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Preface

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On behalf of the UKAIS and its committee, we welcome you to the conference proceedings for UKAIS 2026. This volume contains the papers presented at UKAIS 2026: UK Academy for Information Systems, Annual International Conference held on April 09-10, 2026. The conference has 10 tracks and includes 3 Keynote presentations – Dr James Muldoon is Reader (Associate Professor) in Management at the Essex Business School, University of Essex and a Research Associate at the Oxford Internet Institute; Professor Isabel Fischer is Professor of Digital Innovation, University of Warwick; Katie Heard is Head of Research and Data Insights at the Good Things Foundation. We also had a Doctoral Keynote presentation from Professor Pamela Abbott, Professor of Information Systems, University of Sheffield.

The UKAIS conference is the premier academic event in the Information Systems calendar within the UK and attracts leading scholars from the UK and overseas. It is a charity, whose aims are to enhance the recognition and knowledge of IS within the UK, and to provide a forum for discussing issues in IS teaching and research. UKAIS recognises the importance of including practitioners in its work.

The UK Academy for Information Systems was established in 1994 to foster a better understanding of the Information Systems field within the UK. We provide a forum for discussing issues in IS teaching and research and lobby professional/policy bodies on behalf of our field, such as the Office for Students, UKRI/Research England, UK business and UK Government. There is a conference every year, which is usually preceded by a PhD consortium. UKAIS Aims:

- To promote a better knowledge and understanding of information systems within the United Kingdom.
- To improve the practice of information systems teaching and research.
- To enable successful knowledge transfer of IS research into teaching and practice in order to provide a positive economic and societal impact.

Many thanks to all those that have given of their time so freely to review papers for the academy, it is much appreciated.

Thanks to everyone that has made this happen, the UKAIS Board and all the Track Chairs and Reviewers, we thank you all.

April 2026 The UKAIS 2026 Conference Chairs

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Paper 43

Counter-institutionalization in the Age of Disinformation: The Case of Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN)

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Research in progress

Abstract

This paper examines contemporary disinformation as a process of counter-institutionalization through which institutional interventions reshape epistemic authority within global information ecosystems.

Drawing on neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and the concept of counter-institutionalization (Zürn, 2018), the study employs a qualitative critical case study design that integrates discursive analysis, comparative institutional analysis, and network-oriented examination of transnational information infrastructures.

The case of the Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN) is considered a critical example of how actors deploy institutional mimicry to undermine trust.

The paper contributes to research on disinformation and global media governance by shifting the analytical focus from content-level manipulation to institutional-level strategies of epistemic contestation.

The findings show how credibility-producing institutional forms are selectively replicated and reoriented to contest the authority of established fact-checking networks, underscoring the need for resilience approaches that extend beyond content correction to institutional safeguards.

Keywords: fact-checking, disinformation, institutional mimicry, counter-institutionalization, resilience, digital communication, information ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Fact-checking has emerged as a cornerstone of democratic resilience in the digital era. It represents not only a journalistic practice but an institutional infrastructure that upholds the integrity of information systems. Global networks such as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) (Poynter Institute, 2022) have established standards of transparency, non-partisanship, and methodological rigor that guide hundreds of organizations worldwide. Yet, as these standards have become institutionalized, they have also become targets.

Recent years have seen the emergence of pseudo-fact-checking initiatives that replicate the form and discourse of legitimate fact-checking but serve opposing purposes. Among them, the Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN), launched in 2024 by TASS, Russia's state news agency, and ANO Dialog, a government-affiliated non-profit organisation, stands out for its ambition and scope. It presents itself as an international alliance dedicated to opposing "destructive influence on the international and national information space" and promoting "respect for national sovereignty and the right of states to protect their information space" (GFCN Codex, 2025).

This paper positions the GFCN as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for theorizing counter-institutionalization in informational ecosystems as strategic creation of institutions that mimic legitimate structures while subverting their functions. By analyzing the GFCN across discursive, organizational, and systemic levels, the study seeks to illuminate a new form of disinformation that targets the infrastructures of informational ecosystems rather than isolated pieces of false content.

While the analysis adopts a critical stance toward the case, it relies primarily on publicly available materials and secondary investigative reporting. The aim is not normative judgment but analytical examination of institutional mechanisms through which epistemic authority is contested (Reporters Without Borders, 2025; Agência Lupa, 2025).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Fact-Checking as Epistemic Infrastructure

Fact-checking plays an epistemic role in democracies and information ecosystems, safeguarding the conditions for public trust and deliberation. Porter and Wood (2021) provide robust cross-national evidence that fact-checking measurably reduces belief in misinformation, while Lee et al. (2023) show high inter-organizational consistency, positioning fact-checkers as reliable epistemic actors. Lauer and Graves (2024) extend this view by conceptualizing fact-checking as a transnational field governed by shared standards and institutional norms.

However, the prevailing literature in the field remains largely content- or technology-centric, focusing on verification processes or technologies rather than vulnerabilities of the information ecosystem. As fact-checking becomes systematized and globally visible, it also becomes a target for strategic imitation by actors seeking to undermine its legitimacy.

2.2 Ecosystem Perspective and Parasitic Actors

Recent studies treat fact-checking as an ecosystem sustained by funders, media organizations, platforms, and coordinating networks (Lauer & Graves, 2024; Altuncu et al., 2025). This ecosystemic lens emphasizes interdependence and shared resilience, yet it also exposes a structural weakness: openness creates vulnerability. Pseudo-institutions can infiltrate this network, borrowing symbolic legitimacy while eroding trust from within.

2.3 Counter-Institutionalization and Institutional Mimicry

Michael Zürn (2018) describes counter-institutionalization as the deliberate creation of parallel institutions by dissatisfied actors seeking to contest global orders. These entities imitate legitimate forms - rules, memberships, and standards - while redirecting their function toward alternative political objectives. In global governance, counter-institutions emerge where established architectures fail to meet perceived needs for fairness or sovereignty.

Institutional theory provides the second pillar: DiMaggio and Powell (1983) defined mimetic isomorphism as the replication of organizational forms to gain legitimacy in the face of uncertainty.

Whereas classic mimicry aims at inclusion within an institutional field, the GFCN exemplifies mimicry with a subversive intent: rather than seeking inclusion, it aims to subvert the epistemic function of fact-checking by weaponizing institutional legitimacy itself.

2.4 From Disinformation to Counter-institutionalization

Traditional disinformation studies emphasize false claims, whereas the GFCN represents a shift toward institutional capture, characterized by the replication of credible architectures to manipulate epistemic authority. Existing concepts on counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) or government-organized NGOs (Toepler, 2010; Plantan, 2022) partially explain parallel institutions but not their epistemic dimension.

Unlike counter-publics or government-organized NGOs, counter-institutionalization in the epistemic domain targets not participation or representation, but the authority to define verification itself. Therefore, counter-institutionalization extends these ideas to the level of informational ecosystems.

While counter-institutionalization overlaps with adjacent literatures, it differs in analytical focus. Counter-institutionalization foregrounds the strategic replication of institutional forms that are central to the production of epistemic authority.

This perspective captures how verification-oriented institutions are mimicked not merely to advance alternative narratives or political interests, but to intervene directly in the infrastructures that define credibility, neutrality, and trust.

Counter-institutionalization thus extends existing approaches by conceptualising disinformation as an institutional process aimed at reshaping the conditions under which truth claims acquire legitimacy.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), suitable for exploring emerging and under-theorized issues. The GFCN is treated as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of counter-institutional formation within a contemporary information ecosystem. Following Flyvbjerg's logic of critical case selection, it is examined as a strategically important site where mechanisms of counter-institutionalization, if present, should be empirically observable in a particularly explicit form.

The GFCN constitutes a critical case in Flyvbjerg's (2006) sense for several interrelated reasons. First, it represents a deliberately institutionalised project rather than a spontaneous or loosely coordinated initiative. Second, it explicitly models itself on a globally recognised verification institution, adopting comparable organisational forms, terminology, and symbolic markers. Third, the GFCN is openly state-affiliated, rendering the mechanisms of institutional intervention and legitimacy construction unusually transparent. Fourth, it operates transnationally, positioning itself within global information infrastructures rather than a single national context.

Finally, it combines formal organisational structures with explicit epistemic claims, asserting authority over verification and credibility. Following the critical case logic, it should be most clearly observable in cases involving organisational form, discursive claims, and transnational position.

The empirical material consists of publicly available documents produced by the Global Fact-Checking Network between its launch in late 2024 and mid-2025. Data collection focused on materials through which the organisation articulates its institutional identity, verification practices, and epistemic claims.

The dataset includes official statements and press releases published on the GFCN website, normative documents such as codes of conduct and mission statements, training and explanatory materials, and selected publications presented in fact-checking formats. Documents were selected based on their relevance to institutional self-description, explicit reference to verification practices, and availability through official GFCN communication channels.

At the time of analysis, the dataset comprised approximately 150 items, including around 130 website pages, 15 official statements or publications, and a set of core normative documents. The website pages include organisational descriptions, methodological explanations, and published fact-checking materials. Given the organisation's ongoing development, the dataset is considered provisional.

The qualitative analysis followed a framework-informed approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 2010), combining theoretically derived sensitising concepts with inductive attention to empirical material. Initial analytical categories were informed by neo-institutional theory and the concept of counter-institutionalization, including institutional mimicry, epistemic authority, and organisational legitimacy.

At the same time, the analysis remained open to patterns and variations emerging from the data, allowing empirical observations to refine and specify the analytical framework. This approach aligns with the critical case logic by enabling systematic comparison across materials while preserving sensitivity to contextual and processual dynamics.

The analysis proceeds across three interconnected layers.

Discursive level: examination of GFCN's public statements, codes of practice, training materials, and website content to identify rhetorical and semiotic strategies of truth-mimicking, as evidenced through the systematic appropriation of fact-checking terminology, formats, and justificatory frames. The analysis focuses on identifying rhetorical and semiotic strategies of truth-mimicking, operationalised through the systematic appropriation of fact-checking terminology, formats, and justificatory frames. Discursive inversion was identified through a qualitative analysis of texts that examined the relationship between verification-oriented form and epistemic function. Specifically, texts were analysed for instances where fact-checking formats, terminology, and justificatory structures were preserved, while their underlying epistemic orientation was reversed.

Three indicators guided the identification of discursive inversion: (1) the use of standard fact-checking formats (e.g., claim–assessment–verdict) to advance predetermined epistemic positions; (2) the substitution of evidentiary reasoning with appeals to sovereignty, loyalty, or external threat; and (3) the redefinition of verification outcomes in normative or political terms rather than evidentiary ones. Instances where these elements co-occurred were treated as cases of discursive inversion.

Organisational level: The study employs comparative institutional analysis to examine GFCN's governance structures, membership rules, and accreditation practices in relation to established professional fact-checking

standards. While the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) serves as the primary reference point, the comparison is not limited to a single institutional model. Rather, the analysis draws on multiple verification frameworks, including the European Fact-Checking Standards Network, to assess patterns of formal convergence and substantive divergence in institutional function.

On the systemic level, the analysis draws on network-oriented approaches to map GFCN's transnational connections, including its affiliations with actors in Brazil, Venezuela, and other regions. Rather than conducting full-scale network analysis, this stage traces relational patterns and positioning within global information infrastructures, following established approaches to studying transnational fact-checking ecosystems (Lauer & Graves, 2024; Altuncu et al., 2025).

While the network-oriented dimension of the analysis resonates with insights from Actor-Network Theory, the study remains anchored in a neo-institutional perspective. This choice reflects the analytical focus on institutional forms, legitimacy structures, and epistemic authority, rather than on ontological symmetry between human and non-human actors. Network-oriented approaches are therefore employed instrumentally to trace transnational connections and positioning within information ecosystems, without adopting Actor-Network Theory as a primary theoretical framework (Latour, 2005)

Triangulation between primary documents, GFCN's digital papers, and external investigative reports (RSF 2025; Lupa 2025) ensures contextual depth and reliability.

4. Case Study: The Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN)

4.1 Origins and Founding Actors

The GFCN was announced in November 2024 during the "Dialogue about Fakes 2.0" forum in Moscow. Its principal founders are TASS, Russia's state news agency, and ANO Dialog, a Kremlin-linked nonprofit managing government communication and digital engagement. The network's website (globalfactchecking.com), was officially launched in April 2025 by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, who framed it as a platform for "true investigators."

The very name Global Fact-Checking Network echoes the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), while its code of "Responsible Fact-Checking" imitates the ethical frameworks of IFCN and EFCSN. Unlike its counterparts, GFCN's charter lacks requirements for transparency, independence, or funding disclosure. It instead prioritizes "collegiality" and "sovereignty" as important values.

4.2 Discursive Level: Truth-Mimicking

At the rhetorical level, GFCN reproduces the semiotics of verification and claims of neutrality, objectivity, and global cooperation. Its publications employ fact-checking formats (claim + verdict + context) but invert their epistemic direction. For example, articles "inform" that "The Soros family is the shadow organizer of the "HANDS OFF!" protests", assert that ChatGPT amplifies anti-Russian bias, and label EU policy as "EU doubles censorship under guise of countering Russian threat".

This discursive inversion functions as a truth-mimicking device by deploying performative codes of verification to construct alternative realities. The GFCN's self-stands for "harmonization of national interests" and replaces factual accuracy with geopolitical loyalty, transforming epistemic virtues into ideological ones.

4.3 Organizational Level: Institutional Mimicry

GFCN mirrors several formal features of established fact-checking organizations. It accepts both individuals and organizations as members, publishes a "Code of Responsible Fact-Checking," and presents itself as a professional alliance. At the same time, its governance structure lacks organizational independence, as funding and infrastructure development are administered by state-affiliated bodies.

A comparative analysis reveals the absence of core organizational mechanisms typically associated with professional fact-checking, including transparent verification procedures, funding, public accountability reports, and appeals mechanisms.

Rather than supporting professional autonomy, these formal structures function primarily as markers of legitimacy. This pattern aligns with Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) concept of institutional work, whereby organizational forms are selectively appropriated to signal conformity while their professional and epistemic functions remain substantively underdeveloped.

4.4 Systemic Level: Network Embedding

GFCN's membership extends beyond Russia to include actors from Brazil, Venezuela, South Africa, and Nigeria – contexts characterized by strong state involvement in information governance or by public actors that have articulated positions supportive of Russian foreign policy narratives. For example, Brazilian member Lucas Leiroz is sanctioned, and Pepe Escobar is associated with EU-sanctioned entities involved in pro-Russian disinformation.

The network also engages in transnational legitimization practices, such as deploying affiliated "fact-checkers" to observe Venezuela's 2025 elections. While assessments by international observer missions and independent monitoring organisations raised concerns regarding the integrity of the electoral process, GFCN reports characterised the elections as "democratic and peaceful," illustrating how verification-oriented formats can be mobilised to support alternative legitimacy claims (Global Fact-Checking Network, 2025).

Election observation is not a recognised function of professional fact-checking organisations. GFCN's engagement in election monitoring, therefore, represents a boundary-crossing practice that extends verification-oriented legitimacy into domains beyond established fact-checking mandates.

Through these actions, GFCN embeds itself in global information ecosystems not by competing epistemically but by occupying institutional space. This demonstrates counter-constitutionalization as the infiltration of information ecosystems, where pseudo-institutions mimic participation to shift legitimacy boundaries.

5. Discussion and Implications

The GFCN case illustrates how disinformation evolves from content manipulation to institutional simulation, where the forms and languages of epistemic authority are appropriated to contest credibility itself (Hutchings, 2024). This shift carries profound implications for the governance of information systems.

Counter-institutionalization operates by appropriating legitimacy markers: codes of conduct, transparency language, and network membership, and redirecting them to alternative truth regimes. In this sense, GFCN exemplifies institutionalized disinformation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that resilience frameworks grounded exclusively in content correction or cognitive inoculation are insufficient when epistemic authority itself becomes the object of strategic imitation. Much of the current literature conceptualizes resilience at the level of information exposure, either by correcting false content after it circulates (Nyhan & Reifler; Porter & Wood, 2021) or by pre-emptively strengthening individual cognitive resistance to misleading claims through inoculation models (Lewandowsky et al.; van der Linden).

While effective against content-based disinformation, these approaches presuppose the integrity of epistemic institutions and do not account for scenarios in which those institutions themselves are strategically imitated.

Even system-oriented approaches to media resilience (Frischlich & Humprecht, 2021) largely assume the integrity of fact-checking institutions themselves. What these models overlook is the possibility that the institutions of verification, as the actors that produce credibility, can be strategically mimicked.

Building informational resilience, therefore, requires multi-level safeguards that extend beyond content: independent audits of fact-checking organizations, accreditation protocols, and metadata standards that authenticate institutional provenance.

GFCN illustrates how institutional mimicry functions as a geopolitical strategy. By creating a parallel epistemic order, it expands its influence beyond state media, projecting a semblance of pluralism while subverting global media ecosystems

This case enriches theory by extending Zürn's (2018) concept of counter-institutionalization into the epistemic domain. Here, counter-institutions do not contest trade or governance norms but the definition of truth itself and the frontier of global legitimacy politics.

6. Conclusion and Future Work

This developmental paper advances the concept of counter-institutionalization by applying it to the domain of institutional-level disinformation. Using the GFCN as a critical case, the study demonstrates how an existing concept from global governance can be extended to analyze attacks on epistemic institutions, revealing how actors employ institutional mimicry to erode epistemic trust.

Preliminary findings indicate that GFCN functions through three mechanisms: (1) discursive truth-mimicking, (2) organizational mimicry of form without function, and (3) systemic embedding within transnational informational networks. Collectively, these mechanisms transform fact-checking architectures into instruments for advancing political objectives by reorienting their epistemic functions.

The study's contribution is twofold: theoretically, it reframes disinformation as an institutional intervention targeting epistemic authority; practically, it calls for ecosystem-level resilience strategies that audit not only content but also the institutions that claim authority over truth.

As a research-in-progress study, subsequent stages will expand the empirical material and apply discourse-analytic and network-oriented approaches to examine transnational information flows (Lauer & Graves, 2024; Venturini et al., 2018), tracing the diffusion of GFCN narratives across platforms and partner organisations.

Future work will further refine the operationalisation of counter-institutionalization within information ecosystems and develop diagnostic indicators for identifying pseudo-institutional forms in global information systems.

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