**[Fact-checking 101](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629105/fact-checking-101)**

[Ramsha Jahangir](https://www.dawn.com/authors/5545/ramsha-jahangir)Published June 13, 2021

The writer reports on disinformation and digital politics.

IT all starts with labelling. To anyone familiar with Pakistani Twitter, the semantics of political discourse have become predictable — either you are a traitor or you are a patriot.

It is the ‘patriots’ who are often rewarded, while the ‘traitors’ face the brunt of being discredited as propagandists peddling fake news. Waging this information war, is an army of self-proclaimed ‘fact-checkers’.

Proponents parroting Trump’s slogan of ‘fake news’ make relentless attempts to ‘exp­o­­­se’ the media, but often forget that the me­­dia, too, is a casualty of information disorder. Journalists try to sift the truth from an ocean of lies, often with the sword of deadline hanging over them. This is why fact-checking has taken root as an independent industry globally.

According to the Duke Reporter’s Lab, a centre for journalism research, there are now 102 countries with fact-checking projects.

Officials weaponise what is global editorial practice.

Over 300 fact-checking projects are active across the world but none are run by supporters of a political party, unless Pakistan wants to join authoritarian regimes such as India, where government-led initiatives exist but have not been accredited by the global fact-checking industry.

To fact-check is a tedious task, one that comes with a lot of responsibility and credibility. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) has introduced a comprehensive code of principles that it requires groups to adhere to in order to be considered qualified for the role.

A foremost aspect of the global standard is non-partisanship and fairness. An individual fact checker’s personal or political biases can influence what they confirm as genuine, and what they even deem worthy of checking in the first place. A fact-checker does not concentrate their fact-checking on any one side. They do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues they fact-check.

Fact-checking groups are also required to explain the methodology they use to select, research, write, edit, publish and correct their fact-checks.

In Pakistan, pro-PTI supporters, some with access to government officials, have proudly taken up the role to correct media coverage. In the global practice of fact-checking, individuals who declare or show support for any party, any politician, or advocate for or against any policy positions on any issues save for transparency and accuracy in public debate, do not qualify for the role.

Government representatives, on the other hand, have spent ample time maligning the press — through hundreds of tweets and fake news stamps, and defamation threats. In their opinion, only they are providing “facts and figures” to counter “propaganda” by journalists.

For instance, providing official information (such as stats on Covid-19) falls under the mandate of a spokesperson. When they present provision of information as efforts to ‘counter’ the media, officials conflate their role with fact-checking, weaponising what is a global editorial practice partaken of by full-time professionals. Ideally, officials should issue formally worded clarifications, if required, instead of singling out journalists under #fakenews campaigns.

If anybody is genuinely interested in tackling fake news, they should consider how and who should best communicate fact-checks to the public. Partisan supporters casting allegations of bias on journalists not solely focused on ‘positive’ coverage are serving their own biases. They are not ‘fact-checkers’, but only serve as mobilisers of the ruling party’s narrative. This disclosure of association and political leaning is key to ethics of fact-checking.

Fact-checking thrives when there is acco­u­ntability within all systems, including the media which is not without its shortcomings. Industry leaders should consider ways to discourage WhatsApp jou­rnalism and ticker cultures. By no means should the media, like any other institution in a democracy, escape critical feedback on its performance. It is, however, important to acce­­pt that mistakes happen. Newsrooms and those journalists with an active profile online, should carefully consider dealing with errors in reporting and ensure corrections are well communicated to readers.

Recently, IBA’S Centre for Excellence in Journalism and the IFCN signed a partnership to help journalists build fact-checking skills. This is a start, however, a long road until fact-checking becomes a priority within the industry.

Given that fact-checking is based on accountability at the core, the government or its sympathisers cannot be their own judge. The approach to fact-checking lies far beyond merely labelling or running discrediting campaigns.

In the words of author David Patrikarakos, who writes about social media, the more doubt you can sow in people’s minds about all information, the more you’ll weaken their propensity to recognise the truth. If the idea is to conflate the truth, it appears the government’s ‘fact-checking’ warriors are winning.

*The writer reports on disinformation and digital politics.*

**Twitter:** [**@ramshajahangir**](https://twitter.com/ramshajahangir)

*Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2021*