Check for updates

Shortcut to Rebuilding Public Trust:
Fact-Checking Journalism by YNA in South Korea

Jae Sik Ha
University of Illinois at Springfield, United States

Abstract. This study investigated how the emergence and practice of a fact-checking movement in South Korea have assisted the revival of journalism with a primary focus on truth-seeking and information verification. It examined in what ways Yonhap News Agency (YNA), a leading news agency in South Korea, fact-checked social and political issues, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed in-depth interviews with fact-checking journalists at YNA. In addition to that, to trace YNA's fact-checking activities and cross-check the findings from the interviews, this study conducted textual analysis of YNA's fact-checking articles, examining their claims, evidence, and judgments. This study found that YNA's fact-checking services contributed to preventing the spread of the 'infodemic' in South Korea. YNA's fact-checking journalism can be considered as one form of ethical journalism that ensured incorrect information did not pass through journalistic gates in the pre-internet era. This study underscores the significance of fact-checking journalism in enhancing the quality of journalism worldwide.

Keywords: Fact-checking; South Korea; Yonhap News Agency; ethical journalism; Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

Since the early 2010s, the proliferation of social networking services and the Internet has made South Korea fertile ground for misinformation, disinformation, and false narratives that influence political processes (Tworek & Lee, 2021). This spread of polluted information has been fueled by intense confrontations between political parties, deep ideological divisions, widening wealth gaps, and generational hostility. One pivotal moment for the dissemination of falsehoods was the 2017 impeachment of President Park Geun-hye on charges of corruption and abuse of power (Lim, 2017). Supporters of Park alleged that the accusations against her were fictitious and that her impeachment was orchestrated by corrupt journalists colluding with liberal politicians.

However, it should also be noted that misinformation and disinformation, characterized by false, deceptive, and defamatory narratives, have flourished inside a network of information and communication in South Korea throughout the 2010s. Messages inciting hatred and animosity have corrupted public discourse and democratic processes. In the 2012 presidential election, which elected President Park, Won Sei-hoon, the director of the National Intelligence Services (NIS), directed a disinformation campaign against Moon Jae-in, the candidate of the opposition party (Tworek & Lee, 2021). This operation utilized

thousands of fake Twitter accounts to malign Park's opponents in the run-up to the election. Moreover, following the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster, which claimed 304 lives, including 250 high school students, numerous rumors and conspiracies circulated on platforms like YouTube and KakaoTalk (a South Korean messaging application).

These incidents significantly eroded public trust in the news media and journalists. An emblematic example of the ensuing 'media bashing' was the term 'Giregi', a neologism blending 'trash' and 'journalist', popularized during the Sewol tragedy in 2014 (Lim, 2017). This term encapsulates public disappointment and animosity toward journalists and mainstream media outlets. Conversely, conservative factions, supportive of President Park, decried news outlets that exposed her political corruption as purveyors of fake news. This pressure compelled South Korean news outlets to verify information and present the truth, counteracting the dissemination of fake news.

Against this backdrop, the fact-checking phenomenon gained traction during the 2017 presidential election, with several media outlets initiating fact-checking projects. Notable among these were the JTBC's (Joongang Tongyang Broadcasting Company) 'Fact Check', the Ilyo Daily's (a weekly newspaper) 'Truth or False Poll', the Newstapa's (a news outlet focusing on investigative journalism) 'Really?', and OhmyNews' (an online news outlet for citizen journalism) 'OhmyFact' (Lim, 2017). Introduced between 2013 and 2015, these projects aimed to restore public faith in journalism following the Sewol incident and President Park's impeachment. The 2017 presidential election served as a catalyst for establishing fact-checking as a recognized journalistic practice in South Korea. Furthermore, since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the world has grappled with a deluge of misinformation and disinformation. South Korea's effective response to COVID-19 has been hindered by false information proliferating across online communities, social media, and mainstream outlets.

This study investigates how the emergence and practice of fact-checking in South Korea have facilitated the revival of journalism, focusing on truth-seeking and information verification. Specifically, this study examines how the *Yonhap News Agency (YNA)*, South Korea's leading news provider, has executed its fact-checking endeavors. By conducting textual analysis of fact-checking stories and in-depth interviews with YNA's fact-checking reporters, the present study examined YNA's independent fact-checking efforts.

This study offers valuable insights into the extent to which fact-checking by South Korean news outlets may have forestalled the occurrence of the 'infodemic', characterized by an overabundance of information, both accurate and inaccurate, hindering people's ability to find trustworthy sources (Pan American Health Organization, 2020). By examining the case of fact-checking journalism in South Korea, this research delves into the unique Korean model of fact-checking, thereby enhancing global awareness of the fact-checking movement and its philosophy, processes, and verification methods as exemplified by YNA.

2. Literature review

In 2020 and 2021, misinformation and disinformation regarding the coronavirus have impeded effective efforts to combat the disease globally. Many individuals were unwitting victims of the falsehoods and conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Romano, 2020; Stone, 2021). Before this period, false information had permeated across borders and within nations, influencing events, such as England's Brexit vote, Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. presidential election victory, and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar (Ahmed,

2016; Castle, 2019; Frenkel & Benner, 2018; Kirby, 2018), precipitating a significant crisis globally. Despite being lauded as drivers of globalization, social media and the Internet have undermined democracy in many countries and eroded global solidarity (McIntyre, 2018; Shoshana, 2019; Bruni, 2018).

2.1. *Post-truth and science denialism*

The post-truth phenomenon has proliferated across the globe since 2016. The digital revolution and social media have exacerbated global misinformation. The term 'post-truth' was the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year in 2016, coinciding with Donald Trump's presidential election victory, characterized by his consistent dissemination of falsehoods. In the same year, the term 'fake news' gained prominence worldwide, amid significant events like the U.S. presidential election and Brexit (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

The post-truth denotes a phenomenon wherein objective facts hold less sway than individual beliefs or emotions in shaping public opinion (McIntyre, 2018). In the era of post-truth, emotions and biases outweigh objective facts in influencing opinions and decisions. It denotes intentionally false news articles capable of misleading readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), often crafted for political or economic gain (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). In this sense, it is crucial to differentiate between misinformation, involving unintentionally shared false information, and disinformation, where false information is knowingly disseminated to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The post-truth phenomenon predates President Trump's tenure (McNair, 2018), stemming partly from waning support for scientific research. Science denialism, rejecting widely accepted scientific facts, has gained traction worldwide in recent decades (McIntyre, 2018). Examples include denial of climate change, belief in a flat earth, and rejection of the Nazi genocide against Jews. Science denialists contend that scientific theories are merely conjectures lacking robust testing, viewing scientists as confined by narrow worldviews. Scientific findings often clash with denialists' ideological, economic, or religious beliefs, leading them to challenge scientific consensus not due to scientific flaws, but their own biases (Allyn, 2019; Davidson, 2019).

Scientists, academics, and journalists have largely been regarded as seekers of truth as well as purveyors of facts. However, with the gradual increase of distrust in academia, science, and journalism due to post-modernism and anti-elitism, extremists, white nationalists, conspiracy theorists, and others can disseminate their own false and deceptive information to a larger audience more conveniently and swiftly (McNair, 2018).

2.2. *Emergence of the fact-checking movement*

As fake news threatens democracy and global cooperation, its proliferation poses a significant challenge globally. Internet-based news media have raised concerns about accuracy in the era of rapid and widespread information dissemination (Thussu, 2019). Restraining the spread of misinformation has become a primary responsibility of global journalists.

In the U.S., independent newsrooms started fact-checking during the 1990s. Snopes emerged in 1994 as a pioneer of fact-checking with a focus on "investigating urban legends, hoaxes, and folklore" (snopes.com). And then, in 2001, Spinsanity appeared as the first site solely devoted to journalistic fact-checking, and it continued "the fight for a more factual and rational political debate" by January of 2005 (spinsanity.org). The fact-checking movement

began in the early 2000s, led by major organizations like FactCheck.org (2003), PolitiFact (2007), and The Washington Post's Fact Checker (2007) (Warren, 2015). FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Factchecker were operated by "journalists motivated to ditch stenographic political reporting and instead evaluate politicians with a neutral cool" (Bell, 2019).

The practice of fact-checking has become a global phenomenon, with an increasing number of organizations worldwide engaged in this endeavor. From 44 fact-checking organizations in 2014 to 195 in 2019, spanning 102 countries, fact-checking has steadily gained momentum as a critical tool in combating misinformation on a global scale (Bell, 2019; Adair, 2014; Stencel & Luther, 2021).

At the beginning of this fact-checking boom, fact-checkers focused on political figures, simply to determine if what those figures were saying was true or false. Later, they expanded the targets of their scrutiny to "bloggers, media critics, comedians, elected officials, government agencies, corporations, and other public voices" (Graves, 2016). In the end, fact-checking grew to be a specialized field of journalism, with its own rules and practices, leading to communication scholars' vigorous research on news outlets' fact-checking (Kyriakidou *et al.*, 2022; Lee *et al.*, 2023; Tejedor *et al.*, 2024).

2.3. *The fact-checking boom in South Korea*

In response to the proliferation of misinformation and fake news, South Korean news outlets have increasingly adopted an American model of fact-checking, implementing diverse fact-checking services in recent years (Lim, 2017). In March 2017, the Institute of Communication Research at Seoul National University launched SNU's FactCheck, South Korea's first fact-checking platform (SNUFactCheck, 2022). This non-profit collaborative project involves the press, academia, and the tech industry. Many media organizations have joined SNU FactCheck as affiliated outlets, conducting independent fact-checking services. Since its inception, SNU FactCheck has not only curtailed the spread of false information but also provided citizens with essential facts on public issues and incidents (Jung, 2021). Over 30 news outlets participate in SNU FactCheck, allowing users to compare verification results and make informed conclusions.

In this context, this study investigates one South Korean news outlet, the Yonhap News Agency (YNA), which independently conducts fact-checking as an affiliated news outlet of SNU FactCheck. Yonhap News Agency (YNA) is South Korea's foremost news agency, having "the largest number of journalists among South Korean media companies" and serving "some 180 local news outlets, more than 120 portals and new media platforms, some 210 government ministries and local authorities, and around 250 private businesses" (Yonhap, 2023). YNA also "has 600 journalists and some 60 foreign correspondents, the largest number among domestic media companies" (Yonhap, 2023). In addition, YNA "partnered with 83 news agencies in 70 countries to bring the latest news from the Korean Peninsula to the world."

Due to its primary role as South Korea's unrivaled news agency for providing news reports to its subscribing news outlets, YNA's influence and reach are both widespread and deep. In South Korea, its power to influence public opinion was ranked 3rd in 2016. Since it created the Fact-Check team in 2015, YNA has been actively participating in the fact-checking and verification of information disseminated via Internet communities, social media, messaging apps, and news outlets. While untrue and deceptive information is extensively circulated, YNA's role as a premier news agency in South Korea could not be more emphasized.

This study poses the following research questions: 1. How does YNA conduct its fact-checking service and how does it present its fact-checking findings? 2. How do YNA fact-checkers' perceive disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and public distrust of news media and journalists in South Korea?

3. Method

This study seeks to shed light on potential improvements in South Korean fact-checking by examining journalists' perspectives on critical issues like fake news and disinformation as well as YNA's fact-checking services. To investigate its accomplishments, as well as YNA's fact-checking practices, this study employed in-depth interviews with fact-checking journalists at YNA in August and September 2021. Firstly, after obtaining Human subject approval (IRB), the interviews were implemented through two communication channels: email-based messaging and Zoom conferencing platform. Specifically, two reporters, the director of the Fact-Check Team (FCT) and a reporter on the FCT, at Yonhap News Agency (YNA) were interviewed. These journalists have served as fact-checkers since YNA started to operate its FCT in May 2018. The director has worked as a journalist, including a foreign correspondent in Japan, for more than 21 years since 1999. The reporter on the FCT has worked at YNA since 2011.

Secondly, to trace YNA's fact-checking activities and cross-check the findings from interviewing, this study conducted a textual analysis of YNA's fact-checking articles. It examined three basic elements of fact-checking, i.e. claims (verifiable statements), evidence (materials to evaluate the claims), and judgments (explicit adjudication of whether a particular claim is true or false) (Graves, 2016; Coddington *et al.*, 2014).

4. Results and discussions

4.1. *YNA's fact-checking values, methods, and routines*

YNA established its Fact-Check Team (FCT) in May 2018, supervised by a political editor at YNA's newsroom and comprising four reporters: the team director, two reporters, and one intern. According to the FCT director, YNA is the sole news agency in South Korea with a separate and independent fact-checking team. YNA reporters noted that in addition to YNA, other outlets such as NEWSTOF (online news site), MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation), and JTBC (Joongang Tongyang Broadcasting Company) have also undertaken commendable fact-checking initiatives in South Korea.

When it comes to fact-checking principles, the director of the FCT states, "Our values and philosophy are not only to identify fake news but also to facilitate informed discussions or arguments based on accurate facts." He adds, "To this end, we are striving not only to filter out obvious fake news but also to assist readers in uncovering the truth about issues by revealing the circumstances and background of controversies." The FCT is operated by its director and reporters, who freely propose news items for fact-checking and gather information related to specific topics. The criteria considered significant in the selection process of news items include social importance, public interest, degree of sensationalism and provocation, and level of verifiable, concrete content. Specifically, regarding the 'degree

of verifiable, concrete content,' the FCT director explained that ambiguous claims, such as "the government's achievements were not sufficient," would not be suitable for fact-checking.

FCT reporters do not adhere to specific beats, which makes the process of selecting news items and interviewing sources cumbersome. Sources for finding news items mainly include, but are not limited to, reports from established major media, information circulated in Internet communities, government announcements, statements by public figures, and postings on social networking services. One reporter said, "Since I cover 'new' topics in a 'new' field, I feel as if I am starting from scratch, from identifying current issues to finding contact points, every day."

Regarding journalistic routines as a fact-checker in a South Korean context, the FCT reporter explained her daily work as follows:

> Every morning, I read every page of major newspapers in detail, and I also monitor current affairs programs on radio broadcasts that mainly feature politicians and public officials. In addition, I frequently check various online communities, 'online cafes' (small group communities), social media, the public petition bulletin board of the Blue House (the executive office and official residence of the South Korean president), readers' comments on online news articles, etc. The method of information gathering depends on the claim being verified. Depending on the case, we may seek official statistics, find relevant legal provisions, collect materials inconsistent with information to be verified, and locate facts via interviews with experts.

FCT tries to avoid articles that may cause unconstructive disputes and to maintain a sense of balance in information gathering and news writing, thereby avoiding political bias and unwarranted criticism. News items, primarily proposed by reporters, tend to receive acceptance rates of over 80% in internal meetings. In instances of major issues or events, such as election debates, requiring urgent verification, the director assigns specific items to reporters. However, in most cases, reporters independently select news items they deem necessary and suitable. When a reporter presents the news value of each item, the director makes the initial decision, and then the political editor ultimately determines whether to report on the item.

FCT reporters have developed varying expertise in the fact-checking process. Initially, they utilize publicly available statistics, government briefings, and press releases. After conducting preliminary research on data and materials, reporters endeavor to obtain further information on issues directly from the government or related parties. As reporters do not have specific beats, they primarily work over the phone at their office, or from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, to gather additional information. Additionally, reporters seek out experts on issues and conduct interviews with them either over the phone or in person.

YNA's FCT aims to publish at least one article per working day. Throughout a typical week, the team publishes three to six articles, with four to five news articles being the norm. Occasionally, a video is embedded within an article, although YNA also maintains a separate video news team. If the video news team produces a video for an article created by the FCT, it is integrated into the article.

Between May 2018 and June 2021, the FCT has authored approximately 630 fact-checking articles. In the year 2020 alone, a total of 256 articles were published with diverse topics as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. FCT articles published in 2020

Number of articles	Topic
72	Coronavirus and public health
35	Court and legal cases
32	Social issues
28	Politics
18	Economy
16	General election in April 2020
15	Defense, unification, and North Korea
14	Labor, public administration, and local government issues
9	Culture and sports
6	Global affairs
5	History
4	Environment
2	Information technology and scientific subjects

4.2. Collaboration with SNU fact check platform

As of December 2021, the SNU Fact Check Center maintains a collaborative fact-checking partnership with 31 news outlets to combat misinformation and disinformation in South Korea. The results of fact-checking, conducted by affiliated news media, are posted on the center's platform. Additionally, the center dispatches one intern reporter to each affiliated news outlet, selecting new interns every six months and providing salary support for each intern.

Some articles produced by YNA's Fact Check Team (FCT) are forwarded to the SNU Fact Check Center and subsequently published on the center's website. YNA determines which articles to submit to the center. Furthermore, the FCT selects certain ideas from news items proposed by ordinary citizens on the center's website. Currently, there is no separate compensation for contributing articles to the center. The SNU Fact Check Center awards the Best Article Awards quarterly among articles from affiliated outlets posted on its website.

The SNU Fact Check Center presents each news article using a five-point scale: not true, mostly not true, half true, mostly true, and true. These scales are determined by each news outlet conducting fact-checking. However, the SNU Fact Check Center also assesses the validity of facts based on evidence included in news articles. If the center determines that a news article lacks validity and supporting evidence, it classifies the article as 'undecidable'.

Nevertheless, FCT generally does not utilize SNU Fact Check's scales when publishing fact-checking articles on its website or submitting them to other news outlets. The FCT director stated, "As the current team leader, it is my opinion that it is better to leave the determination of whether an article is 'true' or 'not true' to our readers rather than having a reporter decide." However, since the SNU Fact Check Center advocates for each news outlet to employ a five-point scale, YNA submits its articles to the center only when FCT concludes that the application of these scales is appropriate and reasonable. The director stated, "We appreciate the current collaborative model between our team and the center. We endorse the center's philosophy of respecting the independence and autonomy of affiliated news outlets."

4.3. Achievements and cases of fact-checking by YNA

YNA has operated its fact-checking team with a staff of four reporters. Currently, in South Korea, only a few news outlets consistently produce fact-checking articles through dedicated fact-checking teams, similar to YNA's FCT. Overall, FCT bears resemblance to the Washington Post's fact checker in certain characteristics, such as its status as a sub-organization of a news outlet, team size, and number of reporters. The FCT director emphasized, "In other news outlets in South Korea, even if there is a dedicated team, it typically comprises only one or two reporters. The pool of reporters in YNA's newsroom is limited due to the demands of producing hard-hitting and breaking news in real time. Nevertheless, FCT, as an independent team, produces quality news articles on current issues, including COVID-19, by leveraging dedicated manpower. This is precisely what sets us apart from other outlets."

As South Korea's leading news agency, YNA functions as a wholesaler of news content. Consequently, when YNA publishes a fact-checking article, it is promptly disseminated to all media companies, often serving as a source or being reproduced by each outlet. Moreover, various channels, including South Korea's major portals (such as Naver and Daum), YNA's website, and news media outlets worldwide, facilitate the distribution of YNA's news content.

The FCT director stated, "Although the exact impact of our fact-checking cannot be quantified, YNA has been recognized as an authority in fact-checking, and there are numerous instances where the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation substantially decreased after we published fact-checking articles on controversial issues." The director added, "Some articles on hot topics receive more than 10,000 page views." Similarly, another reporter shared a similar perspective on YNA's positive influence in combating false information:

> In many instances, FCT has significantly contributed to correcting misinformation and disinformation. For instance, there was a report that the AstraZeneca vaccine was suspended in Austria due to blood clot issues, and all domestic media outlets reported it as true. However, after fact-checking this news, we discovered that only vaccines with specific manufacturing numbers were suspended, while the rest of the AZ vaccines were administered without issue. Following our report, other news outlets followed suit, and public confusion about AZ vaccines markedly decreased.

Moreover, there are several instances where YNA's fact-checking has helped reduce disinformation and misinformation in South Korea. Table 2 exemplifies the headlines of news articles published by the FCT at YNA.

Table 2. Article's headlines of the YNA's FCT

Case	Headline
Can a healthy person forgo wearing a mask?	This article addresses the issue of mask-wearing amidst the spread of the novel coronavirus in South Korea. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced that healthy individuals did not need to wear masks except in certain circumstances. YNA noted, "According to the WHO recommendation, individuals without suspicious symptoms, such as cough or fever, do not need to wear a mask unless in close proximity to a suspected infected person." Through expert interviews and a thorough analysis of WHO documents, YNA clarified not only the context of the WHO announcement but also its implications for public health. Published on March 4, 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, this report played a pivotal role in encouraging the public to wear masks.
Are 99% of COVID-19 cases non-patients?	In August 2021, a Korean doctor with 340,000 YouTube channel subscribers claimed, "99% of coronavirus cases in South Korea are asymptomatic." He asserted, "Only 1% of confirmed patients develop severe symptoms or die, while 99% remain asymptomatic or experience mild symptoms." Following his statement, Internet posts emerged suggesting that the government exaggerated the severity of infectious diseases to enforce COVID-19 containment measures. YNA's article not only debunked the doctor's statistical inaccuracies but also exposed his misinterpretation of government data and its context.
Is the ratio of female officers at the National Police Agency 75%?	An online community post claimed, "The ratio of women in the National Police Agency's headquarters exceeds 70%, the highest among government agencies." It further stated, "The proportion of female police officers within the main office is 75.1%." Allegedly, women lacking physical strength were deemed useless in fieldwork and reassigned to internal positions within the agency. YNA investigated this claim, which garnered over 300,000 views, and found it to be false. Gender equality has become a prominent issue in South Korea, with many young males feeling discriminated against compared to females. The fact-checking article's author stated, "I believe healthy debates should be grounded in facts. Our article holds significance as it corrects misinformation diverging from reality."
Did a Harvard Professor Deny 'Sex Slavery' by the Japanese Military?	In January 2021, controversy arose over a research paper titled "Contracting for sex in the Pacific War," authored by Harvard Law School Professor J. Mark Ramseyer. In the paper, Professor Ramseyer argues that during the Pacific War, a 'brothel owner' and a 'potential prostitute' had a contract that satisfied their conflicting interests. He controversially classified Korean women, brought from Japanese-occupied Korea and coerced into sexual slavery, as 'prostitutes.' YNA investigated the veracity of Ramseyer's claims, utilizing historical materials, official announcements from the Japanese government, scholarly works, and interviews with experts. The article concluded that Ramseyer's argument was 'Not True' as it relied on flawed materials and illogical interpretations.

4.4. Fact-checking in media distrust and post-truth

What is the raison d'être of the Fact-Check Team within a newsroom? The director explains, "FCT plays a supplementary role to the articles generally reported by news outlets. Specifically, it performs the role of pinpointing and surgically verifying so-called fake news floating in a society." He further remarks, "I believe the existing departments within each newsroom lack sufficient time and human resources to adequately address the verification of fake news or disinformation."

The director emphasizes, "In the age of social media, any individual can claim to be a one-person media entity. Therefore, a dedicated department focused on fake news and disinformation is imperative in South Korea and worldwide." He projects, "As long as social networking services remain prevalent, the issue of disinformation or fake news will persist over the foreseeable future. Consequently, the fact-check team bears a responsibility to rectify this problem." The reporter echoes a similar sentiment, "Every news outlet should possess a specialized team solely dedicated to fact-checking, as news media primarily serves the function of rapidly disseminating announcements by the government or other public actors due to the competitive nature of breaking news." Additionally, the reporter stresses, "Even if a separate fact-checking team is not feasible, bolstering the fact-checking function is essential."

This raison d'être becomes much more urgent in South Korea, a nation significantly divided across various dimensions, including politics, economic justice, cultural values, and generational gaps. Additionally, it has experienced the phenomenon of post-truth, wherein the public gradually falls into confirmation bias, leading individuals to believe partisan information aligning with their ideological and political beliefs. Concurrently, a considerable number of people express high levels of cynicism and distrust toward mainstream media outlets. It is pertinent to examine how this political and social atmosphere, along with media distrust, has impacted YNA's fact-checking work.

Firstly, fact-checking journalists face political pressure arising from the political rivalry among multiple factions. The hostile environment may lead to self-censorship among journalists when fact-checking articles are routinely exposed to political attacks. The FCT director acknowledges this possibility:

> When dealing with politically sensitive issues, I am conscious of the potential backlash and criticism the article may attract. Regardless of the source, if a reporter identifies something worth fact-checking, I believe they should publish it. However, when deciding on news items, I consider the identity of the source. Continuously challenging the statements of a specific politician or political party may raise suspicions about our impartiality. Thus, I am sometimes compelled to conduct fact-checking on public statements from other political factions. The YNA's Fact-Check Team recognizes this as a problem and aims to resolve it by establishing a tradition of fairness and impartiality through its fact-checking efforts.

The second issue involves individuals perceiving the results of fact-checking as politically motivated. The FCT reporter notes, "There are numerous instances where readers do not read the article at all and leave comments criticizing our reporters below a news story. In such cases, I feel disheartened because our efforts are not accepted by readers." The director adds:

> As South Korean society is politically divided, many readers view our fact-checking articles through a 'political' lens, attributing political motivations to our chosen items and presentation methods. When examining reader comments on our articles, we find that individuals who have not read the article in its entirety or carefully criticize the reporters simply because they are uncomfortable with our results after only glancing at the headline.

Thirdly, the question arises as to why South Korean society is inundated with false information. The FCT director identifies several contributing factors, such as public distrust of established media, politicians and celebrities promoting conspiracy theories for political

purposes, and individuals with strong partisanship framing everything through a political lens. The public's skeptical attitude toward fact-checking results is triggered by their cynicism toward media and journalists. The director explains, "The problem arises when news is suspected of having a 'political frame,' implying a political meaning or hidden background attached to a particular news item." An FCT reporter shares a similar experience, affirming:

> I aim to write a fact-checking article without favoritism and bias, but when verifying the statements of politicians, there are many cases where fact-checking focuses on the statements of opposition politicians. Many people in the opposition parties think we are trying to protect the government or ruling party while criticizing them, making fact-checking a challenging task in South Korea.

The fourth issue is the responsibility of news media in fostering public distrust. The director acknowledges the role of journalists:

> While browsing Internet communities, I found one posting, 'The facts are not important. What matters is the direction.' I don't know how many people sympathize with this idea, but as many people think like this, fake news has a place to stand. The established media also caused public distrust of themselves. Although opinions may differ among people or parties, a common ground must be created about the facts. In the current political polarization, many people on the right distrust the liberal government and ruling party announcements, while many people on the left disparage the right-wing party as ignorant.

However, when asked about the claim that journalists produce fake news and disinformation, an FCT reporter argues, "I cannot agree at all with the claim that South Korean media are the source of fake news. Reporters sometimes make mistakes and report in an excessively partisan way, but it is rare that they intentionally create and spread fake news."

Nevertheless, it is challenging to deny that South Korean media's political partisanship has contributed to public distrust toward media and news. According to the director, the political landscape of Korean society is extremely polarized, with a tendency to thoroughly suppress and exclude opposing viewpoints having intensified in the past decade. The director adds, "In this circumstance, many news outlets are not in a neutral space and are trying to align themselves with one side. In a situation where many outlets abandon simple neutrality, the center of the media ecosystem has shifted to Korean Internet portals, such as Naver and Daum, creating a problem of sensationalism in reporting due to an obsession with click numbers."

YNA receives a subscription fee from the South Korean government according to the News and Communication Promotion Act. Due to this, there has been a growing public perception that YNA is a 'pro-government media' source. The director addresses this issue, stating, "Our company is fundamentally a news agency, and thus, unlike newspaper or broadcasting companies, we do not face space or airwave restrictions. We have maintained a philosophy of 'dry' reporting, focusing on presenting just the facts without sensational interpretation of issues or events." He adds, "Our coverage is generally 'colorless' due to the relative lack of political bias or partisan framing. If the reports of the conservative *Chosun Daily* and the liberal *Hankyoreh Daily* in South Korea are divergent, readers will try to acquire the truth by using YNA's reports."

Journalism is defined as "a set of transparent, independent procedures aimed at gathering, verifying, and reporting truthful information of consequence to citizens in a

democracy" (Craft & Davis, 2016). It plays a crucial role in supporting democracy by ensuring that citizens have access to accurate and trustworthy information. In essence, journalism's primary function is to provide reliable and truthful reporting. As a result, news media outlets, which carry out this work, have become some of the most influential institutions in modern society (Ekstrom, Lewis, & Westlund, 2020). Without strong and effective journalism, the world could suffer greatly from the absence of verified, factual information.

It is important to recognize that, within journalism, there are "two modes of objectivity that underlie daily mainstream news on one hand and the fact-checking genre on the other" (Coddington, *et al.*, 2014). The first, professional objectivity, emphasizes neutrality, balance, and impartiality as defining principles that distinguish journalism from other fields (Lawrence & Schafer, 2012). However, a limitation of this approach is that, even when two sides present contradictory factual claims, reporters often leave it to the audience to resolve the dispute (Pingree, 2011). This 'he said/she said' style can undermine political accountability by presenting opposing or contradictory claims without verifying information (Lawrence & Schafer, 2012).

The second mode, scientific/substantive objectivity, involves actively debunking claims and determining what is true and false (Coddington *et al.*, 2014; Lawrence & Schafer, 2012). Scientific objectivity is rooted in the scientific method, which includes testing hypotheses and drawing conclusions based on evidence (Coddington *et al.*, 2014). This mode has gained traction as fact-checking journalism has grown in popularity, particularly in response to the post-truth era, and is now widely embraced by fact-checkers as a philosophy of verification.

Thus, YNA's fact-checking journalism aligns with the 'adjudication' model, which emphasizes scientific objectivity. Its goal is to assess and determine whether certain information is true or false. In the post-truth era, this adjudication journalism is urgently needed. YNA's fact-checking project serves as a model for verifying the accuracy of information disseminated by politicians and Internet users. One YNA reporter noted, "I believe that when we meticulously fact-check information, our approach can become a norm in the future. That is a shortcut to rebuilding public trust in our reporting and journalism."

5. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how Yonhap News Agency (YNA) has navigated the challenges of fact-checking amid political polarization and widespread media distrust. While this study does not fully assess YNA's success in advancing fact-checking journalism, it is evident that the agency's Fact-Check Team (FCT) has remained committed to upholding journalistic integrity by correcting misinformation and maintaining impartiality. A notable achievement in YNA's FCT is its consistent delivery of accurate information amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, offering rational perspectives on the novel virus to readers. This underscores YNA's contribution to enhancing journalism quality in South Korea and positions its fact-checking efforts as a potential model for other nations and cultures.

The study's findings hold several implications in the context of rampant misinformation in the post-truth era. First, YNA's fact-checking may serve as a model for verifying the information accuracy. In this context, YNA's fact-checking journalism can serve as a stepping stone toward developing fact-checking practices in South Korea. While it draws inspiration from American fact-checking by news outlets, it can be considered a notable

model of Korean fact-checking journalism that emphasizes facts and verification over sensationalism and clickbait. Second, YNA's fact-checking journalism can contribute to combating hateful messages by quickly correcting false information and providing accurate context. In an era where online hate speech is widespread, the work of fact-checkers in countering misinformation significantly contributes to promoting tolerance and understanding. In addition, fact-checking journalism provides a remedy for fractured journalism, particularly in South Korea where media outlets have been criticized for prioritizing sensationalism over factual accuracy. By adhering to rigorous fact-checking standards, news organizations can rebuild public trust and reaffirm the importance of factual reporting.

Overall, this study highlights how fact-checking journalism has rejuvenated the status of journalism in a South Korean context. While focusing on YNA's fact-checking efforts, it acknowledges broader implications for journalism worldwide. Fact-checking serves as a cornerstone of ethical journalism in an era where misinformation abounds, emphasizing the importance of truth-seeking and factual accuracy in public discourse.

In today's world, everyone has a gate to produce and transmit messages. Accordingly, determining the truth or falsity of information that has already been disseminated to the public has become much more important. YNA's fact-checking journalism can be considered a form of ethical journalism that ensures incorrect information does not pass through journalistic gates, contributing to efforts to rebuild public trust in journalism.

Notes on Contributors

Jae Sik Ha, University of Illinois at Springfield, United States. He earned his Ph.D. in Mass Communications from the School of Journalism, Indiana University at Bloomington, in July 2013. He has published peer-reviewed research articles in academic journals, such as The Social Science Journal, International Communication Gazette, Journal of Gender Studies, Journalism Practice, Atlantic Journal of Communication, Newspaper Research Journal, International Communication Research Journal, and Asian Communication Research. Email: jha28@uis.edu

References

Adair, B. 2014. Duke study finds fact-checking growing around the world. *Duke Reporters' LAB*, April 4. https://reporterslab.org/duke-study-finds-fact-checking-growing-around-the-world/

Ahmed, Y. 2016. It's offensive to call Brexit an 'Independence Day'- the EU wasn't an enslaving colonial power like Britain. *Independent,* June 26. https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/it-s-offensive-to-call-brexit-an-independence-day-the-eu-wasn-t-a-colonial-power-enslaving-your-nation-a7104286.html

Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M. 2017. Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* 31(2): 211–236. Doi: 10.1257/jep.31.2.211

Allyn, B. 2019. New U.S. measles cases break 25-year-old record, health officials say. *NPR*, May 30. https://www.npr.org/2019/05/30/728382757/new-u-s-measles-cases-breaks-25-year-old-record-health-officials-say#:~:text=Earlier%20this%20week%2C%20the%20CDC,year%2Dend%20total%20in%201994

Bell, E. 2019. The fact-checking industry. *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fact-check-industry-twitter.php

Bruni, F. 2018. The Internet will be the death of us. *The New York Times,* October 30. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/opinion/internet-violence-hate-prejudice.html

Castle, S. 2019. Of civil wars and family feuds: Brexit is more divisive than ever. *The New York Times,* March 9. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/world/europe/brexit-friendship.html

Coddington, M., Molyneux, L., Lawrence, R.G. 2014. Fact checking the campaign: How political reporters use Twitter to set the record straight (or not). *The International Journal of Press/Politics,* 19(4): 391–409. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161214540942

Craft, S., Davis, C.N. 2016. *Principles of American Journalism: An introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Davidson, J. 2019. State of the nation: Alleged white-supremacist killer finds inspiration in Trump. *The Washington Post,* March 18. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/18/state-nation-alleged-white-supremacist-killer-finds-inspiration-trump/

Ekstrom, M., Lewis, S.C., Westlund, O. 2020. Epistemologies of digital journalism and the study of misinformation. *New Media & Society* 22(2): 205–212.

Frenkel, S., Benner, K. 2018. To stir discord in 2016, Russians turned most often to Facebook. *The New York Times,* February 17. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/technology/indictment-russian-tech-facebook.html

Graves, L. 2016. *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jung, E. 2021. Fact-checking of the Korean press: Focusing on achievements and prospects of SNU FactCheck during the last 4 years. *SNU FactCheck,* May.

Kirby, J. 2018. UN report: Myanmar generals should be prosecuted for genocide against the Rohingya. *Vox,* August 28. https://www.vox.com/2018/8/27/17786078/un-myanmar-genocide-rohingya-rakhine-state

Kirkpatrick, D. 2017. Signs of Russian meddling in Brexit referendum. *The New York Times,* November 15. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-brexit-twitter-facebook.html

Kyriakidou, M., Cushion, S., Hughes, C., Morani, M. 2022. Questioning fact-checking in the fight against disinformation: an audience perspective. *Journalism Practice*, 17(10): 2123–2139. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2097118

Lawrence, R.G., Schafer, M.L. 2012. Debunking Sarah Palin: Mainstream news coverage of 'Death Panels'. *Journalism,* 13: 766–782.

Lee, S., Xiong, A., Seo, H., Lee, D. 2023. "Fact-checking" fact checkers: A data-driven approach. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*. https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-126

Lim, B. 2017. What's behind South Korea's fact-checking boom? Tense politics, and the decline of investigative journalism. *Poynter*, June 16. https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2017/whats-behind-south-koreas-fact-checking-boom-tense-politics-and-the-decline-of-investigative-journalism/

McNair, B. 2018. *Fake News: Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism*. New York: Routledge.

McIntyre, L. 2018. *Post-truth*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Pan American Health Organization. 2020. Understanding the infodemic and misinformation in the fight against Covid-10. https://www.paho.org/en/documents/understanding-infodemic-and-misinformation-fight-against-covid-19

Pingree, R.J. 2011. Effects of unresolved factual disputes in the news on epistemic political efficacy. *Journal of Communication,* 61: 22–47.

Romano, A. 2020. New Yahoo News/YouGov poll shows coronavirus conspiracy theories spreading on the right may hamper vaccine efforts. *Yahoo!News,* May 22.

Shoshana, Z. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

SNUFactCheck. 2022. About SNU FactCheck. Institute of Communication Research at Seoul National University.

Stencel, M., Luther, J. 2021. Fact-checking census shows slower growth. *Duke Reporter's LAB*, June 2. https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking-census-shows-slower-growth/

Stone, W. 2021. Untangling disinformation: An anti-vaccine film targeted to black Americans spreads false information. *NPR*, June 8. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/06/08/1004214189/anti-vaccine-film-targeted-to-black-americans-spreads-false-information

Tandoc, E.C., Lim, Z.W., Ling, R. 2018. Defining 'fake news': A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism,* 6(2): 137–153. Doi: 10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

Tejedor, S., Romero-Rodríguez, L.M., Gracia-Villar, M. 2024. Unveiling the truth: A systematic review of fact-checking and fake news research in social sciences. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 14(2): e202427. https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmt/14455

Thussu, D.K. 2019. *International Communication: Continuity and Change.* New York: Bloomsbury.

Tworek, H., Lee, Y. 2021. Lessons from South Korea's approach to tackling disinformation. *Brookings*, July 12. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-from-south-koreas-approach-to-tackling-disinformation/

Wardle, C., Derakhshan, H. 2017. *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Warren, J. 2015. Academic research: 'Huge growth' in fact checking by the media. *Poynter*, April 20. https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2015/academic-research-huge-growth-in-fact-checking-by-the-media/

Yonhap. 2023. About YonhapNews: Yonhap News is South Korea's representative newswire service. Yonhap News Agency.