



From Crisis to Credibility: Institutional Isomorphism and the Evolution of Indian Fact-Checking Organizations

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Abstract

In the Global South, particularly in populous democracies like India, misinformation and disinformation have become persistent features of public discourse. False narratives in this country don't just appear during moments of political tension, they're often deployed strategically to tap into identity-based divisions and sway public sentiment. Understanding how institutions respond to these dynamics, this study investigates the organizational trajectories of fact-checking entities operating in India's National Capital Region (NCR) using the lens of Institutional Isomorphism. The study examines how external pressures and normative influences have shaped their institutional behaviour. The three dimensions of the theory—coercive, mimetic, and normative, were employed to understand the forces guiding their evolution. Coercive pressures from elections, communal unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many into reactive, short-term responses, and over time, with international standards and lessons borrowed from global peers, these organisations were encouraged towards more stable institutional practices like multilingual outreach, broader thematic coverage, and new verification tools based on platform-integration and Artificial Intelligence & Machine Learning. Drawing on 24 interviews across 13 NCR-based organizations, the findings suggest a discernible shift from reactive crisis response to strategic institutionalization, positioning fact-checkers as emerging pillars within India's media accountability ecosystem.

Keywords: Fact-checking, Misinformation, Disinformation, Evolution & Institutional Isomorphism, SDG 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions, SDG 9: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals, SDG 4: Quality Education

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How to Cite This Article in APA

Jha, V. & Kumar, R. (2026). From crisis to credibility: Institutional isomorphism and the evolution of Indian fact-checking organizations. *Plaridel*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2026-26jhvkrcj>

Introduction

Background of Misinformation in India

The Indian information ecosystem has been contaminated in the past decade due to rise in misinformation and disinformation, hence it has been a matter of serious media discourse. What earlier seemed to be mere rumours has now turned into a full-fledged network of deliberate falsehoods spreading through digital means (Das & Schroeder, 2020). This menace has shaped and, in many ways, destabilized democratic processes, public trust, and social cohesion in today's digital environment (Campbell & Coleman, 2024; Tandoc et al., 2017). A closer examination of misinformation patterns in India reveals that their origins extend beyond technological factors, emerging instead from the country's evolving social and political fabric (Kumar, 2025). As the previous literature suggest, the lives of common people in India changed substantially during the middle of the 2010s as identity-based stories, which were mainly political in nature became dominant in public discussions, due to majoritarian perspectives spreading their influence (Bhat, 2023). The idea of national belonging was likely to be affirmed by cultural pride and religious symbolism (Dubey, 2023; Ghasiya et al., 2023), these extreme steps changed the entire digital space into stages where ideology is performed and confirmed (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2023).

Apart from ideology, the reigning class and economic inequality has also pushed the misinformation flow. The digital growth of India did not eliminate the wide digital divide which separates people who use technology to the best of its ability from those who lack basic literacy and digital skills (Kumar & Maurya, 2024). Urban users who possess better education levels can verify news through various sources but rural users depend on WhatsApp forwards and local language media that more often than not, provide unverified claims (Tewathia et al., 2020). Additionally, in 2016, when JIO (a private telecommunication provider) came into the market, it sold data at cheaper rates as a consequence, people of all the demographics widened access to the internet, yet it also opened the door to misinformation, especially for first-time users learning to navigate social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp etc. (Mukherjee, 2019; Vasist & Chatterjee, 2025). Furthermore, many individuals face economic precarity and social instability, so spreading of fake news (sensational stories or conspiracies

etc.) can become a form of comfort or entertainment, a way of making sense of their place in a volatile world (Jaggi & Patankar, 2024).

Researches have also explored how India's diverse culture makes it relatively difficult for fact-checking organisation to operate; the country has 22 official languages together with numerous dialects, this creates separate communication spaces for different regions (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2024; Roy et al., 2025; Seelam et al., 2024; Singhal et al., 2021;). The definition of trustworthy information in these areas relies more on the speaker's identity than on evidence because people are more likely to trust statements from elders, community leaders and familiar voices. (Avieson & Mazumdar, 2025; Kader & Gundala, 2022).

Another critical factor persists with the increase in user-generated content and its vast consumption, digital platforms have expedited the misinformation spread and dissolved the boundaries between formal journalism and what ordinary users post or forward each day (Kanthawala & Maddox, 2022). As per DataReportal, Digital 2026 report, India has 500 million social media users, representing 34.1 % population penetration, with one of world's largest social media user base. WhatsApp, perhaps the most influential of them all, with over 487 million users, followed by YouTube (480 million), Instagram (481 million) and then Facebook (403 million) (Kemp, 2025). Kalogeropoulos and Rossini (2025) highlights that, while all these platforms help people stay connected, they also sow the seeds of misinformation. They also mention about the privacy provided in its encryption, which appears to make it a fertile ground for misinformation. Moreover, such closed networks help in establishing validity of the message, not because they are true, but because they are shared by known and someone trusted (Ahmed et al.; Neyazi, 2020).

Deepening the analytical focus, misinformation in India is better understood not only by digital chaos created by common people, but also by its structured use as a mode of political communication by elites or ruling groups (Chauchard & Badrinath, 2025). Earlier, people depicted flow of such information to be natural, but now it appears deeply coordinated and calculated to influence electoral behaviour, strengthen ideological identities, and mould public emotion (Basu, 2025; Bhat, 2023). Such campaigns often play the emotional and communal angle to gain political mileage, drawing on familiar fears and loyalties to sustain attention and belief (Bhat & Chadha, 2023).

Previous scholarly literatures confirm behind the scenes role of the IT cell networks run by various political parties which produce and circulate narratives, they deploy their troll armies to amplify outrage through hashtags and memes (Mukherjee, 2020; Neog, 2024; Oza et al.; Udupa, 2024). As discussed above, the encrypted nature of platforms like WhatsApp comes to their help, they have become crucial spaces for spreading ideologically charged content and election propaganda (Trauthig et al., 2024). The orchestrated persuasive steps have blurred the boundary between participation and propaganda (Campos, 2023), making fact-checking an important fixture in the country's political landscape.

Emergence of Fact-Checking Organizations in India

Fact-checking in India emerged as a collective concern from its society's importance for the veracity of information (Das & Tripathi, 2023). The first known fact-checking organisations in India named Factly, started its operations in 2014 (Haque et al., 2018). The scientific literature on Indian fact-checking indicates that the first wave appeared between 2016 and 2018, a period, when India was gearing up for general elections and the use of social media led political campaigns was at its peak (Graves, 2018). Initiatives like BOOM, Alt News, and Factly came into effect almost reactively, motivated by an urgent need to counter political misinformation and disinformation spread on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. In those early days, these new organisations had inadequate resources, which led them to improvise a lot (Haque et al., 2018). Fleeting nature of news required timely debunking; hence the focus was on immediate correction rather than structural reform.

Fact-checking in India appeared to be more planned between 2019 and 2021, when global conversations around misinformation studies started guiding their aim (Jha & Kumar, 2024; Seelam, 2024). Kumar (2022) mentions about the time when international forums like the IFCN stepped forward for assistance, Indian fact-checkers started formalizing their workflows by adopting editorial guidelines and transparency standards. He also specifies that getting listed in Duke Reporter's Lab database as active fact-checking organisations to attending fact-checking summits all these helped in uplifting the Indian fact-checking ecosystem.

Lowrey (2015) highlights that the field evolved into two separate streams through natural expansion during this time. Newsroom-embedded units followed journalistic practices, while independent civic

groups focused on outreach and educational activities, developing trust through direct public engagement. He further states that it was by the beginning of 2022, when fact-checking in India appeared to enter what might be described as a consolidation phase. Specialized beat-oriented fact-checking organizations like The Healthy India Project (THIP), First Check, Climate Fact-check etc. were established. They started forming networks, automate the fact-checking process and professionalize even more (Graves, 2018; Koliska & Roberts, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

Considering the rapid expansion of fact-checking initiatives in India, academic inquiry into this field still feels somewhat limited and uneven. Much of the existing research remains descriptive, focused on content analysis of major events like general elections (Das and Schroeder, 2020) or COVID 19 pandemic etc. (Kanozia & Kaur, 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021), their working mechanism and verification process or connecting it with media literacy (Das et al., 2025; Kumar, 2022). Current works have not yet explored the institutional evolution and the way these organisations have started to show shared forms of practice and alignment, despite cultural differences. Building on these gaps and trying to make sense of these layered transformations of content shifts, technology adoption, and audience outreach this study turns to Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The theory suggests that organizations adapt not just for efficiency but also to gain legitimacy. This study attempts to foreground how institutions adapt (reactive to strategic) and begin to resemble one another when responding to external demands.

Given the above, this research paper posed the following questions:

Research Questions

1. How have Indian fact-checking organizations responded to legitimacy pressures?
2. What forms of institutional isomorphism are evident in their development?

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Isomorphism

Overview of Institutional Theory

According to DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) theory of Institutional Isomorphism, organizations, despite differing in their initial goals and orientations, progressively acquire similar structural and behavioural traits when exposed to the same institutional environment. Their model identifies three key mechanisms, coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism, when taken together they explain how organizations manage uncertainty and legitimacy pressures. This appears especially relevant to media and civil society groups in countries like India, where fluctuating power relations, funding dependencies, and public trust all affect their growth.

Types of Isomorphism

- *Coercive*: As the name suggest it tends to arise from formal and informal pressures, imposed by powerful actors such as governments, regulators, donors, or dominant platforms. In the case of fact-checking organizations, these pressures might take the form of compliance with platform policies, strict donor reporting standards, or emerging state regulations on digital communication.
- *Mimetic*: It unfolds under conditions of uncertainty; organizations choose to adopt successful models from others when they lack clear direction about their path forward. The Indian fact-checking community uses globally accepted verification standards and IFCN certification to demonstrate their professional credentials and establish credibility.
- *Normative*: This develops through the gradual spread of common professional standards and training methods. The Indian fact-checking sector develops journalistic values through international workshops and professional networking activities. The exchange of practices between organizations leads to the development of a shared professional identity.

Relevance to Media and Civil Society Organizations

Applying institutional isomorphism to media and civil society organizations can help in understanding how legitimacy pressures quietly reshape both structure and purpose. In a democratic country

like India, where civil society often walk between two opposing roles of advocacy and journalism, maintaining credibility becomes less a choice and more a condition of survival. Fact-checking organizations are good examples, they began as reactive, civic-driven responses to misinformation crises but gradually adopted journalistic practices and transparency norms etc. to preserve public trust and secure resources. Seen through this lens, institutional isomorphism appears less theoretical and more practical: it clarifies how looking for legitimacy has encouraged convergence across funding models, editorial standards, and organizational design. Coercive pressures enforce compliance; mimetic imitation lends credibility through alignment with global practices; and normative professionalization sustains shared ethics.

The Indian Fact-Checking Landscape

The fact-checking ecosystem in India operates both as media-affiliated and independent ones. At the time the data was collected, India had 29 active fact-checking organisations as per the Duke Reporter's Lab database (browse locations page). Amongst the most prominent ones which defines the variety in institutional character are Alt News, Boom Live, Factly, and India Today Fact Check, THIP etc. each reflecting slightly different trajectories.

Furthermore, fact-checking organisations in India have a very diverse legal and structural composition, they are formally registered as private limited companies or non-profit entities, depending on their founding vision and revenue model. Media-affiliated projects such as, Aaj Tak Fact Check, Vishwas News and WebQoof operate as editorial units within corporate media networks, bound by existing media law frameworks and internal codes of conduct. On the other hand, independent initiatives like Alt News (registered under the Pravda Media Foundation), Factly, and DFRAC are structured as trusts, NGOs, or privately owned firms, this allows them to have operational autonomy but they are also vulnerable to unstable funding (Das & Tripathi, 2023).

Besides, according to information available on their official websites, the funding models of these organisations varies significantly. Organisations those are affiliated to the media are largely sustained by advertising and subscription revenue, general news budget/licensing revenue, corporate cross-subsidization, parent company capital and platform grants from firms like Meta or Google. Additionally, these organisations ensure their fact-checking units are separately funded

and editorially independent (e.g., India Today Fact, AFP fact-check and Vishwas News etc.). Whereas, independent entities (DFRAC, THIP and Newschecker etc.) who also rely on Meta or Google, additionally depend on public individual donations, crowdfunding, philanthropic grants, or consultancy-based income, owner investments & venture capital and non-profit foundation funding.

Evidence gathered from multiple webpages reveals that organizations are sustaining under hybrid financial models. Despite that it's also understandable that donor support has been essential in the growth of fact-checking in India. However, such dependence often come with a question mark on integrity and to counter this, organizations have stated their transparency policy, donor disclosures, conflict-of-interest statements, no-partisanship policy and also the annual impact reports to maintain their autonomy and public trust (Koliska & Roberts, 2024).

As far as the staff composition is concerned, their designation and experience suggest that teams usually comprise journalists, data analysts, and technologists. Some organizations like The Healthy Indian Project and First Check, bring in subject-matter experts such as doctors or researchers. These organisations also form partnerships, which is another defining layer of this ecosystem. They collaborate with technology platforms like Meta and Google, they are signatories to the IFCN, or join regional alliances such as the Trusted Information Alliance (TIA). These characteristics specify towards an evolving field that balances civic responsibility, market logic, and global alignment.

Despite these developments, India operates under multiple structural, political, and emotional challenges which share similarities with worldwide patterns (Roberts & Koliska, 2025). Political pressure, surveillance, and regulatory constraints under the 2021 IT Rules have created a hostile environment which makes organizations choose to self-censor (Kumar, 2025). Financial precarity also persists as organizations depend on short-term grants from donors and tech firms like Meta and Google, reinforcing reliance on external legitimacy markers such as IFCN accreditation (Haque et al., 2018). The combination of language differences and technological limitations adds to their woes, preventing them from reaching diverse audiences (Singhal & Shah, 2021).

Methodology

To understand how fact-checking has developed over time in India, [the undertaken research](#) employed the qualitative case study approach, conducting 24 semi-structured interviews with 13 fact-checking organizations operating in the National Capital Region (NCR), the study also examined the documents on organisational websites (such as transparency reports, editorial guidelines, and funding disclosures) to enhance analytic depth. Amongst the interview respondents, 14 were handling administrative roles, and 10 were core fact-checkers who had at least two years of hands-on experience. Reaching these participants wasn't exactly straightforward, the process started by emailing and calling contacts listed on official websites and also by sending messages via LinkedIn accounts. Oddly enough, the more established outlets were the slowest to respond, perhaps a reflection of how overwhelmed or guarded they are. Still, once connection was established and the intent behind the research was explained, most were generous with their time and insights.

The reason for focusing on the NCR is practical but also strategic. This region houses the highest concentration of fact-checking organizations in India as per the duke reporter's lab database, and it offers a mix of linguistic diversity, media access, and technological infrastructure that mirrors broader national patterns. In short, it gave the investigation a good shot at capturing a variety of organizational experiences while keeping the geography manageable.

Participant Sampling Technique

This empirical work used purposive sampling to recruit respondents, a method that's fairly common in qualitative research when the goal is to access informed voices rather than random ones (Etikan et al., 2016). Each organization was briefed about the study, and the interview questions were shared with the participants in advance. HR representatives or senior staff then suggested individuals they felt would be best positioned to respond. In some cases, the organisations gave access to top-level leadership: four organizations allowed to interview either their CEO or a founder. Table 1 lists the respondents, the type of organization they're affiliated to (whether independent or media-backed), and their IFCN certification status.

The research undertaken here was conducted considering all the ethical norms, respondents were clearly stated about the data collection

process and they were elaborately explained the purpose and problem under investigation. Only those who gave verbal willingness and agreed to participate were interviewed. Participants were informed about the expected duration of the interview and the use of audio recording in order to ensure procedural transparency. All the interviews were done as per the convenience of the respondents. The participants were also informed about the strict use of data for academic purposes only (journal articles, conference paper presentations etc.).

Out of the 13 organizations, 11 provided two respondents each. The remaining two, Boom and Vishwas News contributed one each. In those cases, the individuals spoken to held dual roles, handling both administrative duties and core fact-checking work (participants P5 and P24, respectively). Even among those in leadership positions, most had prior fact-checking experience, so, their contributions weren't just managerial, they reflected operational knowledge as well.

Table 1.

List of Organizations with their Type and IFCN Status and the List of Participants with their Designation at the Time of the Interview.

Organization's Name	Organization Type	IFCN Signatory	Respondent Code & Role	
AajTak Fact Check	Media Affiliated	YES	P1	Co-Founder & Editor
			P2	Fact-Checker
AFP Fact Check	Media Affiliated	NO	P3	Editor
			P4	Fact-Checker
BOOM Live (Delhi Bureau)	Independent	YES	P5	Producer, Workshops and Training
Digital Forensics Research and Analytics Center (DFRAC)	Independent	YES	P6	Co-Founder/Advisor
			P7	Fact-Checker
First Check	Media Affiliated	YES	P8	Editor
			P9	Fact-Checker
The Lallantop Fact Check	Media Affiliated	YES	P10	Editor
			P11	Fact-Checker

Organization's Name	Organization Type	IFCN Signatory	Respondent Code & Role	
Logically Facts (Log. Facts)	Independent	NO	P12	Head of Editorial Operations
			P13	Deputy Editor & Fact-Checker
Newschecker	Independent	YES	P14	Editor & Social Media Head
			P15	Fact-Checker
NewsMobile Fact checker	Independent	YES	P16	Senior Editor
			P17	Fact-Checker
Press Trust of India (PTI) Fact Check	Media Affiliated	YES	P18	Head of Fact-checking and Digital Services
			P19	Fact-Checker
The Quint's WebQoof	Media Affiliated	YES	P20	Editor
			P21	Fact-Checker
The Healthy Indian Project (THIP)	Independent	YES	P22	CEO & Founder
			P23	Editor & Fact-Checker
Vishwas News	Independent	YES	P24	Associate Editor & Fact-Checker

Interview Protocol and Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted over a span of six months, from February to July 2024. A semi-structured interview guide built around the study's central research questions was developed, which included open-ended prompts about organizational origin stories, shifts in content focus, tech adoption, and evolving approaches to audience engagement. Depending on the direction of the conversation, follow-up questions were asked to get deeper into the “how” and “why” behind these experiences.

Where possible, interviews were done face-to-face in English, however three interviews were conducted in Hindi (P10, P11 and P21) and translated into English by the researcher. That seemed to help participants open up a bit more and allowed for richer, more grounded conversations. Still, not everyone was available for in-person meetings,

so four interviews took place over Zoom or Google Meet, each session lasting roughly for 60-70 minutes.

This enquiry encouraged participants to walk through real-world examples demonstrating the tools they use, describing workflows, or sharing anecdotes about how they handled specific misinformation spikes. These moments added valuable texture to the data. All interviews were recorded with prior consent and then transcribed verbatim by the first author using Turboscribe, an AI transcription service. After transcription, both authors independently reviewed the transcripts along with any field notes. For analysis and thematic coding, NVivo 15 was employed, while data visualization was supported through Julius AI (julius.ai), which generated figures from qualitative datasets. Tables were produced using Microsoft Word. The analysis and interpretation process remained free from any AI influence.

This qualitative inquiry combined both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) coding. The analysis began by assigning deductive codes aligned with the framework, covering categories like crisis events, content shifts, tech integration, and audience strategy. Within those broader themes, the analysis allowed codes to emerge more organically (for example difficulties in scaling regional outreach surfaced only through repeated reading). Throughout the coding process, the researchers went back and forth as a team, discussing and refining the categories. When interpretations diverged, it was talked through until a consensus was reached. This iterative approach helped the investigation arrive at a final set of themes that directly address the research questions. The findings from this analysis are organized thematically in the next section.

Findings and Analysis

The findings section is structured around two primary analytical categories, (i) The early stages where much of the evolution in the Indian fact-checking appeared reactive and (ii) Evolution over the passage of a decade (2014-2023), where they've also learned and adapted in more deliberate, strategic ways. Both the sections embed the three forms of institutional isomorphism: coercive pressures predominate in reactive phases, whereas mimetic and normative influences emerge as organizations move toward strategic institutionalization. A concluding subsection is also included to synthesize the key insights, "Trajectory: From Crisis Response to Strategic Institution" where the

argument of isomorphism is fleshed out stating all the themes with empirical evidence and its interpretation. This highlights how the three mechanisms collectively shaped the fact-checking in India.

Reactive Adaptations: Organizational Responses to Misinformation Crises

This section explores how Indian fact-checking organizations initially mobilized in response to sudden spikes in misinformation, as P16 noted that “After 2014, you must have seen a lot of fake news related to different domains which acted as an immediate catalyst for the need of fact-checking...” Most of these efforts were short-term, reactive, and often assembled as a necessity, driven by urgent public events like national elections, communal unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic (fig. 1). Fact-checkers found themselves racing to identify and debunk high-risk misinformation spreading across platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, often with very little lead time (fig. 1).

Figure 1

The main themes and subcategories in fact-checking responses, including channels, triggers, methods, and adaptive strategies used by Indian organizations.



The process usually began with a rough triage: teams would assess which claims posed the greatest threat based on reach, potential harm, or likelihood of inciting panic or violence. Once prioritized, the claims were scrutinized using manual searches, cross-referencing credible sources, or consulting domain experts all while managing the pressures of real-time misinformation cycles. Several interviewees described hastily reassigning staff, suspending routine tasks, or building makeshift workflows just to stay afloat (see Table 2).

These reactive practices while temporary and resource-straining proved foundational. They seeded habits, tools, and instincts that many organizations would later formalize as part of their long-term verification models.

Table 2.
Themes and Codes of the Data Showing Reactive Adaptions

Theme 1: Crisis-Driven Organizational Mobilization
Triggers: Elections, Health Crises, Communal Violence Digital Infrastructures Fuelling Misinformation Crises External Socio-Political Pressures Prompting Expansion
Theme 2: Reactive Content Strategy Shifts
Immediate Shifts to Health, Political, or Communal Claims Emergence of Region-Specific Content Needs Managing Viral Rumours in Rural and Semi-Urban Contexts
Theme 3: Rapid Workflow and Resource Adaptations
Organizational Agility in Scaling Verification Efforts

Crisis-Driven Organizational Mobilization

This theme exhibits how political, communal, or public health-related mis and disinformation triggered both the birth and rapid evolution of India’s fact-checking sector. These moments created external pressures so intense that they left organizations with little choice but to act.

Triggers: Elections, Communal Violence, Health Crises

Participants consistently pointed to key global and local events that nudged them into action. For instance, the 2016 U.S. presidential election was frequently mentioned as a kind of global wake-up call. Fact-checkers recalled how discussions sparked abroad soon filtered

into Indian media spaces, prompting concern about similar patterns of politically charged misinformation at home.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election is widely regarded as a turning point in the political use of fake news, with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok playing a central role. This triggered heightened awareness about the need for fact-checking mechanisms worldwide. India, too, began recognizing the urgency of countering political misinformation during this period (P3).

Domestically, however, Indian elections particularly those in 2014 and 2019 stood out as the most powerful triggers. During these campaigns, false information circulated at breakneck speed, much of it designed to inflame communal tensions and deepen partisan divides, P6 showed concerns and mentioned that “India’s diverse social fabric and culture make it highly susceptible to communal misinformation, often spread to incite violence or create social unrest. False claims about politics, religion or other communal sentiments have led to widespread confusion and even violence.”

Health-related crises followed a similar logic but presented unique stakes. COVID-19 didn’t just accelerate misinformation, but reframed it as a matter of public health and safety. This wasn’t just a media issue anymore it was life and death. In this regard P8 recalled:

I think in many ways the COVID pandemic put a spotlight on an issue which already existed. If you see in the 1990s, autism, measles vaccine and even with the polio vaccine there were all sorts of fake news but it wasn’t so amplified. COVID happened at a time when all of us had access to social media, that’s why it became more mainstream, especially when it came to vaccine hesitancy and all the unsubstantiated cures that people were peddling for COVID.

Digital Infrastructures Fuelling Misinformation Crises

By the responses of fact-checkers it turned out that India’s digital revolution was a double-edged sword. On one hand, the spread of affordable smartphones and cheap data especially after Jio’s 2016 market entry expanded internet access like never before, on the other it created a storm where millions of first-time internet users with low

media literacy were part of an unregulated content environment, P10 explained the challenge: From 2016 to 2018, there was a rise in the Indian telecommunication industry, particularly Reliance Jio, which came with economical services bringing millions of Indians online and that has been a pivotal factor in triggering the growth of fact-checking in India.

This influx of new, often first-time internet users created fertile ground for misinformation ecosystems. Social media, which had previously played a secondary role in news consumption, became a mainstream source of information and disinformation alike as “low-cost mobile data plans revolutionized internet access” (P20). Simultaneously, even “verified people on Twitter with blue ticks” (P18), contributed to misinformation, eroding assumptions about credibility online. As social platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook became default news sources, misinformation circulated on these networks. Even verified users those assumed to be credible were often cited as misinformation amplifiers.

Socio-Political Pressures Driving Expansion

Beyond digital and crisis-driven triggers, deep-rooted socio-political tensions also fuelled the expansion of fact-checking. First was claims targeting specific communities often in the form of altered videos or false accusations required immediate intervention, P10 noted that fake contents are widely used to instigate communal tensions, often with doctored videos and photos. Fact checkers began debunking these to prevent violence and misinformation-driven hatred (translated from Hindi).

Second was public scepticism toward mainstream media often perceived as politically biased or corporately compromised. Independent fact-checking units stepped into this void, offering more impartial and evidence-driven alternative, according to P14 “citizens sought unbiased verification services to cross-check claims made by news outlets. They filled this gap by offering transparent and evidence-based analysis of news stories, restoring public confidence in the accuracy of information.”

Third was in the context of rising polarization, where many organizations began to view fact-checking not just as a journalistic task, but as a form of democratic safeguard, “I’ve found that the growing political polarization and the steady rise of propaganda has made fact-checking feel less like a niche practice and more like a necessary response to narratives that seem designed to divide and destabilize” (P24).

Reactive Content Strategy Shifts

This theme explores how fact-checking organizations in India recalibrated their editorial priorities in real time to cope with evolving misinformation crises. The shifts were fast and often reactive, spurred by intense coercive pressures from political unrest to health emergencies.

Immediate Shifts to Health, Political, or Communal Claims

Fact-checkers described how their early efforts were dominated by political misinformation, particularly around elections between 2014 and 2016 (see Fig. 2). Misleading speeches, doctored campaign material, and hyper-partisan posts flooded social platforms, making political fact-checking an obvious and urgent priority as P19 recalled “most of the fact-checking in the early days were full of political content and politics remained a consistent driver of misinformation.” But that changed rapidly when COVID-19 hit. With the pandemic came a whole new category of claims: miracle cures, vaccine conspiracies, and misrepresented medical advice. Fact-checkers had to pivot almost overnight, adjusting their content focus to tackle health-related misinformation that, if left unchecked, could have had life-threatening consequences P22 observed that “COVID spread endangered lives and placed a burden on healthcare systems. Our country saw a sudden shift in the news environment. So, fact-checking groups intervened, working with medical professionals, and endorsing trustworthy sources such as WHO.”

Communal misinformation, too, never really left the spotlight. Videos spliced to provoke outrage or audios stripped of context often targeted already marginalized communities, raising the stakes and demanding immediate debunking to prevent flare-ups of violence “contents have always been mostly political and social, targeting vulnerable sections of society with misinformation frequently directed at minorities like Muslims, Christians, Dalits, or Adivasis” (P6).

Over time, a more complex problem emerged. The nature of misinformation began to evolve becoming trickier, harder to verify, and often deliberately ambiguous. Some claims lived in the grey zone, carefully worded to avoid outright falsehoods while still misleading the public. Others were recycled from earlier events, resurfacing just enough to trigger fresh confusion. What this pattern revealed was not just the breadth of topics but the need for constant editorial flexibility.

Emergence of Region-Specific Content Needs

Fact-checking organizations soon realized that India's vast linguistic landscape wasn't just a backdrop, it was a major factor shaping how misinformation spread. False claims often moved fastest in regional languages, especially on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, where content tends to circulate unchecked in rural and semi-urban areas. In many of these communities, access to mainstream media is limited, and formal fact-checking resources are either scarce or unknown. That made the need for regionally tailored strategies not just useful, but essential. P7 stated:

The format has changed, the style of editing has changed, we have to adapt to the regional audiences. We have started going regional and we are opting for fact-checking in different Indian languages, we are also hiring people from specific regions or we translate.

But the challenge wasn't just about language. Many of the rumours that gained traction were deeply embedded in local cultural contexts from superstitions and caste-related narratives to emotionally charged, hyper-local communal claims. These kinds of misinformation didn't just demand translation; they called for interpretation. Fact-checkers had to approach them with a sensitivity to regional norms, histories, and dynamics.

To bridge this gap fact checking organisations collaborated local journalists and influencers to connect fact-checking with the grass-roots level, where false narratives can spread unchecked and incite significant harm (P21, translated from Hindi). These collaborations helped build trust with audiences who might otherwise dismiss fact-checks as urban interventions.

Managing Viral Rumours in Rural and Semi-Urban Contexts

The rapid rise of "cheaper smartphones and internet access along with low digital and media literacy, made rural and semi-urban areas susceptible to fake news, frequently disseminated through social media and messaging platforms" (P1). Fact-checking organizations observed that many people in these communities were encountering digital news with little guidance on how to assess credibility, they were especially vulnerable to hoaxes, conspiracies, and forwarded disinformation.

Recognizing this, organizations began creating region-specific verification services that didn't just translate content, but adapted it to suit local formats, languages, and attention patterns. One notable example was the "Don't Forward the Forwards" campaign, a direct attempt to raise awareness about the risks of blindly forwarding messages, particularly in settings where a single WhatsApp video could provoke panic or violence.

But the response went deeper than reactive debunking. Fact-checkers increasingly invested in building trust networks on the ground. They partnered with local NGOs, collaborated with community leaders, and trained residents themselves to spot and report suspicious content.

Rapid Workflow and Resource Adaptations

This theme looks at how fact-checking organizations showed notable agility under pressure adjusting internal systems and scaling up operations in response to sudden spikes in misinformation.

Organizational Agility in Scaling Verification Efforts

In many cases, this meant temporarily setting aside business-as-usual routines. Editorial teams were stretched thin, and staff from other departments were brought in to help manage verification tasks. External partnerships played a key role in extending the reach and credibility of fact-checks, especially when misinformation was spreading faster. P18 remarked *"We had to bring in volunteers from journalism schools during election spikes, we collaborated with doctors and health experts during COVID just to keep up with the flood of claims."*

Similarly, partnerships became critical for reach and credibility "We quickly coordinated with local news outlets and civil society groups so our fact-checks reached rural communities faster than misinformation did" (P14). There were also inherent challenges of rapid scaling "Our workflow was designed for steady misinformation but sudden viral waves forced us to triple-check processes to avoid mistakes under pressure and it also hit us financially" (P23).

But what's important here is that many of these strategies didn't just evaporate after the crisis. Over time, organizations began formalizing what had started out as emergency fixes. Things like streamlined claim-logging systems or multilingual alert templates initially designed during emergencies were later integrated into regular workflows. In that sense, these adaptations acted as building blocks for long-term preparedness. That said, there were problems too, respondents hinted at how difficult it

was to sustain these expanded efforts once the immediate crisis passed. Burnout was a concern, and not all organizations had the resources to keep their crisis-level capacities running indefinitely.

Strategic Transformations: Institutionalization of Fact-checking Practices

This section examines how fact-checking organizations gradually moved from short-term, crisis-driven responses to more stable and professionalized operations, a shift that signals a deeper process of institutionalization. Insights from the interviews reveal that repeated exposure to misinformation rise pushed organizations to adopt clearer content policies, expand the scope of what they fact-check beyond just breaking crises, and place advanced verification tools into their regular routines. Most of these changes were shaped by normative pressures, a growing expectation to follow professional codes, like the IFCN Code of Principles and mimetic ones, as organizations increasingly looked to global peers for models of success.

Table 3

Themes and Codes of the Data showing Strategic Transformations

Theme 4: Content Evolution and Standardization
Broadening Claim Categories: Politics → Health → Economy → Social Issues Adapting to Emerging Phenomena (e.g., Deepfakes, AI-Generated Content) Increasing Alignment with International Norms and Standards
Theme 5: Technological Institutionalization
Technological Integration and Innovation Strategic Platform Collaborations for Verification
Theme 6: Strategic Audience Engagement and Trust-Building
Inclusive and Culturally Sensitive Engagement Strategies Building and Evaluating Public Trust

Content Evolution and Standardization

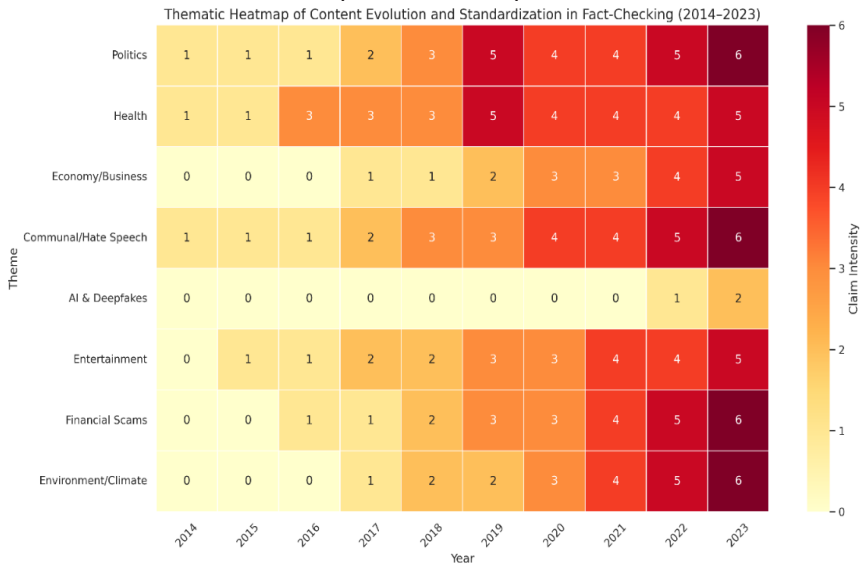
This theme looks at how fact-checking organizations gradually expanded and formalized their content strategies. While earlier sections focused on reactive content shifts driven by specific crises (as covered in Theme 2), this section highlights a slower and more strategic phase of evolution. Over time, organizations shifted from focusing almost exclusively on political and communal claims to covering a wider range

of topics, including health, economy, financial scams, environment and even entertainment related misinformation (see fig. 2).

Thematic patterns from the heatmap illustrate this progression clearly (see fig. 2), in the early years, political misinformation dominated, often combined with communal narratives. But post-2021, the landscape began to shift. Concerns about AI-generated content and deepfakes started to appear, signalling that fact-checkers were increasingly responding not just to events, but to emerging technological problems. This shift wasn't accidental; it reflects a growing awareness of professional expectations and audience needs and a move toward more consistent editorial frameworks.

Figure 2

Thematic Heatmap of Content Evolution and Standardization in Indian Fact-Checking (2014–2023). This heatmap visualizes the evolving intensity and diversity of fact-checked claims across eight content categories over a decade.



Broadening Claim Categories: Politics → Health → Economy → Social Issues

Over the past decade, fact-checking in India has undergone a significant transformation, both in scale and in scope. What began as a relatively narrow focus on political misinformation has gradually expanded to include health, economic, and socially sensitive topics.

Data from the Duke Reporter’s Lab (2024) reflects this shift clearly, as of this year, India is home to 29 active fact-checking organizations, a steep rise from the handful that existed in 2014. This growth suggests that fact-checking in India has moved beyond its early experimental phase and is now maturing into a more institutionalized field.

The emergence of health-focused outlets such as *First Check* and *The Healthy Indian Project (THIP)* illustrates how organizations have deliberately targeted specific gaps, in this case the rampant spread of medical misinformation “*During the pandemic, fact-checking expanded into health misinformation, combating false claims about COVID-19 treatments, vaccines, conspiracy theories, traditional remedies, miracle cures, and unverified medical practices prevalent in local communities*” (P8).

Several participants noted that while political claims were the initial priority, the rise of health-related disinformation soon demanded dedicated resources, especially during public health crises P5 and P22 reflected that earlier, political content was the main focus, but COVID shifted us to health, and health fact-checking became a constant feature and over time, Indian fact-checkers broadened their scope to include health, environment, education, and crime etc., the diversification didn’t stop there. As misinformation began to track major national events from the demonetization drive and rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to the farmers’ protests, fact-checkers responded by developing more nuanced strategies to monitor economic and policy-related claims. At the same time, communal and caste-based disinformation continued to pose persistent threats, prompting further expansion of content categories.

By being eligible and adopting the commitments to the International Fact-Checking Network’s Code of Principles (IFCN, n.d.-b), and by formalizing content selection strategies, Indian fact-checkers moved from ad hoc debunking toward more structured, agenda-driven verification practices. This marks a critical normative shift from isolated fact-checks to a broader, more systematic approach.

Adapting to Emerging Phenomena (e.g., Deepfakes, AI-Generated Content)

Artificial intelligence-generated misleading information such as fake text and deepfake videos poses a new problem and it is very challenging as AI techniques

make it possible to produce and distribute extremely convincing bogus information quickly with minimum effort, making verification more difficult (P18).

One of the clearest signs that fact-checking in India is becoming institutionalized is how organizations responded to new, AI-driven forms of misinformation including deepfakes, synthetic text, and cloned audio. These aren't just technical curiosities; they're fast-emerging threats that have fundamentally changed the verification landscape. In response, fact-checkers have had to upskill quickly, developing specialized workflows, learning new detection techniques, and investing in tools like InVID, Microsoft Video Authenticator, and other deepfake analysis models.

The urgency around AI-generated misinformation has also sparked collaboration. Several organizations have partnered with international tech firms and peer networks to access tools, share knowledge, and organize training sessions aimed at preparing fact-checkers for these evolving challenges P2 shared “we have created a joint initiative called the Misinformation Combat Alliance (MCA), where 13 Indian organisations have come together, we also have a Deepfakes Analysis Unit (DAU) there.”

Fact-checkers are now trying to stay ahead of the curve, anticipating how new formats might disrupt public discourse. “*With time, fact-checking is evolving*,” as one participant put it (P24). In that sense, these technological disruptions have done more than complicate the fact-checking task, they've helped solidify it. By normalizing continual innovation, regular training, and deeper investment in digital tools, AI-driven misinformation has, somewhat paradoxically, contributed to stabilizing and professionalizing fact-checking practice in India.

Increasing Alignment with International Norms and Standards

One of the strongest indicators that fact-checking in India has become institutionalized is the growing alignment of organizations with international norms most notably through certification under the International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles. Today, according to recent IFCN records, that number of IFCN signatories are 19, with 11 of the 13 organizations featured in this study now officially certified (IFCN, n.d.-a). This signals more than symbolic affiliation, it reflects a strategic commitment to values like transparency, accuracy, and answerability, embedding global best practices into local verification

workflows P9 explained that “becoming a signatory in 2021 expanded our reach beyond Asia, attracting members globally, we also saw a lot of people from outside Asia who were interested in becoming a part of our organisation.” Beyond standard-setting, IFCN has also played a practical role in supporting Indian fact-checkers. Participants noted that IFCN-provided grants helped them improve their verification infrastructure whether through building new tools, training teams, or refining editorial systems.

These international ties also paved the way for more public-facing initiatives. One standout example is the Teen Fact Check by Boom, developed with support from global media networks, “in collaboration with MediaWise, we select middle and high schoolers who use social media to debunk viral misinformation and share media literacy tips” (P5). Fact-checkers described the program as a major leap forward in outreach. Not only does it build resilience to misinformation among younger users, but it also creates peer-driven feedback loops where teens themselves challenge and correct falsehoods.

Another notable initiative is the Northeast Facts Network, a collaboration with the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ), which specifically targets disinformation circulating in India’s Northeast. Participants pointed to this as an example of adapting global frameworks to local contexts, in this case, a region often overlooked in national narratives yet highly vulnerable to targeted misinformation. Regular participation in international events like the Global Fact Summit has further enhanced this professionalization. These gatherings, according to several respondents, offer exposure to emerging tools, facilitate global collaboration, and reinforce the sense that Indian fact-checkers are part of a larger, interconnected effort.

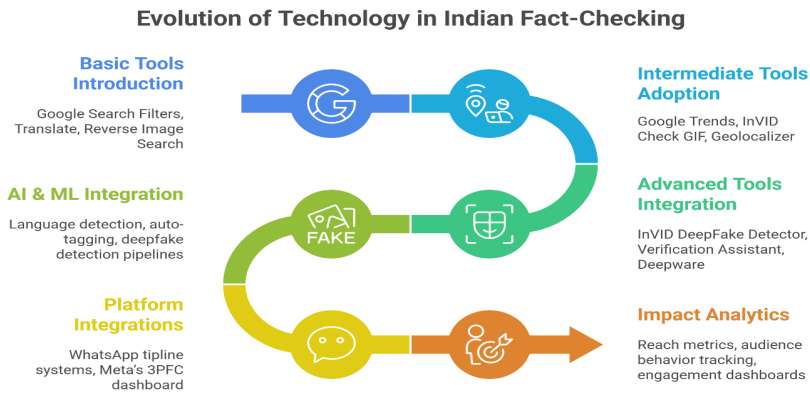
Technological Institutionalization

This theme examines how Indian fact-checking organizations have gradually institutionalized technology as a central part of their verification process a shift shaped by both mimetic pressures (looking to global peers) and normative ones (aligning with professional standards). In contrast to the early days, when manual checks and individual judgment were the norm, fact-checkers at present rely on advanced digital tools like reverse image search engines, video forensics software, and AI-powered deepfake detectors (see Fig. 3). What’s also notable is how external collaborations have played a role in this transformation. Partnerships with major platforms like Meta and Google (see Fig. 3)

have allowed Indian fact-checkers to scale their operations, expand their reach, and more importantly gain access to tools and datasets that are otherwise out of reach for small teams working independently.

Figure 3.

Technological Evolution and Integration in Indian Fact-Checking Workflows (2014–2023).



Technological Integration and Innovation

Fact-checking organizations in India have seen a major shift in their technological capacity, moving from basic tools to advanced, AI-powered verification systems (Fig. 3) that have stabilized operations and supported scalable responses, P15 quite clearly mentioned:

In the era of AI, Google reverse image search is not enough, advanced tools have emerged to combat misinformation. Tools like InVID and Amnesty YouTube DataViewer specialize in detecting manipulated videos by analyzing metadata and breaking videos into keyframes for reverse image searches. Then there is Deepware Scanner focuses on identifying deepfakes, using AI-driven algorithms to pinpoint inconsistencies in videos and images. Additionally, Hive Moderation and Sensity AI offer cutting-edge solutions for deepfake detection in video and photo datasets.

But acquiring tools wasn't enough. To use them effectively, organizations created structured training protocols, recognizing that skills had to evolve alongside technology. Journalists described proactively learning deepfake detection methods and geolocation tools, P12 acknowledged "we keep updating ourselves with learning new tools on deepfakes and geolocation like Google Earth, Street View, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) platforms to verify the geographical accuracy of viral videos and images." Sustaining these systems also meant staying ahead. Many began using AI-based translation tools like Google Translate and custom models to process claims in multiple regional languages. Some even experimented with blockchain-based verification, anticipating future misinformation threats.

Strategic Platform Collaborations for Verification

A defining marker of India's fact-checking institutionalization has been the growth of strategic partnerships with global technology platforms, collaborations that have allowed organizations to scale their reach and deepen their impact. What began as informal use of digital tools has gradually evolved into formalized, long-term programs. Google, in particular, has played a central role, tools like Google Lens, Google Earth, and the Fact-Check Explorer have not only enhanced image and video verification but also provided fact-checkers with searchable archives of previous debunks, streamlining the verification process as P7 stated "Google has a wide range of storage and data, it helps us find a fact-check which has already been done earlier in the past on that image."

Importantly, these partnerships extended well beyond the tools themselves. Respondents highlighted Google's role in structured training and capacity-building, especially through the Google News Initiative (GNI). Since 2018, many fact-checkers have participated in GNI workshops, which offered systematic, nationwide training. Several participants credited these sessions as being instrumental to their professional development, describing them as key turning points in their organizational growth. In this context, the relationship with Google illustrates both normative and mimetic isomorphic pressures. Indian organizations aligned with best practices and modelled their workflows after globally established leaders.

Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking (3PFC) program also came up repeatedly as a transformative initiative. By enabling verified fact-checkers to directly flag misinformation on Facebook and Instagram,

the program expanded both their technical capability and audience reach. More recently, fact-checkers cited initiatives like Mission Shakti- a consortium of fact-checkers and news publishers working collaboratively to detect online misinformation and deepfakes and expanding fact-check dissemination across local languages (Nyariki, 2024). This initiative is evidence of how partnerships can be mobilized to address targeted misinformation. These examples collectively signal how international and domestic partnerships have become embedded in the operational front of Indian fact-checking, supporting both scale and legitimacy, “New alliances have created distribution channels via CrowdTangle, WhatsApp’s tip lines, and Instagram Reels allowing us to intercept misinformation at scale and deliver verified information in user-friendly formats” (P20).

Strategic Audience Engagement and Trust-Building

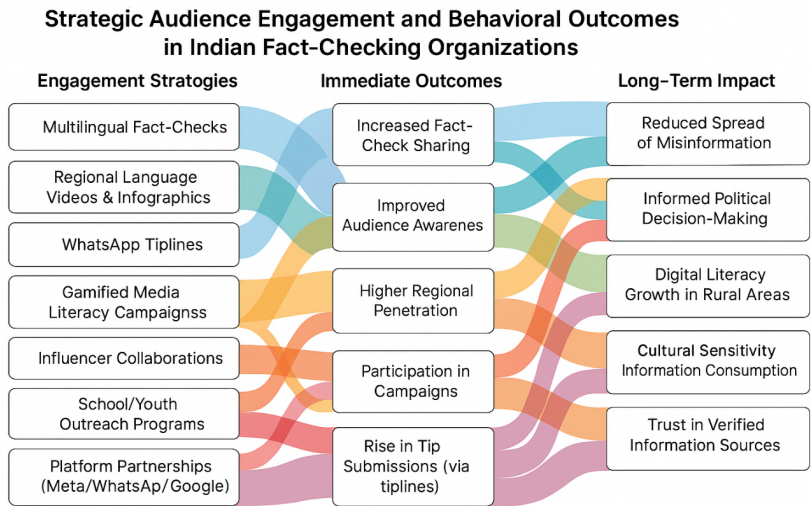
This theme explores how Indian fact-checking has moved beyond a generic, one-size-fits-all outreach model toward more intentional, strategic approaches designed to reflect the country’s vast linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity.

As shown in the directional flows (Fig. 4), these interventions include multilingual fact-checks, WhatsApp tiplines, collaborations with local influencers, and targeted media literacy campaigns. Together, they have led to immediate, tangible outcomes like higher rates of fact-check sharing and improved reach in regional and rural areas. Over time, these outcomes appear to be contributing to deeper societal impacts like slowing the spread of misinformation, improving political awareness, and boosting digital literacy in underserved communities.

Figure 4 further illustrates that by designing interventions that speak to people’s specific contexts and languages, fact-checkers have begun fostering participatory ecosystems where users don’t just consume verified content they help circulate it. In that sense, trust-building has become central to the institutionalization of fact-checking in India.

Figure 4.

Strategic Pathways from Engagement Initiatives to Behavioral and Societal Outcomes in Indian Fact-Checking Organizations (2014–2023)



Inclusive and Culturally Sensitive Engagement Strategies

Fact-checking organizations in India realized that tackling misinformation meant going far beyond English-speaking, urban audiences. *“Even with the expansion of digital access, vast populations remained digitally illiterate or new to platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube, India still has a large population unfamiliar with digital media and media literacy” (P1).* In a country with extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity, any serious attempt to curb false information had to account for how it spreads in rural and semi-urban areas.

To address this, multilingual fact-checking became a foundational part of their outreach strategy. Interviewees described how organizations expanded their operations to serve a wide range of language communities. *Newschecker*, for example, began producing fact-checks in Hindi, Malayalam, Assamese, Bengali, and more. *The Healthy Indian Project (THIP)* pushed to cover seven languages despite limited resources, while *Vishwas News* managed to reach users in 12 different languages. Other than these, ten organisations which are part of the study fact-checks claims in more than two languages.

These weren’t just translations, they involved creative, often resourceful adaptations. Some organizations dubbed videos into

regional dialects to increase accessibility. According to Nyariki (2024), others formed strategic partnerships, such as Project Shakti, to boost their translation capacity. A few even set up dedicated language-specific bureaus to tailor content more precisely to regional contexts. P21 (translated from Hindi) discussed that the long-run goal is to increase reach and provide fact-checks and media literacy in multiple languages, this move will tackle misinformation that spreads quickly in local languages to be countered just as fast.

Beyond addressing language barriers, fact-checking organizations also began rethinking content formats to better connect with younger, digitally native audiences, as P20 observed “in today’s social media world... everybody wants to see, not read.”

Recognizing that traditional text-heavy fact-checks weren’t always effective, especially on social media, teams like The Quint started experimenting with more dynamic formats using infographics, bite-sized explainer videos, and even interactive elements like gamified challenges to make fact-checks more engaging and shareable, P20 shared that “infographics, explainer videos, and reels draw younger consumers who demand rapid, easy-to-understand information.”

Figure 5.

(a) A YouTube shorts and a Instagram reel explaining fact-check videos (b) A video on You Tube explaining a health fact-check with funny visuals (c) Use of ‘infographics’ on You Tube and WhatsApp channels making it more engaging.



Fact-checkers also observed changes in user behaviour over time, P3 noticed that “*earlier, people would take it at face value, now they also share the debunks*”, with more people proactively verifying content before sharing, driven by increasing polarization and heightened awareness of social media liabilities (fig. 4).

Building and Evaluating Public Trust

Indian fact-checkers has shifted from simply debunking false claims to actively building public trust through long-term literacy initiatives, P5 explained one of the ways, “we teach students and young professionals how to spot false information through online challenges and quizzes.” Through the responses it was noted that public awareness has matured over time, people who once accepted forwarded messages on WhatsApp without question are now more likely to pause, verify, or even seek out fact-checks.

Many participants pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a pivotal moment in this evolution. The urgency of reliable information during the health crisis opened a window of opportunity, communities became more aware of misinformation’s risks, and more receptive to fact-checkers’ work. In response, organizations launched a wave of media literacy efforts from gamified quizzes and interactive videos to hands-on workshops, all aimed at helping users spot red flags, question viral claims, and think more critically about the content they consume, P22 noticed that “when it was directly impacting people’s health, people realized the need of fact-checking”, highlighting how crises catalysed trust-building opportunities.

Table 4.

List of major Media Literacy initiatives and campaigns initiated by the organizations who are part of the study.

Name of the Organisation	Media Literacy Programs & Campaigns
Vishwas News	Sach Ke Saathi (<i>Friends of the Truth</i>)
BOOM	Facts Neeti, The Teen Fact-Checking Network (TFCN), Deepfake Watch
	Media Buddhi (Now Defunct)
First Check (GNI)	Factshala
	Bihar Information and Media Literacy Initiative (BIMLI)

Name of the Organisation	Media Literacy Programs & Campaigns
WebQoof	Verify Kiya Kya (<i>Did You Verify?</i>)
DFRAC	Don't Forward the Forwards
AFP	Fact Story
NewsMobile	Chunavshala & Covidshala
PTI Fact-check	Grow by Growing Others

Trajectory: From Crisis Response to Strategic Institution

After examining the reactive adaptations and strategic transformations, [the authors decided to prepare a trajectory that helps to](#) flesh out the argument of isomorphism in an organised way (table 5). The table points out all the six themes along with coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic pressures, which interacted dynamically over time, transforming Indian fact-checking from a reactive response to a more strategic institutionalized field. A few excerpts from interviews and some common observation during data collection suggests that these three forms of isomorphism did not operate in isolation but rather in a sequenced and cumulative manner.

Table 5.

Established evidence of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphic pressures shaping the Indian Fact-checking

Themes	Instances of Empirical Evidence	Type of Iso-morphism	Analytical Interpretation
Crisis-Driven Organization- al Mobiliza- tion (Elec- tions, COVID)	"We had to act immediately dur- ing elections and COVID spikes." (P16, P8)	Coercive	External shocks compelled orga- nizations to adopt fact-checking rapidly under crisis; limited strategic choice.
Reactive Con- tent Strat- egy Shifts	Sudden pivot from political to health misinformation. The emergence health specific fact-checking.	Coercive	Government and public health emer- gencies exerted regu- latory and societal pressure for immedi- ate adaptation.

Themes	Instances of Empirical Evidence	Type of Iso-morphism	Analytical Interpretation
Rapid Work-flow and Resource Adaptations	"We brought in volunteers from journalism schools during election spikes and also brought in health experts during COVID." (P18)	Coercive → Mimetic	Initially crisis-driven, later reinforced by observing global rapid-response models.
Content Evolution and Standardization	"We adopted IFCN guidelines and broadened content categories." (P14)	Normative	Movement toward codified professional standards and institutional legitimacy.
Technological Institutionalization	"We learned tools like InVID and Data-Viewer from GNI workshops, along with whenever we went to fact-check summits it benefited us technically" (P9)	Mimetic → Normative	Emulation of global practices transitioned into standardized workflows.
Strategic Audience Engagement and Trust-Building	"We started fact-checks in 12 languages to reach regional users." (P21, P24)	Normative	Professional ethics and inclusion norms shaping institutional legitimacy.

For most of the organisations, which were part of the study, the triggering factors in the early phase (2014–2017), of the decade occurred due to coercive pressures like political polarization, election misinformation, communally charged stories and the emergence of JIO bringing a telecommunication revolution with economical internet, which in turn increased the number of social media users exponentially. Alongside this, there was rising distrust and scepticism towards traditional media which forced experienced journalist to come up with independent fact-checking organisations, DFRAC is an example, where the co-founder (P6) had 22 years of prior journalistic experience. These triggers led to reactive mobilizations characterized

by short-term task reallocation, rapid content triage, and improvised debunking mechanism. The coercive context thus served as base for these organizations entering into the fact-checking ecosystem.

Following the early phase, the intermediate phase (2018–2021) was characterized by the emergence of mimetic and, to some extent, coercive forms of isomorphism. When COVID-19 stepped in, dedicated health fact-checking units like THIP and First check took charge bringing in journalists and health matter experts. During this health crises other organisations were also compelled to act under intense external urgency. By this time organizations which were established in the early phase stabilized operations, they began emulating practices from recognized international peers such as MediaWise and PolitiFact (US) etc.

We often looked up to PolitiFact, which also won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for covering the U.S. presidential election, I remember how the concept of its rating systems helped us in making ours. We also run a program called Teen Fact-check Network, a newsroom by teens, aged 13-19, it was part of the MediaWise network (P5).

Another important aspect of this phase was exposure to global standards through collaborations (e.g., DFRAC forged a partnership with the UN Department of Global Communication, this collaboration aimed to synergize resources and materials), cross-platform partnerships (e.g., International Centre for Journalists) and technology integration workshops (e.g., Google News Initiative), these steps facilitated this imitation. These organisations also focused on collaborating with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan for technological exchange and literacy programs etc. Mimetic learning was evident in the adoption of shared verification tools, content selection frameworks, and cross-regional collaboration models. This phase also saw a hint of normative isomorphism, when seven organisations part of study became signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principle (IFCN, n.d.-a) or the first time, NewsMobile, Boom Live and Aaj Tak in 2018, WebQoof and Vishwas News in 2019 and Newschecker and THIP in 2020.

Finally, in the institutional strengthening phase (post-2021), normative isomorphism became prominent. Alignment with the International IFCN COP saw growth, for instance “First check”

became a signatory for the first time in 2021, PTI Fact-check in 2023 and Lallantop Fact-check in 2021 (these examples are only the ones part of the study), apart from these, other ones who started to become signatory in the intermediate phase consolidated their place by getting repeated signatory status.

Other important factor was increased participation in professional networks (e.g., Global Fact Summits), these exposures helped expand professional legitimacy. One of the prominent normative isomorphic patterns was seen in the recent development of the 'Fact-Checking Network (FCN)', this has started on the footsteps of IFCN. FCN is an initiative by the Trusted Information Alliance (TIA) to develop self-governing standards and best practices for fact-checking organisations in India. At this stage, fact-checking evolved from reactive journalism to a recognized institutional practice.

Examination of these stages indicates that the process does not involve a linear transition from one form of isomorphism to another, but a layered trajectory in which coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures overlap and reinforce each other. Coercive crises opened the entry points for innovation; mimetic learning stabilized operational norms; and normative commitments institutionalized legitimacy. This sequential layering signifies a shift from reactive crisis management to strategic institutionalization, demonstrating how external pressures, peer influence, and professional standards collectively shaped the trajectory of fact-checking in India.

Discussion

This section examines how institutional isomorphism appears in civil society under democratic stress, uncovering the dimensions of media pluralism and accountability that position fact-checking as a promising institutional form. It further analyses the emerging challenges of sustainability and integrity for these organisations and addresses the risks of isomorphic change including homogenization, global norm vulnerability and local diversity depletion. The findings contribute a forward-looking perspective to existing scholarship by offering a more refined perspective of the evolutionary mechanism of civic media institutions.

Implications for Institutional Theory

Till date scientific literatures on fact-checking in the Indian context analysed content, looked at their methodologies and challenges etc.

(Banaji et al, 2019; Das & Tripathi, 2023, Haque et al, 2018; Kumar, 2025; Shukla & Shrivastav, 2024), but all in isolation. By tracing the evolution in the last decade through the coercive, mimetic and normative dimensions of institutional theory, findings of this study reaffirm and extend this field by giving a more holistic perspective.

The present analysis has traced this evolution as per DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) lens, where they suggest that organizations evolve not only through strategic choice but also by responding to pressures for legitimacy. The reflection of this statement was visibly apparent in the Indian fact-checking field. The first analytical category of the findings exhibits how organisations adapted reactively, demonstrating coercive isomorphism where organizations emerged through crisis-induced imperatives like plethora of misinformation during elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and contents inciting communal unrest, that compel fact-checking initiatives to respond with limited autonomy. Findings from the current investigation suggests that rather than formal regulation, these coercive pressures appeared as urgent triggers, where legitimacy is earned through responsiveness to public crises rather than institutional authority (Shin et al., 2025). These pressures didn't only make them go along with what was expected, they changed the complete idea of credibility and objectivity meant in the context of democratic stress (Suomalainen et al., 2025).

The second analytical category illustrates how these organisations became more institutionalised and stable through strategic transformation; throughout the themes and codes, a combined influence of mimetic and normative isomorphism was evident. Fact-checking organizations in India's NCR borrowed operational practices, transparency norms, and ethical guidelines from international peers, gradually aligning themselves with models established by networks such as the IFCN (Graves, 2018a). It also pans out that the pattern of imitation and adaptation was often indirect, driven by training programs, collaborations, and the search for authenticity. As Graves & Anderson (2020) note, professional fields under political pressure develop transnational reference points to signal trust and protect autonomy, this "adaptive mimicry" is a result of the practical learning common in vulnerable institutional fields.

This was followed by normative isomorphism, which consolidates the field's professional standards, some examples are IFCN certification and cross-national collaborations, which have become markers of

legitimacy. However, it is also evident that in contrast to the anchoring effect of normative pressures in more established Western systems, these coexist in India with periodic occurring of coercive pressures, consequently the organisations are simultaneously formalized and fluid (Koliska & Roberts, 2024).

Through this decade long journey (2014-2023), this undertaken research explains how isomorphism manifests differently in civil society settings under democratic stress. Legitimacy here is not granted by the state or by market success but earned through ‘networked credibility’, with the help of transparency reports, open correction policies, and international recognition (Lowrey, 2015). This enquiry goes beyond western newsroom models and tries to understand a hybrid civic-media spaces in the Global South. The findings indicate that in these settings, isomorphism may be less about bureaucratic stability and more about managing susceptibility. Taken together, the study reaffirms that isomorphism under democratic stress operates as both a survival strategy and a site of innovation.

Impact on Media Pluralism and Accountability

Adopting an institutional perspective on the evolution of fact-checking in India reveals that this development exerts a mixed influence on media pluralism and accountability. On one hand, the field has grown leaps and bounds by strengthening the mechanisms of verification, transparency, and ethical journalism, on the other, the growing convergence of organizational models and reliance on similar global standards has introduced a form of institutional uniformity that may narrow epistemic diversity. The study’s findings on professionalization and normative convergence illustrate this tension clearly, while shared standards have enhanced credibility, they have also centralized verification authority among a few well-resourced, English-dominant organizations (Graves, 2018a; Lowrey, 2015). Though TIA has come up as an alternative but it’s very new to the fact-checking world and its endurance can be a case study for future research.

The results point at rising scepticism towards traditional media (see section 4.1.3), it has made fact-checking organizations more sought for, when it comes to a trusted source. It is also important to note that these organisations have supplemented but not replaced traditional journalism. It is their rise that helps reframe and redistribute the accountability function, not simply in legacy newsrooms, but into the wider civic infrastructure of truth mediation (Koliska & Roberts, 2024).

Talking about in-house responsibility of these 13 organisations, there were a few interviewees who indicated that the traditional editorial hierarchies no longer existed in their offices, this observation aligns with the concept of “epistemic infrastructures” (Juneja & Mitra, 2022; Shin et al., 2025), wherein accountability is distributed across multiple actors.

From what fact-checkers explained, it could be interpreted that Indian media is marked by polarized pluralism and democratic volatility (Kumar, 2025). The first set of findings suggest that organizations responded to institutional pressures by labelling their work as neutral and transparent which allowed them to avoid political scrutiny and donor conditions. This helped them support core journalistic verification principles while adjusting to the realities of platform-driven visibility and public participation. Similarly, the second set of findings on professionalization and normative convergence revealed that as fact-checking networks adopted international standards like IFCN certification, they also became more centralized and uniform in practice. This dual dynamic reflects how institutional legitimacy in India’s fact-checking field remains fragile and negotiated (Horowitz et al., 2021).

Media Inheritance and Organizational Divergence in Indian Fact-Checking

The participants elucidated that organisations affiliated to the media drew much of the professional ethos (e.g. objectivity, editorial responsibility and the watchdog tradition) from their parent media house. For instance, the “about” section on the websites of Aaj Tak Fact-check or Vishwas News, clearly demonstrates a defined pattern of hierarchy and distribution of tasks. The interviewees expressed that in the early phase of institutionalization, this connection to an established newsroom helped in showing credibility and visibility, that too at a time when misinformation was seen as a threat to journalistic integrity (Lowrey, 2015; Graves, 2018a). They also confirmed that over the years the fact-checking unit turned up as separate unit with no influence from the parent organisation, and their duty appeared to be more civic in nature. As far as independent organisations were concerned, they also imbibed many of these traditional journalistic ethics, this can be counted under professionalization and Normative Convergence. The Indian organisations amongst themselves carried training programs,

cross-organizational collaborations (TIA is an example), and this was in tandem to the IFCN guidelines which promoted shared ethical standards (Koliska & Roberts, 2024).

The research results of the reactive phase confirm that many media-affiliated fact-checkers initially functioned as extensions of the media's watchdog. This was evident when crisis during elections, communal tensions, and the pandemic occurred. The coercive nature of these crises switched on the reactive mode, and in the beginning, they performed similarly to journalism's traditional role correction, but with passing time when they matured, they mediated through digital tools and real-time verification (Graves & Anderson, 2020). Fact-checking thus evolved from being an auxiliary journalistic response to becoming an independent institutional practice (Ferracioli et al., 2022).

Considering the independent fact-checkers, they differ mainly in organizational flexibility, funding sources, and editorial orientation. The findings highlight that they have developed community-centric and advocacy-oriented approaches. For example, one of the interviewees (P5) was designated as producers for workshop and training. So, it indicates they engaged more in media literacy campaigns (see table, 4) training (see 5.2.2), and civic partnerships that extended beyond verification. Further by investigating their websites, it can be concluded that they relied more on donor support, which made them less constrained by corporate editorial interests but more exposed to financial precarity.

On the other hand, media-linked fact-checkers showed exactly the opposite traits, while they profited from a stable infrastructure, but they faced seeming conflicts of interest when it came to verifying content from their own outlets. Nonetheless, despite much differences both types gradually converged through mimetic and normative isomorphism, adopting similar editorial standards, ways of working, and legitimacy markers (Graves, 2018b; Lauer & Graves, 2024).

Limitations of Isomorphic Adaptation

This study has traced how fact-checking organizations in India evolved from reactive to more stable, institutionalized actors. What began as ad-hoc responses to crises like elections, communal unrest, and health emergencies gradually shifted toward structured practices shaped by a mix of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures. Along the way, fact-checkers reoriented their content strategies, adopted advanced verification tools, deepened engagement with audiences, and increasingly aligned with international standards. Together, these

changes reflect not just organizational growth, but a broader move toward professionalization and credibility but they also risk producing a standardized global model that suppresses local diversity (Cazzamatta, 2025). As Lowrey (2015) and Graves (2018b) note, transnational diffusion of journalistic norms frequently privileges Western professional codes, generating similarities to an extent rather than pluralistic adaptation.

The findings show this reading in the Indian context, the global verification templates such as becoming an IFCN signatory and mimicking platform-endorsed tools may increase credibility but it has narrowed down epistemic and cultural diversity. The results also suggest that normative isomorphism in the organisations have surely given them stability, but it may have flattened context-specific practices, particularly in multilingual and politically heterogeneous environments where misinformation circulates through localized channels, and India is no different (Mahl et al., 2024). Thus, this is a double-edged sword, where the very mechanism that secures legitimacy internationally can constrain the creative and adaptive potential of fact-checking in the Global South.

This research come with its limitations at the theoretical level, it appears that isomorphic adaptation risks oversimplifying institutional change as mimicry, this research has not considered agency, innovation, and localized resistance. Lewis (2019) argues that institutional fragility doesn't only lead to decline, it can also inspire more personal, community-driven, and diverse journalism.

Conclusion

The qualitative inquiry conducted, shed light on evolution of fact-checking in India through the lens of institutional isomorphism, it connected to the concepts of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that shaped and stabilized fact-checking organisation in India's NCR. The trajectory displays how these organisations have transformed from a crisis led reactive intervention to a more stable strategic institution.

Based on the study's findings, from a policy and practice viewpoint, there seems a need to strengthen independent verification that is free from platform and political influence. Along with that developing regionally adaptable transparency standards including public disclosure of funding, editorial policies, and correction protocols can mitigate public scepticism and enhance accountability. The practicers should promote more collaborative verification networks like TIA and Shakti

Collective that include fact-checkers, traditional journalists and researchers. The media industry, academia and policy institutes should come together and perform fact-checking research, training and media literacy initiatives for veracity of information and a well-informed public.

Future research should take into account the smaller, hyperlocal actors whose approaches might have offered valuable contrasts or further depth, future research could also benefit from pairing this with quantitative indicators like engagement trends, misinformation volume, response times to more fully capture impact over time. Apart from that, through comparative analyses across the Global South an examination of how institutional trajectories differ in relation to political regimes, media regulation, and digital infrastructures can be performed. Cross-national studies could also help bring alternative models of institutionalization that balance global legitimacy with local innovation.

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Grant Support Details

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V. Jha and R. Kumar.; methodology, V. Jha and R. Kumar.; investigation, V. Jha; data curation, V. Jha; writing—original draft preparation, V. Jha; writing—review and editing, V. Jha and R. Kumar.; project administration, V. Jha and R. Kumar. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to express gratitude to all the research participants from the Indian fact-checking organizations in the NCR who generously shared their time and insights for this study.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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