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Comparing Fact-checking Efforts across Five Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Case of UNDP's iVerify

Abstract

This study shed light on the process of activation and implementation of iVerify, a UNDP-enabled fact-checking initiative, across five countries in sub-Saharan Africa: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia. A content analysis of 1093 fact-checking materials revealed main themes and the scope of factually accurate and inaccurate news distributed in these countries during the election cycles and beyond. The findings also demonstrated how the fact-checking process was institutionalized and discussed similarities and differences in the implementation of this initiative. The analysis showed that fact-checkers not only played an active role as gatekeepers identifying which news to fact-check (e.g., identifying which news needs to be double checked for integrity and possible debunking), but also played an active role in shaping the information flow through verifying the information and making decisions which sources to use to confirm or debunk the news. Thus, fact-checkers had considerable power over final verdicts and over labeling news as true, false, or misleading. Such power further challenged the traditional gatekeeping process of not only traditional media but also digital media and influencers whose narratives gained traction before fact-checkers could intervene.

Keywords

Misinformation, disinformation, election news, political campaign, United Nations, media.

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1. Introduction

Navigating today's information environment poses a significant global challenge, particularly given the overwhelming volume of online content and its influence on electoral processes, where individuals exercise their right to self-determination (CIGI-Ipsos, 2019). Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech increasingly contaminate the digital landscape, undermining peace and security while disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations (UNDP, 2022). A

global survey of 25,000 participants across 25 nations found that 80% had encountered misinformation, and 83% believed fake news negatively impacts political discourse (CIGI-Ipsos, 2019). These concerns are especially pronounced during pre-election periods, when political discourse is highly susceptible to information pollution.

This study offers an exploratory analysis of fact-checking efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), focusing on the implementation and outputs of the iVerify initiative. In recent years, fact-checking efforts in the region have been led by local non-governmental and quasi-governmental organizations, often supported by transnational actors such as the United Nations. Building on networked gatekeeping theory and research on the institutionalization of fact-checking, this study examines iVerify, a UNDP-supported initiative implemented in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia between 2021 and 2025.

The iVerify case study revealed that institutional support from UNDP and local partners enabled fact-checking of election-related news stories in these countries, as well as fact-checking of other news stories outside election cycles. In some countries, the initiative continued to function, whereas in others it was discontinued soon after the elections.

This study examined the implementation and outputs of the iVerify fact-checking initiative across five Sub-Saharan African countries. Specifically, we analyzed fact-checking materials (referred to as articles throughout) published on the official iVerify platforms of these five nations to identify recurring misinformation themes and verdict patterns. In addition, institutional descriptions on the platforms' websites were examined to understand how the initiative was implemented across national contexts.

While misinformation and disinformation are often used interchangeably, they differ conceptually. Misinformation refers to false information shared without intent to deceive, whereas disinformation is deliberately fabricated or manipulated to mislead (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Both contribute to information disorder, and fact-checking initiatives are designed to address them. Given that iVerify engages with both forms, this study uses "misinformation" as an umbrella term.

To explain cross-national variation in outcomes, this study draws on two complementary frameworks. Networked gatekeeping theory (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Dovbysh, 2021; Wallace, 2018) conceptualizes fact-checking within decentralized, multi-actor information environments, while research on institutionalization (Graves, 2016, 2018; Lowrey, 2017) frames fact-checking as a professional practice shaped by organizational structures, funding, and partnerships. Together, these frameworks guide the study's central questions: how consistently was iVerify institutionalized across five countries, what content did it produce, and what explains variation in its outputs across contexts?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gatekeeping Theory and Fact-Checking

Gatekeeping theory, originally conceptualized by Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1947) and later expanded by David Manning White (White, 1950), explains how information flows through controlled channels where certain individuals or institutions determine what reaches the public. As Shoemaker and Vos (2009) explain, gatekeepers "facilitate or constrain the diffusion of information as they decide which messages to allow past the gates" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 21). Traditionally, journalists and media institutions have performed this role, shaping public discourse by controlling the selection, framing, and distribution of news.

However, recent research findings suggest this traditional paradigm is insufficient in today's digital environments. Modern media systems are increasingly influenced by algorithmic curation

and artificial intelligence which has reshaped how information is filtered for public consumption (Shoemaker et al., 2010; Voinea, 2025). As such, digital gatekeeping now operates within a hybrid system of journalists, amateurs, professionals, and algorithms (Wallace, 2018). Unlike traditional gatekeeping, fact-checking functions as retroactive gatekeeping by assessing the accuracy of claims that have already entered public discourse (Singer, 2023).

Despite its critical role, fact-checking faces several challenges. One primary limitation is timing: unlike traditional gatekeepers who filter information at the point of production, fact-checkers often respond only after misinformation has already gained traction (Singer, 2023). Singer (2023) highlighted how corrections frequently struggle to undo the influence of false claims, especially given the speed at which misinformation spreads.

2.2. Networked Gatekeeping Theory and Fact-Checking

The Networked Gatekeeping Theory (NGT) explains how information flows in a fragmented and decentralized digital media ecosystem. NGT acknowledges the influence of multiple actors, including social media users, digital influencers, and algorithmic amplification (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016; Wallace, 2018). Singer (2023) introduced the concept of retroactive gatekeeping, wherein fact-checkers assess the veracity of information after it has already been widely disseminated rather than filtering it before publication. This challenges the traditional gatekeeping process, as social media and digital influencers determine which narratives gain traction before fact-checkers intervene (Singer, 2023; Wallace, 2018).

Unlike traditional gatekeeping theory that conceptualizes information control as hierarchical and linear, NGT highlights the active role of those “whom gatekeeping is being exercised upon” (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1494). This theory recognizes that the “gated,” public and non-institutional actors, are not merely passive recipients but active participants in shaping information flows (Dovbysh, 2021, p. 4). This shift has significant implications for fact-checking as the rise of non-traditional actors in the information ecosystem complicates efforts to identify, correct, and mitigate misinformation (Garajamirli, 2025).

Algorithmic gatekeeping worsens this challenge by prioritizing content visibility based on engagement rather than factual accuracy, amplifying sensationalist content that generates high interaction regardless of its credibility (Potnis et al., 2025; Wallace, 2018). This process reinforces echo chambers, limiting the reach and effectiveness of fact-checking interventions, as misleading content often remains more visible and influential than corrections (Diakopoulos, 2019; Just & Latzer, 2017; Thorson & Wells, 2015). NRT states that even when the same technological infrastructure is used across different contexts, the actors operating it, the platforms distributing verified content, and the audiences reached will vary, leading to different gatekeeping outcomes even within a shared system (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Wallace, 2018; Dovbysh, 2021).

2.3. Bias and Perceived Neutrality in Fact-Checking

While fact-checking initiatives aim to combat misinformation, scholars argue they can be viewed as politicized when audiences perceive ideological alignment. Some critics claim fact-checking favors certain political groups (Stencel, 2015), while others contend that, to avoid appearing partisan, fact-checkers may create false equivalence by presenting all sides as equally misleading (Krugman, 2011). Additionally, editorial judgment in selecting claims and evidence can introduce implicit biases shaped by institutional ties, political contexts, or limited resources (Graves, 2016; 2017). These concerns are amplified when fact-checking organizations collaborate with governments or donors, raising questions about independence, credibility, and the application of tools like iVerify in sensitive political environments.

2.4. Misinformation and Disinformation in Africa

Past research (Kiunga, 2024; Kulundu, 2021; Matanji et al., 2024; Miyandazi & Thuo, 2025; Mudavadi et al., 2024; Nanfuka et al., 2024; Tully, 2022) has shown that misinformation and disinformation in Africa are shaped by political, economic, and sociocultural factors that influence the spread of false narratives. Election-related disinformation is particularly rampant, with political actors deploying manipulated images, deepfake videos, and misleading claims to sway public opinion (Miyandazi & Thuo, 2025). Weak regulatory frameworks and low media literacy levels exacerbate the spread of misinformation, making fact-checking a challenging endeavor (Matanji et al., 2024). In rural areas, where digital access is limited, radio and interpersonal communication remain the primary channels for misinformation dissemination, complicating digital fact-checking efforts (Tully, 2022). Additionally, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and TikTok prioritize engagement-driven content over accuracy, amplifying sensationalist misinformation while fact-checking corrections struggle to reach the same audiences (Mudavadi et al., 2024; Thorson & Wells, 2015). The problem is further compounded by the speed-over-accuracy dilemma, where the rush to break news often outweighs careful verification, leading to the rapid spread of unverified information (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Kulundu, 2021).

Contextually, several characteristics distinguish the SSA information environment. First, social media platforms such as WhatsApp play a central role in information dissemination, creating challenges for fact-checkers because misinformation spreads in closed networks that are difficult to monitor (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2024). Second, many SSA nations experience heightened misinformation during election periods, as politicians, political actors, and supporters strategically disseminate misleading stories and information. Finally, fact-checking organizations often have to operate with limited financial and institutional resources compared to their counterparts in North America and Europe, making international support initiatives such as iVerify particularly significant.

2.5. The Role of Fact-checking Organizations

Despite these challenges, in recent years, SSA fact-checking organizations have been playing a crucial role in promoting information integrity and accountability. Leading fact-checking initiatives include: Africa Check, founded in South Africa, now active in Nigeria, Kenya, and Senegal, which specializes in political, health, and economic fact-checking (Kulundu, 2021; Matanji et al., 2024; Miyandazi & Thuo, 2025); PesaCheck, which operates across East and Central Africa and applies data-driven verification to expose financial and political misinformation (Kiunga, 2024; Kulundu, 2021; Matanji et al., 2024); Dubawa, based in Nigeria and Ghana, that monitors election-related misinformation and trains journalists in fact-checking methodologies (Kiunga, 2024; Nanfuka et al., 2024); and AFP Fact Check, a global initiative with an African fact-checking division, leverages journalistic expertise to counter disinformation (Kulundu, 2021; Matanji et al., 2024; Mudavadi et al., 2024).

Despite the growing number of fact-checking organizations operating in Africa, iVerify still represents a particularly significant case for study. iVerify is not only supported by international organizations and implemented simultaneously across multiple countries, but is overseen by the UNDP, the United Nations' lead agency on international development. Unlike locally developed fact-checking organizations that operate independently within national media systems, iVerify seeks to standardize verification practices across countries through common tools and institutional partnerships. Examining how this initiative functions across different national contexts provides insight into the opportunities and challenges involved in institutionalizing fact-checking practices in diverse media ecosystems.

2.6. Institutionalization of Fact-checking Practices

Institutionalization of fact-checking practices has gained ground in the last decade thanks to the growing interest from national and transnational organizations, governments, and donors, and with support from

the technology (tech) companies, such as Meta, and the global and local media and journalists (Graves, 2016; Graves et al., 2024; Lowrey, 2017; Shin et al., 2025). In the recent years, international donors expressed interest in supporting various fact-checking initiatives in regions where information (and mis/disinformation) spread is fast and furious, fueled by the behemoth consumption of information through social media, search engines, and most recently, AI-enabled LLM models such as Chat GPT (Cazzamatta, 2025; Graves & Andreson, 2020; Mahl et al., 2024, Koliska & Roberts, 2024). Institutionalization scholarship further suggests that the thoroughness and consistency of fact-checking practices depend on factors such as organizational capacity, ongoing funding, editorial standards, and how well verification norms are internalized by local practitioners (Graves, 2016, 2018; Lowrey, 2017).

In sub-Saharan Africa, which has the youngest population in the world with 70% of sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30, according to the United Nations and the Brookings Institute (Boumphrey, 2017; Signé, 2018), about 47% of people receive their news from social media or the Internet at least a few times a week (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2024). Not surprisingly, information accuracy is a major concern in the continent where media literacy rates remain stubbornly low (Boshoff & Fafowora, 2024; Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2018). Rising disinformation in SSA influences the opinions of Africans (Salisu & Mohammed, 2025).

In recent years, with the help of transnational organizations and donors, many organizations have institutionalized fact-checking initiatives in Africa. Nanfuka et al. (2024) discussed more than 24 country-specific and 11 multi-country initiatives across Africa. In DRC alone, they identified at least six different fact-checking initiatives: Congo-Check, Ebuteli, Goma Actif, Habari RDC, and iVerify.

This study focuses on one specific fact-checking initiative called iVerify, developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and implemented with the help of local media or watchdog civil society organizations (SCOs). The next section provides a detailed overview of the iVerify initiative across sub-Saharan Africa.

2.7. iVerify and its Fact-checking Efforts in Multiple African Countries

Developed by UNDP through the Brussels-based Task Force on Electoral Assistance and the Chief Digital Office, iVerify is a fact-checking initiative that aims to combat the spread of false narratives during election periods (UNDP, 2021). It combined new technology, such as CrowdTangle, previously available through Meta, which was shut down on August 14, 2024 (Meta, 2024), and, most recently, AI and machine learning with tried-and-true in-person fact-checking (UNDP, 2025).

In 2022, iVerify was implemented in Kenya, leading up to the 2022 general elections with mixed success (Tsetsura et al., 2025). The platform was envisioned as a fact-checking mechanism that would help to ensure the information integrity of news related to pre-election campaigns, particularly across online spaces, including social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, and messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram. Through iVerify, users could submit content for verification, where a team of trained professionals would manually assess and classify the accuracy of the information using predefined labels: True, Half-true, Unproven, Misleading, False, and Toxic.

UNDP positioned iVerify as an AI-powered fact-checking tool that piloted during Zambia election in August of 2021 and demonstrated global promise (UNDP, 2021).

Initially, the iVerify platform utilized a combination of AI-powered and manual tools, specifically Meta's CrowdTangle, a public insights tool to explore public content on social media. As of August 14, 2024, CrowdTangle is no longer available (Meta, 2024).

According to UNDP, unlike traditional methods of countering misinformation, iVerify relies on a structured verification process that involves manual review by independent professionals, in addition to AI-driven automated detection tools (UNDP, 2022). This human-centered approach was designed to

enhance credibility and trustworthiness, particularly in highly sensitive electoral environments (Media Council of Kenya, 2022).

2.8. Limitations of Fact-checking Mechanisms

Several scholars have examined the limitations of fact-checking mechanisms like iVerify in electoral settings. One of the major concerns has been perceptions of bias in the verification process. Mudavadi et al. (2024) argued that despite meticulous verification procedures, some may still perceive the initiatives as being politically influenced, primarily because they often operate in collaboration with government institutions and mainstream media or are supported by international donors. This skepticism aligns with Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018), who highlighted that fact-checking initiatives that depend on official government sources may be perceived as reinforcing dominant political narratives rather than neutrally adjudicating facts.

Another challenge is the speed of verification. Miyandazi and Thuo (2024) argued that misinformation spreads exponentially faster than fact-checking responses, thereby limiting the ability of platforms like iVerify to combat viral falsehoods in real time. Despite these concerns, the iVerify initiative, as well as many others, has been active in SSA for some time. The next section discussed iVerify's implementation in five countries that were the focus of this study.

2.9. iVerify Implementation in Five Countries

The implementation of iVerify across SSA represents a strategic response to the rise of misinformation, especially concerning electoral processes. The next section discusses iVerify implementation in each of the five countries, DRC, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia, to demonstrate the extent of institutionalization of iVerify initiative across the region. Table 1 summarizes the iVerify efforts across the five countries.

Table 1. Overview of iVerify Implementation Across Five Countries

Country	Local operating organization details	Elections Date
RD Congo (operated by L'Université de Lubumbashi-UNILU)	The University of Lubumbashi, also known as UNILU, is one of the major universities in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is located in the copper-rich province of Katanga in the south of the country. The Ordinance creating the University of Lubumbashi assigns it the following missions: • To provide training for design executives in the most diverse areas of national life. In this capacity, it provides courses included in its programs in order to encourage the emergence of new ideas and the development of professional skills. • Organize fundamental and applied scientific research geared towards solving the specific problems of the Congo, taking into account the evolution of science, techniques and technology in the world. • To open up to the environment that generates the University in order to make itself useful there. It thus contributes not only to the development effort of its micro-society, but also, and thereby, to the building of the entire nation.	General elections were held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on 20 December 2023.
Nigeria (operated by the International Press Centre (IPC))	iVerify is an independent fact-checking initiative of the International Press Centre (IPC), Lagos-Nigeria, supported by the United Nations Development Programme. Among the current collaborators on the initiative and activities arising from it are the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ICPR) the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). As a media resource centre with the mandate to facilitate the role of the media in democracy and development, IPC prioritises the promotion of information integrity and good journalism, with a premium on factually accurate reporting of elections and democratic accountability issues thereafter... With the support of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ICPR), iVerify offers capacity support for journalists on fact-checking as part of a media literacy programme aimed at raising public awareness on the threats of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech to peaceful nation building.	The 2023 Nigerian presidential election was held on 25 February 2023 to elect the president and vice president of Nigeria.

Country	Local operating organization details	Elections Date
Zambia (operated by Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf))	Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf), through support from the United Nations Development Programme under the Democracy Strengthening Zambia (DSZ) programme, is implementing the iVerify fact checking initiative. This is a technology based, multi-stakeholder initiative for identifying and mitigating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in the electoral process and beyond in Zambia. The initiative is responding to the growing trend of people sharing and accessing unverified information over the years. In an increasingly confused information environment, mis/disinformation potentially raises alarm and triggers conflict; Promote corruption; stifle good journalism; cause inaction, non-responsiveness, apathy; threaten public safety; fracture community cohesion; reduce trust in institutions and the media; undermine public acceptance of science's role in informing policy development and implementation; damage economic prosperity; and undermine the integrity of democratic processes. When the information environment during elections is characterized by false information, the public at large are denied an opportunity to appreciate the electoral choices available and this can undermine the electoral process and environment. Disinformation, misinformation and mal-information can raise alarm and trigger conflict. Good journalism can be obstructed as it can be difficult to tell the difference between fake information and the truth. As part of contribution to the broader multi-stakeholder response to misinformation, disinformation and hate, Panos Institute Southern Africa through support from UNDP is implementing the iVerify project, which is centred around the setting up and operationalisation of a technology platform for identifying and addressing mis/disinformation and hate speech.	General elections were held in Zambia on 12 August 2021 to elect the President, National Assembly, mayors, council chairs and councilors.
Sierra Leone (operated by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ))	The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and the Independent Radio Network (IRN-SL), with support from the United Nations Development Programme and BBC Media Action are implementing the iVerify fact checking initiative. This is a technology based, multi-stakeholder initiative for identifying and mitigating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech during the 2023 electoral process and beyond in Sierra Leone. The initiative is responding to the growing trend of people sharing and accessing unverified information over the years. In an increasingly confused information environment, mis/disinformation potentially undermines the integrity of democratic processes. When the information environment during elections is characterized by false information, the public at large are denied an opportunity to appreciate the electoral choices available and this can undermine the electoral process and environment. Misinformation and disinformation can raise alarm and trigger conflict. Good journalism can be obstructed as it can be difficult to tell the difference between false information and the truth. As part of contribution to the broader multi-stakeholder response to misinformation, disinformation and the spread of hate speech, SLAJ and IRN through support from UNDP are leading this fact-checking initiative to bring verified news to the public, including through the broadcasting of the iVerify radio show, and to allow for verification to be requested by each and every citizen before sharing. BBC Media Action provides support to the iVerify initiative by leading on research and learning; supporting capacity building; and producing social media content to build media literacy and awareness of mis-disinformation. iVerify Radio To allow for wide distribution of verified news, IRN broadcasts a radio show once a week that focuses on verified elections-related content, media literacy and electoral education. Four weeks prior to the election, the frequency will increase to respond to the demand for information as the election draws closer.	General elections were held in Sierra Leone on 24 June 2023 to elect the president and members of Parliament.
Liberia (operated by Local Voices Liberia)	Local Voices Liberia is a network of Liberian journalists established in 2015. The network came to being to counter the spread of dis/misinformation during the Ebola pandemic and encourage responsible health journalism. Since then, we are engaged with training reporters and development reporting (health and human rights, etc.) and independent fact checking.	General elections were held in Liberia on 10 October 2023 to elect the President, House of Representatives and half of the Senate.

Source: Own elaboration.

2.9.1. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The iVerify initiative in the Democratic Republic of the Congo started on December 19, 2023, just one day before the country's general elections on December 20, 2023. The implementation was led by

L'Université de Lubumbashi (iVerify DRC, 2025). The platform continued to be active through March 2025, at the time of data collection for this research, expanding fact-checking on many topics beyond the initial election-related fact-checking mandate.

2.9.2. Liberia

Liberia's iVerify platform began operations on March 14, 2023, well before the general elections held on October 10, 2023. The initiative was carried out by Local Voices Liberia, a network of journalists established in 2015 that initially aimed to combat the spread of dis/misinformation during the Ebola pandemic and later focused on promoting responsible health journalism (Local Voices Liberia, 2019–2025). The last update to the iVerify Liberia website was recorded on January 19, 2024.

2.9.3. Nigeria

In Nigeria, iVerify was implemented by the International Press Centre (IPC), with operations beginning October 31, 2023, over eight months after the presidential elections held on February 25, 2023. Supported by UNDP, IPC collaborates with national stakeholders, such as the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ICPR), the Nigerian Press Council, and the Independent National Electoral Commission (Jimoh, 2023). Although its timing missed direct national election coverage, its ongoing use through December 2024 focused on combating disinformation in local elections and throughout the broader governance cycle.

2.9.4. Sierra Leone

The iVerify platform in Sierra Leone was launched on March 27, 2023, providing a three-month window before the June 24, 2023, general elections and implemented by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and the Independent Radio Network (IRN), with support from UNDP and BBC Media Action (iVerify Sierra Leone, 2025). The system remained active through March 2025.

2.9.5. Zambia

Zambia was among the first to adopt iVerify, launching the tool in July 2021, three weeks before the general elections on August 12, 2021. The initiative was implemented by Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf) with support from UNDP through the Democracy Strengthening Zambia (DSZ) program. The platform continued to function through March 2025.

2.10. Differences in Implementing iVerify across Five Countries

Although iVerify was designed as a standardized fact-checking platform, its implementation differed across the five countries. These differences reflected variations in institutional leadership, timing of implementation relative to elections, and levels of sustained activity after electoral periods. Taken together, the five country cases indicate that iVerify is best understood not as a single standardized initiative but as a family of nationally adapted implementations operating under a shared institutional brand and verification framework. The DRC implementation, led by a university, positions fact-checking within an academic and civic education context. Sierra Leone's model, built around an existing journalists' association and a community radio network, integrates fact-checking into local media infrastructure in ways that extend beyond digital platforms. Nigeria's post-election launch presents iVerify primarily as a capacity-building and media-literacy tool for journalists rather than a real-time misinformation watchdog. These differences are not merely organizational details; they reflect significantly different understandings of the purpose of fact-checking and whom it serves.

From the perspective of networked gatekeeping theory (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Wallace, 2018), such variation reveals how the same gatekeeper tool can be incorporated into different institutional logics, and thus how the same "gate" may function differently depending on who operates it and

within what information ecosystem. Understanding this variation is precisely what the following research questions aim to investigate.

3. Research Questions

Based on the NRT and institutionalization framework, we identified three key investigative areas: first, how the initiative was implemented across different national contexts (the institutional dimension, addressed by RQ1); second, what content the initiative produced, especially whether the topics reflect the political misinformation focus of the program (the thematic dimension, addressed by RQ2); and third, whether the outputs (verdicts, sources, and verification patterns) demonstrate systematic practice or reveal inconsistencies that challenge claims of institutionalization (the process dimension, addressed by RQ3). Therefore, the study proposes the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What were the similarities and differences among the five countries in SSA in the implementation of iVerify?

Research Question 2: What were the major themes that emerged from the articles fact-checked through the iVerify mechanism in five countries?

Research Question 3: What were the overall trends in the results of the iVerify fact-checking process across five countries in Africa?

4. Method

This study used a two-stage content analysis approach to answer the three research questions. For RQ 1, a qualitative conceptual content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was conducted on the visible content of the five iVerify institutional websites, focusing on their “About Us” sections, stated principles, partnership listings, and descriptions of verification processes, to compare implementation similarities and differences across countries. For RQ 2 and RQ 3, a quantitative content analysis of the 1,093 fact-checked articles published across all five iVerify platforms was performed to identify thematic patterns and verdict trends. This distinction, between analyzing website content for RQ1 and analyzing fact-check articles for RQ2 and RQ3, is important for understanding the results presented below.

4.1. Data Collection

The dataset for this study included all five websites as well as the articles published by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) iVerify platform for five African countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia (see Table 2). The goal was to ensure complete coverage of all publicly available iVerify content for these countries within the specified timeframe.

Table 2. Dataset of Fact-checked Articles from iVerify

Country	Total number of articles (N=1093)	First upload (the day of the first article)	Last update (as of March 18, 2025)
RD Congo (operated by L'Université de Lubumashi-UNILU)	224	19-Dec-23	3-Mar-25
Liberia (operated by Local Voices Liberia)	109	14-Mar-23	19-Jan-2024
Nigeria (operated by the International Press Centre (IPC))	107	31-Oct-23	16-Dec-24
Sierra Leone (operated by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ))	391	27-Mar-23	18-Mar-25
Zambia (operated by Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf))	262	20-Jul-21	14-Mar-25

Source: Own elaboration.

Data collection involved a combination of automated and manual processes, depending on the accessibility and technical functionality of the individual country platforms. For DR Congo and Sierra Leone, both of which maintain the highest volume of iVerify publications, automated web-scraping scripts were developed to systematically extract all available articles.

For Nigeria and Zambia, the Wayback Machine (Internet Archive) was used to access archived versions of websites. This method has known limitations: the Wayback Machine crawls pages at irregular intervals and may not capture all published content, particularly dynamically loaded pages or content removed before indexing. It is therefore possible that some fact-checked articles from Nigeria (n=107) and Zambia (n=262) may be underrepresented in our dataset, and cross-country comparisons of output volume should be interpreted with this caveat in mind. The time frame for inclusion encompassed all materials published from the founding of each country's iVerify tool through to March 31, 2025.

4.2. Data Coding and Data Analysis

The coding process was conducted using NVivo. A master NVivo project file (iVerify.nvpx) was created, into which all collected articles were imported and sorted by country. The articles were also categorized based on the five African countries to facilitate navigation and analysis. One researcher coded all the data from Sierra Leone and Zambia, and the other (with proficiency in French) coded the data from DR Congo, Liberia, and Nigeria.

Before beginning full-scale coding, the research team independently coded a calibration set of ten articles in NVivo, randomly selected to represent all five countries. This step served to refine the codebook and align coders, rather than as a formal intercoder reliability test. Both researchers coded the ten articles independently and then compared their decisions in detail. The comparison revealed disagreements on the boundaries of several codes, especially regarding how to distinguish political claims related to governance from those categorized as general local news, and how to handle articles where a verdict was absent or unclear. These differences were used diagnostically to identify areas where code definitions were vague or underdeveloped, rather than to generate an agreement statistic. Following the discussion, code definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and decision rules were revised to remove ambiguity and ensure conceptual consistency across the entire dataset. This approach aligns with exploratory multi-country content analysis designs where linguistic and contextual expertise is essential (Lombard et al., 2002). Coding consistency was maintained through iterative codebook development, documented decision rules, analytic memoing in NVivo, and ongoing consensus discussions between the two coders during scheduled check-ins throughout the coding process.

Because the iVerify verification process is conducted by trained media professionals who evaluate claims, gather evidence from credible sources, and assign verdict classifications (e.g., false, misleading, true), the analyzed data represent human efforts rather than automated system outputs.

5. Results

5.1. Research Question 1: What were the similarities and differences among the five countries in SSA in the implementation of iVerify?

The results showed several similarities across all five countries in terms of partnerships, a focus on fact-checking political news, expert verification presence, verdict categories, channels, similarity in the verification process, and the principles of fact-checking. Table 3 offers an overview of similarities and a comparison of iVerify implementation across five countries.

Table 3. Similarities and Comparisons of iVerify Implementation in Five Countries

7,5	(N= 1093)	Top 3 topics covered	Top 3 verdicts	Top 3 misinformation channels	Top 3 misinformation sources	Top 3 verification sources	Top 3 verification channels
RD Congo (operated by L'Université de Lubumashi-UNILU)	224	Politics, General local news, and Security, War, or Local Terrorism	True, False, and Unproven/Unverifiable	Facebook, X, and News Media	News media or journalist, Unspecified source affiliation, and Activist or Private citizen	News media or journalist, Independence source or experts, and Accused party	News publication, social media post, and Website, Notice & Press statement
Liberia (operated by Local Voices Liberia)	109	Politics, Religion, and General local news	Misleading, Mostly correct, and False	Facebook, Instagram and social media (general)	News media or journalist, government or politician, and Unspecified source affiliation	Image and video reverse search, Independence source or experts, and News media or journalist	Website, Notice & Press statement, News publication, Interview (phone, email or other), and social media post
Nigeria (operated by the International Press Centre (IPC))	107	Politics, General local news and Economy	False, Misleading, and Unproven/unverifiable	X, Facebook and Whatsapp	Unspecified source affiliation, Government or politician, and Blogs or Bloggers	Accused party, News media or journalist, and Government	News publication, Website, Notice & Press statement, and Interview (phone, email or other)
Sierra Leone (operated by the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ))	391	Politics, General local news, and General international news	True, False, and Misleading	Social media, open-source social media, and traditional media	No claim source, Government or politician, and News media or journalist	Independence source, Government, and Claim Source	In person, Social media post, and Website, Notice & Press statement
Zambia (operated by Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf))	262	Politics, General local news, and Security, War, or Local Terrorism	False, Misleading and True	Social media, open-source social media, and traditional media	Government or politician, News media or journalist, and No claim source		Website, Notice & Press statement, Social media post, and Interview (phone, email or other)

Source: Own elaboration.

5.1.1. Partnerships

Each of these nations' websites listed several local and international partners that have partnered with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to help make the fact-checking process happen. These partnerships can be categorized in different ways, such as operational vs. financial partners, as well as local vs. foreign partners. For example, the DRC's foreign partners included the UNDP and the United Nations Peacekeeping, while the local partner was the University of Lubumbashi (RDC iVerify, n.d.). Sierra Leone's foreign partners included government ministries in Canada and Iceland, as well as private companies like the Orange Group, a French telecommunications company (iVerify Sierra Leone, 2025).

5.1.2. Political focus

Politics was the main topic for fact-checking in each nation. This was not surprising given the overall mandate of UNDP's iVerify initiative to combat misinformation in times of elections. These claims included instances of verbal, textual, and visual manipulation. Verbal claims include political actors (e.g., candidates, spokespersons) providing misleading or false content in recorded interviews or in political rallies. This was a prominent feature during electoral

periods. Visual manipulation included the sharing of deepfake videos and manipulated images on social media platforms. These were broadly consistent among the five countries.

However, elections were not the only political issue that was consistently fact-checked. Other news that was subject to verification included accusations made by major political figures, policy debates, and foreign affairs, among others. With that said, much like the election misinformation, the non-election political misinformation was also characterized by the format variation (i.e., verbal, textual, and visual).

5.1.3. Expert verifications

Each nation's website stressed that the fact-checking efforts were being handled by trained experts. This generally indicated trained journalists or specifically hired and trained people who helped verify and fact-check information. Despite variations in local media environments, all the chosen countries presented fact-checking as a collaborative, expertise-driven process designed to enhance credibility and public trust.

5.1.4. Verdict Categories

Each website relied on a shared set of core verdict categories based on iVerify's standardized framework, demonstrating institutionalization at the template level. The categories *false*, *true*, and *unproven* appeared across all five countries, with *misleading*, *toxic*, *harmful*, and *half-true* included on most platforms as well. However, local implementations also introduced locally adapted labels not found in the standard framework: DRC's platform used *wrong* instead of *misleading* and included a separate *hate speech* category, while Liberia's version featured up to eight verdict types, such as *exaggerated*, *mostly correct*, *partially correct*, and *out-of-context*. This variation indicates that while iVerify's core verification structure was adopted uniformly, local teams had discretion to modify verdict labels to suit their specific informational and political contexts, which has direct implications for cross-country comparability of results.

5.1.5. Channels

Each nation's team invited claims or queries from the public. The websites all had a list of channels for local individuals to submit their claims. These channels included social media (e.g., X, WhatsApp), email, and directly through the website. However, the websites did not disclose the percentage of queries that came from the public or the extent to which the public was involved in identifying and inviting to fact-check potentially misleading content.

5.1.6. Similarity of the verification process

Several fact-checking initiatives had already taken place in these nations before the UNDP partnered with the local organizations to introduce and implement iVerify. iVerify was positioned as an initiative that could provide support and an additional fact-checking mechanism. For instance, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and the Independent Radio Network were already engaged in quite sophisticated fact-checking before UNDP. In Liberia, the Local Voices of Liberia, the primary operator of the fact-checking efforts in Liberia, has been in operation since 2015 (Local Voices of Liberia, 2019–2025).

5.1.7. Principles for fact-checking

Under the "About Us" sections on each website, each nation had a set of principles that helped to define its approach as well as its mission statement. The principles followed the overall design of iVerify fact-verification processes, further confirming the institutionalization of this cross-country fact-checking initiative. Consistency in fact-checking values, specifically transparency, impartiality, fairness, and professionalism, was present across five countries.

The study also identified several differences in current operations, different types of local implementers, and inconsistency in stating verdicts, presenting evidence, and sharing information.

5.1.8. Differences in Current Operations

The iVerify websites were not all operational at the time of research. While DRC, Liberia, and Sierra Leone were all online and operational, Zambia and Nigeria were not at the time of the study. Additionally, the last updated story on Liberia's website was over two years ago (August 2023), and the last story on DRC was in March 2025. Although UNDP positioned iVerify as an ongoing mechanism for utilization beyond elections, many local partners did not seem to find value in implementing the system past the elections, once UNDP funding to support fact-checkers dried out.

5.1.9. Different Types of Implementers of Fact-Checking Operations

Implementation of fact-checking efforts was handled by different types of teams or organizations. For instance, both Liberia and Sierra Leone were operated by teams of trained journalists, while iVerify in Nigeria and Zambia was operated by larger media initiatives, and DRC's efforts were led by a local leading university.

5.1.10. Inconsistency in Stating the Verdicts

Some nations used verdicts inconsistently. For instance, some articles did not have verdicts published, and others had incomplete verdicts for DRC. Liberia to feature stories without any verdicts attached, whereas Sierra Leone and Zambia always had them. Sometimes, verdicts were inconsistent (most of these examples were on the website of iVerify Liberia). There were also cases across countries where more than one verdict was given for a single story.

5.1.11. Inconsistent Evidence and Reference Sections

Some nations did not always have the evidence section filled out for their verified stories. For instance, Zambia and Nigeria listed stories that were verified but did not provide any links or references to support the information. Liberia and Sierra Leone always had these sections completed. This inconsistency showed that, despite the best efforts by UNDP to standardize the fact-checking process, some local organizations chose not to follow the institutionalized efforts to provide a reference for information verification, which potentially could mar the transparency and reliability of the fact-checking process in the eyes of the public.

5.1.12. Information Dissemination Inconsistencies

Most of the analyzed nations shared their verified stories or claims on their websites or social media handles. However, iVerify in Sierra Leone, because of their partnership with IRN, relied on radio broadcasts to disseminate information about media literacy and shared verified stories on the radio on a weekly basis.

5.2. Research Question 2: What were the major themes that emerged from the articles fact-checked through iVerify mechanism in five countries?

Across all five countries, *politics* ($n=435$) emerged as the most consistently covered topic on iVerify platforms. This dominance aligned with the initiative's founding objective: to counter election-related misinformation and disinformation (UNDP, 2025). However, the political content extended well beyond electoral events, encompassing stories on local governance, policy debates, and international relations (see Table 4). This breadth of fact-checked topics indicates that iVerify platforms engaged in fact-checking claims related to politics not only during major election moments, but consistently across time. A political dimension of public

life that shapes citizens' trust in information systems and institutions was an important part of this fact-checking initiative across all five countries.

Table 4. Major Themes of Fact-Checked Articles Across Five Countries

Theme	Congo	Liberia	Nigeria	Sierra Leone	Zambia	Total
Agriculture	0	0	0	0	4	4
Economy	1	10	15	17	24	67
Education	0	15	4	1	12	32
Financial Scam	0	5	10	1	1	17
Foreign Aid	1	0	0	8	5	14
General international News	18	4	4	32	11	69
General local news	59	38	24	129	58	308
Health	4	35	1	0	11	51
Politics	60	51	35	239	162	547
Religion	5	50	2	1	3	61
Security, War, Local Terrorism	47	1	12	12	30	102
Sports	32	3	2	0	6	43
Weather	0	2	0	0	1	3

Source: Own elaboration.

The other recurrent themes reflected broader public interest and contextual relevance. *General local news* was consistently among the top three categories across the nations, functioning as a flexible space for fact-checks that did not fit neatly into predefined topical boundaries. These stories typically addressed issues of everyday community concerns rather than overtly political controversies. Meanwhile, the *security, war, or local terrorism* category appeared less frequently but often intersected with political developments, particularly during or around election periods. Together, these patterns suggest that while politics remains the central axis of iVerify's agenda, the platforms also responded dynamically to local informational needs and socio-political contexts.

5.3. Research Question 3. What were the overall trends in the results of the iVerify fact-checking process across five countries in Africa?

Results of the iVerify initiative across DRC, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia showed significant variation in focus, verdicts, sources, and thematic patterns among these countries, highlighting both shared and unique challenges in the African fact-checking ecosystem.

First, political claims dominated the landscape: Across the five countries, political content was the most frequently fact-checked theme, with Sierra Leone (n=239) and Zambia (n=162) recording particularly high counts. This indicates that misinformation about elections, governance, and political figures remains a core issue, aligning with the region's unstable political environments and contested democratic processes. General local news and health claims were also prominent: General local news, including unclassified but locally relevant topics, was the most common theme in Sierra Leone (n=129) and DRC (n=59), while health-related claims were most common in Liberia (n=35). These patterns may reflect local information gaps, post-pandemic health concerns, or limited mainstream media coverage of everyday community issues that fact-checkers are trying to address. Misinformation related to the economy and financial scams was most prominent in Zambia and Nigeria: Zambia had the highest number of economic misinformation articles (n=24), followed by Sierra Leone (n=17) and Nigeria (n=10). Nigeria also

had significant entries under “financial scams,” reflecting broader digital fraud trends and the misuse of brand names or gift-giving culture in misinformation content.

Next, *false* was the most common verdict in most countries: DRC (n=89), Zambia (n=111), Nigeria, and Liberia all reported *false* as their leading outcome, indicating a high rate of outright fabrications in the claims submitted for verification. Sierra Leone was a notable exception: the only country where *true* (n=172) exceeded *false* (n=157). The reasons for this difference cannot be determined from the current data alone. One possible explanation is that Sierra Leone's community radio model and face-to-face outreach attracted a broader range of public inquiries, including claims that proved to be accurate, compared to platforms relying solely on digital tip lines. Another possibility is that the types of rumors circulating in Sierra Leone during the study period were less likely to be outright fabrications. Further research, including interviews with fact-checkers or analysis of claim submission patterns, would be necessary to explain this finding. In all five countries, categories like *misleading* and *unverifiable* were less frequent than clear true/false judgments, raising questions about whether the coding scheme fully captures the nuanced spectrum of information disorder.

Social media was the leading source of claims that were selected for fact-checking: Facebook was the leading source of claims in DRC (n=145) and Liberia (n=82), while WhatsApp was prominent in Nigeria (n=12). Sierra Leone and Zambia showed high numbers for both encrypted (e.g., Telegram) and open platforms (e.g., Facebook), with Zambia recording 176 instances from various open social media and 206 from social media overall. This confirms that digital platforms continue to be the primary channels for misinformation in the region.

Additionally, claim sources often remained ambiguous or came from the media itself: A large number of claims were attributed to news media or journalists, especially in DRC (n=104) and Zambia (n=58), but many articles also listed “no claim source,” particularly in Sierra Leone (n=211). This finding highlighted concerns about traceability and transparency in origin attribution and demonstrated problems with the iVerify fact-checking process, highlighted by the previous research (Tsetsura et al., 2025).

Most fact-checks did cite evidence, but the types of sources used for verification varied: Sierra Leone (n=378) and Zambia (n=195) showed the highest use of evidence, while DRC often cited news media or journalists (n=184) and Liberia frequently used accused parties or reverse image searches. Interviews and social media posts were also commonly used as evidence (e.g., Sierra Leone listed 213 “in-person” verifications, and Zambia had 157 verifications that listed sources from social media to support claims). The inconsistency in citing evidence and selecting types of sources demonstrated the lack of coordination and contributed to questions about the quality of the iVerify fact-checking process in these countries.

Finally, electoral misinformation was a significant part of the issue: Sierra Leone and Liberia had a high percentage of fact-checks related to elections, especially presidential and regional contests. In Sierra Leone, 16% of all articles were election-related, showing that the iVerify platform positioned itself as an active player in fighting electoral misinformation during critical periods.

Across all five countries, social media platforms, mainly Facebook and WhatsApp, accounted for most of the identifiable claim sources. Facebook was the dominant platform in the DRC (n=145) and Liberia (n=82), while WhatsApp was the main platform in Nigeria (n=12). In Sierra Leone and Zambia, both encrypted platforms like Telegram and open platforms like Facebook were widely involved, with Zambia recording 206 instances of claims from social media overall. These findings show that Facebook and WhatsApp together serve as the primary channels for

misinformation that iVerify platforms aimed to address, a pattern consistent across all five countries despite differences in implementation and reach.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study largely confirm existing research on the promise and challenges of fact-checking in Africa, especially the complex and uneven results of the iVerify initiative. Specifically, the study supported previous research and announced practical implementations of iVerify in five ways.

First, the study confirmed that politics dominated misinformation and fact-checking efforts of iVerify during the pre-election periods. This study demonstrated that political claims were the most frequently fact-checked across all five countries, confirming earlier work by Miyandazi & Thuo (2025) and Mudavadi et al. (2024), who argued that election-related misinformation in Africa is widespread and closely linked to political interests. The focus on politics also supported Kiunga (2024), who noted that political actors often weaponize digital platforms to influence public opinion, particularly during election cycles. The iVerify initiative appeared to directly address these issues, but its reactive approach raises questions about its speed and overall impact.

Second, the results demonstrated that the iVerify initiative was certainly institutionalized to some extent, much like many recent fact-checking initiatives across the globe (Graves, 2016; Graves et al., 2024; Lowrey, 2017; Shin et al., 2025). Specifically, UNDP attempted to institutionalize the iVerify initiative across several countries. It was involved in finding donors, identifying suitable local organizations, and collaborating with the local partners. Additionally, UNDP engaged in the development and implementation of standardized mechanisms for identifying topics and news to fact-check (e.g., election-related news) through manual (tiplines) as well as AI-enabled (such as CrowdTangle) identifiers. Finally, UNDP was involved in standardizing and systematizing fact-checking processes with specifically assigned verdicts across all five countries, and achieved a degree of success in establishing shared core verdict categories, though national implementations varied in how they extended and adapted these labels to local contexts, as evidenced by DRC's use of *wrong* and *hate speech* and Liberia's expanded eight-category system.

Next, limited reach to rural and linguistically diverse populations limited iVerify efforts. This study indirectly supported concerns raised by Matanji et al. (2024) and Tully (2022) about iVerify's limited reach in non-urban areas. Although platforms like iVerify often provide evidence and verification, the study showed heavy reliance on digital formats to spread fact-checked articles (with the notable exception of Sierra Leone, which utilized radio to share the fact-checked information). Rural audiences of SSA usually engage with radio, face-to-face communication, or local dialects (Boshoff & Fafowora, 2024; Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018). The underrepresentation of traditional media as a dissemination channel in our findings suggests that iVerify, like many fact-checking tools, remains more accessible to digitally connected urban populations, deepening the digital divide.

Consistent with previous studies (Mudavadi et al., 2024; Tully, 2022), our analysis showed that Facebook, WhatsApp, and other open platforms were the primary sources of misinformation, highlighting issues with algorithmic gatekeeping and viral spread. This aligns with Wallace (2018) and Diakopoulos (2019), who noted how platform-driven visibility often exceeds the reach of verified information. It also underscores the difficulty iVerify and other fact-checking initiatives face as they combat disinformation after it has already gone viral.

Finally, the results indicated evidence of institutional networking gatekeeping of the iVerify fact-checking process. Specifically, in line with previous findings (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008), iVerify fact-checkers not only played an active role as gatekeepers identifying which news to fact-check

(e.g., identifying which news needs to be double checked for integrity and possible debunking), but also played an active role in shaping the information flow through (Dovbysh, 2021) verifying the information and making decisions which sources to use to confirm or debunk the news. Thus, iVerify fact-checkers had considerable power over final verdicts and labeling of news as true, false, or misleading. Such power further challenged the traditional gatekeeping process of not only traditional media but also digital media and influencers whose narratives gained traction before fact-checkers could intervene, just as previous studies discussed (Singer, 2023; Wallace, 2018).

Findings such as inconsistent use of verdicts in Liberia or lack of reference links in Nigeria and Zambia reflect critiques from Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) and Mudavadi et al. (2024) that African fact-checking efforts often face capacity issues, lack standardization, and suffer from inconsistent editorial practices. This highlights broader systemic problems in African media, such as low funding, limited professional development, and a lack of institutional independence, which weaken uniform fact-checking methods across the continent.

The dependence on government institutions and media organizations as sources of evidence (e.g., verdicts often supported by official statements or political parties) confirmed critiques in the literature, especially from Mudavadi et al. (2024) and Tsetsura et al. (2025), that fact-checking in Africa is sometimes seen as biased or lacking neutrality, particularly when media and fact-checking organizations work with state actors. While the human-centered model of iVerify might have enhanced the credibility of the process, its closeness to political or institutional power risked perceptions of co-optation.

6.1. *Contradictions or Nuanced Differences*

The results of this study indicated several contradictions and nuanced differences in the way how the iVerify fact-checking initiative was implemented. Continued reliance on manual labor, rather than AI tools, to identify and verify potential news to fact-check further contributed to possible inconsistencies in the quality of the fact-checking process and potentially undermined the institutionalization efforts of iVerify. Although UNDP (2021) promoted iVerify's use of AI for scalable fact-checking, our findings indicated that most claim analysis and evidence collection were carried out by individual journalists or local teams, with very few mentions of AI-based verification methods (e.g., Perplexity, reverse image search). This raises questions about how much automation has truly been integrated into iVerify workflows and contradicts earlier optimistic projections about AI-enhanced verification capacity in Africa (UNDP, 2021).

The implementation of iVerify in Sierra Leone demonstrated a notably proactive approach to fact-checking. Unlike previous criticisms that fact-checking is reactive and disconnected from local communities (Matanji et al., 2024; Singer, 2023; and Tully, 2022), our study showed that Sierra Leone used radio, face-to-face engagement, and frequent updates to share their fact-checking findings, indicating the preference for a more integrated community-oriented model. This local adaptation challenges the common narratives of under-resourced fact-checking in Africa, showing that success could happen when institutional coordination and local outreach are combined. It also offers valuable lessons for scaling up and further institutionalizing the iVerify fact-checking initiative. Sierra Leone's model potentially could serve as a template for more localized, culturally relevant fact-checking.

In summary, the findings confirmed that iVerify was a well-meaning but inconsistently executed institutionalized initiative across five countries, shaped by each country's media ecosystem, institutional capacity, and socio-political context. While it positioned itself as the fact-checking mechanism that played a crucial role in electoral integrity and public accountability, the data showed that iVerify's reactive approach, dependence on digital platforms, and occasional lack

of transparency most likely limited its overall effectiveness, especially among underserved, non-digital populations in the region. These findings aligned with existing critiques in the literature and also highlighted new directions for more integrated, multilingual, and locally embedded fact-checking strategies in SSA.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Studies

This study highlights several strategic pathways for future fact-checking initiatives.

From a theoretical perspective, this study demonstrated that iVerify fact-checking initiative was largely institutionalized across five countries in SSA. Despite the coordinated efforts for organizing and implementing this fact-checking initiative, iVerify did not ensure a transparent and reliable fact-checking process that was consistent across the board. One might argue that the UNDP's goal was not the institutionalization of iVerify as a fact-checking mechanism; rather, UNDP wanted to offer iVerify as a system and a tool for fact-checking to those countries and organizations that potentially saw value in the tool to combat pre-election misinformation, and thus provided opportunities to freely utilize and implement the tool as the countries saw fit. At the same time, however, clear efforts to unify the fact-checking process, as well as to systematize the implementation of iVerify across five countries in SSA, indicated at least some level of interest by UNDP in the institutionalization of iVerify.

Additionally, from the theory-building perspective, the study offered a refreshed look at institutionalized fact-checking as a form of networked, open gatekeeping and identified challenges associated with the fact-checking process of iVerify, one of the most transnational fact-checking efforts to date.

Pragmatically, the study revealed how global fact-checking institutional processes can be improved. Inconsistencies in the verification process not only hinder cross-country comparability but may also weaken public trust. Future efforts should adopt standardized coding systems and editorial guidelines to ensure greater coherence and reliability in the verification process. As fact-checking initiatives evolve, measuring success by quantity (e.g., the number of claims verified) should yield to evaluating actual impact. Future projects can focus on how fact-checks affect public beliefs, behaviors, and trust in institutions.

Overall, the future of fact-checking in Africa is not about expanding existing models haphazardly but about adapting them carefully based on local realities, reinforced by institutional partnerships, and supported by both technology and human-centered strategies. Only then can fact-checking become a key part in defending democratic discourse across the continent.

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