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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The State of Fact-checking in Morocco: from Information Disorder to Information Integrity

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence of fact-checking in Morocco as a modern journalistic practice in response to a growing proliferation of mis/disinformation across social media platforms in recent years. The article specifically explores the factors contributing to the rise of fact-checking initiatives, assesses the efficacy of fact-checking in mitigating the spread of false and misleading information, and identifies key challenges encountered by practitioners in the field. For the purposes of this study, we have used semi-structured interviews and document analysis as data collection instruments. Based on the data collected, we have concluded that fact-checking has a crucial role to play in combatting mis/disinformation in Morocco, but that contribution could be greater if two conditions are met: 1) the government provides financial support to fact-checking efforts, and 2) schools devote resources to building young people's media and digital literacy competence.

| KEYWORDS

Fact-checking, Morocco, misinformation, disinformation, information integrity

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past 2 decades, information technology has immensely developed and along with that came the challenge of information abundance, or rather the "democratization" of content. This challenge lies in the proliferation of mis/disinformation on social media platforms and its societal impact. Several interventions have been made to respond to this disruptive global information ecosystem, from empowering individuals with media and digital literacy programs, developing technological tools to detect mis/disinformation, to introducing anti-mis/disinformation laws and encouraging collaborative initiatives as well as launching independent fact-checking organizations. The ultimate aim of this paper is to investigate the practice of fact-checking in the Moroccan context. Not only do we examine the institutional role of external post hoc fact-checking entities as communities of practice but also explore the potential for fostering a culture of fact-checking within Moroccan society. It is a culture that we believe should empower citizens to actively resist mis/disinformation and build community resilience against its spread.

## 2. Literature review

Fact-checking is defined as “the verification of claims made in the public arena, using journalistic skills and evidence drawn from the latest credible and publically available data and information.”<sup>1</sup> It differs from the internal editorial process of news organizations which aims to eliminate errors prior to publishing a story.

Fact-checking, as an information-evaluation control instrument entrusted to external entities, emerged in 2003 with FactCheck.org.<sup>2</sup> Its value to reclaiming truth was acknowledged in 2009 with the Poynter Institute’s PolitiFact project winning the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for their coverage of the 2008 election.<sup>3</sup> The practice gained even more significance during Donald Trump’s race to the White House in 2016 and indeed during his tenure.<sup>4</sup>

Various scholars have attempted to account for the emergence of fact-checking as a modern genre of journalism. Michael Dobbs, for example, traces the rise of fact-checking to the long history of antagonism between the political establishment in America and the media to shape the narrative that will be presented to the public during such events as wars and presidential campaigns.<sup>5</sup> For example, during the Vietnam War, “American journalists perceived that the military consistently and intentionally tried to mislead the media concerning its operations in Vietnam.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a decision based on the bogus claim that Iraq had WMDs—an allegation that was made by the US intelligence community and touted to the international community by Secretary of State Colin Powell. As *The New York Times* political editor Richard Stevenson puts it, “For many journalists that episode [the invasion of Iraq] was a wake-up call on the need to be more vigorous.”<sup>7</sup> By that statement, Stevenson meant that the media in America did not do enough to get facts straight to the American people and hold the Bush Administration accountable for its actions. Likewise, Donald Trump’s campaigning for presidency in 2016 and 2020 was another instance of tug of war between the establishment and the media. This is illustrated by Trump calling several media outlets as “the enemy of the [American] people.”<sup>8</sup>

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, a senior research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, provides one more compelling context for the emergence of the practice of fact-checking. According to him, journalism in the Western world is in a serious crisis of an economic and professional character reinforced yet by a crisis of confidence.<sup>9</sup> By that Nielson means that the traditional business model of journalism is no longer economically sustainable due to the decline in advertising revenues and the dominance of digital technologies. From a professional perspective, the emergence of content production from freelance content contributors or any other content producers lacking journalistic professionalism has undermined journalism by weakening journalists’ mission to serve citizens and democracy. The third aspect of the crisis of journalism lies in the low level of trust that ordinary people have in news outlets. As Nielson puts it, “People want reliable, truthful reporting. They want access to news outlets they can trust. They would like journalists to operate with a shared commitment to accuracy and independence.”<sup>10</sup>

Against this background, at the 2015 Global Fact-Checking Summit in London, the founder of fact-checking organization PolitiFact, Bill Adair, announced the birth of a global movement of fact-checkers comprising experts from the fields of journalism,

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<sup>1</sup> Internews. (2024). *Youth Media Literacy Program Fact Checking Manual*. <https://internews.org/resource/youth-media-literacy-program-fact-checking-manual/>

<sup>2</sup> Mantzaris, A. (2016, June 7). *There’s been an explosion of international fact-checkers, but they face big challenges*. Poynter Institute. <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2016/theres-been-an-explosion-of-international-fact-checkers-but-they-face-big-challenges/>

<sup>3</sup> Adair, B. (2009, April 20). *PolitiFact wins Pulitzer*. PolitiFact. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2009/apr/20/politifact-wins-pulitzer/>

<sup>4</sup> Fischer, S. (2024, October 1). *Fact checks fall amid political pressure*. Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2024/10/01/news-fact-checking-sources-decline>

<sup>5</sup> Dobs, M. (2011). *The Rise of Political Fact-checking: How Reagan Inspired a Journalistic Movement: A Reporter’s Eye View*. New America Foundation. [https://www.michaeldobbsbooks.com/uploads/1/1/1/7/11179754/dobbs\\_fact\\_checking\\_2011.pdf](https://www.michaeldobbsbooks.com/uploads/1/1/1/7/11179754/dobbs_fact_checking_2011.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Samisch, M. H. (1991). *Comparison of the media coverage of the Vietnam War to the media coverage of the invasions of Grenada and Panama: a question of legacies*. [Master’s thesis, The University of Maryland]. p.44

<sup>7</sup> Dobs, M. (2011). *The Rise of Political Fact-checking: How Reagan Inspired a Journalistic Movement: A Reporter’s Eye View*. New America Foundation. [https://www.michaeldobbsbooks.com/uploads/1/1/1/7/11179754/dobbs\\_fact\\_checking\\_2011.pdf](https://www.michaeldobbsbooks.com/uploads/1/1/1/7/11179754/dobbs_fact_checking_2011.pdf). p.8.

<sup>8</sup> Samuels, B. (2019, May 4). *Trump ramps up rhetoric on media, calls press ‘the enemy of the people’*. The Hill. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/437610-trump-calls-press-the-enemy-of-the-people/>

<sup>9</sup> Nielsen, R. K. (2014). *The many crises of Western journalism: A comparative analysis of economic crises, professional crises, and crises of confidence*. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2600863](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2600863)

<sup>10</sup> Nielsen, R. K. (2014). *It’s time for journalists to listen*. Zeit Online. <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2024-09/journalism-democracy-trust-media-world-news-day/komplettansicht>

academia, and civil society closely joined by the purpose of adjudicating truth. As Dr Lucas Graves, of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, labels it, it is a global initiative that aims to promote “transparency, effective governance, democratic dialogue, and civic engagement.”<sup>11</sup> Today, the number of active independent fact-checking websites worldwide has reached 446.<sup>12</sup> Examples of these are Tahaqqaq (Morocco), Africa Check (South Africa), AFP Fact Check (France), Reuters Fact Check (England), AAP FactCheck (Australia), and Annie Lab (China). However, according to Duke Reporter's Lab, political pressure and lack of funding have led to the end of operations for 161 fact-checking sites globally.<sup>13</sup> For instance, PolitiFact Illinois (US), Portal EBC (Brazil), FactSpace (Gambia), Iarbitrefact (Morocco), and Real or Not Myanmar (Myanmar) are some of the fact-checking initiatives that have ceased existing.

### 3. Methodology

To accomplish the purpose of our study, we opted for semi-structured interviews (SSIs) as a powerful instrument to collect primary research data. As Anne Galletta (Galletta, 2013) states, SSIs are central to qualitative research as they offer the potential to attend to the complexity of the topic under study. By that, Galletta means that SSIs allow for conducting the interview with a great deal of flexibility and depth. In other words, the researcher can go through the questions prepared in advance in no particular order—guided only by the objectives of the study. While doing so, the researcher can also ask questions on issues emerging from the responses contributed by the interviewees. That marks the depth of knowledge that semi-structured interviews usually offer. It is also important that semi-structured interviews foster a strong rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee due to their conversational nature, which makes interaction more engaging and allows for the emergence of more key research data.

Along with semi-structured interviews, we included documentary analysis as a secondary data source. This research method is based on collecting data from such diverse forms as organisational or institutional reports, books and brochures, journals, newspapers, press releases, and various other public records. The rationale for combining semi-structured interviews and document analysis is to ensure the credibility and validity of findings through triangulation.

### 4. Results and Discussion

For primary data collection, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 journalism professionals. Each interview lasted approximately 1 - 1:30 hours. The interviewees included:

INTERVIEWEE	EXPERTISE
Ms Latifa Akharbach	President of the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA)
Ms Yasmine Laabi	Digital verification journalist at AFP
Ms Soukaina Esdar	Fact-checker at Chayyek
Mr Sami Saber	Fact-checker at Gerbal
Ms Khadija Boufous	Journalist and fact-checker
Mr Noureddine El Bayar	Digital media consultant and fact-checker
Mr Abdelmoula Boukhraiss	Journalist (Medi1 TV)

While the interviews explored various topics related to information disorder, for the convenience of this paper, we are going to focus solely on fact-checking and the challenges that fact-checkers in Morocco have to attend to. For a clear perspective of the views of the interviewees, we present the results along the following thematic analysis:

#### 4.1. Context of fact-checking in Morocco

All the interviewees concurred with the assessment that social media fuel mis/disinformation among Moroccans. More than that, Ms Latifa Akharbach, the president of the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), believes that a worrisome trend has emerged wherein the public has become desensitized to the proliferation of mis/disinformation, resulting in a de facto “cohabitation” with information disorder.

<sup>11</sup> Graves, L. (2016). *Boundaries not Drawn: Mapping the institutional roots of the global fact-checking movement*. Routledge, 19 (5), 613–631. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1196602>

<sup>12</sup> The Reporters' Lab. <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking/>

<sup>13</sup> Fischer, S. (2024, October 1). *Fact checks fall amid political pressure*. Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2024/10/01/news-fact-checking-sources-decline>

Also disconcerting, following Mr Nouredine Elbayar, is that mis/disinformation is spread not only by ordinary citizens but also by practising journalists, which adds to the complexity of the information landscape in the country. About journalists peddling false narratives, Mr Elbayar explained that curricula in Moroccan schools of journalism need revamping in such a way that fact-checking, artificial intelligence (AI), and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) become core components of what future journalists study. Without these, the journalist will be less equipped to conduct thorough investigations that capture the essence of a news story. Mr Abdelmoula Boukhraiss also alludes to the same idea by saying that the quality of fact-checking is demonstrably influenced by the journalist's level of expertise.

Regarding the source of mis/disinformation in Morocco, the interviewed media professionals stated that problematic information usually originates from individuals and can be classified as:

- a) Correct,
- b) Partially correct,
- c) False,
- d) Misleading,
- e) Hate speech,
- f) Sarcasm,
- g) Conspiratorial thinking.

Interestingly, Ms Yasmine Laabi pointed out that on careful analysis of the social media mis/disinformation landscape, as monitored by fact-checkers in the Moroccan context, one can easily conclude that it is at a low level of sophistication. By way of comparison, while individuals in the West, for example, peddle falsehoods associated with climate change, democratic processes, health-related issues, and politics (national/international), the context of mis/disinformation in Morocco tends to include false or inaccurate information about things like social welfare initiatives, corruption involving public figures, or major events evoking strong emotions, among other topics.

Ms Yasmine Laabi and Ms Soukaina Esdaar trace the phenomenon of mis/disinformation in Morocco to the seismic shocks of COVID-19 in 2020—a time when demand for information was very high. As a consequence, people started sharing social media content to fill information voids (the origin of the virus, safety measures, mortality rate, efficacy of vaccines, etc.) that many Moroccans had.

While the outbreak of COVID-19 was clearly marked by a parallel spread of an infodemic, Mr Abdelmoula Boukhraiss noted that mis/disinformation in Morocco seemed to have started a bit earlier in 2020. To him, the uprisings of the Arab Spring led to the rise of citizen journalism in the Arab world. Obviously, that is a form of journalism where ordinary citizens with smartphones and internet connections collect, analyse, and disseminate information/news without necessarily adhering to journalistic ethics and standards. In the absence of key gatekeeping principles, the ground becomes conducive to the dissemination of mis/disinformation.

In short, the Arab Spring and COVID-19 highlighted the importance of fact-checking as a modern journalistic practice to debunk falsehoods and build a society resilient against mis/disinformation.

#### **4.2. Evaluating the efficacy of fact-checking initiatives in Morocco:**

Fact-checking in Morocco can be considered a form of "activism"<sup>14</sup> whose main mission is to reclaim truth in a growing sea of mis/disinformation. Moroccan fact-checkers, like their counterparts elsewhere, have been empowered by such organizations as Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), L'Agence France-Presse (AFP), and the Knight Center for Journalism at the University of Texas. These have been providing Moroccan fact-checkers with trainings, resources, and collaboration opportunities along with awards in recognition of the fine work they do.

In Morocco, two fact-checking initiatives are worth mentioning: Tahaqaq and Gherbal. Tahaqaq was launched in March 2020 by digital entrepreneur Ghassan Benchiheb and a group of enthusiasts. The founder and his team leverage digital technology and journalistic skills to combat mis/disinformation and limit its societal impact in Morocco through fact-checking a variety of false claims disseminated on social media platforms and designing educational materials and awareness campaigns. The platform's work is supported by the Arab Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN), the French Media Development Agency (CFI), and SA7 Project.

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<sup>14</sup> Yachoulti, M. and Bailla, H. (2021). Youth virtual activism in Morocco: The case fact-checkers. In I. Natil (Ed.), *Youth Civic Engagement and Local Peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa: Prospects and Challenges for Community Development*. (1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp.37-47). Routledge.

Tahaqaq has an online presence on a set of social media platforms. However, there seems to be more engagement with its content on Instagram. Users interact more on the platform than anywhere else by liking and commenting on content. The following key figures help with tracking the platform's impact:

Platform	Number of followers
Instagram <a href="https://www.instagram.com/tahaqaqcom/">https://www.instagram.com/tahaqaqcom/</a>	67.1K
Facebook <a href="https://www.facebook.com/tahaqaqcom/">https://www.facebook.com/tahaqaqcom/</a>	20K
X <a href="https://twitter.com/tahaqaqcom">@tahaqaqcom</a>	481
YouTube <a href="https://www.youtube.com/@tahaqaq-7369/featured">https://www.youtube.com/@tahaqaq-7369/featured</a>	27

The content of Tahaqaq focuses primarily on debunking false and misleading information. In a few limited cases, the platform posts educational videos aiming at raising people's awareness of the dangers of mis/disinformation. While Tahaqaq's effort is an ambitious step towards building community resilience against mis/disinformation, we believe that its inaccessible website ([www.tahaqaq.com](http://www.tahaqaq.com)) limits its reach and impact.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> fact-checking initiative in Morocco is of Ghirbal. It was launched in 2024 by digital creator and journalist Sami Saber. Ghirbal has an online presence on Facebook and X, but with very little engagement. Figures speak volumes for the impact of the initiative—2.4K followers on Facebook (<https://web.facebook.com/ghirbalcom>) and 3 followers on X ([@ghirbalcom](https://twitter.com/ghirbalcom)). What's more, Ghirbal's website is inactive (<https://ghirbal.com/>).

We believe that Tahaqaq and Ghirbal are promising initiatives that can deliver good results towards fighting mis/disinformation in Morocco, but such platforms need to forge partnerships with the government, NGOs concerned with the information environment, news media, universities and think tanks, digital investigators, and philanthropists for sustainability and impact.

### 4.3. Challenges to fact-Checking in Morocco:

According to the interviewed fact-checkers, fact-checking in Morocco stumbles over 4 main issues:

- a. **The scale and speed of the proliferation of mis/disinformation:** The sheer volume and rapid spread of mis/disinformation overwhelm fact-checkers, who struggle to keep pace. As the saying goes, "a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth can get its pants on" (McIntyre, 2018, p.122). Debunking a claim takes time, and by the time that happens, more falsehoods emerge, rendering the effort of fact-checkers an uphill battle.
- b. **Shortage in fact-checkers:** The limited availability of professional fact-checkers in Morocco, coupled with the lack of media and digital literacy education in schools, severely hampers efforts to fight the growing threats of information disorder.
- c. **Lack of government support for fact-checkers:** Despite acknowledging the threat of mis/disinformation, the Moroccan government seems to be doing too little to combat the phenomenon. While the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE), an independent constitutional institution with an advisory role to the Moroccan government and parliament, released a 2022 report<sup>15</sup> outlining the problem and offering recommendations, these have not been implemented. CESE specifically suggested two recommendations related to fact-checking<sup>16</sup>:
  - a) Provide financial support, such as through an independent universal service fund (USF), to fact-checking websites to ensure their effective functioning while preserving their impartiality and credibility.

<sup>15</sup> Le Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental. (2022). *Les fake news, de la désinformation à l'accès à une information avérée et disponible*. <https://www.cese.ma/media/2023/03/Avis-Fake-News-VF-3.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.8

- b) Promote initiatives aimed at assisting media professionals in identifying and reporting false information, thereby minimizing its spread.

The interviewed fact-checkers revealed that the Moroccan government currently provides no funding geared towards supporting the efforts of fact-checkers in Morocco.

- d. **Access to reliable information** While the right to information law in Morocco (31.13 law) guarantees citizens the right to access information held by public administrations, elected institutions, and organizations entrusted with public service missions<sup>17</sup>, the interviewed fact-checkers reported that at times obtaining information from public authorities can be a serious challenge. This comes as a confirmation from famous YouTuber Mustapha El Fekkak (AKA Mustapha Swinga)<sup>18</sup> as well. In a Facebook story he shared on 2 February 2025 (screenshot below), El Fekkak stated that “the government makes a series of laws but keeps quiet about them. We [El Fekkak and his team] have to painstakingly dig for the facts and inform the public.”



El Fekkak’s story was posted in a context where labour unions in Morocco called for a general strike nationwide as a response to the Moroccan government’s unpopular CNOPS and CNSS merger bill and strike law bill.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we have argued that fact-checking as a modern journalistic practice has emerged in Morocco not only in response to the wider use of digital technology to share social media content (correct/false) associated with the Arab Spring and Covid-19, which served as accelerating events, but also as a result of a concerted global effort contributed to by Arab fact-checking organizations sensing serious mis/disinformation threats in the MENA region. Within this context, post hoc fact-checking comes as a vital instrument in public life. Fact-checkers contribute to democracy in 3 fundamental ways:

- a) Hold people in power accountable for their actions,
- b) Expose untruths and misleading discourse,
- c) Promote evidence-based reasoning among ordinary citizens.

The primary data we have collected suggest that Morocco is building significant fact-checking capabilities, but these are very much the result of efforts from independent fact-checkers. We believe that combating mis/disinformation requires the

<sup>17</sup> More on the law can be accessed here : <https://www.mcinet.gov.ma/en/content/right-access-information>

<sup>18</sup> Mustapha El Fekkak’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@Mustaphaswingaofficial>

involvement of different actors—the government (communication, funding, legislation, and coordination), academics (research), civil society (reaching out to the public & reporting), media outlets (informing), and fact-checkers (constant monitoring). Furthermore, ordinary citizens must also be involved in the fight against information disorder as they tend to be particularly susceptible to it. In this regard, media and digital literacy should be essential for students to study at school. Ideally, this should be a well-crafted educational program targeting primarily individuals aged 16-34. The choice of teenagers and young adults is predicated on the fact that individuals from these age groups tend to be more active on social media than any other age group in terms of the time they spend there and the number of platforms they are active on engaging with content by commenting, sharing, liking, etc.

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