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Different Country, Different Truth? A Cross-Country Comparison of Fact-Checking Journalism During Public Health Crises

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent shifts in support from major digital platforms, fact-checking journalism has been expanding globally over the past decade. However, little is known about how fact-checking varies across countries with different media systems and cultures. Taking a cross-national comparative approach, we explore how different political and media environments shape the fact-checking content. This study employs content analysis and statistical testing for group comparisons to analyze fact-checking journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic across five countries: China, Israel, India, Russia, and the U.S. The news data is drawn from a dataset of 1,036 fact-checking articles produced by five news outlets, one from each country. We examine how news outlets in each country prioritize claims for scrutiny (focusing on topics, stakeholders), and approaches used to debunk misinformation. Results show that there are significant differences between the outlets in different countries in their selection of claims and debunking approaches. Specifically, we found that news outlets in China and Russia are more inclined to debunk claims that potentially impact their governments, while outlets in the U.S. and Israel predominantly target claims concerning public interest. These distinctions underscore the influence of different political and media systems on the practice of fact-checking journalism.

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In response to the growing spread of misinformation and disinformation, especially on social media, many independent organizations and traditional news outlets have established dedicated fact-checking units to scrutinize claims made by public figures and viral content. This rising awareness has been a key driver behind the global growth of fact-checking journalism (Graves 2016; Graves and Cherubini 2016). However, recent developments, such as Meta scaling back its partnerships with third-party fact-checkers and removing fact-checking programs for its social media platforms, suggest a potential decline in the institutional support for fact-checking journalism and reflect a changing media landscape (Bauder 2025).

Despite the expansive growth of fact-checking, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the influence of political and media systems on fact-checking practices and how these practices vary between countries. Filling this gap is crucial, as approaches to fact-checking can vary significantly based on the journalistic culture and media system in which a newsroom operates, influencing how *truth* is defined and validated. For instance, the initial step of fact-checking—selecting claims to check—is influenced by an evaluation of feasibility and news value, which can vary significantly from one organization to another (Graves 2016).

This study conducts a content analysis of fact-checking news published during the COVID-19 pandemic in five different countries: China, India, Israel, Russia, and the U.S. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a particularly pertinent context for this study due to its global impact and the high volume of accompanying misinformation, which posed significant challenges across countries with different health systems and political landscapes (Roozenbeek et al. 2020). This period also offers a rich dataset for analyzing how urgent, life-affecting information was addressed by fact-checkers across diverse media environments. These five countries were selected not only for their diverse journalistic culture but also for the significant impact each had during the pandemic: the virus was first identified in China, and the U.S. and India were among the hardest-hit nations. Israel is noted for its effective pandemic response and rapid vaccination rollout, while the debates surrounding the efficacy and safety of domestically developed vaccines in China and Russia further contribute to the significance of this study. By examining this diverse range of contexts, we aim to explore how different journalistic cultures influence fact-checking practices.

Specifically, we analyzed how the selected countries prioritized certain claims for fact-checking based on the topics of these claims and the stakeholders involved. We also compared the verification approaches used by these countries in their fact-checking processes. Our analysis identified three primary approaches: plain denial, evidence-driven debunking, and ideology-driven debunking.¹ The findings reveal how different journalistic cultures influence fact-checking practices: the selection of claims and the debunking methods can reflect underlying national priorities and ideological biases. While fact-checking is widely regarded as a tool for promoting journalistic ideals (Mena 2019), our findings highlight that it can also serve to legitimize authoritarian governance by selective verification of truth claims, thereby enabling the control, manipulation, or construction of public perceptions during health crises.

Literature Review

Fact-Checking Journalism

Rising awareness of mis/disinformation has prompted fact-checking efforts across diverse entities and practices. Many fact-checkers, who verify and evaluate information, are affiliated with institutionalized media outlets (e.g., BBC Verify) (Graves and Amazeen 2019) while a growing number of independent fact-checking groups (e.g., PolitiFact) have also emerged (Graves and Cherubini 2016). This study focuses on fact-checking journalism, a (relatively) new genre of political news that prioritizes the validation of accuracy and truth in claims made by politicians, journalists, or other public figures (Graves 2016).

Within journalistic practice, fact-checking can be broadly divided into internal and external activities. *Internal* fact-checking involves verifying information before it is published to uphold journalistic standards of truth and objectivity, which has always been an intrinsic part of journalism (Graves and Amazeen 2019). *External* fact-checking operates as an independent assessment of public statements and claims, typically performed by specialized organizations or dedicated units within media outlets to counter misinformation and enhance public understanding. In this research, we specifically focus on external fact-checking activities within institutional media, where journalists assess claims made by public figures or information circulating in the public sphere.

The proliferation of fact-checking journalism worldwide can be attributed to several pivotal factors: the decline of journalism and democracy, and the easy access to information technology (Amazeen 2020). Some understand fact-checking as a democracy-building tool that emerges when democratic institutions are perceived to be weak or under threat (Amazeen 2020). For journalists, fact-checking is a defense of their profession against accusations of media bias (Pingree et al. 2018), and an endeavor that upholds journalistic ideals (Mena 2019). Indeed, fact-checking news has been proven effective in enhancing people's trust in media, their political efficacy, and their intentions for future news consumption (Pingree et al. 2018).

However, the way fact-checking is conducted in non-Western, non-democratic countries presents unique challenges that diverge significantly from practices observed in democratic contexts. For example, in China, fact-checking journalism has been co-opted as a government-led rumor-debunking campaign, serving as an effective tool for information governance by defining unwanted voices deemed by the government as rumors (Fang 2022). These variations often reflect the broader political and media systems in place, highlighting the importance of comparative research on fact-checking journalism. Understanding how fact-checking operates under different media and political systems can provide insights into its potential uses and misuses, particularly how it might serve as a tool for authoritarian information governance or as a beacon of truth in restrictive media landscapes. Building on prior research that compares fact-checkers' transparency worldwide (Ye 2023), this study further advances the literature by analyzing news content and debunking practices. Through a comparative approach, we seek to provide a deeper understanding of the role and implications of fact-checking in diverse global context.

Fact-Checking in Different Countries: Influence of Journalistic Culture and Roles

Although fact-checking is carried out with a shared commitment to truth, its practice varies, as journalistic decisions involve human judgment (Uscinski and Butler 2013). This human judgment is shaped by various factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, the broader media and political system shape journalism practice. For instance, countries with greater press freedom and democratic governance are often more active in their fact-checking (Amazeen 2020). At the meso level, the organizational culture and editorial policies of specific media outlets could shape fact-checking practices. At the micro level, individual beliefs, biases, and practices of journalists come into play. This study focuses on macro-level differences, specifically journalistic cultures that vary at the country level, to understand the variations in fact-checking practices.

Journalistic culture reflects the ideas and practices, both conscious and unconscious, that journalists adopt to justify their roles and find meaning in their work and the profession (Hanitzsch 2007). It is closely linked to how journalists perceive and perform their roles that they are expected to fulfill in a society (Hanitzsch 2007). These roles are shaped by broad and collective expectations, known as journalistic roles, that journalists perceive as being valued by society (Donsbach 2008). Our study adopts the categorization of perceived journalistic roles developed by the *Worlds of Journalism* project (Hanitzsch et al. 2019) to analyze the five selected countries. The project identifies four roles: monitorial, interventionist, accommodative, and collaborative. According to their typology, journalists with the monitorial role critically analyze and challenge political authorities to ensure accountability. Conversely, those in the collaborative role support government efforts during crises, focusing on preserving social stability. Journalists with an interventionist role actively engage with societal issues, while those with an accommodative role prioritize content that resonates with audience preferences, treating them as consumers. Studies have combined the cross-country survey and content analysis of news articles to demonstrate how journalistic role perceptions contribute to news selection (e.g., van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albæk 2012), and news framing (e.g., Chen and Koo 2022; Jungblut et al. 2024).

As fact-checkers create unique content shaped by the journalistic culture of their respective countries (Graves and Cherubini 2016), this study posits that cross-national variations in fact-checking practices stem from the ways different journalistic cultures define the roles and responsibilities of journalists (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).

Comparison of Five Countries

One of our key rationales for conducting cross-national comparative research on fact-checking is the well-documented critique that research on information disorder heavily focuses on Western countries, while often neglecting the Global South and overlooking contextual differences. This has led to problematic generalizations, highlighting the urgent need for research that accounts for various local contexts (Badrinathan and Chaudhary 2024). This study selected five countries—China, the U.S., Russia, Israel, and India in response to this call, taking into account two key factors: the COVID-19 situation and journalistic role perceptions.

First, these five countries were reported as battlefields of COVID-19 mis/disinformation. As the initial epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, China has faced significant challenges in managing the spread of the virus and related (mis/dis)information. Alongside the development of the pandemic, varieties of disinformation have been spread in China that relate to virus origin, confirmed cases/deaths, lockdown policies, treatment methods, and efficacy of vaccines (Leng et al. 2021). In addition to the bottom-up misinformation, China was also accused of using disinformation strategies to downplay the pandemic—for example, the whistleblower doctor Li Wenliang's alert about the coronavirus was called a rumor by the government (Buckley and Myers 2020). The U.S., as one of the countries that experienced the most COVID-19 cases and deaths, also witnessed widespread misinformation about the disease's severity, prevention measures, vaccines, and conspiracies. Russia has faced accusations of spreading disinformation about COVID-19 and also experienced widespread disinformation while promoting its own vaccine (Emmott 2021). Israel, although initially praised for its rapid vaccination rollout and

management of the pandemic, also encountered misinformation related to vaccines and conspiracies about Jewish people (Scharft and Zion 2021). India, with a vast population, faced great challenges in controlling the spread of COVID-19 and the misinformation regarding treatments and vaccines (Badrinathan 2021).

Second, five countries exemplify countries with distinct journalistic role perceptions (Hanitzsch et al. 2019).² They demonstrate a great variety in their media systems and allow us to investigate how different journalistic cultures may shape various approaches to fact-checking. For example, the media systems in China and Russia are characterized by government control, where the news media is used as a political tool to set the political agenda, propagate official policies, monitor public opinion, and rally support for the regime (Brady 2007; Vartanova 2011; Zhao 2011). However, the American and Israeli media systems are often regarded as liberal models, characterized by their relatively high degree of freedom and diversity (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Peri 2011). They are strongly market-driven, with a broad array of media outlets representing various political perspectives. For India, because of the country’s sheer size and its heterogeneous political and economic structures, India has a vast and diverse media landscape with a mix of state-owned and private media (Neyazi, Kumar, and Semetko 2016; Shahin et al. 2016). Applying Hanitzsch et al. (2019)’s framework, we categorized five countries as shown in Table 1.

Selecting Claims to Verify: Topics and Stakeholders

This study examines how journalistic roles, as part of journalistic culture, influence two key aspects of fact-checking: claim selection and debunking approach (Graves 2016). First, choosing which claims to verify requires identifying the key topics and individuals or groups (i.e., stakeholders) that will be the focus of the fact-checking efforts. This selection process is essential because it plays an agenda-setting role, where the topics selected by news outlets can influence public perceptions of issue importance and shape attitudes (McCombs and Shaw 1972).

Each news outlet has its own policies that guide its fact-checking practices. For instance, *The Associated Press* emphasizes in its policy that it prioritizes verifying information deemed of great “relevance and importance” (Easton 2017). However, fact-checking activities often face criticism regarding their topic selection, as it is often shaped by the priorities and interests of journalists, news organizations, or broader societal stakeholders, including political ideologies, audience preferences, and editorial decisions (Soo et al. 2023; Uscinski and Butler 2013). In countries where maintaining social stability is a priority, for instance, news organizations may assign higher news value to claims that could undermine government legitimacy and fact-check them. Conversely, in countries where journalists adopt a watchdog (i.e., monitorial) role, challenging authority would

Table 1. Primary journalistic roles in the five countries.

Country	Primary journalistic role
China	Collaborative
India	Collaborative
Israel	Interventionist
Russia	Collaborative-accommodative
U.S.	Monitorial-accommodative

Notes: This is based on the results from the World of Journalism Study 2012–2016 (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). See Figure S1 in the Online Appendix for a coordinate map of journalistic roles in countries worldwide.

be considered a primary responsibility, prompting active verification of claims made by government officials or political leaders. Given these dynamics, we first examine how each news outlet select claims for fact-checking based on their topics and the stakeholders involved:

RQ1: Which claims did news outlets in five countries choose for fact-checking?

RQ2: Who were the stakeholders associated with these claims?

Building on these research questions, we further hypothesize that the selection of claims and stakeholders varies at the country-level. In countries like China and Russia, where journalistic activities often closely align with government narratives (Hanitzsch et al. 2019), we expect news agencies to prioritize fact-checking claims that involve domestic government stakeholders. This reflects a collaborative role that supports state perspectives and maintains social order. Conversely, in countries such as the U.S. and Israel, where the press typically adopts a monitorial role (Hanitzsch et al. 2019), news organizations are anticipated to focus more on claims affecting the general public, aiming to uphold transparency and accountability. Therefore, we predict:

H1: News outlets in China and Russia are more likely to fact-check claims involving stakeholders from the domestic government.

H2: News outlets in the U.S. and Israel are more likely to fact-check claims involving stakeholders from the general public.

Debunking Approaches

Debunking is the process of correcting misinformation by systematically refuting false claims with evidence and logical reasoning (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). In this context, it is especially important to maintain transparency and credibility by showing “how they know what they know and what they don’t know” (Center for News Literacy n.d.). The process involves (or is expected to involve) assessing the truthfulness of claims by collecting and evaluating evidence from sources such as scientific resources, public reports, or experts or making inferences from evidence (Center for News Literacy n.d.; Nieminen and Sankari 2021).

Researchers have identified three primary approaches to debunk rumors: denial, refutation, and attack (Paek and Hove 2019). Denial involves directly contradicting the false claim without offering supporting evidence, which may not be persuasive to those who already believe the misinformation. Refutation counters misinformation by presenting factual evidence, data, and expert opinions to substantiate the correction, enhancing credibility and effectiveness in changing beliefs (Yang and Paek 2018). The attacking approach involves responses that contain threatening information or potential punishments directed at those who spread the rumors, which may deter some from sharing false information but can also escalate conflicts and be perceived negatively by the public.

In this study, we refine these approaches into a plain denial, evidence-driven, and ideology-driven debunking to make them more relevant to the journalistic practices across countries with different media-political systems. Evidence-driven debunking relies on factual information, scientific evidence, and expert testimony to refute false claims, emphasizing objectivity and a commitment to truth. This approach enhances

the journalist's credibility and fosters public trust. Ideology-driven debunking attributes false information to opposing political groups or foreign entities, presenting the correction from a specific ideological perspective. While this may resonate with in-group audiences, it may reinforce existing biases, affecting the perceived objectivity of journalism.

Comparing debunking approaches across different countries provides deeper insights into how political and media systems shape fact-checking practices—not only in the selection of claims but also in the methods used to debunk them. By examining the debunking strategies employed during the pandemic, we aim to identify how these systemic factors affect the extent to which journalists rely on scientific evidence/expert opinions versus ideological narratives influenced by political agendas. Therefore, we ask:

RQ3: What fact-checking approaches are predominantly used in each of the five countries?

Fact-Checking During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 misinformation often involved twisting or recontextualizing information rather than outright fabrication, making it particularly challenging to discern its truthfulness (Brennen et al. 2020). During the pandemic, fact-checking has become increasingly important to combat the spread of inaccurate information and to promote more effective risk communication. As a result, there was a remarkable surge in the volume of fact-checking efforts in journalism, highlighting the news media's efforts to act as a supplement to the public sphere in upholding truthfulness (Luengo and García-Marín 2020). At the same time, fact-checking can serve different purposes and address the interests of different stakeholders. Growing concerns over “fake news” grant governments greater legitimacy to combat misinformation, yet ironically, fact-checking which is meant to enhance public knowledge can also be used as a tool to restrict freedom of expression (Schuldt 2021).

We focus on topics of COVID-19 fact-checking news stories by initially applying four categories of inaccurate information that commonly arise during health emergencies: (1) incorrect portrayals of the disease or preventive actions; (2) unsubstantiated medical treatments or interventions; (3) wrongly blaming certain groups of people; (4) conspiracy theories which frequently debate on the disease's origins or existence (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2021). During the COVID-19, from its initial stages when treatment was uncertain due to limited scientific understanding, to later periods where evidence increasingly affirmed the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines, a wide range of misinformation. We expand on these categories by examining each story in detail (see Methods).

Researchers worldwide have explored how journalists fact-check misinformation during the pandemic. For instance, most UK broadcasters rarely questioned the government's decisions (Cushion et al. 2022), while German and U.S.-based news outlets often included links to external sources or documents in their fact-checks, reflecting high levels of transparency (Humphrecht 2020). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of systemic understanding regarding how different journalistic cultures shape COVID-19 fact-checking. Disparities in journalistic professionalism and organizational structures, for example, can significantly shape how news outlets approach the task of debunking false information.

Methods

Data Collection

This study conducted a content analysis of news stories collected from Factiva, an online database of global newspapers and publications. We identified COVID-19 fact-checking news stories with the following search terms: (“COVID” OR “coronavirus” OR “pandemic”) AND (“fake” OR “fact check” OR “false” OR “incorrect”). Boolean search strings were applied to retrieve news articles relevant to the COVID-19 fact-checking. We collected stories published between December 2019 and December 2021, marking two years since the first reported COVID-19 case. News outlets selected for each country included *Xinhua News Agency* (China), *The Associated Press* (the U.S.), *Press Trust of India* (India), *TASS* (Russia), and *Jerusalem Post* (Israel), chosen based on the size of each news outlet and the availability of English-language. As a result, we collected a total of 1,590 news articles: 250 from China’s *Xinhua*, 448 from India’s *PTI*, 146 from Israel’s *JP*, 186 from Russia’s *TASS*, and 560 from the U.S.’s *AP*.

Justification of Selected News Outlets

Albeit with its limitations, the selection of a single prominent news outlet from each country ensures a manageable yet effective comparison across different media environments. This strategy allows for a focused examination of how internationally visible and widely read (mainstream) media, which typically reflects broader national journalistic norms and practices, engage in fact-checking. We opted to analyze English-language texts to maintain consistency in analysis and to utilize the extensive global coverage available in English, making it feasible to conduct a comprehensive cross-national study. Furthermore, by focusing on traditional media outlets instead of independent fact-checkers, we can better assess how established journalistic routines and infrastructures impact the way fact-checking is done and presented during major global events like the COVID-19 pandemic. We provide a brief overview of each news outlet below:

Xinhua is the official state-run press agency of China. It is one of the most influential media organizations in the country, serving as a major channel for disseminating news domestically and internationally (Brady 2007). *Press Trust of India* (PTI) is one of the largest news agencies in India, offering news services to various media outlets across the country. PTI’s status as a non-profit cooperative provides a level of insulation from direct commercial and political pressures (Jeffrey 2000). The Russian News Agency *TASS* is a major state-owned news agency in Russia and one of the largest news agencies globally. The agency operates under the oversight of the Russian government and is known for providing news that aligns with the official stance of the Kremlin (Rantanen 2002). The *Jerusalem Post* (JP) is an English-language daily newspaper that serves as one of Israel’s leading news sources for a global audience. The *Jerusalem Post* has a reputation for its independent editorial stance, though it is often perceived as leaning towards centrist to right-wing perspectives (Peri 2004). *The Associated Press* (AP) is an independent, not-for-profit news cooperative headquartered in New York City. The AP is known for its commitment to unbiased, comprehensive news reporting (Sterling 2009).

While we acknowledge the internal diversity of fact-checking practices within countries, the selection of a single prominent news outlet per country can be justified

by our aim to explore how mainstream and influential media organizations, which represent broader journalistic norms within their respective national contexts, conduct fact-checking. While this approach may not capture the full spectrum of fact-checking practices within each country, it enables us to identify and compare overarching patterns and priorities reflective of mainstream media systems.

Measurements

We adopted a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to build the codebook. First, we relied on existing research and reports to guide the identification of topic categories related to COVID-19 misinformation (e.g., Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2021) as well as prior studies that used content analysis to examine fact-checking practices across different countries (e.g., Cazzamatta and Santos 2023; Ferracioli, Kniess, and Marques 2022; Leon et al. 2022). Then, two researchers independently reviewed a stratified random sample of 150 news articles, which is approximately 30 articles per country, to evaluate the relevance and comprehensiveness of the initial topic categories. The final codebook was established after the researchers discussed their observations and reached a consensus on the modifications needed to ensure accuracy and applicability of the topics across different contexts.

The codebook includes three focal variables: *rumor topics*, which specify the subject matter of the claims being examined; *rumor stakeholders*, identifying the parties involved in or affected by the claims; and *debunking approach*, detailing the methods used to refute the claims, such as citing evidence or presenting ideological arguments. All variables were coded on a binary scale (1 = presence, 0 = absence), and the items within these categories were not mutually exclusive; for instance, a story could address multiple topics and stakeholders. Table S1 provides operational definitions and examples for each category.

Sampling and Coding Process

For the coding process, the sample sizes for India's PTI and the U.S.'s AP were roughly twice double that of the other three news outlets. To create a balanced sample for comparison, we sorted the data from PTI and AP by publish date and then selected every other story. This approach yielded a final sample of 1,036 articles for human coding, which included 250 from China's Xinhua, 224 from India's PTI, 146 from Israel's JP, 186 from Russia's TASS, and 230 from the U.S.'s AP. Based on this dataset, two researchers independently coded a stratified random sample of 100 news articles, representing approximately 10% of the total sample size, to establish inter-coder reliability. After the coding, they compared their results and discussed any discrepancies to resolve disagreements. This iterative process was conducted over two rounds, until inter-coder reliability was established, evidenced by an average Cohen's Kappa score of 0.83. Following this, the two researchers independently coded the remaining stories.

Data Analysis: Chi-Square Tests and Logistic Regressions

To address our research questions and evaluate our hypotheses, we employed a combination of chi-square tests and logistic regression analyses. This methodological approach

allowed us to investigate overall between-group differences and facilitate more detailed comparisons between countries. We examined how five news agencies differ in their selection of claims based on topics (RQ1), stakeholders (RQ2), and approaches to debunking in fact-checking news (RQ3). Initially, chi-square tests were used to assess broad between-group variations. Subsequently, we ran logistic regression with pairwise comparisons to provide deeper insights into these differences. H1, which suggests that Chinese and Russian news outlets are more likely to fact-check claims related to domestic government stakeholders, and H2, which proposes that news outlets in the U.S. and Israel predominantly focus on claims concerning the interests of the general public, were tested using logistic regression and pairwise comparisons.

Chi-Square Tests

Chi-square tests were employed to analyze significant differences in article proportions across various categories (e.g., topic categories) among the five countries. Our binary human coding process assigned a “1” for presence and a “0” for absence in each category. The chi-square test is well-suited for comparing categorical data across multiple groups, enabling us to assess whether the distribution of articles varies among the five countries.

Logistic Regression

While chi-square tests were used to determine if there were significant differences in the proportions of coded articles across categories among the five countries, these tests do not reveal the direction or strength of associations. Therefore, we employed logistic regression for a more nuanced analysis, estimating the odds of an event (such as the use of particular fact-checking practices) relative to a reference group and exploring how factors like country influence the likelihood of different practices. Since standard logistic regression only compares each group against a reference group, we also performed comprehensive *pairwise comparisons* using the R package “multcomp” (Hothorn, Bretz and Westfall 2008), which allowed for a detailed analysis of differences and similarities between each pair of countries. Additionally, we conducted Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests and Tukey post hoc analyses to ensure the robustness and consistency of the results.

Results

Topic Selection

To answer RQ1, which examines how the five news organizations selected different topics to fact-check, particularly whether one country selected a specific topic significantly more than others, we conducted chi-square tests to compare the proportional differences in fact-checking across the seven predefined topics. The results show the differences in claim selections based on topics across the five countries in their COVID-19 fact-checking news. The degree and significance of these differences vary by topic and country pairs (see Table 2).

We found distinct patterns in the topic selection across five countries, each shaped by the news media’s priorities and the specific socio-political contexts. In Israel, for instance, a significant focus on debunking conspiracy claims, accounting for 51.7% of the total,

Table 2. Descriptive results of each variable.

	Israel (JP)	US (AP)	China (Xinhua)	Russia (TASS)	India (PTI)
<i>N</i>	60	111	153	93	86
<i>Topic of Rumor</i>					
Situation	2 (3.3%)	14 (12.6%)	9 (5.9%)	18 (19.4%)	17 (19.8%)
Disease	4 (6.7%)	16 (14.4%)	9 (5.9%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.2%)
Treatments	4 (6.7%)	26 (23.4%)	9 (5.9%)	1 (1.1%)	8 (9.3%)
Vaccine	13 (21.7%)	38 (34.2%)	16 (10.5%)	25 (26.9%)	10 (11.6%)
Policy	7 (11.7%)	14 (12.6%)	8 (5.2%)	5 (5.4%)	3 (3.5%)
Conspiracy	31 (51.7%)	24 (21.6%)	56 (36.6%)	30 (32.3%)	6 (7.0%)
Discrimination	22 (36.7%)	5 (4.5%)	16 (10.5%)	1 (1.1%)	7 (8.1%)
Other/Not Spec.	22 (36.7%)	5 (4.5%)	37 (24.2%)	18 (19.4%)	36 (41.9%)
<i>Stakeholder of Rumor</i>					
General public	55 (91.7%)	105 (94.6%)	43 (28.1%)	14 (15.1%)	23 (26.7%)
Gov. (domestic)	17 (28.3%)	16 (14.4%)	79 (51.6%)	76 (81.7%)	40 (46.5%)
Gov. (foreign)	11 (18.3%)	4 (3.6%)	20 (13.1%)	12 (12.9%)	6 (7.0%)
Indiv./orgs (dom.)	2 (3.3%)	3 (2.7%)	2 (1.3%)	13 (14.0%)	18 (20.9%)
Indiv./orgs (for.)	1 (1.7%)	2 (1.8%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (2.2%)	4 (4.7%)
Other/Not Spec.	2 (3.3%)	4 (3.6%)	1 (0.7%)	2 (2.2%)	4 (4.7%)
<i>Debunking Approach</i>					
Evidence-driven	15 (25.0%)	65 (58.6%)	75 (49.0%)	36 (38.7%)	42 (48.8%)
Ideology-driven	26 (43.3%)	19 (17.1%)	34 (22.2%)	37 (39.8%)	9 (10.5%)
Plain denial	17 (28.3%)	28 (25.2%)	31 (20.3%)	13 (14.0%)	12 (14.0%)

Note: Each number represents the count of articles, while the numbers in parentheses indicate the percentage of news articles in each country that fall into the category.

possibly stems from the prevalence of conspiracies targeting Jewish people. These conspiracies might be exacerbated by Israel's early and effective vaccine rollout, which, while heralded as a public health success, could have unintentionally spurred misinformation campaigns linking it to global control narratives, potentially feeding into long standing anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Similarly, in China, the predominance of conspiracy claims at 36.6% may be influenced significantly by ongoing narratives surrounding the origin of the virus. This focus could reflect the government's concerted efforts to manage and counteract conspiracy theories that suggest the virus was man-made or escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan. These theories have not only international implications but also domestic repercussions, potentially undermining trust in the government's handling of the crisis. The Chinese media, operating under state directives, likely prioritizes these particular claims to align public perception with official narratives, aiming to stabilize societal trust and uphold the government's image both at home and abroad.

In the U.S., the vaccine discourse is notably politicized, representing 34.2% of the fact-checking focus. This polarization likely arises from differing responses at federal and state levels, where some leaders promote vaccines while others cast doubts, contributing to a divided public perception. Russia's focus on disease-related claims, comprising 19.4%, may be fueled by public skepticism toward the government's transparency in managing pandemic data, with citizens potentially doubting the accuracy of official reports. India's broad spectrum of claims, with 41.9% categorized as Other/Not Specified, highlights the complexities brought on by its massive population and regional disparities in health infrastructure, which can give rise to a diverse array of localized rumors regarding the pandemic's handling. Table 3 presents the full results of the chi-square tests and logistic regressions comparing rumor topics.

Table 3. Results of chi-square tests and logistic regressions comparing rumor topics.

	Situation	Disease	Treatment	Vaccine	Policy	Conspiracy	Discrimination
χ^2 ($df = 4$)	19.51***	23.62***	35.46***	30.53***	10.95***	42.65***	58.99***
China-US	-0.84 (0.45)	-0.99 (0.44)	-1.59*** (0.41)	-1.57*** (0.34)	-1.04 (0.46)	0.74. (0.29)	0.91 (0.53)
Russia-US	0.51 (0.39)	-17.78 (1115.14)	-3.34** (1.03)	-0.35 (0.31)	-1.01 (0.54)	0.50 (0.32)	-1.47 (1.10)
Israel-US	-1.43 (0.77)	-0.86 (0.58)	-1.45. (0.56)	-0.63 (0.37)	-0.17 (0.49)	1.35*** (0.35)	2.51*** (0.53)
India-US	0.53 (0.39)	-2.66. (1.04)	-1.09. (0.43)	-1.38** (0.39)	-1.46 (0.65)	-1.30. (0.48)	0.63 (0.60)
Russia-China	1.35* (0.43)	-16.79 (1115.14)	-1.75 (1.06)	1.22** (0.36)	0.03 (0.59)	-0.24 (0.28)	-2.37 (1.04)
Israel-China	-0.59 (0.80)	0.13 (0.62)	0.13 (0.62)	0.93 (0.41)	0.87 (0.54)	0.62 (0.31)	1.60*** (0.38)
India-China	1.37* (0.44)	-1.67 (1.06)	0.50 (0.51)	0.19 (0.43)	-0.42 (0.69)	-2.04*** (0.46)	-0.28 (0.47)
Israel-Russia	-1.94. (0.77)	16.93 (1115.14)	1.88 (1.13)	-0.28 (0.39)	0.84 (0.61)	0.86. (0.34)	3.98** (1.04)
India-Russia	0.03 (0.38)	15.12 (1115.14)	2.24 (1.07)	-1.03. (0.41)	-0.45 (0.75)	-1.80** (0.48)	2.10 (1.08)
India-Israel	1.97. (0.77)	-1.80 (1.13)	0.36 (0.64)	-0.74 (0.46)	-1.30 (0.71)	-2.66*** (0.50)	-1.88*** (0.48)

Note: Chi-square results indicate overall differences between the groups. Standard logistic regression provides estimates for each group relative to the reference group. We conducted pairwise comparisons to elucidate the differences between each pair of groups. The estimate values indicate the direction and magnitude of these differences, with standard errors presented in parentheses. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Stakeholders of the Claims

To answer RQ2, which asks how stakeholders of the claims selected for fact-checking differ between the five news organizations, we used chi-square tests to compare the differences in proportions for fact-checking news in each of the seven identified claim topics. As shown in Table 4, we found significant differences in rumor selection based on stakeholders among the five countries.

In Israel, a significant majority of rumors (91.7%) involve the general public as stakeholders, highlighting a focus on broadly disseminated misinformation that could impact public perception and social harmony. This aligns with the high prevalence of conspiracy claims, suggesting an effort to maintain public trust and counteract narratives that could fuel societal division. The U.S. also shows a strong emphasis on the general public

Table 4. Results of chi-square tests and logistic regressions comparing stakeholders.

	General Public	Domestic Government	Foreign Government
χ^2 ($df = 4$)	222.75***	99.177***	12.281*
China-US	-3.80*** (0.46)	1.85*** (0.32)	1.39. (0.56)
Russia-US	-4.59*** (0.51)	3.21*** (0.38)	1.38 (0.60)
Israel-US	-0.46 (0.63)	0.85 (0.39)	1.79* (0.61)
India-US	-3.87*** (0.49)	1.64*** (0.35)	0.70 (0.66)
Russia-China	-0.79 (0.34)	1.36*** (0.31)	-0.01 (0.39)
Israel-China	3.34*** (0.50)	-0.99* (0.33)	0.40 (0.41)
India-China	-0.07 (0.30)	-0.21 (0.27)	-0.70 (0.49)
Israel-Russia	4.13*** (0.55)	-2.36*** (0.39)	0.42 (0.45)
India-Russia	0.72 (0.38)	-1.57*** (0.34)	-0.68 (0.52)
India-Israel	-3.41*** (0.53)	0.79 (0.36)	-1.10 (0.54)

Note: The estimate values indicate the direction and magnitude of these differences, with standard errors presented in parentheses. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

(94.6%) as the main stakeholder in rumors, reflecting the media's role in addressing widespread misinformation among the population. This is particularly pertinent given the politically charged environment, where vaccine and policy-related misinformation can have significant public health and social implications.

China presents a different dynamic, with a substantial focus on domestic government stakeholders (51.6%), indicative of the state-controlled media's role in safeguarding the government's image and authority. This aligns with the high number of conspiracy claims linked to the government, emphasizing efforts to control the narrative around sensitive issues like the virus's origin and the state's response to the pandemic. In Russia, the focus is also overwhelmingly on the domestic government (81.7%) as the primary stakeholder, reflecting concerns over governmental transparency and the accuracy of official information, particularly regarding disease-related claims. This suggests a significant public and media focus on holding the government accountable for its pandemic responses and data reporting.

India's scenario is more distributed, though there is still a notable focus on the domestic government (46.5%) and the general public (26.7%). The diverse range of stakeholders matches a variety of claims, reflecting the complex social and regional diversity in India, which necessitates addressing misinformation that impacts different layers of society.

H1 predicted that news organizations in countries like Russia and China, where journalists are expected to take collaborative roles, are more likely to select claims involving stakeholders from the domestic government. We found that the Russian news organization TASS was significantly more inclined to select claims related to their domestic government compared to those in the U.S. ($p < .001$), India ($p < .001$), Israel ($p < .001$), and China ($p < .001$). Chinese news organizations were also significantly more inclined to select domestic government-related claims in their fact-checking news compared to news organizations in the U.S. ($p < .001$) and Israel ($p < .05$). **Therefore, H1 is supported.**

H2 anticipated that news organizations with a dominant monitorial role (such as in Israel and the U.S.) would be more likely to select claims concerning the interest of the general public. The pairwise comparison results indicate that the American news organization AP was more likely to fact-check claims related to the interests of the general public than those in India ($p < .001$), Russia ($p < .001$), and China ($p < .001$). We also found that the Israeli news organization JP was more likely to fact-check claims related to the interests of the general public than those in India ($p < .001$), Russia ($p < .001$), and China ($p < .001$). **Therefore, H2 is supported.**

Fact-Checking Approaches

RQ3 asks how five news organizations use different debunking approaches. We found that the differences in debunking approaches are statistically significant (see Table 5).

In Israel, the predominant debunking approach is ideologically driven, accounting for 43.3% of cases. This is likely in response to the high volume of conspiracy claims, which often involve complex narratives about Jewish people that require ideological counterarguments to address deeply ingrained biases and misconceptions. The U.S. primarily utilizes an evidence-driven approach in 58.6% of debunking efforts, matching its focus on

Table 5. Results of chi-square tests and logistic regressions comparing debunking approaches.

	Evidence-driven	Ideology-driven	Plain denial
χ^2 (df = 4)	20.489***	34.365***	8.55
China-US	-0.38 (0.25)	0.32 (0.32)	-0.28 (0.30)
Russia-US	-0.81* (0.29)	1.12** (0.33)	-0.73 (0.37)
Israel-US	-1.44*** (0.35)	1.31** (0.36)	0.16 (0.36)
India-US	-0.39 (0.29)	-0.57 (0.43)	-0.73 (0.38)
Russia-China	-0.42 (0.27)	0.79* (0.29)	-0.45 (0.36)
Israel-China	-1.06* (0.34)	0.98* (0.33)	0.44 (0.35)
India-China	-0.01 (0.27)	-0.89 (0.40)	-0.45 (0.37)
Israel-Russia	-0.64 (0.37)	0.19 (0.34)	0.89 (0.41)
India-Russia	0.41 (0.30)	-1.69*** (0.41)	-0.00 (0.43)
India-Israel	1.05* (0.37)	-1.88*** (0.44)	-0.89 (0.42)

Note: The estimate values indicate the direction and magnitude of these differences, with standard errors presented in parentheses. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

vaccine-related claims. Given the highly politicized nature of vaccine discourse in the country, providing empirical evidence and factual data is essential to counteract misinformation effectively. China employs a predominantly evidence-driven approach as well, in 49.0% of cases. This aligns with the government's effort to control the narrative, especially regarding conspiracy claims (36.6%) that often challenge the government's account of the virus's origins and its pandemic response. Despite using evidence-based strategies, the professionalism of Chinese media is often perceived as compromised due to its role as a tool for government propaganda. The emphasis on evidence is strategically employed not merely for public enlightenment but to consolidate state control over information, ensuring that the dissemination of facts aligns with government-approved narratives. Russia shows a balanced use of evidence-driven and plain denial approaches, at 49.0% and 30.3% respectively. India's debunking strategies are the most diversified, with a slight preference for evidence-driven methods (48.8%).

Overview of the Findings: Key Characteristics of Each Outlet

Based on our findings, we present key characteristics of each news outlet. In Xinhua stories, we observed two distinct characteristics in their fact-checking news. First, the selection of claims targeted for fact-checking shows a significant focus on conspiracy theories and discrimination, with nearly half (47.1%) of the claims falling into these categories. They included conspiracies on "lab leak," and the politicization of the virus's origin, particularly in the U.S, which fueled a surge in anti-Asian hate crimes. Second, over half of the fact-checking efforts are directed at claims concerning the domestic government, highlighting a prioritized area of scrutiny within their fact-checking process. This emphasis indicates their effort to address and dispel misinformation that could damage the image of the Chinese government or undermine the public trust in the government.

The JP (Israel)'s fact-checking news also prominently addressed conspiracy theories, especially those alleging that foreign countries were spreading claims that Israel was intentionally spreading the virus to profit from vaccines, and discrimination, especially against its own citizens, thus targeting the general public as its main stakeholder. For instance, a story dealt with "disinformation [spread] by the Iranian regime that America is responsible for coronavirus, and is using the disease to defeat China and Iran" (Edmunds 2020). The JP most frequently used the ideology-driven approach to debunk

inaccurate information. Interestingly, plain denial without corroborating evidence was the second most common strategy, followed by an evidence-driven approach.

In India's PTI, the most frequently addressed claims concern the pandemic, particularly the numbers of infections and deaths, accounting for approximately 20% of the coverage. Regarding stakeholders, a significant portion of the fact-checking activities (46.5%) focuses on claims related to the domestic government. This highlights a strong emphasis on scrutinizing the government's handling of the pandemic, reflecting the importance of government accountability and the impact of its decisions on public health and safety.

TASS, the Russian news organization, demonstrated that a significant portion of the fact-checked claims focuses on vaccines (26.9%) and conspiracy theories (36.3%), reflecting a proactive approach to addressing misinformation related to public health and societal stability. Notably, a substantial majority (81.7%) of the stakeholders involved in their stories were the domestic government.

In the U.S.'s AP, the prevalent topics included vaccine, treatment, and conspiracies theories, including claims that "Bill Gates intentionally spread the virus" and "China used the virus as a bioweapon." The main stakeholder was the general public. AP's fact-checking coverage was primarily evidence-driven, with more than half of the sampled dataset falling into this category. In some cases, the news outlet independently established the evidence by collaborating with research labs (e.g., "A nine-month AP investigation, conducted in collaboration with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, found ...") or by citing official health institutions like the WHO or CDC, and scientists.

Discussion

Fact-checking journalism has gained global prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by an unprecedented spread of misinformation. However, little is known about the factors shaping fact-checking practices, particularly how different journalistic cultures across countries influence these approaches. This study fills that gap by conducting a content analysis of fact-checking news articles from different countries. Specifically, it analyzes fact-checking articles from five news outlets, each from a different country, published during the COVID-19 pandemic. By comparing the topics, stakeholders, and debunking methods in fact-checking news, we reveal how journalistic priorities shape fact-checking practices across different political and media environments. We unpack our key findings.

First, regarding the topics, journalists in countries where they are expected to fulfill a monitorial role, such as in the U.S. and Israel, are more likely to fact-check claims related to the public interest (H1, H2). This aligns with the role in scrutinizing power and informing the public about issues that impact their well-being. In contrast, in countries where the news media takes a collaborative role with the government (China and Russia), journalists tend to fact-check claims related to government narratives. These differences suggest that fact-checking serves not only as a means of truth-telling and holding power accountable but also as a strategic tool of governance, reflecting how journalism, while committed to facts, inherently involves relativity and subjectivity in producing meaning and knowledge (Zelizer 2004). In some cases, it may even function as propaganda under the guise of "seeking truth," selectively focusing on or correcting certain information while overlooking others. When news media and journalists prioritize regime stability,

their fact-checking activities can reinforce the legitimacy of political elites or the government, validating their authority and control over society (Wojcieszak et al. 2019).

In fact-checking, journalists must carefully balance the need to provide accurate information with the responsibility to avoid amplification of false claims, all while maintaining impartiality and objectivity (Graves, Bélair-Gagnon, and Larsen 2023). Deciding what to fact-check among the vast amount of misinformation highlights these challenges, and different priorities among journalists reflect deeper concerns about external pressures shaping the field (Graves, Bélair-Gagnon, and Larsen 2023). Making such decision without becoming instruments of state governance, can be especially challenging under authoritarian regimes or when journalists are expected to play collaborative roles. Social expectations and normative responsibilities also shape how journalists navigate this tension, with imagined audiences—formed through direct and indirect interactions across various networks—shaping how they perceive and communicate with the public (Coddington, Lewis, and Belair-Gagnon 2021), including what they believe their presumed audiences need to hear during the fact-checking process.

While this study focuses on comparisons rooted in journalistic role perceptions and culture, it is important to recognize that variations in fact-checking practices are also shaped by factors operating at multiple levels: macro, meso, and micro. These levels collectively influence journalistic routines and decision-making (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). For example, our findings indicate that TASS and Xinhua were more likely to fact-check claims involving stakeholders from their own governments than those related to foreign actors (H1), and the outlets examined differ in ownership and editorial orientation. TASS and Xinhua are state-run news agencies, PTI and AP operate as non-profit entities, and The Jerusalem Post is a for-profit organization owned by private business interests.

Our findings also reveal notable cross-national differences in how journalists debunk falsehoods (RQ3). In China, India, and the U.S, there is a greater tendency towards evidence-driven approach. AP (U.S) frequently cited scientific research, infectious disease experts, and health officials to debunk inaccurate information. They undertook its own research for fact-checking in collaboration with research labs or presented scientific evidence provided by medical institutions to support its findings. PTI (India) also emphasized evidence in its fact-checking practices. This aligns with Kumar's (2022) research on professional fact-checking organizations and services in India, demonstrating a strong commitment to transparency norms, such as disclosing the procedures for verifying information and the sources consulted. In contrast, Israeli (JP) and Russian (TASS) news demonstrated more ideologically-driven approaches to fact-checking, such as by emphasizing that foreign governments or actors with opposing geopolitical or ideological stances are maliciously spreading falsehoods.

One way to understand the reasons behind these differences is by examining the specific topics chosen for fact-checking. We found that Israel and Russia predominantly focused on debunking rumors related to conspiracy theories. In news stories from Israel, for instance, fact-checking efforts often address concerns over rumors originating from countries in conflict or with political tensions, driven by antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiment. This narrative underscores a historical pattern of "Christianity and the West" threatening them (e.g., Hersowitz 2020) has now extended to antisemitism during the pandemic, with false accusations against Jews and the Jewish State for spreading the disease, propagated by entities such as the Palestinian authority or the Iranian regime.

Similarly, in a TASS story (Russia), the news described the European Union's allegations of Russia's engagement in spreading coronavirus disinformation as a "Russophobic obsession" (TASS 2020). Given that conspiracy theories are among the most prevalent types of rumors that news outlets attempt to verify and given that these theories are inherently based on blaming sinister groups with political motivations, it is not too surprising that Israeli and Russian news focused heavily on debunking them using ideologically driven approaches. This also mirrors prior research showing that Russian (pro-government) fact-checkers often debunked information by referencing official government statements (Montaña-Niño et al. 2024).

Interestingly, China was an exception, with its news stories focusing on fact-checking COVID-19 conspiracy-related rumors, however, they were more likely to use an evidence-driven approach, prioritizing factual verification over ideological narratives. One plausible explanation is that, since China was at the center of the pandemic as its origin, this raised challenges to the legitimacy and prestige of its government (Lemus-Delgado 2020). As a result, the government had a greater need to rely on scientific claims to defend its position. Journalists, adopting a collaborative role with the government, are likely to use science as a form of "truth knowledge" (Lemus-Delgado 2020) to craft counter-narratives against accusations that threaten the government's legitimacy. However, it is important to note that our conclusion may be issue-specific, as research suggests that in authoritarian context like China, fact-checkers tend to focus on health-related topics while steering clear of political and economic issues (Liu and Zhou 2022).

Taken together, these findings connect to the concept of journalistic culture, which offers a useful lens for understanding the diversity of newsroom practices worldwide, grounded in the idea that journalism is shaped by culturally negotiated values and norms (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). In Russia, China, and Israel tends to play a more active institutional role in shaping the political agenda, whereas in the U.S., journalists typically adopt the role of detached observers or providers of political information (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). These differences underscore how journalistic practices and professional boundaries are embedded in broader cultural and institutional contexts.

Limitations, Suggestions for Future Research, and Implications

This study has several limitations. First, it sampled only one news agency from each of five countries, which may not fully capture the diversity of global or national fact-checking practices. The reliance on a single outlet per country limits the ability to generalize findings across different media organizations with varying policies, resources, and editorial stances as we acknowledge potential intra-national variations in fact-checking news across different outlets within one country (Kim et al. 2022; Kumar 2022; Tsang, Feng, and Lee 2022; Yousuf 2025). Future research should expand the sample to include more countries and multiple fact-checking outlets per country to better represent and understand international fact-checking journalism. As recent research suggests that online fact-checking activities in China are often carried out by government-affiliated accounts, primarily aimed at debunking rumors spread by ordinary citizens (Chen and Lu 2024), comparing multiple fact-checking organizations across different platforms, such as independent fact-checkers, journalistic outlets (mainstream vs. partisan media),

citizen-led initiatives, and social media platforms, would also help reveal more nuanced dynamics around who debunks what, when, and why.

This study focused exclusively on the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by a surge in health-related misinformation and a unique global focus. This context, while significant, does not cover other factors that may influence fact-checking, such as geopolitical events. For example, the Russia-Ukraine war or Israel-Gaza war presents unique challenges where geopolitics heavily shape information dissemination and correction. Investigating fact-checking in varied contexts like international conflicts could reveal how external factors influence journalistic approaches to misinformation.

Despite these limitations, this study is pioneering in comparing fact-checking news across multiple countries. The news outlets, though limited in number, are significant and influential within their respective nations, representing key aspects of national journalism practices. This comparative analysis of claim selection and debunking approaches establishes a foundational framework for understanding how journalistic culture shapes fact-checking. We advance a comparative framework by operationalizing key dimensions of fact-checking news, including claim selection based on topics and stakeholders, and debunking approaches. This provides a tool for future studies to systematically compare fact-checking practices across countries.

Notes

1. While some researchers distinguish debunking, fact-checking, and verification as distinct practices with similar goals, often viewing debunking as a subset of the other two (Graves, Bélair-Gagnon, and Larsen 2023), this study does not differentiate between these terms and uses them interchangeably.
2. Hanitzsch et al. (2019)'s Worlds of Journalism Studies (WJS) explain factors that contribute to journalistic cultures with the survey data of journalists, assessing their role perceptions including perceived influences, editorial autonomy, and their thoughts on their place in society. This data has been widely applied as a tool for cross-national analysis.

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