THE DEBUNKING EFFECT

RECENT AND UPCOMING CHALLENGES FOR FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATIONS

Authors:
Robert Nemeth, Marius Dragomir

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Introduction

In an era when misinformation is spreading like fire, verifying information, and hence the work of fact-checking organizations, have become increasingly important.

Misinformation is not a new phenomenon, enough to think about how in his poems Pharaoh Ramses II claimed victory over the Hittites in 1274 BCE, in the Battle of Kadesh, which he actually lost, according to historical consensus. However, nowadays misinformation has been spreading with an unprecedented velocity, often turning out to be very profitable as well.

“Fact-checking first emerged as a distinct role in U.S. newsmagazines in the 1920s and 1930s, decades in which the objectivity norm became established among American journalists,” Lucas Graves and Michelle A. Amazeen wrote in their study on fact-checking. The number of fact-checking groups has been growing significantly in the last two decades or so. According to the Duke Reporter’s Lab, there are almost 350 active organizations in the world now.

But while the impact of misinformation has been widely studied in recent years, more analysis of the effect of fact-checking on society is needed. Trying to fill that gap, the CEU Democracy Institute’s Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) embarked in November 2020 on a one-year project aimed at mapping and analyzing the work of the world’s fact-checking groups, with a focus on their challenges, needs and successes.

The project started with a survey of 30 fact-checking organizations worldwide, which were asked to indicate the importance of certain impact-related challenges. Based on the survey’s results and research, CMDS identified four areas of interest, and also groups that have been successful in addressing these challenges. These fact-checking organizations, some of them lesser-known groups established in the past few years, and their modus operandi have been showcased in four articles covering audience outreach, methods to tackle misinformation on social media, fact-checking misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic and fact-checking for teenagers, which were published over the course of the past year.

This booklet collects all these papers in one place, presenting the results of the survey and the articles produced as part of the project, as well as an additional, fifth piece that looks into the future of fact-checking.
This article is based on a survey among 30 fact-checking organizations worldwide. They were asked to indicate the importance of the following impact-related challenges on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning “not at all important”, and 5 meaning “very important”:

- Identifying the target audiences
- Reaching the target audience
- Relationship with mainstream media
- Using social media effectively
- Community building
- Gaining/keeping credibility
- Impact of fact-checking

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Key Findings

- One of the main challenges for fact-checkers seems to be to better and more effectively reach their audience. That means, on the one hand, improved skills and capacity to reach out to a specific group of followers, but also techniques to more efficiently use social media as an audience generation tool.

- Effective use of social media turns out to be a challenge of high importance for African fact-checking organizations in our sample in particular, which have thus far been slow in building a strong follower base on social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

- Credibility has also been mentioned as a major challenge for fact-checking groups, with 22 out of 30 groups that responded in our poll saying that the challenge of gaining or maintaining credibility is “very important” or “fairly important.”

- Achieving a higher impact is an important challenge for many fact-checking organizations as they seek methods that would help them to both measure and increase their impact. All African fact-checking groups included in our research indicated the challenge of impact to be “very important.” Impact of fact-checking remains a research gap as there is no solid evidence to understand how effective fact-checking is.

- Collaboration with mainstream media doesn’t rank high on the fact-checkers’ priority list as far as challenges are concerned, with only 10 of them indicating it as “very important.” On the other hand, collaboration with mainstream news outfits is considered a more important challenge for fact-checking groups from African countries in our sample, where internet penetration is relatively low.

- Community building is not among the top challenges of the fact-checking organizations covered by the survey; yet, it is important in countries where misinformation proliferates.
Better Audience Reach

Reaching the audience seems to be the key impact-related challenge for fact-checking organizations. A total of 16 out of 30 groups canvassed by our survey indicated audience reach as being “very important” for them. Concretely, what most fact-checking organizations deem a highly important challenge is to improve are their skills and capacity to reach out to a specific group of followers.

There is no particular region or country where learning how to better target the audience is more or less challenging. Four organizations from each Africa, Asia and Latin America identified reaching the audience as a very important priority. The others come from Eastern Europe (2), Western Europe (1) and the Caucasus (1).

Only four groups said that reaching the audience is only a ‘slightly important” challenge for them (they come from Turkey, the U.S., Bosnia & Herzegovina and the Baltics), which is arguably not a sign, judging by the profile of the responding organizations, that audience engagement is not recognized as being important, but rather an indication that these groups are already advanced in reaching out to their target audience.

Notably, in Asia, three of the four groups that ranked “reaching the audience” the highest on their list of impact-related challenges are based in the Philippines. To a certain extent, this finding is skewed by the higher number of organizations from the Philippines in our survey.

Yet, the interest in audience engagement could be also proof that the media environment in the Philippines is worsening, prompting fact-checkers to step up their efforts to counter state-sponsored propaganda. In one of the latest moves against independent journalism in the country, the regime of President Rodrigo Duterte refused the application lodged by ABS-CBN, a media conglomerate, for the renewal of its broadcast license. The regime is also known for its repeated attempts to muzzle independent journalists. High-profile Filipino-American
journalist Maria Ressa, one of the most vocal investigative journalists in the Philippines, last year was found guilty of “cyber-libel” by a Filipino administration-controlled court. Ressa is the co-founder of Rappler, a digital news outlet with its own fact-checking team, which has been widely praised for its collaborative approach to fact-checking. Two years ago, Rappler was part of a group of 11 news organizations and three universities that launched Tsek.ph, a fact-checking platform whose avowed mission was to verify facts related to midterm elections held in the Philippines that year.

Potential reason for the high level of interest in impact is that, as some of the older fact-checking organizations say, a second generation of fact-checkers has emerged in recent years, and their approaches are changing the field. The first generation of fact-checkers based their work on pure journalism, which produced results, albeit “not nearly enough.” The second generation is more about “publishing and acting,” which means that fact-checkers are more proactive in engaging with their audiences.

Chequeado, an Argentina-based fact-checking platform, launched in 2013 a live collaborative platform that allowed the audience to participate in verifying facts. Africa Check, a pan-African verification outlet, has increased its efforts to attract political parties in their fact-checking projects. In Nigeria, for example, Africa Check cooperated with the health ministry, health practitioners and NGOs to identify and expose false news in health reporting.

Others say that focusing only on the internet, which is what most fact-checking groups, especially grassroots ones, do, is the wrong approach because in many countries, traditional media, particularly broadcasters, remain the main sources of news and information. These channels have to be covered by fact-checking to ensure that a larger audience is being engaged. “Not only should broadcast fact-checking be adopted more widely, print and online fact-checkers can learn ways to make their content more engaging by paying attention to broadcast journalists,” wrote Matthew Riley, an International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) TruthBuzz Fellow in the U.S.
Using social media in an effective way was indicated as a main impact-related challenge by most of the respondents in our poll, 14 out of 30 organizations marking it as “very important,” eight as “fairly important” and seven as “moderately important.” Only one organization, based in Europe, indicated that social media was not at all a big challenge for them. This organization is very active on social media, especially on Twitter where it has almost 10,000 followers, but they prefer to reach their audience in other ways as well. For them, developing a relationship with mainstream media and improving the impact of fact-checking are the most important challenges as far as impact is concerned.

Looking at the geographical breakdown, the effective use of social media is clearly a top challenge for African fact-checking organizations in our sample. The relatively low size of their follower base, a few thousand followers on each Facebook and Twitter and rarely a presence on Instagram, is further proof that they need to do better there.

Southeast Asian organizations are a similar case. All except for one indicated social media as a top priority impact-related challenge. The reason why the only group in the region that marked use of social media as only “fairly important” could be that they are already very successful in this respect, with millions of followers on both Facebook and Twitter.

In contrast, no fact-checking group in the Middle East from our sample, regardless of their success or the size of their follower base (which varies from a few thousands to more than one million people) thinks that using social media effectively is a an important challenge.

The effective use of social media is clearly a top challenge for African fact-checking organizations in our sample.

All the fact-checking groups that were covered by our poll have a Facebook account, all but three have a Twitter account, and 23 out of the 30 use Instagram as well. All four African organizations lag behind in Instagram where they have very few followers if they are active at all. That
is not surprising as Instagram is not a popular platform in Africa where less than 1% of the population uses it regularly, according to data from Statcounter.

Using social media effectively can massively boost the reach of fact-checking organizations. For example, Chequeado increased its traffic nearly ninefold in 2015, with half a million visits in November 2020 alone. This was partly the result of a contested presidential election in Argentina that increased the demand for fact-checking. On the other hand, sharing more and better on social media was key in their success. Facebook and Twitter accounted for almost half of the website’s traffic.

Nevertheless, social media doesn’t mean only Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, even though these are the most popular social networks worldwide. Some organizations focus instead on dissemination on other channels, especially messaging platforms, and do it very effectively.

Chat and messaging applications have become a hotbed for spreading misinformation. As Vernise Tantuco, researcher with Rappler recently wrote, misinformation often spreads unchecked on these platforms because they are considered private spaces and thus “trending content often evades detection and fact checking.” This is not a new phenomenon: in 2018 the messaging platform WhatsApp, owned by Facebook, had to introduce limits on forwarding messages after the spread of hoaxes via messages resulted in multiple mob Lynchings in India.

Such tendencies have prompted the Turkish fact-checking organization Doğruluk Payı to extend its work to messaging platforms. The mobile version of their website makes it easy to share content over WhatsApp, “a truly important feature in the Turkish context,” the organization’s co-founder Ferdi Özsoy told Poynter.

In a separate development, the Taiwanese Cofacts, a collaborative platform of the civic community g0v, that combines a chatbot with a hoax database, integrated within LINE, a popular instant messenger application popular in Asia where misinformation very often spreads in closed groups such as family groups, according to Wu Min Hsuan, the community’s deputy CEO. Any user can forward messages to the chatbot, which then are fact-checked by volunteers before the chatbot replies to the user.
Gaining or maintaining credibility is another challenge related to impact that many fact-checking organizations responding to our questionnaire marked as very important: half of them (15 out of 30) said so. Credibility is a “fairly important” challenge for seven other organizations, and “moderately important” for five more. There were two groups, both from the Middle East that marked this challenge as “slightly important,” and only one, from South Asia, for which credibility is not an important challenge.

Trust seems to be lower on the list of challenges in the Middle East. On the other hand, all four African groups canvassed by the research named gaining or keeping credibility to be among their most important challenges.

Another salient observation is that fact-checking groups belonging to larger organizations tend to see credibility as more of a challenge than smaller, independent groups.

The fact that credibility received one of the highest scores in the questionnaire is not surprising as trust is a crucial issue for every organization aiming to provide the public with truthful information. In recent years, trust in the media declined to an all-time low. This is especially true in divided societies, which “seem to trust the media less, not necessarily because the journalism is worse but because people are generally dissatisfied with institutions in their countries,” said Nic Newman, lead author of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020.

As fact-checking organizations often debunk news items published by news outlets, being trusted and credible is crucial for their success. That is what distinguishes them from yet another voice in the information landscape. At the same time, there is not much research out there to know whether audiences, in fact, trust or distrust fact-checkers, a study by Petter Bae Brandtzæg and Asbjørn Følstad found. They argue that “fact-checking services should strive to increase transparency in their

![Bar chart showing the challenge of gaining/keeping credibility](chart.png)
processes, as well as in their organizations, and funding sources” as a way to increase trust in their operation.

Most successful fact-checking organizations agree that transparency is key to strengthening credibility. Prompted by this belief, the International Fact-Checking Network, curated by the Poynter Institute, carried out last year a review of its code of principles, one of the few sets of quality standards recognized worldwide and followed by dozens of other organizations all over the world.

One of the credibility-related problems fact-checkers have been facing for some time is criticism of their work, especially attacks from politicians who try to disparage the work done by fact-checkers. In most cases, such attacks are carried out by populist politicians and groups, which do not like their lies exposed. An analysis conducted by the Duke Reporters’ Lab during the 2016 elections in the U.S. found that 97% of the accusations of bias against fact-checkers were accounted for by conservative websites. Nevertheless, fact-checkers say that, in most cases, such attacks do not hurt their credibility, but, to the contrary, reinforce the value of their work.
Almost the entire group of fact-checkers canvassed by our questionnaire said that they found identifying their audience a challenge, and the need to learn of tools and skills to measure and boost the impact of their fact-checking important. A total of 13 organizations found such methods “very important” and another 14 “fairly important.” Two organizations, one from the Western Balkans and another one from Latin America, indicated that impact as such was “moderately important,” and only one, from the Baltics, marked it as “slightly important.”

Among all other European organizations, one indicated impact to be a “very important” challenge whereas all the others marked it as “fairly important.” There was also only one organization from the Middle East that deemed impact as a top priority challenge whereas the other three ticked the “fairly important” box. At the same time, impact is a very important challenge for every African fact-checking group that participated in our survey.

We do not observe a connection between the size of the fact-checking groups or their social media audience and their approach to impact in our sample.

The question of whether fact-checking really has impact and, if so, how significant that impact is, has been debated for years. Various studies have provided mixed results, but they agree on a number of factors that influence the impact of fact-checking. Generally, the activity of fact-checking itself is perceived positively by people who see no harm in the attempt to correct inaccurate information. However, this perception is less marked among certain audiences and in polarized environments where it may not lead to concrete changes. For example, a group of France-based researchers investigated fact-checking related to the 2017 presidential campaign by Marine Le Pen, the extreme-right candidate, during which she often made false or misleading claims. The study found that, although checking such claims improves the voters’ factual knowledge, it does not affect the support for the candidate.
All these studies suggest that more evidence is needed to actually understand how effective fact-checking is. As a review of psychological studies states: “The process of correcting misinformation is complex and remains incompletely understood.”

Nevertheless, there are success stories, especially if success is measured based on how many people are reached by a specific debunking effort. This is one of the many website metrics-related factors that donor organizations are interested in, according to a report by the Reuters Institute. Another measure of impact is the number of journalists who are paying attention to checked facts. “There’s every reason to think that the influence on readers and the influence on politicians is greater when there’s consensus among journalists and when journalists are widely willing to treat something as debunked that’s been thoroughly debunked,” Lucas Graves of the University of Wisconsin told the National Public Radio (NPR) in America.

There are times when fact-checking and debunking have an indisputable impact. During the 2014 presidential elections in Indonesia, for example, hoaxes fueled social tensions and created havoc, posing a severe threat to how citizens were informed. Two years later, during the gubernatorial elections in the capital city, the spread of false information about the leading candidate led to his downfall. But the 2019 presidential election was different thanks to the fact-checking alliance Cek Fakta, which chased misinformation even on messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram.
Collaboration with Mainstream Media

The challenge of relationship with mainstream media

Collaboration with mainstream media doesn’t seem to be a top challenge for fact-checking organizations, with only 10 of the groups that participated in our survey indicating it as “very important.” One fact-checking group didn’t attach any importance to it, which could be the result of either the narrower focus of its work, geared exclusively on medical disinformation, or their success in this area.

Two European fact-checking groups and one from Latin America referred to the collaboration with the media as “slightly important.” One of the European organizations doesn’t seem to need mainstream media coverage to reach a large audience as they already have over half a million followers on Facebook, with their stories being often read by hundreds of thousands of users.

Collaboration seems to be by far more important a challenge for African fact-checking groups, one of the reasons being that they only operate in the online sphere. As internet penetration remains comparatively low in most of Africa, these groups need media coverage to better disseminate their findings.

Fact-checking groups seem to have assessed the importance of the challenge of collaborating with mainstream media for them regardless of their size or the level of media freedom in the country. Responses of fact-checking groups from countries with captured media varied from “moderately” to “very important.”

Studies suggest that fact-checkers should expand their efforts to partner with news organizations. As media and development analyst Raji Rasaki writes, using broadcast journalism to fight misinformation has a huge benefit: “In countries without reliable internet, radio and TV are the best way to give audiences factual content.”

Many fact-checking groups have followed the advice. Africa Check, for example, syndicates its content to other news organizations to republish it free of charge, with an attribution. VERA Files, a non-profit, independent group in the Philippines, which focuses on debunking false claims and
misleading statements of public officials, went one step further to sell their stories to news media outlets, thus generating income that is crucial for their survival.

The 2019 presidential election in Indonesia featured another good example of collaboration between news media and fact-checking groups. During the second debate of the candidates, experts and journalists of three fact-checking groups and 24 news organizations gathered in Google Indonesia’s office for a collective fact-checking exercise. This collaboration has since grown into a coalition of media outlets and fact-checking groups that track down misinformation during electoral campaigns.

Another form of cooperation with mainstream media consists of making fact-checkers available to appear as guest experts in the media. Team members of two fact-checking projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Istimomjer and Raskrinkavanje, both operating under the umbrella of the organization Zasto Ne (Why Not?) make an average of three guest appearances a week on different media outlets. “Our staff is small, but we feel we are making a difference,” said Aida Ajanovic, fact-checking team coordinator and editor with Zasto Ne.

Since many fact-checkers are trained in journalism, moving from one medium to another may not seem to be a big challenge.

However, there are snags. For example, fact-checking online is very different from doing it on television. The Brazilian fact-checking group Lupa often uses graphics to debunk disinformation. But its director, Cristina Tardaguila, realized how difficult it is to do it on TV when she was invited on a program produced by the channel Globonews to explain the debunking work done by her organization around a microcephaly outbreak. As she said, it was challenging to make healthcare records interesting on the screen without the infographics, adding that “the minute the show ended, I realized how I could have done it better. (...) To be better requires someone from TV by my side translating my article into television.”
Community building, including recruitment and training of contributors is not among the top challenges of the fact-checking organizations canvassed by our research; yet, there were 12 groups that marked it as “very important.” Nine groups think that it is “fairly important” and five found it “moderately important.”

One Latin American and two European organizations indicated community building as a “slightly important” challenge. There was only one group, also from Europe, for which community building is not an important challenge at all. It is remarkable that all four African groups interviewed believe that community building is a top challenge. Also, almost every East and Southeast Asian organization found it “very important.”

Creating a community around fact-checkers is especially important in countries where misinformation proliferates. Indonesia is one of them. There, most of the 43,000 or so online news platforms are not credible sources of information, according to a CMDS report that cites a survey, according to which one in three Indonesians encounter misinformation on a daily basis.

In such an environment, there is naturally room for more fact-checking groups. The Indonesian Anti-Defamation/Slander Community, known as Mafindo, has been hunting hoaxes since 2015 when a Facebook group named FAFHH (Anti Slander, Provocation and Hoax Forum) was created by Harry Sufehmi as a crowdsourced hoax-busting effort, a platform where members would work together to debunk false news items. As of today, this community has 80,000 members, 17 chapters across the country and more than 300 volunteers. Community building in the fact-checking field does not only mean more people available to help with debunking hoaxes, but also outreach of a potentially very large audience, which can translate into significant impact.
Fact-Checking: Where to Next?

In a media environment populated by an increasing number of players where essentially anybody has access to both producing and consuming information, ensuring that truth prevails is extremely important. Elections all over the world during the past decade have shown how important it is for the public to have access to accurate information about the people and parties that are going to lead them. But electoral and political communication is only one area where fact-checking is important. The Covid-19 pandemic has been proving how important it is to have access to facts during extreme crises when people’s safety and basic needs are in peril.

News media naturally have an important role to play in ensuring that truth prevails, but as the media field continues to fragment and perpetrators of disinformation have access to increasingly powerful communication tools, the value of fact-checking will most likely continue to grow. Bill Adair, the founder of PolitiFact, was saying back in 2015 that “fact-checking has become a powerful and important new form of accountability journalism around the world.” It remained so.

Dozens of fact-checking sites, operated by news media organizations, curated by university students or run by individual journalists, are now in operation all over the world, holding politicians to account and doing their best to blot disinformation out of the internet.

But most of them, especially those that are not incubated in a larger media company, are still struggling to become financially sustainable. Most of them continue to be financed by grant-making organizations, private philanthropies that dish out cash to NGOs all over the world. While their effort is laudable, it doesn’t ensure the longer-term sustainability that these groups need.

Some say that, being a public good, fact-checking should be financed by governments from public funds. In countries with autocratic leaders, that is hardly a recipe for success as these are precisely the enemies of fact-checking and free press. These nations, on the other hand, need fact-checking organizations that work without any pressures from governments or politicians.

Other experts suggested a paid-content model as a solution where audiences contribute financially to keep fact-checking groups in business. That is a more realistic scenario as fact-checking is an activity that serves the general public in the first place. But convincing people to pay for content is not an easy task, and media outlets can attest to it.

What is fairly obvious though, wherever the fact-checking field goes, is that its success and impact will largely depend on how fact-checking groups engage with their audience: knowing them better, reaching out to them more and more effectively and gaining their trust. Our research, summarized in this paper, reinforces these needs.
Methodology

This article is based on responses from 30 fact-checking organizations to a questionnaire that was sent to a total of 102 fact-checking organizations in the world as following: 33 in Europe, one in Australia, 11 in Africa, 30 in Asia, 14 in North America and 13 in South America. They were asked to indicate the importance of the listed impact-related challenges on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning “not at all important”, and 5 meaning “very important.”

The goal of our survey was to understand the needs and challenges of fact-checking organizations related to the impact of their work as a base for a series of upcoming webinars with fact-checking groups aimed at helping their efforts that the Center for Media, Data & Society (CMDS) is planning to organize in 2021.

The selection of the organizations was made according to their profile, with geographical diversity, audience and topical focus also taken into consideration. The questionnaire was sent to the 102 organizations in November 2020.

Of those, a total of 30 organizations answered the questions, which is a good response rate for a field like fact-checking that is very small compared to other communications-related fields.

Nevertheless, the survey has its limitations. As the aim of the survey was to determine the topic of a series of workshops, the canvassed organizations were asked to identify challenges related to impact they are faced with in their work and indicate the importance of these challenges without going into further details. Therefore it is not known whether the groups identified certain challenges as having low importance because they are already successful in that area or because they simply don’t think these challenges are important. We would like to emphasize that in accordance with the aim of the project the questionnaire is a part of, the response options fact-checking organizations were given were limited to issues related to impact of fact-checking. Sustainability, fundraising and many other challenges are clearly important to some of these organizations, but these our outside the scope of the project, and consequently of the scope of the questionnaire. As the survey didn’t go into that level of detail, in the paper, we have not identified any organization by name in relation to its response to the questionnaire. The concrete examples of fact-checking groups given in the paper are based on additional desk research that was carried out for this study.

In spite of these limitations though, we believe that the survey offers important insights into the challenges that fact-checking organizations are facing in their extremely important work.
Reaching the audience is one of the main challenges fact-checking organizations all around the world face. However, many of them have come up with innovative solutions to overcome this problem. This article introduces four groups that successfully implemented unique methods and tools to better engage their audiences.
Fact-checking organizations face various challenges, but reaching the audience is one of their key impact-related challenges, according to a recent survey that canvassed 30 fact-checking organizations all over the world. (See chapter *What Keeps Fact-Checking Organizations up at Night*)

That is not surprising at all: effectively engaging with audiences is vital for the credibility, outreach and impact of these organizations. Nevertheless, as audiences are inundated with information from an ever growing number of platforms, it is more and more difficult for fact-checking groups to grab the public’s attention; and get them to spot disinformation.

At the same time, the number of fact-checking organizations has also been growing rapidly all over the world, all of them competing for attention, a battle that news organizations are also involved in.

To be able to keep up with these trends, most fact-checking organizations find it very important to improve their skills and capacity to reach out to specific audiences. Some of them have been experimenting with less conventional methods to reach certain groups of followers. In this article we are going to introduce four of these groups: Gisa Group, focusing on Sudan; DebunkEU.org, based in Lithuania and focusing mostly on the Baltic region; Panos Institute Southern Africa and Bloggers of Zambia, both based in Zambia.

**Collective Lie-Chasing**

**GISA Group** is a Sudanese media development and research nonprofit registered in the US whose main aim is to empower civil society to hold the powerful accountable.

GISA’s fact-checking project is relatively new, still in the initial phase of focus group discussions with experts and “people working in the field,” as Kiran Bhatia, the group’s senior advisor puts it. At this stage, their main goals are a) to examine the phenomenon of disinformation in Sudan by identifying the actors creating and circulating disinformation, and the strategies and channels of communication they use and b) to create a space for collective deliberation and networking through workshops where people working in the field can come together and identify methods they can use to counter disinformation in their own environment. The aim of this project is to support and document indigenous knowledge organizations and context-specific methods of countering disinformation.

“The project aims to encourage opinion leaders such as journalists, social workers, activists, and others to use their experiences of networking and deliberating in workshops to create awareness among people through their work, research, activism, and/or advocacy,” says Bhatia.

GISA Group plans to document the counter strategies emerging from within the indigenous knowledge structures that people rely on to challenge disinformation in their communities. Indigenous knowledge structures include the local, highly-contextual, and situation-specific responses to disinformation designed by local community workers based on their understanding of and immersion in the communities they work with. This also highlights GISA’s aim to de-colonize...
technological interventions compelled onto countries in the Global South and to generate grounds-up and meaningful discussions on the importance of designing context-sensitive ideas and projects.

Another important goal of the group is to create a sustainable solution for identifying disinformation, one that “local community workers would be motivated to use in their work of research, creating awareness, or for activism and/or advocacy,” Bhatia says.

At the end of the day, the group tries to create a community-centered repository of educational content that can be accessed by anyone interested in learning about disinformation techniques and getting advice on how to handle lies, disguised, more or less, as news.

The Good Story of the BadNews Game

DebunkEU.org is an independent technology center and think-tank that researches disinformation in the public space and executes media literacy campaigns aimed at combating the phenomenon. It has thus far expanded to six countries.

The organization is keen on using innovative approaches not only in its research (it bases its disinformation analysis work on artificial intelligence), but also in its outreach efforts. “As the ultimate goal of malicious actors spreading disinformation is to manipulate public opinion through false and misleading content, it is important to communicate with audiences which are the most exposed to it,” Viktoras Daukšas, the head of the organization, says.

For that reason, last year, the BadNews Game was adapted for Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian audiences by DebunkEU.org in partnership with DROG and Cambridge University as part of a “gamified” media literacy project rolled out in the three Baltic countries to increase resilience against disinformation coming from various hostile sources, mostly Russia-supported ones. The game was first adapted to Lithuanian language, then presented in Latvia and Estonia. It is also available in Russian.

The premise of the game is quite straightforward – players are put into the shoes of an online troll and are encouraged to spread false and misleading content through tweets, fabricated news portals, memes, etc. Through the course of the game players have to collect six badges for successfully implementing disinformation techniques, such as impersonation or spreading conspiracies. To make the game more relatable, various disinformation cases and personalities which are known in the Baltics were used, to showcase that the players themselves might have seen a piece of fabricated content before, just did not notice it.

The game proved to be very successful: it was played by over 118,600 citizens more than 163,000 times. Almost one in every four players indicated that, after playing the game, they started to evaluate online content more critically. The success of the game can be also attributed to the promotion strategy. The game was advertised through banners on popular news websites in the three countries (to reach grownups), but also on national e-gradebook platforms (to reach younger citizens).
“Looking at the reach we were able to create, we can confidently say it was one of the biggest media literacy campaigns carried out in the Baltic countries,” Daukšas says.

Another way for DebunkEU.org to share their knowledge and explain the dangers of disinformation is through wide outreach via media outlets in the Baltics and beyond. “Visual content is proven to be one of the most effective and engaging ways of communication; moreover, we try to communicate through various channels and cover an as diverse audience as possible,” Daukšas says, adding that reaching the general public, from the youngest to the oldest, is important because everyone is vulnerable against disinformation.

To achieve such ambitious goals, DebunkEU.org has actively engaged with mainstream media in recent years. It now cooperates with Laisvės TV, a Lithuanian channel broadcasting on YouTube. The station’s business model is based on crowdfunding. Within just five months of launch in 2016, Laisvės TV became the most subscribed Lithuanian media channel on YouTube, with over 116,000 subscribers.

DebunkEU.org partnered with Laisvės TV as part of the station’s project ‘Humor against Covid-19’. The station created a weekly show, titled ‘That’s News: Expert Speaking’, which was dedicated to debunking various cases of misinformation about the pandemic. In it, experts from DebunkEU.org talked about specific disinformation cases, explaining why certain information is false, but also describing techniques to debunk it.

Articles about DebunkEU.org research are also being shared by the largest national news outlets in Lithuania, and the organization is quickly becoming a go-to team of experts when it comes to disinformation analysis. The number of the organization’s mentions in the news media has also been growing significantly; from only 37 mentions in 2018, it skyrocketed to 118 in 2019 and to a whopping 228 in 2020.

A Dramatic Performance

Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf) is a regional non-profit, non-governmental communication for development organization. Founded in 1996 as a branch of Panos London, it became autonomous in 2005. Based in Zambia, the organization works in 10 countries, currently implementing nine projects. PSAf focuses particularly on amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, embedding fact-checking in almost every media activity.

With their fact-checking and media literacy project, PSAf also tries to engage with communities where internet access is problematic. To reach out to people in these communities, the organization relies entirely on text messaging. Anyone can text information to the organization free-of-charge from all networks within Zambia. “We have an interface where, once messages are received, we verify if the issues raised are authentic, and then channel the message to the relevant leaders or entities for action,” says Vusumuzi Sifile, executive director of the organization. Once the issues are raised, they also facilitate discussions about them in various radio programs, Sifile says.
The impact of this approach is yet to be seen. “We still need to do more in terms of measurability. This is an aspect we are actually working on addressing as we develop a new platform monitoring the elections in Zambia,” Sifile says.

To engage with marginalized communities, PSAf also organizes drama performances. “The drama simplifies the information into the local languages and local context,” Sifile says. PSAf works with performance groups, helping them to develop storyboards and scripts, and also assisting them in planning the performances.

The plays are performed at various locations ranging from town markets to small villages. At markets, there are often more than 500 viewers, but in rural areas the numbers are smaller. According to Sifile, after the performances the team also conducts a mini-survey in the audience to get feedback, and “people also ask questions, which also helps determine the extent to which they have understood the message.”

In some cases, the performances are also disseminated via radio. They are recorded on location and broadcast later, but there are examples of live broadcast as well.

The radio component is especially important in the African context where radio is still the most important source of information. “Radio reaches far more people than any other media on the continent,” Franz Krüger, Director of the Wits Radio Academy in South Africa, told Deutsche Welle. Radio broadcasts of these drama performances can significantly amplify their potential audience.

No Missed Calls

Also based in Zambia, Bloggers of Zambia is an independent and non-profit enterprise working in the fields of internet governance and digital rights, media rights and freedoms, and online creative content management, with a special focus on fact-checking and educating the audience about spotting and fighting misinformation.

With what it considers a satisfactory social media outreach, Bloggers of Zambia introduced a less conventional approach to reach out to specific audience segments: calling them directly on the phone. With the phone calls, Bloggers of Zambia targets the youth, women, journalists and other civil society organizations, says Richard Mulonga, the organization’s founder and CEO, adding that they “look at the urgency or the importance of a matter as a reason to make calls.” For example, they call journalists directly when there is some information to clarify. Hence, calling becomes a method to build an audience.

In general, staff members at Bloggers of Zambia make these calls, but they also use students interning with the organization to do that. Before making a call, they are given adequate training in organizational norms and behavior to ensure a professional attitude, Mulonga says. After the calls, Bloggers of Zambia send information and content such as videos, infographics, podcasts or animations to the people they talked to.
The organization uses social media analytics to measure impact and outreach as well as feedback they receive on WhatsApp and via face-to-face interactions with their public, Mulonga says.

**Conclusion: What It Takes to Reach Your Audience**

Most fact-checking organizations seek to improve their skills and capacity to reach out to specific audiences. The four examples analyzed in this paper prove that innovative approaches, out-of-the box solutions along with proper audience segmentation, including a clear definition of whom exactly they want to engage with, lead to improved outreach.

At the same time, our research found, innovation doesn’t always mean inventing brand new, never-before-used techniques; sometimes going back to old school, offline tools such as calling people on the phone, this odd 20th century habit, can also be very effective.
Fact-checking is important for the health of our media systems. But fact-checking alone is not enough. Exposing audiences to debunks is crucial in helping sanitize major social platforms such as Facebook and TikTok. Two debunkers, Zasto Ne in Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Verificat in Spain, are doing just that.
The spread of disinformation hasn’t spared any regions in the world. In many countries, disinformation also fuels a lucrative industry. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a disinformation paradise, even reputable news outlets sometimes publish false or misleading information.

“This is not a rule, it is not the most common form of fake news that one could find in the Balkan media, but surely [it] is one of the most alarming,” Elvira Jukic, editor in chief of Mediacentar Sarajevo, a media training organization, told Poynter, an American think tank.

The unabated spread of lies online prompted a local NGO, Zasto Ne (‘Why Not?’), which has been operating the digital platform Istominjer to strengthen political accountability since 2010, to launch another platform that monitors disinformation: Raskrinkavanje in 2017. The former focuses on fact-checking public office holders and monitors how promises made by political candidates during elections are fulfilled. The latter concentrates on media reports and social media. Public reaction to the work of the Bosnian fact-checkers has thus far been mostly positive, but they also had some unpleasant experiences as well. Staff of the two outfits are regular guests in various media outlets and their audience on social media has skyrocketed, also because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Raskrinkavanje already has more than 70,000 followers on Facebook, an impressive figure in a country of 3.3 million.

Politics and social media are also important for Verificat, the first independent, non-profit fact-checking platform in the Spanish region of Catalonia. Founded in 2019, but running at full speed for only a year, Verificat aims to counter the spread of disinformation in both Catalan and Spanish. The outfit’s staff monitors news items and social media posts, and debunks false information. The organization also tries to be present on various platforms, especially because the majority of their traffic comes from smartphones.

Verificat also runs an educational program for students. “Young people are not only consumers, but also producers and distributors of information,” Verificat’s website states. By focusing on youth, Verificat tries to also increase its social media outreach. Verificat often translates long fact-checks into Twitter threads and Instagram posts.

Facebook’s Endless Fight with Disinformation

There are countless articles, research papers, and even books about how disinformation flooded social media platforms, and what could be done to counter it. Nevertheless, false news still spreads rapidly on every platform in spite of recent efforts by tech giants to stop it. “We take misinformation seriously,” Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote shortly after the 2016 American elections. However, a recent report by the online advocacy group Avaaz slammed the platform for doing “too little, too late” to tackle disinformation, giving the example of the 2020 elections in America.

Furthermore, social media companies are often criticized for focusing on English-language disinformation, and caring much less about false news in other languages. Thus, it is not surprising that in Central and Eastern Europe Facebook is still the
Although Facebook has not been very successful in curbing false news given the sheer amount of fake content that is produced and circulated online, some of its fact-checking partners have been doing a remarkable job. One of them is Raskrinkavanje, which became a Facebook partner in 2020.

To decide which posts to fact-check, Raskrinkavanje takes several factors into consideration. “First of all, [we think about] how dangerous the disinformation itself can be. Some disinformation, for example the ones [information] about Covid-19 vaccines, can have a much more negative impact on society overall than others, which makes them somewhat of a priority for us to fact-check,” said Marija Ćosić, a fact-checker with Raskrinkavanje. She added that virality is an important factor for them, too. “If we realize that certain disinformation has the potential to reach a very wide audience through social media, we make sure to fact-check it and try to stop the further spread,” she said.

A special type of disinformation that often goes viral on Facebook consists of fake giveaways. “We’ve noticed a lot of fake Facebook pages posting videos of celebrities alongside the claims that if you solve some kind of a riddle and post the answer in the comments, you can win a large sum of money,” Ćosić said. “However, the catch was that, in order to participate in the giveaway, you needed to register on some sketchy website and leave your bank account details.”

One of them involved the renowned tennis player Novak Djokovic. Another one claimed that Jala Brat, a popular Bosnian rapper, will give away cash. The team quickly figured out that it was a recurring scam and started systematically monitoring such videos to quickly rate them as false as soon as they appeared.

But how much impact this effort has is hard to gauge because it’s not easy to measure the impact of debunks, Ćosić admits. Still, thanks to the partnership with Facebook, Raskrinkavanje is able to flag posts containing disinformation, and “this helps our debunks reach a wider audience that sometimes, that way, gets to see them even before [seeing] the disinformation itself,” she said.

Fact-checking the fake giveaways was a success. “At first, we would find dozens of similar videos a day, but after months of consistent and strenuous ‘whack-a-mole’ action, we got to a point where we would only find one [fake news piece] a week,” Ćosić said.

Facebook in the meantime has forged partnerships globally with independent, third-party fact-checkers that are certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a unit at the Poynter Institute that vets fact-checking outfits. The focus of Facebook’s initiative is on addressing viral disinformation, especially groups or individuals who have the potential to mislead or harm, according to the company.
How TikTok Handles Disinformation

Nevertheless, the most popular social media platform among youth is not Facebook or Instagram anymore, let alone Twitter, but a fairly new player: TikTok, a video sharing application owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. TikTok unfolded in 2018 after acquiring the U.S.-based Musical.ly and merged the two apps. In 2020, with over two billion downloads, it became the most downloaded app globally. The number of its users has since been constantly increasing. According to Sensor Tower, an online metrics company, in April 2021, TikTok was still the most downloaded non-gaming app worldwide with more than 59 million installs.

Despite privacy concerns, TikTok has about one billion monthly active users, 60% of whom belong to Generation Z (people born between mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s).

Like any other social media platforms, TikTok also struggles to blot out disinformation from its website. Quartz warned already in 2019 that “posts that promote mistruths, hate, and even violence do sneak in. And researchers say the way the platform is set up makes it fertile ground for those who’d want to spread that kind of content.”

TikTok claimed that it was committed to fight disinformation on its platform. In 2020 it signed up to the European Union’s Code of Practice on disinformation. The decision was hailed by the European Digital Media Association (EDiMA), Europe’s trade association of online platforms, as “great news” because it “widens the breadth of online platforms stepping up the fight against disinformation online.”

Furthermore, last February, TikTok announced new measures to curb the spread of disinformation. “We take the responsibility of helping counter inauthentic, misleading, or false content to heart,” the company claimed in a statement. It added that they remove disinformation as soon as they identify it. When “fact checks are inconclusive or content is not able to be confirmed,” then viewers will see a banner that “the content has been reviewed but cannot be conclusively validated,” and the creator will also be notified.

However, this doesn’t prevent users from sharing such content. Although they see a “prompt reminding them that the video has been flagged as unverified content,” users can still decide to share it. Irrational Labs, a behavioral science lab that tested the new features before they were introduced found that “the new sharing prompt led users to share misleading videos 24% less often,” and likes on unverified content decreased by a mere 7%.

The same month, TikTok announced that it removed almost 90 million videos globally in the second half of 2020, for violations of its community guidelines and terms of service. However, it seems that only a fraction of those were removed because they consisted of disinformation. A bit more than 50,000 videos were deleted because they promoted Covid-19-related disinformation, and nearly 350,000 for spreading false information about the U.S. elections. In addition, 441,000 videos “were not eligible for recommendation into anyone’s For You feed.”

Compared to the vast amount of videos uploaded to TikTok daily, this seems like a drop in the ocean. Only a few weeks after the announcement, Advance Democracy,
a research organization studying disinformation and extremism found numerous videos on TikTok that were spreading false news under various hashtags.

Chloe Colliver, head of digital policy at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue told USA Today, a popular American newspaper, that TikTok “still has a long way to go to improve the reality of safety on its platform.” Just like other social media platforms, there is “a vast difference between what the platform claims to be taking action on and the evidence of how it implements its policies in practice,” Colliver said.

Counter Disinformation on TikTok: Verificat’s Formula

But again, it is very often that fact-checkers have more impact in fighting disinformation TikTok than the platform itself. Enter Verificat. Its staff one day came across a Spanish TikTok video that had been posted by a student. In the video, the student claimed that doctors recommended taking paracetamol before getting a Covid-19 shot. She also said that, if she doesn’t get the vaccine, she won’t be able to travel, work or finish her studies.

Nevertheless, these claims were incorrect: paracetamol is recommended as a treatment to mitigate eventual side effects in case they appear, not before the vaccination, and in Spain vaccination is neither mandatory nor required as a condition to allow people to work or study.

It was “a very typical misinformation content,” a viral video coming from someone who didn’t have a bad intention, said Verificat’s co-director, Lorenzo Marini who calls misinformation “one of the biggest traps on social media.”

So, Verificat decided to debunk the story and correct the false claims. They tried to get in touch with the poster, but with no avail. Then they created an Instagram story and posted the fact-check on every channel they had. “We are aware it was not sufficient,” Marini said, adding that now they would definitely create a TikTok video about the debunk as well.

Nevertheless, the episode helped Verificat realize that they needed more resources to segment potential audiences as well as a different strategy to disseminate every piece of content they produce, especially as Verificat relies to a large extent on its community and on content their audience sends to them.

That’s why Verificat changed its approach, setting up the DesFake program, which has been publicized as “fact-checking for Generation Z.” The program targets high-school students who detect and verify content circulating in their networks. After a few weeks of training they start building a YouTube channel and profiles on Instagram and TikTok to share their fact-checks.

A pilot project to test the program was run successfully in one school last year. With a grant from the Barcelona city council, it will be expanded to three more schools. Verificat also plans to involve more and more institutions. Some of them will be offered intensive one-week workshops.
In addition to teaching media literacy and fact-checking for social media to Gen Z users, “we want to involve them [young users] to send us content because such content is not easy for us to find on TikTok, for example, it’s a different environment which they know better,” Marini said. Such an approach, he believes, will allow Verificat to fact-check claims that go viral among teenagers on TikTok. The young people trained in media literacy and fact-checking can also help correct content that reaches large audiences. Such corrections themselves can go viral sometimes.

“We also need to find more tools, formats and a design that is effective with teenagers,” Marini said. For now, in an attempt to gain more attention, Verificat is thinking about posting less serious content on these channels. But, of course, the organization will still source everything on its website along with the methodology used in debunking stories to allow visitors to find all the details about the misleading articles they might have come across.

Although they operate in different contexts and address audiences that speak different languages and have a different exposure to disinformation, both Zasto Ne and Verificat show how important locally sourced debunking and fact-checking initiatives are for the larger efforts made by tech companies to clean up their platforms. Their work, especially experiments with dissemination of their debunking results, also shows how crucial it is for fact-checkers to know, follow and involve the audiences in this work.

Miss that and fact-checking will be a vain effort.
The spread of misinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic created new headaches for fact-checkers around the world. Some launched new organizations, others intensified their debunking efforts and shifted their focus. However, misinformation seems to move faster than any of them.
Providing accurate information is always critical, especially in times of emergency when false news can literally cost lives. However, the Covid-19 pandemic that forced almost the entire world into lockdown for months showed that even in such circumstances misinformation spreads faster than the virus itself.

The World Health Organization (WHO) even created a new term, infodemic, to describe the situation, defined as “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them.”

The WHO also issued a joint statement along with several United Nations (UN) bodies (UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), claiming that this is the first pandemic in history when “technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, informed, productive and connected. At the same time, the technology we rely on to keep connected and informed is enabling and amplifying an infodemic that continues to undermine the global response and jeopardizes measures to control the pandemic.”

Tackling the Infodemic

In addition to the growing general distrust in media and politics, there are various reasons why the pandemic quickly turned into an infodemic including lack of government data, underdeveloped health systems that struggle to handle endemic diseases, and the inability of many news organizations to cover such crises without resorting to sensationalism.

As a result, anyone who does a quick search online will find endless false news items about the pandemic. According to a Harvard Kennedy School’s Misinformation Review article, such content ranges from harmless false cures to dangerous rhetoric targeting minorities.

These trends have alerted the fact-checking community as well. The authors of the Harvard article found “a significant increase in the debunking efforts of fact-checking organizations in 2020” driven mostly by Covid-related misinformation. As a joint effort, more than 100 fact-checkers around the world were brought together by the International Fact-Checking Network at the Poynter Institute to create the #CoronaVirusFacts / #DatosCoronaVirus Alliance. In addition to debunking false news items and conspiracy theories, the Alliance also publishes, shares and translates facts about the pandemic in more than 40 languages.

The infodemic not only prompted existing fact-checking groups to step up their debunking efforts, but it also led to the rise of a spate of new organizations that were established precisely for this purpose.
Fighting Disinformation in France: Use a Video

One of these organizations, Journalistes Solidaires (JS) was launched in March 2020 in France where “the flood of misinformation caught the media system a bit off guard,” said Clément Legros, a journalist working with JS. Moreover, fact-checking in French newsrooms isn’t as common as, for example, in American news media.

Hence, several journalists realized that it was time to help the audience gain access to verified information. Some of them responded to an appeal to join JS, which was posted on Facebook by one of the group’s founding members. “Considering the mistrust people felt for the media, Journalistes Solidaires organized itself as an open-newsroom,” Legros said, adding that JS consists of journalists from France and Belgium who produce good content at a rapid pace, and that it is collaborative, and “hundred percent transparent and accessible for its audience.”

The original idea was to identify misinformation, investigate and debunk it, and then communicate the results to the audience, says another journalist from the group, Cypriane El-Chami. “We tried to respond to misinformation where we found and observed it. And we decided to counter it in its field: social networks,” Legros said.

To achieve its objectives, JS is focusing on short videos that are distributed on social networks. “Our aim was to offer the substance of debunk in a different format from the traditional written article and to take into account the preference for video on the social networks,” Legros said. JS also tried to be mindful of people’s preferences who don’t consume mainstream media and would not read long articles, El-Chami said.

This strategy had mixed results: while some of JS’s videos have been viewed thousands of times, like the one investigating the effects of the virus on the immune system, some haven’t really found their audience. “We did not set ourselves a quantitative objective for the distribution of our videos, only an obligation in terms of format, which was to [convey] the core of the information but in a different way,” said Legros.

While misinformation keeps spreading, JS keeps facing renewed challenges. Partnering with mainstream media would help increase their impact, but now most of these news media have their own fact-checking desks. “They are less interested in cooperation,” said El-Chami.

In the meantime, the group’s journalists set their sights on new topics. Without ceasing to debunk false news items about Covid-19, they aim to investigate the upcoming presidential elections in France. “The rise of populism on this occasion and the climate situation seem to us at the moment to be subjects of legitimate concern as they are accompanied by misinformation,” said Legros.
Nepal: Fighting on Social Media

As the Covid-19 pandemic reached Nepal, misinformation about it started to spread as well. Nepal was another country without a fact-checking culture, and the pandemic exposed it widely, Ghamaraj Luitel, a media educator at the Central Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the Tribhuvan University said to Online Khabar, an English-language journal.

As a response, Nepal Fact-Check was launched by the Center for Media Research-Nepal (CMR-Nepal), a local NGO, in March 2020. “There was a lot of fear among the public regarding the coronavirus, and the fear was fueled by misinformation spreading fast and quick through social media and communication channels,” said CMR-Nepal’s Umesh Shrestha. With his colleagues, he saw that misinformation was mostly “propagated by influencers and ‘credible’ people” who even themselves were so duped to believe that what they shared was true.

Since such false news spread mostly on social media, the social networks’ users became the organization’s primary target audience. “Debunking these [lies] on a website would be a mismatch” as this content would not reach the same audience, said Ujjwal Prajapati, a media researcher with CMR-Nepal. “We need to reach them on the same platform where they receive misinformation, and in the same way they receive it”.

To reach such audiences, the CMR-Nepal’s fact-checkers partnered with Mysansar.com, the most popular Nepali blog, to co-publish their debunks, and created their own social media channels (on Facebook, Twitter and Viber).

“We have a very good response from the public,” said Shrestha. “We also saw a rise in newspaper reports and articles about fact-checking since NepalFactCheck.org was launched.”

Indeed, some of the group’s debunking work had a substantial impact. For example, because of their work, the US Embassy in Kathmandu corrected a press statement that contained incorrect information. When virologists published social media posts about Chinese vaccines being donated to Nepal, the group discovered that “they had wrongly claimed that the vaccine was not the one that WHO has approved for emergency use, but the other one still in the trial phase,” Shrestha said. After the debunk, the experts deleted or corrected their posts, some even apologizing for the mistake.

The fact-checks had an impact on social media influencers as well, according to Shrestha. Some deleted the debunked posts, others apologized for the mistakes, and a few even thanked the fact-checkers for the corrections.

The group also started to fact-check misinformation not related to the pandemic, with more or less the same success. For example, Center for Investigative Journalism, a local partner of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), corrected a fact in its reporting on ICIJ’s FinCen files where “it has claimed that one of the companies involved was not registered in Nepal, which in fact was registered,” Sheshtra said.
In recent months, Southern African countries have also experienced a rise in infection rates along with a new wave of misinformation. False news items penetrated a variety of topics: possible (and ineffective) treatments as well as the “dangers” of vaccinations. “We see a lot of misinformation about unproven cures for coronavirus being shared on WhatsApp groups,” Peter Deselaers, DW Akademie’s program director for Namibia and Southern Africa told Deutsche Welle.

In Africa, radio is still a key source of information, and many local fact-checking organizations aim to reach their audiences via radio, so the spread of online misinformation created new challenges for them. “[It] was quite a difficulty considering that most of our audience are community media personnel and radio-listening clubs who mostly access and share content offline,” said Vusumuzi Sifile, executive director of Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf), a non-profit organization based in Zambia. (See chapter Fact-Checking Organizations and Their Brilliant Ideas to Reach Audiences)

Organizing remote discussions by phone or online conferencing tools was yet another challenge. “This compelled us to take steps to equip the media houses to integrate some technology-based tools into their normal routines,” Sifile said.

With its pandemic-related fact-checking, PSAf targeted mostly media practitioners, decision-makers, but also the general public. Its aim was not only to debunk misinformation, but also to prevent it from spreading. The organization has a platform where it can receive tips via WhatsApp, text messages or emails. “The scourge of misinformation around Covid-19 is so massive, and requires concerted multi-stakeholder efforts,” said Sifile. “Every day there are all sorts of new waves of misinformation about the pandemic. This requires a high level of alertness.”

Still, based on reactions and feedback, Sifile thinks that their audience increasingly understands the dangers of misinformation related to the pandemic. “However, some of them still go ahead and spread unverified or unverifiable content,” Sifile said. “This calls for continuous and multi-pronged sensitization and capacity building on not only identifying, but also mitigating misinformation on Covid-19 and other challenges.”

As the pandemic affects all sectors of life, PSAf has been working to set up “a multi-theme fact-checking center that will also support the media to produce and disseminate verified content.” They have already launched a new platform, iVerify Zambia Fact Checking Mechanism, which is focused on identifying and mitigating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech during elections and beyond.
The authors of the Harvard article claim that “in many places, engagement with coronavirus-related content drove a large percentage of overall user engagement with fact-checking content, and the capacity organizations developed to address coronavirus-related misinformation was later deployed to debunk misinformation on other topics.”

Nevertheless, they also found that “user engagement did not follow as clear a pattern as the increase in fact checkers’ activity. Coronavirus may have driven user engagement in the early months of the pandemic, but region-specific salient events and one-off viral tweets influenced user engagement in the later months of 2020.”

While fact-checking organizations have been making efforts to tackle the infodemic, and have been in many cases successful in engaging their audiences, it seems that keeping up with the rapid pace of false news production and distribution is a difficult, if not impossible, mission.
Despite growing up in the digital world, today’s teenagers are easy prey to disinformation, especially on their favorite social media platforms. Some fact-checking and media literacy outfits are struggling to fix that.
In an era when disinformation is alive and kicking, it is often challenging for any news consumer to decide whether a news item is real or fake. And it is not only a challenge for adults. “Children can be targets and objects of mis/disinformation, spreaders or creators of it,” according to a recent UNICEF report, which argues that children are even more susceptible to bogus news, because they are not properly equipped to judge whether information is true or false.

Even though teens and tweens (pre-teens, between the age of around 10-13) have been growing up in the digital world, more than half of them don’t know how to distinguish fake news stories from real ones, according to a report by Common Sense Media (CSM), a nonprofit organization aimed at helping parents, children and teachers to better understand media and technology. Its findings are echoed by a report of Stanford History Education Group, which showed that the majority of teenagers have trouble navigating the internet when they search for information. Another report issued by the group showed that high-school students “remain unprepared to navigate the digital landscape,” and they “displayed a troubling tendency to accept websites at face value.”

The CSM report also found that teens and tweens don’t really trust news: only one in four thinks that news items they see online are “very accurate.” The report also examined their sources of news, and found that 39% prefer social media, while traditional media is the number one source for only 24%.

Troubling findings that hide an uncomfortable truth: shavers are as easy to dupe as anyone else.

**The New Superspreaders on the Block**

The social media platforms most consumed by the young generations are TikTok and YouTube, followed by Instagram. TikTok officially has over one billion active users a month. This makes it the fourth largest social media platform in the world, according to data from Wallaroo Media. Facebook leads with 2.9 billion users, followed by YouTube with 2.2 billion and Instagram with some 1.4 billion users.

However, TikTok is the fastest growing social media player among all four. It was the second most downloaded app in the U.S. in November 2021, with four million downloads, trailing only the streaming platform Disney+. Facebook’s own TikTok clone application, Lasso had only 250,000 downloads in the U.S. in one year. TikTok had more than 41 million.

Furthermore, six out of 10 TikTok users belong to Generation Z, that is, people born after the mid-1990s, making it the largest age cohort among its users. Almost one third of all TikTok users in the U.S. are between 10 and 19, and they are very active: the average user spent 21.5 hours per month on the platform in 2020, a significant increase from the 12.8 hours in 2019.

On Facebook and Instagram, users between the ages of 25 and 34 constitute the largest demographic group (around 31% and 33%, respectively). According to a recent survey, 29% of American teens named TikTok as their favorite social media platform, and 25% selected Instagram. Only 2% mentioned Facebook.
It is not then surprising that many education experts and organizations realized how important it is to teach media literacy. Research has shown that media literacy creates better resistance to online misinformation. UNESCO introduced a new approach to promote media and information literacy (MIL), based on how misinformation spreads on social media. Its program, known as MIL CLICKS, is aimed at helping people to acquire MIL competencies “in their normal day-to-day use of the Internet and social media and to engage in peer education in an atmosphere of browsing, playing, connecting, sharing, and socializing.”

Add to that the exposure to misinformation that circulates rapidly through messaging applications like WhatsApp. A recent study by Paula Herrero-Díz, Jesús Conde-Jiménez and Salvador Reyes de Cózar found that “under the guise of news, an attractive format and outrage discourse,” misinformation appeals to emotions which often results in impulsive sharing. And, since on mobile phones sharing is also a matter of trust, “they are less likely to check a piece of content before resending it if it comes from a contact in their personal address book.”

Partially as a result of all these media consumption trends, almost one third of teens and tweens said that, in the past six months, they had shared a story that later turned out to be fake, the CSM report found.

Learning To See Truth Where There Is None

It is not then surprising that many education experts and organizations realized how important it is to teach media literacy. Research has shown that media literacy creates better resistance to online misinformation. UNESCO introduced a new approach to promote media and information literacy (MIL), based on how misinformation spreads on social media. Its program, known as MIL CLICKS, is aimed at helping people to acquire MIL competencies “in their normal day-to-day use of the Internet and social media and to engage in peer education in an atmosphere of browsing, playing, connecting, sharing, and socializing.”

"For too long, media and information literacy programs have focused on young people as beneficiaries of MIL. We need to engage young people as catalysts for change, as co-creators and co-leaders of media and information literacy development and dissemination,” Alton Grizzle, a program specialist with UNESCO, told Deutsche Welle.

The program has achieved some positive results. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, disinformation has been spreading even faster than the virus itself, nonetheless, there has also been “an uptick in the sharing and engagement with content connected to the MIL CLICKS platform,” Grizzle said. It is particularly encouraging to see that uptick also in regions such as Africa, Asia and Latin America where media literacy is still in its infancy.
WhatsApp Schooling: Best Way To Teach Kids How To Check Facts in Zimbabwe

Besides media literacy, or as part of it, learning to check facts is also important to keep young generations well informed. Teaching media literacy and fact-checking to teens and tweens is especially important in countries where the majority of the population is young. Take Zimbabwe where around 70% percent of the people are younger than 35, and more than 40% is below 15.

Zimbabwe is also characterized by an “overwhelming amount of misinformation in the information ecosystem,” said Cris Chinaka, editor-in-chief of ZimFact, Zimbabwe’s first national, independent and non-partisan fact-checking platform. Hence, “you want people, including the youth, to focus on public interest issues, and not gossip and conspiracy theories.”

Launched in 2018, ZimFact is dedicated to playing a watchdog role by fact-checking news and information in the public domain. It also promotes media literacy in schools, colleges and universities as well as equips media practitioners with fact-checking skills and tools through training programs.

The organization’s media literacy programs are rooted in the belief that empowering the youth with basic fact-checking skills helps them to recognize and reject misinformation. According to Chinaka, ZimFact’s experts go to different schools, explain the danger that misinformation poses to communities and individuals, and run a basic training focusing on what the audience should look at to recognize misinformation.

The program was launched almost two years ago, but the lockdowns triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic limited its potential, forcing ZimFact’s fact-checkers to visit only eight schools and 12 colleges. “Virtual training is not really possible here due to limitations in infrastructure,” Chinaka said. Face-to-face programs have a much higher impact, he added. Nonetheless, ZimFact’s plans remain ambitious: they plan to increase the number of visited schools to 100 over the course of the next two years.

According to Chinaka, the highlight of the program was the establishment of a fact-checking club comprising 50 students at the Harare Polytechnic College. ZimFact helps them improve their fact-checking skills and edit their content. Members of the club also fact-check information themselves and share the results of their work with their peers.

ZimFact not only trains young people, but also tries to reach out to a larger number of them by sharing with them on WhatsApp stories describing how they debunked false stories. WhatsApp is the most popular platform used to exchange information in Zimbabwe. “Literally almost everyone uses it,” Chinaka said. In the beginning, the team at ZimFact thought that the organization’s website would be their most important platform, but they quickly realized that they had way more impact, especially among young people, through WhatsApp. “They spend a lot of their time on the platform, so this is where we can make an intervention,” Chinaka said.
ZimFact sends out factsheets or texts about debunked stories that they previously posted on social media to the four WhatsApp groups the organization has created thus far. The ZimFact’s audience on WhatsApp has been constantly growing mostly thanks to the work that ZimFact’s team does in the field, such as regular visits to schools or college clubs where they invite students to join these groups.

To engage with the young audiences, ZimFact identified the topics these people are mostly interested in: education, employment and the pandemic. “These topics receive lots of traction every now and then,” Chinaka said.

Communication in the WhatsApp groups is not one-way. ZimFact also receives requests and tips for fact-checking certain topics. For example, it has recently received an increasing number of inquiries from the audience to fact-check job advertisements published on social media platforms, many of which turn out to be fake.

**Teaching Catalanian Teens How To Debunk False Information**

Verificat, the first independent, non-profit fact-checking platform in Catalonia, has also increasingly focused on young audiences in recent years. (See chapter How Fact-Checking Organizations Tackle Disinformation on Facebook and TikTok) “Young people are not only consumers, but also producers and distributors of information,” one can read on Verificat’s website.

With funding from YouTube and the International Fact-Checking Network, Verificat launched in 2020 its “fact-checking for Generation Z” DesFake program, a project that targets high school students who share content in their social media networks, especially on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.

The program was tested in a high school in Sant Boi de Llobregat, a small town close to Barcelona, where first-year students were taught to verify content: false news, manipulated images or videos. After a few weeks, they started to build a YouTube channel and create profiles on other social media platforms to share their findings. The project has been designed to fit the academic year. There are 24 hours of training distributed in 16 sessions. As the pilot was successful, the program was expanded to three more schools this year thanks to support from the Barcelona City Council.

“Before it didn’t even dawn on me to go to the original sources, at this age you don’t think about it, it’s much easier to share something if you like it,” Laia, a 14-year-old student in the program, told El Pais. “Now I am a different person,” she added.

Verificat plans to involve more institutions in the program and offer them tailor-made workshops: sessions of one to four hours for students to learn about verification tools and methodologies. The group also offers thematic workshops that allow students to analyze the relation between misinformation and social issues, or misinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic.
The Poynter Institute, a Florida-based think tank that works on supporting journalism, facts and media literacy, believes that the most effective approach to combat misinformation must be education-based. The institute launched in 2018 the program MediaWise, which teaches “teens to be critical media consumers and make decisions based on facts.” One of the central elements of the program is the Teen Fact-Checking Network (TFCN), which focuses on middle and high school students (age 11-18), and is also a verified signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network’s Code of Principles.

"A lot of people assume that teenagers – because they're digitally savvy and grew up with the internet – are better at identifying misinformation. But that is not true,” MediaWise program manager Katy Byron told Business Insider. The program equips teens with skills and tools that professional fact-checkers also use. These teens then also show other students what they learnt. The idea of “showing rather than telling” is one of the main goals of the program, according to the program’s mission statement.

“I think my teachings have made an impact on my peers, both because they’re more willing to listen to things other teenagers are saying, and because it’s a more accessible way to understand an important issue in today’s society,” said Taylor Fang, one of the participants in the program.

The program helps teens spot all types of misinformation, Alexa Volland, head of TFCN said in an interview with WBUR, Boston’s NPR news station, adding that “our teens are using social media storytelling to virtually walk viewers through every step of how they fact-checked these claims.”

TFCN doesn’t only train teens, but also publishes daily fact-checks for them, performed by the trainees. And it seems to have achieved a solid impact. According to a (non-representative) poll on the MediaWise Instagram account, 86% of respondents voted that they were more likely to fact-check on their own after watching a TFCN fact-check story.

"We're not changing the world right here, but we are slowly making people more aware of the information they're putting out into the world. And that is how we stop the spread of misinformation," MediaWise's fact-checker Thea Barrett said.

Changing the world might well be a utopian goal. Yet, if more and more young adults are made aware of how exposed they are to misinformation, they will begin to look more critically at dubious information shared on various platforms instead of helping to spread it, and thus will be better equipped to debunk such lies themselves. That will indeed be a first, albeit small, step in the right direction in the fight against disinformation.
As the fact-checking field is entering a new cycle, well-connected, media savvy fact-checking groups are likely to thrive. But many more others, especially those without a connection to a media outlet, are facing a turbulent future.
When Channel 4 News in Britain launched a blog to cover a parliamentary election in 2005, nobody realized that the broadcaster was making history. Aimed at verifying statements made by politicians and other election-related facts, the blog was one of the first fact-checking platforms the world saw. Three years later, similar initiatives were launched in France and the Netherlands. By the end of 2010, fact-checking groups were present in ten countries.

With over 300 fact-checking initiatives in operation all over the world today, fact-checking has become one of the most vibrant communication fields. As many of these groups are autonomous outfits, without formal links to media companies or other institutions, the sector has developed more or less as an independent field, complementing the work of journalists and media outlets.

Yet, although there are many successful fact-checking organizations in operation today, the sector still lacks a business model that would make fact-checking a sustainable enterprise on its own. Moreover, it seems that it is the relationship fact-checkers develop with media companies or the outright support they get from the media that ensures their viability. Without a strong link or partnership with a media company, fact-checkers are faced with extinction sooner or later, according to an analysis carried out by the Center for Media, Data & Society (CMDS).

Fact-Checking: Enter Phase Three

Reporter’s Lab, a center for journalism research in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, counted in 2021 nearly 349 fact-checking organizations in the world, a significant increase from 44 in 2014 and no more than 200 in 2019. The list includes news agencies, universities, NGOs, as well as regional initiatives and projects with a local focus.

The sector growth is impressive, yet there are numerous cases of initiatives that went bust after a shorter or longer period of time. Between 2005 and 2015, roughly a third of the 50 fact-checking groups that were launched across Europe folded or began to operate only occasionally. According to the CMDS analysis, all the fact-checking groups that have shuttered during the period had no form of cooperation with a media outlet (or were born just as a temporary initiative).

Based on these historical facts, our analysis identified three phases in the development of the fact-checking sector.

The first phase, stretching roughly between 2005 and 2010, marked the emergence of fact-checking as an independent activity with media outlets setting up specialized units to follow and verify facts related to a special event (especially elections) and independent organizations and individuals (especially journalists) creating fact-checking groups and initiatives as a reaction to the growing amount of disinformation and propaganda online.

In the second phase, spreading throughout the 2010s, the fact-checking field expanded at a frantic pace. The number of fact-checking groups, initiatives and projects skyrocketed, prompted by a number of factors including the aggressive rise of populist and propagandist movements (which required comparably high fact-checking efforts), the increase in resources allocated by tech companies to projects
aimed at countering disinformation and the increased finances that philanthropies kept pouring into the field. This rapid growth of available resources for fact-checking has also triggered a wave of opportunism, with numerous academic institutions, NGOs and think tanks swiftly embracing fact-checking and the study of disinformation as a more effective fundraising strategy.

As of 2020, a third phase, one of consolidation of the fact-checking field, seems to be underway, characterized on the one hand by the collapse of an increasing number of fact-checking groups and, on the other hand, by the strengthening of the fact-checking initiatives that seem to have found their modus operandi. The Covid-19 pandemic breathed new life into the field as demand for truthful facts swelled during the unprecedented health crisis we are still experiencing. However, the process of consolidation seems to continue as key actors are growing in prominence while weak ones, especially those without solid media partnerships, are operating on the fringes or succumbing altogether. Already in the last years of the past decade, the field was losing players at a fast rate. In 2021, Reporters’ Lab counted more than 110 “inactive” fact-checking operations.

But who’s going to survive and how is fact-checking going to change in the ongoing stage? The groups and initiatives anchored in solid cooperation with media companies or organizations able to attract healthy audiences are likely to dominate, our analysis shows.

An NGO Job

NGOs are the most typical fact-checking outfit, accounting for the largest part of the fact-checking and debunking fake news initiatives in the world. They also have links to media literacy initiatives and base their work on voluntary contributions from citizens, activists and academic researchers. Most of them are financing themselves through grants, donations, crowdfunding and advertising revenues. More than 60% of the fact-checking groups in Europe operated as independent outfits or NGO projects, according to data from 2016.

During the past decade or so, NGOs have gained a solid footing among fact-checking organizations thanks to the quality of their work and their low-cost operations, which made them valuable assets for media companies. Some of them became indispensable sources of content for mainstream media.

The question whether collaboration with mainstream media is a significant challenge for fact-checking organizations was also asked in a survey conducted by CMDs earlier this year among 30 fact-checking organizations worldwide. The survey showed that such collaboration doesn’t generally rank high on the fact-checkers’ priority list. Yet, it is a far more important challenge for fact-checking groups in Africa, the reason being that most fact-checking organizations operate in the online sphere, and since internet penetration remains comparatively low in most of Africa, these groups need media coverage to better disseminate their findings.

Various studies suggest that fact-checkers should expand their efforts to partner with news organizations. Our analysis also shows that the most prominent NGO-run
fact-checking initiatives owe their success to their non-competitive approach to media companies, which are perceived and treated as allies rather than competitors.

Take Chequeado, an Argentinian fact-checking group that operates as a small team of journalists with a mission to improve the quality of public debate. To date, they have offered their content and shared their fact-checking methodology with over 20 news media outlets across Latin America, including ColombiaCheck and Detector de mentiras run by the news outlet La Silla Vacía in Colombia, Lupa and Aos Fatos in Brazil, El Sabueso Verificador of Animal Político in México, Chile Check of CNN, and Ojo Biónico run by Ojo Público in Peru. In Italy, we identified Pagella Politica, a political fact-checking outfit that has built strong partnerships with nationwide media outlets such as TV RAI2 and the news agency AGI. In America, PolitiFact, a Pulitzer Prize-winning website that was established by the then St. Petersburg Times, to cover the 2008 presidential election, and became a unit of the Poynter Institute ten years later, has partnerships with newsrooms in a dozen states today. The Latvia-based Re:Baltica, an investigative journalism outlet covering the Baltic states, runs Re:Check, an initiative that works exclusively on fact-checking and social media research, routinely encouraging media outlets to “steal” its content. Finally, Salud con lupa, a collaborative journalism platform set up by a group of Peruvian journalists to cover public health across Latin America works today solely through alliances with journalists and media organizations in the region.

Some NGOs, especially those specialized in advanced investigative journalism techniques such as open-source intelligence techniques, crowd-sourced information, covert sources and digital forensics, or focused on a specific region or country, have become go-to resources for news media. In the first category, Bellingcat, an international team of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists that have been working on stories ranging from drug lords and crimes against humanity to use of chemical weapons and conflicts, is often used by news media to improve their coverage of these topics. In many cases, these outlets team up with Bellingcat to conduct investigations together. Another key player is the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, which has built the world’s largest hub of digital forensic analysts who specialize in tracking events in governance, technology and security.

In the second category, of fact-checkers focused on regional expertise, we can mention Africa Check, a fact-checking group covering African countries, which is extensively used by journalists who write Africa-related stories, and StopFake in Ukraine, a fact-checking platform that, thanks to its expertise in pro-Kremlin disinformation, is often used by journalists reporting on Russia.

**Born in the Newsroom**

Generally, editorial teams in media outlets always had among their members fact-checkers tasked to verify that all factual items in a text are correct. These items include dates, spelling of names or footnotes, among many other things. In the past two decades however, as media outlets have significantly increased their news output under the pressure of a growing online content industry, journalists have
been constantly required and expected to generate much more content, which prevents them from checking every piece of information gathered.

As a result, in recent years an increasing amount of news media have embarked on setting up larger fact-checking units whose mission is to assist journalists in the news gathering process and to conduct fact-checks during major events or news coverage that attracts more public attention. Very often these fact-checking units not only verify the facts collected by their journalists, but also correct claims made by third-party actors, such as politicians known for spreading fake news and propaganda.

A common trigger for media companies to set up their own fact-checking units was the need to react more methodically to the growing amount of disinformation spread online, chiefly by politicians. Many of these units were established to cover high-profile political events that were clearly seen to be vulnerable to disinformation such as elections or events with a major global impact such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some of these initiatives are created only as temporary projects with the aim of achieving outreach within a limited period of time. For example, CrossCheck in France was a collaborative journalism project that was created to counter misinformation online during the previous French presidential election. It brought together more than 30 newsrooms as well as journalism students across France to work on debunking false claims. The latest U.S elections also saw a boom of fact-checkers, almost 60 initiatives, that were dedicated to monitoring the statements of those involved in the electoral process. Other such initiatives include Faktiskt.se, a collaboration of major Swedish media to counteract misinformation during the 2018 election campaign in the country (it closed down after the elections), and Falsch Project, a project that was run by the German daily Süddeutsche Zeitung to debunk the biggest lies about Covid-19.

In a few cases, fact-checking work has been carried out by media outlets as part of joint initiatives. Faktisk in Norway, for example, has been created by a group of prominent newspapers and television broadcasters, including the country’s public service television operator, to jointly chase and expose false news.

Generally, the fact-checking units run by media outlets proved to be the most resilient among all fact-checkers, primarily because they are run by resourceful companies, which can easily scale up or down such projects. Moreover, fact-checking carried out by media outlets is also benefiting from a much larger exposure thanks to the larger, more loyal audiences that these outlets command. For example, fact-checking work that was featured on the program El Objetivo con Ana Pastor, a popular public affairs weekly program on the Spanish TV network La Sexta, was followed by nearly two million viewers each Sunday.

In some cases, fact-checking programs designed by media outlets are spun off into independent organizations, the most relevant example being Africa Check, which was established in 2012 by the non-profit media development arm of the news agency AFP. Covering four countries (South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal), Africa Check, after it became independent, has been financing itself through grants from international donors such as the Gates Foundation, Luminate and the Open Society Foundations (OSF).
Fact-checking units at prominent news media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News media</th>
<th>Name of fact-checking unit</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Channel 4</td>
<td>News Fact Check</td>
<td>Testing the claims of people in power</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delfi</td>
<td>Melo Detektorius</td>
<td>Checking claims made by Lithuanian political figures, online users of social networks and information found in other media</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dpa</td>
<td>Faktencheck</td>
<td>Part of their daily work</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagbladet, VG, TV2, NRK</td>
<td>Faktisk.no</td>
<td>General fact-checking</td>
<td>Norway</td>
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<tr>
<td>France 24</td>
<td>Les Observateurs</td>
<td>User generated content and image verification unit for videos from all over the world</td>
<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>Le Monde</td>
<td>Les Décodeurs</td>
<td>Widespread fact-checking</td>
<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reuters</td>
<td>Fact-checking unit</td>
<td>Fact-check visual material and claims posted on social media</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Fact Checker</td>
<td>High-quality fact checks on those in power in the U.S</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: CMDS

Academically Speaking

Academic institutions have been another important player in fact-checking, yet their influence has been declining in recent years. Some academic institutions have made an important contribution to the fact-checking field, but, with a few exceptions, the overall impact of the fact-checking groups run as part of academic institutions has been thus far very limited. The reason might be partly the more scientific approach to fact-checking of universities, which to a large extent limits the scope of their engagement with the general public.

Fact-checking initiatives created as part of academic institutions range from small student groups to large operations affiliated with major international universities. The latter are those few that have made an impact. Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, for example, monitors the factual accuracy of what American politicians say, publishing their content on Factcheck.org, which is known as a well-trusted source of fact-checking of political claims. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an American think tank, has also been involved in fact-checking work, focusing on identifying responses to the spread of disinformation. In Europe, we can mention EUfactcheck.eu, a fact-checking project run by the European Journalism Training Association that brings together schools from ten countries to build a sustainable curriculum unit on fact-checking.

But while universities as such have played a minor role in creating impactful fact-checking initiatives, it has to be noted that they often assist NGOs in fact-checking and debunking work. For example, the fact-checking site Demagog in Slovakia was
The newsroom-embedded fact-checking model can be found everywhere in the world, yet it is prevalent in developed media markets with relatively healthy media environments. Usually, fact-checking initiatives are established by independent media outlets concerned about the quality of public debate and low levels of access to factual information. Hence, most of the political fact-checking initiatives have been created by news media in Northern and Western Europe as well as the United States whereas in the rest of the world, the NGO-led fact-checking initiatives remain the predominant model.

Thus, the trends in the fact-checking field are also a strong indicator of the state of news media in a certain country. Nations with high levels of media capture, where most of the media outlets, both privately and state-run, are controlled by the government and associated businesses, lack newsroom-embedded fact-checking units. Instead this work is taken on by civil society groups or individuals, be they activists or independent journalists.

Nevertheless, in such captured media environments, the relations between fact-checking groups and media outlets are often challenging. Zasto Ne (‘Why Not?’), an NGO in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has been operating since 2010 the digital platform Istinomjer to strengthen political accountability, and launched another platform that monitors disinformation, Raskrinkavanje, in 2017.

The former has had a good working relationship with mainstream media, with an average of three guest appearances a week in different outlets. Even though both platforms are verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network, Raskrinkavanje’s relationship with mainstream media wasn’t that good, and has continuously deteriorated. Reactions by people working in the media to the stories published by Raskrinkavanje became more and more aggressive to the extent that a few months ago the executive editor of one of the most influential news portals in the country harassed one of Raskrinkavanje’s fact-checkers on the phone, threatening to “blow up” their entire organization. Raskrinkavanje was used to harassment, but this was the first time they received “an open death threat from an editor of a mainstream media outlet. The fact that such a threat came from a colleague who is himself a journalist is particularly shocking,” the organization wrote in a public press release.

On the other hand, in advanced media markets, with healthy levels of editorial independence, large media houses host prominent fact-checking initiatives. The danger there is that, being commercially funded, these media companies often follow a commercial logic in their editorial approach, which forces them to shut down fact-checking units when they become a financial burden or do not attract large audiences. For example, two initiatives pioneering fact-checking in France, Libération’s Désintox, launched in 2008, and Le Monde’s Les Décideurs, which
How the fact-checking sector develops further depends on many factors, the most important including the next stages of the pandemic, the priorities in the philanthropic funding area and the development of the media industry. Yet, our analysis identified a series of development patterns strongly indicating that the sector is going to rapidly consolidate in the coming years, with only the larger, more media-connected fact-checking outfits most likely to survive this new phase.

In the coming years, fact-checking organizations with a large following and strong links with media companies are expected to flourish whereas smaller fact-checking outfits, lacking links with or support from media outlets, are primed to fold at a much faster rate than in the past. Western news organizations in the first place are going to lead the fact-checking efforts, but due to the ongoing economic pressures, which are likely to intensify because of the pandemic-related crisis, the scope of their response to disinformation will vary greatly depending on the nature and importance of the events that are going to be covered, but also on the benefits that fact-checking will bring them.

The NGO model is also likely to survive, especially in less vibrant, highly politicized media environments where mainstream media are the main promoters of false news and propagandistic content, but also in some western countries where such organizations have established strong links with media companies. A string of NGOs carrying out fact-checking work in several Eastern European countries, ranging from Istinomer in Serbia and its sister fact-checking site in Bosnia & Herzegovina to Faktograf in Croatia to Demagog in Poland, have already gained broad recognition. Yet, their future remains unstable as they depend entirely on funds from donor organizations and philanthropies.

The economic pressures have already prompted a number of fact-checking NGOs to diversify their activities in their attempt to be more attractive to donors or generate additional sources of funding. For example, Vistinomer, a fact-checking site in North-Macedonia, is housed in an NGO that operates as an independent newsroom, which focuses on investigative reporting.

At the same time, fact-checking groups that have so far specialized in specific areas or topics and become key sources of information and expertise for news media and other institutions and organizations are also expected to thrive in the near future.

Some of them have their funding secured. For example, the East Stratcom Task Force, an outfit established in 2015 to collect evidence of disinformation spread by pro-Kremlin and Russian state media, which has become a key source of information for many news journalists covering politics, is financed by the EU’s diplomatic service. Others have to generate funding on their own, but have managed so far to attract hefty financing from donor organizations and philanthropies. They include groups such as Bellingcat or the Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Lab, which have gained experience in gathering special intelligence that is used to debunk lies or identify the source of disinformation.
Overall, the consolidation of the fact-checking field is a normal stage of development. Organizations that garnered attention and built partnerships, especially with resourceful media companies, will survive. Those who didn’t, will not. In countries with poor records of media freedom and highly captured media markets, where news organizations are rarely supportive of fact-checking and government-run outlets that promote propaganda and disinformation are dominant, fact-checkers are expected to face a rocky future. The demise of many of them will only deepen the crisis independent media are confronted with.
Robert Nemeth is Communications and Outreach Officer at CEU Democracy Institute (DI), and Editor of Review of Democracy. Previously he was Outreach Coordinator at the DI’s Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) where he was responsible for the communication and dissemination of the Center’s projects, programs and publications. Prior to joining CEU, he had a 15-year-long career in journalism working for different Hungarian TV stations and online media outlets in various positions ranging from journalist to senior editor and news producer. He also served as Content Project Manager for the European Maccabi Games 2019. Previously, he graduated in History and in Media Studies at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, then obtained an MA in Sociology and Social Anthropology at Central European University. He also works part-time for Minority Rights Group Europe as a Media and Communications Consultant and is a guest lecturer at the Department of Media and Communications at ELTE.

Marius Dragomir is Director of CMDS, and Senior Manager at CEU Democracy Institute. He previously worked for the Open Society Foundations (OSF) for over a decade: he has managed the research and policy portfolio of the Program on Independent Journalism (PIJ), formerly the Network Media Program, in London. He has also been one of the main editors for PIJ’s flagship research and advocacy project, Mapping Digital Media, which became the largest policy research project ever. He was the main writer and editor of OSF’s Television Across Europe, a comparative study of broadcast policies in 20 European countries. He has been advising international organizations including Council of Europe where he serves as a member of the Committee of Experts on Media Environment and Reform, and UNESCO, where he has been sitting on the advisory board of the organization’s World Trends in Media Freedom Project. In 2015, with a group of journalists and researchers, he co-founded MediaPowerMonitor, a community of experts in media policy covering trends in regulation, business, and politics that influence journalism.

Mihaela Groza is Program Coordinator for CMDS, where she coordinates international and EU funded projects that deal with media capture and literacy, declining trust in journalism and cross border investigative journalism. Since 2017 she has been a collaborator of Naturvåg (HORIZON 2020 EU project) where she conducts research on sustainable development goals (SDG 11). Her academic background includes a BA and a MA in Jewish history as well as Jewish minority heritage and its representations in the shared public space. For the past 3 years she has engaged in a series of human rights trainings in the UK and the Netherlands. This helped her perform better in her profession as well as in her volunteer activities. She is also proficient in data visualizations tools such as Infogram, Tableau Public and Datawrapper.

Eva Bognar is Senior Program Officer and Researcher at CMDS. She has been managing projects (including EU-funded projects on Violent Online Political Extremism, Media Pluralism, Press and Media Freedom, and projects funded by the Open Society Foundations on Hungarian Media Laws in Europe, misinformation, and Hungarian Media Ownership) and events (public lectures, workshops, conferences and the annual summer school) for the Center. She is the Hungarian contributor to the Digital News Report, a major comparative project from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University. Recently she has been studying Hungarian minorities and their use of online space; and media representation of migration. Her background is in sociology.