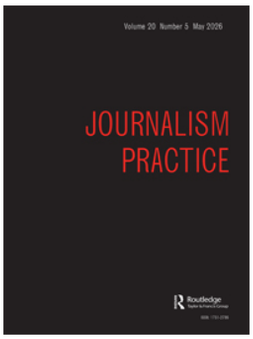

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Journalism Practice

ISSN: 1751-2786 (Print) 1751-2794 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjop20

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To cite this article: Christian Nounkeu Tatchou, Chikezie E. Uzuegbunam, Chinedu Richard Ononiwu & Enock Magack Masaki (07 May 2026): Fact-Checkers' Perceptions of Their Roles and Challenges in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, Journalism Practice, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2026.2668491

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2026.2668491

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Fact-Checkers' Perceptions of Their Roles and Challenges in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa

Christian Nounkeu Tatchou[a], Chikezie E. Uzuegbunam[b], Chinedu Richard Ononiwu[c] and Enock Magack Masaki[d]

[a]Demicom/Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden; [b]School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa; [c]Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria; [d]School of Communication, Culture & Media Studies, Howard University, Washington, DC, USA

ABSTRACT

Fact-checking is the journalistic activity of tracking and counteracting false and misleading claims. It has gained prominence over the last decade as a response to the overwhelming spread of falsehoods mostly on social media. Meanwhile, while scholarly evidence shows that fact-checkers perceive their roles in very different ways, there is insufficient scholarly attention paid to Sub-Saharan Africa. In view of this argument, this study investigates how fact-checkers in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa perceive their roles and the challenges they encounter within distinct political and media environments. Theoretically, the study is underpinned by scholarship on journalistic cultures, political and media systems framework. The study adopted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 19 fact-checkers from the four Sub-Saharan African countries. The findings reveal that the roles of fact-checkers in the countries of study are not monolithic but are significantly influenced by the political context, societal norms, and the evolving nature of misinformation. The research lays emphasis on the need for tailored fact-checking strategies that address diverse challenges.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 September 2025
Accepted 9 April 2026

KEYWORDS
Fact-checking; disinformation; fact-checkers; journalistic cultures; media systems; political systems; role perceptions; Sub-saharan Africa

Introduction

The spread of false and misleading claims in the public sphere has gained in prominence worldwide over the last decade. This rise has been connected - at least partly – to the advent of digital and social media, which enable anyone to bypass the gatekeeping in news media and directly disseminate information to the public (Bennett and Livingston 2018). Recent advances in artificial intelligence are also being used to create and disseminate falsehoods (Shin, Koerber, and Lim 2025). Misinformation and disinformation are everywhere and span diverse issues, from vaccination to global warming to diverse

CONTACT Christian Nounkeu Tatchou christian.nounkeutatchou@miun.se
Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2026.2668491.

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political and social debates (Tsfati et al. 2020), with potentially harmful consequences for democratic processes and for society (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018). To counteract false claims, media organizations as well as organizations outside of the media sphere have been engaging in fact-checking, which in this context refers to the journalistic activity of tracking, assessing, and reporting about the facticity of news reports, public information, and public statements (Koliska and Roberts 2025). The movement has been growing with the number of fact-checking outlets increasing from a dozen before 2016, mainly based in the US and Europe, to about 450 by June 2025, established in more than 100 countries (Ryan 2025). Although Meta ended its third-party fact-checking program across all its platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Threads, Horne and Craig (2025), who focussed on the US, found that most people still want fact-checkers on social media.

Indeed, there is evidence that fact-checkers perceive their missions in very different ways, crucially because they operate in a wide variety of media and political systems. However, insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to sub-Saharan Africa. In view of this paucity, this study explores how fact-checkers working in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, four countries in sub-Saharan Africa, perceive their roles in the media ecosystem as well as in society. First, we review the literature about fact-checking in Africa.

Fact-Checking in Africa: A Literature Review

Fact-checking, as an essential aspect of journalism, serves to correct these information disorders – disinformation and misinformation – and acts as a mechanism through which institutions can establish and maintain credibility within democratic societies. Fact-checking can enhance clarity and context in political discourse while increasing the public's familiarity with information verification processes (Amazeen 2015). Experimental evidence supports that individuals who actively seek out fact-checking resources exhibit higher information literacy than those who do not engage in these practices (Amazeen 2015).

Furthermore, the intersection of fact-checking and social media has become crucial for mediating public discourse, especially regarding political misinformation. The challenges posed by platforms like X and Facebook necessitate developing new strategies for delivering corrective information, as misinformation often spreads more virally than factual corrections (Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2017). This discrepancy raises questions regarding fact-checking's potential to serve its purpose amidst competing narratives and the overwhelming prevalence of misinformation on social media.

Fact-checking is growing worldwide as a tool for democratizing information and mitigating misinformation. Traditional media gatekeepers used to decide what was "true" or "newsworthy." Fact-checking shifts this power. By using transparent, evidence-based methodologies, fact-checkers provide citizens with the tools to verify claims themselves, effectively "open-sourcing" the skills once reserved for investigative journalists. In Africa, this is especially important because of low media and information literacy. In the African context, "fact-checking platforms have assumed a pivotal role in the fight against misinformation […], employing a variety of methodologies and specialized knowledge to authenticate claims and deliver accurate information to the citizenry" (Aliagan and Daranijo

2025, 54). In the context of African political landscapes, the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives is closely linked to local realities. Literature suggests that fact-checkers in Africa encounter unique challenges, including cultural contexts, political environments, and varying trust levels among audiences that shape their practices (Cunliffe-Jones 2020). For instance, Africa Check, (the continent's first independent non-profit fact-checking organization launched in South Africa in 2012), employs a holistic audience-centred approach, incorporating community engagement in their mission to combat misinformation, by using platforms like WhatsApp to spread timely, factual messages to users, obtaining feedback from the public via the same channel, and during local gatherings (Cunliffe-Jones 2020). Understanding these local contexts enables tailored interventions to address misinformation, fostering an environment conducive to civic engagement and empowerment.

Empirical studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa on fact-checkers' perceptions of their journalistic role are very limited – this gives impetus to this study's focus on exploring how fact-checkers in Africa think about and understand their journalistic role in various contexts. Exploring "how fact-checkers understand their work seems to support the critical juncture hypothesis" (Amazeen 2019, 555). This means that the lived experiences and perceptions of global fact-checkers align with the idea that fact-checking emerges during moments of deep systemic change – what political communication scholars call critical junctures (Amazeen 2019). A study of fact-checkers' perceptions in Mali and Ethiopia (Badji, Orgeret, and Mutsvairo 2024) reveals that fact-checkers in both countries perceive themselves not merely as debunkers of false claims but as vital defenders of public understanding, civic empowerment, media literacy promoters, and democratic consolidation in the face of rising disinformation, particularly in conflict-affected contexts. It is possible that fact-checkers in Africa often find themselves in a peripheral position relative to mainstream media outlets, yet their influence on journalistic practices and public discourse is growing. Literature from other parts of the Majority World or the Global South reveals that journalists view fact-checking as pivotal in restoring credibility to media: to bolster social trust and positively contribute to democratic processes in contexts characterized by silenced discourses (Pérez, Rojano, and Rosa 2021). The intersections between fact-checking, democracy, and social trust are further reinforced by organizations like Africa Check, committed to fostering media literacy awareness among the public (Cunliffe-Jones 2020).

Despite earnest efforts to establish fact-checking as a reliable practice, challenges persist, particularly with the rise of alternative facts and populist narratives on social media. As the digital world advances, with growing information disorders, the need for fact-checkers who uphold information credibility and journalistic impartiality becomes even more urgent. The realities of combating misinformation in Africa are complicated by resource limitations and infrastructural constraints impacting the functionality of local fact-checking organizations (Park 2023).

Moreover, Cheruiyot and Conill (2018) emphasize the pivotal role of non-journalistic entities, such as Africa Check, Code for Africa and Open Up, in spearheading fact-checking initiatives that span several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Positioned outside traditional media, these organizations significantly shape fact-checking processes and reformulate public discourse around trust and accountability (Cheruiyot and Conill 2018). This positioning gives them a kind of fluidity, since they equally comprise journalistic and non-

journalistic actors that are essential for rethinking fact-checking norms and practices in Africa. This then promotes a sense of collective responsibility for the integrity of information shared within communities. As the global discourse on fact-checking progresses, particularly in the African context, recognizing local adaptations and innovations becomes crucial. Due to the continent's peculiarities, there is a need for collaborative approaches that integrate technology, community engagement, and regional contextuality as pathways for advancing a more robust understanding of fact-checking for deepening democratic engagement and combating misinformation.

Truly, research argues that journalistic cultures influence how journalists comprehend and practice their profession (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). Thus, to scrutinize fact-checkers' self-role perceptions, it is fundamental to consider the concept of journalistic cultures.

Journalistic Cultures and the Roles of Fact-Checkers

The concept of journalistic cultures should be comprehended as consensus between journalists within specific contexts, toward a common understanding and cultural identity of journalism (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2017). According to Lauer and Graves (2024) and Hallin and Mancini (2004), political and media environments provide contextual conditions within which journalistic cultures are negotiated.

Hanitzsch et al. (2019, 168) argue that "cross-national differences in cognitive journalistic roles are primarily related to the way journalists emphasize four general role dimensions in their work: monitorial, collaborative, interventionist, and accommodative roles." Meanwhile, these are ideal types of articulations of the various role dimensions likely to be emphasized in particular political and media contexts. It is not that journalists assume fixed and monolithic roles (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

Instead, at the performative level, mainstream media's roles are often multilayered and hybrid (Mellado et al. 2024; Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Mellado et al. 2017). This means that "different roles are present across a wide range of societal contexts, while at the micro level, the different roles tend to co-occur -even roles that might be thought to be incompatible" (Hallin, Mellado, and Mancini 2023, p.225). It is for that reason that Raemy and Hellmueller (2024) invoke the tension between ideals and the realities of the contexts within which journalists operate.

That being said, the monitorial role is about the ideal of journalism being the "fourth estate," the watchdog holding those in power to account. This role dimension of journalism is generally embraced in established democracies. In the words of Hanitzsch et al. (2019, 166), "the monitorial capacity of journalism as an institution to hold ruling powers to account is slightly more pronounced in democratic societies, but it also resonates in less democratic contexts."

When it comes to the collaborative role dimension, the authors argue that it refers to journalism supportive of the governance of authorities in power. They further explain that the collaborative role of journalism is usually embraced in countries with lower levels of democracy, where the states constrain media freedom and political liberties. In such contexts, journalism is perceived by professionals as an instrument for supporting government policy and providing a positive image of political leadership. Concerning the interventionist role dimension, Hanitzsch et al. (2019) indicate that it points more to journalism that advocates for a cause, pursues a particular mission, and promotes certain

values. The authors argue that interventionist role is more supported in less developed countries and facing disruptive challenges. Thus, in countries that are less developed socioeconomically and/or in political climates restricting journalistic freedoms, journalism is commonly perceived as a tool for advocating social change, influencing the public. Regarding the accommodative role dimension, it speaks of journalism that seeks to provide the audience with the information that appeals the most to the public, which journalists see more as consumers than citizens. Accommodative journalism focuses on providing entertainment, relaxation, advice for daily life, and news that attracts the largest audience. The accommodative role is mostly associated with developed countries where the media systems are strongly market driven.

Drawing inspiration from Hanitzsch (2007), Hanitzsch et al. (2019) emphasize that theoretically connected dimensions are not mutually exclusive. This means, for example, that journalism which is not interventionist is not necessarily accommodative, but a neutral disseminator. Similarly, the opposite of collaborative journalism is not monitorial journalism; rather, it is adversarial journalism. Clearly, contexts matter when it comes to examining journalistic cultures and how journalists perceive their roles. In that respect, the political landscape of Sub-Saharan Africa is very diverse, comprising autocracies, hybrid regimes, and stable democracies (Hatungimana and Wuthrich 2025; Kratou and Laakso 2022). Therefore, Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa are interesting as case studies because they are prototypes of these various political environments of sub-Saharan Africa.

Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa

Cameroon is situated in Central Africa, with a total population of about 30 million (UNPFA 2025). According to Ndongmo (2021), Cameroon is officially a democracy with universal suffrage, but the effectiveness of democracy is undermined by an autocratic regime. Concerning the media environment in Cameroon, Nfor (2024) asserts that the liberalization of the media landscape in the 1990s, following a return to multipartyism, was marked by the proliferation of media outlets. Also, internet penetration has grown significantly in Cameroon over the last 20 years, from 0.25 per cent in 2000 to 23.1 per cent in 2020 (Ndongmo 2021). Disinformation has become a concern in Cameroon, with falsehoods spread mostly on social media on various subjects, including the Covid pandemic (Nche 2023), the Anglophone crisis (Nounkeu 2020), as well as elections (Toussi 2024). To combat the phenomenon, independent fact-checking organizations have been launched, including DataCheck, PesaCheck, Stopintox, Cameroon Check, 237Check, Africa Check, AfricTivistes, Defyhatenow, and Stopblablacam.

Kenya is situated in East Africa and has a population of about 53 million as of mid-2025 (UNFPA 2025). The nation remains overwhelmingly youthful, with approximately 75% of Kenyans under the age of 35, vibrant on digital platforms for social, political and economic change (Magack, David, and Ogodo 2025). Kenya is a hybrid democracy (Hatungimana and Wuthrich 2025). Electoral periods have witnessed deliberate campaigns of falsehoods disseminated through social media, targeting ethnic tensions, political legitimacy and public health narratives. Research highlights how platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were instrumental in spreading claims of electoral fraud, ethnically charged propaganda, and dubious health remedies during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic

(Matanji et al. 2024). In response, Kenya has cultivated a robust, albeit fragmented, fact-checking ecosystem. Organizations such as Africa Check and PesaCheck have institutionalized verification practices, evaluating claims made by political leaders, media actors, and viral online content.

Nigeria is situated in West Africa and counts about 237 million inhabitants (UNFPA 2025). Jatau and Köprülü (2024) describe the country as a hybrid political system that combines authoritarian and liberal democratic principles. The media landscape in Nigeria is an expansive terrain that includes broadcast, print, new and digital news platforms (Apejoye and Mutsvairo 2024). However, repressive laws and regulatory instruments are used to intimidate and silence journalists (Oyinloye et al. 2024). According to Adebajo and Ogundipe (2019), the problem of disinformation is a major concern in the Nigerian context and the need for fact-checking strategies has become increasingly paramount. Nigeria's 2023 election, for example, was marked by important disinformation campaigns, which met with the response of independent fact-checking organizations including Africa Check, Dubawa, and FactCheckHub.

South Africa is classified as a deliberative democracy (Saka 2021). According to Jones and Hadland (2024), freedom of the press in this country of about 63 million inhabitants is constitutionally protected and generally respected in practice. Its media ecosystem is large and mixed, with public, commercial and community players across broadcast, print and digital platforms (National Association of Broadcasters 2024). Internet adoption has grown rapidly, with mobile and social platforms central to information flows (Kemp 2024). Recent digital reports show high smartphone use and rising social media engagement (WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, X), with social platforms important both for personal communication and news discovery. In addition, news consumption is hybrid: broadcast TV and radio still reach the broadest audiences while online news and social feeds are increasingly primary for younger cohorts. Surveys and the Reuters Digital News Report document declining newsroom resources, persistent trust concerns, and elevated public worry about misinformation, especially around elections and public health (Newman et al. 2024). High WhatsApp use and closed group messaging amplify the rapid spread of rumours; recent election cycles saw viral false claims (deepfakes, rigging narratives) that prompted public and platform responses. The fact-checking landscape in South Africa is dominated by Africa Check. Africa Check is an independent non-profit with a Johannesburg base and regional offices scattered across Africa and produces stand-alone fact checks and media partnerships.

In view of the foregoing, we formulate two research questions to guide our empirical investigation.

RQ1: How do fact-checkers perceive their roles in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa?

RQ2: How do fact-checkers perceive the challenges of their work in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa?

Methodology and Data Collection

In-depth interviews with the selected fact-checkers in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa were conducted to gather insights into the perceptions and challenges of

their work. Nineteen fact-checkers were interviewed in total including five from Cameroon, five from Kenya, five from Nigeria, and four from South Africa. The qualitative research approach is particularly suited for exploring context-dependent phenomena where descriptive insights are required rather than numerical generalizations (Creswell and Poth 2018). It is key to note that qualitative methods are ideal for understanding complex social contexts by capturing the lived experiences of the participants (Flick 2014). Semi-structured interviews, which are open-ended but guided by core questions, allow participants to answer in their own words while enabling the researcher to probe further when necessary. Each interview was scheduled to last 45–60 min and was recorded on audio with participants' consent. Recording the interviews helped to guarantee correct transcription.

Considering the researchers' awareness of ongoing fact-checking initiatives within each respective country, participants were selected through purposive sampling. This non-probability sampling strategy was employed to identify individuals who possessed substantial expertise and practical experience in fact-checking practices. Accordingly, participants were chosen based on the relevance of their professional background and the extent to which their insights aligned with the objectives of the study.

This sampling method is particularly well-suited for qualitative inquiries where the goal is depth rather than representativeness (Palinkas et al. 2015). In this study, professional fact-checkers from multiple Sub-Saharan African countries were deliberately selected to maximize diversity in African experiences and African contexts (see Appendix A). We also ensured the diversity of participants in demographic aspects such as gender and age. Both fact-checkers working for media organizations and those working for organizations outside of the media sphere were interviewed in this study. The same interview guide was used for all the interviews. We explored questions such as the role they play as fact-checkers, their priorities and processes in fact-checking, their motivations as fact-checkers and their limitations in fact-checking. Most of the interviews were conducted virtually using digital platforms, including Zoom, Google Meet, and Kennet, with the exception of Cameroun – one of the authors conducted the interviews in person during a visit to the country. The interviews took place concurrently between January and August 2025. Audio recordings of the interviews were transferred to the online version of NVivo for transcription, and subsequent analysis was conducted with the latest software version of NVivo. Prior to participation, all interviewees were provided with written ethical guidelines outlining the objectives and procedures of the study, along with informed consent forms to ensure voluntary and informed engagement.

The data were analysed using a thematic approach, following the six-stage recursive process of familiarization, coding, and theme development as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). Moving beyond surface-level descriptions, we explored the underlying assumptions within each of the country cases within the data. During the initial coding phase, we identified specific labels by comparing the fact-checkers' descriptions of their daily routines and challenges against the broader political and media systems of the four countries.

These initial labels were then systematically clustered to develop the study's two overarching themes for each country. The analysis captures the tension between factcheckers'

professional aspirations and the restrictive political environment they operate in. We ensured that the final themes accurately reflected the unique socio-political nuances of each Sub-Saharan African context studied.

Results and Discussion

Perceived Roles of Fact-Checkers in Cameroon: Factchecking as Human-Interest Verification Under Political Constraint

The Cameroonian participants perceived fact-checking as an instrument essentially for debunking false claims that are spread on the internet. However, the fact-checkers also acknowledged that they are mostly interested in claims of human-interest nature (see Appendix B). Rarely would they embark on verifying claims made by members of government or top holders of political offices because of the fear of repression by the authoritarian regime in power in Cameroon. This is what participants had to say:

> We live in fear of government's repression. Even citizens are not willing to be interviewed by journalists, because you never know what will happen to you because of your opinions. We do not want to face the repression from the authorities; we mostly limit our fact-checking to human interest stories. (Cameroonian factchecker 1).

We verify claims spread on the internet about fire outbreaks, road accidents, information about a footballer, the death of a personality, armed robbery, rumours about celebrities, like musicians, media personalities, athletes, influencers and so on. We avoid fact-checking government authorities. It is a risky enterprise to do that (Cameroonian factchecker 2)

This situation is consistent with literature indicating that authoritarian regimes stifle journalistic freedom (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956). The fear of repercussions leads fact-checkers to focus on less controversial topics, resulting in a form of self-censorship that undermines the potential impact of factchecking as a journalistic ethos.

Perceived Challenges of Factchecking in Cameroon: Transparency, Methodological Disclosure, and Credibility

> It is not enough in fact-checking to just say this information is false and this one is true. The fact-checker must disclose the evaluation process in such a way that whosoever can be convinced on the credibility and reliability of the work. Fact-checking is not the gospel truth. We must show our processes and the tools we use for investigation. (Cameroonian factchecker 5)

The fact-checkers in Cameroon believe that demonstrating transparency is a challenge because of several reasons. First, they have difficulty assessing official sources. The authoritarian political leadership is particularly hostile in collaborating with fact-checkers who do not serve their interest. Therefore, Cameroonian fact-checkers are faced with providing the public with facts supported by authoritative sources.

In addition, the eyewitnesses in Cameroon are usually not willing to talk to journalists and fact-checkers. They are afraid of repression from the authorities for disclosing information to fact-checkers. This reluctance of sources to directly speak to fact-checkers and journalists in general about events they have witnessed, and which are of interest in fact-checking and news reporting has been extensively described in Shin, Koerber,

and Lim (2025). Happenings related to the Anglophone conflict in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon are among such which eyewitnesses largely avoid talking about with fact-checkers for fear of eventual repression from the parties involved in the crisis. However, the fact that these accounts often appear on WhatsApp or Facebook has made many journalists in Cameroon resort to social media platforms for fact-checking information they would not access directly from the scene. For better transparency and reliability of their processes, fact-checkers would have preferred to collect the needed information directly from the sources and disclose these sources to the public for the purpose of transparency, which is a core principle of both the epistemology and ethical consideration of the fact-checking practice.

Perceived Roles of Fact-Checkers in Kenya: Factchecking as Democratic Engagement and Information Navigation

The Kenyan fact-checkers saw their roles as having multiple facets, including promoting democratic involvement, settling political and social disputes, ensuring accountability, and enabling people to critically interact with information. A participant stated: "My job is easier nowadays since the young people seem not to fear anymore" (Kenyan factchecker 1).

Another important result was that fact-checkers see themselves as essential navigators in a world of digital fragmentation and information overload. According to a participant, their organization has created direct interaction channels for citizens to submit dubious content (such as photographs or memes that have gone viral) for verification. In addition to making fact-checking more pertinent, these participatory methods demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing public concerns.

Conversely, mainstream media organizations commonly engage fact-checking specialists and provide extensive training on verification practices that enable journalists to cross-reference media texts, images, and videos with the original data sources. These procedures help authenticate information prior to broadcast or publication on official social media platforms, functioning as a mechanism for public education and as a means of reinforcing journalistic accountability.

However, the participants expressed concerns indicating frustrations, especially regarding information from politicians and those holding positions in the government, as they are not willing to cooperate. A participant affirmed that:

> When we call the concerned parties in government to respond to information that is viral and needs fact-checking, some never pick nor never respond to our concerns, in fact some politicians will ignore for alleged reasons that the media is against them or is putting them on the spot, so, they seldom respond to us. (Kenyan factchecker 3)

This response aligns with Matanji et al. (2024), who argue that journalists often experience frustration when government officials and individuals occupying senior positions in government are reluctant or slow to respond when approached for comment or clarification.

The viewpoints expressed by fact-checkers in Kenya are consistent with the suggestion that journalistic fact-checking is generally expected to be linked to maintaining credibility, guaranteeing the accuracy of information, and halting the spread of false information online (Mena 2019). Thus, the findings from Kenya confirm Hanitzsch et al. (2019)'s

suggestion that the journalistic cultures in countries where the freedom of the press is respected to an extent largely emphasize the monitorial and interventionist roles of journalism.

Perceived Challenges of Factchecking in Kenya: Organized Disinformation, Harassment, and Safety Risks

Participants also underlined the intricate difficulties fact-checkers in Kenya face. The spread of organized disinformation efforts by rival political groups, both pro-government and opposition-aligned, is one persistent issue. These efforts use social media platforms to disseminate propaganda that puts regular people "at a crossroads" about whom to believe. Furthermore, harassment and intimidation still happen in Kenya despite the country's comparatively open media landscape, particularly for individuals who openly oppose political elites (Nyabuga and Khamadi 2024). As a result, fact-checkers frequently strike a balance between their watchdog duties and institutional and personal safety concerns. Similarly to the situation in Cameroon, Kenyan fact-checkers confront challenges that are related to organized disinformation campaigns and political harassment, which complicate their efforts to maintain credibility. This is consistent with findings from Garrett, Nisbet, and Lynch (2013), who emphasize the difficulties fact-checkers face in counteracting misinformation in a highly polarized political environment. While the political climate in Kenya would seem to be more favourable for free speech than in Cameroon, the presence of disinformation campaigns points to the multidimensional challenges that exist even in more open societies.

Perceived Roles of Fact-Checkers in Nigeria: Factchecking as Normative Journalism and Information Integrity Work

Nigerian fact-checkers perceived fact-checking as a practice that is rooted in normative journalistic principles such as accuracy and fairness, as well as accountability to the public. A female participant aged 34 asserted that:

> The principle of fact-checking comes from the core ethics of media practice that you and I already know. Here, we talk about accuracy, fairness, and telling the truth. What we are doing is evidence-based journalism. (Nigerian factchecker 1)

However, the application of these principles appears to be influenced by the specific institutional environment and the participant's duration in the field. When examining the responses of those working within independent fact-checking organizations (IFOs) compared to traditional newsrooms, a procedural divide begins to emerge. One participant, currently working within an independent organization, described a more contained, output-driven role:

> I verify viral content, especially around elections and health, and publish simple verdicts, in line with what my organisation wants. I focus more on what the audience can easily understand. (Nigerian fact-checker 2)

As the interviews progressed, a distinction surfaced between those who view the role as a set of discrete tasks and those who view it as a systemic intervention. This broader

perspective was most prominent among participants with extensive professional backgrounds (with over 10 years of work experience in fact checking), who argued that "fact-checker" is perhaps too narrow a label. These professionals advocated for the term "information integrity professionals," viewing their work as a comprehensive effort that includes media literacy and the tracking of disinformation cycles. One participant in this category explained:

> We are trying to stop using the word fact-checking … what we are essentially going for is information integrity and helping people to develop media literacy. What we do is more than fact-checking; it is more about working toward information integrity in a more encompassing way. (Nigerian fact-checker 3)

This perspective mirrors the arguments of Frau-Meigs and Corbu (2024), who suggest that contemporary fact-checking must combat systemic disinformation through Media and Information Literacy (MIL). What distinguishes this more expansive view is the depth of integration between verification and civic empowerment. While Global North studies often position fact-checkers as "journalistic adjuncts" focused on political veracity (Luengo and García-Marín 2020), the Nigerian context, as described by these senior practitioners, sees the role as an interventionist strategy embedded in public education (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

In contrast to the expansive "integrity" model, participants newer to the field (with less than 5 years of work experience as fact checkers) or situated within traditional newsrooms described their roles in more restrictive terms. For these practitioners, fact-checking is often a sub-function of their primary identity as journalists. One participant from an online newspaper noted:

> My job is mostly verifying viral claims before publication. I still consider myself primarily a journalist. (Nigerian factchecker 5)

This sentiment aligns with Selnes, Walulya, and Lukanda (2023), who found that newsroom-based fact-checkers often operate within institutional routines that can limit a broader sense of civic autonomy.

Despite the differences in how they define their professional boundaries, all interviewees consistently linked their work to the prevention of tangible societal harm. One participant highlighted the physical and economic dangers of "offline" misinformation in regional markets:

> People were selling postcards of fake news in Sokoto, like women giving birth to goat-headed babies, which caused unnecessary panic … There are also postcards featuring herbal medicine that claims to cure all diseases … That is economic disinformation, and it leads to public harm. (Nigerian factchecker 3)

The urgency of this "harm-reduction" role was further echoed regarding public health crises:

> People died from fake COVID cures. Ginger, garlic, and turmeric disappeared from markets as people rushed to stock up on them … Informing people of the truth to prevent health-related harm is the primary goal of fact-checking. (Nigerian factchecker 2)

Senior fact-checkers, often with backgrounds in investigative leadership, assume a reformative, multidimensional role consistent with frameworks of epistemic accountability

(Koliska and Roberts 2025). On the other hand, those with less experience or those in traditional newsrooms tend toward a "reactive content moderation" model. While literature often portrays fact-checking as a coherent field (Nieminen and Rapeli 2019), the Nigerian experience reveals an uneven terrain where professional socialization and institutional affiliation create vastly different perceptions of what it means to be a fact-checker.

Perceived Challenges of Fact-checking in Nigeria: Political–Legal Pressures, Structural and Economic Constraints

Fact-checkers in Nigeria consistently reported that political interference, legal intimidation, and safety risks constitute the most pervasive challenges shaping their professional practice. Interview excerpts revealed that fact-checking work – particularly around elections, governance, corruption, and insecurity – often attracts scrutiny from state and non-state actors. One female participant aged 37 stated: "Once a claim touches politics or security, you start receiving warnings, sometimes framed as "friendly advice" but clearly meant to intimidate." (Nigerian factchecker 2). Another participant, male, aged 44, noted that cybercrime and defamation laws are frequently invoked to threaten litigation, even when reports are evidence-based (Nigerian factchecker 3).

These findings closely align with Jatau and Köprülü's (2024) characterization of Nigeria as a hybrid political system where formal democratic guarantees coexist with weak enforcement of press freedoms. Fact-checkers' experiences of legal ambiguity and coercive pressure reflect the continued deployment of repressive legal instruments identified by Oyinloye et al. (2024). Expert interviewees emphasized that fact-checkers are particularly vulnerable because their work directly challenges elite narratives and viral political misinformation. As one of the participants, male, aged 44 observed, "Fact-checkers sit at the intersection of journalism and accountability, which makes them visible targets in a system intolerant of scrutiny." (Nigerian factchecker 3).

However, in contrast to the literature's emphasis on widespread self-censorship, some fact-checkers, especially those working in Independent Factcheck Organizations, reported (Nigerian factchecker 3, Nigerian factchecker 2) continued engagement with sensitive topics, suggesting a degree of professional resilience. This reflects the gradual liberal shift noted by Jatau and Köprülü (2024), where space for critical media practice exists but remains fragile and uneven.

The fact-checkers in Nigeria also pointed to the combined effects of economic precarity, organizational limitations, and the rapid spread of misinformation on digital platforms. Participants consistently highlighted inadequate funding, small teams, and limited access to advanced verification tools. One participant, male, aged 44, explained: "We are chasing misinformation that spreads in minutes with resources that barely sustain daily operations." (Nigerian factchecker 3). Another female, aged 37, noted that reliance on donor funding undermines sustainability and long-term planning (Nigerian factchecker 2).

Perceived Roles of Fact-Checkers in South Africa: Factchecking as a Complementary and Corrective Media Function

Fact-checkers in South Africa perceive themselves as fulfilling a vital but often misunderstood role within the broader media ecosystem. Their work is framed as both

complementary to traditional journalism and as a corrective force that strengthens information resilience. A male participant captured this duality succinctly: "We are doing the job that everyone wants or might be doing but doesn't have the time or the resources to really get into." This statement reflects the perception of fact-checking as a specialized, resource-intensive practice that fills a gap left by increasingly strained newsrooms.

Historically embedded within journalistic practice, fact-checking has evolved into an independent function, giving rise to organizations like Africa Check. These entities operate outside conventional media outlets, relying on digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and X to disseminate their findings. Their strategy includes partnerships for translation into local languages and broadcasting via radio and television. This underscores their commitment to accessibility and wider reach. Despite this independence, fact-checkers see themselves as allies to newsrooms, offering training, co-publishing agreements, and media literacy campaigns. A female participant noted, "Africa Check trains journalists, students, civil society organizations, and, in fact, the general public," positioning their work as a public service. They see their work as directly applying pressure on media outlets and the public to get their facts right and setting a good example.

However, the public's understanding of their role remains limited. A young female fact-checker recalled, "I would tell people what I do for a living and mostly just get blank stares," highlighting the opacity surrounding their function. This lack of clarity is compounded by the erosion of trust in media institutions, of which fact-checkers are not immune. While public engagement initiatives – such as inviting users to submit claims via WhatsApp – have yielded positive interactions, they have also exposed fact-checkers to hostility. A male participant recounted, "People yell at us and say that we're liars and we're wrong," especially when debunking politically charged claims about immigration or vaccines. Despite such backlash, fact-checkers maintain a commitment to transparency and accountability. They distinguish between good-faith criticism and conspiracy-driven hostility. As the male participant further explained, "If someone is engaging in good faith and they have noticed an actual error … then we will retract that or edit an article to reflect new information." This ethos of correction and responsiveness reinforces their self-perception as ethical arbiters, even as they shift toward empowering the public with verification skills rather than merely pronouncing truth.

In South Africa, fact-checkers perceive themselves as important components of the media ecosystem in a way that fills gaps left by traditional journalism and their dual role as both correctors and educators points to the complexity of their position within an environment that can be hostile. This perception is consistent with the literature that seems to point to fact-checking as a mechanism that can be used for restoring trust in media (Pérez, Rojano, and Rosa 2021). However, the public's limited understanding of their role reflects a broader challenge within the media landscape regarding the erosion of trust in media institutions. The perceptions of fact-checkers in South Africa are, to an extent, surprising. In addition to playing a watchdog role for news media content, we expected, in keeping with Hanitzsch et al. (2019), that they would place a strong emphasis on fact-checking the claims made by political actors and holding them accountable. This is because, as suggested by Hanitzsch et al. (2019), monitorial roles, especially watchdog journalism, which holds politicians and holders of public

offices accountable, are predominantly supported in the journalistic cultures of liberal democracies such as South Africa.

Perceived Challenges of Factchecking in South Africa: Public Distrust, Reactive Verification, and Structural Barriers

Despite their principled approach, fact-checkers in South Africa confront a range of structural and epistemic challenges that constrain their impact. Chief among these is the reactive nature of fact-checking. As a female participant lamented, "When you wait for a claim to go viral and then you respond to it … much of the damage has already been done." This temporal lag underscores the limitations of post-hoc verification in an age of rapid misinformation diffusion. Audience engagement poses another hurdle. Fact-checking content, often lengthy and technical, struggles to capture public interest. A female participant admitted, "They don't necessarily want to sit on our website and read a thousand-word article about why the claim is incorrect." This necessitates innovative packaging and dissemination strategies, particularly for audiences with limited internet access or English proficiency.

To address these limitations, fact-checkers have expanded their remit to include proactive interventions such as media literacy education, pre-bunking, and curriculum integration. These efforts aim to cultivate a more discerning public, capable of evaluating sources and resisting misinformation. Yet, the broader context remains fraught. Public trust in media and institutions continues to erode, and fact-checking itself is increasingly politicized; as a female participant observed, "Fact-checking is sort of becoming more and more seen as something that is partisan … a way of silencing people's freedom of expression."

A particularly persistent challenge is the phenomenon of "zombie claims": recurring falsehoods that resurface cyclically. A female factchecker described the exhausting repetition this way: "In a 10-year period, every two years, we're debunking the same thing … We're living in this cycle of moral panic." This cyclical misinformation not only drains resources but also reflects a broader societal amnesia, as the same participant noted, "We have a terrible long-term memory, even medium-term."

Compounding these issues are structural barriers such as the digital divide and low general media literacy. As a male factchecker put it, "It's just very difficult to ensure a healthy information ecosystem if an ordinary person doesn't know … how to evaluate a source for bias." Moreover, the imperative to remain neutral can sometimes lead to a "neutrality bias," where the desire to appear balanced may inadvertently obscure the truth. While fact-checkers in South Africa are deeply committed to their role as guardians of public knowledge, their work is circumscribed by systemic challenges that demand both strategic innovation and broader societal awareness and engagement.

Conclusion and Future Research Direction

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of fact-checkers working in Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa about their role perceptions and the challenges of fact-checking activities (sse). From the data obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nineteen fact-checkers, it appears there is a consistency between the

viewpoints of the professionals with relevant theoretical positionings for understanding their self-role perceptions within a global landscape. Indeed, political and media environments shape journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

This study points to the deep relationship that exists between political contexts and the role perceptions of fact-checkers across Africa. In authoritarian settings such as Cameroon, political repression constrains the role of fact-checkers to non-political claims. In contrast, the environments that are relatively more liberal, such as Kenya's, seem to support a proactive role among fact-checkers, aligning with research that highlights the potential for civic engagement in democratic contexts. The findings of this study also illustrate how challenges in fact-checking are shaped by varying political and social environments. While all countries face unique obstacles, the degree of political freedom significantly influences the scope and effectiveness of fact-checking efforts. The research reveals that the role of fact-checkers in Africa is not monolithic; rather, it is deeply influenced by the political landscape, societal norms, as well as the evolving nature of misinformation. This complexity raises the need for a deep understanding of fact-checking as both a journalistic practice and an important component of democratic engagement. It also raises the need for continued exploration and adaptation of strategies to combat misinformation across diverse contexts.

Regarding the perceptions of challenges, Cameroonian fact-checkers perceive the challenges they face in their work as stemming primarily from political repression, which limits their ability to engage with politically charged claims. Similarly, Kenyan fact-checkers confront challenges that are related to organized disinformation campaigns and political harassment, which complicate their efforts to maintain credibility. This is consistent with findings from Garrett, Nisbet, and Lynch (2013), who emphasize the difficulties fact-checkers face in counteracting misinformation in a highly polarized political environment. While the political climate in Kenya would seem to be more favourable for free speech than in Cameroon, the presence of disinformation campaigns points to the multidimensional challenges that exist even in more open societies.

In Nigeria, the challenges of fact-checking are tied to what looks like institutional disparities and the varying levels of experience among practitioners. The fragmentation in role perceptions suggests that less experienced fact-checkers face or are susceptible to restrictions at their places of work and may, therefore, struggle to advocate for broader societal change in a way that limits the overall effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives. In the Nigerian system, there are also political and economic constraints as mentioned by the fact-checkers in the country, which pose as brick walls to their work.

On their part, South African fact-checkers confront structural challenges, such as the reactive nature of their work and the public's disengagement with lengthy fact-checking articles. This reflects a broader trend noted in the literature, which highlights difficulties in capturing public interest amidst a fast-paced information environment (Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2017). The politicization of fact-checking as a partisan tool would seem to raise questions about its effectiveness, complicating the landscape for fact-checkers striving to maintain impartiality.

Future research can explore the evolving dynamics of misinformation and fact-checking in other African nations, particularly in regions experiencing political transitions or conflicts, to further understand the implications of local contexts on information verification efforts. In addition, longitudinal studies could provide insights

into how fact-checkers adapt their roles in response to shifting political landscapes and emerging technologies.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Participants

Participant	Country	Assigned pseudonym	Gender
1	Cameroon	Cameroonian factchecker 1	Male
2	Cameroon	Cameroonian factchecker 2	Female
3	Cameroon	Cameroonian factchecker 3	Female
4	Cameroon	Cameroonian factchecker 4	Male
5	Cameroon	Cameroonian factchecker 5	Female
6	Kenya	Kenyan factchecker 1	Male
7	Kenya	Kenyan factchecker 2	Male
8	Kenya	Kenyan factchecker 3	Male
9	Kenya	Kenyan factchecker 4	Female
10	Kenya	Kenyan factchecker 5	Female
11	Nigeria	Nigerian factchecker 1	Female
12	Nigeria	Nigerian factchecker 2	Female
13	Nigeria	Nigerian factchecker 3	Male
14	Nigeria	Nigerian factchecker 4	Female
15	Nigeria	Nigerian factchecker 5	Male
16	South Africa	South African factchecker 1	Male
17	South Africa	South African factchecker 2	Female
18	South Africa	South African factchecker 3	Male
19	South Africa	South African factchecker 4	Female

Appendix B. Summary of Fact-Checkers' Perceived Main Roles and Challenges by Country

Country	Perceived role of fact-checkers	Perceived challenges of fact-checking
Cameroon	Fact-checking is perceived as verification of human-interest and non-political claims.	Political repression and transparency in the disclosure of sources.
Kenya	Fact-checkers view their role as multifaceted, encompassing watchdog journalism, democratic engagement, dispute resolution.	Persistent organized disinformation campaigns, political polarization, and online harassment.
Nigeria	Perceptions are stratified by experience and institutional context spanning information integrity work and procedural, verification-focused role.	Political–legal intimidation, including threats via cybercrime and defamation laws, alongside surveillance and harassment.
South Africa	Fact-checkers perceive themselves as complementary and corrective actors within the media ecosystem.	Reactive verification, declining public trust in media, and audience disengagement with long-form fact-checking content.