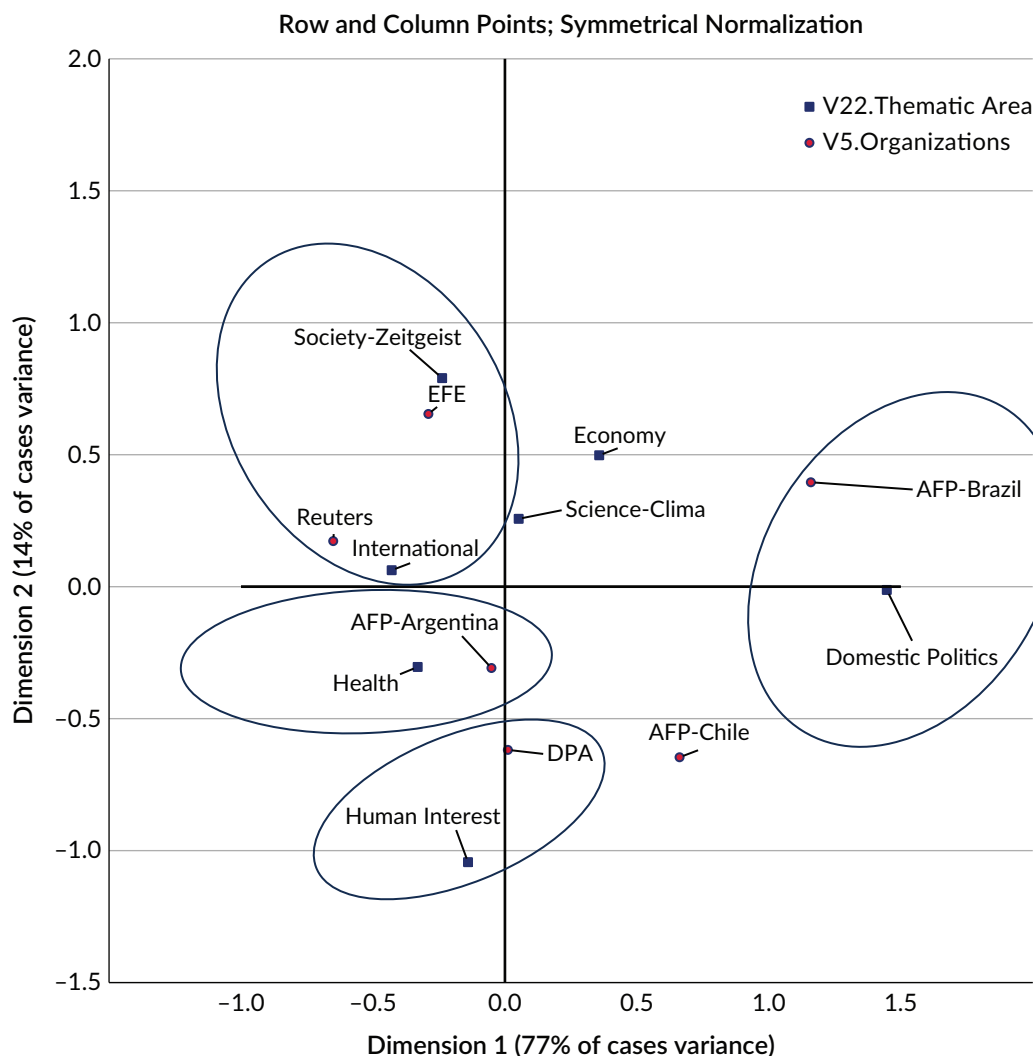


Figure 1. Correspondence analysis of debunked topics and news agencies. Note: See the Supplementary Material for the contingency table on which this illustration is based.

highly polarized Brazilian presidential election in 2022 and a constitutional referendum proposed by Chile's leftist government. The extensive network of fact-checkers in regional offices may have influenced these results. However, it remains unclear how thoroughly the central office in Paris verifies French domestic politics. In Argentina, AFP Factual debunks health issues more than expected ($SR = 1.7$), positioning it in a different quadrant than its counterparts in Chile and Brazil, as shown in Figure 1.

In analyzing the types of falsehoods, EFE and AFP hubs in Latin America cluster in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 2. Both agencies verify a higher-than-expected number of aggregated fabrications, including complete inventions, manipulations, decontextualization, and imposter content. In contrast, Reuters focuses on correcting misunderstood satire and sensationalism, which aligns with the UK media system's strong tabloid culture and yellow journalism (Esser, 1999). The German dpa distinguishes itself by verifying fabrications involving conspiracy theories ($SR = 4.4$), hate speech ($SR = 5.4$), and online scams ($SR = 6.9$). This emphasis may reflect the organization's effort to counteract narratives propagated by the Querdenker movement, which combines anti-vaccine sentiments, skepticism towards government policies, and conspiracy theories (Heinke, 2022). Although Germany is a wealthy nation, it faces challenges in

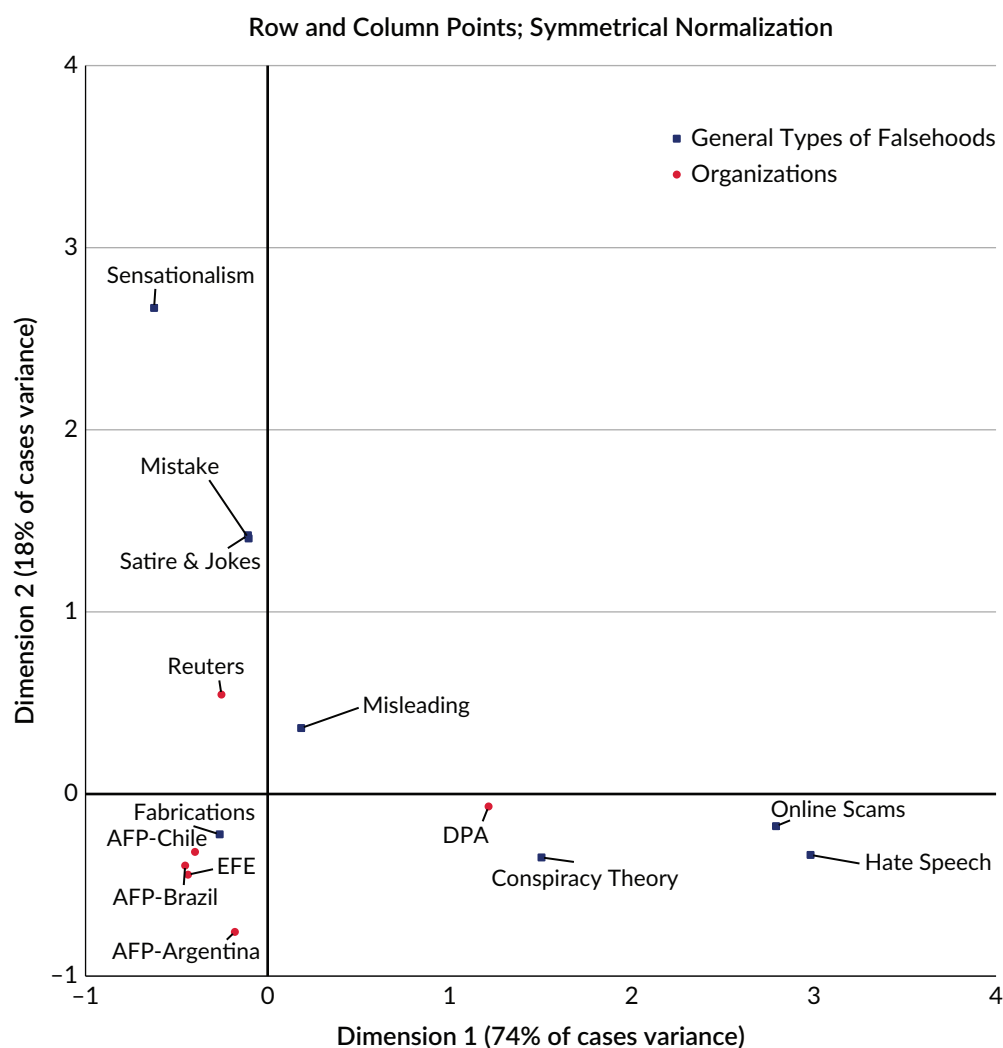


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis of types of falsehoods and international agencies. Note: See the Supplementary Material for the contingency table on which this illustration is based.

digitalization (Delcker, 2021; Płóciennik, 2021), making it more susceptible to exploitation by foreign actors seeking financial gain. If citizens are not well-versed in digital infrastructures—such as e-commerce platforms, cloud storage, social media, e-government services, and remote work tools—they may struggle to recognize online scams and phishing tactics. Alternatively, dpa’s focus may simply reflect concerns about online security, cybercrime, and data protection in the country.

4.2. Indicators of Selection Criteria (RQ2)

To understand news agencies’ selection criteria, we analyzed factors presented in their verification articles. Many organizations enhance transparency by providing evidence of fact-checking along with the reasoning behind their choices. Virality is a key criterion; as one interviewee noted, “If something is not being shared a lot, we would give it more visibility,” suggesting that content previously shared widely might warrant attention. In our content analysis, “viralization” was defined by metrics such as sharing numbers and cross-platform circulation—indicating falsehoods identified on multiple platforms or by cross-border organizations verifying the same claim. Viral content was significant, varying from 82.7% in EFE to 100% in the AFP hubs in Chile and Argentina, while dpa reported these indicators in only 23.5% of its articles (Figure 3). This does not imply that dpa verifies less widely disseminated falsehoods but rather that it communicates dissemination levels less clearly in its editorial process. Some organizations, particularly EFE (9.3%) and AFP hubs indicate whether a rumor was suggested for verification by readers. These mentions are notable in countries with widespread WhatsApp use, where fact-checkers face challenges in monitoring private messaging groups. Conversely, the lack of such mentions in Reuters and dpa articles does not mean they ignore user requests; it simply reflects that they do not disclose whether their verifications are based on user suggestions.

Some interviewees indicated that the prominence of the misinformation source plays a crucial role in the selection process: “If it’s a public figure and the misinformation could potentially influence public opinion, especially if it’s false, we will likely choose to verify the statement.” However, this criterion is not reflected in the content analysis, likely because news agencies primarily focus on social media policing, verifying information from anonymous online sources (see Section 4.3). This factor varied from 5.1% for AFP Chile to

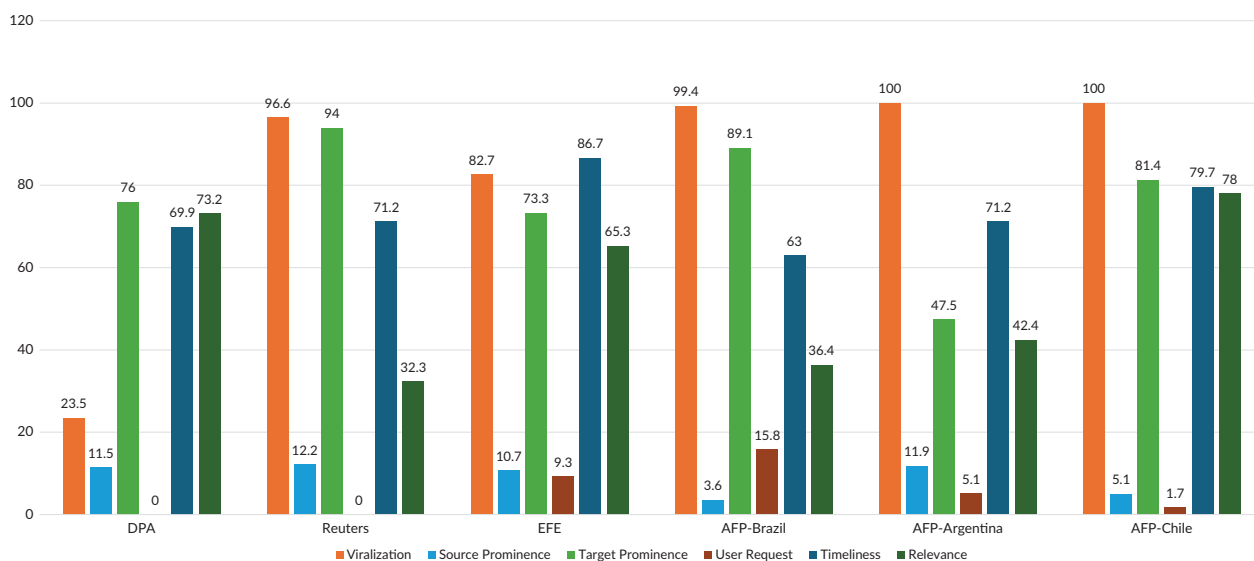


Figure 3. Indicators of selection criteria conveyed in the verification articles (in percentages).

12.2% for Reuters while the prominence of misinformation targets was significant—ranging from 47.5% in AFP Factual to 94% in Reuters (Figure 3). Typically, political actors, established media through impersonation, public figures, and well-known companies are the primary targets of misinformation. The lower percentage for AFP Factual can be attributed to its strong emphasis on health misinformation, where the target is often less clear (e.g., claims that lemon juice prevents Covid-19). Here, “target” refers to individuals, actors, groups, organizations, and institutions implicated in specific problems or actions, rather than the audience being misled.

Timeliness and relevance may initially seem to overlap. We define timeliness as hot media topics in 2022, including claims made in parliamentary speeches, the war in Ukraine, the aftermath of Covid-19, the World Cup, and other major events. As some interviewees noted, statements that are “potentially part of the news cycle” are given priority. One interviewee explained, “If it’s happening right now—current events—it’s something that is going on today, so we prioritize it over other things we were fact-checking earlier that can wait.” While media topics appear relevant, we applied a stricter definition of relevance and social impact in our content analysis, focusing on falsehoods targeting election campaigns and procedures, policymaking, legal debates, harmful health recommendations, wars, and verifications aimed at protecting users from online scams. As explained by the fact-checkers themselves, the priority is given to “matters of public danger, such as those related to health, environmental issues, climate change, or anything that could impact the social agenda.”

Fact-checking units within news agencies are well synchronized with public and media debates, with coverage ranging from 63% (AFP Checamos) to 86.7% (EFE). Relevance significantly influences dpa (73.2%) and AFP Chile (78%), with dpa showing strong verification coverage of domestic politics and online scams, while AFP Chile focuses on issues surrounding the constitutional referendum. The lower social impact of verifications produced by AFP Checamos (36.4%), despite the ongoing presidential race, can be attributed to misinformation in the electoral context that does not necessarily target election procedures or policy discussions. Reuters’ verification of less impactful claims (32.3%) includes false gaffes by international figures and verifications related to Queen Elizabeth’s funeral or socio-historical curiosities.

4.3. Targets of Fact-Checking Scrutiny and Platform Partnerships (RQ3)

As expected, due to the Meta Third-Party Fact-Checking Program launched in 2016, news agencies are prioritizing the verification of social media rumors to a significant extent, ranging from 100% at AFP Chile to 88% at Reuters (Figure 4). Hence, it is unsurprising that most identified problematic information circulating on social media was labeled as “false” or “partially false”—Reuters (89.7%), AFP Brazil (90.9%), AFP Chile (94.9%), EFE (98.2%), and AFP Argentina (100%). As discussed in Section 4.1, this percentage is significantly lower for dpa (54.6%), largely due to its comparatively greater focus on complex political verifications. Notably, apart from dpa, which initiated some form of fact-checking as early as 2013, most news agencies embraced this genre following the onset of Meta collaborations. The lower percentage at Reuters does not necessarily indicate a higher focus on public figure statements but rather indicates an editorial orientation towards the verification of misunderstood jokes circulating in satire outlets or problematic content in tabloids. While the trend of social media policing is widespread across various organizations worldwide (Cazzamatta, 2025d; Vinhas & Bastos, 2023), it appears particularly pronounced within global news agencies, which seem to be focused primarily on sanitizing online platforms.



Figure 4. Percentage of online rumor scrutiny compared to the verification of public figure statements (in percentages).

The literature (Full Fact, 2020) and our interviews indicate that Meta prohibits fact-checkers from tagging content spread by politicians directly. While they may address such content on their blogs, these posts are not recognized as verifications by Meta, as explained by an interviewee:

We don't engage with anything related to candidates. That is a restriction we have. However, we can check ads about political topics, as long as they are not made by the candidate or a politician. If it's any random person talking about politics and promoting a business, we can verify that.

In response, fact-checkers have developed alternative strategies, such as identifying non-political users who amplify the same falsehoods spread by politicians, which explains our content analysis results. Rather than viewing the approach as self-censorship, fact-checkers see it as a way to counter misinformation while adhering to Meta's partnership requirements, enabling them to accumulate their "points" within the collaboration framework. Additionally, due to confidentiality agreements with Meta, details on financial compensation are limited; some organizations report a fixed monthly cap, while others are unaware of any limitations.

Some fact-checkers acknowledge the emphasis on social media policy but also stress the importance of this work, noting that "what's going on within social media impacts the real world. Social media is also the real world...and affects other people." Social media policing typically requires less time than political fact-checking, and agencies find it manageable: "False videos, photos, or anything that has been manipulated needs to be addressed too" (interviewees). Another interviewee points out the significance of verifying trending topics. However, an important issue raised is that falsehoods must appear on Facebook or other Meta platforms,

which is problematic since some falsehoods go viral on alternative networks but do not count toward the program. This highlights the close scrutiny of Facebook.

When examining where falsehoods selected for verification circulate, Facebook emerges at the top, with figures ranging from 32% at AFP Checamos to 64.8% at dpa, followed by X (formerly Twitter), which ranges from 8.8% at dpa to 40% at Reuters (see Supplementary Material). Facebook's prominence is due to its collaboration with fact-checkers and monitoring tools. Prior to Elon Musk's ownership, X was also widely used for its accessibility and ease of research, with some agencies having partnerships with the platform. As one interviewee noted, "They told us what to debunk, but we also had the freedom to suggest." However, Musk terminated fact-checking services with some agencies. Currently, an interviewee remarked, "X is particularly bad in terms of information quality, especially since Elon Musk took over. The number of hoaxes and dangerous content has increased significantly."

Instagram plays a notable role for AFP Checamos (7.7%) and Reuters (14.7%). Surprisingly, news agencies do not monitor WhatsApp, despite its significant role as a disinformation channel, particularly in Latin America. TikTok is monitored more closely by EFE (10.3%), AFP Checamos (9.1%), and, to a lesser extent, AFP Factual (4.3%), likely due to established partnerships with the platform. Unlike Meta, where fact-checkers seek out falsehoods, TikTok sends videos that require verification (interviewee). This has been an important revenue source, but interviewees report a considerable reduction in the number of videos sent for verification. In contrast, YouTube is scrutinized less, with monitoring rates from 0.8% at Reuters to 3.1% at dpa. While a detailed discussion of the advantages and pitfalls of the Meta partnership is beyond the scope of this article, three interviewees noted that at least "Meta is taking action." They emphasized that other platforms, such as YouTube, which are challenging to monitor and verify, should also implement similar measures. As of writing, Zuckerberg has announced the termination of the discussed fact-checking program following Trump's reelection. The impact of this decision on the fact-checking landscape remains uncertain.

4.4. Motivations for News Agencies Involvement in Fact-Checking (RQ4)

Some motivations emphasized by our interviewees are closely intertwined with the core values and operational structures of international agencies. A primary motivation is to leverage extensive global expertise, which enhances their ability to verify information quickly and accurately. In addition to sustaining revenue streams through platform partnerships, they also highlight the importance of combating disinformation, creating a dual benefit of public service and financial viability.

4.4.1. Journalistic DNA and Global Informational Structures

Most of our interviewees view the involvement of international news agencies in fact-checking initiatives as a natural progression, as it aligns with their "journalistic DNA." These agencies have a strong reputation for accuracy and impartiality and benefit from a global network of multilingual professionals and reliable sources, enabling them to verify information quickly and precisely:

A big advantage of [our agency] in taking these contracts was that [our company] already has a huge network of journalists all over the world. So, for platforms, it was easy to find...reliable professionals who have it in their DNA to verify information before providing it.

Well, I think in [our case], it's a win-win decision because fact-checking is a very important public service. The fight against misinformation is something beneficial for the whole society....We don't have an editorial opinion or an editorial line. All our work is based on facts and data. It's very natural that [the agency] has a fact-checking service because this is something very current and consistent with [our] mission...as a whole.

In addition to accuracy and credibility, the extensive global information structures were emphasized. When a fact-checker lacks a source, they can connect with other departments worldwide to obtain contacts, allowing them to verify information reliably.

We benefit from the collaboration of our offices across the world. Sometimes we need to ask questions to the German police, Austrian prosecutors, or investigate something that happened in China, Beijing, or Latin America. Then we can contact our colleagues in those offices to ask if they can inquire with the police or relevant authorities to continue the research we started here.

4.4.2. Strategic Opportunities and Commercial Advantages

While emphasizing the journalistic essence of fact-checking, agencies also acknowledge its commercial potential. One interviewee remarked: "It's an important source of revenue. If you maintain your independence and seek new clients, why not target big platforms?" As journalism faces a business model crisis due to the internet, media companies have explored various strategies to regain lost funding. Even state-owned agencies, traditionally reliant on public funding, have seen a decline in media clients due to the diminished value of their general news services. "There are new ways to recover the money lost in the new world initiated by the Internet. Fact-checking is a profitable product, and it's very journalistic," another interviewee noted. Overall, agencies emphasize two main aspects: providing a public service and generating new revenue primarily through platform partnerships. "Because [we are] very clear, precise, and maintain this journalistic rigor, it benefits fact-checking, and fact-checking benefits [us] too," concluded an interviewee. Another interviewee highlighted the advantage that media companies like Reuters, AFP, dpa, and EFE have in global negotiations, thanks to their worldwide presence and multilingual journalists. This sets them apart from regional outlets, further enhancing their leverage:

I think a Reuters, an AFP, or any other global company can negotiate and come to the table with Meta or TikTok and say, "Look, I can offer this in [these many languages]...for X countries." I imagine that this also benefits the agencies when it comes to closing these deals. It's an agency engaged in commercial activity, right? There's nothing wrong with that. It's no mystery to anyone.

In relation to the platforms, an interviewee noted that, for better or worse, partnerships with platforms "create a minimally sustainable model for fact-checking activities." While these organizations remain "still very dependent on them," they argued that such a model is crucial for conducting these activities. These partnerships allow organizations to establish dedicated fact-checking units and closely monitor how disinformation spreads and which actors are involved, facilitating the analysis of its implications for journalism and society. Without platform partnerships, "a journalistic company would have to pay out of its own pocket to fund this activity," the interviewee added.

4.4.3. Free Dissemination of Fact-Checks

Fact-checks are typically available for free on the agencies' websites, setting them apart from other operations that involve selling texts, videos, infographics, and photographs. The collaboration with Meta—encompassing Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp—requires that fact-checks be published without a paywall. While clients, primarily platforms like Yahoo and MSN, can publish these fact-checks, they are not sold in the traditional sense. As one interviewee stated, "Fact-checks worldwide are free....We generate income from fact-checking through Meta, TikTok, and Kwai. We do not commercialize it."

Some agencies state that they can explore agreements with subscribers and publish fact-checks in various sections of their outlets (national, international, and sports), as long as this aligns with the IFCN/EFCSN fact-checking methodology required by their partnership with Meta: "There are no restrictions for us to use this material that we already produce for Meta [free available on their websites]. This content is ours. Therefore, we can utilize it in the way we believe is best." Consequently, the agencies aim to leverage this content and sell it to companies interested in republishing it, ensuring compliance with IFCN guidelines.

4.4.4. Reinforcing Journalistic Authority in the Age of Disinformation

In addition to business opportunities and the agencies' commitment to global and rapid fact-checking, interviewees emphasize a vital reason for engaging in these enterprises: the societal mission to combat disinformation and uphold journalistic values. They stress the importance of linking verification efforts to information on Facebook, Instagram, or Threads to limit the reach of falsehoods on these platforms. Some believe that, while their work is "very journalistic and closely related to traditional journalism," it also demands dedicated specialization to effectively tackle online falsehoods. This specialization enables them to respond better. As one interviewee noted, there is a "need to have a team that works specifically on this—actively searching for misinformation on social networks and responding with factual information." The expectation is that people will develop better skills in recognizing falsehoods online.

Some interviews also emphasize the importance of preserving journalistic values. There is a perception that "if we don't do this work, no one else will." If journalism companies do not take on this responsibility and leave it to technology companies, the outcome is unlikely to be favorable: "We do, in theory, have the expertise to perform this work. If we don't engage in this effort, and the entire informational environment is dominated by disinformation, our work loses its value as well." From this perspective, journalism plays a critical role in distinguishing between fact and falsehood: "We need to demonstrate that we are the ones who can do this; it's journalism, it's the companies operating in this area." In summary, another motivation is to validate journalistic work.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines the role of European international news agencies—Reuters, AFP, dpa, and EFE—in the evolving subgenre of external fact-checking journalism, a hallmark of hybrid journalistic practices (Chadwick et al., 2017). It employs content analysis of their verification articles ($n = 860$) and expert interviews ($n = 7$) to explore their motivations. The collaboration of these prestigious global news agencies, historically pillars of journalism in the mass media era, with tech companies to combat online misinformation exemplifies the

dynamics of (dysfunctional) hybrid media systems (Chadwick et al., 2017). In the traditional gatekeeping era, falsehoods were simply discarded and did not feature in news coverage. However, diminished journalistic gatekeeping—despite its democratic potential—has empowered regressive movements and actors, resulting in an ecosystem polluted with false information that journalism must confront. At first, news agencies adapted to the internet's impact on news reporting by striving to be the first to release news while maintaining high journalistic standards. Now, they also incorporate fact-checking practices to distinguish facts from falsehoods.

Initially, the fact-checking movement was viewed as a reform against the “he said/she said” style of journalism, where reporters were expected to assess the veracity of statements rather than leaving it to the audience (Amazeen, 2020; Graves, 2016, p. 20). However, this adjudicative process can be seen as editorializing, conflicting with the orthodox notion of journalistic objectivity (Cazzamatta, 2025b), which emphasizes neutrality and impartiality (Maras, 2013). Consequently, it is not surprising that news agencies became involved in fact-checking later, as the movement shifted toward verifying online rumors on social platforms, mostly spread by anonymous sources (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Graves et al., 2023). Our content analysis indicates that 90% to 100% of verification articles produced by news agencies target online rumors rather than statements by public figures (RQ3)—a significantly higher percentage compared to some independent organizations (Cazzamatta, 2025d), although independent units are also increasingly monitoring social media. Meta restricts fact-checkers from directly labeling content shared by politicians. Although fact-checkers can discuss this content on their blogs, such posts are not financially supported by Meta. As a workaround, they have developed strategies such as flagging non-political users who amplify the same misinformation as politicians, which explains the high percentage of social media users under scrutiny. Fact-checkers see this approach not as self-censorship, but rather as a method to address misinformation while complying with Meta's partnership requirements.

Fact-checking is considered central to the agencies' core mission, leveraging their global expertise and networks to deliver fast and accurate verifications (Chadwick et al., 2017). Despite some criticism, partnerships with platforms are viewed as a new revenue stream and a sustainable business model, allowing newsrooms to create dedicated fact-checking desks with specialized reporters (RQ4). Some interviewees find platform support contradictory, noting that the attention-driven economy of these platforms partially fuels the spread of disinformation: “It's really paradoxical, you know, to have Meta finance your journalism. It's the world we live in, right? I mean, big tech, you can't, you can't run away from big tech.” Conversely, platforms are seen as legitimate clients, as long as agencies maintain their independence.

Our content analysis shows that most news agencies—Reuters, EFE, and AFP—exhibit a lower-than-expected focus on domestic politics. In contrast, dpa, a private company representing several German outlets, verifies political claims more frequently (RQ1). While it may seem logical for international agencies to prioritize global misinformation, this trend may also reflect the influence of platform partnerships, which could lead them to overlook domestic political issues. As a result of reduced political coverage and increased social media policing, the prominence of disinformation sources does not appear to directly affect fact-check selection. However, this should be interpreted cautiously. Fact-checkers have noted that ordinary social media users often replicate false claims from politicians, which they correct without breaching platform partnership regulations. This suggests that the impact of disinformation sources as a selection factor may be less visible. Furthermore, collaboration with platforms contributes to the high volume of debunked information on Facebook, making virality—especially on Meta platforms—and timeliness the most significant news factors (RQ2).

This article is among the first to investigate the fact-checking practices of global news agencies. Our aim is to contribute to the fields of fact-checking, global news wire services, and disinformation studies in an era of “disrupted hybridity.” Future research should examine the pitfalls, advantages, and idiosyncrasies of the relationship between platforms and news agencies. Are platforms making sufficient efforts to control disinformation? While collaboration with Meta faces significant criticism, some interviewees highlight its pioneering strategy and suggest that other tech companies, such as YouTube, should develop similar initiatives to support journalism in combating disinformation. Nonetheless, following Mark Zuckerberg’s recent announcement to discontinue collaboration with fact-checkers on Meta platforms in favor of community-driven verifications, akin to Musk’s X community notes, scholars must urgently assess the impact of this decision on the fact-checking landscape (Canetta & Panizio, 2025; EFCSN, 2025; Graves, 2025; IFCN, 2025). This includes examining their effects on news agency desks, not only in the US but also in Europe, taking into consideration platform regulations outlined in the Digital Service Act.

As a key financial supporter, particularly for organizations in the Global South, the program’s discontinuation raises significant concerns about the long-term viability of independent fact-checking efforts (Graves, 2025). For global news agencies that primarily focus on policing social media, it is worth questioning whether their fact-checking initiatives will continue if Meta indeed discontinues this service in Europe. Unlike professional fact-checking efforts, such as those conducted by global news agency units, which adhere to rigorous standards of accountability and the IFCN code of conduct, corrections in community notes are generated by citizens, whose resilience to misinformation varies (Humprecht et al., 2020; Labarre, 2025). Although comprehensive studies on the effectiveness of community notes remain scarce, research conducted by the Spanish fact-checking organization Maldita (2025) reveals that fact-checks are among the most trusted sources cited in X posts. References to fact-checks enhance the credibility of these contributions, making them more effective in countering misinformation (Nyariki, 2025). Finally, scholars should explore whether news agencies provide services to regressive digital outlets (Cazzamatta, 2025c) that spread falsehoods, which these same agencies then must verify, further complicating the hybrid nature of dysfunctional media systems. This paradox illustrates the complexities of dysfunctional hybrid media systems, where legacy journalistic institutions both inadvertently sustain and counteract the digital misinformation ecosystem, blurring the lines between authoritative fact-checking and the amplification of disinformation (Chadwick et al., 2017). A similar contradiction applies to tech platforms, which, despite their previous support for fact-checking initiatives, have never fundamentally challenged the attention economy and business models that fuel the information disorder, for which they compensate fact-checkers to mitigate (Diaz Ruiz, 2023; Klinger et al., 2024).

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material available here: https://osf.io/nuc5r/?view_only=aa7bc4183d8f4aaba3d89826b325884b

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