



IFCN's Code of Principles Transparency Report for 2020

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Prepared by Baybars Orsek (Director) and Ferdi Ferhat Ozsoy (Program Manager) of the International Fact-Checking Network

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Background

Founded back in late 2015, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) has been advocating for higher standards among the global fact-checking community. To fulfill that purpose, a code of principles for fact-checkers has been developed and introduced to the community in 2016.

This report aims to provide a clear and transparent update on our code of principles through its key metrics in 2020.

Code of Principles was immediately signed up by **35** organizations from **27** countries after its launch in 2016. Facebook [announced](#) it will rely on it for their 'Third Party Fact-Checking Program' in December 2016, after an **open letter** to Mark Zuckerberg was signed by the community, addressing the need for fighting against misinformation.

In January 2017, a new system of independent external assessors reviewing adherence to the code and setting up an advisory board to determine whether the applicants qualify to become a verified signatory or not. A year after the launch of this application process, an online application portal was introduced in 2018 to streamline the process.

Leveraging the increasing pool of independent external assessors and the growing number of fact-checking organizations around the world, the number of verified signatories to the code reached 60 organizations from 40 countries in January 2019.

As of the publishing of this annual report for 2020, the International Fact-Checking Network has 82 organizations from 58 countries among its verified signatories.

Code signatories range from big beasts of traditional media such as Le Monde's **Les Decodeurs**, in France and the **Washington Post** in the U.S, to global newswires AFP, AP and Reuters, non-profit organizations and start-ups such as **Rappler** in the Philippines. As the list of signatories has grown, so has the diversity of news and political environments in which they work. Some operate in what are effectively one-party states and others in multi-party systems. (Few enjoy the relative simplicity of working in a two-party state.) For some, official information is easy to get and generally judged reliable. For many more, the reverse is true.

To ensure the changes in the code are applicable in different parts of the world, we reached out to fact-checkers worldwide over six months, and in December 2019 they ratified dozens of detailed changes. This new code came into effect in April 2020

First, the **new code** includes new rules on who can be a signatory. It bans state-controlled media, demands signatories are focused primarily on public interest issues and requires a longer testing period.

Second, given that in most countries it's rare for every political party to generate the same number of checkable claims, signatories must prove they select what to check based primarily on the reach and importance of the claims themselves, not falling prey to false balance. At the same time, they must explain how their choices adhere to the principle of non-partisanship. We then work with external, independent assessors to review the evidence from the applicants.

Third, we have introduced standards for sourcing and methodology that range from the quality of sources to rigor in how claims are tested. These standards ensure greater fairness and accuracy.

Fourth, parent media companies that want a fact-checking unit to be a signatory must follow an honest and open corrections policy themselves. This ensures that the parent company works in concert with the signatory in disseminating accurate information.

Fifth, we are working with **the independent assessors** to introduce a randomized sampling of the fact-checks produced and have almost tripled to 31 the number of criteria that applicants are judged on.

Lastly, we want the fact-checkers' audiences to be more involved in checking the fact-checkers' work too and are encouraging signatories to publish a summary of their IFCN assessment in their own language.

We look forward to allocating our resources and efforts to increase the effectiveness of our process and ensure higher standards for fact-checkers in accountability and transparency.

Key metrics

Received applications

Between January 1st - December 15, 2020, IFCN have received a total of **117** applications from **63** countries resulting with acceptance. Out of those 117 applications **44** of them (from 31 countries) have been received from first time applicants while **73** (from 42 countries) of them come from renewing verified signatories.

It is important to note that every verified signatory needs to go through a renewal process, basically with the same requirements as far as the application goes for first time applicants, to keep their verified signatory statuses.

The application process was initially designed not longer than a month for applicants, however, due to the increasing number of first time and renewing applications, the average time to process and application from its receipt to decision, has risen to **45 days**, and around **70-80 days** in rare cases where finding new assessors for new countries presents itself as a challenge or extended discussion is deemed necessary by our advisory board.

Due to that increased volume of applications, there are **36** applications that have not been processed yet. 26 of those pending applications are currently being assessed and 10 of them are waiting for the advisory board decision. **21** of those pending applications are from first time applicants while **15** of them are from renewing applicants.

Accepted applicants

Between January 1st - December 15, 2020, **81 applications resulted in acceptance**. **58** of those applications were renewals while **23** of those accepted applications were from first time applicants. Here are the first time verified signatories to IFCN's Code of Principles in 2020.

[Bolivia Verifica \(Bolivia\)](#) / [Congo Check \(Democratic Republic of Congo\)](#) / [Cotejo.Info \(Venezuela\)](#) / [EFE Verifica - Agencia EFE \(Spain\)](#) / [Fact Ferret Service \(United Kingdom\)](#) / [FactSpace West Africa \(Ghana\)](#) / [Faktoje.al \(Albania\)](#) / [Grupo La Republica Publicaciones SA \(Peru\)](#) / [Källkritikbyrå \(Sweden\)](#) / [Logically \(United Kingdom\)](#) / [Media Foundation for West Africa \(Ghana\)](#) / [MediaWise \(United States of America\)](#) / [Newschecker.in \(India\)](#) / [Newsmeter \(India\)](#) / [Oštro-Razkrinkavanje.si \(Slovenia\)](#) / [Real or Not Myanmar \(Myanmar\)](#) / [Reuters \(USA\)](#) / [Stopfals.md \(Moldova\)](#) / [The Dispatch \(United States of America\)](#) / [The Healthy Indian Project \(India\)](#) / [USA TODAY \(United States of America\)](#) / [Verificat \(Spain\)](#) / [Youturn \(India\)](#)

Albania, Bolivia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Moldova, Myanmar, Sweden, Slovenia, Peru, and Venezuela joined the list of countries hosting at least one verified signatory of IFCN's Code of Principles.

IFCN's advisory board has provided a waiver to one application on the below criteria since the requirements associated with those criteria could have posed real life harm and danger to the applicants.

4.2 : Applicants that are independent organizations have a page on their website detailing each source of funding accounting for 5% or more of total revenue for its previous financial year. This page also sets out the legal form in which the organization is registered (e.g. as a non-profit, as a company etc).

Rejected applications

Our audit and update process earlier this year introduced an approach to provide feedback and guidance to applicants failing short of meeting all our criteria instead of rejecting the applications as long as they meet the criteria partially. Those applications acceptance can take several months through regular follow up and monitoring before they can eventually be accepted. However, between January 1st - December 15, 2020, more than 15 applications were rejected even after that process. Rejected applicants are invited to reapply after three months should they manage to address the feedback and suggestions.

Funding of application process

In order to support the global fact-checking community. IFCN is subsidizing the application fees by compensating the \$150 difference between the \$200 application fee and the \$350 paid for assessments. The **\$17,550** deficit from the application process was funded in 2020 by IFCN's funding from Luminate.

Advisory Board

The International Fact-Checking Network has 15 members in its **advisory board**, 11 from active verified signatory organizations and up to 4 independent board members participating in decision making processes except vetting incoming applications to Code of Principles.

Approved in September 2020, the International Fact-Checking Network's **Bylaws** lay out the governance structure of the IFCN. The responsibilities of the advisory board members and the IFCN Director are available in the bylaws.

Board members who come from active verified signatory organizations represent the geographical diversity of the network. They are pioneers in the development and implementation of fact-checking in their countries and regions. All board members are unpaid.

The Advisory Board's main role is to help oversee the verification process of the code of principles, but it is also consulted on all matters of other decisions that have an international

relevance for fact-checkers. Independent board members do not cast votes for incoming applications to IFCN's Code of Principles, while actively participating in all other decisions.

The role of the advisory board members in applying for the code of principle is fundamental, because once the external advisors issue a recommendation on the applicant, the board votes. The organizations are approved after obtaining at least six votes in favor.

Pool of external independent assessors

External assessors are the first filter in the application and vetting process of the code of principles. External assessors are journalism professors, researchers or media consultants that have a solid knowledge of the media and fact-checking ecosystem, a broad understanding about transparency and freedom of the press and about the political context of the country or region where they work and where the assessed applicants publish their fact checks.

The IFCN currently has a pool of 168 advisors.

International Fact-Checking Network puts a strong emphasis on the expertise, geographical coverage, and impartiality of its pool of external independent assessors. 42 different assessors have assessed applications for IFCN in 2020. IFCN organized webinars for the assessors during this year's virtual Global Fact and afterwards to disseminate the know-how and experience essential for assessments. The 34 pages long guidelines for the assessors provides the assessors with guidance on the interpretation of the code as well as good examples and red flags to provide context to assessors.

External independent assessors are invited to the pool by IFCN's staff through direct consultation with industry experts.

In 2021, our efforts to widen our assessors pool will continue to address the need for new and qualified assessors given the increase of applications we receive both from first time applicants and existing verified signatories for renewal purposes.

Complaints against verified signatories

Starting with the introduction of the updated criteria to the code, IFCN introduced a new complaints system where the public can submit complaints regarding the verified signatories. Effectively from 1st of April 2020, 167 complaints on 11 verified signatories have been recorded by IFCN. The complaints that are identified as relevant to verified signatories' compliance to Code of Principles have been shared with the assessors during the application process for their review. Out of those 167 complaints, 14 of them have been identified as legitimate complaints, meaning they should be shared with the assessors during the renewal assessments.

Durin 2020, a very significant amount of complaints have been submitted one single source against one specific verified signatory, therefore, encouraging us to explore how to navigate

such overwhelming attempts without allowing the system to be abused while making sure legitimate complaints are recorded.

It is also important to note that the overwhelming number of complaints received are not necessarily related to the code but more about individual fact checks that those organizations have submitted to Facebook's Third Party Fact-Checking Program.

We are monitoring the [appeals process](#) that Facebook has for publishers and fact-checkers and advocating for an appeals system that doesn't put fact-checkers liable for their fact checks and at danger before publishers attack them. The International Fact-Checking Network does not oversee the complaints related to individual fact checks on any social media platform's partnerships with fact-checkers and handling the disputes between publishers and fact-checkers is not a part of our responsibility. It is up to the platforms how they enforce their interventions based on their own policies and practices.

During 2020, International Fact-Checking Network has not launched an official investigation against a verified signatory, however, StopFake in Ukraine has been invited to apply before the expiration of their status to address concerns related to their non-partisanship. Their application has been approved and it can be found [here](#).

Most frequently scrutinized criteria

In order to shed light to first time and renewing applicants, we find it valuable to share where the applicants found it challenging to meet some of the criteria.

Non-Compliant

Applications that are rejected are usually found non-compliant due to the following reasons:

1. ***Criteria 1.1 : The applicant is a legally registered organization, or a distinct team or unit within a legally registered organization, and details of this are easily found on its website.***
 - a. Most organizations that fail with this criteria because:
 - i. Legally they can not register their organization in their country due to restrictions
 - ii. The lack of freedom of press in their given country.
 - iii. Don't want to share - this can be many reasons from not being transparent of who they are to safety issues within their given countries.
2. ***Criteria 1.3: The applicant has published an average of at least one fact check a week over the course of the six months prior to the date of application. For***

applicants from countries with at least 5 or more verified signatories need to have at least a fact check a week over the twelve months of publishing track.

- a. This can vary from organization to organization. Most Applicants apply when they meet this Criteria, but some fail due to the amount of organizations in the given country .
3. *Criteria 1.4: On average, at least 75% of the applicant's fact checks focus on claims related to issues that, in the view of the IFCN, relate to or could have an impact on the welfare or well-being of individuals, the general public or society.*
 - a. Organizations fail to meet this criteria in countries where Press Freedom is an issue, and organizations are hesitant to check claims that involve issues within their countries context.
 4. *Criteria 1.5: The applicant's editorial output is not, in the view of the IFCN, controlled by the state, a political party or politician.*
 - a. Assessors have found connections to the state, a political party or politician and found applicants non-compliant for this particular requirement.
 5. *Section 3: A commitment to Standards and Transparency of Sources*
 - a. As a whole section, applicants fail to meet this requirement due to not providing sources within their fact checks or the sources used are not sufficient for the accuracy of the fact checks.

Request for changes

As stated in the **guidelines** for the IFCN Code of Principles, applicants have chances to make changes to only certain sections of the application during the assessment period.

One of the most common changes requested happens due to issues with links and documents provided which are easily fixed through communication with the applicant. Others include clarification or recommendations to the applicants website.

Certain Sections that often need amending are the following:

Section 4: A commitment to transparency of funding & organization

1. *4.2 : Applicants that are independent organizations have a page on their website detailing each source of funding accounting for 5% or more of total revenue for its previous financial year. This page also sets out the legal form in which the organization is registered (e.g. as a non-profit, as a company etc).*

On a rare occasion the funding of the organizations requests a waiver on this criteria.

2. ***4.3 : A statement on the applicant's website sets out the applicant's organizational structure and makes clear how and by whom editorial control is exercised.***

4.4 : A page on the applicant's website details the professional biography of all those who, according to the organizational structure and play a significant part in its editorial output.

These two criterias are essentially related to each other. Here there are usually minor corrections to make organizational structure a bit more clearer on the organization webpage along with the professional details that might be missing.

Section 6: A commitment to an open & honest corrections policy

1. ***6.1 : The applicant has a corrections or complaints policy that is easily visible and accessible on the organization's website or frequently referenced in broadcasts.***

Here the most changes that are requested deal with making the information easily accessible by users to the web site.

2. ***6.2 : The policy sets out clear definitions of what it does and does not cover, how major mistakes, especially those requiring revised conclusions of a fact check, are handled, and the fact that some complaints may justify no response. This policy is adhered to scrupulously.***

Here most organizations state out the clear definitions of what it does cover, but fail to state what they do not cover and changes are requested.

3. ***6.3: Where credible evidence is provided that the applicant has made a mistake worthy of correction, the applicant makes a correction openly and transparently, seeking as far as possible to ensure that users of the original see the correction and the corrected version.***

Here organizations usually provide the corrections they have published but have technical issues in presenting corrected articles or have not stated that an article was corrected.

Resources

This year's Code of Principles Transparency Report aims to serve as a go-to resource for those who are interested in knowing more about the application process and how it works. Building on this accumulated feedback, we will keep publishing similar reports with year-by-year comparisons on the metrics shared above.

If you have any questions or request for elaboration on any of these metrics and/or insights, please reach out to factcheck@poynter.org. You can also consult related links for more on each of those topics pertaining to IFCN's Code of Principles.

- The commitments of the code of principles
 - poy.nu/code
- Guidelines for applicants
 - poy.nu/applicants
- Guidelines for assessors
 - poy.nu/assessors
- Checklist for applicants & assessors
 - poy.nu/checklistcop
- Application for Code of Principles
 - poy.nu/apply
- Complaints policy and form for violations
 - poy.nu/complaints