Original Article

The toll of fighting misinformation: Precarity in fact-checking work

Journalism
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–19

DOI: 10.1177/14648849251355817
journals.sagepub.com/home/jou


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Abstract

Stand-alone fact-checking organizations are a relatively recent addition to the journalistic genre, linked to the rapid adoption of social media and a concurrent rise in fake news, misleading, and false information shared on social media sites. Fact-checking organizations around the world increasingly share norms, practices, and epistemologies, suggesting a growing institutionalization of fact-checking. These institutional similarities suggest that fact-checkers may also share similar professional challenges. To better understand the challenges, the effects of dealing with those challenges, and the ways fact-checkers cope with those effects, this study draws on interviews with 51 fact-checkers working at 41 fact-checking organizations from around the world. Findings suggest that fact-checkers face precarity on multiple levels. Fact-checking work itself presents a challenge as many fact-checkers expressed frustration and despair at the recurring falsehoods or "zombie" misinformation they had to debunk, and others are exposed to misinformation that includes upsetting graphic images that impact fact-checkers' mental health. Additionally, fact-checkers are frequently attacked by audiences and public figures, such as politicians, even as they face financial challenges to organizational survival. Participants in the study shared a number of strategies to prevent, mitigate, or cope with the worst psychological effects, but the findings point to a need to more systematically address the precarity of fact-checking work.

Keywords

Fact-checking, precarity, journalism (profession), mental health, misinformation

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Introduction

Fact-checking has long been a journalistic practice, but independent fact-checking organizations or operations not embedded in the production of journalistic work are a relatively recent addition to the journalistic genre (Graves, 2016). The emergence of fact-checking organizations as a "transnational movement in journalism, one that brings together practitioners from many different media systems and journalistic cultures" (Graves, 2018: 614) is linked to the rapid adoption of social media and a concurrent rise in fake news, misleading, and false information. Fact-checking organizations around the world have dedicated their work to combating fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (IFCN, 2024).

As a relatively new journalistic genre, fact-checking organizations have sought to strengthen their institutional standing by partnering with social media companies such as Facebook, Google, and TikTok (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023), and to bolster their institutional legitimacy by being signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). These efforts point toward a growing institutionalization of fact-checking operations, not only with respect to standards, processes, and norms, but also regarding their wider societal acceptance and legitimacy (Koliska and Roberts, 2024). Despite this, the present study suggests that their institutional survival is challenged by precarities that stem from the very nature of fact-checking work that can impede individual fact-checkers' ability to perform their core mission, that is, countering misinformation.

To better understand the challenges faced by fact-checkers, the effects of dealing with those challenges, and the ways fact-checkers cope with those effects, this study draws on interviews with 51 fact-checkers working at 41 fact-checking organizations from around the world. Overall, the findings suggest that, while fact-checkers operate in different socio-cultural, political, and linguistic contexts, they face similar personal and professional challenges. The findings show that fact-checkers face precarity on multiple levels and from multiple sources. Not only are fact-checkers frequently exposed to misinformation that includes graphic images that cause them distress, they are also frequently attacked by audience members and institutional stakeholders such as governments. Other journalists even challenge the fact-checkers' professional legitimacy. Moreover, independent fact-checkers remain in a constant state of precarity because their organizations' financial survival is a persistent concern, as they heavily rely on grants from governments and NGOs. Participants in the study shared a number of strategies to prevent, mitigate, or cope with the worst psychological effects. But evidence from this study suggests that fact-checking organizations need more financial and other kinds of support, which would not only ensure the survival of fact-checking organizations, but also help to address psychological challenges fact-checkers face.

Literature review

Fact-checking and fact-checkers

Fact-checking in journalism is differentiated between the internal processes of verification prior to publication, and external fact-checking that "consists of publishing an evidence-

based analysis of the accuracy of a political claim, news report, or other public text" (Graves and Amazeen, 2019: 1). This study is concerned with the latter practice, done by fact-checkers who publish stand-alone checks on the accuracy of existing claims circulating online or in the media. Fact-checkers generally do not do enterprise reporting or "break" news; rather they aim to confirm or refute assertions that are circulating online or have been made by politicians or other prominent figures.

As external or stand-alone fact-checking operations—whether teams working at journalistic organizations or fact-checking operations launched by civil society groups, activists, or amateurs online—have come to constitute a journalistic genre, scholars have examined the historical roots, norms, practices, goals, and effects of fact-checking. Amazeen (2020) argued that the roots of fact-checking go back to muckraking journalists in the United States, but political or external fact-checking started with the introduction of the internet and several initiatives in the United States, such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com in the early 2000s (Graves and Amazeen, 2019). The rapid adoption of social media and a concurrent rise in fake news, misleading, and false information further spurred the growth of fact-checking sites around the world (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023), expanding fact-checks beyond political discourse to debunking all kinds of claims, often related to public health (Graves et al., 2023).

Many fact-checking projects or organizations are signatories of the IFCN and/or partner with social media companies, such as Facebook, Google, and TikTok (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023), and research shows that fact-checkers increasingly share similar norms, practices, and epistemologies (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022), indicating a growing institutionalization of fact-checking globally (Koliska and Roberts, 2024). For example, fact-checkers from Australia, Brazil, India, South Africa, the UK, United States (Ye, 2023), India (Kumar, 2022) and Italy, France, Portugal, and Spain (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022) are committed to transparency and accountability, although their practices may vary.

Research on fact-checking practices shows that fact-checkers predominantly apply journalistic standards and a general "scientific ethic" (Graves and Amazeen, 2019), by focusing on all kinds of knowledge claims that are factual (not opinion), using data that is widely seen as legitimate (i.e. official, academic, and government sources) and making all the steps transparent, so readers can replicate the process (Graves and Amazeen, 2019). These practices appear to be shared not just in the United States (Graves, 2016, 2018), but also other parts of the world, including South America, South East Asia and Africa (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Graves and Cherubini, 2016; Kumar, 2022; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022; Ye, 2023). In fact, several studies indicate that fact-checkers share similar epistemologies, that is, production of fact-checking knowledge (Amazeen, 2019; Singer, 2020), and goals, such as accountability, improving public debate and journalism, and educating the public (Koliska and Roberts, 2024).

Research on the effects of fact-checking has yielded mixed results, with Vinhas and Bastos' (2022) meta-analysis of fact-checking effects studies showing that fact-checks can work within specific situations and interventions. Walter et al. (2019) found that the ability to correct political misinformation is attenuated by the ideologies, preexisting beliefs, and knowledge of participants.

Overall, research indicates that fact-checkers in various socio-political and cultural contexts share many norms, practices, and goals, which suggests they may also share challenges.

Precarity in journalism and news work

Meanwhile, Chadha and Steiner (2021) suggest that globally journalism is becoming an increasingly precarious profession. Scholars have noted rising levels of precarity in Western societies for some time, initially linked to the idea of uncertainty of employment. Bourdieu (1998) stated that precarity can be found in most sectors, as employment has become more casual and uncertain. Uncertainties stemming from digitalization, loss of advertising revenue, increased competition, social media, cost-cutting measures, and the closure of many news organizations have increasingly "affected institutions of cultural production" (Chadha and Steiner, 2021: 16), including journalism, media, and, as we argue, fact-checking.

Chadha and Steiner (2021) trace precarity research to economists and sociologists of the 1960-1970s, who used the term to describe employment situations of vulnerability, scarcity, and limitations. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018: 1), for instance, define precarity as a state that is "uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections." Blustein et al. (2024: 2) expanded this view of precarity to a "psychosocial and political construct or dynamic," linking the psychological experience with structural inequities "to explicate how people and communities respond to these sources of oppression and marginalization."

The implications of precarity for journalism can be wide-reaching, as it can impact the value systems of professionals and journalistic production, and as journalists have less time and fewer resources to develop sources and pursue investigative or difficult stories (Cohen et al., 2019). Chadha and Steiner (2021) identified four themes of precarity that affect journalists: labor conditions (financial, employment), emotional well-being (verbal attacks and accusations of being fake), physical risks (generally in war reporting), and national and populist movements (wide-scale social and political criticism of the journalistic profession).

Precarity appears to be an issue for journalists globally, with some differences in the Global South. Wahl-Jorgenson (2021: 111) interviewed community start-up journalists in the UK, and participants exhibited existential, financial, and social sacrifices in their pursuit of "their passion for local journalism." Wahl-Jorgenson (2021: 114) also noted that many of the start-ups themselves were the "result of the precarity characterizing the journalistic field." Similarly, Higgins-Dobney (2021) examined the working conditions of freelancers for U.S. local television stations, arguing that the various levels of uncertainty freelancers experience, including irregular and shifting work schedules, can negatively impact their health. Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2021) noted that precarity in news work in Latin America was part of a general context of high levels of informal labor and a history of funding news media at levels that have fostered precarity. Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020: 1839) similarly argued that precarity in Nigeria is inherent in the profession where

journalists have long been "trapped between 'professionalism and survival,'" which is compounded by negotiating risks to their personal and professional selves. Ferreira (2024) suggested that the consequences of such precarity has steered journalists in Brazil to adopt practices that can damage democracy.

Physical attacks or threats to the lives of journalists have been a prevailing topic in research about war reporters, often focused on the psychological toll of reporting on war or other extremely violent situations (Feinstein et al., 2002, 2018), or threats to journalists covering protests, from police and protestors (Miller and Kocan, 2022). Palmer (2021) examined how freelance war correspondents face physical, psychological, and institutional threats and uncertainties because of their precarious labor conditions. Palmer (2021: 85) argued that besides sociopolitical precarity stemming from the conflict that led to war, freelance war reporters are often seen as a form of "flexible laborers" and thus, they "cannot be certain that news organizations will provide them with protective gear or hazardous environment training…[or] that news outlets will advocate for them if they get kidnapped or imprisoned on the job."

But journalists do not only face physical threats. Hostility towards the press (Miller, 2021, 2024), and related attacks have been increasing around the world. As noted by Miller and Kocan (2022: 3), "While extreme violence is often associated with war zones, repressive regimes, and revolutions, mounting evidence has shown threats to the press continue to be pervasive in democratic countries as well—creating very real threats against even the 'free' press." While earlier studies addressed the effects of PTSD on journalists (Browne et al., 2012; Feinstein et al., 2018), more recent research has examined the effect of negative audience responses in digital contexts. Lewis et al. (2020) found that nearly all journalists in their study experienced some online harassment, although infrequently, especially in its most severe forms. The authors also showed that the more journalists were harassed online, the more likely they were "to see their audiences as less rational and unlike themselves, and to see interaction with their audiences as less valuable" (Lewis et al., 2020: 1062). Deuze (2025) argued that there is a mental health crisis across media industries, given the negative effects of media work on the mental health and well-being of its practitioners, including journalists.

Journalists have long been the target of public attacks from politicians and others (Koliska et al., 2020), but engagement with online publics has opened new avenues of attack. Waisbord (2020) called the online harassment of journalists "digital mob censorship" and noted that it has been increasing globally. A report from the Committee to Protect Journalists identified online harassment as the biggest issue for journalists (Westcott, 2020). Waisbord (2020) suggested that women and minorities (racial, religious, sexual) are more often the targets of online harassment, including identity-based slurs and other hateful expressions, a claim confirmed by Lewis et al.'s (2020) survey and Kim and Shin's (2022) interviews with journalists.

Adding to the precarity of journalists, Nelson (2022) chronicled how journalism organizations do little to protect journalists from harassment and may even make the harassment worse by penalizing women and journalists of color. When asked about the risks for journalists using social media, participants in his study "pointed to online harassment as the biggest concern. They specifically brought up fears of trolling, doxing,

and threats of physical violence, in addition to less terrifying (though more common) insults thrown their way by social media users" (Nelson, 2022: 1464). Nelson (2022: 1467) highlighted examples of journalists subsequently being suspended by their employers; as he summarized it, "Although newsroom social media policies could aspire to mitigate these conditions, journalists feel they do the opposite." Perhaps as a consequence of this lack of institutional support, Bélair-Gagnon et al. (2022: 2) detailed how individual journalists deal with the challenges of the digital information environment by "creating private spheres for interaction…or turning away from engagement…altogether."

Regarding fact-checkers, Graves and Amazeen (2019) identified financial challenges and attacks from the public as some of the main precarities they face. Singer (2020) showed that financial issues were directly linked to the ability of fact-checkers to do their work, as many worked with a full-time staff of four or fewer. The lack of financial resources and institutional support often converged with external pressure from the audience or exacerbated stress on individuals already burdened with heavy workloads. Bélair-Gagnon et al. (2023) also found pervasive concerns about revenue and funding.

According to Rick and Hanitzsch (2024: 200), the various forms of precarity should not only be approached from the observation of objective factors, such as the lack of resources, but must also include the "subjective side of precarity, as it is an essential parameter of journalists' occupational job satisfaction." The authors argue it is necessary to differentiate between "causes of precarity, distinct dimensions of objective precarity, and individual dispositions driving or moderating subjective perceptions of precarity" (200) to better contextualize the various threats and opportunities that arise from different forms of precarity. Our research aims to understand the factors of precarity that fact-checkers around the world perceive and experience.

Given the above, this study posed the following questions:

RQ1: What are the precarities that fact-checkers perceive in their work and as a consequence of their work?

RQ2: How do the perceived precarities manifest in the individual experiences and perceptions of the work of fact-checkers?

RQ3: How do fact-checkers manage or mitigate the precarities they face in their work?

Methodology

We conducted and analyzed interviews with 51 fact-checkers working at 41 fact-checking organizations whose work reaches audience in more than 50 countries on six continents (click-to-view repository A). The fact-checkers participating in this study were all signatories to the IFCN Code of Principles and third-party fact-checkers for Facebook in their respective countries. Initially, 70 fact-checkers were identified through Duke Reporters' Lab (2020) and contacted, with the aim to have a representative sample of fact-checkers from the Global North and Global South; 51 agreed to participate. Fact-checkers who participated in the study worked in Africa (Kenya, Nigeria), Asia (India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan), Australia, Europe (Belgium, Croatia, Czechia,

Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, Ukraine), MENA (Israel, Jordan), North America (Canada, the United States), and South America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia). The organizations for which they worked represented both independent fact-checking operations and operations that were part of larger news/media organizations but publish fact-checks as separate content, that is, they are not embedded in news production processes. Since the topic of precarity can be very personal, we anonymized the participants and their organizations, identifying them only by country of operation.

Interviews lasted between 50 and 150 minutes and were conducted via Zoom between June 2020 and March 2021. The semi-structured interviews addressed topics ranging from daily fact-checking and decision-making, including newsroom values and norms, to coping with challenges (click-to-view repository B). For this study, which is part of a larger fact-checking research project, special emphasis was given to the challenges fact-checkers face. It should be noted that interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected the perceptions of participants; this potential limitation is addressed in the conclusion.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using automated software (otter.ai) and were reviewed, corrected, and edited for clarity by the authors and a research assistant. The authors then analyzed the transcripts together, applying an open coding approach through ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996). This approach involves a systematic and analytic examination that enables researchers to allow patterns and themes in the discourse to emerge, without approaching the data with preconceived categories. After first reading all the interviews carefully, the authors focused on the parts of the interviews that mentioned challenges, whether resulting from a specific question or emerging from a discussion of other topics. Then, the authors read each passage and generated and applied codes to the interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The authors coded all the data together, engaging in a discussion regarding the application of codes to various parts of interviews to arrive at agreement on the most appropriate code. Codes were revised as further coding was done, in an iterative process.

Following the application of codes to the text, codes were grouped into common themes and further analyzed to identify broader patterns. This process led to the identification of three overarching categories that encompass factors of precarity for fact-checkers: (1) perceived precarities faced by fact-checkers; (2) fact-checkers' experiences of precarity/psychological effects; and (3) strategies that fact-checkers and their organizations employed to deal with or mitigate the effects of precarity. The theme of perceived precarity was further differentiated into six sub-themes: 1. *attacks and pushback from the public/audience; 2. attacks from the government, 3. skepticism from mainstream/established journalists; 4. climate of hostility; 5. financial and institutional challenges; and 6. the nature of fact-checking work.* Fact-checkers' experiences fell into two sub-themes: negative emotions, which ranged from frustration to despair, and contextualizing or downplaying the effects as inherent to the work. Finally, strategies to deal with the effects of precarity were further divided into preventive efforts and coping mechanisms, and formal and informal strategies.

Findings

Perceived precarity of fact-checkers

Participants perceived different sources of precarity—the public, the government, mainstream journalists, a general climate of hostility (emerging from political polarization, extremism, and belief in conspiracy theories), financial and institutional uncertainty, and the nature of fact-checking work itself—but not every fact-checker personally experienced or had to deal with every source of precarity. The perceived prevalence of the different sources of precarity depended on the socio-cultural and political climate in which individual fact-checkers operated.

Attacks and resistance from the public/audience. Fact-checkers from several countries reported that they face backlash and personal insults from readers or followers, often via social media. A fact-checker from Lithuania said,

> "personal harassment, you know, in Facebook Messenger. One of our colleagues is always getting messages with, I would say not only bad words, but they're saying that they're gonna catch him in the street and do something bad to him, it's not really, you know, nice."

A Croatian fact-checker pointed out that much of the backlash has to do with being associated with Facebook:

> "When Facebook informs people that they have shared false news, they also inform them that this news has been deemed false by us… and for some people, this amounts to censorship and so we are getting death threats on a daily basis, basically."

A fact-checker in Canada said harassment in general increased during COVID-19 because of the high levels of misinformation circulating and the strong emotions people had about containment measures and the virus:

> "When we do a fact-checking article, especially in terms of COVID-19, we often get a lot of comments saying that we are part of the conspiracy, that we're lying to the people, we even got death threats recently, me and one of my colleagues."

A fact-checker in Denmark noted that fact-checking information about 5G provoked a strong backlash from the public. A German fact-checker stated flatly, "People hate us" and reported that a colleague had received a letter from a prominent German neo-Nazi.

A fact-checker from the United States explained that many users don't understand how fact-checks end up on their social media sites, sharing a representative phone call they received:

> "A: 'What right do you fucking have to be on my fucking Facebook digging through my personal fucking life, you little fucknut?… ' B: 'Sir, did you post a false information?' A: 'I don't care about the false information. You little dickweed really don't go through my

> personal information. Tell me what right you have to be on my Facebook?'… You see, he (A) was upset because we fact-checked a YouTube video that claimed that cats may protect you from COVID-19."

A Colombian fact-checker said people sometimes just wanted to unload their frustration: "One guy just called and screamed at the journalists for like an hour. He didn't have any arguments, that made us change the fact-check or anything, he just was angry."

Many said they felt their work was becoming increasingly contentious, and attacks from the audience were at times highly personal and moved from online to offline contexts. Besides verbal abuse, fact-checkers have been doxed, forcing some to work in anonymity. A U.S. fact-checker's parents were doxed and received threatening phone calls. A Brazilian fact-checker recounted that, "someone made a report of fact-checkers, mentioning fact-checkers names and publishing pictures of them saying they were politically biased, saying they're all leftists. So that was a major attack that happened during the elections." One of our participants had been doxed and requested that no identifying information be used in this study.

A common line of attack was accusations of bias, which were based on a variety of supposed factors: political favoritism, financial dependence, and religious favor or prejudice. An Indian fact-checker said:

> "they attack us, they troll us on social media…I've had cases where colleagues have been attacked, based on some old tweets when they were not even in journalism. Then there are cases where people raise unrealistic or unfair judgments against our work, calling us left of the center or that we are aligned to some political party or that we are sold out to some political party."

Fact-checkers in Jordan were accused of spreading fake news and threatened with jail. Their work was seen as both anti-religious and anti-atheist: "if we debunk fake news published by atheists, they say you are religious and radical people. And if you debunk fake news published by religious people, they say that you are atheist and you hate religion." A Kenyan fact-checker recounted, "someone actually did try to expose us as government agents, and that was quite funny. They basically did a whole blog post saying we're agents of the Ugandan government."

In several cases, accusations of bias were tied to broader anti-media and anti-institutional sentiment. A fact-checker in India explained, "the media has always been one of the boogeymen that they have sought out. So, we have been criticized and slammed for a lot of the reporting that we've done." A fact-checker in Canada also mentioned the anti-media sentiment, saying, "we also noticed a growing hate and mistrust of them, of media."

A few fact-checkers reported they were victims of cyber-attacks. A Ukrainian fact-checker said they were attacked by bots, after "talking about some of the politicians with a Russia-affiliated politician." A Spanish fact-checker reported they had experienced server attacks. A Colombian fact-checker spoke of a coordinated effort against them: "they just bombarded our social media and our YouTube and comments everywhere that they found our name… and they usually put like the same message."

In some cases, fact-checkers reported that members of the audience sought to employ other institutions to harass them or impede their work. A handful of participants had lawsuits or false police reports filed against them. A German fact-checker said they were told to come to the police but did not comply. A Polish fact-checker said, "we've been threatened with lawsuits twice but we'd never got to where they would file the suit, these were only threats." Even though the legal attacks were unsuccessful, a fact-checker in Spain explained the impact:

> "if you see the demands, it's stupid, it's not gonna happen. It's obvious to anyone seeing this lawsuit that you're going to lose it. But you're making me waste my time, my energy, and my money, and having to go to court and saying to the judge that everything you're saying is bullshit. and hoping that at some point, because of that, I will stop fact-checking your content, which is not going to happen."

Despite the challenges and attacks from the audience, several participants shared the sentiment of a fact-checker from India who said, "yes, there is sometimes hate, there is sometimes trolling on social media, but at least I don't think it has, in our case, reached a dangerous proportion."

Attacks from the government: accusations of bias. Government officials who are fact-checked also react negatively, arguing with fact-checkers online or using their platforms to target them. A fact-checker in Czechia explained, "There have been attempts by government representatives to publicly pressure us to change our results. The government office at one point did like a counter fact-check to one of our fact-checks of the Prime Minister." Likewise, a fact-checker in Indonesia reported that a politician called the owner of the company to ask them to take down a video related to a claim the politician had made. A fact-checker from the Philippines said, "We got attacked by (then-President of the Philippines) Duterte himself." A fact-checker in Spain said they had been invited to testify in parliament, but the invitation was rescinded after political pressure: "a specific political party's undermining our credibility by saying that we are censors, that we are controlling public speech, that we're telling people what to think according to communist idealists."

Some attacks were tied to more general attacks on the media by political figures. A fact-checker in Brazil explained the efforts of the government to discredit journalists and fact-checking organizations: "Every time there is a reporter that writes an article that it's very against the government or points out something very wrong about the government, then he starts receiving death threats." They continued, noting that the government's attacks on media were taken up by supporters: "they kind of manipulate supporters that they act against everything and everybody that is against the government."

In Colombia, fact-checkers also deal with more indirect challenges from government officials in rural areas, who at times restrict access to public data:

> "The national government is generally good with public data and technically, every public entity should provide public data, but in smaller cities… They just say, 'no, we're not going to give you data because you're going to write bad about me.'"

Skepticism from mainstream/established journalists. Some participants dealt with negative reactions from mainstream journalists, in the form of "skepticism" or resistance to their checks. Fact-checkers in Italy called it a "cultural resistance" from established media. A Colombian fact-checker explained why they thought journalists responded negatively: "journalists in Colombia usually don't criticize a journalist. There's like this unspoken bond that you didn't talk bad about other journalists." This challenge was mentioned only a couple of times, perhaps due to the increasing institutionalization of fact-checking, or because many fact-checking operations are part of journalistic organizations.

Climate of hostility: the larger context of misinformation, conspiracies, extremism, and polarization. Several fact-checkers tied their concerns to a broader political context in which audiences were increasingly polarized and belief in conspiracy theories was growing. One fact-checker from the United States described the challenge:

> "they are convinced we are part of the conspiracy that we are leftists or rightists or Trump supporters or fascists or communists or whatever, whatever the thing is they hate most. We must be that because we are contradicting their idea or their posts."

A Canadian fact-checker said, "People who are convinced that the state and the media are out to get them and to vaccinate them by force or are hiding the truth, they get really angry, and then they see us literally as an enemy." A Brazilian fact-checker said the "level of the conspiracy theories is like unbelievable" and suggested it is related to a movement that is "anti-intellectual and anti-education." The attacks were sometimes tied to global conspiracy theories, as another participant from Brazil reported: "we are all the time accused of being a communist organization paid by George Soros."

Financial and organizational challenges. Another challenge that fact-checkers mentioned was the precarity of their organizations, especially financially. They pointed out that it is very difficult to monetize fact-checking through advertising or sponsorships. A Croatian fact-checker said, "We pretty much function like any other nonprofit getting money from grants" and cited Facebook as "an important source of funding for us." A Spanish fact-checker explained, "Around 80% of our income has to be fundraised every year, and most of it is fundraising offshore… because no one gives money to a nonprofit in Spain dedicated to media."

The lack of financial resources was also noted by a Polish participant, who said that initially everyone worked as a volunteer but recently three of the 25 people get paid. An Indian fact-checker said that there is no money in the budget so that when, for instance, "as an editor, I get excited about video, I cannot say that I'm going to hire five people for videos, unless I get a grant to do those videos." A Brazilian fact-checker shared that the lack of funding restricts scheduling: "You can't change teams. I mean we cannot have holidays, but people [are taking a break] in the middle of the week because we are like small organizations with a small team and a lot of things to do." A fact-checker from the Philippines also connected the financial concern to manpower issues: "Manpower limits us. [My colleagues] are all overworked. We wish we can get more fact-checkers."

Although funding is seen as a source of precarity by many and creates a lot of professional uncertainty, an Indonesian fact-checker pointed out that money is not a motivating factor for them: "[funding] is not the main issue for us, with or without any funding, with or without any money from other parties, we will still want to do this [fact-checking]."

The nature of the work: overwhelming quantities of misinformation, disturbing content. A common challenge fact-checkers brought up was the overwhelming amount of misinformation circulating online, and how easily it resurfaced after being debunked. For many fact-checkers, the negative emotions—ranging from depression and disillusionment to anger and frustration—resulted from the onslaught of false information. A fact-checker in Canada said,

> "You know, sometimes we feel like, oh, we're such a small team, and... in comparison to the amount of misinformation that is spread. When we get sometimes like 50 different conspiracy videos a week, and we know that we cannot fact-check them all, we feel like we are very small, we have very limited resources."

A participant in Jordan described the imbalance:

> "one of the things that's killing us when you found a fake news, which gets, for example, 10 million views in 24 hours, and it's totally fake, and it's very easy to debunk as fake news, then you write an article, and take a lot of effort, and time and work and design and proofreading and fact-checking and double fact-checking and feedback and publishing and it's a lot of work. And then after that, all what you get, for example, 500 likes, and he gets like 10 million views. And then you say… I can never beat the fake news, like fake news is gonna win each time."

Others talked about how misinformation keeps resurfacing, even after it has been labeled as false, and can be easily disproven. A fact-checker in France said, "it's depressing when you see always the same kind of information coming back and back again, like a zombie."

Although some of these challenges, such as online harassment and personal threats, were shared by most fact-checkers in our study, the challenges differed and were often related to the medium (video, audio, or text) used to distribute misinformation in a particular region. Several participants described the kind of information they have to verify as quite graphic and disturbing. One from Taiwan said, "recently we had a video clip saying that because of the coronavirus, people in India are eating humans, okay, we're still doing the fact-check on that, we haven't found the evidence… we just kind of watching the videos. Really disgusting, to be honest and there's an effect on personnel, if you're reading a lot of misinformation or watch video clips."

Experiences of precarity: the emotional and psychological toll of fact-checking

The challenges described above impacted the psychological well-being of fact-checkers in our study. Participants reported feeling distress caused by viewing graphic and

disturbing images, stress from dealing with the attacks from the audience and others, as well as impotence in the face of the overwhelming amount of misinformation they encounter and the apparent ineffectiveness of their work, and depression, emotional numbness, and disillusionment. Several participants expressed dismay at the public's continued belief in misinformation, or disdain for people who persist in believing misinformation despite its having been repeatedly debunked. Nearly every participant had at least some degree of negative feelings stemming from their work, while some responded by rationalizing the challenges as inherent to fact-checking work.

A fact-checker in the Philippines described the effect of disturbing content as "morbid and gross to look at." Others reported needing to take time away from work after viewing a lot of graphic content and an Indian fact-checker reported of his colleagues that, "over a period of time they're not able to sleep properly in the night." A fact-checker in Brazil explained:

> "it is an ambience that's really hard to work in because... people are sharing a lot of images that you really don't want to see. So, you get angry, you get sad, I don't know, feelings that can affect your work and affect your debunking."

A Swedish fact-checker said, "I try not to look at too horrible images, and you lose hope in humanity sometimes, but then you get back on the horse."

Frustration with the public spreading misinformation was expressed by a fact-checker in Denmark: "it makes you depressed… Because sometimes it's, how can people be so either stupid or is there no hope for the future generation?" Others described a similar feeling of disillusionment, saying they were losing hope for humanity because of their inability to convince the audience of clearly verifiable facts. A fact-checker in Poland described it as, "maybe distrust would be a bad word to describe it… disenchantment a little bit. And I think the best one would be disillusioned." A fact-checker in the United States similarly said:

> "I have the feeling that it's starting to impact my view of humanity in general, like how dumb can people be that they believe this stuff? Apparently dumb enough to give it hundreds of thousands of likes… And it's a complete ridiculous and utter stupid, no evidence at all, but there are hundreds of thousands of people literally convinced that Wayfair is selling children. Yeah, I mean, if that doesn't make you depressed…"

Many fact-checkers expressed a sense of helplessness in the face of the extremism that had gripped some segment of their audience, and a perception that there was nothing they could do to change those people's minds.

Revealing differences in how fact-checkers perceive the challenges, some participants dismissed or downplayed the attacks they experienced, contextualizing them as a normal part of work that relates to political issues. A few fact-checkers suggested that getting pushback from the audience was evidence they were effective, as a participant from Argentina said, "being a fact-checker is not that people love you. Because if people love you, you are not doing really well your job." Although they went on to add, "I noticed in

the last year, I can say that there's a lot of fact-checkers outside the country, but also in our own team, that they are kind of accepting that part of our job is to suffer that harm. I'm pretty worried about that." A German fact-checker said, "I'm actually worrying if I'm getting too insensitive because I'm seeing it [graphic imagery] so many times and don't let it get to me. Then I just think maybe one time, I won't even feel anything anymore."

Preventive and coping strategies to deal with precarity

The strategies that participants employed fell into two main categories: preventive strategies meant to stave off the worst effects of exposure to misinformation, and coping strategies employed after they had already suffered some negative effects. Preventive strategies included adjusting workflow so that individuals rotated through the roles that were most stressful and assigning tasks according to informal assessments of fact-checkers' emotional or psychological resilience. Coping strategies included seeking help from authorities (such as calling the police when threats were considered serious), taking time off from work, mental health care support, and informal conversations with colleagues. These strategies could also be further divided into formal and informal approaches.

Several participants reported that their organizations introduced new workflow protocols to protect staff from overexposure to harmful misinformation, including allowing fact-checkers to take days off and/or assigning them to different duties. In some organizations this was a formal protocol, while in others, it was an informal strategy employed by a manager, who would make subjective assessments of the mental health or emotional state of employees to determine who needed a break.

In terms of other formal approaches, a fact-checking organization in India created a booklet about how to protect fact-checkers' mental health that has been widely disseminated in the fact-checking community. Some organizations formed support groups or limited the public profile of their individual employees, to reduce the negative effects on their staff. One participant reported that their organization barred employees from using social media. While these practices were sometimes in tension with values of transparency, some organizations felt they were necessary.

Informal approaches included strategically limiting engagement with social media and using humor. Several participants mentioned having informal newsroom conversations to grapple with the psychological impact of their work. A few participants said they sought help or protection from the police. Several turned to mental health professionals. Only two organizations mentioned providing mental health or emotional support to help staffers deal with the effects of their work. Another coping mechanism mentioned above was the rationalization of the negative consequences of their work as a necessary or inevitable part of the job.

Discussion

Fact-checkers in this study reported multiple challenges: cyberbullying, hate mail, legal attacks, police harassment, and financial struggles, among others, all while engaged in

work that they found emotionally difficult, discouraging, and revelatory of a dark side of the public. The psychological toll of fighting both misinformation and hostile audiences was substantial: feelings of impotence in the face of the monumental task they faced, stress and distress, as well as numbness and a feeling of disillusionment or cynicism about the audience. Several fact-checkers experienced despair and even disdain for their audiences, a feeling that misinformation and conspiracy theories had pushed the audience to extremes, and that some segment of the public was beyond help. Fact-checkers adopted various strategies to try to mitigate or cope with the psychological effects of fighting misinformation, ranging from taking short breaks to seeking help from police or mental health professionals.

Although the fact-checkers in our study were signatories of the IFCN and helped flag misinformation on Facebook, many had been in operation for less than 5 years, and largely operate outside the institutions of traditional journalism, so the financial rewards are relatively small, and several participants mentioned that fact-checks do not attract advertising revenue. Therefore, they already operate under greater precarity than established news media organizations, and their organizational survival is highly affected by the fallout from negative psychological effects that disrupt operations. Nevertheless, many were motivated to do their work as a public service to provide verified information about issues of political, social, or other importance, no matter the financial rewards or professional challenges, indicating that they identified strongly with the role they performed (Mellado, 2020). They showed a great deal of idealism and belief in the importance of their work, reflected in the fact that many work for very low or no wages.

Fact-checkers in this study experienced precarity differently partly due to regional or socio-cultural differences, but our findings also suggest that factors affecting the mental health of fact-checkers may be related to the predominant type of media that is used to spread misinformation in a particular region. For instance, our data suggest that disturbing videos were a primary cause of psychological suffering in the Global South.

While precarity is a condition of labor generally, and journalists also face growing challenges in a digital media environment (Waisbord, 2020), fact-checkers appear to face even more extreme financial precarity while also dealing with additional stressors. We found that all the elements (i.e. labor conditions, emotional well-being, physical risks, and anti-press national and populist movements) that Chadha and Steiner (2021) identified as contributing to precarity for journalists were present and often more acute for fact-checkers. For example, the verbal attacks and accusations of bias are even more pointed at fact-checkers because of their role in adjudicating the "truth" in a highly polarized political and media environment.

Conclusion

This study explored the multifaceted, interconnected precarities fact-checkers face—primarily centered around their professional role and the nature of their work—contributing to a better understanding of how combating misinformation affects individuals and fact-checking organizations, and how they respond. Blustein et al. (2024) theorized that the structural elements of precarity, like financial and employment

uncertainty, are linked to psychological factors. Our findings confirm these links, while other factors, like the perceived inability to counter the spread of misinformation, appear to be more subjective, and can be linked to general role performance expectations of fact-checkers (Mellado, 2020). This study extends the literature on the precarity of journalists (Chadha and Steiner 2021) to fact-checkers and highlights how many of the sources of precarity stem from the nature of the work itself: attacks and resistance from the public; attacks from the government; skepticism from mainstream journalists; a general climate of hostility; and the content fact-checkers work with.

The perceptions of precarity differed among fact-checkers, with many expressing dismay, despair, and frustration, while others accepted the pushback as part of their job and even evidence of their success. Some fact-checkers appear to be willing to endure the challenges related to their expected role performance (Mellado, 2020) and find coping mechanisms, because of the public service value they see in their work. Fact-checkers in this study often came up with informal, ad hoc ways to deal with the psychological toll of their work. Among the common coping strategies, distancing (see Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022) stood out, but generally fact-checkers were less uniform in responding to the similar challenges they faced.

In terms of limitations, interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to a more negative attitude, although other studies have provided evidence of hostility towards journalists and news workers before and after the pandemic. While this is a qualitative study, it identifies global factors of precarity that affect fact-checkers, who remain some of the most vulnerable news workers. The mental health challenges that fact-checkers face and the personal sacrifices they make to fight harmful information in the public sphere merit further inquiry. Specifically, future studies could examine the effectiveness of preventive and coping strategies, including the ones employed by participants in this study, and others that could be put forward by scholars or media professionals, as well as strategies to inoculate audiences or educate them about fact-checking.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Janhvi Bhojwani for assistance with organizing and conducting the interviews for this study.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval

The Institutional Review Board at Georgetown University approved our interviews.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation. The consent was audio-recorded in the presence of an independent witness.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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