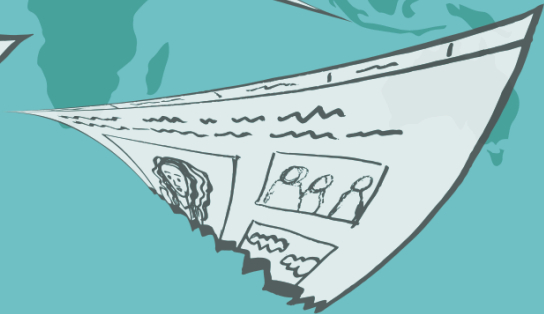
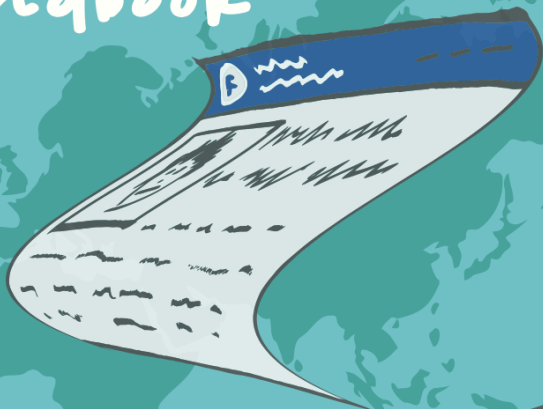


# The Best Practices Handbook



A Guide by Fact-checkers for  
Fact-checkers

# THE BEST PRACTISES HANDBOOK

## THE IE CONSULTANCY TEAM



**Andrew Moorman**

*MSc in International Development*

*United States of America*

*Professional Background : Law*

*Enforcement & Emergency Medicine*



**Reyung Cho**

*MSc in International Development*

*Mexico*

*Professional Background: Strategy*

*Consultant*



**Dominic Johnson-Kerr**

*MSc in International Development*

*United Kingdom*

*Professional Background: Project*

*Management*

# THE MISSION

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*As a global network of journalists, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) from the Poynter Institute is committed to setting the standard for fact-checkers in the global community. As an International Organization responsible for developing good global governance for fact-checkers, the IFCN is cultivating strategic partnerships, working with social media giants, and developed a Code of Principles for the community to follow.*

*The IFCN designed this project in an effort to keep fact-checkers safe in their line of work, tasking the IE Team to conduct research into this issue. Here, the IE Team has developed a best practices handbook of policy recommendations, guidelines, and strategies revolving around keeping fact-checkers safe.*

*The recommendations are based on both interview with 8 IFCN affiliated fact-checking organization based in 7 countries and a literature review to analyze existing methods. Additionally, the team created a website to enable the IFCN and affiliated fact-checkers to monitor best practices and share their experience combating hate speech and other challenges. [Website Link: Hate Check Book](#)*

## SDG CHALLENGE

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*Originating as a final consultancy project for their Master's Degree, the authors found a passion for developing practices to keep fact-checkers safe as they recognised the vital role they play in establishing democracy. Inspired by the United Nation's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the team knew that they could contribute to SDG 16 of Peace Justice and Strong Institutions, and SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals.*

*Within SDG 16, the team understood that developing mechanisms to ensure citizens have access to truthful and unbiased information will promote the rule of law, strengthen institutions, and facilitate justice within a country. Furthermore, their work facilitates SDG 17 of Partnerships for the Future, as they highlighted the critical importance of developing Public-Private Partnerships between governmental bodies, social media platforms, and 3rd party fact-checking organisations.*

*Only when these stakeholders work together can independent and critical journalists work to publish the truth and ensure a democratic system of government and rule of law.*

*The capstone project directly works to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda, specifically focusing on SDG 16 Peace Justice and Strong Institutions as well as SDG 17 Partnerships for the goal. This challenge focuses on three key areas;*

- ➡ *The development of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in an effort to create global governance that would provide a security framework for fact-checkers.*
- ➡ *Balances the need to protect free speech while also providing a mechanism to protect journalists.*
- ➡ *Promote human rights and work for a sustainable future to encourage and ensure democratically elected societies*



# Acknowledgements

**T**he production of the best practises handbook would not have been made possible without the help of the IE School of Global and Public Affairs for their continual support throughout the 10 months of the Masters program.

We would also like to thank Cristina Tardaguila of the International Fact Checking Network for generously presenting the capstone project and connecting us to 8 of their partnered fact-checking organisations that devoted over 16 hours of their time for interviews, feedback and updates. Furthermore the IE Team would like to thank the organizations that allowed time for us in their busy schedules to provide us their experience, recommendations and insights that allowed the IE Team to successfully produce a best practises handbook that candidly reflects the reality of what fact-checkers go through. We sincerely hope that this handbook works to improve the safety of fact-checkers around the world and facilitate their missions within each of their countries.

The IE Team would also like to thank their capstone supervisor, D.J Flynn whose continual support and guidance throughout the 10 months was truly unwavering. Lastly we would like to thank Milly Jane McDougall for helping with the illustrative design of the booklet cover.

# Research Sample

*The IE Team had the privilege of interviewing 8 different fact-checking organizations across 5 continents, who all had very different political, social and cultural contexts. For their safety and privacy, this best practice handbook will refer to them by their country of origin or as “organizations” to uphold our promised confidentiality to them. The countries included were*

Germany	
Greece	
Philippines	
Brazil	
Mexico	
Jordan	
Kenya	

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## CHAPTER 1

# PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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**A**s a phenomenon that is increasing as more of society gets access to the internet, attacks against journalists, specifically fact-checkers has exponentially increased in recent years. Historically, journalists found themselves in the most danger when reporting on politics, war, and human rights violations, yet today's fact-checking climate has organizations receiving death threats for almost any topic. The threats have forced fact-checkers to adapt their work, avoid covering specific topics, or unfortunately resulted in the harm of fact-checkers. With the voice of the free and unbiased press being suppressed, democratic values are at risk of being removed from modern society. It is therefore the goal of the authors to provide the best practices, recommendations, and resources to fact-checking organizations to protect their voices and uphold democratic principles.

*"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death you're right to say it."*

**- Voltaire**

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## PART 1 - *LEADING PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS*

# TRANSPARENT JOURNALISM

### Recommendation One

It is strongly recommended that an organization publishes the methodology used when it fact-checks articles so that readers understand how a conclusion was reached. **This promotes trustworthiness, credibility, and enhancing repeatability of the fact-checkers conclusion.** Additionally, promoting user reader engagement, organizations have found that fact-checks published as a picture or other user-friendly format have increased engagement and distribution allowing their message to reach a greater base.

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E.g. -Fact-checking organizations publish articles that include the author's name, picture, email address and social media accounts providing absolute transparency when fact-checking. Additionally, some fact-checking organizations provide an editorial board that aims to examine the language used to avoid unnecessary backlash. This is often managed by the senior editor.

# DEVELOPMENT OF LABELLING SYSTEM

## Recommendation Two

Once an article has been fact-checked, it is strongly recommended that they assign a label to the article such as ***“Exaggerated, contradictory, underestimated or false”***. It is important that all labels are explained why they received the particular label and what they could do to remedy the issue. Creating a labeling system will bring questions about the methodology, therefore, an FAQ section is recommended. Research has shown that a considerable amount of originally negative interactions with the publishers end up being an educational moment for them to improve their journalism and avoid future mistakes.

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Note: The labeling system can be adapted to the organization and its needs. ***The labels mentioned are taken from real examples.***

\*It is also important to note that users on certain social media sites who have negatively labeled articles might have their income and visibility affected, therefore, it is essential that fact-checkers give justification for the labeling.

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E.g. - Several fact-checking organizations have created their own labeling system to classify the fact-checked articles.

*“our aim is to make sure we stay ahead of the false information as much as possible making sure our information is fair, accurate and unbiased”*

**- Kenya:**

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# CASE LAW DATABASE

## Recommendation Three

Be up to date with their country's legal framework. This includes knowing the resources available to them including open data policies and information requests to government bodies. Therefore, creation of a database that contains all the relevant case law applicable to the jobs of a fact-checker is essential.

***“N.b What is considered “relevant” to the job may legally vary from country to country, but it is important that it stays up to date.”***

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Note: The creation of a country database will be beneficial in keeping up to date with the development of case law. This is due to a lack of global governance on the topic area.

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E.g. - Organizations have created a database of all their country's case laws that apply to freedom of speech and collection of public information.

*“Conspiracy theories are proportional with the level of ignorance in the community, lack of information, right information and also a lack of trust in the government*

**- Jordan**

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*“They point out that we censorship them, but we only provide accurate information”*

**- Mexico:**

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# ENGAGE IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM

## Recommendation Four

Familiarisation of the legal system procedures is essential when faced with an attack that requires the intervention of authorities. When the organization understands what to expect, the steps that need to be taken, will be easier with more support being provided to the attacked fact-checker. Also, engaging with a legal counsellor for guidance is highly advised if resources permit.

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E.g. Organizations have a legal system that protects them against digital crimes, however, in order to report an attack, the individual journalist must submit the complaint to the court system, and not the organization as a whole. One organization mentioned that when they have filed a complaint through digital platforms, Law Enforcement is not able to process the case due to the account being either an alias or a fake account.

# DIVERSIFY REVENUE STREAMS

## Recommendation Five

In order to provide a secure financial safety net, it is essential for fact-checking organizations to have a variety of sources for income. The challenge this presents is that organizations need to be wary of where these funds originate from, careful to avoid stakeholders who would create a conflict of interest. For example, state governments and political parties should never be used as a source as this can easily be seen as a bribe. Additionally, it is critical to creating different sources of income that do not depend on programs and donations/grants, especially in times of uncertainty, such as coronavirus where the funding is being redirected to tackle other pressing issues. Alternative income streams include.

- o **Digital content consulting,**
- o **Education and training services on how to fact-check,**
- o **Google ads (be wary of what's being advertised),**
- o **Fact-checking as a paid service to mainstream media outlets.**

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E.g. - Organizations have implemented subscription models to continue their operations if any supporting program gets canceled.



# DIVERSIFY THE FACT-CHECKING TOPICS

## Recommendation Six

Political fact-checking has been seen to be one of the most polarizing and dangerous topics for fact-checkers to cover. Although fact-checking agencies have published their non-partisanship statements and affidavits, fact-checkers are almost constantly attacked for being biased or promoting an outside agenda when they fact-check an article against a popular belief. In order to minimize these risks, there are practices that organizations can partake in to disprove any alleged bias. Of such practices, is the record-keeping of articles checked and which political direction they go against to show that all sides of politics are verified. Furthermore, organizations have also moved to specifically focus on those in power as they are the ones who hold the responsibility to their people.

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*\*N.B. For security reasons, some organizations have decided to stop political fact-checking and started to diversify the portfolio due to their political context.*

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# DATA PROTECTION AND THREAT PREVENTION

## Recommendation Seven

Securing communication channels and installing surveillance devices arose as a need from a portion of the interviewed organizations. Fact-checkers have experienced threats and events that have justified the need for such measures. With cyber threats becoming a growing concern, it is important that measures are in place to protect both the physical safety of the staff and the work they do. Organizations have utilised platforms such as *Slack* to communicate pending and credible threats against them and develop strategies to mitigate them. **Organizations have employed an VPN network to hide the IP address to avoid the office being geolocated.**

E.g. - Organizations from the research sample have suffered from office raids, unlawful arrests, and intimidation from political parties. This resulted in the development of methods to combat state oppression such as

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# PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

## Recommendation Eight

Organizations working together is crucial to the fact-checking community. Partnerships are important to have in both the in-state context, as well as cross state lines to neighbouring countries. Working with other organizations who operate within the state should not be seen as competition, but rather a resource to rely on. These partnerships strengthen the network and capacity of information to be fact-checked as both organizations are working to the same goals. Especially important in the context where a state actor is a suppressor of journalism, is the development of partnerships in neighbouring countries. If a fact-checking organization fears severe and imminent danger from the state as a result of the work they do, in some contexts, a neighbouring state's fact-checking organization can break the story. The principle behind this method is that hopefully, the neighbouring fact-checking organization will be outside the retaliation reach of an oppressive government.

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E.g. - Several organizations that we interviewed are partners inside a region, both organizations support each other financially and knowledge sharing. For example, one organization in particular, partnered with 99 organizations during an election period to fact-check all the political speeches and commitments from the parties, it is worth mentioning that some of those partnerships are still in place.

*“Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangers than ignorance*

**- George Bernard Shaw**

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# REGISTER ON A DATABASE THE THREATS/ATTACKS RECEIVED

## Recommendation Nine

In an effort to understand what topics generate the most backlash and danger, it is recommended that severe and credible threats are recorded and categorized by what topics generated the reaction (*if applicable or traceable*). The recommendation relies on registering the threats/attacks received on the fact-checked publications to understand the sources of the attacks. The framework proposes the classification of articles such as political, scientific, and medical. Where journalists will identify from where and how often severe attacks originate. Therefore, the organization can spot the trends and prepare mitigation plans..

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E.g. - Several organizations had identified and registered the attacks on the organization but did not possess a database to track the trends. A few companies received attacks but did not register them.

# PUBLIC REQUESTS FOR FACT-CHECKING SPECIFIC ARTICLES

## Recommendation Ten

Organizations have created an online submission forum where citizens can submit and request an article to be fact-checked. This encourages the engagement of the community as well as being a potential source of revenue for the fact-checking organization.

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E.g. - Some organisations have an open claim policy for citizens to engage the organization, the online application layout contains the link for the article and the fact checker responsible for reviewing the article in the organization.

# CORRECTION POLICY

## Recommendation Eleven

In some cases, human error could be the reason why an article has been incorrectly fact-checked. An important characteristic of an accountable organization is the ability to admit fault and work to rectify the issue. That being said, it is important that any corrections are clearly disclosed, and the correct information is on the article available to the public.

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E.g. - Organizations from our research sample have clearly stated in their methodology section the correction policies applicable to fact-checked articles.

*“News is what someone wants suppressed. Everything else is advertising. The power is to set the agenda. What we print and what we don’t print matter a lot.”*

**- Katharine Graham**

## CHAPTER 2

# PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### **Best Practices Handbook**

The best practices and recommendations put forth have been compiled from the necessity and experiences of the interviewed organizations and have been designed to be applicable to different contexts fact-checkers operate in. The intent is that such measures can be easily implemented into each organization helping not only to facilitate work but also to assist in keeping their staff safe.

### **Framework**

Based on the interviews, the IE Team has highlighted the best practices within the interviewed organizations and have compiled recommendations. Recommendations will outline safety protocol suggestions, successful workplace cultures, as well as other information, deemed essential for the job. It is important to stress that just because there is not an immediate need for implementation of a recommendation does not mean the recommendation should be ignored. It is more important and easier to get ahead of the problem than to possibly have a journalist hurt and try to make up for it.



# CHARACTER CODE OF CONDUCT

## Recommendation One

Ironically for a profession dedicated to protecting the voice of democracy and free expression, the job of a fact-checker comes with limitations of personal expression. As a position who's credibility and legitimacy correlates to the trust and perception of being non-biased by the public, displays of political opinion on personal time or social media may justify questioning the motive of fact-checks. It is essential that Fact-checkers avoid this and any conflicts of interest, and that their behaviour reflects utmost neutrality. When fact-checkers express support, opinion or favouritism on a topic, it invites resentment from opposition voices looking to discredit the organization.

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*“Fact-Checking organizations have developed official policies of political neutrality that ensure fact-checkers remain unbiased, while other organizations forbid their members from any sort of affiliation with political parties mandating the staff to sign non-partisanship affidavits.”*

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# LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES

## Recommendation Two

The leadership of fact-checking organizations have the challenging task of running a credible organization while ensuring the wellbeing of their staff. Arguably more important than the work they deliver is the responsibility of leadership to ensure the safety and well-being of the staff. With the current trend of attacks against fact-checkers becoming increasingly prevalent and severe, there has been a need for resources to be put in place to ensure that the staff is protected. The subsequent recommendations after this section can be considered additions to this section.

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E.g. - Organizations are currently providing procedures that aim to protect employees from threats, attacks, and hate speech, while others are ensuring the constant training of their employees to ensure they understand their rights, resources available to them and stay updated on case law.

# EMERGENCY GUIDELINES

## Recommendation Three

The term emergency will be within the discretion of the organization to define yet implies measures that need to be taken in response to a severe incident. These situations will often result in the physical or emotional damage to the organization and its staff, as well as hinder the ability to provide a free and critical press. It is important that organizations define what is an emergency to them. At the minimum, plans should be in place for

- **Situations when a journalist is physically assaulted due to their line of work.**
  - **Unwelcome or hostile guests arrive at the place of work.**
  - **When state actors interfere with the work of fact-checking.**
  - **Situations where funding is decreased or eliminated (See: “diversification of Revenue Streams).**
-

# IN HOUSE RESOURCES

## Recommendation Four

As a responsibility of leadership to maintain a healthy work environment, it is critical that mechanisms are in place to help fact-checkers cope with constantly being the target of attacks. What these resources are will vary depending on each organization and the demands they have, but it is recommended that they incorporate some sort of positive mental health and team building exercise. Over time if left unchecked, the negative reinforcement of attacks for a publication will facilitate burnout in the staff and the development of unhealthy habits to cope with stress. For this reason, leadership needs to be aware of the mental health of their staff and routinely check in to monitor their well-being.

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E.g. - Organizations have developed a buddy system to provide emotional and psychological support to employees as well as considering hiring a psychologist from the emotional turmoil caused by threats and attacks.

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD

## Recommendation Five

Oftentimes, when individuals join the field of fact-checking, they either do not come from a traditional journalistic education background and/or experience in the field. Therefore, it is important to highlight to new staff the associated risks with fact-checking and techniques to protect themselves from threats/attacks and professional ways to react. Furthermore, as mentioned above, there is a behavioral change required in the fact-checking field that requires fact-checkers to always act in a manner of impartiality. This introduction to the field should not be taken lightly as the reputation of the organization is reflectant on the journalists they employ.

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E.g. - Organizations have mentioned the importance of understanding the lifestyle changes as you have a higher level of responsibility (giving the example of never going to a protest). While other organizations shared a similar viewpoint stating that new employees will be trained on the risk associated with fact-checking and what to expect on the job.

# IMPACT OF GENDER ON THREATS/ ATTACKS

## General Warning

An unfortunate occurrence the consultancy team observed during their research was that more often than not, gender played a significant role in the quality, and quantity of attacks against fact-checkers. Attacks were often seen to be male aggressors, targeting female fact-checkers. It is therefore the goal of this section to not only reiterate the importance of absolute gender equality, but also bring recognition and awareness to a topic that could have severe impacts on fact-checking staff. The experiences of female fact-checkers in regard to attacks and threats are different than their male coworkers.

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Oftentimes, female fact-checkers are targeted not for the quality or subject of their work, but rather professionally irrelevant topics that are misogynistic, sexist, and outright inappropriate. Upon occasion, these attacks have risen to the level of threatening extreme indecency and immoral behaviour upon the staff, having a negative emotional impact on the journalists.

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It is the responsibility of every staff member, leadership and fact-checker to recognise how these attacks impact their co-workers and work to support them. It is recommended that such attacks are recorded and turned over to authorities by a person who the attack was not directed to to avoid revictimization a fact-checker with these upsetting and unacceptable statements.

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E.g. - Organizations have expressed that female fact-checkers receive a greater level of hate speech and threats through online platforms. The hate speech largely consists of targeting female appearances, misogynistic comments, and devaluing their work with sexist comments. One example in particular portrayed the local fact-checking organizations in a political cartoon that portrayed female journalists' faces in a manner that was extremely sexist, inappropriate and troubling for the organizations.

# BACKGROUND CHECK

## Recommendation Six

Potentially seen as an extreme measure, it is crucial to remember that credibility hinges on acceptability. In an era of high political polarization, the ever more important role of fact-checking is gaining prominence in mainstream media as a reliable source of information. For this reason, organizations need to do their due diligence in their hiring process to ensure that there is no political bias or personal history that causes concern with the journalist's credibility. It takes a very long time to gain the trust of the community and very little time to lose it.

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E.g. - Most interviewed organizations currently don't run background checks as they don't think necessary yet but rather, but rather focus on supervising new fact-checkers closely. However, one organization provides both a rigorous social media check of employees to avoid conflicts of interest and tests for content creations and impartiality before being hired.



# PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA & PROFESSIONAL ONLINE PRESENCE

## Recommendation Seven

Social Media is a constantly evolving technological tool excellent for getting information out to a wide base of people in a short and inexpensive amount of time. This makes it an excellent tool for fact-checking organizations to not only get their work into the public sphere but also monitor and if need be intervene in information already published. Unfortunately, just as it can be used as a tool for good, it opens up fact-checkers to potentially dangerous situations with the amount of information able to be accessed on it.

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It is vitally important fact-checkers separate their personal and professional accounts in order to keep a separation between work and recreation. If the organization a fact-checker is employed by requires a high level of transparency where a fact-checkers name, biography, and picture are available on the organization website, it will make it easier to locate them on social media.

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.For this reason, fact-checkers need to be aware of the content they post and avoid any subjects that may turn out to be a conflict of interest in their professional lives.

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When an organization establishes its online presence, it is important to set up verified accounts on all the platforms it wishes to utilize. Many of the fact-checking organizations resourced have partnered with Facebook to not only to receive funding but also to become more recognizable as a legitimate fact-checking agency. When accounts are not verified, they not only miss out on an opportunity to be seen as more trustworthy but also are more vulnerable to coordinated attacks against them. Platform dependent, when an unverified account gets flagged by a large number of people in a short period of time, the platform takes down the content for the review. This can be especially problematic if the content is time sensitive. Although not guaranteed, a verified account on certain platforms offers various protections against this.

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E.g. - Organizations have ensured that all personal political opinions on their social media are removed and avoided posting pictures of family and friends. One organization in particular had an experience where a fact-checkers family was targeted at home by a threatening letter and the organization was not able to determine how the attacker got this information.

*“What does it mean when you flag my content.  
Individuals asking what specific information needs to  
be changed in order to remove the flagged content*

**- Anonymus**

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# HANDLING AND REPLYING TO COORDINATED ATTACKS

## General Recommendations

Seen as a new and developing trend, opposition to fact-checking organizations have started to coordinate attacks against fact-checkers and the social media sites they use in an effort to stop them from sharing content. The more prevalent, supported and followed a fact-checking organization gets, the more attacks they will be targeted for. Unfortunately, There is little an organization can do to prevent these attacks as there will always be someone who disagrees with the work. Measures to mitigate such attacks revolve around presenting the smallest target possible, not giving those against the organization an excuse to attack. This is the principle of good journalism, producing work that is unbiased, accurate, professional, and able to be sourced. The motivation for coordinated attacks are more often fueled by political ideology and opinion rather than facts. Therefore, it is not recommended to engage these individuals as the information they are contradicting should already be available for them to reference before attacking. Fact-checkers should not lose too much time being caught up in such attacks, yet, remain vigilant to ensure there are no imminent risks or threats.

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E.g. - As a methodology to raise awareness of the attacks they face and deter future ones, organizations have started to publish the threats and hate speech they received. Additionally, organizations have tracked and documented the accounts that send especially threatening messages to develop a portfolio for law enforcement and the court system.