

## Visualizing Truth in Digital Conflicts: Fact-Checking as Image Governance in Contested Information Spaces

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### Abstract

In contemporary digital conflicts, images function not merely as communicative content but as architectural structures of meaning that organize perception, affect, and political positioning within information spaces. Visual misinformation—through decontextualized photographs, altered screenshots, memes, and video fragments—operates by destabilizing the spatial and semiotic coherence of these environments. While existing scholarship has extensively examined fact-checking as an epistemic or journalistic corrective, its role as a visual-governance practice remains underexplored. This article reconceptualizes fact-checking as a form of image governance that intervenes in the circulation, spatial positioning, and symbolic stabilization of visual meaning in conflict-laden digital environments. Drawing on qualitative visual analysis of approximately twenty-five image-centered fact-checking reports published between 2020 and 2023 by international and Indonesian platforms, the study examines how misleading visuals are dismantled, recontextualized, and architecturally reassembled. The analysis identifies three recurring modes of visual governance: visual deconstruction, contextual re-anchoring, and symbolic repair. By situating fact-checking within image studies, visual culture, and spatial theories of digital media, this article advances an interdisciplinary understanding of how visual meaning is governed in contested information architectures. The findings suggest that fact-checking operates not only at the level of factual verification but as a culturally situated practice of representational re-architecture, essential for maintaining visual coherence and mitigating conflict escalation in contemporary digital spaces.

**Keywords:** *Visual Misinformation, Image Governance, Fact-Checking, Visual Framing, Digital Conflict, Representation.*

### Introduction

Digital media environments have increasingly become contested arenas in which images play a central role in shaping public understanding of events. In moments of political tension, social polarization, or crisis, photographs, screenshots, memes, and short videos frequently circulate more rapidly and exert greater affective influence than textual claims. These visual elements do not simply accompany narratives; rather, they actively organize perception, emotion, and interpretation. In this sense, images function as architectural components of digital information spaces, structuring how conflicts are seen, interpreted, and remembered. (Mitchell, 1994; Rose, 2016)

From the perspective of architecture and image studies, digital media environments can be understood as visual-spatial systems in which images operate as structuring elements rather than as isolated representations. Within such systems, misinformation constitutes not only epistemic distortion but architectural disruption. This article positions fact-checking as a form of visual governance that intervenes in these disrupted image architectures, contributing to debates on representation, spatial meaning, and the regulation of visual environments.

Within such environments, visual misinformation has emerged as a persistent feature of contemporary information conflicts. Images are often removed from their original temporal, spatial, or social contexts and reinserted into new narrative frames that support polarizing or misleading claims. A photograph from a previous event may be presented as evidence of a current conflict, while a cropped screenshot or selectively edited video can visually authorize false interpretations. These practices

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exploit the evidentiary authority commonly attributed to images and their capacity to naturalize constructed meanings.

Fact-checking organizations have become key actors responding to these dynamics. However, academic discussions have largely conceptualized fact-checking as a journalistic practice concerned with accuracy, verification routines, and epistemic authority (Graves, 2016). While this perspective remains important, it underestimates the fundamentally visual character of much contemporary misinformation. In practice, many fact-checking interventions revolve around images: tracing their origins, analyzing visual manipulation, reconstructing spatial and temporal contexts, and re-presenting visuals within explanatory frameworks.

This article argues that fact-checking should be understood not only as an epistemic or journalistic activity but also as a form of image governance. From this viewpoint, fact-checkers operate as visual interpreters who intervene in the representational architecture of digital spaces. Their work involves regulating how images function, circulate, and acquire meaning, particularly in conflict-sensitive environments where misleading visuals can intensify social tension. By examining fact-checking through the lens of image studies, this article addresses an underexplored intersection between visual culture, media representation, and conflict communication.

### **Visual Conflict and Image Architecture**

Visual conflicts arise when images are mobilized as primary sites of contestation within digital information environments. On contemporary platforms, images operate not as neutral reflections of reality but as representational structures that organize attention, emotion, and interpretation (Entman, 1993). Photographs, memes, screenshots, and video fragments serve as symbolic architectures through which events are spatially and temporally framed in public discourse.

In conflict situations, visual misinformation disrupts this representational architecture by dislocating images from their original contexts. Through processes of recaptioning, selective cropping, or temporal displacement, images are transformed into semiotic resources that can be repeatedly reassembled to support divergent and often antagonistic narratives. As a result, digital spaces become fragmented environments in which competing visual structures struggle for legitimacy.

From an image-studies perspective, such dynamics can be understood as a breakdown of visual coherence. Meaning is no longer stabilized through shared contextual reference but is continuously renegotiated through circulation, platform affordances, and user interpretation. Images function as nodal points around which information conflicts crystallize, making the struggle over visual meaning as significant as disputes over factual accuracy.

Within this disrupted architecture, fact-checking interventions can be understood as attempts to restore visual order. By identifying image provenance, reconstructing original contexts, and re-presenting visual evidence within interpretive frames, fact-checkers engage in a process of visual re-architecture. Rather than merely negating false claims, they reorganize the representational space in which images acquire meaning, thereby repositioning fact-checking as a practice aligned with image governance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on visual framing theory, image semiotics, and spatial metaphors of digital media to conceptualize fact-checking as an intervention in the governance of visual meaning. Visual framing theory extends traditional framing approaches by emphasizing how images structure interpretation through selection, composition, and contextual anchoring (Entman, 1993; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Images frame problems, assign significance, and evoke moral evaluation, functioning as active agents in meaning-making rather than passive representations.

Semiotic approaches further clarify how images operate as systems of signification. Visual signs convey meaning through both denotative and connotative layers (Barthes, 1977; Mitchell, 1994). In the context of misinformation, connotative meanings are frequently manipulated through recontextualization, juxtaposition, or visual emphasis, enabling images to signify events or intentions that exceed what is visibly depicted. The persuasive power of visual misinformation lies in its ability to present constructed interpretations as self-evident visual proof.

Complementing these perspectives, the concept of digital space as representational architecture provides a spatial lens for analyzing visual conflicts. Digital platforms can be understood as environments in which images are positioned, circulated, and hierarchically organized through interfaces, algorithms, and user practices (Crary, 1990). Meaning is shaped not only by the image itself but also by its placement, repetition, and proximity to textual claims.

By integrating these approaches, the article conceptualizes fact-checking as a form of image governance operating across visual, semiotic, and spatial dimensions. Fact-checkers intervene by exposing semiotic manipulation, re-anchoring images to their original contexts, and reconstructing the visual architectures through which credibility is established. This framework enables an analysis of fact-checking as a culturally situated practice for regulating visual meaning in contested digital spaces.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative visual-analytical methodology grounded in image studies and visual culture research. Rather than treating fact-checking outputs primarily as journalistic texts, the methodology approaches them as visual-architectural interventions that reorganize representational space, visual hierarchy, and meaning within digital environments. The analytical focus is therefore placed on images as spatial, semiotic, and relational structures embedded in contested information architectures.

## **Research Design**

The research is designed as an interpretive qualitative study that examines how image-based fact-checking practices intervene in the circulation and stabilization of visual meaning during digital information conflicts. The study does not seek to measure the effectiveness of fact-checking in correcting beliefs; instead, it investigates how visual meaning is governed, restructured, and symbolically repaired through fact-checking practices.

This approach aligns with traditions in visual methodologies and image studies that emphasize close reading, contextual interpretation, and the relational positioning of images within broader representational systems (Rose, 2016). Digital platforms are treated as spatial environments in which images operate as architectural elements shaping perception, attention, and interpretation.

## **Data Selection and Corpus Construction**

The empirical material consists of image-centered fact-checking reports published by selected international and Indonesian fact-checking organizations. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure analytical relevance and conceptual depth.

### **Cases were selected based on the following criteria:**

The presence of a central visual artifact (photograph, meme, screenshot, or video still) that functioned as primary evidence within a contested claim.

The circulation of the visual within a conflict-sensitive or polarized digital context, such as political disputes, social tensions, or crisis-related misinformation.

The inclusion of explicit visual analysis within the fact-checking report, such as image comparison, annotation, provenance tracing, or contextual reconstruction.

Using these criteria, a corpus of approximately 25 image-based fact-checking reports published between 2020 and 2023 was assembled. The selected materials represent a range of visual formats and geopolitical contexts, allowing for comparative analysis across different modes of visual misinformation and correction.

## **Units of Analysis**

The primary unit of analysis is the visual artifact as re-presented within the fact-checking report. Each case was analyzed across three interconnected visual moments:

1. The image as it circulated in its misleading or decontextualized form.
2. The image's original or source context as reconstructed by the fact-checking process.
3. The image as symbolically reconfigured within the corrective narrative.

Analytical attention was given to visual features such as framing, cropping, resolution, annotation, juxtaposition, and spatial placement in relation to explanatory text. This multi-layered approach enables an examination of how visual meaning shifts through recontextualization and architectural repositioning.

### **Analytical Procedure**

The analysis proceeded through an iterative, three-stage process informed by visual semiotics and spatial metaphors of digital media.

First, each case was examined to identify the dominant mode of visual misinformation, including decontextualization, temporal displacement, symbolic misattribution, or selective visual framing.

Second, the fact-checking intervention was analyzed to determine how visual meaning was dismantled and reorganized. Particular attention was paid to the techniques used to expose visual manipulation, reconstruct original contexts, and guide interpretive realignment.

Third, patterns across cases were compared to identify recurring strategies of image governance. Through this comparative process, three analytically grounded modes of visual intervention emerged: visual deconstruction, contextual re-anchoring, and symbolic repair.

This analytical procedure emphasizes interpretive coherence and conceptual saturation rather than statistical generalization, consistent with qualitative research traditions in image studies and visual culture.

### **Analytical Validity and Reflexivity**

To enhance analytical rigor, the study employed cross-case comparison and repeated close readings of visual materials. Categories were refined iteratively to ensure they emerged from sustained engagement with the data rather than from a priori assumptions.

Research reflexivity was maintained by situating the analysis within established debates in visual culture, image semiotics, and digital media studies. Rather than claiming neutrality, the study acknowledges that visual interpretation is a situated practice, and positions fact-checking as a culturally embedded form of visual governance operating within contested representational environments.

### **Findings**

The analysis identifies three interrelated modes through which fact-checking organizations govern visual meaning in digital conflict environments: visual deconstruction, contextual re-anchoring, and symbolic repair.

#### **Visual Deconstruction**

Visual deconstruction involves exposing the constructed nature of misleading images. Fact-checkers frequently employ techniques such as zooming, annotation, and side-by-side comparison to reveal cropping, editing, or selective framing. By making these manipulative practices visible, fact-checkers destabilize the image's claim to authenticity and undermine its persuasive authority.

For instance, in several fact-checking reports examining photographs circulated during political protests, visual annotations were used to expose selective cropping that removed police presence from the original frame, thereby reconstituting the image's implied narrative (*Zelizer, 2010*).

#### **Contextual Re-Anchoring**

Contextual re-anchoring refers to repositioning images within their original spatial, temporal, and social contexts. Fact-checking reports often trace image provenance, identify original publication dates, and clarify production circumstances. This process restores contextual reference points, enabling audiences to reinterpret images within a coherent and verifiable narrative.

#### **Symbolic Repair**

Symbolic repair addresses the broader representational consequences of visual misinformation. Beyond correcting inaccuracies, fact-checkers reframe images to mitigate their potential for social harm, particularly in conflict-prone contexts. This may involve explaining the implications of misinterpretation or situating images within narratives that emphasize restraint and collective responsibility. Symbolic repair thus functions as a preventive form of image governance aimed at stabilizing meaning and reducing the escalation of visual conflict.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that fact-checking operates as a practice that extends beyond epistemic correction into the governance of visual meaning. Through visual deconstruction, contextual re-anchoring, and symbolic repair, fact-checkers actively reorganize the representational architecture of digital spaces. These interventions highlight that visual misinformation constitutes not only false content but also a structural disruption of how images function within public discourse.

From the perspective of image studies, the analysis underscores the importance of conceptualizing fact-checking as a visual-cultural practice. Images are dynamic structures whose meanings are continually negotiated through circulation and framing. Fact-checking, in this sense, acts as a regulatory mechanism that seeks to stabilize interpretive pathways within fragmented information environments. (Mirzoeff, 2011; Pallasmaa, 2012)

The emphasis on symbolic repair also reveals a normative dimension of image governance. In conflict-laden contexts, the impact of visual misinformation extends beyond individual misperception to collective harm. By foregrounding social consequences, fact-checking practices implicitly articulate an ethics of visual responsibility, positioning fact-checkers as custodians of representational integrity within digital architectures.

## Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes fact-checking as a form of image governance embedded within the architectural dynamics of digital information spaces. By foregrounding images as spatial and semiotic structures central to contemporary information conflicts, the analysis demonstrates how fact-checking practices dismantle misleading visual architectures and reconstruct stabilized pathways of meaning. (Tufekci, 2017; Walter et al., 2020)

Extending debates within architecture and image studies, the article positions fact-checking as a culturally situated practice of representational re-architecture, operating beyond textual correction and epistemic verification. In increasingly fragmented visual environments, the governance of how images circulate, signify, and acquire legitimacy emerges as a critical condition for sustaining coherent public meaning and mitigating the escalation of visual conflict.

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