From Fact-Checking to Narrative Grounding: Toward Local Narrative Infrastructures for Epistemic Justice

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Traditional fact-checking focuses on verifying discrete claims, often overlooking the broader narratives and local contexts that give misinformation its persuasive power. We argue for a shift to *narrative grounding*: an approach that embeds verified information within locally meaningful community narratives. Drawing on empirical insights from studies of local identity, community storytelling, and knowledge gaps, we propose *local narrative infrastructures* as sociotechnical systems supporting collaborative creation and verification of community narratives. We present three design provocations: community truth platforms integrating stories with evidence, AI-augmented local knowledge gathering, and hybrid physical-digital story spaces. We examine practical considerations including managing risks to truth-tellers, fostering expert-community collaboration, and ensuring epistemic justice in whose knowledge is recognized. Our position bridges empirical analysis and design speculation to envision systems empowering communities to ground truth in narrative rather than isolated facts, strengthening resilience against misinformation while promoting inclusive knowledge production.

1 Introduction

Misinformation is not merely a collection of false facts; it often takes the form of compelling *narratives* that resonate with people's values and experiences. Traditional efforts to counter misinformation, such as fact-check articles, truth labels, and content moderation, tend to focus on verifying or debunking individual claims. While such methods can correct specific falsehoods, they frequently fall short in shifting entrenched belief systems. Fact-checks alone often fail to alter long-held worldviews [3, 9, 37]. Indeed, false information often feeds into larger narrative frames or deep stories, such as nostalgia-based or identity-based myths, that resonate with communities and reinforce pre-existing worldviews [19, 33, 36]. Intervening at the level of individual claims may thus do little to dismantle the overarching story that gives them meaning. People often interpret facts through pre-existing narrative schemas, especially around local or communal issues, where experiential testimony from trusted community members carries significant weight [6, 7, 31, 35].

The efficacy of fact-checking is also limited by local context: what counts as credible evidence varies across communities [5, 34]. Many online platforms lack content tailored to small towns, rural counties, or vernacular perspectives, resulting in persistent *information gaps*: topics with demand but systematically limited supply of accurate, contextualized information [10]. These information gaps can be quickly exploited by opportunistic actors who introduce misleading narratives, particularly when official coverage fails to serve community-specific domains [20]. In such environments, rumors or conspiracies often fill the gap, further marginalizing local truth.

In this paper, we propose **narrative grounding** as a complementary strategy to fact-checking tool design. Narrative grounding involves situating information within coherent, locally meaningful stories constructed through both verified facts and community participation. Instead of presenting claims as isolated propositions, narrative grounding weaves them into the lived histories, cultural values, and experiences of a place, fostering robust public understanding and engagement [8]. In short, a fact is most readily persuasive when embedded in the right narrative frame.

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Our argument is grounded in empirical work on localness: studies of online identity signals [12], community storytelling and migration [11], evaluation of AI knowledge gaps in local domains [12], and deployed narrative tools in situated contexts [13]. We found that local authenticity is often signaled not through accurate recall of local facts, but through experiential, affective, and relational cues. Furthermore, in the absence of anchored community narratives, individuals naturally resort to hearsay or unverified online content to make sense of local topics [10, 14].

Building on these insights, we position our work at the intersection of fact-checking, community storytelling, and information infrastructure. We first articulate narrative grounding as a new direction for combating misinformation (Section 2), then propose design provocations for *local narrative infrastructures* (Section 3), and finally discuss supporting this collaborative work while addressing issues of risk, power, and epistemic justice (Section 4). Our aim is to inspire progress toward technologies that treat local communities as co-creators of grounded narratives that uphold truth and justice.

2 Position: From Fact-Checking to Narrative Grounding

We propose reorienting misinformation response efforts from a predominant focus on *fact-checking* toward *narrative grounding*. This position emerges from our empirical work and growing critiques of the fact-checking paradigm.

Fact-checking typically involves verifying specific claims and labeling them as true or false. While valuable for flagging false information, this approach does not fully address how misinformation embeds itself in belief systems. The core problem is not just faulty facts, but the compelling *stories* into which those facts are woven [1]. A false claim about election fraud may be one element of a larger conspiracy narrative; debunking that single claim might not dispel the overall stolen election belief. People can acknowledge a fact-check yet remain aligned with a narrative that gives them community or meaning.

Conventional fact-checking also presents truth in one-size-fits-all formats, divorced from local context. Fact-checks written for broad audiences assume general cultural references, but what resonates as credible differs hugely across communities [14, 17]. A fact-check citing national experts may carry little weight with local audiences who trust community leaders or have contradictory lived experiences [5, 24, 43]. In our studies, participants often discounted "official" information from outsiders that conflicted with their experiences, echoing findings that local audiences are skeptical of distant authorities [15, 20].

Furthermore, focusing on isolated facts can overlook systemic biases in knowledge representation. Information platforms often carry implicit values about what counts as valid knowledge [1]. Fact-checkers might dismiss knowledge from marginalized groups because it doesn't fit canonical evidence formats. Content moderation algorithms have flagged personal health stories as misinformation when they contradict official guidelines, potentially erasing lived experiences crucial for understanding truth [28]. The fact-check paradigm risks inadvertently perpetuate epistemic injustice by centering official facts while devaluing narrative knowledge from the margins [39].

We define **narrative grounding** as constructing and validating narratives where each component is supported by evidence and contextualized within the community's lived reality. This goes beyond verifying propositions; it entails collaboratively weaving *coherent stories* that are both factually correct and culturally resonant.

In our conception of narrative grounding, the unit of analysis — and likely intervention — is the narrative rather than the atomic fact. For instance, instead of writing "Claim: The new factory is causing water pollution (False)," a narrative-grounded approach might work with local groups to build a timeline incorporating historical water quality data, resident anecdotes about river changes, scientific explanations, and acknowledgments of uncertainty. The result is

a community-vetted narrative explaining how pollution rumors started, what investigations occurred, what evidence shows, and how residents can stay informed.

This approach draws inspiration from science and technology studies emphasizing storytelling as inquiry and engagement [7]. By bringing narratives to the forefront, community members become *sense-makers* who help ground truth in lived experience [29]. Prior HCI work shows people trust information connecting with their personal context [7, 15, 31]. By embedding facts in community narratives, we hypothesize that true information will gain stronger footing in people's cognition and community memory.

Our position is that narrative grounding may help tackle misinformation at the level of stories while empowering communities in knowledge production. It shifts epistemic authority from external fact-checkers to local communities, under the premise that collaboratively grounded narratives will carry more weight and relevance. This leverages rigorous fact verification but infuses it into the storytelling fabric of communities.

3 Design Provocations: Toward Local Narrative Infrastructures

If we are to embrace narrative grounding, what tools and platforms would facilitate this practice? Here we present design provocations oriented around **local narrative infrastructures**: socio-technical scaffolding that allows communities to generate, share, and maintain grounded local narratives over time. These infrastructures prioritize local knowledge, participation, and information needs. Our provocations are informed by fieldwork and related HCI/CSCW systems, offering speculative concepts to inspire discussion and future prototyping.

3.1 Community Storytelling Platforms for Truth

We envision Community Truth Platforms: wiki-like spaces where local narratives are iteratively co-written, sourced, and challenged. The design draws on two strands of CSCW scholarship. First, online–deliberation systems such as *ConsiderIt* and *Reflect* showed that structured templates, listening back-channels, and pros/cons lenses help citizens articulate positions while remaining open to revision [22, 23]. Later work added on-demand fact-checking and newcomer-crafted prompts, demonstrating that verification cues and light facilitation can coexist with civic dialogue [21, 27]. Second, community-storytelling research illustrates how context-aware prompts and summarisation widgets surface experiential knowledge that would otherwise stay fragmented [2, 7]. Building on these insights, this provocation treats verification as a core narrative element: contributors drag photos, public records, or sensor readings into a story canvas that automatically requests citations and provenance links, producing living, multi-voiced accounts whose truth claims remain visible and contestable.

Unlike prior deliberation wikis that focused on national policy or encyclopaedic scope, we target the hyper-local information gaps where misinformation breeds. By coupling *ConsiderIt*-style trade-off framing with *Reflect*-inspired listening cues and *Datavoidant*'s information gap detection [10], Community Truth Platforms aim to convert ad-hoc rumours into collaboratively vetted truth blocks centred on place. The contribution is thus not a new wiki per se, but a locality-first infrastructure that weaves storytelling affordances and continuous fact-checking into a single workflow, advancing deliberation research toward misinformation-resilient, community-owned knowledge.

3.2 AI-Augmented Local Knowledge Gathering

Building on Halperin et al. [15]'s community storytelling agent for documenting housing-insecurity experiences and subsequent work that tailors generative chatbots to multi-ethnic disaster-preparedness contexts [42], we envision conversational agents that elicit and cross-verify locally grounded stories rather than composing narratives wholesale.

Guided by co-design insights from fact-checker collaborations [25], a chatbot first invites residents to share lived accounts, then, with consent, queries a retrieval-augmented local knowledge base to surface corroborating evidence (e.g., inspection reports, council minutes). When contradictions arise, the agent highlights them ("Earlier you said X, the archive shows Y") and encourages reflection, echoing RAG-driven dialogue systems that keep provenance visible [13, 30, 32].

Prior studies show users trust AI-generated credibility cues only when source links are transparent [13, 26]; our design provocation adopts this finding by embedding inline citations and confidence tags next to each retrieved fact. Our envisioned agents treat evidence as a first-class conversational turn, weaving sensor data or public records directly into the dialogue canvas. The human narrator retains editorial control: deciding which AI-suggested references to accept—while discrepancies become part of the final narrative, transforming potential misinformation moments into co-constructed sense-making episodes. In short, community members supply experiential texture, and AI supplies connective provenance, together producing semi-structured stories that marry local voice with verifiable fact.

3.3 Hybrid Physical–Digital Story Spaces

Hybrid Story Hubs re-purpose library or museum corners into small record-and-reflect studios: residents drop in to capture oral histories, scan photographs, or annotate a map; AR kiosks then super impose those contributions with public-record snippets or sensor data. The vision synthesises lessons from participatory heritage platforms, e.g., Tsenova et al. [40]'s community–historian fact-checking workflow, playful library installations such as the Department of Hidden Stories that scaffold child-led digital storytelling [41], and using embedded AR layers to deepen place-based understanding when historical sources are surfaced at the point of view [18]. Unlike earlier museum PD projects that prized engagement over veracity [38] or recent CSCW studies that foreground migrant self-expression without formal verification [4], Story Hubs weave source links and confidence cues directly into the exhibit: every anecdote is anchored to an archival object or citation, allowing visitors to toggle between lived voice and documented evidence.

These provocations are not mutually exclusive and could be integrated. Together, they sketch an ecosystem supporting creation, verification, and sharing of local knowledge, treating truth-telling as communal narrative act.

4 Supporting the Work: Risk, Collaboration, and Epistemic Justice

Designing local narrative infrastructures is not just a technical challenge; it is inherently social and political. We discuss three critical dimensions for supporting narrative grounding work: managing risks, fostering collaborations, and upholding epistemic justice.

Empowering community truth-tellers exposes them to risks. Local narratives challenging powerful interests may invite backlash. Narrative infrastructures must include anonymity options, legal resources, and harassment prevention policies. Narratives also could become vehicles for falsehoods if not properly verified. Built-in verification loops should allow community reviewers to tag unverified assertions, marking narrative parts as disputed until evidence is found. Moreover, sharing personal narratives can involve substantial vulnerability. Support structures like community moderation, peer support, and professional counseling for trauma may be necessary.

Narrative grounding requires collaboration between expert fact-checkers and community members, who respectively bring investigative skills and experiential knowledge. Co-creation requires negotiating roles and authority; in HistorEsch, historians had to negotiate content with community contributors, sharing epistemic authority [16]. Design solutions might include formal structures (committees with community representatives and experts), platform features (summon expert buttons, expert-community content handoffs), and capacity building through workshops teaching media literacy

and fact-checking skills. We envision establishing networks of partnerships between libraries, universities, fact-checking organizations, and hyperlocal media that could help pool resources and lend credibility to narrative projects.

We frame narrative grounding as pursuing **epistemic justice**: ensuring diverse communities have equal authority in producing and validating knowledge [1]. Infrastructures must welcome those often excluded from civic knowledge projects through multilingual support, non-digital participation options, and accessible interfaces that allow vernacular expertise to shine. Narratives should use Creative Commons licensing controlled by communities, with media outlets crediting community authors rather than co-opting content. When communities hold false beliefs, narrative grounding means inviting evidence-based examination rather than automatic validation: epistemic justice is not relativism but fair participation in determining truth.

5 Future Work

We see a pressing need to move narrative grounding from concept to practice through community-engaged deployment and evaluation. Future work should pilot narrative-grounded storytelling systems in real locales, co-design evaluation frameworks with community partners, and conduct comparative studies against traditional fact-checking approaches to measure impact on trust, meaning-making, and community resilience. Models of community governance and decentralization are also an empirical question, and it is likely important to explore licensing or sociotechnical frameworks that help protect local control and prevent capture by external actors.

Scaling narrative grounding raises questions about maintaining local specificity while enabling connections across communities. Future studies could explore how narrative infrastructures might bridge neighboring regions (e.g., shared climate or migration stories) without erasing place-specific voice. It will be important to experiment with modular tools and open frameworks that allow diverse communities to tailor narrative interfaces while benefiting from shared development and support.

Finally, as narrative grounding extends to practice, we must prioritize safety, inclusion, and justice. This includes field-testing privacy-preserving features (e.g. pseudonymity, anonymized archives), designing workflows for expert–community collaboration, and ensuring marginalized voices are centered in story creation. Ethically guided deployments, with attention to power, emotional risk, and epistemic justice, align with past CSCW calls for participatory, justice-oriented community systems and research collaborations [1].

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