

Managing Fact-checking Organizations to Combat Hoaxes in Southeast Asia

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Abstract. This research aims to identify the organizational structure and dynamics related to fact-checking procedures in three fact-checking organizations in Southeast Asia, namely CekFakta in Indonesia, Jomcheck in Malaysia, and VERA Files in the Philippines. Using a qualitative approach and comparison study, data collection was carried out through a series of face-to-face and online interviews with 19 informants, including founders, management, fact-checkers, and editors from each organization. Another online Focus Group Discussion attended by 6 participants, as are representatives of Mafindo, the website manager of cekfakta.com, and representatives from AJI to gain in-depth insight into the process and methodology of fact-checking of the organizations forming the coalition of CekFakta. The interview framework covers critical aspects such as organizational structure, fact-checking work dynamics, and best practices in implementing fact-checking. The research results show that although the three fact-checking organizations were founded because of the election, the CekFakta Coalition and Jomcheck are alliances between media, journalists, academicians, and civil society organizations. In contrast, VERA Files was founded by six female veteran journalists with the same vision and mission regarding journalistic practices in the Philippines. Shared challenges involve the complexity of social media information, unequal public understanding, doxing risks, and bias management. The lack of legal protection for the fact-checking profession and the personal risks of factchecking highlights the need for concerted practice and collective efforts to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: Fact-checking, Management, Hoax

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S. Musa et al. (eds.), Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Global Innovation and Trends in Economy 2024 (INCOGITE 2024), Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 302, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-585-0_2

1. Introduction

Several recent studies [1] [2] have suggested that fact-checking organizations are essential in verifying the accuracy of information, especially in the context of news and public discourse. The fact-checking process involves assessing the veracity of a claim, is generally performed by journalists, and is increasingly relevant for ordinary citizens, namely *fact-checkers* [3]. Fact-checking can be understood as a democracy-building tool that emerges when democratic institutions are considered weak or threatened [4]. Pal and Loke [5] emphasized that fact-checking websites play an essential role, with features such as acquisition, disclosure, verification, presentation, interaction, and diffusion enhancing their effectiveness.

Several studies have shown the results of comparative studies to measure how fact-checking organizations perform in several countries. Porter and Wood [6] conducted a study in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the UK to prove the effectiveness of fact-checking in increasing factual accuracy while reducing trust in fake news. Furthermore, Humprecht conducted a study across multiple countries that revealed notable variations in fact-checking tactics, which can be linked to varying degrees of journalistic professionalism and organizational disparities [7]. Another comparative study in the UK and Spain shows differences in work characteristics and methodologies between the two countries [8]. Karadag and Ayten [9] found the scope and process of verification/fact-checking and the division of roles within different organizations. Additionally, qualitative research compared the number and frequency of exams, protocols, outreach strategies, and societal roles in various Latin American and Spanish nations [10].

Even though fact-checking organizations are becoming more widespread worldwide, scientific studies that attempt to document the existence of fact-checking practices in Asian countries, including Indonesia, are still few. According to a study, fact-checking groups in Indonesia are expanding and establishing connections with international organizations, spearheading the continuous battle against hoaxes [11]. The results of this case study show that fact-checking organizations in Indonesia still face several challenges in standardizing the methodology, measuring and evaluating the "impact" of fact-checking activities, and managing resources. Fact-checkers' work is still relatively new, and hoaxes are proliferating in production and distribution. Those in this industry cite the Ministry of Communication and Information website, kominfo.go.id, which shows that there are already 800,000 hoax-spreading sites in Indonesia. Waves of disinformation use various means and strategies to go viral.

Quoted from its website, cekfakta.com is a collaborative fact-checking project between Mafindo (Masyarakat Anti-Fitnah Indonesia or Indonesian Anti-Hoax Society), AJI (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen or *The Alliance of Independent Journalists*) and AMSI (Asosiasi Media Siber Indonesia or *Indonesian Cyber Media Association*), supported by the Google News Initiative. It was first launched at the Trusted Media Summit 2018 event in Jakarta on Saturday, May 5, 2018, after 22 Editors and the Chairman of Mafindo signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The website also explains how the fact-checker's workflow implements an RSS Feed system where all content produced by fact-checkers from each media and institution can simultaneously be pulled into the cekfakta.com content management system. This model requires work at the beginning of the process to synchronize the system in network media and cekfakta.com, but after implementation no more effort is needed for the publication process. Meanwhile, the second alternative is the manual model. In this model, each network media appoints a person responsible to choose content for themselves which will be broadcast on cekfakta.com.

The site jomcheck.org explains that the Jomcheck is the first academic-media-civil society fact-checking alliance in Malaysia that mitigates the impact of mis-and-disinformation on democracy in Malaysia and disseminates fact-checking to the public. As a non-profit, non-partisan alliance founded in 2022 by a group of journalists and academics, this alliance is based on a partnership model that brings together various stakeholders and is inspired by collaborative fact-checking models that exist in neighboring countries such as CekFakta (Indonesia), tsek.ph, and FactsFirstPH (Philippines).

Meanwhile, as reported by the website verafiles.org, VERA Files is an independent, non-stock, and non-profit media organization founded in March 2008 and registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (Company Registration Number CN200808072). Founded by six veteran Filipino female journalists, it investigates current issues in the Philippines.

These various challenges require standardized work guidelines regarding fact-checking work procedures. Micallef et al. [12] added to this discussion by identifying the manual and labor-intensive nature of current fact-checking practices as a barrier to scaling and proposing suggestions for improvement. In-depth research is essential to improve the quality of fact-checkers. The three organizations were chosen for several reasons, such as being the first fact-checking activity in their country or being fact-checking organizations with a good reputation in their country. Interestingly, the exploration will focus on the structure and dynamics of organizations of which fact-checkers are part.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

Based on the background mentioned earlier, the objective of this research is to identify the organizational structure that led to the role and function of the founder/co-founder, editor/management, and journalist/fact-checker as well as the job descriptions for each part, to explore the dynamics of work procedures in carrying out the fact-checking process in the three (3) organizations, and to collect and process various best practices related to

the fact-checking process from the three organizations. Therefore, two research questions were proposed:

(1) How are the organizational structures and work descriptions created to support the fact-checking process?

(2) What are the work procedures' dynamics in the fact-checking process?

2.1 Research Significance

The fact-checking process is essential because of the now massive circulation of mis-and-disinformation. Southeast Asia is one of the regions experiencing information pollution and the uncontrolled spread of hoaxes. Considering the large amount of content that must be checked daily with a limited number of fact-checkers is a significant challenge. This research also identifies the work patterns of the (3) three organizations in the fact-checking process to determine whether each organization has met the existing standards or whether improvisation is needed. Therefore, this research is essential to carrying out the good practices and innovations each organization aims to use.

3. Methodology

This research used a qualitative approach with a comparison study and was conducted for four months, from October 2023 to January 2024. The research subject is three fact-checking organizations, namely cekfakta.com from Indonesia, Jomcheck from Malaysia, and VERA Files from the Philippines. These three organizations were chosen because their fact-checking activities are well-known inside their respective country of origin and in other countries. Research informants were determined using purposive and snowball sampling techniques simultaneously. The purposive sampling technique was carried out by determining the criteria for becoming research informants, specifically (1) Founder/Co-founder, (2) Editor and or Management, and (3) Journalist/Fact-checker (Senior and Junior). The initial determination was completed using purposive sampling by determining a person from the three institutions to be the first informant and then asking for recommendations from the person concerned for the following informants: Trinna Leong (Co-founder) for Jomcheck, Celine Samson (Trustee and senior Fact-checker) for VERA Files, Septiadji Eko Nugroho (Co-founder and Chairman) for Mafindo, Ika Ningtyas (General Secretary, Senior FC) for AJI, and Wahyu Dyatmika (Founder and Chairman) for AMSI.

The interview processes were conducted face-to-face or online, either via email or other online meeting applications, depending on the situation and conditions in the field, especially for informants of Jomcheck and VERA Files. Due to the location of informants from AMSI and AJI being outside Jakarta, some interviews were conducted online. Thus, ten interviews were conducted via Zoom from a total of 19 interview sessions. Interviews for Jomcheck were conducted with the Co-founder, Management, and Fact-checker. In

contrast, the interview was conducted with the President/Founder, Editor/Management, Senior Fact-checker, and Junior Fact-checker for VERA Files. For Mafindo, AMSI, and AJI, interviews were conducted with each organization's Founder, Management, Editor, and Fact-checker/Jurnalis. Further data was collected through an online Focus Group Discussion attended by 6 participants: representatives from Mafindo, the website manager of cekfakta.com, and representatives from AJI. Data analyses were conducted using transcription analysis and triangulation tables to explain the various data found.

4. Findings and Discussion

The collaborative fact-checking project by Mafindo, AJI, and AMSI, cekfakta.com was launched at the 2018 Trusted Media Summit in Jakarta on May 5, 2018. This coalition was inspired by similar movements in various countries, primarily related to political mis-and-disinformation ahead of the general election. In Indonesia, the fact-checking movement involves journalists, media organizations, and people from various backgrounds united against hoaxes.

Mafindo is a civil society organization (CSO) that focuses on preventing hoaxes. It started as an online movement in 2015 and was officially founded on November 19, 2016. Mafindo is known as a pioneer in various anti-hoax initiatives, including crowd-sourced hoax busting, digital literacy education, and public campaigns to raise awareness of the dangers of hoaxes. With a vision to help build an active and peaceful civil society, Mafindo is committed to collaborating with others to fight deception and hatred contained in most hoaxes. Integrating positive social aspects aims to create an intelligent and resistant society to the spread of hoaxes. Their products and services include hoax mapping reports, an anti-hoax search engine, and a chatbox on WhatsApp.

AJI was founded on August 7, 1994, by young journalists as a response to banning media critical to the New Order regime. The solidarity action developed after the Sirnagalih Declaration on August 7, 1994. During the New Order regime, AJI operated secretly, with around 20 administrators and less than 200 members. This secret activity led to several members going to prison. AJI is pro-democracy, defending press freedom and gaining recognition from within and outside the country. On October 18, 1995, AJI joined the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Although press freedom increased after the reform, AJI faced challenges such as media closures and increased violence against journalists, including hostages taken in 2003, in which AJI was involved in the effort of liberalization.

AMSI is a non-profit organization formed by a chief editor from 26 cyber media companies in Indonesia on April 18, 2017. Its members are a cyber media company that meets press company standards based on Press Council Regulations. AMSI aims to build a healthy, qualified, and sustainable cyber media ecosystem that complies with the code of ethics to serve the public interest. Currently, AMSI has 157 members out of 17 provinces

in Indonesia and actively organizes activities such as training, education, and assistance related to editorial management, business, technology, and branding.

The three organizations then established the CekFakta Coalition. They have unique reasons and motivations for joining the coalition. AMSI, as an association of publishers, joined forces to encourage media online to maintain news quality and promote the production of fact-check articles. AJI, which consists of journalists from various media organization backgrounds, sees CekFakta as part of the effort for a healthy digital ecosystem, especially facing the spread of hoaxes ahead of the election. Mafindo is expected to be a balancer in the coalition by focusing on everyday interest-checking activities. Mafindo aims to unite the media in one context, eliminate ego competition between media, and allow journalist friends to focus on fact-checking content without worrying about technology.

Each founding organization has a different role according to each organization's nature. AMSI encourages the production of fact-check articles from its members, whether IFCN certified or not. AJI, whose members are journalists, provides training to journalists to convey fact-checks, and these skills can be applied in the media organization where they work. Apart from that, AJI also collaborates with academics and the community to carry out media literacy. Mafindo supports media organizations and journalists by creating technology information systems, such as the Yudistira API and the cekfakta.com site, to ensure that the production and distribution of fact-checked content is well documented and socialized to various parties, including society.

Jomcheck is an alliance in Malaysia consisting of academics, media, and civil society that aims to reduce misinformation through fact-checking. It was founded by journalists and academics inspired by the cekfakta.com model in Indonesia, Tsek.ph, and Factfirst.ph from the Philippines. Jomcheck has received support from several reputable media organizations in Malaysia as partners. Receiving financial support from the Google News Initiative for the 2022 and 2023 Malaysian state elections, Jomcheck maintains its independence and does not accept donations from political parties or the government. As a collaborative organization, reported questionable information is shared openly with partners through WhatsApp Group, and if no partner votes to fact-check it, the Jomcheck team will do the examination. Editorial rules are adjusted to the policies of each partner, and fact-check training is provided where necessary. They do not run paid articles and are open to new partners who want to join. Jomcheck also accepts corrections and does not discriminate within the alliance.

VERA Files is a non-profit, independent media organization founded in March 2008 by a group of veteran Filipino journalists focused on researching issues in the Philippines. The name VERA comes from Latin, which means *true*. This organization has a board supervisor, founded by Ellen Tordesillas, Luz Rimban, Bomma Cruz, Jennifer Santiago, Yvonne T. Chua, and Chi Estella. VERA Files has expertise in creating in-depth research reports, providing training, and building a network of contributors. Funding comes from grants, selling stories, and donations, with selectivity toward donors to maintain

independence. The organization has unique, multi-year projects supported by various parties, including fact-checking projects such as VERA Files Fact-check. The goal is to contribute to research, writing, and news distribution, which involves training superior journalists. Although founded in 2008, VERA Files fact-checking activities started in 2016 as a response to the spread of hoaxes ahead of the elections in the Philippines.

	CekFakta (Indonesia)	Jomcheck (Malaysia)	VERA Files (Filipina)
Structure	Initial phase: Founder level and media network level (21) Current Phase: Joint Secretariat AJI Secretariat AMSI Secretariat Mafindo Secretariat Partner: CSO, academia, research centers, etc	 Seven partners, including from media, university, CSO, etc. Management composition: Editorial Team, which consists of a project manager that is appointed as liaison officer for partner and editor, a manager for WA TipLine, a student writer who is media debunking, and an editor who is hired professionally. Production Team that led by a lecturer 	Twenty journalists with multitasking roles. Management composition: 1. Management, which consists of media team (graphic artist and video editor), web administrator, and social media 2. Fact-checking Team, that consist of Public Figure Team (editor dan reporter) and Verification Team for FB (editor dan reporter)
Fact-chec ker	No in-house FC in the Coalition, FC is conducted in each media	No in-house FC, FC is conducted by media partners.	There is an in-house FC, a team consist of 4 reporters and 4 editors
Internal Communic ation	For program: WAG consists of founders and secretariat. For FC: Group Yudistira For CekFakta Leader: WAG	WAG with partners, Google Sheet as database.	Weekly meeting on Friday Face-to-face meeting Own office

Table 1. Comparison of Organization Structure and Dynamics

	For Research and Campaign: WAG		
External Communic ations	Website, email, social media (Instagram, X, FB)	WA line, email, website, social media (Instagram, Line, TikTok, Facebook)	Website, social media (FB, X, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok), email

Table 1 shows the organizational structure and dynamics of the three organizations. CekFakta (Indonesia) is managed by a joint secretariat where representatives from Mafindo, AJI, and AMSI are part of the joint secretariat. CekFakta has no fact-checkers; thus, each organization conducts all the fact-checking work. CekFakta maintains communication internally through some tools and less for external communication due to scarce resources. On the other hand, Jomcheck (Malaysia) and VERA Files (Philippines) have two divisions in the organization; one works to manage the organization, and the other works to support the fact-checking process. Both Jomcheck and VERA Files need less communication media to coordinate but have more to reach their audiences.

	CekFakta (Indonesia)	Jomcheck (Malaysia)	VERA Files (Philippines)
Work flow	 Every day Fact-checker from each organization browses social media or checks public reports. Fact-checkers select content to review, report to editors and group together. In the Yudhistira Group, content will be shared for review by one of the members, so that there will be no double checks. Fact-checking is carried out in media 	 Every day at 12.30, information received from the public will be shared to partners for fact-checking. Partners volunteer to do or not do fact-checking. When partners carry out fact-checks, Jomcheck amplifies the content by (1) distributing it via WA, (2) repackaging it in the form of short videos made by UKM students under the guidance of Prof. 	 There are 2 levels of editing: reporter – peer review – editor. Every day reporters choose content to be debunked, the results of the choice will be submitted to the Editor. Once approved, it will be debunked, the article written, the infographic made, then submitted back to the editor for peer-review, and once approved it will be published. Target 40 pieces of content per month.

	 organizations that are members. The debunking results are shared with the Yudhistira Group who then ask partners who want to publish it. If there is criticism, the method can be discussed, if there is doubt, it can be re-checked by other media partners. 	Sabariah by writing credit to the partner. • Students do not do fact-checks.	
Conte nt Select ion	 Get access to the Facebook fact-checker dashboard, there is a recap of content that has high engagement or is viral. The nature is (1) public interest, (2) the level of virality of the content is high, and (3) it meets the criteria and can be checked. The issue depends on the organization. 	 Get access to the Facebook fact-checker dashboard. Only information about the election Checkability factor 	 Get access to the Facebook fact-checker dashboard. Relevant with public issues All issues, refer to principles (1) relevance, (2) virality, and (3) feasibility
Conte nt Publi cation	Media partner, website cekfakta.com, grup WA organisasi pendiri	Konten FC, konten edukasi (tahun lalu 124 FC, tahun ini 97 FC, 24 video)	Konten FC dibagi ke seluruh media di Filipina secara gratis

The fact-checking flow, the Fact-check Coalition, Jomcheck, and VERA Files have fixed procedures for conducting fact-checking. The stages are as follows:

1. The monitoring stage is searching for hoax content on social media or checking content reported through the organizations' external communication media. In collaboration with META, the three organizations accessed the Facebook dashboard, where various information circulated in levels or tiers 1, 2, or 3. Tier

1 shows content that gets much engagement, usually content such as sharing gifts. On the dashboard, each organization can see which content is viral and needs checking whether the content is a hoax. Apart from that, the three organizations also receive content complaints from various parties to fact-check.

- The selection stage determines which content can be checked because not all information circulating can be checked. Opinions, for example, cannot be checked. The criteria for selecting content are (1) its nature as a public interest, (2) the level of virality of the content is high, and (3) the criteria can be checked.
- 3. The fact-checking stage is carried out at media organizations for CekFakta and Jomcheck but is carried out by internal fact-checkers at VERA Files.
- 4. The editing stage, carried out in media organizations at the CekFakta and Jomcheck, is carried out by internal fact-checkers at VERA Files; even VERA Files implements two levels of editing, the second through peer review. The editing process is carried out to ensure that the fact-checking process has been completed according to the method, the references are accurate, and there are no more errors. Meanwhile, VERA Files shares fact-checking content with all media in the Philippines for free.
- 5. Media partners for CekFakta and Jomcheck carry out the publication stage for checked content. They are under no obligation to publish.
- 6. Some notes regarding the fact-check process carried out by the three are (1) The results of the examination can be used together; (2) If there is criticism, the method can be discussed; (3) If there is any doubt, it can be re-checked by another media partner.

Brooke [13] highlights the importance of collaboration in fact-checking and focuses on the role of international and inter-agency alliances. Increased cooperation between journalists from different newsrooms leads to confrontation between routines, professional culture, and editorial identity; and collective editorial decision-making allows competing newsrooms to make joint decisions about what to report and what to strategically ignore [14]. The study emphasizes the need for more research on fact-checking organizations' tactics, strategies, and effects, highlighting their potential as cutting-edge media accountability tools. It also highlights the role that fact-checking platforms play in battling misinformation and rebuilding public confidence in journalism by upholding the values of transparency, accountability, and public service [15].

Each of the founding coalition organizations of CekFakta has a different role: AMSI encourages the production of fact-check, Fact-articles; AJI provides training, and collaborates with academics and the community. At the same time, Mafindo supports media and journalists with information technology systems and grassroots or community-based principles. Mihaylova et al. [16] introduced the idea of fact-checking in communities, highlighting the importance of using specific approaches to check the veracity of information. This multifaceted model includes checking information from answers, author profiles, entire forums, and external official sources.

Previous research results have proven that elections are often a source of spreading hoaxes. Disinformation in elections, often in the form of fake news, has become a growing concern and can influence voter choices, especially among those who lack trust in the media and politics [17]. This concern also made the three fact-checking organizations in Southeast Asia; CekFakta, Jomcheck, and VERA Files form this organization to combat the spread of election-related hoaxes.

Each organization has several recommendations and best practices that can be used as input to improve the quality of fact-checking practices. In the era of social media, social media also plays a vital role in reaching a wider audience. According to Hou and Kankham [18], advocating for fact-checking on social media posts has important implications for government and third-party fact-checkers. Interesting content based on infographics and following trends is expected to reach a wider public.

5. Conclusion

The research results show that, regarding organizational structure, the three fact-checking organizations, namely CekFakta, Jomcheck, and VERA Files, were founded in different periods. The research confirms that elections are a significant source of disinformation. The formation and activities of fact-checking coalitions such as CekFakta in Indonesia, Jomcheck in Malaysia, and VERA Files in the Philippines have significant political implications, particularly in the context of elections. These coalitions are crucial in ensuring the integrity of the democratic process by combating misinformation and disinformation, which are often rampant during election periods.

The fact-checking profession needs to be protected by press law, indicating legal vulnerabilities and protections that must be considered when carrying out the fact-checking function. The risks of doxing and the liability that may arise from fact-checking mean that safety and personal impact factors must be considered when performing fact-checking tasks. The challenges that need to be overcome through joint exercises to identify and manage bias emphasize the need for awareness and joint efforts to minimize biased influences in the fact-checking process. By adhering to rigorous verification processes and maintaining transparency, they establish benchmarks for responsible journalism. These standards can influence legal norms and ethical guidelines within the media industry.

Diverse roles and contributions are also important, as each organization within the coalition brings unique strengths and expertise. For instance, AMSI encourages the production of fact-check articles, AJI provides training and collaborates with academic and community groups, and Mafindo offers technological support and grassroots involvement. Alternatively, Alliansi Jomcheck consists of diverse media covering every type of media in Malaysia, and it can reduce bias in debunking the content. This diversity ensures a comprehensive approach to fact-checking and media literacy.

The research outlines detailed workflows for fact-checking, including monitoring, content selection, verification, editing, and publication. These structured processes ensure the accuracy and reliability of the fact-checking outputs, which are crucial for maintaining public trust in journalism. The ethical guidelines followed by fact-checking organizations emphasize transparency, accountability, and public service. These principles are essential in maintaining the integrity of communication practices. By upholding these values, fact-checking coalitions contribute to a more ethical and responsible media environment. The research outlines detailed workflows for fact-checking, including monitoring, content selection, verification, editing, and publication. These structured processes ensure the accuracy and reliability of the fact-checking outputs, which are crucial for maintaining public trust in journalism.

Overall, fact-checking organizations face several complex challenges in carrying out their duties. Standardization of fact-checking content has become essential with the expansion of the digital space, which includes developing SOPs, handling niche issues versus "loose change" issues, implementing consistent methodologies, and maintaining the quality of results. Fact-checking's content production versus distribution challenges arose in efforts to make the platform a "sleeping partner," increase the content's appeal and redesign the website. Coordinating fact-check content publication flows requires synchronization and automation efforts to maintain timeliness. An effective internal communication and coordination pattern is required, with a joint secretariat concept to ensure synergistic collaboration. In addition, the challenge of sustainability versus donor funding is a critical focus, requiring long-term strategies to ensure operational continuity and independence.

5.1 Limitation

This research has several limitations, namely (1) it only discusses three fact-checking organizations, one in each country, even though several fact-checking organizations have a good reputation in each country; (2) For the Philippines, the research subject is not a coalition, so it is not easy to compare with the other two organizations.

5.2 Recommendation

Several recommendations that can be given from this research to the CekFakta coalition include the following:

1. The role of each founding organization needs to be clarified and enhanced again, especially for media organizations that join, so there are no sleeping partners or partners who do not contribute to the coalition. Suppose a media organization cannot produce fact-checks due to factors such as funding, personnel, or other variable factors. In that case, the organization can become a distributor of fact-checked content prepared by other organizations such as Mafindo.

2. There is a need for a clear division of coordination between the founding organizations so that there is no impression that one organization plays a more critical role than the other organizations.

3. The issue of "heavy" content versus "small change," which is unique to each fact-checking organization, is a uniqueness that still needs to be maintained considering that the target market is different for each organization. There is an audience for heavier fact-checking content, and the wider community needs fact-checking context on various simple issues in everyday life. What needs to be standardized is the quality of the content, for example, regarding the issue of labeling hoaxes, which still differs from one organization to another, as well as the packaging of more interesting fact-checking content, for example, in the form of videos and infographics.

4. More focused coordination is needed in managing the cekcepat.com website by involving the Joint Secretariat, which will begin to be formed in 2022. The three founding members should clearly describe and divide tasks regarding work on the website related to donor programs, supported by an automation process and technology.

5.3 Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude to Google News Initiative (GNI), which has supported the capacity strengthening of the fact-checking process in Indonesia by providing this grant delivered through the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) to the research team for conducting research entitled "*Comparation of Fact-checking Practices: Study of cekfakta.com, Jomcheck, and VERA Files*," which was implemented from October 2023 to January 2024.

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