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Fact-Checking in Practice: Exploring Digital Workflows and Operational Structures of Organizations in NCR

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates how fact-checking organisations in India's National Capital Region (NCR) convert rumours into verified public knowledge. Drawing on 24 semi-structured interviews, we trace a five-stage operational cycle. Claim Intake & Prioritisation relies on crowd-sourced tips that undergo editorial triage weighted by potential harm. During Verification & Rating Workflows, teams blend desk research, field verification and expert consultation within a standardised truth-rating taxonomy. Findings show that Disclosure, Transparency & Corrections protocols—publicly available rationales and swift rectifications—fortify institutional credibility. The ripple effects emerge in Editorial Reach & Public Impact, where fact-checks reshape communal narratives, curb health misinformation and prompt investigative follow-ups. Underpinning every stage is Ethical Governance & Safety, a rule set balancing accuracy, audience protection and community sensitivity. By mapping these interlocking components, the paper advances infrastructural understandings of digital fact-checking as a socio-technical service.

Keywords: fact-checking; digital journalism; verification workflows; media ethics; India

Biographical note

Dr Rajesh Kumar has been associated with the discipline of media education as a distinguished academician, researcher, administrator and media professional. He has produced qualitative publications in SCOPUS and UGC CARE Indexed Journals. He has also contributed more than 30 articles and has prepared layout, design and make up for more than 500 pages in newspapers during his association with the media industry as a Copy Editor/Sub Editor.

Vinayak Kumar Jha is a PhD scholar at the Central University of Jharkhand, specializing in fact-checking and media literacy. He holds an MA in Journalism and Mass Communication from Banaras Hindu University (BHU). His research explores the evolution, working mechanisms, and challenges within India's fact-checking ecosystem. He is also committed to advancing media literacy through research and teaching, contributing to both academia and the broader communication landscape.

1. Introduction

The "infodemic"—a torrent of misleading, fabricated, or de-contextualised content—has become a signature risk to democratic life worldwide (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2024). Recent assessments warn that unchecked misinformation erodes public trust, distorts policy debates, and endangers health outcomes (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; The Diplomat, 2025).
India is *uniquely exposed*: it is the world's largest social-media market, yet it ranks first on the 2024 Global Risk Index for vulnerability to disinformation (World Economic Forum, 2024). National surveys show that encrypted messaging apps account for nearly two-thirds of false content shared daily (MeitY, 2023; Next IAS, 2025). The National Capital Region (NCR)—home to India's political power brokers, legacy newsrooms, and a hyper-connected electorate—functions as a *nerve-centre* where unverified claims can "go viral" within minutes during elections, communal flashpoints, or public-health scares (Nazakat, 2024).

In response, a proliferation of fact-checking organisations has emerged since 2017, many of which subscribe to the Poynter International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles (Graves, 2016; IFCN, 2024). The

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Indian government itself created a Fact Check Unit within the Press Information Bureau in 2019 to debunk false messages related to state policy (Press Information Bureau, 2019). Early studies document the *effectiveness* of fact-checks in reducing false beliefs (Nyhan, 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2021) and outline generic production routines (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). Yet scholars also highlight two unresolved problems.

First, reach and awareness remain limited: fewer than 0.1 % of social-media users in India ever encounter a professional fact-check (Vashistha et al., 2024). Second, we still lack a *holistic map* of the human and technological infrastructures that enable (or constrain) Indian fact-checkers throughout the claim-to-correction life-cycle (De, 2023; Cheruiyot et al., 2017). Building on infrastructure studies (Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Plantin et al., 2018), this article conceptualises NCR-based fact-checking as a socio-technical service composed of five interlocking stages: (1) *Claim Intake & Prioritisation*, (2) *Verification & Rating Workflows*, (3) *Disclosure, Transparency & Corrections*, (4) *Editorial Reach & Public Impact*, and (5) *Ethical Governance & Safety*. This analytic lens foregrounds the mundane but consequential "back-end" decisions—triage criteria, tool selection, audience-sensitivity protocols—that often remain invisible in public-facing debunks (Ferrucci & Vos, 2020).

1.1 Research Gap and Questions

Despite NCR's strategic importance, no study has systematically traced how local organisations operationalise each stage, how they negotiate resource constraints, or how their outputs reverberate across media and policy spheres. Addressing this lacuna, we pose three research questions:

RQ1. How do NCR fact-checking organisations collect, triage, and prioritise claims for verification?
RQ2. What human and technological resources underpin their verification, rating, and disclosure workflows?
RQ3. What editorial and societal impacts—and ethical tensions—arise once a fact-check is published?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to (a) communication scholarship, by detailing an India-specific fact-checking infrastructure; (b) platform-governance debates, by illustrating operational bottlenecks that limit corrective reach; and (c) practical guidelines, by surfacing ethical protocols suited to multi-lingual, high-risk information environments.
The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews scholarship on misinformation, fact-checking, and infrastructure theory. Section 3 explains the qualitative methodology: 24 semi-structured interviews with founders, editors, and senior fact-checkers from all NCR outfits. Section 4 presents findings organised around the five themes above. Section 5 discusses broader implications and limitations, and Section 6 concludes with recommendations for research and practice.

2. Literature Review

The literature on fact-checking has evolved from simple descriptions of corrective practices to more nuanced analyses of verification as a sociotechnical process. This review synthesises key debates across misinformation studies, infrastructure theory, and media ethics to contextualise the operational realities of NCR-based fact-checking organisations within global scholarly frameworks.

2.1 Misinformation and the Role of Fact-Checking

The rise of digital misinformation has prompted global concern over its impact on democratic institutions, public health, and social cohesion (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). While early models focused on detecting "fake news," the scholarship has matured to view misinformation as part of a broader information disorder ecosystem that includes disinformation, malinformation, and media manipulation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Within this context, fact-checking has emerged as a corrective genre that attempts to repair public discourse by supplying evidence-based verification (Graves, 2016).
Fact-checking has proven effective in reducing false beliefs, though its influence is contingent on prior beliefs, source credibility, and exposure timing (Nyhan & Reifler, 2021). Studies from Brazil, Kenya, and the Philippines show that the structure and operations of fact-checking organisations vary widely by region and institutional context (Cheruiyot, Ferrer-Conill, & Westlund, 2017). Yet much of this literature remains descriptive and Western-centric, leaving the inner workings of fact-checking in the Global South under-theorised (De, 2023).

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2.2 Fact-Checking as a Sociotechnical System

Recent studies have begun to frame fact-checking as a sociotechnical practice—that is, a hybrid system involving human labour, technological tools, and organisational routines (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Fact-checkers rely not only on journalistic judgment but also on APIs, reverse image search, blockchain archives, and audience flags to determine what is true and why (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, & Chaparro Domínguez, 2018). These routines often follow a lifecycle: claim selection, verification, rating, and publication. However, infrastructure remains an underused lens. Most existing accounts reduce fact-checking to a functional workflow without considering how infrastructural constraints—platform dependencies, funding mechanisms, language support—shape what gets fact-checked and how (Ferrucci & Vos, 2020). India, with its multi-lingual environment and state-platform friction, offers a compelling site to study these sociotechnical tensions in context.

2.3 Infrastructure Studies and Digital Journalism

Infrastructure studies, originally rooted in science and technology studies (STS), have become increasingly relevant to media research (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). Infrastructure is defined not just as tools or platforms, but as the invisible protocols, relationships, and routines that make information systems durable and usable (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018). Media infrastructures thus include everything from publishing software to editorial hierarchies, distribution networks, and correction policies.

Applying this lens to journalism reveals how "invisible work" sustains credibility—whether through routine verification or backend transparency processes (Anderson, 2017). In the context of fact-checking, infrastructures shape which claims are prioritised, which tools are adopted, and which publics are reached. This perspective also sheds light on infrastructural breakdowns—such as when a fact-check cannot be completed due to language barriers, lack of archival access, or API failures (Russell & Vinsel, 2018).

2.4 Ethics and Editorial Governance in Fact-Checking

The normative dimensions of fact-checking are often sidelined in operational accounts, despite being central to its legitimacy. Fact-checkers face tensions between correcting misinformation and protecting vulnerable publics from potential harm (Mantzarlis, 2018). For example, fact-checking claims related to communal violence or health hoaxes can have real-world consequences, demanding rigorous editorial review and ethical caution. In India, these tensions are exacerbated by legal ambiguity, state interference, and algorithmic visibility biases (Ganguly & Banaji, 2020). Organisations must balance speed with accuracy, reach with responsibility, and automation with human oversight. Ethical guidelines often emerge as *infrastructural artefacts*—formalised documents, rating protocols, or correction timelines that both enable and constrain fact-checkers (Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017). The NCR, as a hotspot for sensitive misinformation, provides fertile ground to examine how these ethical infrastructures function on the ground.

2.5 Gaps and Need for a Contextualised Analysis

While several studies touch on fact-checking routines or audience reception (Shin & Thorson, 2017), few offer a holistic analysis of infrastructure in the Indian context. Existing work often examines output (fact-checks themselves) rather than the hidden organisational, technological, and ethical processes that produce them. Moreover, regional dynamics—like linguistic diversity, digital inequality, or political sensitivities—are rarely accounted for in comparative work.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing NCR-based fact-checking organisations through the lens of human and technological infrastructures. By focusing on five thematic stages—from claim intake to ethical governance—it aims to enrich existing literature with grounded, operational insight into how fact-checking functions in India's most politically and digitally saturated region.

3. Materials and Methods

This section outlines the qualitative research design used to investigate the operational infrastructures of fact-checking organisations in the NCR. It details the sampling strategy, data collection through semi-structured interviews, transcription procedures, and thematic analysis using NVivo 15, ensuring methodological rigour, transparency, and alignment with ethical research standards.

3.1 Research Design

Guided by an interpretivist epistemology, the study was conceived as a *multiple-case, qualitative inquiry* that seeks to make the usually invisible "back-end" of NCR fact-checking work empirically visible (Yin, 2011). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen because they allow participants to narrate operational routines, tacit judgments, and organisational constraints in their own terms while giving the researcher sufficient

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latitude to probe for clarifications (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). An infrastructure lens framed every stage—from sampling to analysis—so that both human and technological resources were treated as mutually constitutive elements of fact-checking practice (Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Plantin et al., 2018).

3.2 Sampling Strategy

The project employed purposive, maximum-variation sampling (Patton, 2015). All *thirteen* fact-checking organisations headquartered in the National Capital Region were first identified through public registries and professional networks. To ensure a balanced capture of strategic and operational viewpoints, the researcher systematically consulted the *"Our Team"* section on each organisation's website and extracted the names, designations, and contact details of (a) a *founder or senior editor* and (b) an *experienced fact-checker* with a minimum tenure of two years. These dual roles were deemed crucial: founders or editors articulate organisational vision, budgeting, and policy, whereas frontline fact-checkers narrate day-to-day verification routines and technological constraints (Cheruiyot et al., 2017). Recruiting both profiles simultaneously provided a *delicate yet deliberate balance* that reduced the risk of a leadership-heavy or practitioner-heavy bias in testimony (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

Initial contact was made via professional email wherever available; absent email addresses were supplemented with telephone outreach or personalised LinkedIn messages. Eighty-nine per cent of invitees responded within two follow-ups, yielding a final corpus of 24 participants.

Organization's Name	Organization Type	IFCN Signatory	Respondent Code & Role	
AajTak Fact Check	Media Affiliated	YES	**P1**	**Co-Founder & Editor**
			P2	**Fact-Checker**
AFP Fact Check	Media Affiliated	NO	**P3**	**Editor**
			P4	**Fact-Checker**
BOOM Live (Delhi Bureau)	Independent	YES	**P5**	**Producer, Workshops and Training**
Digital Forensics Research and Analytics Center (DFRAC)	Independent	YES	**P6**	**Co-Founder/Advisor**
			P7	**Fact-Checker**
First Check	Media Affiliated	YES	**P8**	**Editor**
			P9	**Fact-Checker**
The Lallantop Fact Check	Media Affiliated	YES	**P10**	**Editor**
			P11	**Fact-Checker**
Logically Facts (Log. Facts)	Independent	NO	**P12**	**Head of Editorial Operations**
			P13	**Deputy Editor & Fact-Checker**
Newschecker	Independent	YES	**P14**	**Editor & Social Media Head**
			P15	**Fact-Checker**
NewsMobile Fact checker	Independent	YES	**P16**	**Senior Editor**
			P17	**Fact-Checker**
Press Trust of India (PTI) Fact Check	Media Affiliated	YES	**P18**	**Head of Fact-checking and Digital Services**
			P19	**Fact-Checker**
The Quint's WebQoof	Media Affiliated	YES	**P20**	**Editor**
			P21	**Fact-Checker**
The Healthy Indian Project (THIP)	Independent	YES	**P22**	**CEO & Founder**
			P23	**Editor & Fact-Checker**
Vishwas News	Independent	YES	**P24**	**Associate Editor & Fact-Checker**

Table 1: List of organizations with their type and IFCN status and participants with their designation at the time of the interview.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted between February 19 to July 24, 2024. All interviews took place face-to-face at organisational premises, Prior to each session, participants received an information sheet describing the study's aims, confidentiality provisions, and voluntary nature. All sessions were audio-recorded using a high-bitrate digital recorder or platform-native encryption. Recording was vital for two reasons: it freed the interviewer to maintain eye contact and pursue emergent leads, and it created a verbatim record that mitigates selective memory (Saldaña, 2021). Interviews averaged 46 minutes (range = 38–57 min), producing 20.4 hours of raw audio. Field notes on non-verbal cues, office ambience, and observable workflow artefacts (e.g., tip-

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monitoring dashboards) were logged immediately after each interview to enrich contextual understanding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).
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3.4 Analytic Approach: Thematic Analysis in NVivo 15

Data were imported into NVivo 15, selected for its dual-pane coding interface, robust auto-coding options, and transparent audit-trail functions. Adopting Braun and Clarke's (2006) *reflexive thematic analysis*, but operationalised through NVivo's node architecture, the analytic workflow unfolded in four iterative stages:

1. Familiarisation and Memoing – Each transcript were read twice while jotting analytic memos about possible patterns, contradictions, or infrastructural references (Friese, 2019).
2. Hybrid First-Cycle Coding – An initial codebook mixed *a-priori* nodes based on the five-stage infrastructure lens with *in-vivo* codes capturing participant terminology (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Examples include *"WhatsApp triage"*, *"tipline overload"*, and *"source-cred Google Sheets"*.
3. Second-Cycle Condensation – Seventy-one first-cycle nodes were clustered via constant comparison into five higher-order themes: Claim Intake & Prioritisation, Verification & Rating Workflows, Disclosure & Corrections, Editorial Reach & Impact, and Ethical Governance & Safety (Glaser, 1978).
4. Thematic Mapping and Validation – NVivo's "Project Map" visualised relationships among themes, sub-themes, and representative quotations, allowing the team to test coherence and boundary clarity. Two external qualitative experts audited the map and found it analytically robust.

Themes and Respective codes
Claim Intake & Prioritisation
Tip Collection & Crowd-Sourcing
Editorial Triage & Selection Criteria
Harm & Impact Prioritisation
Verification & Rating Workflows
Desk Review & Editorial Quality Check
Field Verification & Expert Consultation
Truth-Rating Taxonomy
Disclosure, Transparency & Corrections
Transparency & Corrections Protocols
Editorial Reach & Public Impact
Countering Communal & Sensitive Narratives
Mitigating Health Misinformation
Investigative Deep-Dives
Shifts in Media & Audience Perception

Table 2: Themes and Codes of the Data

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines (Markham & Buchanan, 2019). No monetary incentives were offered, minimising undue inducement (Head, 2009). Participants could withdraw at any stage; none elected to do so. To further mitigate risk, verbatim quotes used in the findings section were stripped of identifying details, and sensitive organisational anecdotes were paraphrased while retaining analytic meaning.

4. Findings

4.1 Claim Intake & Prioritisation

The process of claim intake and prioritisation is the first and arguably most crucial stage in the fact-checking workflow. It determines which claims are pulled into the verification pipeline, which are ignored, and why. Across NCR-based organisations, this stage operates through a structured yet adaptive mechanism that combines audience-driven alerts, editorial triage systems, and risk-based decision-making. While the surface may appear reactive—responding to viral rumours or public tips—closer examination reveals an intricate filtration process guided by organisational routines, verification tools, and normative judgments about public harm. Fact-checkers rely on both user inputs and internal editorial protocols to manage high volumes of potential misinformation and direct attention toward claims that are either viral, socially risky, or politically charged. This layered, socio-technical process forms the operational backbone upon which verification efforts are built.

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4.1.1 Tip Collection and Crowd-Sourcing

Every organisation in the study operated open and accessible channels through which the public could submit claims for verification. These typically included WhatsApp tip lines, public email IDs, and submission forms embedded in websites or social media. One fact-checker noted that "there is a WhatsApp number… anyone can send" suspicious content they come across, reflecting a consistent strategy across organisations to rely on citizen inputs as a first point of contact. In most cases, WhatsApp was the primary collection tool due to its widespread use in the region, although Twitter mentions and tagged Instagram posts also contributed to claim intake in larger organisations.

"Almost every organization doing fact-check have a tip line number. Means there is a WhatsApp number. If you see anything there is a WhatsApp number where you can complaint. So, there is Crowd sourcing of claim from everywhere. You can also send us an email id; we have all these mediums."- P10

Legacy-media affiliated fact-checking units reported an advantage in terms of *tip volume*, owing to their expansive brand presence across multiple platforms. As one editor pointed out, "we have a huge network with many social-media channels," which naturally generates more submissions from users already familiar with the outlet. In contrast, smaller, independent fact-checking start-ups relied more heavily on automated dashboards and hashtag monitoring tools to track potential misinformation trends and supplement their lower direct engagement with users.

Despite the different scales, the overarching model of crowd-sourced input reflects a *bottom-up, participatory structure*, where the audience functions as an early-warning system—surfacing claims that might otherwise remain invisible in encrypted or fringe spaces. This user-enabled scanning, however, is only the beginning of a much more selective verification process, as explored in the following section.

4.1.2 Editorial Triage and Selection Criteria

After collecting tips, all organisations engage in a structured editorial triage process to determine which claims merit verification. This triage varies in complexity based on organisational size and resources but is universally present. In larger organisations, claims are evaluated through formalised routines—often involving daily editorial meetings and multi-layered review. For instance, one outlet uses a four-question framework: *Is it fact or opinion? Is it in public interest? Could it cause harm? Is it viral?* This ensures that only the most socially relevant and verifiable claims proceed further.

Several fact-checking teams implement a "maker–checker" system, where the initial fact-check is reviewed by another team member or editor before approval. This reduces bias and embeds accountability. In smaller teams, editorial judgement is guided by internal checklists and the principles of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), ensuring a level of procedural uniformity despite limited resources. Importantly, this stage blends human judgement with digital tools. Initial checks using reverse image searches, InVID, or Google Lens often help editors determine whether a claim is new or a re-circulated hoax. If a claim is quickly debunked, it's dropped; if not, it moves forward. This pragmatic filtering reflects the careful allocation of limited verification bandwidth.

4.1.3 Harm and Impact Prioritisation

While virality often drives attention, perceived social harm is the decisive factor in claim prioritisation. Fact-checkers consistently reported selecting claims based on their potential to incite violence, spread health misinformation, or damage reputations. As one respondent stated, "we pick and choose what is trending… which has a potential to harm society more." Communal tensions, hate speech, and medical hoaxes were especially flagged as high-risk categories. Some organisations adopted structured metrics for assessing harm. For example, one outlet used a dashboard that scored claims on reach and demographic sensitivity before moving them to verification. Others relied on editorial judgement, scanning hashtags and news cycles to identify legacy content being repurposed for current communal or political contexts.

"See, there are hundreds and thousands of fake news and, you know, hate speech is floating around. We can't handle all of them. So, we pick and choose. We pick and choose that which are being, which is trending, which is reaching to lots of people, which has a potential to harm society more."-P6

This emphasis on risk-based triage reveals a normative orientation in NCR's fact-checking culture: prioritising not just what's popular but what's dangerous. It underscores how editorial decisions are infused with ethical responsibility, not just technical feasibility.

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4.2 Verification & Rating Workflows

Once a claim is selected for verification, NCR-based fact-checking organisations initiate a structured verification and rating process that blends desk-based investigation, field-level fact-gathering, and final classification using standardised taxonomies. This stage draws upon multiple sources—open-source tools, expert consultation, public records, and eyewitness accounts—to validate or debunk a claim. Editorial teams apply rigorous quality checks before final publication, ensuring alignment with transparency and accuracy protocols. The process culminates in a truth-rating system, allowing readers to quickly understand the reliability of the claim and rationale behind the verdict. Together, these workflows form the backbone of credibility in fact-checking practice.

4.2.1 Desk Review & Editorial Quality Check

Desk review isthe foundational phase of the verification workflow across NCR-based fact-checking organisations. At this stage, fact-checkers and editors gather publicly available information and assess the initial credibility and context of the claim. Common sources include viral content from social media, public speeches, news articles, and audience tips. Editors cross-check claims through internet search, crowd-monitoring tools (e.g., CrowdTangle), and platform analytics to determine scale and spread. The review extends to primary sources such as government portals, official press releases, legal records, and statistical databases.

Drafts are written with embedded citations and visual evidence, including screenshots or archival footage. Quality control is central. Many organisations enforce multi-tier review systems such as the “maker–checker” model, ensuring that the claim is not only accurate but neutrally presented. Copy editors refine tone and structure before publishing. Transparency is reinforced by linking source materials and detailing methodology, so that readers can retrace the verification steps, bolstering organisational trust.

4.2.2 Field Verification & Expert Consultation

Field verification and expert consultation are indispensable when claims involve nuanced, scientific, or location-specific content. Many NCR organisations augment desk research with ground reporting, especially when verifying claims involving public events, local incidents, or sensitive communal issues. Teams contact eyewitnesses, local reporters, police officials, or administration representatives to gather first-hand accounts. Some organisations leverage their larger parent network (e.g., TV Today or Jagran group) to access a pool of reporters for on-the-spot fact-gathering.

Expert opinion is sought especially in fields such as medicine, public health, climate science, or law. Organisations like First Check or News Mobile consult domain-specific professionals before reaching a conclusion. Experts are chosen for their subject-matter credibility, academic publications, or affiliation with reputable institutions.

“Given our focus on health and science, our team sifts through medical journals and research papers to understand the context of every claim and whether or not it has any scientific backing. We also reach out to First Check members, who are experts in the relevant field, whether it’s public health, research, a particular disease, or vaccines, to check if there is any scientific evidence to support the claim.”-P8

Their inputs are not only quoted but often cross-referenced with documentary evidence. This ensures that claims, especially those with high public stakes, are substantiated with both authoritative voices and empirical data, making the final verdict robust and defensible.

4.2.3 Truth-Rating Taxonomy

After completing verification, fact-checkers classify the claim using a truth-rating taxonomy—a structured system of labels that signal the credibility of the claim to the audience. These rating systems vary slightly across organisations but share core categories like *True*, *False*, *Misleading*, and *Unverified*. Some, like AFP and Logically Facts, apply nuanced tags such as *Missing Context*, *Altered Image*, or *Satire* to describe layered misinformation. Others localise the system—Aaj Tak, for instance, uses a “crow rating” metaphor to visually communicate the intensity of the falsehood.
These verdicts are grounded in evidence thresholds: at least two high-quality, independent sources must confirm a claim before it is rated as “True.” Claims lacking sufficient data may be labelled “Unverifiable.” The rating is usually accompanied by a short justification and links to source material. This final classification step is crucial—it distills complex investigative work into clear, communicable judgments, enhancing readability, transparency, and user engagement in the fact-checking process.

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4.3 Disclosure, Transparency & Corrections

A defining feature of NCR-based fact-checking organisations is their commitment to transparency and correction protocols, which serve both ethical and operational purposes. Most outlets explicitly state the tools, keywords, and processes used in each fact-check so that readers can replicate the findings. Hyperlinks to primary sources, screenshots of claims, and clear citations are common features. Equally important is the correction policy—nearly all organisations acknowledge the possibility of error and provide mechanisms for submitting corrections. Major updates are labelled prominently as "Correction" or "Update," with dates and justifications, reinforcing accountability and public trust in the fact-checking process.

4.3.1 Transparency & Corrections Protocols

Fact-checking organisations across the NCR place strong emphasis on methodological transparency, ensuring that their verification process is not only thorough but also replicable. Several teams explained that they do not just mention that a Google search was done—they detail the exact keywords used, the tools applied (such as Google Lens or reverse image search), and the specific links or datasets consulted. For instance, one respondent from Boom stated, "we tell everything in detail with hyperlinks... so you don't have to trust me, you can follow the same steps and arrive at the same result." This degree of openness is intended to compensate for the reader's lack of personal connection with the organisation and to foster trust through procedural clarity.

"Each and every process, each and every step that we did in fact-checking we tell everything in detail with hyperlinks etc. That's why we say you as an individual don't have to trust me because you don't know me as an individual, you know us as an organisation. Our interaction with you is only through our article. Our article should be answering each and every question that you might have in your mind."-P5

Equally rigorous are their correction protocols. Errors are acknowledged publicly, with modified articles clearly marked as "Correction" or "Update," along with the date and nature of the revision. Organisations like Aaj Tak and AFP maintain archives of these changes and post corrections on the same social media platforms as the original content. Reader feedback channels—via email, comments, or forms—are actively encouraged, and many outlets treat all such feedback as part of their editorial review. Transparency and responsiveness together establish their credibility architecture.

4.4 Editorial Reach & Public Impact

Fact-checking in the NCR is not merely a corrective mechanism; it also serves as a form of editorial intervention that shapes media narratives and public perception. The findings reveal four major impact areas: countering communal and sensitive misinformation, mitigating health-related disinformation, enabling investigative deep-dives, and triggering broader shifts in how media and audiences perceive credibility (see fig.1). These outcomes are not always quantifiable but are visible through story retractions, public apologies, increased journalistic caution, and feedback from affected communities. Fact-checkers move beyond verification to influence journalism ethics, civic awareness, and even policy conversations through persistent, targeted editorial engagement.

Figure 1: Major words hovering around the reach and impact

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4.4.1 Countering Communal & Sensitive Narratives

NCR-based fact-checkers regularly intervene in the manipulation of communal and emotionally charged narratives, which are often amplified around interfaith relationships, political tensions, and minority representation. One respondent recounted a story involving an interfaith couple falsely targeted as part of a "love jihad" narrative. The case required extensive effort, including speaking to unwilling victims and pushing past political interference. In another instance, fact-checkers noted a growing awareness among mainstream media outlets, who now think twice before publishing inflammatory content for fear of being debunked publicly.

"We fact-checked a story on a Muslim boy and Hindu girl being labelled as love jihad... It was fake. But local politicians had already tweeted it. It was emotionally disturbing, but we still did it. We spoke to the girl; she was terrified. That kind of misinformation can spark riots. Earlier, local media would publish anything, but now they call us first to check if it's real. They don't want to be embarrassed later."-P20

Fact-checkers view this role as both protective and corrective, shielding vulnerable communities from narrative exploitation. In several cases, fact-checks led to public retractions, corrections, or shifts in public framing of events. The presence of dedicated teams focusing on communal claims is a strategic response to India's unique socio-political environment. These efforts contribute not only to immediate debunking but also to fostering longer-term editorial responsibility and narrative accountability within the media ecosystem.

4.4.2 Mitigating Health Misinformation

Health misinformation presents a distinct challenge for fact-checkers due to its scientific complexity, emotional sensitivity, and widespread public consequences. NCR-based organisations such as First Check and Quint have actively worked to debunk false or misleading health claims, ranging from the misuse of traditional remedies to misinformation around neurodivergent conditions like ADHD. One respondent highlighted internal biases even within fact-checking teams and stressed the need to challenge assumptions by foregrounding evidence-based thinking.

Fact-checkers also spoke about the difficulty of making health stories engaging. Younger team members often found health misinformation "dry" or "boring," prompting senior editors to emphasise storytelling techniques that balance scientific rigour with audience relatability.

"People believe neem and turmeric can cure everything. During COVID, we had to counter daily fake remedies going viral on WhatsApp. Even within our team, someone believed that autism is caused by mobile radiation. We had to address that carefully, using experts. Health stories aren't flashy, but they matter. If we don't clarify them, no one else will—and people act on wrong information."-P22

Respondents pointed out the dilemma of being perceived as either "pro" or "anti" a person or product when, in fact, their aim is to focus on what the science says. Over time, these stories have helped initiate broader conversations about health literacy, particularly around issues such as antibiotic use, alternative therapies, and LGBTQI+ health narratives—areas where fact-checkers are increasingly taking leadership.

4.4.3 Investigative Deep-Dives

Several NCR-based organisations engage in long-form investigative fact-checks that go beyond quick debunks and explore the deeper origins, mechanisms, or agendas behind misinformation. One standout example comes from DFRAC, which exposed a group falsely presenting itself as a Dalit-rights organisation operating from India. Through digital forensics, the team discovered that the organisation was actually being operated from Pakistan, leading to significant media attention and public awareness.

"We traced a fake Dalit rights page back to Pakistan. The name, the website, everything looked real. But we found digital fingerprints. We don't just say 'this is fake'; we go deep—who created it, who benefits, how it spreads. That's investigative fact-checking. For that doctored video of the political leader, we used metadata tools and frame-by-frame analysis. It took two days but was worth it."-P16

These investigative pieces often blend traditional journalism techniques—such as source verification and political analysis—with technical tools like IP tracing, metadata analysis, and visual forensics. Another example involved debunking a digitally altered image of a political leader, where fact-checkers used tools like Photo Forensics to prove manipulation. Such deep-dives not only correct individual claims but also uncover networks of influence and manipulation, providing a broader understanding of disinformation campaigns. They also demonstrate the expanding role of fact-checkers as hybrid professionals—part journalist, part researcher, part technologist.

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4.4.4 Shifts in Media & Audience Perception

The ripple effects of fact-checking are increasingly visible in shifts within mainstream media behaviour and public understanding. Respondents from organisations like Boom and Quint shared cases where their fact-checks directly led to petitions, content takedowns, or public apologies by media outlets. For instance, during the farmers' protest, a major news channel falsely reported that the national flag was removed and replaced with a Khalistani flag. A fact-check disproved this, and the evidence was cited in a legal petition, eventually prompting regulatory action and a public apology.

"Our fact-check on the Khalistani flag story during the farmers' protest was cited in a petition. It led to a TV apology. Earlier, people would just forward anything. Now they tag us directly and say— 'Please verify this before I share it.' That's progress. Even big journalists are more cautious now. They know if they report wrongly, it'll be fact-checked publicly and their reach might drop."-P5

Fact-checkers also reported changes in audience behaviour—such as increased scepticism toward viral content and a growing demand for source-based reporting. Some noted that being repeatedly tagged by fact-checking outlets now reduces a media house's social media reach, incentivising editorial caution. Internally, teams reflected on how bias awareness and methodological transparency had evolved, both within their organisations and among their audiences—suggesting a slow but measurable shift toward a more verification-conscious media culture.

5. Discussions

This study set out to examine how fact-checking organisations based in India's National Capital Region (NCR) navigate the complex processes of verifying digital claims. Through 24 in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, we uncovered a five-stage operational infrastructure, four of which—Claim Intake & Prioritisation, Verification & Rating Workflows, Disclosure & Corrections, and Editorial Reach & Public Impact—are analysed in depth here (see fig.2).

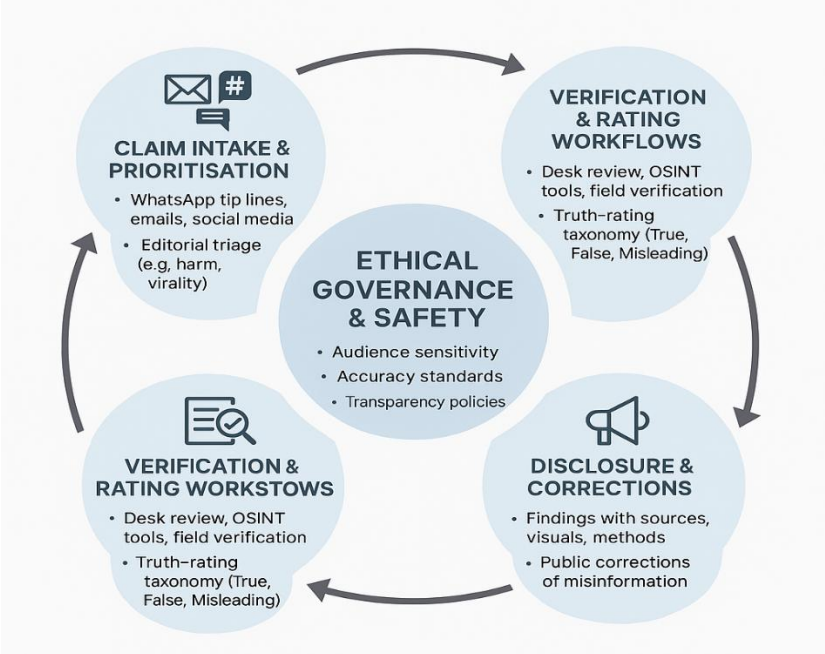

Figure 2: Fact-checking Workflow

The findings shed light on a mature, adaptive, and ethically attuned ecosystem that is highly responsive to regional challenges, especially those related to political polarisation, communal tensions, and information overload. In this discussion, we interpret the findings in relation to media infrastructure theory, platform governance, and the evolving role of fact-checking in journalism.

5.1 Infrastructure as Practice: Beyond Workflows

While prior literature has often focused on fact-checking outputs (Graves, 2016; Brandtzaeg et al., 2018), our findings push the conversation toward infrastructural depth—highlighting not only what fact-checkers do but

how they construct and maintain the socio-technical scaffolding that sustains their practice. In the NCR context, infrastructure is not merely material (e.g., tools, dashboards) but procedural, relational, and ethical.

The claim intake system, for instance, is not a passive inbox but an active filtration layer powered by user engagement, editorial judgement, and algorithmic tracking. The consistent use of open WhatsApp tip lines shows how these organisations have operationalised audience participation as infrastructure, transforming users into distributed sensors who surface potential misinformation in closed networks. This represents a shift from conventional newsroom hierarchies to distributed verification systems, aligning with Star and Ruhleder's (1996) proposition that infrastructure is "sunk into, inside of, other structures" and only becomes visible upon breakdown or scrutiny.

Likewise, editorial triage routines mirror decision trees used in emergency rooms or cybersecurity response centres. Whether through structured checklists or collaborative Slack threads, the triage process embeds risk calculus, normative concerns, and real-time digital analytics into seemingly routine editorial decisions. These are not just organisational choices; they are *infrastructural logics* developed to operate at scale and under time constraints.

5.2 The Dual Lens: Human Judgement Meets Machine Tools

The verification stage vividly illustrates the co-constitution of human and technological intelligence. Fact-checkers seamlessly blend desk research with field verification and expert consultation, deploying tools like reverse image search, InVID, Google Lens, and metadata extractors as part of a toolkit mindset. These tools are not merely instrumental; they are part of a wider epistemic culture (Knorr-Cetina, 1999) that privileges triangulation, transparency, and reproducibility.

Yet, tools are never used in isolation. Teams consistently contextualise automated outputs within broader social meanings. For example, a reverse image search might suggest a photo was taken in 2017, but its reuse in a communal context today requires understanding the narrative payload it now carries. This interplay reflects what Plantin et al. (2018) term the "platformisation of infrastructures", wherein tool-based systems are infused with editorial and cultural judgment. Rather than replacing human expertise, platforms amplify the need for interpretive literacy, which fact-checkers in the NCR appear to cultivate through collaboration, redundancy, and procedural memory.

5.3 Truth Ratings as Social Contracts

The final stage of verification—rating the claim—emerges as more than a semantic exercise. Taxonomies like "True," "False," or "Misleading" serve as cognitive shortcuts for audiences but also carry institutional weight. These classifications anchor the fact-checker's legitimacy and stake a position in contested informational terrains. The decision to use nuanced tags like "Missing Context" or "Partly False" reflects not only a technical precision but also a strategic effort to pre-empt accusations of bias or censorship.

What's notable in the NCR context is the internal standardisation that governs these ratings. Many organisations require two or more independent sources before assigning a definitive label—an internal rule that mimics scientific peer review. This formalisation of rating protocols speaks to a broader theme in our data: the codification of trust production. In an environment marked by institutional mistrust and political polarisation, these internal rules offer epistemic stability, even when the informational environment is volatile.

5.4 Transparency and the Politics of Correction

One of the more distinctive findings is the explicit commitment to transparency and self-correction. Unlike mainstream media, where corrections are often buried or unacknowledged, NCR-based fact-checking organisations prominently label updates and often re-circulate corrections on the same social platforms where the original story was shared. This is infrastructural in both form and function: correction policies are documented, routinised, and logged—becoming both a public ethic and an internal discipline.
Transparency extends to the granular level. Fact-checkers routinely include the exact keywords, search queries, and data sources they used, allowing the audience to replicate the process. This is an act of "methodological self-disclosure" (Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017) that both demystifies verification and enhances audience agency. It transforms the reader from a passive consumer to a co-verifier, advancing the broader goal of media literacy.

5.5 Editorial Impact as Information Governance

Fact-checkers in the NCR are not just verifying claims—they are reshaping the editorial ecosystem. Multiple respondents described how fact-checking had created a "healthy fear" among journalists and editors in

mainstream newsrooms, who now double-check content for fear of being called out. This aligns with what Ferrucci and Vos (2020) describe as "vertical accountability," where external actors enforce ethical standards on mainstream media. Moreover, NCR organisations have triggered policy and public impact. Fact-checks have led to FIRs, public apologies, NBDSA orders, and court petitions. The impact is both direct (removal of false content) and ambient (changing editorial routines). In a fragmented media environment, such influence marks a significant expansion of fact-checkers' agenda-setting power. The ripple effects also reach marginalised audiences. Whether by debunking fake communal narratives, addressing LGBTQI+ health myths, or exposing pseudo-scientific claims, these organisations enact a form of editorial inclusion—bringing neglected publics into the realm of verified information. In doing so, they don't merely correct misinformation—they restructure the politics of visibility.

5.6 From Verification to Editorial Sovereignty

Finally, the NCR model suggests that fact-checking is evolving from a secondary, reactive practice into a form of editorial sovereignty. Through transparent workflows, ethical triage, and long-form investigations, these organisations assert control over what deserves public attention and how it should be framed. They are not simply correcting the record; they are redefining what counts as record-worthy. This is particularly evident in the shift toward investigative fact-checking—where teams trace the origins, intent, and ecosystem of misinformation, rather than limiting themselves to claim-level correction. These deep-dives blend journalistic investigation with computational methods and political analysis, illustrating the hybrid skillset that fact-checking now demands.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the operational infrastructures of NCR-based fact-checking organisations, focusing on four core stages: claim intake and prioritisation, verification and rating workflows, transparency and corrections, and editorial impact. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it revealed that fact-checking in the NCR is not an ad hoc or purely reactive process, but a structured, ethically grounded, and technologically supported ecosystem. These organisations balance audience participation with editorial triage, leverage both digital tools and human judgement, and embed transparency and correction protocols into their core workflows. Moreover, their work extends beyond verification—reshaping public narratives, challenging media routines, and prompting policy-level consequences.

The findings underscore the significance of treating fact-checking as a sociotechnical infrastructure—one that fuses editorial practice with platform awareness, risk assessment, and public accountability. In a region deeply affected by communal sensitivities, political polarisation, and digital misinformation, these fact-checkers perform not just a corrective function but a constructive one, influencing how information flows and how trust is built. This research contributes a grounded model of fact-checking as public information governance, offering insights not only for journalism studies but also for broader conversations on democratic resilience and platform accountability in the Global South.

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