

The challenge of trust - how the IFCN is building factchecking accountability

In my home country, the UK, trust in journalists is low. According to the most recent IPSOS-MORI survey on trust, only 26 percent of people in the UK say they “generally trust” journalists “to tell the truth”. This rates the profession below realtors (trusted by 30%) and means journalists do only slightly better than government ministers (22%) and politicians in general (19%) – though those numbers might have dropped after the past few weeks of electioneering.

By contrast – and this will please the academics in the room – academics are trusted to tell the truth by 86% of people in Britain and doctors and nurses by 92 and 96%.

This low level of trust in journalists and the news we produce is not a recent phenomenon. In 1930, the English poet Humbert Wolfe spoke for many when he wrote a poem about my profession:

“You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
thank God! The British journalist.

But, seeing what the man will do, unbribed,
there's no occasion to.”

Across Asia, the issue of trust in media is, perhaps unsurprisingly given the huge variety of political and media contexts, a more complex one.

According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2019, trust in news is even lower in **South Korea**, for example, than in the UK, with “news overall” trusted by just 22% of people, and “news found on social media” trusted by just 15%. The level of trust is only slightly higher in **Taiwan**, where “news overall” is trusted by only 28% of the population, and “news found on social media” by 19%.

Is this a good or a bad thing? I’ll just put that question there.

The low numbers for trust in news might not surprise everyone. Worldwide the decline of trust in the media is a common theme.

By contrast, what I find more interesting is the picture in some other countries. In the Edelman Index on Trust, **China** and **Indonesia** are reported to show the highest level of “trust in news” out of the 26 countries measured –76 and 72 on the Edelman Index respectively.

As our colleague Masato Kajimoto, from Hong Kong University pointed out when I reached out to him recently **Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand** and other countries with similarly limited levels of press freedom and tightly controlled narratives also show relatively high levels of trust in media.

But, and this is the point of my earlier question, what if these particular high levels of “trust” do not necessarily imply trustworthiness.

As Masato put it “trust in media and government *in general* is not necessarily a good indicator of the quality of news or information the public gets”.

I would argue that high levels of trust in the news and government across the board, are an indicator of an unhealthy lack of scepticism, a lack of access to questioning narratives and trust based on the lack of scepticism is dangerous to the well-being of society. To be of any value, trust has to be earned.

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A case in point of how this works for general benefit is that even in countries or markets with low levels of trust, often rightly, in news **in general**, certain media brands have high levels of trust and can use it to good effect. This is the case for example with TV news brands **JTBC** and **YTN** in South Korea, or **ABC** in Australia. Was this also reason that reporting about the **1MDB scandal** by some of the more trusted news brands in Malaysia, a country with low levels of trust in media in general, helped bring a change in government a couple of years ago?

If so, I think that would be quite encouraging, because it suggests the public in more open environments is more discerning than people think. And that trust is something that can be earned, through trustworthy actions.

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THE IFCN'S GOAL is to support the organisations that are working to create - not the sort of blind trust that some would like us to have in government, media and other institutions – but rather a properly earned trust: trustworthiness.

Fact-checking organisations that subscribe to our code work to build trustworthiness by testing the claims that are made by public figures, institutions and the media, fairly, independently against the best publicly available evidence and publishing their results.

When the first IFCN meeting took place in London in 2014 – just a few years ago – factchecking was in its infancy in most parts of the world. Only one of the fact-checking organisations that came to that first meeting was from Asia.

Since then fact-checking has grown across the region. Today the IFCN works with 21 factchecking organisations across Asia and Asian organisations account for more than one quarter of all IFCN code signatories: 10 in India, 5 in Indonesia, 2 in the Philippines, 2 in Australia and 1 each in Nepal and Taiwan. There is of course a lot further to go. Yes, there are 21 IFCN signatories in Asia but spread across just 6 countries. It is important that the number of countries with fact-checking organisations operating grows.

But while the growth in numbers matters, what really matters is that those organisations, fact-checking organisations who claim to uphold the principle of accountability for government, the media and public debate, can be trusted in themselves.

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This is why in September 2016, the IFCN introduced our **Code of Principles**, with three key goals in mind:

1. To ensure factcheckers' audiences and partners can see and understand how the organisations operate, and do not have to take who they say they are on trust. **Transparency!**

2. To ensure factchecks are done in such a way that users can replicate the factchecks for themselves – if they wish.

Verifiability!

3. To thus assist the fact-checking organizations to earn trust; helping them to prove trustworthiness and distinguish them from other partisan actors claiming a role in fact-checking.

Trust!

Coming from a country where the ruling party recently changed its press office Twitter account to “FactCheckUK” during a TV election debate – you will understand I hope why I believe this is important.

I think the first thing to say about the IFCN Code, is quite what a **remarkable success** it has been, due in no small part to role of our friend Alexios. Launched on 15 September 2016, the Code was adopted on Day One by 35 signatories from 27 countries. Today, 81 organisations from more than 40 countries are verified as adhering to the Code, and it is rightly seen as a standard for fact-checking organisations on every continent – except Antarctica. For now at least.

In order to be found compliant with the five key principles of ...

- Non-partisanship and fairness
- Transparency of sourcing
- Transparency of funding
- Transparency of methodology
- An honest and open corrections policy

... these 81 organisations have made, between them, many hundreds of changes – improvements – to their operating practices from enhancing transparency about their team, and methodology, to ensuring they use primary sources in reports.

But the new influence that fact-checking organisations have started to have in public debate since 2017 in particular, rightly requires greater accountability from the fact-checkers.

It is, of course, a concern that if what we might call “bad actors” were ever to secure verified signatory status, they could use it to distort public debate in their country or countries debate. And that is something we have to ensure against.

Since July, the IFCN has run a series of surveys talking to our signatories, to some of the assessors who verify their compliance, to our media partners, partners at the platforms and others and identified a number of challenges.

These included:

1. The need for baseline standards for methodology and sourcing – not just transparency
2. The need for a better way to determine non-partisanship in complex and varied political and media environments
3. The need to close gaps in the verification system that bad actors could potentially exploit
4. And the problem of parent media companies and their factchecking units acting to different standards of accuracy

We have taken this all on board and last month put to a vote of signatories a raft of changes to the Code, and the criteria that are used to judge it, securing their overwhelming approval.

The result is that, in February/March next year, we will be bringing in a new, tightened up Code, to ensure that the public,

politicians and platforms who follow and work with fact-checking organisations can know them to be worthy of a sceptic's trust.

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What will this new Code involve?

- **First, new guidelines on eligibility to be a signatory.** We want the IFCN to be open to as many organisations as possible, particularly in countries where we currently have no signatories, but we need to know more about them & their motivation
 - A longer qualification period – 6 months not 3.
 - Focus on public interest topics & the purpose of their factchecking
 - Open to public service, but not to state controlled media

- **Second, how signatories select the claims to check.** Balance is always an important concern but, in most countries, rival sides in politics, or indeed any form debate, do not often do us the convenience of making the same number of claims, or the same number of claims worthy of fact-checking as each other.

To factcheck precisely the same number of claims made by one side, as the other, when those sides put out different

numbers of fact-checkable claims would not only be a nonsense. It creates false balance and harms honest debate. So, we have agreed with signatories a commitment to not concentrating **unduly** on any one side by taking into consideration the reach and the importance or impact of the claims they select.

- **Third – baseline standards for sourcing and methodology**; setting out both the things we want to see and the red flags of poor standards. These requirements cover issues like reviewing the quality of sources used, using multiple sources for contested points of evidence, checking the methodology of sources uses, contacting those who made the claim where this is possible, and identifying the interests of sources they quote. It is important we guarantee not just honest but fair and good quality factchecking.
- **Fourth – we will require that parent media companies that want their factchecking units to be signatories**, have and follow an honest and open corrections policy. Otherwise, we have the rather self-defeating situation in which the factchecking unit works to tackle bad information, but the parent company keeps putting it out.

- **Fifth, to ensure the verification system itself is effective,**
 - we will work with the assessors to make the verification more rigorous, testing content's adherence with these criteria not simply based on what is provided to them by the signatory but through a randomised sampling of factchecks produced.
- **And lastly,** we want to enable the readers or listeners themselves to be more involved in checking the factcheckers. More than 60% of IFCN signatories work in a language other than English and this means that, often, readers and listeners cannot easily understand the assessments made by the IFCN. To make that easier, we are going to be encouraging organisations to publish on their site a summary of their IFCN assessment that will be written by the assessor in the language the website uses. And the IFCN itself will be starting an annual report on how the Code is implemented and the standards IFCN signatories are meeting.

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Do these changes mean it will be impossible for a “bad actor” to slip through the net? Does it mean there will never be any problems with the way organisations operate? Of course not. What we hope however is that the changes we are making do represent a stronger assurance that IFCN signatories are doing what they say to build trustworthiness and accountability in their work and in wider debate.

Trustworthiness, more even than trust, is the goal.

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