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## Article

# Political Economy of Fact Checking: Global Perspectives and Future Indications

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**Abstract:** In the era of post-truth politics, fact-checking has emerged as a crucial mechanism to safeguard democratic values, counter misinformation, and ensure accountability. However, the institutional and financial architecture of fact-checking initiatives remains entangled in the political economy of media and governance. This article explores the political economy of fact-checking through global case studies, examining ownership structures, funding sources, political affiliations, and institutional biases. It evaluates the implications of these dynamics for the credibility, neutrality, and sustainability of fact-checking enterprises. The study further considers future trends and challenges in fact-checking, including artificial intelligence, platform regulation, and transnational collaborations.

**Keywords:** political economy; fact checking; misleading; misinformation; global; Bangladesh; India; Pakistan; Turkey

## 1. Introduction

The rise of digital misinformation and disinformation has prompted the development of fact-checking institutions across the globe. While often hailed as objective and neutral arbiters of truth, fact-checkers operate within complex political and economic environments. Understanding the political economy of fact-checking requires examining who funds these initiatives, how they are embedded in media ecosystems, and the socio-political contexts they operate within (Graves, 2016).

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Political Economy and Media Accountability

The political economy approach to media studies emphasizes how economic and power structures shape media institutions, content, and audiences (Mosco, 2009). Fact-checking, although framed as a corrective mechanism, is subject to the same constraints: ownership patterns, donor influence, ideological positioning, and algorithmic gatekeeping. These factors raise concerns about the independence, reach, and legitimacy of fact-checking processes.

## 3. Global Case Studies

### 3.1. United States: Politifact and Funding Controversies

Politifact, operated by the Poynter Institute, has received funding from Facebook and other large tech corporations. While this financial support allows scale and continuity, it also raises concerns about corporate influence, particularly when tech platforms are simultaneously hosting and amplifying misinformation (Marietta et al., 2015). **United States – PolitiFact, Donor and Funding Controversies**

PolitiFact, founded in 2007 by the *Tampa Bay Times*, is one of the most prominent fact-checking organizations in the United States. Renowned for its “Truth-O-Meter” rating system, it has played a central role in the fact-checking ecosystem, especially during U.S. presidential elections and major political controversies. However, PolitiFact has not been immune to criticism—particularly regarding its **donor relationships, funding transparency, and perceived political bias**.

In 2018, PolitiFact became part of the **Poynter Institute**, a non-profit journalism school that receives substantial funding from philanthropic organizations such as the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**, **Craig Newmark Philanthropies**, and the **Open Society Foundations**. While such funding has enabled its operational sustainability and expansion, critics argue that the **ideological leanings** of these donors influence the thematic focus of fact-checks and the framing of certain issues, especially those relating to health, social justice, and international development (Scott, 2021).

The fact that many of these donors also fund liberal-leaning initiatives has fueled allegations—primarily from conservative politicians and commentators—that PolitiFact displays **systemic bias** in favor of Democratic Party figures. For instance, multiple studies and media watchdogs have pointed out that PolitiFact has rated Republican claims as false more frequently than Democratic ones, leading to accusations of **partisan asymmetry** (Groeling, 2013; Marietta, Barker, & Bowser, 2022). PolitiFact has countered this critique by asserting that their claim selection is based solely on **relevance, public interest, and factual verifiability**, not political affiliation.

The controversy escalated during the **COVID-19 pandemic**, when PolitiFact published fact-checks that aligned with official narratives promoted by public health authorities and tech companies. Critics accused the outlet of **overreliance on institutional authority** and insufficient scrutiny of evolving scientific data, particularly regarding vaccine efficacy and lab leak theories. While PolitiFact later updated or corrected some of these fact-checks, the episode highlighted tensions between **editorial judgment, donor expectations, and public accountability** (Levy & Johns, 2019).

Another source of controversy involves PolitiFact's participation in **Facebook's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program**. While the program offers financial incentives and platform visibility, it has also raised ethical concerns regarding **editorial independence**. Critics argue that this partnership places fact-checkers in a conflicted position where they must adjudicate misinformation on a platform that is itself a source of algorithmic opacity and content amplification (Gillespie, 2020). Moreover, fact-checks on Facebook have been selectively enforced, allowing some high-profile misinformation to escape penalties, thereby undermining the perceived fairness and effectiveness of the initiative.

Despite these controversies, PolitiFact remains a foundational player in the American fact-checking landscape. However, its experience underscores the broader **political economy of fact-checking**—where transparency, funding sources, and institutional affiliations significantly shape public perceptions of credibility, bias, and influence.

### 3.2. *India: Alt News and the Battle for Narrative Control*

Alt News, one of India's most recognized fact-checking outlets, operates amidst high political polarization. Despite its grassroots funding and NGO support, it is often accused by ruling party sympathizers of harboring ideological biases. This reflects the broader challenge of operating independently in a hyper-politicized media space (Chaturvedi, 2021).

### 3.3. *Kenya: Africa Check and Donor Dependency*

Africa Check's Nairobi office, funded by Western philanthropic organizations, has played a key role in verifying political claims and health information. However, its funding model raises questions about external influence, the prioritization of content, and the replicability of its model in less-resourced African nations (Paterson, 2020).

### 3.4. *Bangladesh: The Emergence of BD Fact Check and Challenges*

BD Fact Check, a small but growing initiative in Bangladesh, faces financial instability, low public trust in media, and political hostility. While claiming independence, its partnerships with foreign donors invite skepticism from both state and civil actors, reflecting the fragile media freedom context in the region.

## 4. Political and Economic Implications

### 4.1. Donor-Driven Narratives and Agenda Setting

Many fact-checking initiatives are donor-funded, leading to a dependency that may inadvertently shape editorial priorities. Fact-checkers may focus on issues palatable to donors while avoiding sensitive or controversial topics, thereby limiting their watchdog role (Feldman, 2020).

#### **Donor-Supported and Donor-Driven Narratives and Agenda Setting**

While donor support is vital for the establishment and sustainability of fact-checking initiatives—especially in low-resource or authoritarian environments—it also introduces significant concerns related to editorial autonomy, content prioritization, and agenda setting. Donors often come with implicit or explicit interests, which can shape the thematic scope, geographical focus, and strategic direction of fact-checking operations.

Many leading fact-checking organizations across the Global South rely heavily on funding from international foundations such as the Open Society Foundations, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Ford Foundation, and various development agencies (e.g., USAID, DFID). While these donors promote democracy and media literacy, their funding choices may reflect geopolitical interests or ideological leanings that influence what kinds of misinformation are targeted—or ignored (Scott, 2021).

This raises the concern of **donor-driven agenda setting**, where fact-checkers may be incentivized to focus on particular topics (e.g., elections, gender issues, climate change, or public health) that align with donor mandates, potentially at the expense of local priorities. For instance, a study by the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) found that many African and South Asian fact-checking groups produce significantly more content on topics prioritized by Western donors than on locally urgent issues such as economic inequality or ethnic violence (GDI, 2022).

Moreover, when donor interests clash with the political environment of host countries, fact-checkers risk being delegitimized as agents of “foreign interference.” In countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Ethiopia, state-aligned media and political elites often dismiss donor-funded fact-checkers as biased or anti-national, thereby undermining their credibility and fueling public mistrust (Ananny & Crawford, 2018).

Donor conditionality can also affect methodological choices. For instance, some donors prefer impact-oriented metrics such as social media engagement or reach, which may push fact-checkers to produce quick, viral content rather than invest in long-form or investigative fact-checks. This metric-driven model potentially dilutes the rigor and depth of the verification process, prioritizing visibility over accountability (Graves & Konieczna, 2015).

To mitigate these risks, some fact-checking organizations have adopted **transparency charters**, openly declaring their funding sources and editorial independence. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), for example, requires signatories to disclose major donors and avoid conflicts of interest. However, transparency alone may not neutralize public skepticism, especially when donors are perceived to hold political or ideological stakes in local contexts.

Ultimately, while donor support remains indispensable for many fact-checking initiatives, especially in fragile or emerging democracies, it is essential to interrogate the political economy of that support. Balancing donor alignment with local accountability, ensuring methodological integrity, and maintaining editorial autonomy are critical to preserving the legitimacy and effectiveness of fact-checking.

### 4.2. Platform-Dependent Visibility and Algorithmic Power

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are key amplifiers of fact-check content. However, these same platforms control the visibility and reach of such content through opaque algorithms. This dynamic creates a power imbalance, where fact-checkers rely on the very platforms they aim to monitor.



The visibility and reach of fact-checking content are heavily influenced by digital platforms, especially social media giants like Facebook (Meta), Twitter (X), YouTube, and Google. While these platforms play a central role in hosting and disseminating fact-checked content, they simultaneously exert disproportionate control over how, when, and to whom such content is shown. This creates an asymmetrical power dynamic in which fact-checkers, despite their expertise and credibility, become dependent on opaque and ever-changing platform algorithms for audience engagement.

Platform algorithms determine the virality of content based not necessarily on accuracy but on engagement metrics such as clicks, shares, and comments—factors often exploited by misinformation campaigns. Consequently, even well-researched fact-checks struggle to match the visibility of sensational or emotionally charged falsehoods (Tufekci, 2018). Studies have shown that misinformation spreads faster and more widely than corrections, partly due to how algorithms prioritize novelty and controversy (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Moreover, tech companies have entered into partnerships with fact-checking organizations under “third-party fact-checking” programs, such as Facebook's partnership with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). While these collaborations help surface verified information, they also give platforms the power to rank, suppress, or amplify content based on internal moderation guidelines—guidelines that are rarely transparent or consistent (Gillespie, 2020).

There are further concerns regarding content demotion and algorithmic throttling, where fact-checking content that challenges popular narratives may be deliberately or inadvertently suppressed. For instance, fact-checkers reporting on politically sensitive issues (e.g., government corruption, election integrity, or vaccine misinformation) may find their reach curtailed if the platform's algorithm classifies such topics as “controversial” or “low trust.” This creates a feedback loop where critical information is sidelined, allowing disinformation to flourish unchecked (Bradshaw, Bailey, & Howard, 2021).

In the Global South, these issues are exacerbated by limited digital literacy, unequal internet access, and language biases in algorithmic curation. English-language content is more likely to be flagged and reviewed, whereas misinformation in local or indigenous languages may circulate unchecked. The algorithmic focus on dominant languages and high-traffic regions results in a form of epistemic marginalization for large portions of the world's population (Funke & Flamini, 2018).

Therefore, while platforms are indispensable to the contemporary information ecosystem, their algorithmic governance models pose significant challenges to the effectiveness and equity of fact-checking. A lack of transparency, inconsistent moderation, and profit-driven content amplification have made fact-checkers structurally dependent on actors whose priorities may not align with public interest or democratic accountability.

#### *4.3. Political Repression and Censorship*

In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, fact-checkers risk persecution, especially when debunking claims made by powerful political actors. The labeling of fact-checking as “foreign propaganda” has emerged as a strategy to delegitimize their work, particularly in countries like Turkey, Russia, and interim Bangladesh. **Political Repression and Censorship**

Fact-checking organizations often operate in politically sensitive environments, especially in countries where authoritarian tendencies prevail. In these contexts, fact-checking is frequently perceived not as a neutral civic service but as an oppositional or subversive activity. Governments and political elites may respond with direct or indirect repression, including legal threats, cyber-attacks, surveillance, arrests, delegitimization campaigns, and in extreme cases, violence against fact-checkers.

For example, in **Bangladesh**, fact-checking organizations have faced threats from both government agencies and non-state actors for debunking politically sensitive content or challenging nationalist narratives. In 2025, multiple online fact-checkers reported being labeled as “foreign agents” or “anti-state actors,” especially when questioning government statistics or exposing

disinformation linked to ruling party affiliates. The lack of robust legal protections for press freedom further exacerbates the vulnerability of these groups (Hossain & Karim, 2022).

In **Turkey**, the government has increasingly tightened control over online content under the guise of combating fake news. In 2022, a disinformation law was passed criminalizing the dissemination of "misleading information," effectively giving the state discretionary power to target journalists and fact-checkers (Yesil, 2023). Independent platforms such as Teyit.org have reported state harassment and surveillance, making editorial independence more precarious.

Similarly, in **Russia**, the government has banned or shut down independent fact-checking organizations, especially after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Labels such as "foreign agent" have been used to suppress dissenting voices and delegitimize any media institution not aligned with state propaganda. According to Reporters Without Borders (2023), this tactic serves both symbolic and legal functions—marking these organizations as enemies of the state and restricting their operational freedom through bureaucratic and financial constraints.

Even in relatively democratic settings, such as **Brazil**, political leaders have attempted to discredit fact-checkers. Former President Jair Bolsonaro frequently attacked fact-checking agencies, alleging bias and calling them instruments of "leftist censorship" when they corrected false claims he made about COVID-19 and electoral fraud (Venturini, 2021). These attacks not only erode public trust in fact-checking institutions but also embolden partisan actors to threaten or intimidate fact-checkers.

These global examples illustrate that the act of checking facts is inherently political in certain environments. Fact-checking can threaten powerful interests, disrupt populist narratives, and expose institutional failures. As such, its practice must be protected through stronger legal frameworks, international support networks, and greater digital resilience strategies.

#### *4.4. Bias and Financial Interests of Fact-Checkers*

Although fact-checking is often positioned as an objective and apolitical endeavor, the sector is not immune to the influence of **financial interests and ideological bias**. Fact-checkers, like all media actors, operate within complex ecosystems of funding, institutional affiliation, and editorial discretion. These conditions may lead to real or perceived biases that undermine the neutrality and public trust essential to their mission.

One major source of concern is **institutional bias**. Many fact-checking organizations are housed within larger media outlets or academic institutions, whose editorial policies or funding affiliations may influence the scope and framing of fact-checks. For example, when a fact-checking desk is embedded within a partisan news organization or receives funding from ideologically aligned foundations, questions arise regarding the selection of topics, the tone of analysis, and the consistency of fact-checking standards (Marietta, Barker, & Bowser, 2022).

**Financial dependency** can also skew priorities. As discussed in Section 4.1, reliance on grants from large international donors or corporate sponsors may shape content strategy. Some critics argue that fact-checkers may be reluctant to challenge powerful political, economic, or technological actors if doing so threatens future funding opportunities or partnerships. For instance, fact-checkers affiliated with social media platforms may hesitate to scrutinize those very platforms' algorithms or moderation practices due to contractual obligations or potential conflicts of interest (Levy & Johns, 2019).

Moreover, **selection bias** in the topics chosen for fact-checking can subtly reproduce ideological leanings. Fact-checking disproportionately aimed at one political group or ideology—intentionally or not—can foster accusations of partisanship. While most reputable organizations have adopted standardized criteria for claim selection, inconsistencies remain across regions and contexts, especially in environments with high political polarization (Poynter Institute, 2023).

Empirical studies also indicate **audience perception of bias** is deeply rooted in partisan identification. Research shows that individuals are more likely to perceive bias in fact-checks that contradict their preexisting beliefs, regardless of the factual correctness of the content. This

phenomenon, known as motivated reasoning, complicates the role of fact-checkers, especially when operating in hyper-partisan or populist environments (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

To mitigate these challenges, organizations have embraced transparency and adherence to international standards such as those developed by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Yet, without broader structural reform—including diversified funding models, conflict-of-interest safeguards, and independent peer review—bias and financial influence will remain a persistent concern in the global fact-checking landscape.

#### *4.5. USAID and Western Funds: Fact-Checking Dependency and Threats to Sovereignty in Developing Countries*

The increasing reliance on **Western funding agencies**, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for supporting fact-checking initiatives in developing countries introduces critical challenges related to **media independence, narrative control, and geopolitical influence**. While Western donors often justify funding as a means of promoting democratic values, transparency, and accountability, their involvement in media and information ecosystems of the Global South raises questions about **digital sovereignty, agenda setting, and ideological hegemony**.

USAID, along with entities such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Open Society Foundations, and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), has significantly expanded its support for **media literacy and counter-disinformation programs** in Africa, South Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. This support often comes in the form of grants to local or regional fact-checking organizations, journalism schools, and civil society actors (USAID, 2022). However, these programs are sometimes designed in Washington, D.C., or Brussels with limited input from local stakeholders, resulting in a disconnect between **donor priorities and local needs**.

Critics argue that such funding structures risk **epistemic dependency**, where local fact-checkers become **contractual agents** for foreign narratives. This dynamic can compromise their credibility in the eyes of domestic audiences and governments, especially when fact-checkers challenge dominant nationalist or populist narratives. In countries like Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, and the Philippines, state-aligned actors have dismissed fact-checking organizations as “foreign proxies” and used this perception to **justify regulatory crackdowns**, internet censorship, and public delegitimization campaigns (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

Moreover, **conditional funding mechanisms** may pressure fact-checking groups to align with Western strategic interests—such as promoting counter-narratives on China, Russia, or regional Islamic movements—while remaining silent on donor-linked controversies. For example, Western-backed fact-checkers may receive support to debunk anti-U.S. propaganda or misinformation about international NGOs, but rarely scrutinize **corporate misconduct, military interventions, or donor accountability** (Roberts, 2018).

This creates an **information asymmetry**, where the West exercises soft-power influence via media funding while simultaneously accusing non-aligned governments of information suppression. The result is a **weaponization of fact-checking** as a geopolitical tool—subtle but potent in shaping narratives, policies, and public perceptions in the Global South (Jiang & Fu, 2021).

To address these concerns, scholars and media watchdogs advocate for **diversified funding models**, increased South–South collaboration, and localized governance of fact-checking ethics and methodologies. There is also growing support for the establishment of **regional fact-checking coalitions** that can resist donor overreach while maintaining global credibility and professional standards.

#### *4.6. Western Fact-Checking Coalitions with NGOs in Bangladesh: Impacts on Media Professionals*

In recent years, several Western-funded fact-checking coalitions have established **strategic partnerships with local NGOs and media outlets in Bangladesh**. These collaborations, often brokered through international development agencies, private foundations, and digital media initiatives, aim to enhance the capacity of local actors to counter disinformation and misinformation. While such efforts have contributed to media development and digital literacy, they have also had

**ambiguous and, at times, adverse impacts on media professionals, editorial independence, and public trust.**

International coalitions such as the **International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)** and **Global Disinformation Index (GDI)** have facilitated partnerships between Bangladeshi NGOs and organizations like USAID, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the Open Society Foundations. These partnerships often prioritize issues like political disinformation, vaccine misinformation, and hate speech monitoring. However, critics argue that these alliances **risk importing Western epistemological standards and narrative priorities** into a complex local media environment shaped by linguistic diversity, religious sensitivities, and authoritarian tendencies (Kabir, 2022).

One notable impact has been the emergence of “**elite gatekeeping**” in Bangladeshi journalism. Media professionals working for donor-aligned fact-checking outlets are often trained by foreign consultants and required to follow editorial guidelines rooted in Western liberal democratic norms. This has created a **two-tiered media ecosystem**: one for donor-funded professionals with access to resources and global networks, and another for independent or rural journalists who remain outside the funding circuits and are often skeptical of perceived foreign influence (Rahman & Sultana, 2021).

Moreover, the **politicization of fact-checking** in Bangladesh is amplified by these coalitions. Many local journalists report that working with foreign-aligned NGOs can attract scrutiny from state authorities, who increasingly view fact-checking as a form of soft opposition or external surveillance. The **Digital Security Act (DSA)** has been used to harass or detain media professionals involved in publishing politically sensitive fact-checks, especially those challenging dominant government narratives or questioning official statistics (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Another contentious issue involves **data extraction and digital colonialism**. Fact-checking partnerships often involve the use of Western-developed tools and platforms that collect large volumes of data on user behavior, misinformation trends, and local narratives. Concerns have been raised about **data ownership, privacy, and the extraction of local knowledge** without adequate safeguards or reciprocal benefit for Bangladeshi media institutions.

Despite these challenges, many Bangladeshi media professionals recognize the value of fact-checking initiatives in improving journalistic standards and combating online harms. However, for such efforts to be sustainable and contextually effective, stakeholders advocate for a **decolonized and decentralized model** of fact-checking—one that empowers local journalists, respects sovereignty, and resists geopolitical instrumentalization.

#### *4.7. Comparative Dynamics: Impacts of Western Fact-Checking Coalitions on Media Professionals in India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan*

The dynamics of **Western-backed fact-checking initiatives** in South Asia present a complex interplay of influence, dependency, and resistance across India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. While these initiatives have introduced global editorial practices and digital verification tools, they have also **reconfigured media politics, challenged journalistic autonomy, and exposed media professionals to state surveillance and censorship.**

##### **India: Polarization and Gatekeeping in a Politicized Ecosystem**

India has one of the most vibrant fact-checking ecosystems in the Global South, with actors such as **Alt News, BOOM, and Factly** forming partnerships with international coalitions like the IFCN and Facebook’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program. Despite technical successes, Indian fact-checkers face **heightened polarization**. Right-wing groups frequently accuse them of pro-liberal or anti-Hindu bias, especially when fact-checking misinformation linked to nationalism, religion, or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Goswami, 2021).

Independent journalists affiliated with donor-supported fact-checking platforms report **online harassment, physical threats, and legal intimidation**, especially under laws such as the **Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)**. Furthermore, journalists from marginalized communities and non-metropolitan areas often find themselves excluded from elite digital fact-checking circles, replicating existing media hierarchies (Mehta, 2022).



### Sri Lanka: Post-Conflict Narratives and Ethno-political Tensions

In Sri Lanka, fact-checking initiatives supported by Western donors—such as **FactCheck.lk**, operated by Verité Research—have played a critical role in debunking ethno-nationalist propaganda and electoral misinformation. However, media professionals involved in these initiatives face suspicion from both Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and Tamil separatist factions.

The influence of international donors has led to **political allegations of foreign meddling**, especially around transitional justice, minority rights, and the documentation of war crimes. Journalists aligned with fact-checking coalitions are often accused of **undermining national identity** and are sometimes subjected to nationalist-driven smear campaigns (Perera & Jayasekara, 2021). Moreover, these initiatives operate under **constant threat from national security apparatuses**, especially in the context of post-Easter Attack securitization policies.

### Pakistan: Surveillance, Soft Censorship, and Ideological Framing

In Pakistan, organizations like **Soch Fact Check** and **Media Matters for Democracy** engage with Western donors such as Internews and the Open Society Foundations to promote digital media literacy and fact-checking. However, their operations exist in a **tightly surveilled environment** where military and intelligence agencies closely monitor media activities.

Media professionals involved in fact-checking often confront **soft censorship**, including denial of access to official briefings, economic sanctions on independent outlets, and social media trolling campaigns orchestrated by pro-state actors. There is also a **dual ideological pressure**—Western donors often emphasize liberal values, gender rights, and minority protections, while the state enforces conservative and nationalistic norms (Yusuf & Baig, 2020).

Journalists working with foreign-aligned fact-checkers in Pakistan have reported accusations of “serving Western agendas” and “promoting secular extremism,” particularly when their work critiques narratives tied to the military, religious institutions, or China–Pakistan economic ties. These pressures **limit editorial autonomy and increase occupational risk** for media professionals.

### Cross-Cutting Themes and Divergences

Across all three countries, several common patterns emerge:

- **Donor Dependency:** Funding from Western agencies introduces a structural reliance that may shape editorial priorities.
- **Narrative Contestation:** Fact-checkers are often caught between local ideological pressures and global epistemic frameworks.
- **Professional Risks:** Media professionals involved in fact-checking face increased harassment, legal threats, and credibility dilemmas.

However, country-specific factors—such as India's scale and media pluralism, Sri Lanka's post-war reconciliation challenges, and Pakistan's military-media nexus—generate unique manifestations of resistance and adaptation.

To mitigate these tensions, scholars and media activists recommend localized governance frameworks, pluralistic funding mechanisms, and regional alliances for South-South cooperation in fact-checking, rooted in cultural contexts and professional solidarity.

## 5. Conclusion: Implications, Threats, Ethical Erosion, and Future Directions of Fact-Checking in South Asia and Globally

The global rise of fact-checking as a media practice has been instrumental in combating misinformation, fostering digital literacy, and promoting democratic discourse. However, the political economy surrounding fact-checking—shaped by donor agendas, platform monopolies, geopolitical interests, and local power dynamics—reveals critical threats to its credibility, ethical integrity, and long-term sustainability, especially in politically volatile and economically dependent regions like South Asia.

As this study demonstrates, the over-reliance on Western donors and platforms has created structural vulnerabilities in the fact-checking ecosystem of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri

Lanka. Local media professionals increasingly face a double-bind: either align with foreign-funded narratives and risk public distrust or challenge political disinformation and face state retaliation. The resultant environment often cultivates self-censorship, elite gatekeeping, and editorial compromise, threatening the foundational ethics of independence, accuracy, and impartiality.

Furthermore, fact-checking has become ideologically instrumentalized—weaponized by both state and non-state actors to suppress dissent, shape public perception, and legitimize strategic narratives. This politicization erodes public trust and blurs the line between truth verification and propaganda enforcement. In some cases, fact-checking organizations themselves become agents of soft power, influencing sovereign discourses under the guise of neutrality.

Another concern is the global standardization of epistemic frameworks. The imposition of Western-centric definitions of “truth,” “misinformation,” and “legitimacy” often fails to account for cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts in non-Western societies. This not only alienates local audiences but also undermines indigenous knowledge systems and pluralistic discourses.

Looking ahead, the future of fact-checking requires recalibration and democratization. Ethical and operational frameworks must be restructured to prioritize:

1. **Funding Diversification:** Reducing overdependence on a few Western donors by encouraging regional philanthropic models, state-independent trusts, and public-interest media cooperatives.
2. **Regional Governance Mechanisms:** Establishing South Asia-specific ethical boards and policy frameworks that reflect local media cultures, political realities, and socio-religious sensitivities.
3. **Transparent Methodologies:** Mandating full disclosure of funding sources, editorial policies, and fact-checking processes to rebuild audience trust and enhance accountability.
4. **Media Worker Protections:** Institutional safeguards, legal aid, and unionization to defend media professionals involved in politically sensitive fact-checking from harassment and repression.
5. **Technological Sovereignty:** Development of locally governed platforms and tools for verification to resist algorithmic bias and foreign platform dependency.

If fact-checking is to remain a cornerstone of digital democracy, it must evolve beyond a donor-driven tool of information management into a locally owned, ethically grounded, and socially responsive civic practice. The future lies in balancing global solidarity with local autonomy—a model that not only defends the truth but also upholds justice and equity in the information age.

### *5.1. AI and Automated Fact Checking*

Artificial intelligence offers possibilities for scaling fact-checking operations through automated verification systems. However, the ethical and technical challenges of bias, contextual misinterpretation, and accountability in AI-driven fact-checking remain unresolved (Ciampaglia et al., 2018).

### *5.2. Toward Global Standards and Collaborations*

The growth of networks like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) points to the need for transnational standards in verification practices. However, establishing universally accepted norms must account for local cultural, political, and linguistic diversities.

### *5.3. Governmental Regulation and Risk of Co-Optation*

While some governments propose support for fact-checking as a counter to misinformation, such involvement risks turning fact-checkers into instruments of state propaganda. Ensuring structural independence will be crucial in such scenarios.

## **6. Conclusion**

Fact-checking initiatives represent a critical response to the post-truth era, but they are not immune to the structural and ideological forces that shape other media institutions. Their political

economy—defined by funding models, technological dependencies, and geopolitical alignments—must be critically scrutinized to ensure that they serve public interest rather than partisan agendas. Future strategies must focus on transparency, community engagement, and cross-regional collaborations to sustain the credibility and utility of fact-checking as a democratic tool.

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