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With Meta Pulling the Plug, are Indian Fact-Checkers at Risk?

By: Kanchan Kaur

Meta's decision to end its fact-checking programme could deal a double blow to Indian fact-checkers. While initially altruistic, the work of many of these fact checkers was largely incentivised by Meta. Without it, their revenue, reach, and ability to continue may vanish.

A couple of days after Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Meta, decided to "get rid of fact-checkers and replace them with Community Notes similar to X", Meta announced that it was also getting rid of its diversity programmes, citing a "shifting and legal and policy landscape." In this, Meta is joined by Amazon, Walmart, and McDonalds, but that is another story.

Zuckerberg explained his 7 January 2025 decision to end the fact-checking programme by saying that it was meant to prioritise free speech, and that "fact-checkers have just been too politically biased." While we have no idea right now whether this policy is only meant for the United States or will be extended to other parts of the world—and when—it has led to criticism that Zuckerberg had done a "full bending of the knee" to US President-elect Donald Trump. It has also been called a "major step back" for public discourse.

Zuckerberg said that the shift was in response to the US presidential election, which he called "a cultural tipping point towards, once again, prioritising speech". This announcement was preceded by the replacement of former UK deputy prime minister Nick Clegg as Meta's president of global affairs by prominent Republican Joel Kaplan. These were all signs that Meta's priorities were shifting with the times, as it has tended to do with each new US administration.

After the contentious 2016 elections when charges of Russian interference flew about, along with a large amount of misinformation and disinformation, Zuckerberg went about creating a "community" in states where Facebook was not doing well. After the 2020 election, during the pandemic, Meta removed a lot of content about Covid-19 from its platform, thereby supporting the Joe Biden administration. However, just before the 2024 US election, Zuckerberg put out a note to the Republican-led House Judiciary Committee blaming the Biden administration for putting "pressure" on Meta to take down content.

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Meta bent further with the wind when indications that Trump would win became stronger. Just before writing to the House Judiciary Committee, Zuckerberg admired the photograph of Trump with his fist raised, defiant after the first assassination attempt on him in July 2024. After the election, he joined several other big tech executives to call on Trump at his Florida residence and donated US$1 million to the new president's inaugural fund.

Trump, is of course pleased. He had been making his displeasure about Meta apparent in no uncertain terms—accusing it of censorship and criticising it for suspending his Facebook and Instagram accounts for two years after the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol. Trump quickly responded to the recent announcements, telling Fox News that Meta had "come a long way".

Indeed, Meta and Facebook have come a long way. The Facebook third-party fact-checking programme (3PFC) began in 2016 in response to the combative US election that had seen huge amounts of "alternative" views surfacing on the internet and social media, especially on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Ananny 2018). Just a little earlier, in 2014, fact-checkers around the world had come together at a conference called Global Fact-Checking Summit in London (Kessler 2014). The next year, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) was set up at the non-profit Poynter Institute to bring together the growing community of fact-checkers around the world.

The IFCN is a body that certifies fact-checkers, holds conferences to discuss challenges and solutions, and liaises with big tech to provide funding for various projects (Brookes and Waller 2023). The IFCN accreditation works as a measure of credibility. When Facebook launched its third-party fact-checking programme, it hired independent third-party fact-checkers certified by the IFCN.

According to recent reports (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2023), this programme included more than 80 fact-checking organisations globally, including in India—in Hindi, Telugu, Bengali, Tamil, and Malayalam.

The idea was that these independent fact-checkers would assess and rate the accuracy of stories that surfaced on Meta platforms. They would do this by following a Code of Principles set up by the IFCN. This code works alongside commitments to fairness, transparency, and honesty, and all applicants for the IFCN's certification must demonstrate that they adhere to it. Following an evaluation by independent assessors, websites are recommended to the IFCN board if they can be certified by the network. Such websites can display an IFCN badge and can apply to Meta for third-party fact-checking work.

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The typical fact-checking process, based on a field study among US fact-checkers has five phases—(1) choosing claims to check, (2) contacting the target, (3) tracing false claims, (4) consulting experts and sources, and (5) publishing the check as transparently as possible (Graves 2017). Despite this seemingly robust procedure and stringent code of principles, fact-checkers tend to pick and choose the claims they check, and this has invited criticism (Uscinski and Butler 2013). The implication that fact-checkers are nudged towards checking some claims by platform companies raises questions about their objectivity. Fact-checkers have also been criticised for ignoring claims that cannot be checked reliably, or at all.

Defenders of fact-checking have responded by pointing out that the purpose is not to establish "who lies most" but to provide information about claims that appear in public media (Amazeen 2015). Criticism also revolves around the focus of fact-checking moving from verifying political speeches to debunking viral posts on the internet. Studies have indicated that debunking, which was once a minor facet of political fact-checking, has become the mainstay of most of the fact-checks produced around the globe, and it is driven by commercial partnerships between fact-checkers and platform companies (Graves et al. 2023).

When fact-checkers rate content as false or misleading, Meta reduces the "virality" of the content—it reduces distribution, it flags the content, and is said to notify users who might share it. Notably, the content is not removed from the platform unless it violates Meta's community standards, sometimes leading to friction with fact-checkers (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2023).

There are other tensions too, about definitions of misinformation between fact-checkers and Meta, as well as Meta's tendency to not upset local governments. In India, for instance, Meta leaves political content well alone, focusing on other viral claims. Yet, for most fact-checking organisations, their work with platform companies is important in their battle against misinformation.

Angie Drobnic Holan, director of the IFCN, has denied that fact-checkers are biased, saying in *The Guardian*, "The attack line comes from those who feel they should be able to exaggerate and lie without rebuttal or contradiction." Fact-checkers are responding similarly. In a statement, Chris Morris, the chief executive of the UK fact-checking organization, Full Fact (which receives funding from Meta to check its Facebook content), said that this move was a step backwards that "risks a chilling effect around the world." He said that fact-checkers assessed claims from "all political stripes with equal rigour, and hold those in power to account through our commitment to truth."

Meta's funding has led to a proliferation of fact-checking websites the world over. India has the largest number for any one country—17 at last count, though some certificates might have expired and others are being renewed.

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Fact-checkers come from a variety of backgrounds, not just in India, but the world over. While some outfits have been set up exclusively for fact-checking, a few legacy media organisations have also jumped on the bandwagon. News agency AFP, for instance, has a fact-checking unit. In India, large media organisations such as *India Today*, *Dainik Jagran*, and PTI have fact-checking units. Some popular fact-checking websites such as Boomlive and Factly come from either independent organisations or from a group of former journalists who believe that fact-checking is the answer to check what they see as journalism's decline. The well-known fact-checking website AltNews has not sought to be part of Meta's dashboard. In fact, they sought IFCN certification only for one year. After that, they have largely been funded by crowdsourcing, with donations from readers and others.

The origins of most fact-checking websites may have been altruistic, but the incentive to go on with the tedious and cumbersome work mostly came from Meta's work, at least in the early years. Some of these websites have now gone on to become popular brands and say that hardly 10% of their work comes from Meta's dashboard, but most of them know that when Meta's third-party fact-checking programme ends, their work too will probably end.

"A lot of us get not just our revenue, but also our reach because of Meta," said one Indian fact-checker. "Who will read a random fact-checked story? Nearly no one. And if there is no reach, it does not generate enough eyeballs to create revenue for the fact-checker. This is a problem not just for fact-checkers, but also for society."

Zuckerberg took a leaf out of Elon Musk's book when he said that Community Notes would be used to flag misinformation. Community Notes, which was around earlier as Birdwatch but not very popular, was revived on X to do away with fact-checkers. Users sign up to rate posts on X, as well as put out notes on claims that, according to them, might be false, misleading, or overall incorrect. The post then displays a tag that says "Readers added context". Users can add links to prove their point, while other users can vote, agreeing or disagreeing with the note, voting it up or down.

The process is not as simple as it looks, according to one fact-checker. "On X, the right of way on Community Notes belongs to the one with the most might. I might flag a post and say that this information is wrong, but I could easily be down-voted by a whole lot of people." This, he adds, could happen simply because "voters" disagree with his point of view, and that is not necessarily based on facts. Further, he points out that the way to prove on Community Notes that a post carried incorrect information was to link it to a fact-checked article. "Now, if no one is going to fact-check, how are you going prove that the post on X or Facebook is false or misleading?"

One independent Indian fact-checker who is not part of Meta's third-party fact-checking programme said that while some fact-checkers who have not partnered with Meta have got by, they will soon be left with no avenues if more platform companies take the same stance as Meta. Further, he fears that most big tech companies will focus on using artificial intelligence (AI) to do fact-checking—a point that most Indian fact-checkers agree upon.

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One of them explained, "Meta has probably been training a model on its dashboard that we all have used for more than half a dozen years. All our fact-checks and work are on that dashboard. It will take the company no time to train and test an AI model and start using it if more fact-checking is demanded of it."

Fact-checkers also believe that Zuckerberg's kowtowing to Trump is indicative of what to expect in other countries. "This is a policy decision, not an operational decision," one fact-checker pointed out, "and that means that the same policy will hold good throughout the world."

The European Union and Australia have strong laws when it comes to platform companies and, given his past record with governments, the chances are that the Meta CEO might be willing to comply with them. In India, the government may well ask Meta to shut down its verification programme because it has itself been inclined to take control of fact-checking. Or, it might lay down conditions that turn the fact-checking into an ineffective exercise.

That will deprive most fact-checking units of their basic bill-paying income, and their reach. Most Indian fact-checkers now believe it all depends on how things pan out in the US in the next few months. Until then, as one of them put it, "We are trying to absorb the shock and letting it sink in."

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