

Guardians of the Digital Public

The Emergence of Fact-Checking as a Hybrid Professional Community

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, fact-checking has emerged as a prominent response to growing concerns about misinformation, public trust, and the integrity of public communication. What began as a marginal journalistic routine has developed into a specialized, highly visible practice that operates across national borders and institutional domains. Today, fact-checking is carried out by a diverse set of actors who share a core verification practice but are embedded in heterogeneous media systems, governance contexts, and market environments. This raises important questions about how fact-checkers establish and sustain professional expertise, autonomy, and authority in the absence of formal institutional protections.

This article examines fact-checking as an emerging professional project shaped by transnational coordination and dense interdependencies with platforms, governance bodies, academia, and markets. Drawing on the literature on hybrid and connective professionalism, it analyzes how fact-checkers collectively organize verification practices, negotiate autonomy, and reproduce authority under conditions of institutional complexity. By tracing how professional claims are enacted across expertise, autonomy, and authority, the article contributes to a better understanding of how new forms of professionalism take shape in contemporary information governance.

The Global Rise of Fact-Checking

Over the past two decades, fact-checking has moved from an internal journalistic quality routine to a globally visible practice that now occupies a central place in debates about misinformation and public trust. Modern fact-checking is a more specialized and public-facing activity that identifies factual claims, evaluates them against primary sources and expert knowledge, and presents them to audiences with explicit accuracy judgments. What distinguishes this practice is not only its focus on discrete, checkable claims, but also its emphasis on transparency, procedural rigor, and the communicative staging of verification as a civic service (Graves and Amazeen 2019).

The origins of this development are often traced to the early 2000s in the United States, where projects such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact were created in response to growing unease about misleading political advertising and the erosion of newsroom capacities. These initiatives formalized practices that had previously existed only in ad hoc form, such as the systematic scrutiny of campaign claims and the use of visual rating devices to signal degrees of truthfulness (Aspray and Cortada 2019; Graves 2016b). Their emergence coincided with a broader reconfiguration of the media landscape, marked by the rise of online news, the fragmentation of audiences, and the intensification of strategic political communication.

As digital platforms became central arenas of public discourse, fact-checking gained new prominence. Social media did not merely increase the volume and speed of circulating claims; it also transformed the visibility of falsehoods and public awareness of misinformation as a societal problem. Fact-checkers capitalized on this attention, presenting their work as a response to viral deception and as an attempt to rebuild trust through demonstrably evidence-based reasoning (Brandtzaeg et al. 2018). From the early 2010s onward, similar initiatives began to appear across the globe, from Europe and Latin America to Africa and Asia, often inspired by American models but reshaped by local conditions.

This global expansion produced a field that is strikingly diverse. In Western countries, fact-checking mainly took root within established news organizations, where specialized desks extended journalistic routines of verification into a distinct editorial product. Elsewhere, fact-checking has been embedded in universities, civil society organizations, or civic-technology startups, where it is combined with research, data analysis, or media literacy work. These differences reflect not only organizational choices but also the ways in which fact-checking is shaped by local media systems, regulatory environments, and political opportunity structures (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018; Graves 2016a; Lauer 2024).

Despite this heterogeneity, fact-checkers are increasingly connected through transnational linkages that have been institutionalized through a growing set of international and regional meta-organizations. These bodies act as coordination hubs rather than fact-checking actors themselves, convening practitioners to facilitate peer learning and cross-border collaborations, for example in joint monitoring of global events like G20 meetings or shared claim databases on global health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lauer 2022). Furthermore, they have articulated codes of practice and ethical principles, which they promote through credential-based membership programs. These programs increasingly operate as quasi-regulatory instruments, shaping access to funding streams and other services while also serving as signaling devices toward relevant stakeholders and the public more generally.

Taken together, these developments reflect an increasingly professionalized community with a shared collective identity rooted in a consolidated set of practices. Fact-checkers have thus become a recognizable actor that attracts interest from other domains and seeks to expand its presence into new areas. Equipped with organizational representation, the community now provides not only fact-checking for the public but also expertise to governing bodies, data for research, and services for business partners. This expansion reflects mounting claims to jurisdiction over information integrity in public discourse, justified through appeals to a broader public interest. At the same time, fact-checking is increasingly entangled with economic interests, as it becomes embedded in funding regimes, platform partnerships, and service contracts. These dynamics invite closer examination of fact-checking as a professional project and the forms of professionalism it enacts.

Hybrid Professionals and Connective Professionalism

In recent sociological and organizational research, the study of professionals has shifted from idealized, insulated occupational groups toward roles and practices embedded in complex organizational and inter-organizational environments (Brock 2021). This shift reflects the erosion of classical professional

arrangements based on strong occupational closure, stable jurisdictions, and relative autonomy, foregrounding professionals' growing embeddedness in firms, networks, and governance regimes that require them to operate across institutional and normative boundaries (Evetts 2013; Muzio et al. 2013; Noordegraaf 2016). While closely associated with research on public sector reform and the rise of managerialism, particularly in healthcare, education, and social services, similar dynamics are increasingly observable beyond these areas, extending their relevance to a wider range of organizational and governance contexts (e.g., Kanon and Andersson 2023).

A focal concept in this literature is *hybrid professionals*, capturing how professionals cope with multiple, often conflicting institutional logics by integrating competencies and responsibilities rather than strictly separating them (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015). In organizational contexts, the term refers to actors who combine professional expertise with managerial, administrative, or coordinative functions, operating at the intersection of professional autonomy and organizational control. Empirical studies describe these actors as mediators who translate professional standards into organizational objectives while adapting managerial demands to professional norms and identities (e.g., Alamaa et al. 2026; Kislov et al. 2016). More abstractly, the concept highlights how "professionals within an area of expertise [...] develop a relational capability vis-à-vis expertise in other areas [...] in order to cope with external pressures from the environment" (Blomgren and Waks 2015, p. 83).

Read in this more general way, the concept of hybrid professionals can be understood not only as a role configuration but as a broader transformation in the way professionalism is enacted under conditions of institutional complexity. Such a view brings to the fore how professional work is reorganized as it becomes increasingly embedded in organizational, technological, and governance infrastructures that mediate access to resources, recognition, and authority. Rather than insulating expertise from external influence, it highlights the growing importance of relational, coordinative, and boundary-spanning work in producing and sustaining jurisdiction and legitimacy under conditions of interdependence and competing normative orders, thus changing the notion of what professionalism itself means.

In his work on protective versus connective professionalism, Mirko Noordegraaf (2020) advances this relational and processual nature of expertise, autonomy, and authority in conceptual terms. The approach starts from the premise that professionals today must continuously enact these dimensions in relation to others, including clients, colleagues from other domains, organizational actors, and external stakeholders. In effect, expertise becomes situational and networked rather than strictly internalized; autonomy is exercised within interdependent structures rather than in isolation; and authority is co-produced through ongoing interactions rather than solely grounded in occupational status.

These features make connective professionalism particularly salient in settings where problem-solving requires collaboration across institutional boundaries, such as efforts to safeguard public information integrity. It therefore provides a useful framework for analyzing how (emerging) professional communities claim jurisdiction and authority while navigating overlapping economic, governance, and normative demands. However, as several scholars have noted, this framework should not be understood as a distinct mode of professionalism that operates independently of, or replaces, protective considerations (Adams et al. 2020; Faulconbridge et al. 2021). Rather, connective and protective actions remain deeply interdependent, as professional expertise, autonomy, and authority rely on both within-group closure and external recognition.

From this perspective, the central question is less whether connective professionalism supplants protective forms than how their interrelation is qualitatively reconfigured. How do (aspiring) professionals navigate combinations of protective and connective logics in complex settings marked by high interdependence across institutional domains? Which new forms of protection and connection emerge to sustain professional expertise, autonomy, and authority?

Fact-Checking Between Expertise, Autonomy, and Authority

Fact-checking offers a particularly instructive case for exploring these questions, as it represents an emerging professional project that seeks to establish authority in relation to a problem spanning multiple societal actors and institutional arenas. This project is driven by a diverse set of nationally embedded actors who recognize each other through a shared verification practice, resulting in a remarkably consolidated transnational community. Within this community, fact-checkers sustain a collective identity, harmonize expertise and methods, and seek public recognition and jurisdiction. By tracing how this community organizes itself and engages with relevant stakeholders, the following discussion shows how protective and connective logics shape its configuration as an emerging professional actor. It proceeds along three dimensions—expertise, autonomy, and authority—examining how these are enacted in key activities and organizational arrangements.

Professional expertise

The defining hallmark of fact-checkers is the practice of methodically verifying public (political) claims and determining their truthfulness, usually in the form of ratings. This practice has been harmonized and formalized considerably over the last decade: from ad hoc approaches developed in relative isolation in the early stages, to increasingly aligned methods and tools shaped through intensive peer exchange and stabilized in codified standards validated by collective bodies, such as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN). As a result, verification practices and outputs have become increasingly comparable across settings, providing new possibilities for collective knowledge production and coordinated action at the transnational level.

These possibilities extend fact-checkers' knowledge base and capacity to serve their primary constituency: the general public. They are most visible in cross-border verification projects that expand both the scale and scope of monitoring and public information provision (e.g., CoronaVirusFacts Alliance 2023). Less visible, but arguably more significant, are the resulting insights into transnational mis- and disinformation flows, their dominant themes and formats, and the actors involved. Their significance is twofold: they enable improved strategic responses and practical approaches, fostering continuous adaptation and strengthening public-facing verification outputs, while also generating forms of expertise that gain particular value for stakeholders across institutional domains, most notably governance, academia, and the market.

Within the domain of public governance, fact-checkers are increasingly regarded as recognized experts whose first-hand experience with online mis- and disinformation constitutes a valuable resource for policymakers. This is particularly evident in the European Union, where officials engage with the community at its annual meetings as well as in formal high-level stakeholder consultations (European Commission 2018) to discuss shared concerns and policy positions—a role that fact-checkers are increasingly demanding worldwide (Tardáguila and Mantas 2021).

In academia, fact-checkers' insights are similarly taken up, primarily in the form of datasets of verified content and sources that serve as empirical resources for the study of misinformation and public communication (e.g., MediaVault 2026). While remaining highly amenable to research collaboration in principle, the community increasingly frames these resources as economic assets and has begun to consider remuneration for access and reuse. This shift is not driven by financial considerations alone but also reflects a more confident professional self-understanding that “fact-checkers are really the only ones who can do this tedious work and actually can provide an assessment of content veracity at large scale” (Giovanni Zagni, personal interview, 27 Feb. 2024).

In the market, finally, fact-checkers' efforts to position their expertise as a distinctive professional asset target various groups and objectives. The most strategic targets are internet platforms, which command not only vast financial resources but also key components of today's public communication infrastructure through which mis- and disinformation circulate. Gaining privileged access to these platforms is therefore crucial both for securing funding and for positioning fact-checkers as central epistemic intermediaries in the governance of online communication (see also below). To this end, the community leverages its verification expertise to complement platforms' technologically oriented self-understanding with an epistemic capacity essential to maintaining healthy public communication—or, in platform parlance, a better product. Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking program (Meta 2025) and the similar partnership with TikTok (TikTok 2026) follow this logic, while Google has pursued a comparable objective by integrating fact-checks through a dedicated tagging system, albeit without direct remuneration (ClaimReview 2026).

Apart from that, fact-checkers increasingly engage in training and consulting for media organizations, signaling the specialization of their expertise even within a closely related professional field while marking emerging distinctions vis-à-vis traditional journalism. They have also begun to offer verification services to corporate actors, positioning their expertise as a tool for safeguarding factual accuracy in public communication and mitigating reputational risks, notably in the context of sustainability reporting and greenwashing. This development partly responds to tightening financing conditions but also underscores the relational value of fact-checkers' expertise across adjacent domains, with important implications for autonomy and authority (Serafini et al. 2026).

Professional autonomy

For fact-checkers, autonomy is first and foremost a matter of editorial independence, epitomized by discretionary control over the selection and assessment of claims according to their professional logic. This logic is grounded in a commitment to the public interest and centers on non-partisanship and methodical rigor. The codification of these principles in transparent standards, and their community-wide implementation, thus become key instruments for insulating verification practices from political and commercial influence. As an emerging professional actor, these efforts are strongly community-driven and rely on collective rule-setting and peer oversight, using shared standards to demarcate legitimate practice and safeguard compliance (Mantzaris 2016).

In this context, meta-organizations like the IFCN and the EFCSN play a pivotal role in articulating binding principles, administering certification schemes, and promoting adherence. These governance efforts are non-trivial, as they must accommodate the diversity of fact-checkers rooted in highly heterogeneous national environments and operating under varying institutional constraints. They rely on ongoing negotiation and consensus-building to reconcile divergent professional traditions, legal frameworks, and political sensitivities (Graves and Lauer 2020). At the same time, credible certification and visible standardization are essential for distinguishing legitimate fact-checkers from bad actors and presenting the community as a recognizable professional actor.

These strongly community-based meta-organizations structure autonomy in other ways by mediating fact-checkers' relations with external stakeholders. In representing the community, they not only develop shared positions but also act as delegated interlocutors vis-à-vis policymakers, platforms, and other external actors (Lauer and Graves 2025). This enables more strategic engagement through a collective voice and shields individual fact-checkers from capture, while also reducing power asymmetries by centralizing negotiations in meta-organizational intermediaries.

The evolution of Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program provides a particularly instructive example of this dynamic. Emerging from an initiative by the IFCN, which publicly appealed to Mark Zuckerberg (IFCN 2016), the program institutionalized a layered governance arrangement. Meta relied on fact-checkers'

certification by the IFCN while retaining bilateral contractual control over individual fact-checking organizations (Meta 2025). Within this structure, the IFCN acted as a collective negotiator, advancing procedural claims such as editorial independence in claim selection and demands for greater transparency and data access (Mantzaris 2017). Yet it also encountered firm limits where platform policy priorities prevailed, most notably the exclusion of political actors from verification (Mantas 2021).

Professional authority

Professional authority is grounded in specialized expertise and relative autonomy yet exercised through jurisdictional control that depends on both institutional anchoring and public recognition. For fact-checkers, the latter is particularly salient, given their status as an emerging transnational community lacking formal institutional protections and operating in a highly public-facing domain. Under these conditions, authority remains fragile and must be continually reproduced through credibility and audience trust, which are cultivated by a range of strategies operating across transnational and local levels.

At the transnational level, fact-checkers highlight their status as a globally operating community that shares a distinct professional practice, foregrounding transparency as a cornerstone of trustworthiness. The community's codified standards specify transparency requirements concerning methods, organizational structures, and funding, while also making accreditation and review processes publicly accessible (IFCN Code of Principles n. d.). At the local level, fact-checking organizations reference this global community and its professional bodies to signal legitimacy to domestic audiences and defend their jurisdictional claims against political challengers. This is reflected in the prominent display of certified membership, yet also references to prominent community members such as *The Washington Post*, Pulitzer Prize-awarded *PolitiFact*, or *Chequeado*, winner of the Gabriel García Márquez Award (e.g., ColombiaCheck 2026). Likewise, the transnational community has gained symbolic recognition in broader institutional arenas, for example through acknowledgment by the Paris Peace Forum for the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance (Mantas 2020) and through the IFCN's nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 (Örsek 2021).

Apart from that, jurisdictional claims and authority materialize in the community's relations with external stakeholders, most notably Internet platforms and governance bodies. This is particularly evident in partnerships with Meta, TikTok, and Google (see above), in which fact-checkers are formally recognized as independent evaluators of disputed content, thereby operationalizing their jurisdiction within platform governance arrangements. In the realm of governance, such validation is more scattered and indirect, taking the form of symbolic and infrastructural acknowledgments, such as the World Health Organization's census of fact-checking organizations covering health-related claims (WHO 2020) or fact-checking support projects initiated by UNESCO (UNESCO 2021). These dynamics are most pronounced in the European Union, where fact-checkers have become institutionally embedded through initiatives such as the European Digital Media Observatory (European Commission 2025) and as a designated component of the Commission's Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission 2022).

Discussion

The global rise of fact-checking offers a particularly instructive case for examining connective professionalism, in which expertise, autonomy, and authority are not secured through occupational closure or formal jurisdictional monopolies but are continuously enacted through relations with heterogeneous external actors. Rather than insulating professional work from organizational, economic, and political environments, fact-checkers operate within dense interdependencies that require coordination across institutional boundaries while safeguarding professional norms. Professionalism is thus not located in

stable structures alone, but in ongoing relational work that connects verification expertise to platforms, governance bodies, funders, and publics.

This connective orientation is most visible in how fact-checkers' expertise is mobilized and valued across domains. Through transnational coordination and standardization, the community has consolidated verification practices into a recognizable and portable form of expertise deployable at scale. This expertise gains authority not only through peer recognition but also through uptake by external actors: platforms integrate fact-checkers' judgments into content moderation systems; policymakers consult them as experts on misinformation dynamics; and scholars rely on their datasets for empirical research. In each case, professional knowledge is not simply applied but translated into different institutional logics, underscoring the centrality of boundary-spanning competencies.

At the same time, connective professionalism reshapes autonomy. Editorial independence remains a core professional value, yet it is increasingly mediated through collective governance arrangements rather than exercised in isolation. Meta-organizations such as the IFCN and the EFCSN play a pivotal role by articulating shared standards, administering certification, and representing the community in negotiations with powerful stakeholders. These arrangements enable collective action in settings marked by pronounced power asymmetries, particularly vis-à-vis global platforms. At the same time, they introduce new dependencies, as autonomy becomes contingent on negotiated access, contractual terms, and compliance with externally defined frameworks. Autonomy is thus exercised relationally—within, rather than outside of, organizational and governance infrastructures.

Professional authority emerges as a co-produced and inherently fragile achievement. Lacking formal institutional protections, fact-checkers rely heavily on public recognition and external validation to sustain their jurisdictional claims. Transparency, peer certification, and transnational coordination function as internal mechanisms to stabilize authority, while partnerships with platforms and acknowledgments by governance bodies operationalize it externally. Yet such recognition remains uneven and reversible, varying across political contexts and governance regimes. Authority is therefore not secured once and for all but must be continually reproduced through credible performance, visible independence, and strategic engagement with stakeholders.

Importantly, this analysis underscores that connective professionalism does not displace protective elements of professionalism but reconfigures them. Boundary work, standard-setting, and peer oversight remain central, yet are oriented less toward exclusion and closure than toward enabling connection under controlled conditions. Protection is achieved not by retreating from interdependence but by collectively managing it. In this sense, fact-checking illustrates how emerging professional projects adapt to institutional complexity by weaving together protective and connective logics, redefining what it means to act professionally in highly networked domains of public governance.

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