

## **Why Do Fact-Checking Organizations Go Beyond Fact-Checking? A Leap Toward Media and Information Literacy Education**

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This study aims to investigate why a remarkable number of fact-checking organizations go beyond “fact-checking” and directly involve Media and Information Literacy (MIL) initiatives and delve into their practices, strategies, and challenges. A qualitative research design was adopted via interviews combined with online observations conducted between January and October 2021, with 12 practitioners from 8 different organizations around the world. Fact-checkers aim to inoculate the public against false information flow and build resilience via educational strategies. They also work within the educational system and mobilize volunteer teachers as proxies to disseminate the knowledge to a wider public. The results indicated that when fact-checking organizations involve educational projects with a politically neutral stance, they attract funds from NGOs, tech companies, and sometimes from governments. Thus, it brings an opportunity to widen the social reach and strengthen their separate education departments by employing more educators and translators.

*Keywords: media literacy, information disorders, fact-checking, information literacy, media education*

Navigating digital media in the era of information abundance is a mountain to climb. Even if it is not a novel phenomenon, the problem of information disorders has been growing since the mid-2010s. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists, and science denialists circulated huge volumes of mis/disinformation via digital platforms, which posed a great danger to public health. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2021, social media platforms such as Facebook and closed groups in instant messaging applications like WhatsApp are regarded as the main channels for spreading false information (Newman et al., 2021). It has been widely discussed that during various national elections, false information can be used as a weapon to manipulate voters and alter election results (Bovet & Makse, 2019; Davis & Sinnreich, 2020). Moreover, information disorders hinder our ability to address global issues like climate change. In this sense, tackling the spread of mis/disinformation became one of the priorities of government agencies, technology companies, and NGOs (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020).

At such a time, fact-checking organizations have come to the forefront as independent initiatives aiming to challenge information disorders and gained magnitude amid the spread of COVID-19-related

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misinformation. Thanks to the Corona Virus Alliance by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) signatory organizations, more than 1,500 online pieces of misinformation related to the pandemic were fact-checked and debunked (Posetti & Boncheva, 2021). Moreover, Maria Reesa, cofounder of *Rappler*, a verified signatory of IFCN, shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for her efforts to “protect freedom of expression, a precondition for democracy and lasting peace” (Rash, 2021, para. 2). At such a time, fact-checking organizations emerge as a prominent constituent of the struggle against information disorders that threaten the formation of truth-based public opinion and social coherence.

Furthermore, some fact-checking organizations chose to go beyond fact-checking and become directly involved in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education campaigns (Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020). Occasionally called “second-generation fact-checking organizations,” they intervene to equip the public with necessary fact-checking skills and undertake educational activities for system change (Africa Check, Chequeado, & Full Fact, 2019, para. 16). Traditionally and generally, MIL education is provided within formal educational institutions (schools, libraries, higher education), while less frequently NGOs and media institutions offer MIL courses through project partnerships (Grizzle, 2016). However, the study by McGrew, Ortega, Breakstone, and Wineburg (2017) shows that in the age of digital media, fact-checkers are effective in teaching students about conducting source investigations, assessing source credibility, and using online resources consciously. In this vein, fact-checkers started to provide MIL courses for students and teachers, organize workshops on fact-checking methods for journalists, and sometimes collaborate with civil society to reach society in general via comprehensive media literacy projects. Today IFCN member fact-checking organizations such as Africa Check (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya), Chequeado (Argentina), Teyit.org (Turkey), Demagog (Poland), Faktisk.no (Norway), Myth Detector (Georgia), MediaWise (United States), Agência Lupa (Brazil), Correctiv (Germany), Faktoje (Albania), FactCheck Center (Taiwan), and Bolivia Verifica are prominent examples of this emergent trend.

Previous qualitative studies focusing on the fact-checking practitioners have addressed such topics as journalists’ perception of fact-checking organizations (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, & Chaparro Domínguez, 2018), the emergence and challenges of the fact-checking organizations (Amazeen, 2019), their funding sources and the challenges of ensuring editorial autonomy (Lelo, 2022), data-driven and journalistic practices of fact-checking organizations in the sub-Saharan African context (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018), and MIL campaigns of the Polish fact-checking initiatives (Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020). However, the global trend of some of the fact-checking organizations’ evolution into hubs for MIL education remains an underresearched field of study. In this context, the study at hand aims to close this research gap by directly interviewing practitioners and “educational” fact-checkers from various countries and organizations.

### **An Intervention to Tackle Information Disorders: Fact-Checking Organizations**

In general terms, fact-checking organizations evaluate the accuracy of suspicious claims in the public domain, share their results with the public, and guide their audience on the credibility of the given content (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). To increase the public good, it is vital to choose potentially misleading content to fact-check that widely circulates on various media outlets and has a significant impact on public opinion. Ideally, they provide accurate and quality information to assist citizens in making educated political

and economic decisions. They aim to minimize citizens' exposure to false information and share not only their findings but also their research methodology and their ways of gathering evidence (Çömlekçi, 2020).

Fact-checking organizations appeared at the beginning of the 2000s in the United States and emerged as an offspring of journalistic practice as a response to the rapid circulation of mis/disinformation on digital media platforms. Fact-checkers—"journalistic reformers" according to some researchers (Amazeen, 2020; Graves, 2016)—use various journalistic practices such as investigating, tracing the origins of the source, and verifying information. They distinguish themselves by their objective and transparent fact-checking methodology and their stance against the political biases of the mainstream media.

According to Brandtzaeg and Følstad (2017), fact-checking organizations can be examined in three general categories based on their areas of concern. Political fact-checkers focus on checking the accuracy of the claims of the politicians, tracking their promises if they kept them, and in general holding them accountable for their statements to protect and empower the public. The main goals of political fact-checking are: "educating the public, improving political behavior, and improving journalism" (Amazeen, 2020, p. 97). PolitiFact, one of the first fact-checking organizations in the United States, can be given as an example of this category (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Moreover, there are some organizations like Snopes.com (United States), which devote themselves to debunking online rumors and hoaxes. Last, as in the example of StopFake.org which addresses information disorders only about the Ukrainian conflict, some fact-checking organizations focus solely on a particular subject or controversy. However, it should be mentioned that there may always be some overlap in terms of the "coverage area" of the organizations. For instance, PolitiFact, categorized as a political fact-checking organization, may perform fact-checks on advertisements and popular culture (Greenberg, 2014).

According to Duke Reporters' Lab's annual fact-checking census, there are 341 active fact-checking projects (up to 51 from last year) in 102 countries as of June 2021 (Stencel & Luther, 2021). Despite the rise of fact-checking organizations, some researchers argued that these organizations are limited in changing public opinion (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015) and some criticized the "subjectivity" in their suspicious claim selection (Uscinski & Butler, 2013). However, the literature on fact-checking organizations predominantly shows that fact-checking is beneficial for society, in terms of improving factual knowledge (Amazeen, 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2020) and the media literacy skills of the citizens (Kuś & Barczynski-Madziarz, 2020).

### **Media and Information Literacy**

According to a widely used definition, media literacy can be defined as the ability of a citizen to access, decode, analyze, critically evaluate, and produce information on print or electronic media (Aufderheide, 1992). As Livingstone's (2004) skills-based approach suggests, access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation are the four main interdependent components of media literacy in a dynamic learning environment. On the flip side, information literacy is defined by the American Library Association (2015) in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education as a "set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (p.

8). While the concept of media literacy has emerged within media and civic studies and is mostly concerned with the sociopolitical construct of media messages; information literacy is more connected to the library and information science and is focused on the formation and management of data and information in various formats. In 2013, UNESCO combined media literacy and information literacy under the umbrella term of MIL to “deal with the huge volume of data, information and media messages coming from different communication and information platforms and providers” (Coles, 2013, p. 30). It had become inevitable to combine these concepts to address the need of developing a set of competencies and collaborative mechanisms in the new digital environment where the information flow accelerated (Coles, 2013). Four years later, UNESCO declared MIL as a “nexus of human rights” and published a MIL framework that recognizes citizens as users/producers of information and promotes MIL as a lifelong learning process (Hagggar, 2020, p. 962). According to Frau-Meigs (2019), this broader approach to MIL can respond to social issues including online privacy and data security, digital well-being, protection of minors, and struggle against the spread of harmful and false information.

In the information age, citizens are exposed to never-ending information flow through traditional and digital media that carry various claims, statements, and narratives about entities in the world (Schwabe, 2021). Simultaneously, disinformation and misinformation are rapidly spreading through online and offline media platforms, posing a great danger to public health, the environment, democracy, and social cohesion. “Information disorders” can be regarded as an umbrella term encompassing disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information, with different levels of deliberation and intention to harm. While disinformation means deliberately creating false information to harm or manipulate a person or a group of people, misinformation signifies false information that is not created to cause harm. On the other hand, mal-information stands for the type of information that is true, but even so, is spread to discredit or endanger others (Wardle & Derekhshan, 2017). The umbrella term of information disorders also covers asymmetrical information flow between different regions of the world and different forms (news, data, images, etc.) of manipulations (Frau-Meigs, 2019). Information disorders are closely linked to the content explosion in digital media. When tech companies, digital platforms, and social media outlets are put together, they create an immense circulation of false information and fake visuals online (Bran, Tiru, Grosseck, Holotescu, & Malita, 2021).

To resist, MIL can provide tools to equip citizens with the necessary digital skills to make informed decisions on their media sources, voting preferences, and positions about acute social issues (Hobbs, 2020). It is critical to better equip people with the cognitive ability to discern facts and accurate information from mis/disinformation (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). Moreover, with MIL education, it is possible to encourage people to think critically when it comes to assessing media messages and learn new ways of countering information disorders. Critical thinking, which entails analyzing, comparing, and sometimes challenging the media messages, is a valuable competency about information consumption. Thus, citizens may situate themselves in an active position, develop healthy skepticism toward media, and minimize the effects of the manipulations (Muratova, Grizzle, & Mirzakhedova, 2019). Starting with classrooms, it is vital to reach an optimum level of MIL and equip students with the necessary tools to become *media prosumers* (i.e., individuals not just consuming media products but finding ways to participate in the ongoing conversation and critically evaluating the media messages).

Given that developing critical thinking skills and seeking quality/accurate information are pivotal aspects of MIL, fact-checking organizations can be considered a significant tool to put the MIL approach into practice (Frau-Meigs, 2019; Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020), alongside the formal education institutions, librarians, and NGOs. Fact-checking practices have evolved into innovation with automation, education for the public, and higher education collaborations with the proliferation of information disorders especially via social media platforms (Kajimoto, 2021). Organizations have commenced sharing their theoretical and practical fact-checking knowledge and skills that are deemed to be essential to identify and discern information disorders, including the “understanding of the context in which misinformation emerges, who creates and spreads it, the types of misinformation, where it circulates, and why people believe it to be true and share it” (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021, p. 21). Moreover, misconception-based learning can be a very effective way of handling information disorders. By improving the critical thinking and debating skills of the learners and creating an engaging learning environment, this approach tends to provide more long-lasting benefits (Cook, 2017).

The “Voter Literacy” project of Faktabaari, a Finnish fact-checking organization, can be given as an example of linking MIL and fact-checking practices. In 2017, Faktabaari initiated the project by collaborating with Finnish schools and started to give fact-checking training to pupils. The training included general information about information disorders, democratic elections, and the media system, examining the claims found in social media, comparing biased and neutral news about a certain topic, showing the emotional and provocative nature of mis/disinformation, and learning the necessary tools to fact-check a suspicious claim (Mackintosh, 2019; Neuvonen, Kivinen, & Salo, 2018). This broader approach has marked a new era for fact-checking organizations by undertaking the mission of promoting MIL in society and expanding their impact. In this context, the main questions of the study at hand are as follows:

- RQ1: Why and how do some fact-checking organizations go beyond the practice of fact-checking and engage in educational campaigns to combat information disorders?*
- RQ2: What tools and strategies do fact-checking organizations use to reach larger segments of society while combating information disorders via MIL initiatives?*
- RQ3: What are the outcomes and challenges of initiating MIL training and projects for a fact-checking organization?*

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

After desk research and via investigation of relevant literature and digital outputs of the fact-checking organizations on education, I designed qualitative research based on semistructured in-depth interviews and online observations to broaden the understanding of the practices of *educational* fact-checkers. As a starting point, I focused on IFCN, which was launched in 2015 by the Poynter Institute with the intent of bringing together fact-checkers worldwide. IFCN evaluates the applicant fact-checking organizations based on five principles, namely the “Code of Principles” (2022): commitment to

nonpartisanship and fairness, transparency of sources, transparency of funding and organization, transparency of methodology, and open and honest correction policy (para. 1). IFCN also evaluates if the applicant institution has any direct connection with a political party or biased media organization (IFCN, Program Manager). After the evaluation by independent experts and the comment of the board, if the applicant organization is compatible with all the articles of the code of principles, they are acknowledged as verified signatories. As of 2021, IFCN has 91 verified and active signatories from all around the world.

I used the purposive sampling technique, which relies on the researchers' knowledge of the field and rapport with the target network (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2015), to designate my interviewees. As the first step for research design, I examined the websites and social media accounts of all these 91 IFCN member fact-checking organizations, which are periodically evaluated according to their commitment to the "Code of Principles" (2022, para. 1). Then I identified 12 of them that had a separate educational department and/or carry-on educational MIL projects. Later, I contacted these organizations via e-mail, explaining the main aims and questions of my research. Contacting responsible people for educational activities and MIL projects was a top priority for me. In 11 months (between January 2021 and October 2021), I interviewed a total of 12 people from eight different fact-checking organizations, who responded positively to the meeting requests, including a representative of IFCN. Faktabaari was an exception in this sense because they are not an active member of the IFCN. However, Faktabaari has been a part of many media literacy projects since 2014, conducting curriculum studies for schools in Finland and striving to publicize ways of fighting against misinformation. Moreover, Faktabaari adhered to the IFCN code of principles and promoted the standards of IFCN. However, they are not yet a member of the network, related to financing and fact-checking resources that they currently working on improving. By considering all these facts, I also included Faktabaari in the sample of the study. The case of MediaWise also needs further clarification. MediaWise is a verified signatory of the IFCN code of principles and the organization practices and publishes fact-checks via their Teen Fact-Checking Network. However, the organization exhibits its mission on its website as "teaching people digital media literacy and fact-checking skills to spot misinformation and disinformation" (MediaWise, 2022, para. 1). Even though MediaWise does not operate as an orthodox fact-checking organization, I added them to my sample as I thought they could provide valuable insights into the relationship between fact-checking and MIL education.

As seen in Table 1, participant fact-checking organizations operate in nine different countries, ensuring a geographically diverse sampling of interviewees. Six of the interviewees were female and six were male. The study is approved by the university institutional ethics committee of the author.

**Table 1. Introduction of Fact-Checking Organizations and the Interviewees.**

Name	Country (Foundation)	Interviews
MediaWise	United States of America (2018)	Program manager
Africa Check	South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya (2012)	Founder, info finder and media literacy editor, head of education and training, head of partnerships and engagement
Teyit.org	Turkey (2016)	Education associate, educational content associate
Faktabaari	Finland (2014)	Founder
Demagog	Poland (2014)	Coordinator of the fact-checking academy
Myth Detector	Georgia (2014)	Editor in chief
Faktisk.no (Tenk)	Norway (2017)	Project manager
IFCN	International (2015)	Advisor, program manager

My interviews with the participants questioned five main topics: (a) their motivations to adopt an educational approach, (b) MIL education and projects of their organizations, (c) their strategies for reaching broader segments of the society for educational purposes, (d) their views on the relationship between fact-checking and MIL, and (e) future educational projections and limitations. I conducted the interviews via Zoom, as the intention to interview fact-checkers from various countries and travel restrictions because of COVID-19 forced me to conduct interviews online. First, I briefed the participants about the scope and objectives of my research.<sup>1</sup> Afterward, I used a semistructured questionnaire to conduct the interviews. I recorded the interviews and then transcribed their responses. Proposed questions helped me to maintain the focus of the research. However, by letting the conversation go off-script and evolve, I tried to gather more data on the individual experiences of the fact-checkers. I conducted 10 interviews in English and two interviews in Turkish. The quotes from non-English interviews were translated into English afterward. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. In addition to interviews, I followed every social media account of chosen fact-checking organizations for 11 months. I listened to/screened the organizations' podcasts and broadcasts on educational activities, participated in their online project-launching events with teachers, and attended online education sessions of Global Fact 8! Conference of IFCN. Finally, I subscribed to the e-mailing list of IFCN and closely monitored the discussions on the MIL initiatives of fact-checking organizations.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed in the light of the "thematic analysis" approach for qualitative research design. According to this approach, it is vital to systematically identify and organize gathered data to unearth patterns and illustrate prominent themes. Moreover, the researcher should sort out the patterns that are directly related to the research questions. Also, by focusing on meaning across the data, the thematic analysis approach helps the researcher to comprehend the shared experiences of the research objects (Braun & Clarke, 2012). According to Joffe (2012), verbal interview data are at the root of thematic research. After the transcription of the interview data, a manual coding frame that includes *code name*, *definition*, and *example from the interviews* was constituted through reviewing relevant literature and raw data. After manual

<sup>1</sup> The interview guide can be found at: <https://osf.io/fr8zy>

coding, to rigorously assure reliability, two independent coders who are in the researcher's professional field were identified, and they reviewed the interview transcriptions. Following their evaluation and comments, coding was reviewed, and opinion differences were discussed. Finally, an agreement was reached between the researcher and independent coders, and the most salient themes were identified.

### Findings

The first theme elaborates on the MIL practices of fact-checking organizations to understand why many of them go beyond the practice of fact-checking (RQ1). The second theme concentrates on the collaborations between schoolteachers and fact-checkers to disseminate knowledge of MIL and elaborates on the outcomes and challenges of penetrating the formal education settings (RQ2–RQ3). The theme entitled *expanding the outreach* gives a detailed picture of MIL tools and strategies that fact-checking organizations use to reach larger segments of society (RQ2). Finally, the theme of *funding and public image* aims to answer the question "what are the outcomes and challenges of initiating MIL training and projects for a fact-checking organization?" (RQ3).

#### ***Going Beyond Fact-Checking: MIL Practices***

The practical aim of the MIL training is to bring necessary digital skills for the youth, teachers, and seniors to verify, discern, and debunk suspicious information. All the fact-checking organizations adopt and follow a transparent methodology when they fact-check suspicious claims that go viral on digital platforms. Publishing fact-checked stories via organizations' website or social media platforms has a limited effect considering the extent of the misinformation circulating on the digital sphere. According to the Program Manager of MediaWise, "empowering people, giving people the tools and so they can be their own fact-checkers, is a more efficient way to tackle misinformation and this must go hand in hand with fact-checking." Therefore, transferring the knowledge of methodology and introducing practical tools they use when fact-checking emerges as a top priority for the MIL approach of the organizations. Editor in chief of Myth Detector put forward a similar approach:

So, we are not just teaching what is true or false, but we are equipping young people with necessary skills on how to differentiate false content from real news. Because they need factual information to make informed choices. The slogan of our program is "Discover Truth Yourself," which is our concept and approach.

As seen in Table 2, fact-checking organizations carry out various MIL programs and training for different target groups. Also, some fact-checking organizations provide case studies for the courses to teach debunking online posts and news pieces, photos, and videos with a real-time experience. This misconception-based teaching approach helps to build engaging and practical course material. Founder of Faktabaari sees "each fact-check as a case study for media and information literacy education." Raising awareness of the motivations behind the spread of mis/disinformation is a prologue for the following theoretical and broader approaches. Fact-checking organizations provide information for their audience on concepts like source criticism, critical thinking, civic journalism, media ownership, and the formation of public opinion. They also concentrate on the political, economic, and social motivations behind the spread



of information disorders. It is not just aimed to equip people with digital fact-checking tools but to contribute to the formation of fact-based public opinion and to build resilience in society against information disorders by underlining the correlation between accurate information flow and democracy.

**Table 2. MIL Activities of Fact-Checking Organizations.<sup>2</sup>**

Fact-Checking Organization	Media Literacy Programs/Training	Education Department	Targeted Groups
MediaWise	Teen Fact-Checking Network, MediaWise Ambassadors, Voter Project	MediaWise	Teens, seniors
Africa Check	Info Finder, Online Fact-Checking Courses (Basic and Advanced), Fellowship Program	Separate Education Department	General audience
Teyit.org	Fact-Checking Seminars and Workshops, Digital Parent, Critical Digital Literacy for Teachers, VerificationPedia	Separate Education Department	University students, businesses, NGOs, general audience
Faktabaari	Voters Literacy	Hiring people with educational background	Students, teachers
Demagog	Fact-Checking Workshops and Webinars	"Fact-Checking Academy"	Students, teachers, seniors, business
Myth Detector	Interactive Online Games, "Discover Truth Yourself" Media Literacy Classes, IREX Learn to Discern Program	"MIL Lab"	General audience
Faktisk.no	Fact-Checking Courses and Workshops	"Tenk," hiring people with educational background	Journalists, teachers, librarians, social scientists, students and schoolchildren,
IFCN	Practical Fact-Checking Courses on Digital Verifying Tools, Free Fact-checking Training	"MediaWise"	General audience

Fact-checking organizations have limitations about funding and human resources. They commit to being transparent about their financial sources and rely on funding from tech companies, NGOs, and various foundations to enlarge their staff. To that end, they select claims to verify according to their importance, urgency, and virality to manage the time and human resources efficiently. Manual fact-checking alone has a limited effect considering the amount of misinformation circulating online. As the Head of Education of Africa Check explained, they "can't fact-check everything, every false information" and they "don't have

<sup>2</sup> Table 2 was prepared by the author based on the in-depth interviews.

enough fact-checkers, to take every false statement that's out there." In that sense, empowering people with the knowledge of "fact-checking" and conveying the knowledge of fact-checking via online/offline courses, workshops, seminars, and Q/A sessions are regarded as a more comprehensive and long-lasting way of bringing about societal impact. Inoculating people against information disorders emerges as a top priority rather than just correcting misinformation, in other words, rather than "putting a bandage on the gaping wound" (Media Literacy Editor of Africa Check). According to inoculation theory, it is possible to inoculate and empower citizens against information disorders by exposing them to imposter content or refuted messages beforehand and by explaining the logical fallacies (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019; Cook, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017).

All in all, the reasons for fact-checking organizations to engage in educational campaigns can be summarized as furnishing citizens with fact-checking tools, introducing source criticism, empowering them via MIL competencies, and in this way improving their organizations' societal impact. In line with these objectives, many of these organizations take advantage of fact-checking case studies and misconception-based teaching approaches to inoculate their audience against information disorders for long-lasting protection.

### ***Teachers as Collaborationists and Transmitters of Knowledge***

The most prominent stakeholder for fact-checking organizations to properly function their MIL training programs is teachers. Collaborating directly with teacher development centers or teacher networks/unions/NGOs stands out as a practical strategy, as reshaping national education curricula is a long and complex process involving several government agencies. In countries like Finland or Norway, it is relatively more feasible for fact-checking organizations to influence curriculum by working together with government authorities in accordance with the immediate MIL needs. However, in countries with more authoritarian regimes or politically polarized social settings, it is extremely challenging to be a part of curriculum design or contest the official standpoint of the policymakers. For this reason, partnering up with teachers and independent teacher organizations can be a model for MIL initiatives independent of the political setting of the country they operate in.

For instance, Teyit.org started a project in 2020 in collaboration with Teacher's Network, an NGO based in Turkey, to prepare a guideline to tackle information disorders and raise awareness about critical digital literacy with the active participation of volunteer teachers and to organize workshops for strengthening the critical MIL competencies of the teachers. Education Associate of Teyit.org explains their project:

We are working on a project involving volunteer teachers who work for the teacher's network, which they call "ambassadors for change." The goal is to empower teachers and build community. What we want is to create educational material for critical thinking and *trigger* the "muscle of doubt." We meet with teachers in workshops and produce critical media literacy materials together. We indirectly reach other stakeholders such as students and parents.

As part of the project, 39 teachers from 19 different provinces of Turkey actively participated in the process of identifying their students and their parents' shortcomings in terms of MIL competencies, generating their classroom solutions to tackle information disorders, and creating a handbook consisting of MIL exercises for all the teachers. According to project members, the content was "not created on behalf of teachers but with the active participation of the teachers." Similarly, Myth Detector worked hand in hand with Teacher's Professional Development Centre, an NGO based in Georgia. Yet, Fact-Checking Academy of the Demagog cooperates with some teacher development organizations in Poland to address the issue of MIL because they "don't see a strong support when it comes to introducing media literacy to the national curriculum" (Demagog, Coordinator). Formal authorities are not always willing to cooperate with fact-checkers because promoting critical thinking and publishing political fact-checks are sometimes perceived as opposing, especially in authoritarian contexts. Besides, these organizations are not yet considered stakeholders in educational decisions. Therefore, in some cases, fact-checking organizations resort to bypassing national education policymakers and directly reaching teachers via civil society. Taking a step further, Faktisk.no (Tenk) and Faktabaari recruit experienced teachers to work for their education departments to bring teaching, MIL, and fact-checking skills together. As the Founder of the Faktabaari explains, most teachers voluntarily participate in working groups to generate MIL education material and tools.

In a similar vein, the Founder of Africa Check underlines the importance of collaboration between teachers and fact-checkers:

I don't think that fact-checking organizations will ever have sufficient staff to significantly affect the education system, to deliver MIL against misinformation, themselves. Teachers will deliver media literacy, or not . . . as fact-checking organizations, we are the experts on misinformation.

However, in some cases, teachers "believe that their skills are not enough to raise misinformation issue" (Demagog, Coordinator), and "some teachers themselves are lacking competence to this" (Myth Detector, Editor in Chief). It is challenging to transfer the knowledge of MIL and fact-checking to teachers, while "even teachers who are willing to learn, have to address many other issues" (Demagog, Coordinator). Considering the responsibilities of the loaded curriculum and the ever-changing nature of digital literacies, equipping teachers with the necessary MIL competencies requires more funding and consistent cooperation of teacher development centers. Nevertheless, some fact-checking organizations provide special online courses for the use of teachers along with a guideline for MIL lessons, tips, and tricks for the classrooms. As carried out by Teyit.org, Faktabaari, and Faktisk.no, working interactively with teachers and preparing classroom scenarios, games, and courses make it possible to reach more students. Moreover, working with teachers is seen as a more time-saving and cost-efficient way to reach students and parents, while preparing online workshops or face-to-face lessons for a significant number of schools is not always feasible.

In sum, educational fact-checking organizations collaborate directly with teachers and/or teacher organizations to overcome the challenge of appending national curriculums with emergent MIL approaches and to maximize their impact by indirectly reaching students and their parents. As McGrew and colleagues (2017) suggested, fact-checkers can bring valuable knowledge to the table on topics such as source criticism and online information literacy by collaborating with schoolteachers.

### ***Expanding the Outreach***

Fact-checking organizations face some obstacles in terms of their primary aim to disseminate their MIL-related projects to as many people as possible. First, Internet connectivity and data costs still pose a challenge when organizations prefer digital tools for their training and education sessions. Since this is an issue in Africa, Africa Check uses popular media in the continent—namely radio, print media, and television—to reach underserved communities. They collaborate with community radio stations and produce interactive radio dramas to raise awareness about misinformation. In a particular radio drama on vaccine misinformation, at some point, listeners can suggest what the main character should do, either through a landline, SMS, or social media (Head of Education of Africa Check). It is challenging for a fact-checking organization to be acknowledged by most of the country in which they operate and disseminate their messages to people from all walks of life. So, partnering with traditional media outlets that have a well-known brand and a broader audience is an effective strategy to raise awareness of information disorders. Training community journalists and local librarians is another way for organizations to reach underserved and disconnected people.

Accessing the Internet can also be challenging for the elderly. MediaWise collaborates with the American Association of Retired Persons for a “Tele-Town Hall,” which aims to elucidate elderly people with no Internet access on topics such as information disorders and COVID-19-related misinformation via a landline. Organizations adopt different strategies for different age groups. MediaWise collaborates with social media influencers and celebrities to boost their popularity and to better communicate with the youth, while some others think that could be a risk because every possible reputation loss of an influencer or a celebrity may negatively affect the organization. Therefore, Africa Check partners with national radio stations and print media in every African country it operates in to reach a much larger audience. The media literacy editor of Africa Check explains part of their strategy as follows: “We did TV appearances, local and national, to discuss fact-checking in general, and around COVID-19, talking about some of the misinformation that spread about the cures, and the facts. That’s another way for us to reach the public.”

For a similar purpose, Demagog organized a workshop on information verification for local journalists to reach underserved local communities. Faktisk.no collaborates with local newspapers in Norway to expand the reach of their fact-checking stories.

Teyit.org displays their MIL content and fact-checked stories on public transportation screens in İstanbul via sharing content for free on *Modyo TV*, a media enterprise working under an agreement with the municipality. Demagog (FakeScape) and Myth Detector (Dr. Fake, Measure the Truth, and Your Nose) designed interactive online games that are generally based on discerning mis/disinformation from accurate information. In addition to that, fact-checking organizations share their educational materials via their interactive websites and social media platforms including Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Twitter. Podcasts are other means to reach the younger generation imagined as digitally connected and more interested in watching or listening than reading lengthy news stories.

Another issue is to reach communities speaking minority languages. For instance, there are 11 different official languages spoken in South Africa, and the United States hosts a huge population of Spanish

speakers. MediaWise is working on a project called "MediaWise Spanish," to enlarge the scope of its audience. Teyit.org is operating in three different languages, Turkish, English, and Azerbaijani, while Myth Detector operates in 5 different languages, Georgian, Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and English. To broaden the reach and to be more inclusive, Africa Check hires translators to render MIL programs and training materials into local languages. The media literacy editor of Africa Check stresses that translation work is vital for "reaching communities, making the content accessible to anyone." The Founder of Africa Check made a similar comment: "A lot of countries have multiple languages. This isn't just an English or national language thing. For instance, very small organizations, one called Togo Check, operate in five or six languages. Not just French. So, it is translation work."

Head of Partnership for Africa Check exhibits their overall strategy for expanding the outreach in detail:

So, by doing our media literacy work, on platforms such as WhatsApp, in local languages and in audio format, we can speak to people in their language, and it's audio they don't have to read. . . . We are trying to create an information ecosystem, by collaborating with translators, local journalists, and local radios, to reach the wider public that they serve, with the MIL content produced by fact-checkers and educators.

Similarly, Faktisk.no operates a collaborative MIL project to build an alliance between local media, schools, libraries, and cultural institutions.

On the flip side, thinking of limitations about finance and human resources, it is a challenge for organizations to reach more citizens by translating their fact-checking and MIL education work or hiring experienced people in MIL education who speak a minority language. Though it is largely country-specific, making MIL content accessible to as many people as possible through translation activities, combining face-to-face and online teaching opportunities, and ensuring the collaboration of mainstream and local media emerge as a general roadmap for fact-checking organizations to improve their social reach and impact.

### ***Funding and Public Image***

Information disorders are widely accepted as a global and societal problem to address. Therefore, funding MIL initiatives and educational organizations to build resilience to malicious information became a priority for some NGOs, foundations, governments, and tech companies. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic and Infodemic (i.e., the rapid spread of accurate and inaccurate information simultaneously), MIL against health misinformation for underserved communities, the youth, and the elderly has become a preferable topic for funding. Accordingly, Africa Check's Head of Partnership stresses that "75% of their funding has got a media literacy element in it." The coordinator of Demagog's Fact-Checking Academy elaborates on funders' preferences:

I think there are plenty of opportunities for funding for projects that focus on education and media literacy. Also, being a fact-checking organization, also being a part of IFCN, we are perceived as a reliable partner for this kind of corporation and funding.

Building resilience in youth against COVID-19-related misinformation is also an attractive topic for the funders:

Our funders are hugely interested in media literacy work in fighting misinformation and working with youth. Especially, there has been a lot of interest from funders in Nigeria for health misinformation. That's because there is rampant health misinformation spread on WhatsApp in Nigeria.

Thus, the increase in financial resources enables fact-checking organizations to have a more institutional structure, increase their investments in the field of education, and establish teams/departments specific to education. The educational department of Teyit.org, Fact-Checking Academy of Demagog, the educational branch of Faktisk.no called Tenk, MIL Lab of Myth Detector can be given as examples. As the Education Associate of Teyit.org put it, the aim is to "enhance social benefit with a more comprehensive approach and long-term cooperation with various stakeholders, rather than one-time training." In addition to that, diversifying the funding opportunities by MIL initiatives helps organizations to avoid the economic dependency on a specific financial source and thus to protect their impartiality and autonomy. On the flip side, political fact-checking practices may affect the public image of the organizations on some occasions, and they can be perceived as biased by some political actors. Therefore, separating the fact-checking and MIL education branches may augment the inclusiveness of the MIL projects and may exhibit a more neutral stance for both funders and the targeted audience. Project Manager of Faktisk.no (Tenk) explains: "So, we focused on not being political, you can get labeled for that, we focused on only giving the necessary MIL tools, on the education side."

MIL projects necessitate building a large network including funders, schools, teachers, students, and parents. Educational initiatives are generally positively perceived by society as attempts to provide social benefits and to raise overall intellectual capacity. In comparison with political fact-checkers or mainstream media professionals, this specific condition of "educational fact-checkers" helps to build trust among the audience and improves the public image of the organizations. The coordinator of Demagog's Fact-Checking Academy explains:

There are some cases where teachers or some other organizations learn firstly about Fact Checking Academy and later, they realize that this is part of Demagog. Sometimes the brand of our educational projects goes beyond the recognition of our Fact-Checking Platform.

By making acquaintance with the practical work and methodology of fact-checkers, people get familiar with their operations and brand. When fact-checking, organizations not only deal with the accuracy of the political statements but also associate their brand with MIL education for the students and seniors; they get a chance to diversify their funding and improve their level of recognition. Additionally, being a member of IFCN and benefiting from their symbolic capital provide an additional reputation for these organizations through their commitment to the "Code of Principles," which secures fairness, nonpartisanship, and transparency.

Ultimately, finding a transparent and sustainable financial source for their operations and building trust with their audience emerge as prominent challenges for fact-checking organizations. As is seen from the quotes of the practitioners, initiating MIL projects and establishing educational branches may assist organizations to attract more funds and improve their public image by highlighting their educational campaigns for the public good.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Fact-checking can be regarded as an asymmetric initiative given that mis/disinformation spreads faster than fact-checks and true information (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Moreover, different political biases and cultural backgrounds of people affect their trust in a fact-checking organization. When the large volume of information disorders are considered and limited financial and human resources of organizations are added to this scenario, fighting with every piece of online misinformation surfaces as a mission impossible. According to IFCN (Poynter, 2022), fact-checkers should not be the only ones debunking false information. A healthy information ecosystem requires everyone to do their part in elevating facts. That can be stated as one of the reasons why some fact-checking organizations, sometimes called "second-generation fact-checkers," go beyond "fact-checking" and involve in educational projects. Fact-checkers work through the educational system and mobilize volunteer teachers as proxies to disseminate the knowledge wider by adopting a misconception-based teaching approach. In addition to debunking false information, they aim to build resilience in society by inoculating people against information disorders and preemptively protecting the public. It is widely accepted that dynamic, practical, and critical MIL education in schools better equips young citizens against information disorders, compared with the reactive approach, which is based solely on fact-checking and data verification (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The practice of fact-checking suspicious claims and publishing the results via digital media platforms is widely discussed as a "double-edged sword." Generally, previous literature shows that methodical and transparent fact-checking is beneficial for the public and democracy (Amazeen, 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2020). However, some studies show that getting the facts right does not necessarily change the mind of an individual, and the effectiveness of fact-checking is vulnerable to the political affiliation of the audience (Walter, Cohen, Holbert, & Morag, 2020). Partisans usually are "motivated reasoners" (Jarman, 2016, p. 13), as their reasoning can be disrupted by their emotional or political biases. Mostly, fact-checked stories can have a limited impact on people's underlying beliefs (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 77). The tendency of fact-checking organizations based on not just fact-checking but involving educational activities and conveying the methodology and tools for the process of discerning truth from inaccurate information has the potential to challenge this issue. The apparent and long-term goal is not "to give the fish" by fact-checking but "to teach how to fish" with the MIL education programs.

The expected result of MIL projects of fact-checking organizations is to raise awareness in society and build resilience to false information flow. Besides, it is possible to talk about a mutually beneficial relationship, which is also expressed by the fact-checkers. Fact-checking organizations that engage in educational projects also strengthen their prestige and public image and build trust with their audience. When they cooperate with schools and national agencies or show up in influential media outlets, they become more familiar and recognizable to society. Correspondingly, they possess various opportunities in reaching

broader segments of society when their brand and positive public image become more apparent. Moreover, when mainstream and conventional media outlets pick up their stories and present them as the “truth of the matter” or collaborate with them, fact-checking organizations gain the opportunity to expand their reach and visibility. However, previous studies show that fact-checkers are sometimes perceived as biased by the public, thus, mainstream media outlets may not risk alienating audiences who do not entirely trust fact-checkers (Amazeen, 2019; Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). Still, some fact-checking organizations approach mainstream media outlets to enhance their public recognition and social impact.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider the financial aspect of the situation. One of the most common problems of fact-checking organizations is to provide a sustainable source of income and increase the number of their employees, especially if they are not the offspring of a media institution or born from a civil society initiative (Esteban-Navarro, Nogales-Bocio, García-Madurga, & Morte-Nadal, 2021, p. 14). In some cases, fact-checking organizations are dependent on voluntary work because they have a limited budget to spare. As stated by Tompkins (2020), MIL projects of fact-checking organizations are eligible for grant funding, and sometimes this funding can be crucial for the organizations in terms of surviving and enlarging the scope of their activities. As the results suggest, politically neutral MIL initiatives of the fact-checking organizations attract funds from NGOs, tech companies, and sometimes from governments, which helps these organizations to find a reliable financial source and opportunity to enlarge their staff and operations. All in all, this approach may provide a sustainable economic model for independent fact-checking organizations. Thus, they may increase their capability to challenge general connectivity problems, language barriers, political biases, and prejudices by expanding their online and offline operations, hiring more educators and translators, strengthening their separate educational departments, and reaching underserved communities. The transformation of fact-checking organizations into “semieducational institutions,” “media literacy schools” (Project Manager, Faktisk.no/Tenk), or “fact-checking schools” (Çömlekçi, 2020) could be feasible in the future in parallel with the goal of spreading the practice of fact-checking throughout society and creating a media ecosystem to tackle information disorders. Referred to as “journalistic reformers” (Graves, 2016), fact-checking organizations have claimed to be “not only a complement but also a corrective for mainstream media” (Singer, 2021, p. 1937) and some of them have recently been involved in MIL campaigns to better address the problem of mis/disinformation. In the long term, this enterprise may inspire mainstream media organizations to put more importance on MIL education and collaborate with fact-checking organizations.

Last, it should not be forgotten that every country or region’s political landscape and cultural values affect the struggle against the information disorders and MIL education approaches of the fact-checking organizations in that country or region. Future studies may adopt a comparative approach considering different political and cultural contexts of different regions and take a step further in understanding the role of fact-checking initiatives in promoting and disseminating MIL. In addition, the long-term efficiency, impact, and sustainability of MIL education initiatives of fact-checking organizations are still uncertain. Studies focusing on the beneficiaries of such MIL programs can shed light on the question of efficiency. Finally, future studies may engage in more fact-checking organizations worldwide, bearing in mind that nearly 50 fact-checkers gathered during the Global Fact 9 Conference of IFCN in 2022 to discuss the possibility of establishing a *Global Media Literacy Network*.



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