

From Movement to Institution: The “Global Fact” Summit as a Field-Configuring Event

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Abstract

The last decade has seen the rise of a self-described worldwide “movement” of fact-checking groups which specialize in debunking false political claims and other forms of misinformation. This very heterogeneous movement now spans nearly 300 fact-checking outlets in more than eighty countries, led by their own professional organization. This study charts the emergence and development of this transnational institutional sphere with qualitative and quantitative analysis of the annual summit of fact-checking organizations, Global Fact, as a field-configuring event (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork by two authors as well as comprehensive data on the first six Global Fact meetings, we use shifts in the structure and content of the event to explore processes of structuration; we highlight a shift from a field-building ethic valuing inclusiveness and celebrating diversity to one valuing common practices and standards, marked by new governance mechanisms and increasing interest from powerful outside stakeholders. Ultimately, our data show the fact-checking field negotiating a necessary tension between managing internal diversity and consolidating as an increasingly recognized institutional actor in the domain of public communication.

Keywords: fact-checking; institutional fields; journalism.

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1 Introduction

The new millennium has seen the rapid global proliferation of organizations which specialize in assessing the truth of political claims, media reports, online rumors, and other public texts. As of mid-2020, the growing field spanned 290 active fact-checking organizations in 83 countries, more than 90 percent of which were established in the last decade (Stencel & Luther, 2020). This self-described global fact-checking “movement” first took shape among U.S. journalists in the mid-2000s, and is led by news organizations in many countries. However, the movement also includes independent fact-checking operations as well as those attached to universities and civil-society groups; many leading fact-checkers identify as activists or policy experts more than journalists.

One way to describe this remarkable trend is as the formation of a new, transnational democratic institution. Fact-checking increasingly exhibits characteristics we tend to describe with institutional language: It is a norm-governed social space whose members are oriented to one another, police the borders of their group, engage in typical practices governed by formal and informal rules, and explicitly celebrate and reproduce shared norms and values (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kluttz & Fligstein, 2016). Crucially, fact-checking fits into the larger, legitimating order of democratic institutions, and its legitimacy is actively recognized by other civil-society actors — foundations, think tanks, NGOs, etc. — as well as by the press, politicians, and the public, though to different degrees in different countries.

Though still incipient, this rapid institutionalization of fact-checking over the last several years has been unmistakable, we argue. Beginning with the first global meeting of fact-checkers in 2014, fact-checking organizations around the world have increasingly become aware of and oriented to one another as a unified organizational field, celebrating their community, sharing best practices, and engaging in active collaborations. They have developed common professional standards and credentialing mechanisms. And they have formed governing structures to take collective decisions as fact-checking draws attention from powerful outside stakeholders like governments and technology companies.

This study charts the development of this global movement with qualitative and quantitative analysis of the annual summit of fact-checking organizations, Global Fact, as a field-configuring event (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). We use shifts in the structure and content of the annual event to highlight growing institutionalization, and to reveal a shift from a field-building ethic valuing inclusiveness and celebrating diversity to one valuing common practices and standards. Our data show fact-checkers negotiating a necessary tension between managing internal diversity and consolidating as an increasingly recognized institutional actor in public discourse.

2 Literature Review: From Interpretive Communities to Field-Configuring Events

This article investigates the role played by an annual conference, called Global Fact, in establishing fact-checking as an increasingly coherent and stable institutional field, or actor. We draw mainly on the literature of field-configuring events, discussed below, but begin with a brief review of the conceptual tools available in the sociology of news to study professional gatherings. It is also worth noting that we refer to fact-checkers as constituting a movement, a community, and a field in different contexts; all three labels apply, in ways that relate precisely to the processes of structuration considered here.

The influential framework of journalists as “interpretive communities” (Zelizer, 1993 & 2009) offers a clear invitation to study professional meetings alongside trade journals, awards, memoirs, and other spaces for “metajournalistic discourse” (Carlson, 2016) where journalists engage in collective meaning-making about their craft. The concept was imported from anthropology and literary studies as a deliberate alternative to more rigid criteria of the sociology of the professions — one affording a view of subtler shifts in journalistic values and practice that take shape in “shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events” (Zelizer, 1993, p. 219). Informed by this work, professional gatherings have provided valuable data for studies of major new currents within journalism, such as the “storytelling” movement (Schmidt, 2019) and data journalism (Anderson, 2018). Because of this emphasis on adaptation by a well-defined occupational community, though, the framework has less to say about how a conference like Global Fact structures a new area of practice — one bringing together heterogeneous actors with no shared history, working in different political and media systems.

The framework of “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) draws attention to precisely this question of how new occupational identities take shape and solidify, in part through community meetings that allow face-to-face interaction. Concerned primarily with learning, the concept rests on the sense of belonging promoted by exchanges among practitioners facing common practical challenges; communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2011, p. 1). The framework suggests a progression through five ideal-typical stages of community development (Erik Andriessen, 2005) that begin with recognition and trust-building and culminate in adaptive communities whose members work together for mutual advantage. The “communities of practice” notion has recently been applied to specialized areas of practice in journalism, such as online newsrooms (García-Avilés, 2014; Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010) and ethnic media (Matsaganis & Katz, 2014); Meltzer & Martik (2017) suggest that it may be especially useful at a moment of chronic disruption and rising collaboration in the field. The Global Fact meetings, focused on exchanging practical knowledge and promoting collaboration, invite analysis under this lens.

A more fully developed framework for theorizing the role of professional meetings is that of field-configuring events, “temporary social organizations such as tradeshows, professional gatherings, technology contests, and business ceremonies that encapsulate and shape the development of professions, technologies, markets, and industries” (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1026). As the name indicates, FCEs derive from the sociological notion of a field as a “socially constructed arena in which actors are oriented toward one another over a common practice, institution, issue, or goal” (Kluttz & Fligstein, 2016, pp. 186–187). Various strains of field theory agree in conceiving of fields (or institutions) as existing between the level of the individual or organization and the wider society (Bourdieu, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011); a field such as journalism or politics is partly “autonomous,” in Bourdieu’s term, in that members adhere to an internal order or logic necessary to make sense of their behavior (Bourdieu, 2005).

The FCE lens has been applied often to commercial or industry events, including cultural milestones such as literary awards (e.g. Anand & Jones, 2008), but less widely in professional or public-sector contexts (but see e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2010). The crux of the concept is that FCEs embody field-level relations and values — “they are structured in conformity with the institutional logic of the field” (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1028) — but also influence the wider field in path-dependent and sometimes unpredictable ways, because of the latitude for individuals (and organizations) to pursue agendas and act creatively in a consequential setting.

These events thus bridge macro- and micro-level processes, and offer a hinge connecting field and network approaches in sociology (Powell et al., 2005).

FCEs offer a promising window onto the formation and evolution of an emerging field like fact-checking, as arenas in which members “become aware of their common concerns, join together, share information, coordinate their actions, shape or subvert agendas, and mutually influence field structuration” (Anand & Jones, 2008, p. 1037). Global Fact has two characteristics which make it an especially promising research site. First, it is a recurring annual event that offers “cross-sectional snapshots of field structure” (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1031) as fact-checking has expanded globally. Second, as developed below, it has what Lampel & Meyer (2008) call a “strong field mandate” as the event that gave rise to the global movement. Global Fact is the far and away preeminent meeting of fact-checkers, many times the size of regional gatherings; for outlets in many countries it is the only opportunity to come together with peer organizations.

3 “Global Fact” and the Global Fact-Checking Movement

The fact-checking movement first took shape in an organized way among U.S. journalists in the mid-2000s. It emerged as a response to so-called “false balance” in conventional political journalism, a long-standing critique sharpened by failures in reporting on the Iraq War. Three full-time outlets founded by veteran national reporters — FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and *The Washington Post*’s Fact Checker — led a wider turn toward fact-checking in U.S. newsrooms, helping to evangelize the practice as a legitimate form of objective journalism. Significantly, perhaps the earliest direct reference to a “fact-checking movement” came at a 2007 conference that brought practitioners together for the first time to articulate their mission and their common concerns. Leading U.S. fact-checkers have been highly oriented to one another as a small but prominent subfield of political journalism, both in daily routines and in meta-journalistic discourse; before Global Fact, these outlets frequently came together at domestic events with foundation officials and academic researchers interested in the movement (see Graves, 2016).

From 2008 on, fact-checking outlets also proliferated rapidly overseas, often modeled on U.S. sites. Internationally, however, the field has been remarkably diverse. As of early 2020, nearly half of outlets worldwide were not attached to newsrooms; many are projects of civil-society groups focused on good governance or building democratic institutions, and some have emerged from popular movements, such as the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, Egypt’s Tahrir Square uprisings, and the India Against Corruption movement. Other outlets stress their in-house academic or policy expertise, hiring researchers rather than reporters. (As the founder of an Indian fact-checking site argued at the 2015 Global Fact, journalists are not necessarily “the most comfortable with facts” [field notes, 2015].) One way to organize this variety is to conceive of the movement as bridging three adjacent institutional fields — journalism, academia, and civil society — whose influence combines to different degrees in individual organizations (Graves, 2018).

The Global Fact conferences played a pivotal role in the development of fact-checking as a self-conscious global movement, which arguably began with the first meeting, in 2014. The conferences are run by the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit, U.S.-based journalism training center which is also the home of PolitiFact. The idea came from PolitiFact founder Bill Adair, who planned, programmed, and led the first two meetings of what was initially called the “Global Fact-Checking Summit,” held in London in 2014 and 2015 with funding from several charitable foundations. The first event included about 50 attendees in a cramped seminar room at the

London School of Economics, with a simple, unformatted agenda that fit easily on a two-page Word document. As discussed below, the small, informal gatherings that year and the next focused on fact-checkers getting to know one another and identifying common concerns.

From 2016 the conference became the responsibility of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), established by the Poynter Institute with a large outside grant announced at the end of the second summit. Taking the name Global Fact, the event moved to spacious venues in Buenos Aires (2016) and Madrid (2017) to accommodate a rapidly growing global community. (Google became a sponsor in 2016 and hosted the summit on its Madrid campus the next year.) The agenda expanded to cover a growing number of themes and activities in a more structured way, from debates over emerging topics to organized workshops to discuss the future of the community. The meetings also began to include more external guests, but retained a familial atmosphere celebrating the annual reunion.

The summits in Rome (2018) and Cape Town (2019), finally, represent highly structured events that serve an increasingly diverse group of fact-checkers, interested outsiders, and specialists from related fields. The lengthy, elaborate conference booklets (46 and 40 pages long, respectively) now include descriptions of the scores of fact-checking projects in attendance. Besides the usual networking events, participants increasingly have to choose, in advance, from a wide range of activities including thematic panels, practical trainings, and coordination meetings; some sessions are limited to private groups. However, a number of headline assemblies, panels, and community events bring the entire community together.

The table below gives a picture of the growth of Global Fact in terms of the number of attendees and other measures.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
ATTENDEES	56	70	106	186	222	252
FACT-CHECKERS	38	56	82	135	161	163
ORGANIZATIONS	43	54	69	117	138	145
COUNTRIES	22	32	41	52	60	55
DAYS / HOURS	2 / 810	2 / 1065	2 / 1270	3 / 1395	3 / 2552	3 / 2420

Table 1: Growth of Global Fact

4 Method

The analysis presented here draws on comprehensive qualitative and quantitative data covering the first six Global Fact conferences, which took place June 8-10, 2014, in London; July 22-24, 2015, in London; June 8-10, 2016, in Buenos Aires; July 5-7, 2017, in Madrid; June 20-22, 2018, in Rome; and June 19-21 in Cape Town. As noted above, over this period the conference grew from a small, informal gathering to a highly structured event with 250 attendees divided across four parallel tracks. We witnessed these changes firsthand while attending the conferences as part of separate ethnographic research projects studying the global fact-checking movement. The present study grew out of conversations that began at the conference itself, as

we compared notes on changes in the content and how these reflect wider developments in the field.

To document these changes, we conducted a systematic content analysis of both the theme and the format of every session and, where applicable, each individual presentation across the six conferences, totaling 145 hours of event-time. Two principal data sources were used to carry out this analysis: a complete record of the formal agenda of each event, as provided by the IFCN; and ethnographic field notes about the content of individual sessions, formal and informal discussions, and community-building events such as dinners and awards. Field notes from at least one of us cover nearly every session in the initial conferences; this share declined as the number of parallel tracks increased, but we coordinated during the last two conferences to maximize coverage. (Only Graves attended London 2014, and only Lauer attended Madrid 2017.) In addition, we had access to copies of approximately half of the actual presentations given as well as to video and/or audio records of many sessions. We were also able to attend some closed sessions, with only IFCN board meetings and a private session for Facebook partners completely off limits.

These records were used to map each conference onto a spreadsheet representing every session on the agenda in terms of time-on-stage for individual participants and their respective organizations. In this way, for example, a four-person panel discussion lasting one hour comprises four 15-minute spreadsheet entries, each recording common session-level data (title, format as listed, format as coded, and whether it was open or closed) as well as individual participant-level details (name, organization, presentation title as listed, presentation theme as coded, and presentation length). All results were analyzed in terms of conference-minutes, giving a more fine-grained view of changing themes. This approach bridges presentation- and session-level coding, necessary because some session formats include multiple themes while others (i.e. panel discussions) were defined as having a single theme. It also accommodates parallel tracks, which simply add to total conference-minutes. (For instance, the 2019 meeting took place over three 8-hour days but included more than 40 hours of conference-time.)

The same data were used to develop codebooks and code the conferences separately for theme and format. In each case, we agreed on a preliminary set of definitions and then used an iterative, two-stage process to refine the codebook: First, each of us independently coded every session across all six events, making notes to flag edge cases and other potential problems or points of interest. Then, we jointly reviewed all of the coding, discussed discrepancies, and revised definitions as needed, initiating the next round. (While this resembles intercoder reliability testing, the goal in this case was to drive collaborative analysis as much as to test consistency; ultimately, all codes were agreed on by both of us.) Over a period of three months, this sequence was followed first for theme and then for format, each requiring at least five rounds of revision and re-coding before we were satisfied with the resulting categories and applied them consistently. While coding for theme and format was carried out separately, one important insight yielded by this process is that the two sets of definitions are necessarily related; judgments about the primary thematic content of a session may depend on contextual details such as whether it emphasized discussion among participants, whether was a private meeting, whether it was a breakout session, and so on.

The thematic codebook spans seven major thematic categories and numerous subcategories, listed below in the sequence they were applied during coding, beginning with the most distinct and specific themes. An “other” category, “Agenda-setting,” was used to capture emerging themes. Two additional top-level categories captured sessions without a distinct thematic focus: “Community” relates to various aspects of community maintenance, and

“Projects & Experiences” covers presentations designed to “tell the story” of an organization or initiative, a common feature of the Global Fact conferences.

Theme <i>Subtheme</i>	Definition
(Tech)nology <i>(I)nitatives</i> <i>(P)latforms</i>	Primary focus is explicitly on technology or technology-related issues, falling into two subcategories: Related to technologies used or developed by fact-checkers, such as automated fact-checking efforts Related to major platforms such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, etc.
Impact <i>(A)udience</i> <i>(P)ractical</i>	Primary focus is on evaluating or enhancing impact of fact-checking efforts, e.g. on audiences or on politicians: Related specifically to academic audience research Related to other initiatives to track or improve the impact of fact-checking
(Fund)ing	Primary focus is on securing financial support for fact-checking organizations or efforts, e.g. a Q&A with a foundation official or a primer on crowdfunding efforts
Method <i>(S)tandards</i> <i>(P)ractical</i>	Primary focus is on core principles and methodology used in fact-checking: Related specifically to formulating or applying common standards to govern fact-checking, such as the IFCN's Code of Principles Related to best practices for verification and other basic elements of fact-checking, e.g. tips for live fact-checking
(Collab)oration	Primary focus is planning, managing, or reviewing voluntary international collaborations among fact-checking organizations
(Disinfo)rmation	Primary focus is on the spread of online mis- or disinformation as an issue, e.g. knowledge-sharing about sources and vectors of false news stories
Education (EML)	Primary focus is on educational and media literacy initiatives, e.g. incorporating fact-checking into the classroom
Agenda-setting (AS)	Focus is on raising new issues of concern to the fact-checking community
(Comm)unity <i>(G)overnance</i> <i>(N)etworking</i> <i>(R)emarks</i>	Describes sessions dedicated to building or managing the community of fact-checkers, falling into three subcategories: Focus is specifically on governance and collective decision-making, e.g. meetings of the IFCN board Focus is on building and celebrating the fact-checking community, e.g. awards ceremonies Applied to opening and closing remarks exclusively
Projects & Experiences (P&E)	Primary focus is introducing or telling the story of a fact-checking organization or project in a holistic way, without emphasizing an explicit theme

Table 2: Thematic Codebook

The format codebook comprises six distinct session formats, listed in the sequence applied during coding. The features associated with each format should be understood as describing an ideal type; not every feature was present in every case. (For instance, a panel discussion typically includes a designated moderator, but a session clearly organized around back-and-forth discussion of a common theme qualified even without a moderator.) As noted, the conference became more explicitly structured each year, with a number of recurring formats used on the formal agenda. (For this reason, the first two events were the most difficult to code.) However, labels were not always applied consistently in conference agendas; our analysis took listed formats into account but did not treat them as decisive.

Format	Definition
Show & Tell	Features a series of short presentations (5 to 10 minutes) about any subject; presenters sign up in advance (as in an "open mic"). Typically used by fact-checking organizations to introduce themselves or share specific initiatives. Always open.
Panel / Q&A	Features discussion of a specific, named issue of importance by a small number of participants who remain on-stage together. Typically has a designated moderator and audience questions. May include prepared presentations. Main room, always open.
Workshop / seminar	Features joint elaboration of a practical issue, often soliciting input from attendees, who are positioned as participants or students. Breakout session, always open.
Meeting / assembly	Features strategic discussion by attendees gathered as members of a specific community, often with expectation of attendance. May be closed.
Conference remarks	Features opening and closing remarks by the conference organizers; an assembly addressed to all conference-goers. Main room, always open.
Presentation	Features a prepared presentation by an individual or a team. Includes keynote presentation and "featured talks" as well as smaller presentations outside the context of an organized thematic discussion. Always open.

Table 3: Format Codebook

5 Analysis

Data yielded by the coding process described above were used to produce a series of charts tracking changes in content and format over the six Global Fact conferences. We considered these high-level views of the evolving event in light of our qualitative field notes on the tone and priorities of each meeting, and of the literature on how communities of practice and field-configuring events develop over time. The resulting analysis highlights three primary roles of the annual meetings in structuring the wider world of fact-checking; while they are offered in rough sequence, these should be understood not as rigid stages in a life cycle, but rather overlapping sets of priorities. (Fig. 1 presents an overview of this thematic analysis.)

5.1 Building and Maintaining Community

The Global Fact conferences feature a pronounced inclusiveness towards even fundamental differences in the backgrounds and methods of the fact-checkers present. This stands out in the early meetings in particular. The first two meetings, London 2014 and 2015, began with a lengthy round of introductions by the diverse participants, many from backgrounds in academia, policy, or activism, rather than journalism. As organizer Bill Adair explained in 2015, "The whole idea is just to give you a flavor of this movement," after giving an informal award to the participant who made the longest trip. (This became a recurring tradition.) Similarly, the final lunch break at the first meeting featured "5-minute talks" for organizations to share ideas or projects; from 2015 these "Show and Tell" sessions became a primary part of the agenda, used for new organizations to introduce themselves to the community. Organizers also surveyed attendees' backgrounds and shared the results during opening remarks to highlight the size and diversity of the global movement.

Given this diversity, a primary thread of the first conferences in particular is to stake out common ground in terms of shared self-understandings and concerns. In keeping with a core premise of communities of practice (Wenger, 2011), this community-building takes place pri-

marily through discussion of common techniques and challenges at a practical level. Sessions focused on trading best practices — how to fact-check live events, how to track campaign promises, how to respond to political attacks, etc. — make up fully one-third of conference minutes (METH-P) at the first two summits. Beyond core methods, two other basic, related challenges are how to secure funding, and how to track and increase the impact of one's work; these themes (FUND and IMPACT) account for close to 25 percent of the agenda over the first three years of the summit. Discussing impacts also offers a way to affirm a common mission of holding power accountable (for instance, one 2014 session focused on celebrating “How fact-checking upsets the status quo.”)

It is crucial to note that basic differences in how these organizations work emerged frequently in practical sessions, leading to discussions about whether it is obligatory to call the person being checked, whether ratings systems are useful, and so on. However, the emphasis in these early conversations is on familiarizing one another with different approaches, rather than on establishing a correct approach to fact-checking (field notes, 2014/15). For example, a panel in London 2014 featured a debate on the “Pros & Cons of Rating Systems”; despite the debate format, and passionate arguments on both sides, the session emphasized common ground and celebrating different approaches (field notes, 2014). Efforts to reconcile differences don't always succeed, of course. For instance, a reporter for France's *Le Monde* complained privately about all of the activists at the 2015 conference, vowing never to return; she never did (field notes, 2015).

5.2 Professionalization and Governance

Perhaps the most distinct change visible in the six years of Global Fact data is a marked turn toward professionalization and governance that began in 2016. These parallel shifts emerge in the thematic analysis as well as in new session formats, like assemblies and closed meetings. It is important to note that conceptually these two strands can be hard to tease apart; markers of professionalization, such as formal standards and credentialing mechanisms, may themselves be read as a form of governance. More broadly, the conference itself acts as a governance mechanism to the extent it structures the interactions that reflect and shape the evolution of the field; indeed, this is implicit in the notion of a field-configuring event (Lampely & Meyer, 2008). However, as detailed below, sessions focused *explicitly* on taking collective decisions and governing as a community of fact-checkers become a regular feature in later conferences, once the community begins to professionalize and to engage more consequentially with outside stakeholders such as governments and platform companies.

The clearest indicator of the field's professionalizing impulse can be seen in the thematic data: Sessions focused directly on developing, promulgating, or managing fact-checking standards (METH-S) first appear with the third conference, in 2016, and claim 1-2 hours of every subsequent meeting. However, incipient signs of this shift were evident at the 2015 conference, in a rising concern with the “quality” of fact-checking documented by both authors. In his opening remarks, conference organizer Bill Adair (2015a) identified this as a basic challenge facing the community, highlighting the “need to focus on the quality of our journalism” and calling for “a thorough discussion of best practices” (field notes, 2015/07). In order to plant the seeds for this discussion and draw attention to sites practicing “weaker journalism,” Adair commissioned one of this paper's authors to conduct a comparative study of fact-checks by six different outlets around the world (see Adair, 2015b); results were presented at the conference and used to raise the question of whether the field needed professional standards (field notes,

2015/07).

At the 2016 conference this concern became explicit: One track of a conference-wide workshop focused specifically on “Fact-checkers’ standards.” During that session, participants discussed the “pros and cons” of devising a single, global standard for fact-checking, and reviewed potential criteria for such a standard, including nonpartisanship, a corrections policy, and transparency with regard to funding, method, and sources; the conference ended with a proposal for a working group to explore the issue, coupled with injunctions to protect diversity by limiting standards to “broad principles” focused on “becoming better as a movement” (field notes, 2016/06). Again, Adair’s opening remarks set the stage for this focus, stressing the need for fact-checkers to remain impartial and base their verdicts on thorough research: “It’s time to make sure we push our journalism to the next level,” he declared. Another sign of professionalization can be read in the increased focus on professional training; a presentation designed for new fact-checkers, delivered by veterans of the movement, outlined core fact-checking principles (such as fairness, transparency, and independence) and reviewed basic methodological steps for choosing claims to check and finding trustworthy sources (field notes, 2016/06).

The IFCN moved quickly to formalize standards in the wake of Global Fact 3, releasing the first version of the Code of Principles in September 2016 with 35 signatories (Kessler, 2016). The new standard gained heft when Facebook announced its third-party fact-checking program, which is limited to signatories (Mosseri, 2016). The three subsequent Global Fact meetings have all included sessions — sometimes closed — dedicated to the Code of Principles, which has 85 verified signatories as of mid-2020. For example, Global Fact 4, in Madrid, included a private “stitch and bitch” session for signatories to discuss the credentialing process, as well as a public presentation on lessons of the first year (field notes, 2017/07). The next year’s conference featured a workshop on how the Code of Principles works, while Global Fact 6, in Cape Town, offered a well-attended workshop to discuss ongoing changes to the standard and the credentialing system, which were subsequently voted on and went into effect in March, 2020 (field notes, 2018/06 and 2019/06). The Code of Principles comes up frequently in other contexts at the conference and structures various activities of the fact-checking community; for instance, some competitive IFCN grants are only available to signatories.

Beyond the Code of Principles, a secondary indicator of the professional turn can be read in the pronounced increase of technology-themed sessions, many of which relate to technical standards that require — and reinforce — a degree of consistency in formats and methods. The Technology code first appears at the second conference, in 2015, claiming about 8 percent of the agenda in minutes; this rises slightly in 2016 and then nearly doubles to cover roughly 15 percent across the three subsequent meetings. The bulk of those sessions (TECH-I) focus on various technologies to automate aspects of fact-checking by standardizing the output of different fact-checking organizations in a machine-readable way. The organizations leading these efforts are also early signatories and proponents of the Code of Principles, and have linked methodological and technical standards as part of a larger professionalizing project (see Graves & Anderson, 2020).

As noted, a rising emphasis on governance accompanies — and is implicated in — the professionalizing tendency reflected in the conference agenda. Sessions with a primary focus specifically on collective decision-making (COMM-G) first appear in our thematic data for the third conference, in 2016. In a pattern we noted repeatedly while coding, a theme which was very clearly defined and easy to apply in later meetings required some discussion in the first instance: We applied the label to a small working group charged with considering an “International Fact-Checking Day” and other potential initiatives to promote public interest in fact-checking, and

to a conference-wide session in which groups previously assigned to work on different specific issues reported out to the community.

The governance theme did not surface explicitly at the 2017 Global Fact, but appears as the most frequent code by far in the fifth and sixth meetings, accounting for 31 and 22 percent of conference minutes, respectively. The format and focus of these later sessions embody the central idea of collective decision-making very distinctly. For instance, the 2018 Global Fact featured a closed meeting of all current signatories of the Code of Principles; both conferences also included closed meetings of the IFCN Advisory Board, a seven-member leadership group charged with overseeing the credentialing process and advising “on all other decisions that have an international relevance for fact-checkers.”¹ Both conferences also featured a number of regional assemblies to facilitate strategic discussions among organizations confronting choices specific to their part of the world; for example, at the 2018 Global Fact, European fact-checking organizations assembled to consider whether and how to work with (or accept money from) European institutions, and then met with representatives of the European Commission in a closed session.

5.3 Thematic Enrichment and Emerging Tensions

From the fourth conference (Madrid, 2017) on, the topics and issues addressed at Global Fact widen significantly, reflecting the broadening scope of activities fact-checkers are involved in both individually and collectively. One vehicle for new approaches is the “Show & Tell” sessions, which increasingly highlight projects that debunk viral rumors and images, reflecting a wider turn in the field discussed below (field notes, 2018/19). In a striking example, the French newspaper *Liberación*, one of the earliest fact-checking outlets in Europe, used a Show & Tell at Rome 2018 to unveil a complete redesign and rebranding centered on answering everyday questions from citizens rather than checking high-profile political claims. New issues emerge even more clearly in featured talks and panel discussions, which increasingly include outside stakeholders and introduce a growing array of narrow topics, from health-related fact-checking to Russian disinformation. Even as the total number of designated themes coded rises each year, the agenda-setting code (AS) — our “other” category, used for miscellaneous or emergent topics — also claims about 10 percent of conference minutes in the last two years.

As well as the growing number of countries represented at Global Fact, particularly in Asia and Africa, this thematic enrichment reflects external developments that reoriented the field of fact-checking. Most importantly, a sharp rise in international concern with the effects of online disinformation after the 2016 U.S. presidential election sparked new interest in — and opportunities for — projects that focus on debunking “fake news” and viral images or rumors, as opposed to political claims. (One immediate outcome was Facebook’s third-party fact-checking program, which pays fact-checkers to debunk misinformation on the social network.) Accordingly, three major related themes appear for the first time at the 2017 Global Fact and account for 17 percent of conference minutes across the last three meetings: Disinformation (DISINFO), Platforms (TECH-P), and Education & Media Literacy (EML).

The new opportunities and pressures for the field appear most clearly in debates about tech platforms like Facebook, Google, or WeChat, as well as direct exchanges with their representa-

1. The IFCN Advisory Board was initially appointed in December, 2016; from 2020, members will be voted on by signatories to the Code of Principles. Board members also met, off of the formal agenda, at the 2017 Global Fact conference, in Madrid (field notes, 2017/07). The description of the board’s duties is from *International Fact-Checking Network Transparency Statement* (n.d.).

tives, who began to appear onstage in 2017. Many discussions have focused on Facebook's third-party fact-checking program, which has grown to include partners in 80 countries and become a major source of funding for the community. These encounters can be quite heated; for example, an onstage Q&A with a Facebook executive in 2018 brought pleas for help from partners in South America whose work made them the target of vicious, coordinated harassment campaigns. A session with a Google engineer provoked complaints from fact-checkers in Eastern Europe who felt neglected in the search engine's efforts to promote fact-checking (field notes, 2018).

Debates about how the community should work with platforms or governments arguably mark a return to the open-ended discussions of the first meetings, as fact-checkers sound out a shared self-understanding and identity in light of increasing diversity and rising stakes. For instance, the 2019 Global Fact featured a contentious, conference-wide debate about competing visions for the IFCN — as an advocacy organization representing the community, or merely as a loose network sharing resources and ideas. At the same time the event includes more formats explicitly designed to promote community and connection among fact-checkers, like “flash meetings” (first introduced in 2017), regional assemblies, and community prizes (both debuted in 2018). Notably, the community has an increasingly developed shared history — often invoked through references to previous Global Facts — that promotes reflexive discussions about how to adapt to new circumstances.

6 Discussion

Taken together, data on the content and format of the first six Global Fact conferences tell a remarkably clear story of diverse organizations first recognizing themselves as members of a new occupational sphere, then identifying common features and shared priorities, strengthening external boundaries and internal status markers, and ultimately confronting the wider set of issues that come with increased relevance. This sequence accords broadly with literature that assigns field-configuring events (FCEs) a pivotal role in the formation of new institutional fields (Anand & Jones, 2008; Schüßler & Sydow, 2015) and suggests an evolution from field-defining concerns “such as setting standards, defining practices, and codifying key vocabularies” to a field-maintenance role focused on reinforcing boundaries and affirming dominant logics (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1029). However, the case of Global Fact highlights the particular demands of codifying dominant values in a diverse, growing transnational field; it also indicates how event-level structures help to resolve these tensions, and offer a kind of scaffold for more permanent field-level governance mechanisms.

One way to distill the event data analyzed in this paper is by noting what kinds of questions are being addressed, implicitly and explicitly, through the evolving Global Fact agenda. As shown, the first two conferences (London, 2014 and 2015) focus overwhelmingly on elemental questions for defining this new sphere: who the fact-checkers are, what they do, why it matters, and how to pay for it. Just four themes account for about 70 percent of conference minutes across the two meetings: Impact (IMPACT), Method (METH-P), Funding (FUND), and Projects & Experiences (P&E), associated with groups introducing themselves to the community. (The comparable figure for the last two conferences is under 25 percent.) In addition, only at the London meetings, the opening remarks (another 120 minutes) included introductions from every group present. Field notes from both of us record that the tone of these initial meetings was emphatically welcoming and celebratory; practitioners discuss how they work in

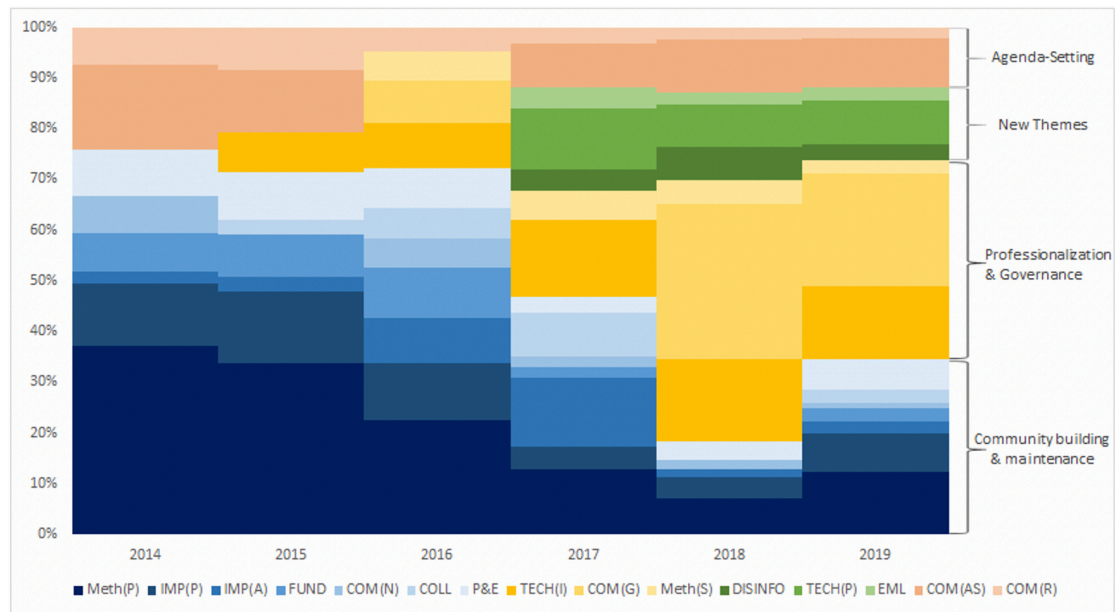


Figure 1. Major thematic clusters across six Global fact conferences (% event time)

order to share ideas and marvel at the range of approaches, rather than to consecrate one authoritative vision for fact-checking (see also Graves, 2018).

The agenda for the third Global Fact conference (Buenos Aires, 2016) formally raises two very different questions, with explicitly normative overtones, that will remain important through subsequent meetings. The first is how fact-checking *should* be conducted, with the corollary of who qualifies as a *legitimate* fact-checker. The IFCN's Code of Principles is one of the first concrete outcomes of Global Fact meetings, and formal standards become a permanent part of the agenda from 2016, in sessions dedicated to promulgating the new Code but also, almost immediately, to critiquing and revising it. From the outset, even advocates of the Code acknowledge the challenge of devising basic standards given the diversity of political environments fact-checkers operate in, and this drives the revisions to the Code discussed in the 2018 and 2019 meetings.

The second new question is what fact-checkers, constituted as a community, should collectively *do* — what decisions they should take together, through the IFCN and otherwise, in areas from establishing standards to launching formal collaborations to partnering with technology companies. The Governance theme first appears in 2016 and rises to constitute more than one-quarter of all conference minutes across the last two meetings. It also increasingly corresponds to specific meeting formats, such as closed meetings and regional assemblies, that reflect the emergence of increasingly articulated governance structures within the community. It is the rising prominence and relevance of the international fact-checking field after the events of 2016 — the new ways they *matter* to outside actors, especially in the government and technology worlds — that necessitates increasingly consequential decision-taking (such as the debates about whether to work formally with EU institutions) and lends new authority and wider jurisdiction to the community's incipient mechanisms of governance, such as the IFCN's advisory board and the credentialing process for the Code of Principles.

The rising global stakes around fact-checking continually draw focus back to those two core questions, of what qualifies as legitimate fact-checking and what collective decisions the com-

munity should take. Increased consequence also introduces a third question that characterizes the later meetings: What else do we need to be paying attention to? As the community grows, gains resources, and becomes involved in a widening array of activities, pressure grows on the agenda to cover emerging, high-profile issues from disinformation and “deep fakes” to media literacy initiatives and health communication. This helps to account for the rapidly diversifying array of Global Fact themes over six years, and the continued importance of the “agenda-setting” code assigned to miscellaneous new topics. (These may develop into recurring themes, as disinformation and media literacy did previously.)

In this way, Global Fact has been the primary venue for establishing, affirming, and contesting institutional logics in the new field of fact-checking. How members of the field collectively assign value can be read in standards formally articulated at the event (even to the extent that verified signatories of the IFCN Code attend closed meetings, have voting privileges, enjoy special eligibilities, etc.) but also in conference programming, awards, and so on (e.g., in the sudden rise to prominence of debunking viral images and texts rather than evaluating political claims). The event itself also reveals a shift in the dominant attitude — perhaps an aspect of what White (1993) calls institutional “style” — from simply *celebrating* diversity to *managing* it. We emphasize “managing diversity” because the abiding differences in how different kinds of organizations, working in very different domestic circumstances, understand and practice fact-checking cannot easily be erased or papered over. Some research points to growing isomorphism in the US context (Lowrey, 2017) but there is limited evidence of this globally (see e.g. Graves, 2018; Humprecht, 2020). This persistent organizational diversity gives rise to an inherent institutional tension or contradiction (see Farjoun, 2002) as the field responds to the imperative to standardize and professionalize.

At the same time, this is not a case of “organizing diversity” by sustaining competing valuation schemes at the firm level in order to navigate uncertainty and achieve organizational goals (Girard & Stark, 2002; Stark, 2009). Rather, managing diversity highlights how the increasingly differentiated and structured nature of the conference itself works through these contradictions in an ongoing way. For instance, the growing variety of session formats in the later meetings recognize multiple forms of attachment to the event, and thus membership in the community; the same organization may participate in one session as an IFCN signatory and another as an Asian or European outlet, while the opening plenary tallies the total number of fact-checkers attending and celebrates the global movement. Similarly, even as signatories to the Code of Principles gain elevated status, “Show & Tell” sessions ritualize the celebration of diverse organizations and projects that characterized the first meetings. Awards ceremonies do the same thing; while such “tournament rituals” reproduce or reconfigure field values by elevating winners (Anand & Jones, 2008; Anand & Watson, 2004), they also bring together members of the field nominally as equals. These structured formats and activities help resolve the paradox of accommodating a pluralistic fact-checking field even as the event itself has been the primary vehicle for promulgating a unifying standard.

These dynamics point to another illuminating feature of Global Fact as a field-configuring event with an unusually strong “field mandate” (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1028). As noted at the outset, the crux of the FCE concept is that these key events bridge micro-scale interactions and macro-scale processes, and thus offer a unique window onto structuration and field evolution (Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Schüßler & Sydow, 2015). In the case of Global Fact, this structuring influence on the wider field takes shape in part through increasingly explicit governance structures developed at and for the event. The most important of these is the IFCN itself, which was a product of the second Global Fact; what began as a loose network of fact-

checkers has become a professional organization that sets field standards, runs the credentialing process, distributes funding, manages training and exchange programs, and often speaks for fact-checkers in dealings with foundations, technology firms, and governments.

Our analysis thus illuminates how a field-configuring event such as Global Fact helps to manage the tensions inherent in a heterogeneous field negotiating increased prominence and relevance in the world. Finally, it also raises the question of the local effects this international event has as diverse participants — from Australia’s public broadcaster, to Balkan NGOs, to watchdog site Rappler in the Philippines — carry practices, discourses, and network resources back to their respective national contexts. A transnational field like fact-checking may be imagined as a relatively weak layer superimposed on stronger, more deeply structured institutional fields in specific countries. At the same time, it can exert unusually far-reaching influence, as shown by the worldwide spread of the Code of Principles. Further research should explore the unique role of FCEs in developing transnational institutions.

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