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Fact-checking in China: normative and strategic transparency of Chinese journalists in fact-checking reports

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how fact-checking journalism in China presents the principle of transparency. Fact-checking is considered one of the effective strategies for combating fake news, and maintaining transparency in the news production process to build public trust. Facing declining advertising revenue due to the rise of social media and stricter censorship from the Chinese government, Chinese commercial news outlets must both adopt a more pro-government stance to ensure their survival and enhance their credibility to compete with social media for audience attention. Based on semi-structured interviews with five fact-checkers working at fact-checking organisations within Chinese commercial media, the study finds that, Chinese fact-checkers employ proactive, normative transparency to demonstrate professionalism while integrating passive, strategic transparency to adapt to their political circumstances. This study contributes to the global debate on transparency in fact-checking journalism, particularly within the restricted political context of non-Western countries, thereby enriching the global fact-checking network. Additionally, it provides insights into the digital transformation practices within China's journalistic ecosystem.

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Chinese media ecology;
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Introduction

Cracking down on fake news on the Internet and social media has become an essential part of the task around the world (Dong, 2011). Fact-checking is considered an effective way to combat fake news (Amazeen, 2015; Graves, 2016; Kumar, 2024). Although fact-checking journalism originated in the West, it has also flourished in non-Western countries. A study by Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) found that non-profit fact-checking organisations in Africa provide neutral and professional fact-checking in conjunction with traditional normative journalistic objectives. Kumar's (2024) study of fact-checkers in India found that normative fact-checking and transparency principles appear to have become a dominant theme in the Indian context. However, fact-checking organisations in other countries present a somewhat different purpose. Many volunteers at Ukrainian fact-checking sites such as StopFake consider themselves journalists, but the

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site focuses on debunking fake photographs and false statements disseminated by pro-Putin news outlets in Russia and Ukraine, with a mission to ‘combat Russian propaganda’ (Graves, 2018). In China, fact-checking journalism is considered to consolidate the truth and expose the facts (Feng, 2024; Liu & Zhou, 2022) although some studies suggest that it has been used as a political weapon (Montaña-Niño et al., 2024). Therefore, fact-checking has also come under scrutiny, with critics questioning their authority to determine truth and accusing them of political bias (Shin & Thorson, 2017).

Transparency is regarded as an important way for news to demonstrate its commitment to facts and accountability by disclosing sources of information, decision-making processes, and possible conflicts of interest in news production (Karlsson, 2011). This openness and visibility helps news organisations to enhance media credibility. Therefore, fact-checking also considers transparency as an important principle to construct trust. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) has developed five codes: (1) A Commitment to Non-partisanship and Fairness; (2) A commitment to standards and transparency of sources; (3) A commitment to transparency of funding and organisation; (4) A commitment to standards and transparency of methodology; (5) A commitment to open and honest corrections policy. Three of these codes emphasise the importance and necessity of transparency in all aspects of fact-checking. As of January 2024, a total of 122 organisations globally have signed up to the IFCN five codes (IFCN, 2024).

Against the backdrop of declining credibility of professional media and shifting audience reading interests, Chinese commercial media also urgently need to reinvent their media credibility. However, influenced by China’s particular political environment, no fact-checking organisation in China has yet applied to sign up to IFCN’s codes. Nevertheless, some media organisations in China, such as Mingcha (明查), still consider the principles of the transparency or IFCN codes, which can be applied in their own countries, to be their own fact-checking goals.

Although there are still a few studies that use Chinese fact-checking organisations as case studies (Feng, 2024; Liu & Zhou, 2022; Lu and Shen, 2023) as well as a few studies of transparency in specific forms of journalism in China (Meng & Wang, 2023) there are currently limited studies that explore transparency in fact-checking journalism in Chinese political context. This study will analyse in detail the characteristics of transparency in Mingcha to explore how Chinese media demonstrate the principle of transparency in fact-checking news, whether performing transparency is a normative journalistic principle to address the dilemma of de-professionalisation in Chinese digital media or a strategic tool to rebuild audience trust. Therefore, this study attempts to reveal how fact-checking practices respond to political and social challenges while focusing on the unique limitations and complexities of the Chinese media environment. Ultimately, it try to provide insights for understanding the potential and challenges of fact-checking in facilitating public discourse in a politically sensitive environment.

Improving credibility of Chinese commercial media in digital era

With the beginning of the Xi’s regime and the development of Internet digital media after 2012, China’s legacy media survived in a passive transformation. The nature of journalism is also changed: the young journalists conceive of themselves as ‘wage workers (Wang, 2021)’. Wang and Meng (2023) even concluded that Chinese journalism is moving towards de-professionalisation.

On the one hand, market-oriented reforms and the development of social media have made China's commercial media inclined to produce content that caters to traffic and advertisers, resulting in content that tends to be entertaining and shallow, neglecting the truthfulness and depth of news reporting (Stockmann, 2013). On the other hand, pressure from the government and declining advertising revenues due to the growth of social media have forced China's commercial media to be pro-government and to seek opportunities for survival in the cracks. They are also seen by the central government as a tool to calm and stabilise public opinion in social media although they actively transformed to launch online applications to complete media convergence. Dominating this online space is a major objective of the CPC, which fears that the control of public discourse will slip away from the legacy media into the hands of large, online, commercial operators (Wang & Sparks, 2019). Therefore, the central government and commercial media need each other, and the commercial media that once struggled to gain a broad voice in the period of reform and opening up, have once again returned to the embrace of the government in the context of technological development, relying on government funding.

While there are earlier studies suggesting that commercial media in China have an advantage in terms of credibility (Xie & Zhao, 2014), other studies with larger samples have concluded that the most credible media in China is the China Central Television (CCTV), and the most credible newspaper is the People's Daily (PD). They are both official media in China (J. Xu, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Tong's (2017) study of investigative journalists in Chinese commercial media also suggests that commercialisation pressures have led Chinese media to avoid sensitive issues, further eroding public trust. Moreover, in their quest for traffic and immediacy, Chinese commercial media also publish unverified and misleading information that seriously undermines their credibility. National Radio and Television Administration in China publicly reported in 2015 that 15 media outlets, including Yangzi Evening News (扬子晚报) and Southern Metropolis Daily (南方都市报), had been investigated for publishing fake news, more than half of which came from China's commercial media (gov.cn, 2015).

Therefore, the decline in credibility of China's commercial media is the result of a combination of factors, including the entertainment of content brought about by market-oriented reforms, the weakening of journalistic professionalism, the dual pressure of policy and capital, and the impact of social media. This trend has had a profound impact on China's media ecology and information dissemination environment, and provides an important context for the development of fact-checking. Chinese commercial media urgently need to reinvent their media credibility.

Repnikova (2018) found Chinese government initiated a comprehensive campaign against online fake news shortly after Xi Jinping ascended to power, which involved shutting down numerous accounts on Sina Weibo, China's leading social media platform, compelling websites to 'rectify their wrongdoing', detaining individuals accused of fabricating fake news. China's State Internet Information Office (SIIO) has established the Chinese Internet United Rumor-Debunking Platform (CIURDP: 中国互联网联合辟谣平台). This platform relies on the National Internet Rumour-Debunking Joint Mechanism, which consists of 104 units. Some scholars believed that Chinese government categorised authentic information that is not conducive to positive publicity as fake news and being eliminated from China's Internet (Zeng et al., 2017) although they have controlled the spread of fake news on social networks to a certain extent. Regulations issued by the

government often reach the leaders of China's commercial media. As previously analysed, Chinese commercial media also need to show their pro-government side by leaning on policy. For example, they can set up fact-checking or Rumor-Debunking platforms to stand with the government to combat fake news.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that fact-checking journalism has emerged under the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. Although it still exists as a marginalised form of ancillary journalism and is hardly even a mainstream form of journalism in China, it may be able to gain more space for Chinese journalism to have a voice.

Fact-checking journalism in and out of China

Fact-checking is a genre (Coddington et al., 2014) that can most directly fulfil the watchdog function of journalism, defined as a way to assess the truthfulness of political discourse (Graves, 2018), an investigation into the performance of journalism (Saldaña & Mourão, 2018), an instrument of accountability (Palau-Sampio, 2018), or a tool to monitor the rhetoric of authorities (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Almost all of the fact-checking content that has sprung up around the world has been centred on political journalism, following the example of US fact-checking journalism's debunking of politicians' statements. After 2016, however, as the alarm over 'fake news' heated up, leading fact-checkers began to shift their attention away from elite political discourse and towards debunking viral disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy (Graves & Amazeen, 2019; Mantzarlis, 2018). It is worth noting that the fact-checking referred to here is both *ex post* and external. The organisations studied here practice *ex post* fact-checking and external fact-checking, which is an evidence-based assessment of the veracity of published public texts, such as political claims, news reports and social media posts.

The organisational structure of fact-checking entities is multifaceted, reflecting variations in both their institutional affiliations and operational methods. Some professional media outlets maintain direct connections with academic institutions in the university. For example, FactCheck.org at the University of Pennsylvania and the Africa Check Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand, which is supported by the AFP Foundation, exemplify such collaborations (Graves, 2018). Additionally, certain fact-checking organisations formally integrate academic and journalistic expertise in their methodologies. In India, for instance, fact-checking is conducted by 'policy analysts' who perform research, with journalists subsequently refining the results (Kumar, 2024).

In China, the landscape of fact-checking within the country has expanded significantly in response to the information disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid development of the internet. Different types of media platforms play distinct roles in the fact-checking ecosystem. Commercial media outlets, such as 'Mingcha' (明查) by the Paper (澎湃新闻), rely on skilled journalists and researchers to conduct in-depth investigations and fact-checking, providing authoritative and comprehensive factual accounts. Platform-based media, like 'Jiaozhen' (较真) by Tencent (腾讯), leverage their vast user base and technological strengths, utilising training data to enhance algorithms capable of accurately identifying characteristics of false information. Independent media, such as 'Youju' (有据) depend on individuals or small teams to quickly respond and engage with specific audiences via social media. Community-based media, like 'Hezhenlu', (核真录) involve community members in collaborative fact-checking,

thereby enhancing the breadth and inclusivity of the process (Wu & Zhang, 2022). Mingcha was selected as the case study for this research, and the background of Mingcha and the Paper will be presented later.

Understanding transparency at two levels

The core aim of fact-checking is to combat fake news and enhance public understanding of information. However, the effectiveness of fact-checking does not depend solely on the correction of information, but also on its ability to be trusted by the public. Some scholars argued this trust can be built through transparency in the fact-checking process (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). Transparency not only allows the public to understand the workflow of fact-checking, the sources of information, and the methods of verification, but also effectively reduces the public's questioning of the motives and impartiality of fact-checking.

Transparency, as an extension of and rebellion against the journalistic principle of objectivity, has a conceptual inheritance from the notion of objectivity in journalism, while also taking into account the sinking of power brought about by the digital age. Scholars have discussed the concept of journalistic transparency from a number of perspectives, focusing primarily on transparency as a journalistic norm and strategy.

Transparency as a norm of behaviour, scholars have mainly emphasised the openness of transparency and the possibility of achieving true public accountability. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), the 'spirit of transparency' means 'embedding in journalism a sense of how stories are formed and why they are presented as they are'. Chadha and Koliska (2015) define transparency as 'allowing the public to see the decisions, methods, and sources used in the production of news stories'. Transparency is synonymous with 'openness' (Vos & Craft, 2016).

At a strategic level, scholars have extensively examined how media organisations employ transparency within the news production process as a means to bolster credibility. Notably, transparency is often utilised by these organisations as a strategic ritual rather than merely adhering to a regulatory norm (Karlsson, 2011). Fengler and Speck (2019) introduced the concept of 'media transparency instruments' (MTIs), which they define as 'any means of making the media more transparent to the public'. Koliska and Chadha (2018) regard transparency as a journalistic innovation that enhances accountability and legitimacy by providing audiences with greater insight into the news production process. Zamith (2019) found that in the case of data journalism, transparency mechanisms such as the inclusion of references and interactivity settings are rarely present in the regular day-to-day work of data journalists but rather in some kind of exemplary behaviour. Based on a study of the New York Times' flagship podcast, *The Caliphate*, Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022) find that journalists strategically use transparency in an attempt to widen the gap between institutional journalists and alternative news actors. In China, Meng and Wang's (2023) study of Chinese vlog journalists' reporting during the Covid-19 pandemic found that journalists displayed three strong transparency strategies at disclosure of routines, emotions and values, which can also be seen as a manifestation of personal transparency.

Ritualised transparency

Transparency, as a concept that is increasingly being discussed, also needs to be ritualised so that it can be actually used in the production of news, rather than remaining in a conceptual dimension that cannot be used in a concrete way. Karlsson therefore proposes (2011) two rituals of transparency: disclosure transparency and participatory transparency.

Disclosure transparency refers to the extent to which news producers openly communicate the processes involved in news production, making the daily operations of newsrooms clearly observable to the public (Tuchman, 1972). It first and foremost includes transparency of technology, where journalists show what specific technology was used in the production of the news to complete the entire piece (Karlsson, 2011). Secondly disclosure transparency includes transparency in decision making, i.e. what are the journalists' criteria in news selection (Karlsson, 2011). Although transparency in decision-making is a very important point in disclosure transparency, as previously analysed in the strategic sense of transparency, transparency in decision-making is difficult to achieve on a real practical level. This is because news media organisations usually have a closed news culture (Bennet et al., 1985; Deuze, 2005). Most of the news organisations try to achieve transparency by showing the audience how the news is produced, while the criteria and preferences for selecting topics remain the 'dark secrets' of the news organisations.

While disclosure transparency emphasises communicating with the audience, participation transparency aims to involve the audience in the news production process in a variety of ways, which directly or indirectly influence all stages of news production (Karlsson, 2011). Previous research has linked various forms of interactivity that allow audience to participate in the news process as transparent technologies (Bivens, 2008; Bruns, 2004; Deuze, 2005).

Existing case studies of transparency have focussed on different forms of journalism, including online journalisms (Karlsson, 2011; Phillips 2010), data news (Zamith 2019) vlog news (Meng & Wang, 2023) and so on, however, there is still a lack of research on media transparency in China. The particular ways in which transparency exists in China, and whether it exists as a normative journalistic principle or as a strategic reporting technique, require more in-depth research. Moreover, a great deal of research on transparency has been directed at the ordinary news. Fact-checking considers transparency as a fundamental principle. However, limited study has yet explored the expressive characteristics of transparency in fact-checking journalism, especially in non-western countries.

Research questions and methods

Based on the above analysis of the current ecology of the Chinese media and related research on fact-checking in the area of transparency, this study will ask the following two questions:

Q1: How do Chinese journalists use fact-checking to stage transparency?

Q2: What are the reasons for Chinese journalists to adopt this form of transparency in fact-checking?

To answer these two research questions, we used the Paper's Mingcha project as the case study and employed semi-structured interviews as our research methodology.

Mingcha of the Paper as the case study

The focus of this study is Mingcha, a news column under the Paper's News and Current Affairs Center (澎湃新闻新闻时事新闻中心). Given Mingcha's reliance on the broader framework and operations of the Paper, it is essential to first examine the background of the Paper.

Launched in 2014, the Paper (澎湃新闻) emerged as the first Chinese mobile news application to produce and feature its own original content (Speelman, 2016). Positioned as a hybrid platform integrating internet-based technological innovation with traditional news values, the Paper was established as a digital offshoot of the Oriental Morning Post, a state-owned print newspaper based in Shanghai. The Paper primarily targets a demographic of Chinese citizens who are regular users of smartphones and social media. Its readership largely consists of young, educated social elites, including middle-level managers and professionals (Speelman, 2016).

This innovative approach has positioned the Paper as a significant player in the Chinese media landscape, exemplifying the potential of digital platforms to redefine news dissemination in the era of mobile internet. Mingcha is a fact-checking based news team launched in 2021 by the Paper's News and Current Affairs Center. There are currently four full-time fact checkers. As the first practical programme in China that focuses on fact-checking international news, Mingcha has received focused attention from the Paper and the Shanghai Municipal Government.

According to Li Zhigang, Executive Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the Paper, the aim of Mingcha is to effectively lead and grasp the international communication discourse power with professional commanding heights, and create an influential international fact-checking platform. Related reports have been read more than 130 million times on Mingcha's main website and a total of more than 10 million views on the WeChat platform (Li, 2022). This study focus more on Mingcha to investigate the current scenario fact-checking platform in China.

Mingcha was chosen as a case study for fact-checking journalism in China for two reasons. On the one hand, compared to other Chinese fact-checking organisations mentioned above, although they claim to have the textual characteristics of fact-checking news, Mingcha relies on professional commercial media with strict production standards and management systems. On the other hand, a large number of rumour-debunking platforms have emerged in China, but they all focus on directly telling the audience to verify the authenticity of information rather than fact-checking reports supported by strict logical verification and evidence. Therefore, Mingcha is the most influential and representative fact-checking platform in China.

Semi-structure interview

Previous research on journalistic transparency has mainly used content analysis, which fails to capture the 'backstage' processes and complex dynamics of news production (Mellado, 2019). To address these gaps, we conducted semi-structured interviews with

five journalists involved in Mingcha's fact-checking reports. The first round of interviews took place in November 2023, followed by a second online interview in March 2024 to clarify additional questions that emerged after reviewing the initial responses. Interviews were conducted post-Covid-19 lockdown, when China had reopened and social life had stabilised, allowing for in-person interviews and a broader range of topics beyond pandemic-related issues.

Respondents were selected at different levels in the organisations to reflect different experiences and functions. I interviewed the editor in chief of Mingcha for insights into the overall situation, dilemmas, and strategies of the groups. In addition to interviews with working journalists for four (one has been resigned) fact-checkers, to determine how they produce fact-checking journalism and how they perform transparency.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese by native speakers using a standardised question outline. To ensure confidentiality, respondents were anonymised, with their names replaced by codes. Consent to record interviews was obtained in advance; recordings were transcribed in Chinese. The texts were coded to facilitate citation clearer in the analysis section, not for content analysis. [Table 1](#) provides details of the interviewees, their identities, and codes.

Analysis of transparency in Chinese fact-checking journalism

According to the semi-structured interviews, the transparency of fact-checking in Mingcha, as expressed by the fact-checkers, was mainly characterised by transparency of disclosure and participation. However, in terms of decision-making on the selection of topics, Mingcha has been opaque and closed.

Mingcha toolbox of disclosure transparency

It is clear that checking technology are an indispensable verification tool for Mingcha fact-checkers to use in their fact-checking. All of the articles used tech tools, which include anti-search technology, tracking technology, whois queries, Internet archive and so on. When Mingcha uses technology, it clearly states in the article which technology was used, and most articles even give the software used to apply the technology. For example, when fact-checking the authenticity of a photo of a church that survived the California wildfire, the fact-checker described 'the AI content detection tool Hive Moderation to analyze the image'. They found that 97.4% of the image was generated or deeply altered by AI. Further anti-search technology 'revealed no other images or reports related to the miraculous survival of the church in the wildfire, apart from the circulated photo' (Mingcha, 2025). However, these descriptions in fact-checking articles

Table 1. Interviewees and codes.

Interviewees	Identity	Code
A	Editor in chief of Mingcha	I2023-01 I2024-01
B	Fact-checker in Mingcha for 4 years working experience until 2024	I2023-02 I2024-02
C	Fact-checker in Mingcha for 2 years working experience until 2024	I2023-03 I2024-03
D	Fact-checker in Mingcha for 1 year working experience until 2024	I2023-04 I2024-04
E	Fact-checker who worked at Mingcha for two years but resigned in 2023	I2023-05

are very limited to a single sentence: technology + software. They do not expand on the technology.

Due to the limited content of each fact-checking news article, many of the technologies used we can only briefly name and do not have more space to introduce them. Therefore, the ‘Mingcha Toolbox’ column provides us with the opportunity to explain the purpose of using them and transparently disclose the rationale for these techniques. The audience can judge whether it is reasonable and persuasive,

fact-checker B explains the significance of the Toolbox column, ‘it’s more like a kind of secondary transparency’. (I2024-02) As of 30 March 2024, Mingcha Toolbox has published a total of 14 ($N = 14$) articles, in some articles can be divided into three categories which can be seen in [Table 2](#).

Mingcha, as China’s first fact-checking-focused news team, had almost no local case studies to study before this. ‘We all learned how some international fact-checking organisations do it first, and then learned the tools of verification, and kept accumulating more applications of the tools in practice’(I2023-03). Mingcha editor-in-chief A explained.

The ‘Mingcha Toolbox’ is the core resource for fact-checkers, which aims to enhance the disclosure transparency of fact-checking work through open-source tools and data. Its main role is to explain specifically the technical support used in fact-checking. Examples include the use of AIS (Automatic Identification System) to track vessel information and MarineTraffic or VesselTracker to track ship paths to verify relevant content spread on the web, which can be presented in [Figure 1](#) (Mingcha, 2023).

It has introduced 14 different types of checking tools and methods in 14 articles of the ‘Mingcha Toolbox’. On the one hand, these articles provide the audience with a more detailed introduction to the specific use of a particular tool that cannot be expanded in a fact-checking report due to space constraints. On the other hand, disclosure transparency emphasises the importance of revealing the tools and techniques employed in the creation of fact-checking reports (Karlsson, 2011). By disclosing the details of the checking methodology and the tools used, the articles serve as an indirect means of transparency, enabling the public to understand and trust the professionalism of Mingcha.

Cooperation with scholars of participatory transparency

As highlighted in the literature review, fact-checking organisations highly value collaboration with academia and university-affiliated individuals to refine their processes. This collaboration is not merely a characteristic of fact-checking but also embodies participatory transparency. Mingcha’s approach to this collaboration manifests in academic visits by scholars. Researchers are granted access to the newsroom. Although these scholars do not directly contribute to the production of fact-checking reports, they conduct in-depth

Table 2. The number of articles in Mingcha Toolbox with different topics.

Mingcha Toolbox	The number of articles
The introduction of tech tools	6
Fact-checking ideas and platforms	4
AI counterfeiting	4

明查·工具箱 | 茫茫大海中，要如何找到那艘船？

郑淑婧 杨依然

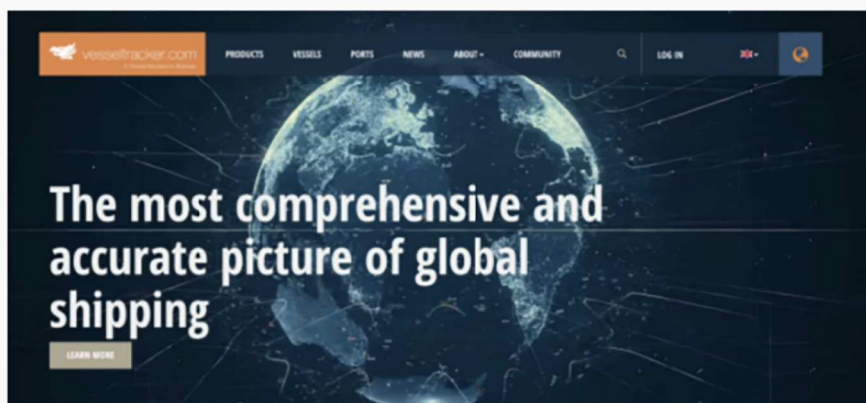
2023-01-26 06:43 来源：澎湃新闻 · 澎湃明查 >

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工具

之前的“明查”工具教程中，我们向大家介绍了借助实时航班跟踪网站追踪飞行器的方法。这次我们来谈谈船舶。

互联网上有大量可用于船舶追踪的工具，如 MarineTraffic/VesselTracker/VesselFinder/ShipSpotting等，主要借助船舶自动识别系统（Automatic Identification System, 简称AIS）运行。



VesselTracker主页。

AIS是一种集船舶识别、通信和导航功能于一体的自助跟踪系统。2004年12月起，国际海事组织（IMO）出于抢险救灾的考虑，要求所有客运船舶及总吨位超过299吨的商业船舶在国际海域行驶时必须携带AIS转发器。小型船舶则可以配备B级AIS转发器。

Figure 1. One article from ‘Mingcha Toolbox’.

investigations using anthropological research methods such as interviews and participant observation. This collaboration highlights the cooperative nature of fact-checking with external entities and reflects an aspect of participatory transparency through active involvement and thorough investigation.

We often host scholars in our editorial office for research, typically for three to four months, and we welcome them greatly. Their involvement allows us to view Mingcha’s development from an industry perspective, addressing areas like audience profiling and industry surveys

that we can't tackle on our own. Third-party input makes surveys more objective, and the feedback and patterns identified are valuable for Mingcha's growth. Additionally, scholars' publications and academic achievements promote the development of fact-checking journalism, and using Mingcha as a case study has expanded its influence within the academic community. (I2023-01)

Mingcha's editor-in-chief, A, expressed strong support for the collaboration with academia. A graduate student from a prestigious Chinese university interned at Mingcha for six months and completed their thesis on fact-checking journalism in China using Mingcha as a case study.

Participatory transparency in fact-checking can be directly demonstrated through scholars' visits within the Mingcha editorial office. This approach not only allows scholars to gain an in-depth understanding of the details of the fact-checking process, but also provides the public with a 'third eye' on the editorial workflow and decision-making mechanisms. Through this open format, Mingcha conveys its commitment to transparency by allowing external observers to enter the core production processes and to independently analyse and document these processes. Deuze (2005) argues that transparency can be seen as, 'a growing number of opportunities for people inside and outside the news to monitor, scrutinise, criticise and even intervene in the news process'. Observations and feedback from academics not only validate the impartiality and scientificity of fact-checking process, but also present these practices to the wider public through academic outputs, thus further reinforcing the concept of participatory transparency.

Non-transparent decision-making

At the strategic level of transparency, many scholars have suggested that news organisations merely express the discourse of transparency rather than the practical work of transparency. They hope to improve public perceptions of media credibility and accountability with minimal sacrifice of professional control (Vos & Craft, 2016). Karlsson (2011) also emphasises transparency in journalistic decision-making when referring to disclosure transparency. However, is this transparency in decision-making reflected in Mingcha's editing room? In fact, Mingcha still produce their own closed environment based on the principle of 'news-centrism', and they still have supreme power over news decisions. Although they openly and transparently show the audience how they make news, the choice of topics and the selection of information remains a 'secret' within the editorial office. There is also a clear lack of transparency in decision-making at Mingcha. The reason of this opacity of decision-making is mainly reflected in two aspects within the media organisation.

The censorship strict system within the supremacy of power

The strict censorship system leaves fact-checkers with very limited space for topic selection and writing. As Figure 2 shows, within the Mingcha editorial department, it usually passes through three reviews i.e. the fact-checkers who wrote the article, the editor-in-chief, and the specialised review department of the Paper. The entire process is called Three Reviews and Three Checks System (三审三校制度).

In the case of selections for some sensitive topics such as those related to China, the article has to pass through four reviews. In addition to passing the ordinary three reviews, it has to be handed over to the head of the Break News Centre (时事新闻中心). And

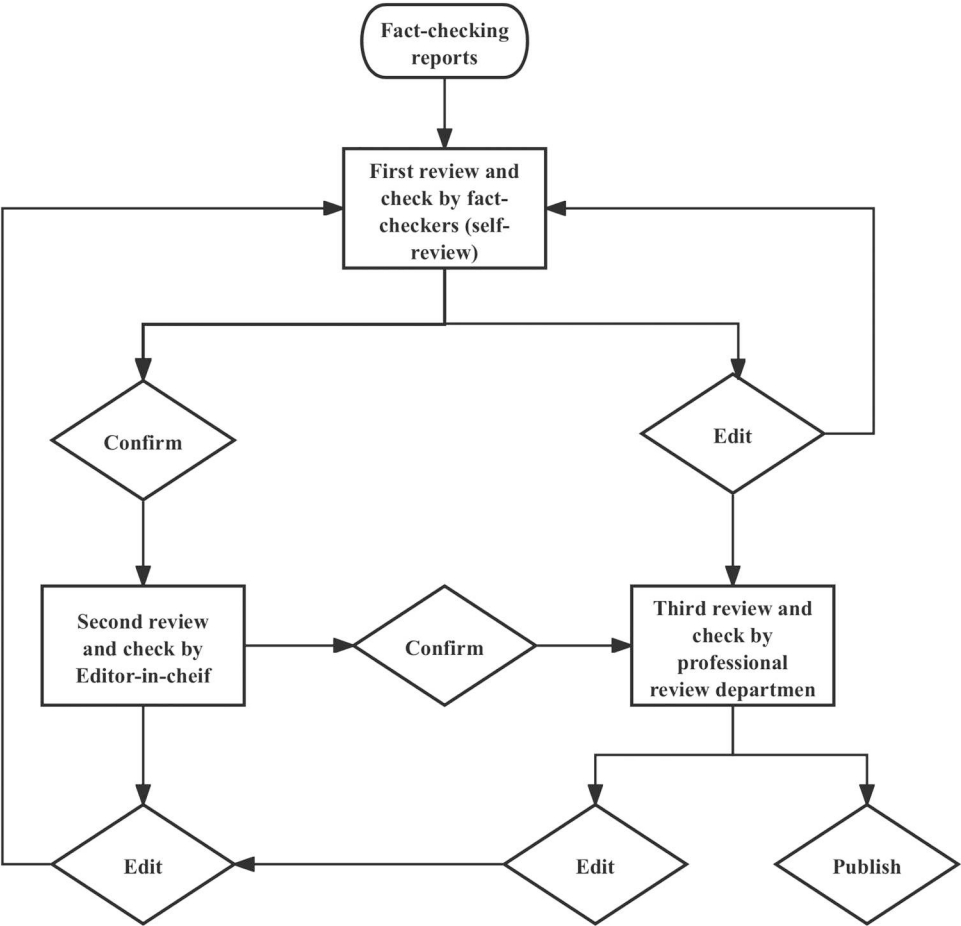


Figure 2. Three reviews and three checks system (三审三校制度).

some extremely special articles such as propaganda articles proposed by government leaders even have to go through five reviews.

In fact, we don't have the term 'five review'. It does not exist in the review system. But for extremely special and sensitive topics, it will only be handed over to the editor-in-chief of the Paper for a final decision on whether to release it if the leaders of the Break News Centre are also unable to determine the impact on public opinion. (I2023-01)

This section, however, addresses a higher-level censorship mechanism that goes beyond the three reviews and three checks system, concentrating on the authority over topic selection and publication decisions.

Although fact-checkers have the power to decide which topics are more likely to be published, they still can't decide at the end whether they can actually publish them or not. It is very common for editors-in-chief to reject fact-checkers' ideas during topic selection meetings. However, above the editor-in-chief is the head of the newsroom, many articles that the editor-in-chief agreed to write and complete would not be released for various reasons. For example, the fact-checker D once wrote a fact-checking report on

the territorial dispute between Bhutan and China. The selection of the topic for this fact-checking report was initially completely agreed upon by the editor-in-chief A. In the course of completing the report, D consulted a great deal of historical information, gained an in-depth understanding of the issues between the maps of the two countries, and interviewed a large number of professionals. Although A and D revised this fact-checking report many times, it was not published in the end.

I really put a lot of effort into writing this report. The editor-in-chief and I revised the language to be more euphemistic and vague. In the end, the article failed to pass the fourth review stage by the leader in charge of the Break News Centre (时事新闻中心). The reason was that the issues involved were more significant might affect public opinion. (I2023-04)

In addition, there are other articles that have been published and then deleted. The fact-checker C mentioned a piece of fake news about the Olympic Games to be held in Shanghai. In the fact-checking report, there was a paragraph stating that ‘the Shanghai government officially responded that it had no plans to host the Olympic Games’. Although this was explained on the official website of the Shanghai government’s Disinformation Platform(上海辟谣平台), the leaders felt that such a statement was too definite and would have a negative impact on the image of the city of Shanghai. The article was eventually deleted the day after it was published.

It’s not really a decision we can make at the editorial level anymore, it’s probably the contradiction between different levels of leadership. They have to consider more from a strategic perspective and a secondary public opinion perspective what the impact of publishing this article. (I2023-03) C, the author of this article, explains.

The censorship system within the Mingcha editorial department also reflects the supremacy of power. The higher the position of power, as [Figure 3](#) presented, the more qualified the person is to decide the direction of the article, while fact-checkers at the bottom of the hierarchy have no real power to decide on the selection and release. The leaders at the upper echelons of power will only give vague explanations for the deleted or ultimately unpublished articles. The reason they usually explain is that the article would have created a large amount of public opinion. Thus, the opacity of decision-making is actually due to the existence of multiple layers of power within the editorial office. Each level of power will almost consider the same selection in a different direction when faced with it. But in the process of consideration, the popularity of the topic and the interest of the audience are put last. The first and foremost task is that this fact-checking report must not cause a large amount of online public opinion to have an impact on the overall image of the Paper, moreover, not to mention touching on sensitive political issues to have an impact on the country’s image. Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed at a forum on the Party’s press and public opinion work on 19 February 2016, that the Party’s press and public opinion work adheres to the principle of party spirit, and the most fundamental thing is to adhere to the Party’s leadership of the press and public opinion work (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). Therefore, both the general audience and the fact-checkers at the bottom of the editorial office have the power to openly and transparently propose selected topics, but the decision-making power is still tightly held by the leadership of the Paper and Chinese government. The

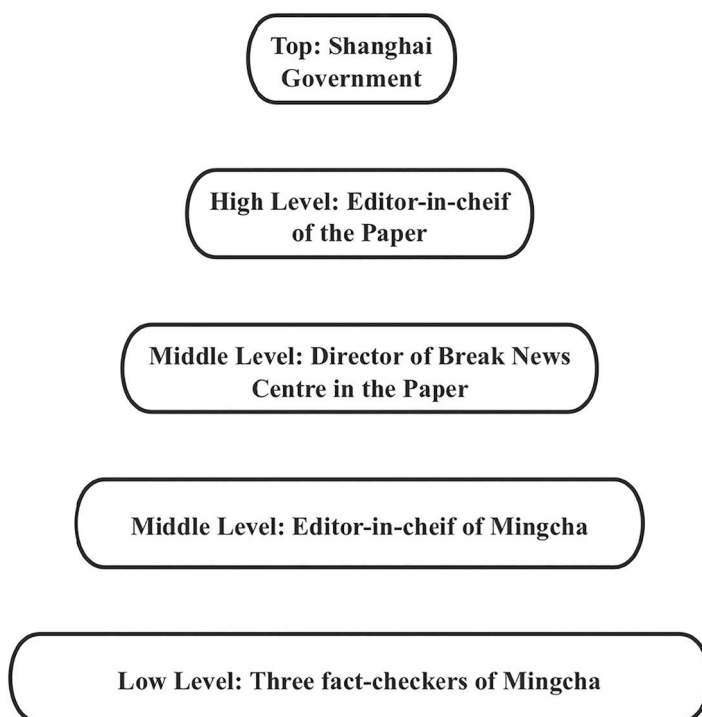


Figure 3. Hierarchical of the paper.

lack of transparency in decision-making has allowed the Mingcha fact-checker to retain a ‘closed’ journalistic culture.

A secretive reward and punishment mechanism

Strict censorship and hierarchy restrict fact-checkers to selective reporting within a limited scope, while a secretive reward and punishment system influences topic choices. Despite having the same basic salary of 3,100 RMB, each fact-checker receives different performance bonuses based on article quantity and quality, with the editor-in-chief grading their work. However, the scoring criteria and final scores remain secret. As one fact-checker explained, ‘Although the scoring criteria are not public, we know from our salaries that China-related or propaganda articles receive higher pay, so we focus on these topics each month’ (I2023-04).

For the editor-in-chief, the awards and the attention of the leadership can secure more hard and soft funding for Mingcha as a project. For example, the editor-in-chief will have more opportunities to negotiate with the leaders on Mingcha’s staffing and travelling expenses.

Additional funding is needed for me to try to discuss with the leadership although Mingcha doesn’t have to think about survival because it is dependent on the Paper. If the Mingcha project get more attention from the society or praise from the government leaders, I can discuss easily with the leadership of our editorial department internal needs. For example, when we go to South Korea for the Global Fact-Checking Conference in July 2023, the amount of travelling expenses is something we have to negotiate with our leaders. (I2024-01)

Mingcha Editor-in-Chief A explains. In addition, A is also very active in getting Mingcha involved in various awards because besides the increased attention that winning an award can bring, there are also some additional funds that can be obtained. ‘Although these funds can’t be paid out on each person’s salary, we can organise some activities together. [The important thing is that] Mingcha’s influence will also grow and its credibility will increase’ (I2024-01). But in fact-checkers who win these awards also give part of the prize money to the writer of the article, as well as to several other fact-checkers. But the percentage of this prize money distributed by the editor-in-chief that reaches each person is different and unknown (I2023-05).

Mingcha’s reward and punishment system is entirely opaque, yet it operates under ‘unwritten rules’ accepted within the industry. Fact-checkers at the bottom must focus on relevant topics and produce high-quality reports to earn higher salaries. Editors-in-chief, in middle management, it is necessary to ensure that Mingcha publishes fair and transparent fact-checking reports of high quality and at the same time balances the tastes of the top management to gain more attention and funds for Mingcha. Therefore, opaque reward and punishment mechanism influences the entire editorial team’s topic selection, shaped by the needs and preferences of leadership.

Conclusion and discussion

Scholars typically view transparency as both a normative journalistic rule and a strategic performance in news organisations (Karlsson, 2011; Meng & Wang, 2023), often treating these as a dichotomy (Chadha & Koliska, 2015; Vos & Craft, 2016). However, the analysis of Mingcha in previous sections shows that both normative and strategic transparency coexist, driven by complex factors.

Proactive normative transparency as routine

Normative transparency in Mingcha stems from its proactive commitment to professionalism of fact-checking. From its inception, Mingcha has prioritised factual accuracy, as reflected in its slogan, ‘facts are sacred’, prominently displayed on its website. The rise of fake news, particularly after the Covid-19 outbreak, has destabilised the global news ecosystem, making it crucial for international news to reflect a real and diverse world. Therefore, after studying many foreign news cases editor-in-chief A proposed Mingcha, a fact-checking-based news project.

They initially researched and read many academic papers and professional fact-checking websites abroad. All fact-checkers in Mingcha also carefully read IFCN’s five codes. Editor-in-chief A believed it should be more open and transparent than ordinary news, especially the logic of fact-checking and the use of supporting materials. This is what they are currently able to achieve in the context of Chinese politics. The multiple and different supporting materials, the application of rating system, the Toolbox and Lab columns, and the audience interaction webpage all came about in this context.

Mingcha has now basically developed a regular writing framework and fact-checking logic. In the process, transparency has become a normative requirement that affects every fact-checker implicitly. It has also become a habit passed on among fact-checkers. Normative transparency was Mingcha’s proactive choice that originated from the founders’

initial desire to restore a truer world and to provide audiences with more professional fact-checking tools to reduce the harm of the spread of fake news.

Passive strategic transparency to survival

Strategic transparency is a survival tactic Mingcha adopted in China's political context. Relying on the Paper's financial support, Mingcha doesn't prioritise audience needs but focuses on increasing its brand influence and credibility to gain attention from higher authorities. While audience recognition helps build credibility, Mingcha's fact-checking on topics like the Russo-Ukrainian war has earned a loyal following. Reports on China-related issues have further strengthened its credibility, aligning with both government's requirement of building up China's image through media propagandas and rising patriotism among the general public in China today. Ultimately, decision-making power on news topics lies not only in the hands of journalists and editors, but also in the hands of the upper echelons of the newsroom. The greatest power remains in the hands of the party and the government. This strategic avoidance and performative transparency is a choice of Mingcha to survive in the Chinese context.

On the other hand, Mingcha as fact-checking journalism needs to present transparency to obtain higher credibility, so scholarly visits become a way that does not involve decision-making on topic selection but can also reflect participatory transparency. In fact, it is difficult for academics to enter into the discussion of fact-checkers' decision-making on the selection of topics. Most of the decision-making discussions come from the Internet through social media especially after Covid-19, this work habit is more in-depth and reasonable. It is difficult for academics to access the WeChat groups set up by fact-checkers and some important meetings on selected topics are denied to academics because of internal confidentiality and even if they do participate, they do not have the power to intervene decisions. 'News-centrism' remains firmly entrenched in the editorial rooms of China's fact-checking news. From another perspective, however, academics do have full access to the verification process and understand all the steps and methods of Mingcha's fact-checking.

From these two analyses, it is clear that, unlike previous studies of Western media, both normative and strategic transparency exist in Chinese fact-checking. The reason for performing normative transparency is that the founder learned from Western professional organisations at the beginning to establish Mingcha. This logic and methodology of transparently displaying fact-checking to audiences has been internalised into a fixed framework for writing. Strategic transparency is a technique and a tool used by Mingcha to enhance its influence and credibility in the current political context of China. The non-transparency of topic decision-making is the newsroom-driven strategy, which is the long-term survival of a media organisation in the Chinese political context. Therefore, strategic transparency is a passive choice for Mingcha under objective factors.

Mingcha's practice demonstrates that even in restrictive environments, news organisations can still enhance credibility through the flexible use of transparency while maintaining a certain level of professionalism. This model provides practical examples for media policy makers in China and abroad on how to cultivate credible fact-checking practices through innovative transparency strategies in restrictive environments. In addition, the case of Mingcha demonstrates that in a diverse media ecology, fact-

checking practices need to adapt to local political and cultural environments while earning public trust and international recognition through transparency and normative operations. This experience provides insights for IFCN to better understand and support fact-checking activities in non-Western environments.

This study, a qualitative exploration based on interviews, lacks extensive quantitative analysis. However, it provides an initial understanding of transparency in fact-checking journalism in non-Western countries, contributing to the global fact-checking network. Future research could incorporate quantitative methods, such as content analysis, to examine fact-checking texts further and explore the impact on communication effectiveness and audience experience across different cultural contexts.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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