INFORMATION CRISIS AND POST-TRUTH REALITY: THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND FACT-CHECKING

Prof. Viktorija Car, PhD,
University of Split, Communication and Media
and Asst. Prof. Iva Nenadić, PhD,
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science

Abstract

European Union's policies to address multifaceted and ever evolving problem of disinformation have been consolidating over the past five years. The European Commission's 2018 Communication introduced the „European approach to tackling online disinformation", which puts forth inclusive and adaptable policy measures recognising the intricate nature of the phenomenon and the swift changes occurring in the digital landscape. This paper specifically focuses on fact-checking, which plays a pivotal role within the European approach to combating online disinformation. Over the past years fact-checking has been growing as a successful market, supported also by EU policies and public financing. At the same time, media organisations appear to be less prominent or are even completely absent from some relevant policy and financial streams. The discussion focuses on potential implications that such separation between fact-checking and the media may have for sustainability of journalism and the public interest – having in mind that fact-checking is primarily debunking disinformation that is already out there, while strengthening the media and professional journalism could prevent some deceiving narratives from reaching wider public in the first place, and in any case to counterbalance disinformation.

Key words: information crisis, disinformation, fact-checking, journalism, EU policies

Introduction

The information environment has been changing profoundly and rapidly in recent years. As social scientist and philosopher Philippe Van Parijs said at a small event in spring 2023, in a lifespan of one generation we came from news shortage, where only few TV channels and daily newspapers were available to citizens, to news abundance. Technological advancements, along with the proliferation of online platforms, initially seemed to offer the potential for a greater variety of voices and perspectives in the realm of news. Instead of fulfilling this promise, it has predominantly resulted in what

is commonly referred to as „information disorder" (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Within this disorder, citizens face challenges in distinguishing reliable information from misleading content (Grbesa and Nenadic, 2022), leading to a significant rate of news avoidance among individuals (RIDNR, 2022). Furthermore, young people, in particular, have become increasingly disengaged from traditional news sources and rely more heavily on social media for their news consumption (Eddy, 2022).

The erosion of trust in the media, experts, and democratic institutions has emerged as a significant concern. When confidence in traditional media and institutions declines, alternative sources of information gain prominence, particularly online (Nenadic and Vuckovic, 2021). Notably, the Reuters Digital News Reports 2021 revealed that individuals who rely on specific social media platforms, such as TikTok, prioritize personalities and influencers over mainstream news sources. Influencers have assumed the role of interpreting meaning and shaping new value systems, often promoting their personal experiences as the sole valid truth. Liesbet van Zoonen (2012) calls this cultural process I-pistemology – in which opinion and personal experience became more important than facts. It is a process that has grown into a modern phenomenon, and Van Zoonen (2012) believes that this process arose as a result of critical theory and movements that identified „knowledge" as an instrument of power that needs to be challenged. The consequence of this avoidance of encountering information that is the result of scientific knowledge and analytical interpretation based on knowledge, and not on intuition and emotions, puts an end to any critical thinking.

Such fragmented audiences that are exposed to contents that do not encourage them to develop critical thinking but to continuously confirm their own views, are fertile ground for disinformation and misinformation. In periods of economic, social, or political crises (such as the Covid-19 pandemic, or Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022), small groups and close connections online remain the primary source of information for an individual with more potential for suggesting content which advocates a certain constructed reality that is not based on accurate, verified facts (more in: Car and Jurišić, 2021).

These developments and conditions pose many challenges in ensuring informed citizenship, a key condition of a functioning democracy. While the role of the media remains vital in such process, other actors are entering the field and gaining importance. One of them are fact-checking organisations, whose rise is attributed to the interplay of socio-political crises, technological change, and decline in the quality of journalism (Amazeen, 2020). As pointed out by Grbesa and Nenadic (2022: 77): „This process of „deprofessionalisation" of journalism and the inability of the media to respond adequately to technological changes and disinformation challenges, has opened the space and need for specialised fact-checking organisations". In this paper we discuss the relationship between the media and fact-checking organisations in the European context and with a specific emphasis on how this relationship is potentially shaped by the European policies against disinformation.

Journalism as a discipline of verification

The American Press Institute, an educational non-profit organization established more than 70 years ago, describes journalism as a „discipline of verification", arguing

that the confirmation of truth or authority is what makes journalism different from other forms of communication and, hence, distinguishes journalists from other, similarly acting communicators. A similar view is shared by Alfred Hermida (2012b: 659), who claims that „through the discipline of verification, the journalist establishes jurisdiction over the ability to objectively parse reality to claim a special kind of authority and status". The discipline of verification has always been a normative essence of journalism (Kovach and Rosentiel, 2001), a core argument through which to claim special status and authority in society. Reuters Handbook of Journalism highlights that accuracy is at the heart of what journalists do. „It is our job to get it first, but it is above all our job to get it right" (Reuters Handbook, Accuracy, n.d.).

The quest for validity has grown in relevance in an environment characterised by information abundance and concerns over the scope and impact of disinformation and viral hoaxes. There is more emphasis and the need for the media to ensure complete and reliable information in counterbalancing misinformation and helping citizens to navigate an increasingly complex information environment. And yet the media continue to negotiate the tensions between being first and being right (Hermida, 2012a), frequently at the expense of accuracy.

Even before the rise of social media, some scholars have questioned whether verification, as a time-consuming activity, is even a feasible goal for time constrained daily journalism. Lewis et al. (2008) found that only half of the stories analysed in British outlets made any visible attempt to contextualise or verify their main source of information, and in less than one in five cases was this done „meaningfully". Shapiro et al. (2013) interviewed Canadian journalists to find out that verification is often a circular process, meaning that the quest for accuracy sometimes rests in knowledge that is derived from a reporter's earlier work and that continues after the act of reporting.

Traditionally, fact-checking has been an integral part and inseparable from journalism and media work. However, what we are observing in recent years is a boom of specialised fact-checking organisations which are increasingly establishing themselves as self-standing organisations and projects, often with little or no links with the legacy media. Today's information overload and the new means to spread disinformation at scale, grew a need for a systematic, specialised, tech-savvy, and independent approach to fact-checking, especially in the digital space. Nevertheless, an important question arises on why there is a separation of fact-checking from journalism and what are the possible consequences of this for the information environment and an informed citizenship. This paper delves into this consideration.

Fact-checking in or out of the media

Some of the leading media companies and journalism associations are developing projects, units, and initiatives to strengthen the fact-checking component within journalism. The American Press Institute, for instance, by 2020 led a programme to increase and improve practice of fact-checking in journalism and to make accountability journalism in general more effective for audiences[1]. The British

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[1] See: https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/category/fact-checking-project/

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), as the United Kingdom's public service media and one of the leading media globally has a BBC Reality Check, which is a BBC News service dedicated to publishing fact-checked content[2]. Agence France-Presse (AFP), as one of the most renowned news agencies supplying thousands of media clients around the globe, established a department specialised in fact-checking. AFP collaborates with the biggest online platforms, including Google, Meta, TikTok, and Twitter[3], in an attempt to minimise misinformation online, and is a very active member of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network as a member of European fact-checking community[4] and as a partner in several local EDMO hubs[5].

While there is more consideration for fact-checking within journalism, there seems to be even more separation of fact-checking from journalism. Fact-checkers are often (former) journalists, but fact-checking is also different from other forms of journalism. For instance, while journalists should check information before publication, fact-checkers check and debunk stories that are already circulating in the public space. The number of fact-checking organisations has doubled globally in the past six years. According to the latest report by the Duke Reporters' Lab (Stencel et al, 2022), there were close to 400 active fact-checking organisations around the world, which is twice as much as in 2016 when the disinformation problem came into spotlight with the Brexit vote and the U.S. presidential elections. Fact-checking organisations exist as both for-profit and non-profit entities, and their association with traditional journalism outlets is weakening, as warned already in 2019 by Emily Bell[6]. The Duke Reporters' Lab report from June 2022 shows that about 40 percent of fact-checking organisations are not affiliated with media organisation. In addition, UNESCO pointed out a complex and at moments problematic relationship between the media and fact-checkers, the actors that are supposed to be partners, especially in Southeast Europe[7].

Disconnection between traditional journalism outlets and fact-checking organisations may be happening for various reasons, including the lack of economic resources for investment in technology and practice of fact-checking, as well the low professionalism and professional dissatisfaction of journalists who migrated from the media to fact-checking organisations. Furthermore, there is also a need to focus on fact-checking, in addition to journalism. Specialised fact-checking organizations can dedicate all their resources and efforts to the task of verifying information, without being concerned with the pressures of producing news content or generating revenue from advertising. This allows them also to develop and employ technology solutions and related skills. By operating independently, fact-checking organizations can attempt to establish themselves as trustworthy sources of information, which may be especially important in an era where trust in traditional media outlets has been declining or is

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2   See: https://www.bbc.com/news/reality_check
3   See: https://factcheck.afp.com/about-afp
4   See: https://edmo.eu/fact-checking-community/
5   See: https://www.afp.com/en/agency/press-releases-newsletter/afp-joins-five-new-european-hubs-fight-disinformation
6   See: https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fact-check-industry-twitter.php
7   See: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/strengthening-relationship-between-independent-fact-checkers-and-media-outlets-promise-quality

in general low. They can collaborate with a variety of media outlets and other partners, without being seen as being aligned with any particular media organization. Then, there is also a non-negligible dimension of funding. Being smaller organisations, rather than departments of larger media organisations, may help in securing funding from a variety of sources, including foundations, philanthropic organizations, and individual donors. Additionally, some funding schemes available lately and with explicit focus on fact-checking may not be available to large media companies[8].

Journalism – fact-checking relationship
in the EU policy against disinformation

Fact-checking takes a prominent role in the European Union's policy against disinformation. In this paper we specifically explore the articulation of the relationship between traditional journalism outlets and fact-checking organisations in documents and instruments that form a base of the EU's anti-disinformation policy. The tone and scope of the EU policy to tackle disinformation is first set by the EC Communication on Tackling Disinformation (EC, 2018a), which is operationalised in the Action Plan Against Disinformation (EC, 2018b), and in the key policy instrument in this area is the Code of Practice on Disinformation (2018, 2022). We primarily look at these three documents to examine how they frame the relationship and weight importance of fact-checking and media organisations in counteracting disinformation.

The Communication (EC, 2018a) emphasized the need for a „dense network of strong and independent fact-checkers", and the Commission committed itself to supporting the „creation of an independent European network of fact-checkers to establish common working methods, exchange best practices, achieve the broadest possible coverage across the EU, and participate in joint fact-checking and related activities". The document is also concerned with the support for quality journalism, which the Commission considers to be an essential element of a democratic society. It calls on journalists and media professionals to „further embrace the opportunities offered by new technologies and develop the necessary digital skills to enable them to use data and social media analytics, with a view to enhancing fact-finding and verification", and promises to explore funding opportunities to support quality news media and journalism. The Action Plan (EC, 2018b) puts forward the importance and the role played by fact-checking organisations, requiring online platforms to „cooperate with independent fact-checkers and researchers to detect and flag disinformation campaigns in particular during election periods and to make fact-checked content more visible and widespread". The Action plan also promotes strengthening the capacity and cooperation between independent fact-checkers and academic researchers in furthering the understanding of the different facets and mechanisms that shape how disinformation is disseminated online. At the same time, it does not explicitly promote cooperation between the media and fact-checkers, nor between platforms and the media.

The Code of Practice on Disinformation, which was first agreed by the leading online platforms, advertisers, and advertising industry in 2018, in its updated 2022 version includes a wider array of signatories, more detailed commitments, and some

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[8] Such as the European Media and Information Fund: https://gulbenkian.pt/emifund/who-can-apply/

performance indicators. Fact-checking organisations are among the signatories of the updated Code, while the media are not. The Code establishes remunerated cooperation between the online platforms and fact-checking organisations as one of the key pillars. No similar commitment regarding cooperation with media organisations.

As per Commitment 30 of the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, relevant Signatories commit to establish a framework for transparent, structured, open, financially sustainable, and non-discriminatory cooperation between them and the EU fact-checking community regarding resources and support made available to fact-checkers. In concrete measures, relevant Signatories (which are primarily online platforms) commit to setting up agreements between them and independent fact-checking organisations to achieve fact-checking coverage in all Member States, and to provide „fair financial contributions to the independent European fact-checking organisations for their work to combat disinformation on their services". The text of the Code further notes that „those financial contributions could be in the form of individual agreements, of agreements with multiple fact-checkers or with an elected body representative of the independent European fact-checking organisations that has the mandate to conclude said agreements". In terms of transparency of such financial transactions, the only commitment at the moment is to report on the „fairness of individual compensations provided" to via these agreements. It is not clear who and based on what criteria will assess fairness in this context. Although the cooperation between platforms and fact-checking organizations is a desirable step, it can also have unwanted consequences considering that it does not consider the media and their role both in verifying information and in amplifying verified information. Moreover, there is an important market dimension and considerations market position of journalism if fact-checking is funded exclusively and separately as a result of EU-level policy.

The signatories of the Code further recognize the importance of providing fact-checkers with automated access to information on the actions they have taken with respect to fact-checked content and the fact checks, and also to other information that is pertinent to help them maximize the quality and impact of fact-checking. Again, fact-checking organisations being active participants in drafting such an agreement, and media organisations being out of it, may widen a gap in the potentials and potential for collaboration between the two important actors in the information environment.

Concluding remarks

The contemporary debate surrounding the problem of disinformation evolves around the balance between addressing the detrimental effects of disinformation and safeguarding the principles of free speech. The line between the two is not always clear and can hardly be unanimously established in various political, legal, and cultural systems. What is clear is that once disinformation is published and becomes viral – the damage is done. Academic and policy discussions have focused on evaluating the effectiveness of proactive and reactive responses, along with their respective methods. In this brief paper we opened four key questions.

First, why has journalism as a profession globally found itself in such a crisis that necessitates the establishment of additional organizations, such as fact-checking

organizations, to perform tasks that have been at the core of journalists' job. What should be done to tackle lack of professionalism in newsrooms and to protect media accountability and trustworthiness?

Second, the scope and influence of fact-checks are aspects that merit additional examination. The question arises as to the most appropriate platform for fact-checkers to publish the outcomes of their investigations. If they solely rely on their webpages, which have a limited readership, what implications does this have on the impact of their work? Therefore, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the audiences of fact-checkers and the extent and dynamics of their reach.

Third question relates to the responsibility of an individual, of a citizen, its agency in obtaining media literacy and its responsibility in selecting contents to use and share. To what extent should citizens be object of fact-checking? The present reality, wherein nearly anyone can engage in public and potentially wide-reaching discussions on a wide array of topics without possessing substantial expertise, has given rise to a novel entity: influential individuals online. These individuals may shape public opinion, and thus, it becomes increasingly important for them to assume responsibility alongside exercising their right to free speech. The differentiating factor between online platforms and traditional physical gatherings lies in the potential reach they offer, which encompasses both the power to shape opinions and the potential for harmful consequences.

And the fourth question emerges on who fact-checking organizations should serve - citizens, media or institutions and companies? And in that light, who should pay for their service, ensuring sustainability, while guaranteeing quality and independence?

The relationship between media and fact-checking organizations can be collaborative or adversarial, depending on the specific circumstances and the nature of the organizations involved. Many media outlets rely on fact-checking organizations to provide them with accurate information and to help them verify the accuracy of claims made by politicians, public figures, and others. Some media outlets have formal partnerships with fact-checking organizations, in which they agree to publish fact-checking reports or to work together on specific projects. Furthermore, it is not uncommon that fact-checking organisations are established and populated by journalists who left media in disappointment with working and professional conditions and from the new workplace negatively view the media world they left behind.

Overall, however, the relationship between media and fact-checking organizations is an important one, as it helps to ensure that accurate information is disseminated to the public and that false or misleading claims are exposed and corrected. There is a room and need for both types of organisations to exist, but even more to cooperate and collaborate.

As the importance of fact-checking organisations is growing, so should also their accountability. It is crucial that fact-checking organisations are transparent about their organisation, funding and working practices. And that their relationship with the media is more of collaborators than of competitors. This is in the public interest.

The media bears a substantial responsibility in adapting to the challenges presented by evolving technologies and shifting audience habits. Academic research demonstrates

how the proliferation of inaccurate and misleading information online is partially attributed to declining standards and poor practices within mainstream media (Allen et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2020; Wardle, 2018). Furthermore, this phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that almost anyone can lay claim to being a journalist or media source today. While it is crucial to acknowledge new forms and actors that have the potential to contribute to public discourse in the contemporary information landscape, the Council of Europe's 2011 Recommendation on a New Notion of Media underscores that, despite changes in tools and the news ecosystem, the role of media in a democratic society remains largely unchanged. Therefore, it is imperative to foster an environment that facilitates a diverse range of reliable voices. As stated in the CoE standards, *all actors whether new or traditional who operate within the media ecosystem should be offered a policy framework which guarantees an appropriate level of protection and provides a clear indication of their duties and responsibilities in line with Council of Europe standards*. This allows for a more granular approach towards protecting and strengthening media and professional journalism as crucial components of democratic societies and encourages complementary policy framework for other actors relevant in today's information environment.

While it is clear that not all actors who operate within the media ecosystem are the same and they perform different roles, it should be the role of policymakers and policies to take full account of these dynamics, relationships, and future developments in order to encourage cooperation and synergies, not separations and divergences. The role of policymakers and policies should be to support strengthening of fact-checking capacities in journalism at least the same extent, if not more than specialised fact-checking has been encouraged in recent and prominent policies against disinformation.

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