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# Building a Cross-Border European Information Network: Hyperlink Connections Among Fact-Checking Organizations

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## Abstract

This article examines the hyperlinking practices of European fact-checking organizations as one of many indicators of efforts to establish a transnational community and identify organizations perceived as “opinion leaders” in combating disinformation. Through a content analysis of 1,976 fact-checking articles from 12 organizations (independent, in-house, and global news agencies) in Germany, Portugal, Spain, and the UK, the study reveals significant variations in hyperlink practices. We measured internal and outbound hyperlinks to fact-checking units used as verification sources or further reading material. The article also evaluates the transnational character of disinformation by analyzing the scope of verified falsehoods. Among the core findings, independent organizations are more likely to establish cross-border connections through outbound links to peer organizations, primarily linking to global news agencies like Reuters and AFP or to other independent fact-checking units from former colonies. In contrast, legacy media units rarely hyperlink to other fact-checkers as evidence sources or for reading suggestions. The study identifies European global news agencies as key opinion leaders, frequently linked for their reliability, particularly amid the heightened disinformation landscape following the Russia–Ukraine war. US fact-checking units, such as PolitiFact and Snopes, also maintain significant influence. This research enhances fact-checking studies by extending beyond liberal systems and emphasizing the strategic importance of hyperlinks in creating a global network of organizations. It offers new insights into linking practices within this domain, complementing existing literature on journalism and political communication. Additionally, the findings advance disinformation research by demonstrating the transnational nature of the issue.

## Keywords

disinformation; fact-checking; hyperlinking; information flows; media systems; opinion leadership

## 1. Introduction

Concerns about disinformation have led to the development of a digital fact-checking infrastructure aimed at circulating verified information and establishing shared epistemologies. This article analyses the extent to which European fact-checking units—whether independent, in-house, or linked to global news agencies (Graves & Cherubini, 2016)—are interconnected online both transnationally and within individual countries. It also identifies organizations that serve as transnational reference points in journalistic co-orientation processes within this news landscape, i.e., as opinion leaders (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019; Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). To measure this online interconnectedness, we examine citational hyperlinks (Ryfe et al., 2016) that are manually embedded by fact-checkers from four European democracies—Germany, the UK, Portugal, and Spain—encompassing three types of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and 12 organizations. Hyperlinks can coordinate actions, enhance collective viewpoints, foster a sense of community, and build a unified group identity (Heft et al., 2021).

Hyperlinks are only one of several indicators used to observe interconnectedness and a sense of community, which may foster a European public sphere, as encouraged by EU-promoted fact-checkers (see Moland et al., 2025). Studies have traced the global fact-checking movement's evolution since 2014, shaped by the Global Fact conferences, where fact-checkers built a community, adopted shared practices, and organized under the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Since then, they have collaborated to define their work, engage with stakeholders, and establish governance mechanisms (Graves & Lauer, 2020; Lauer & Graves, 2024). Despite this, hyperlinking practices as a measure of interconnectedness remain unexamined. While hyperlinks have been studied as strategic tools in journalism, politics, and social movements (Ackland & Gibson, 2013; Heft et al., 2021; Karlsson et al., 2015; Shumate & Lipp, 2008), no research has explored their role in the fact-checking community, which spans both journalistic and NGO-based organizations.

Hence, this article aims to explore the existence of a fact-checking network across Europe, with a specific focus on connections established through hyperlinking practices, while acknowledging the existence of other forms of interconnectedness and community-building. By examining how European fact-checkers collaborate and reference one another, the research identifies key national and transnational organizations that hold influential positions within this network. Additionally, the study analyzes the geographical scope of information verified by European fact-checkers, highlighting their regional and international focus on combating misinformation. Although several studies have examined hyperlinking patterns in journalism (Coddington, 2012; Karlsson et al., 2015; Ryfe et al., 2016; Stroobant, 2019), social movements and political parties (Ackland & Gibson, 2013; Shumate & Lipp, 2008), or right-wing regressive online media (Heft et al., 2021), to the best of our knowledge, no analyses have specifically addressed hyperlinking practices among fact-checkers. Given the hybrid nature of fact-checking organizations, which are linked to media outlets or NGOs, this study contributes to journalism and fact-checking literature, as well as disinformation studies.

The article begins with a theoretical framework from which the research questions are derived, focusing on the following: First, the extent to which European fact-checkers lay the foundation for a national and transnational fact-checking landscape through hyperlinking; second, the identification of fact-checking organizations that can be deemed the most influential or “opinion leaders” for European fact-checkers; and third, the geographical scope of verified information. Initially, we discuss the development of the European fact-checking movement and explain why hyperlinks serve as an indicator of a transnational information ecology. Next, we define

opinion leadership as the role of influential outlets that journalists rely on for information and as a benchmark for shaping their reporting, and briefly address the global circulation of disinformation. Before presenting the findings and concluding discussion, the article outlines the research design and the rationale for selecting countries and organizations in Section 3.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. *The European Fact-Checking Landscape*

The breakdown of the 20th-century mass media system and the emergence of fragmented digital media environments have paved the way for the expansion of populist communication strategies (Waisbord, 2018), intensifying epistemic challenges and information disorder (Wardle, 2019), including the unintentional spread of falsehoods (misinformation) and the deliberate use of propaganda tactics (disinformation). In Europe, post-truth politics has had a significant impact, most notably seen in the Brexit referendum. The problem was further aggravated by the mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic by right-wing governments (della Porta et al., 2024) and the invasion of Ukraine, both of which were accompanied by a surge in misinformation and disinformation, which were amplified through social media. In response to this broad structural and cultural epistemic crisis, fact-checking initiatives have emerged as a new journalistic mediation tool, establishing themselves in numerous countries:

By mediation, it is generally meant that a third element stands between (at least) two other actors and provides services [in this case verification of third-party content] for one or both sides (or is at least expected to do so). (Neuberger, 2022, p. 161)

While these sites may vary in aspects like reach or funding models (Graves, 2018), their emergence can be viewed as a transnational phenomenon (Lauer & Graves, 2024) due to their shared values and the similar information niches they occupy across different countries.

Fact-checking organizations typically fall into two categories: independent or in-house teams within media outlets. Independent fact-checkers, often found in regions like Eastern Europe and Latin America, operate as non-profits free from corporate or editorial influence (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). These organizations rely on grants from foundations committed to supporting democratic institutions (Usher, 2019), though they often face difficulties in securing long-term funding and expanding their audience base. Their work is typically more community-focused, pushing the boundaries of conventional journalism to engage the public (Baack, 2018). As hybrid organizations, they encourage civic activism by promoting informed decision-making grounded in public-oriented values while balancing financial sustainability challenges (Kim & Buzzelli, 2024).

In contrast, in-house fact-checking teams function within established media outlets, primarily in the US and Western Europe (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). These teams benefit from the extensive infrastructure and reach of their parent organizations but are constrained by the editorial guidelines of those media entities. Due to the daily demands of news production, these media outlets generally produce fewer fact-checking pieces (Cazzamatta, 2025; Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Palau-Sampio, 2018). However, some global news agencies, such as AFP, EFE, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), and Reuters, have fully integrated fact-checking practices into their newsrooms. AFP and DPA have even developed

AI-assisted verification tools, including those created through the Vera.ai and WeVerify projects (AFP, 2024). These agencies have the resources to employ specialized technologists and programmers alongside journalists (Lewis & Usher, 2014). Although fact-checking shares similarities with journalism, scholars consider it a “transnational field adjacent to, but distinct from, professional journalism” (Lauer & Graves, 2024, p. 13).

Fact-checking aims to identify, verify, correct, and curb misinformation, often working with government agencies and platform operators (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022). Since 2016, in response to rising disinformation and post-truth politics, fact-checking organizations have shifted focus. Their work has expanded from evaluating statements by politicians and officials to actively tracking and countering viral misinformation on social media (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022; Cazzamatta & Santos, 2024; Graves et al., 2023). The verification process begins by reaching out to sources of misinformation, such as political figures, and tracing false claims. Fact-checkers then gather evidence from authoritative records and independent institutions to ensure transparency. To address conflicting and often politicized expert opinions, they use truth triangulation, comparing perspectives from diverse experts or organizations. Finally, they assess contextual accuracy, consistency, and the broader implications of misleading claims within ongoing debates (Graves, 2016, 2017; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). Some fact-checking coalitions, such as Elections24Check—as demonstrated in this issue by Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2025)—are adopting a more contextual approach to disinformation.

Cross-referencing data from the Duke Reporters’ Lab, the IFCN, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), and the Facebook Third-Party Fact-Checking Project (3PFC) reveals 137 fact-checking organizations operating in Europe. Of these, 77 are affiliated with media outlets, while 60 operate independently within academic institutions, NGOs, CSOs, or other non-profits. In terms of collaboration, 56 are signatories to Meta’s program, 44 to the EFCSN, and 67 to the IFCN. Much like social movements (della Porta, 2022; Diani, 1992; Moss & Snow, 2016), fact-checking networks have emerged through collective efforts, facilitated by events focused on community-building, the establishment of dedicated institutions, and strategic partnerships with key stakeholders to secure institutional support and legitimacy (Lauer & Graves, 2024, p. 13). The inaugural Global Fact conference in 2014, organized by the IFCN, is widely regarded as the pivotal moment that unified the global fact-checking community. Prior to this, although the number of fact-checking organizations had grown since 2009, there was minimal interaction between them (Lauer & Graves, 2024, p. 13). The IFCN sets rigorous standards for fact-checkers, requiring a commitment to non-partisanship, transparency of methods and sources, fairness, and accurate corrections. Through the IFCN, fact-checkers have partnered with major platforms, such as Meta’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, which operates across Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp in 119 countries. IFCN also oversees the Global Fact Fund—an initiative supported by funding from Google and YouTube—designed to support fact-checking efforts worldwide and mitigate the impact of misinformation (Poynter, 2024).

In 2022, the EFCSN was founded to foster collaboration among European fact-checkers and strengthen their fight against disinformation. This initiative aligns with the EU’s broader disinformation strategy, which includes the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), launched by the European Commission in 2020. EDMO operates 14 hubs across 28 EU and EEA countries, while EFCSN concentrates on upholding high standards for fact-checking, promoting accountability, and ensuring transparency in the battle against misinformation: “The EFCSN exists to uphold and promote the highest standards of fact-checking, as well as

build professional, long-lasting links among the community of independent European fact-checkers" (EFCSN, 2024). These networks facilitate collaboration to counter disinformation. Faced with challenges such as debunking war-related misinformation (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024), fact-checkers coordinate efforts to improve effectiveness, expand reach, and minimize redundancy (Linares, 2022). Beyond training and events, European institution-building organizations like EDMO and EFCSN provide a searchable database of fact-checks in multiple EU languages, maintain an updated list of active organizations, analyze disinformation trends, and support joint investigations (EDMO, 2024).

The EU's updated Code of Practice on Disinformation, introduced in 2022, aims to expand fact-checking efforts across all EU member states and languages, ensuring platforms consistently integrate fact-checking into their services. It also seeks to provide fair financial compensation for fact-checkers and improve access to critical information needed for their work (European Commission, 2022). Within this context, we aim to examine the extent to which these collaborative efforts are reflected in their transnational hyperlinking practices, which amplify their initiatives and foster cross-border connections.

## ***2.2. Hyperlinks as an Indicator of a Transnational Fact-Checking Information Ecology***

The described rise of a global fact-checking movement integrated into the information ecology provides some opportunities to establish transnational networks focused on mutual attention, recognition, and support in the fight against disinformation. Hyperlinks constitute the core structural component of the internet. It is defined as a technological function that permits one webpage or website to connect to another (Park, 2003). Depending on their context, hyperlinks can guide attention, credit information sources, offer interactivity, and facilitate the creation of personalized content (Coddington, 2012). Some studies reinforce the notion that linking behavior is deliberate rather than random, suggesting that hyperlinks hold a certain degree of social significance (De Maeyer, 2013) and are a tactically planned communicative act (Heft et al., 2021; Park, 2003). In a literature review of link studies, De Maeyer (2013) shows that hyperlinks can act as a barometer of authority, measured by the frequency with which content is linked. In political science, they can serve as a technical measure, offering insight into the ideological landscape of the blogosphere under study. The list of functions is extensive, including tracking societal debates, establishing connections between blogs and media outlets, and observing international flows of information (De Maeyer, 2013).

Links can also be understood as a journalistic strategy (Coddington, 2012; De Maeyer & Holton, 2016; Karlsson et al., 2015; Ryfe et al., 2016). While links are praised for enhancing context, transparency, and connectivity in the news, such optimism is balanced by a degree of skepticism within metajournalistic discussions due to financial considerations (De Maeyer & Holton, 2016). News organizations aim to retain users on their sites for extended periods to maximize advertising revenue and reinforce their brand. Consequently, directing readers to external websites—particularly those of rival media—seems unlikely in this context. In the realm of news media, external links, when included, are more likely to direct users to the original sources and materials of the reported content (Heft et al., 2021). Ryfe et al. (2016) subsume the significance of news links to a limited set of objectives: navigation, commercial, social, and citation. Navigational purposes help users find relevant content. In fact, all links are navigational, as they guide readers from one page to another. Commercial links are utilized to generate revenue through connections to other sites, such as advertisements or classified sections. Social links facilitate content sharing through social media platform buttons and provide users with opportunities to disseminate content. Citation links,

manually embedded by journalists—the focus of this article—guide users to sources of information, aiming to enhance the credibility of news reports (Ryfe et al., 2016).

Fact-checkers extensively use hyperlinks to cite the sources of evidence used in the verification process, thereby enhancing transparency (Humphrecht, 2020; Seet & Tandoc, 2024). The fact-checking community is encouraged to present research comprehensively and in a near-scientific manner. By sharing sources via hyperlinks—such as statements, documents, infographics, images, and forensic tools—fact-checkers enable audiences to replicate their conclusions, akin to scientific reproducibility (Graves, 2016; Humphrecht, 2020; Kumar, 2024). Studies on fact-checking transparency show that independent fact-checkers in Europe (Humphrecht, 2020), Asia (Seet & Tandoc, 2024), and globally, including the US, UK, India, South Africa, Brazil, and Australia (Ye, 2023), tend to be more transparent than newsroom-based counterparts. These organizations also provide readers with additional relevant content, such as links to prior verifications on the same topic, either produced by the reporting organization or other fact-checking entities. This facilitates navigation to related materials through outbound hyperlinks, which are links that an organization embeds in its website which forward to the website of another fact-checking organization.

Beyond journalism, hyperlinks can also be employed as a political or social movement strategy (Ackland & Gibson, 2013; Shumate & Lipp, 2008). In their comparative study of hyperlinks across around 100 political parties in six countries, Ackland and Gibson (2013) identified three networked communication objectives: reinforcing identity, multiplying forces, and dismissing the opposition. In the case of identity reinforcement, hyperlinks are used to show approval for a specific political cause or issue, thereby strengthening the party's policy stance and key objectives. Transposing this to the fact-checking community, it refers to their shared objective of combating disinformation and enhancing the quality and accuracy of public debate. When used to enhance impact, hyperlinks are employed to amplify the online visibility of political parties or organizations. This strategy is also crucial for fact-checkers to reach a wider readership and strengthen the impact of their corrective messages. In this sense, hyperlinks are assets that “enable members and nonmembers to reach like-minded organizations in order to enhance the visibility of the network's goals” (Shumate & Lipp, 2008, p. 178). Some scholars conceptualize hyperlink networks as a form of connective good, i.e., the collection of inter-organizational links that facilitate members' and non-members' access to similar organizations, thus increasing the visibility of the network's primary objectives. Organizations benefit from this connective good since individuals can navigate among various websites on the same topic or with similar objectives, and the number of hyperlinks directed to a website can impact the ranking of search engines. Based on this background, we ask:

RQ1: To what extent are European fact-checkers interconnected both nationally and transnationally through hyperlinks?

Considering that established online news media primarily use internal links (Heft et al., 2021) and that independent fact-checkers tend to be more transparent, we hypothesize:

H1: Independent organizations are more likely to provide outbound links to their peers.



### 2.3. Media Opinion Leadership

Media outlets or fact-checking organizations are integrated into their respective media systems. Within this informational landscape, a process of reciprocal co-orientation occurs. This means that journalists—and fact-checkers in our case—base their perspectives not solely on their own outlets but also on coverage [or corrective messages] from other media sources (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). Journalists observe and adapt their colleagues' investigative methods, news selection, and event coverage (Harder et al., 2017). These professional co-orientations are influenced by homophily—the tendency for similar individuals to form social connections—a concept established over 60 years ago (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019). In journalism, Donsbach (2004) identified three key orientations: personal relationships with colleagues, professional engagement where peers shape reporting, and news decisions informed by observing others to validate choices and reduce uncertainty. Homophily in social networks is driven by geographic proximity, organizational ties, and shared interests (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019). Since fact-checkers share a common identity, operate within institution-building frameworks like the IFCN, EFCSN, and EDMO, and collaborate on verification and governance (Lauer & Graves, 2024; Linares, 2022), similar co-orientation likely occurs within their community, reinforcing collective efforts against misinformation.

For instance, on the websites of many fact-checking organizations, they acknowledge following or being inspired by methodologies of flagship organizations such as the US-American PolitiFact, the British Full Fact, or even the Argentinian Chequeado (Nafria, 2018). Previous studies focusing on legacy outlets during the mass media era also identified several factors contributing to inter-media coordination. First, due to the commercial nature of the press, they are in a competitive situation that requires them to monitor their competitors. Moreover, the co-orientation of other media outlets reduces uncertainties related to topic selection and evaluation. Finally, the orientation toward colleagues also represents a replacement for the lack of contact with imagined audiences (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). Because of structural conditions and resources, prestigious quality media have always been considered “opinion leaders.” The concept was first developed within audience research (Katz et al., 2017) and has been defined as individuals who enhance, validate, or modify the information their followers hold by sharing media content through personal interactions (Podschatz & Geise, 2024). The concept has then been transposed to opinion formation within the mass media: “Media opinion leaders are certain prestigious media that other journalists use as a source for information and as a frame of reference” (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991, p. 36). In the same vein, we are interested in examining, through hyperlinks, European fact-checking organizations that hold prestigious status and serve as references for their peers.

This reciprocal observation of media and their content takes place across various levels: within the media system, within individual editorial teams, and among journalists (Jarren & Donges, 2011). An indicator of intra-media opinion leadership is the frequency at which media outlets are cited by their peers on specific topics (Media Tenor, 2019). Current research observes the co-orientation—or homophily—phenomenon by examining how media professionals predominantly mention other media actors on social networks, such as Twitter (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019; Wu et al., 2011). In a review of link studies, De Maeyer (2013) further demonstrates that hyperlinks can serve as an indicator of authority, based on the frequency with which content from a specific organization is cited. Hence, we ask:

RQ2: Which national/transnational fact-checking organizations can be deemed as an “opinion leader” for fact-checkers from different European nations?

## 2.4. International Flows of (Dis)Information

As previously mentioned, fact-checking units generally provide links to their national or international peers when using material as evidence or recalling previous debunked materials related to the same topic, usually at the end of the article. Nonetheless, the type of link provided can be related to the scope of verified information. While previous studies did not observe an established linking culture (Quandt, 2008; Turow & Tsui, 2008), the use of hyperlinks has grown over the years, especially to make the reporting process more transparent (Coddington, 2012). Transparency and the reproducibility of verdicts are fundamental to fact-checking practices. However, the selection of links provided, whether to national or international peers, may reflect the geographic focus of the falsehoods being addressed. In this context, hyperlink analysis can be used to observe the international flow of falsehoods. To determine whether a claim merits correction, fact-checkers consider two key criteria: first, whether the claim is verifiable (“checkability”) and not simply an opinion; and second, whether it has achieved viral status, in order to prevent the amplification of rumors (Amazeen, 2015). Once these criteria are met, additional factors such as relevance (or “check-worthiness”), timeliness, and the prominence of sources and targets of misinformation are evaluated (Graves, 2016; Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). Misinformation, understood in this context as a broad category irrespective of intent, is intrinsically a transnational issue. Falsehoods can easily cross borders and languages via digital platforms (Cazzamatta, 2024; EDMO, 2022; Tardáguila, 2021). Global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, or conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, frequently trigger cross-border falsehoods. It is plausible to assume that the traditional structure of news geography can be applied to fact-checking verification practices, wherein falsehoods circulating within global superpowers, neighboring countries, and regions affected by conflict and war receive heightened scrutiny. Hence, we ask:

RQ3: What is the geographical scope of the verified information by European fact-checkers?

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Sampling of Countries and Organizations

To address our three primary research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of 1,976 verification articles produced by European fact-checkers in 2022. We selected only articles that provided some form of verdict, either in a narrative form or based on labels. Explanatory articles, investigative pieces, meta-analyses, and promotional material were excluded from the sample. Our selection included countries representing the three media systems outlined by Hallin and Mancini (2004): Portugal and Spain exemplify the polarized pluralist model, the UK represents the liberal one, and Germany corresponds to the democratic corporatist. Language constraints also influenced our choices within each typology, leading us to exclude France, Italy, and the Nordic countries. Additionally, we included Spain as a second country from the Mediterranean model, considering studies that, based on Hallin and Mancini’s operationalization, later classified Portugal within the liberal cluster (Brüggemann et al., 2014). Although studies have observed a convergence path within independent organizations influenced by transnational structures like platform partnerships or IFCN/EFCSN memberships, the media system approach continues to impact legacy media organizations, reflecting a path of continuity (Cazzamatta, 2025). Considering other indicators, these four selected countries exhibit differing levels of disinformation resilience (Humprecht et al., 2020) and epistemic vulnerability (Labarre, 2025).



Considering varied organizational structures—as well as potential variations in their practices regarding internal and outbound linking to fact-checking peers—we selected different types of organizations when available during the data collection period. This includes editorial units operating within legacy media and global news agencies, as well as independent organizations, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Selected European organizations.

Countries	Legacy Media	Independent Fact-Checking Organizations	News Agencies
Germany	Faktenfinder (Tagesschau)	Correctiv!	DPA Faktenchecks
UK	BBC Reality Check	Full Fact	Reuters Fact Check
Portugal	Fact Checks (Observador); Prova dos Factos (Publico)	Polígrafo	—
Spain	—	Maldita.es; Newtral	EFE Verifica

We collected links published between January and December 2022 using the Feeder extension ( $n = 8,153$ ). While misinformation about Covid-19's aftermath remained widespread, it was no longer the dominant issue throughout the year. Key events included regional elections in Portugal, Spain, and Germany; Brazil's presidential election (which was particularly verified by Portuguese organizations); and the onset of the Russia–Ukraine war. Other significant events included the Qatar World Cup, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, and the resignation of two UK prime ministers, culminating in Rishi Sunak's succession. For the manual content analysis, we drew a stratified representative sample of 25% by following the order of publication and selecting every fourth article ( $n = 2,038$ ). After excluding duplicates and articles unrelated to fact-checking practices (such as explanatory texts, meta-analyses, and investigative reports), our final sample consisted of 1,976 articles, reflecting the overall population.

### 3.2. Coding Training and Reliability

Six research assistants, all native speakers with substantial knowledge of the countries under analysis, manually coded the articles over a period of six months after completing 40 hours of training and reaching acceptable levels of reliability. Krippendorff coefficients are provided below for each category of analysis. Reliability was measured across language groups to ensure that any misunderstandings were attributed to flaws in the coding instructions rather than differences in language proficiency. Furthermore, it was not feasible to train everyone in English, as the assistants needed to be familiar with the organizations they would be coding.

### 3.3. Operationalization and Categories of Analysis

Here, we briefly describe the categories presented in the findings section. For more detailed instructions and definitions, please refer to the Supplementary Material. To address RQ1 and RQ2, we measured whether a verification article provided links to fact-checking organizations either as a source of information within the verification process or as suggested further reading for similar corrections on the same issue:

- Fact-checking link as evidence source: Are links to fact-checking organizations included in the adjudication process during the verification analysis? Four coding possibilities were available: 0 (no

links); 1 (yes—self-production); 2 (yes—outbound links); and 3 (both; Krippendorff's alpha ranged from 0.72 to 0.88).

- Verification provided by other organizations: Does the article provide links to the same verification conducted by other fact-checkers? For a list of 140 global organizations, please refer to the codebook (Krippendorff's alpha ranged from 0.88 to 1.00).

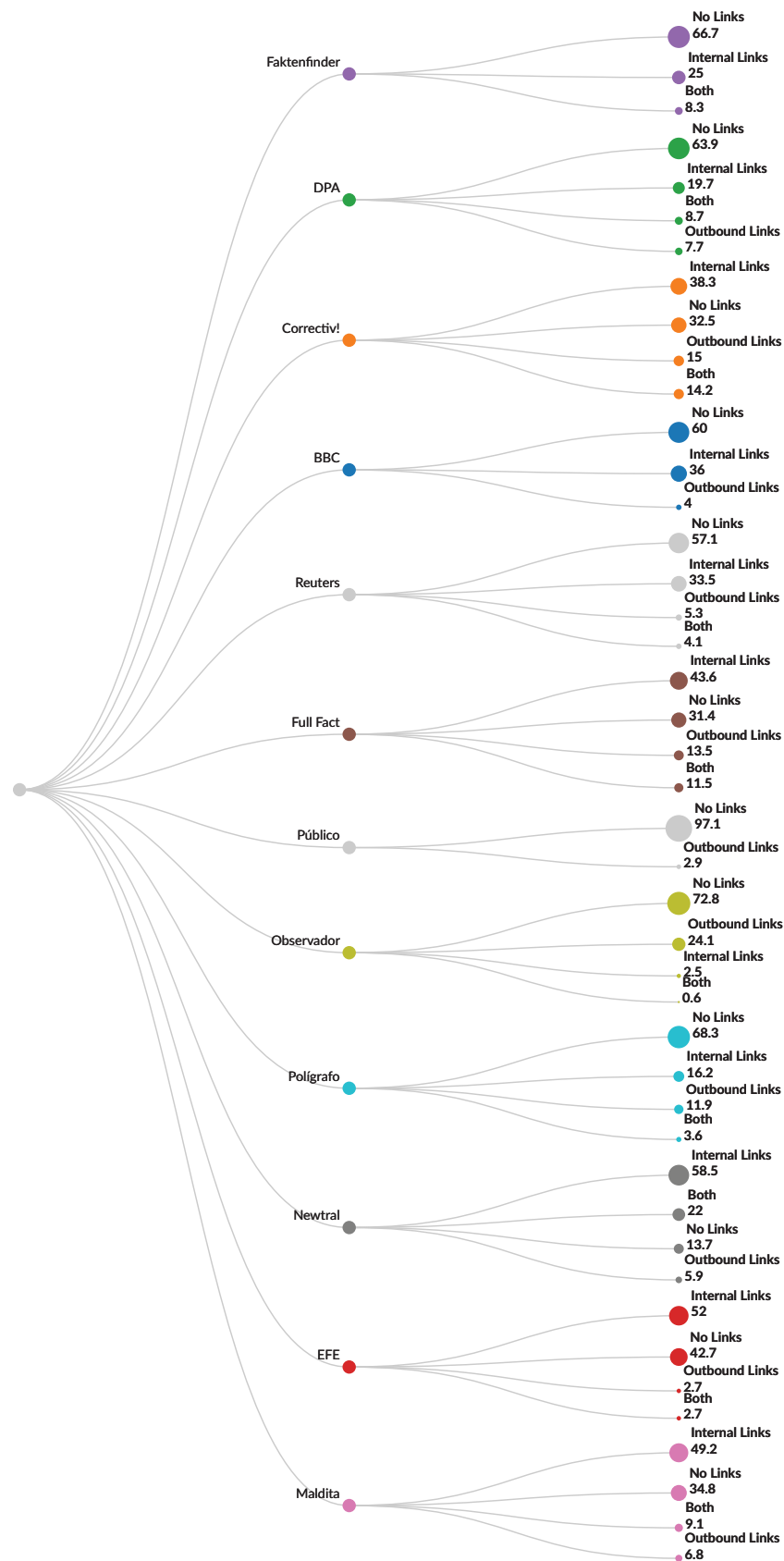
To address RQ3, we combined two additional categories—the geographical scope of the verified information and the countries involved in the content of the false information:

- Scope of verified information (Krippendorff's alpha ranged from 0.77 to 0.95):
  - “Regional–national” refers to verifications entirely related to the reporting country.
  - “International” verifications describe situations in other countries that are not directly related to the reporting state, such as Portuguese fact-checkers verifying issues related to the Brazilian elections.
  - “National–international” linkages encompass the involvement of national actors, either as targets or sources of false information abroad.
  - “Global–transnational–deterritorialized” issues address falsehoods with no clear borders, related to supranational organizations, global companies, or spanning more than two countries.
- Countries involved in the content of false information: Refers to states, other than the reporting country, that are involved in the false content being verified. A mere mention of the nationality of sources or the location of institutions was not sufficient for coding; the country had to be directly involved as either a target or a source of falsehood (Krippendorff's alpha ranged from 0.77 to 0.94).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Linking Patterns Among Fact-Checkers (RQ1 and RQ2)

Fact-checking organizations hyperlink to one another in two contexts. They either reference materials from other fact-checking units during the verification process as supporting evidence or background information, or they link at the conclusion of articles to indicate that the same falsehood has already been debunked by multiple other organizations. In the case of links to other organizations as part of the evidence provided, as shown in Figure 1, fact-checking units within established legacy media—such as the Portuguese newspapers *Público* (91% of instances with no links whatsoever) and *Observador* (72.8%), the public service broadcasters Faktenfinder from Tagesschau-ARD (66.7%) and the BBC (60%), and two global news agencies, the German DPA (63.9%) and Reuters (57.1%)—do not employ hyperlinks to fact-checking organizations, either internal or external (for a tabular visualization, see the Supplementary Material). This result aligns with previous studies of journalistic patterns of hyperlinking, showing that reporters usually don't employ citational links (Karlsson et al., 2015; Turow & Tsui, 2008). If links are available at all, they are primarily internal to their own website. It is interesting that all these legacy media's in-house fact-checking units—except for DPA—are not members of the EFCSN and are probably less involved in community-building practices, which is reflected in their lower levels of homophilic hyperlinking. In this case, similar to the findings of Hanusch and Nölleke (2019), organizational contexts appear to play a significant role in shaping homophilic hyperlinking networks.



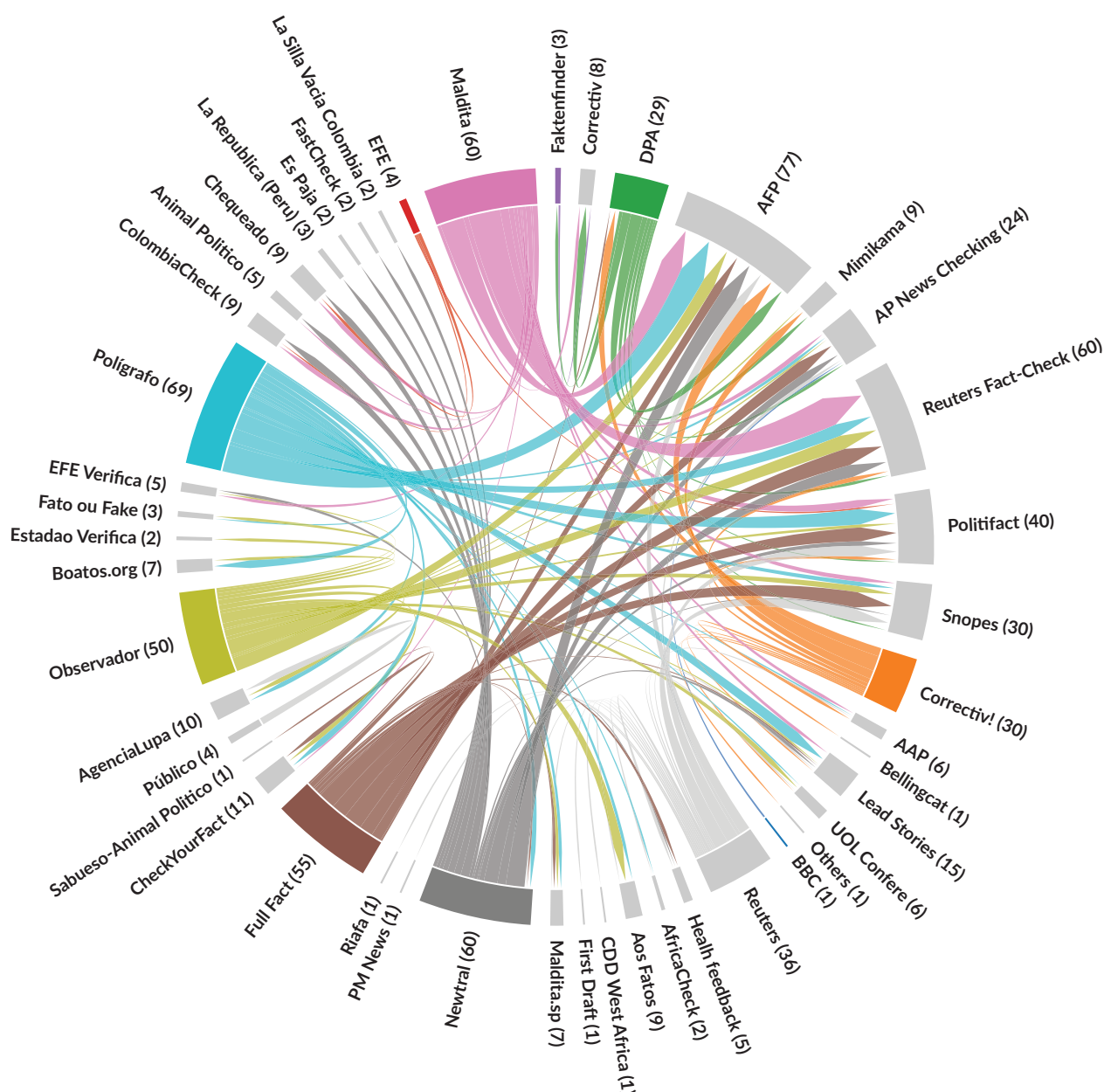
**Figure 1.** Percentage of links to fact-checking organizations used as evidence sources.

In contrast, and in support of H1, independent fact-checking organizations demonstrate a stronger sense of community by providing significantly more outbound hyperlinks to their peers, further demonstrating that organizational structure plays a role (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019). Considering citations of outbound links and cases where both internal and external links are present, we observe that Maldita (15%), Full Fact (25%), Newtral (28%), and Correctiv! (29%) are the organizations most frequently referencing others in their verification process. The online Portuguese newspaper *Observador* (25%) also offers a comparatively higher number of outbound links. Previous studies have shown that media brands with a print legacy exhibit different hyperlinking patterns compared to native online organizations (Stroobant, 2019). Because these independent organizations—all part of the EFCSN—are smaller compared to European legacy media, even though their fact-checking specialized units are generally larger, they may employ hyperlinks more strategically to foster a cross-border sense of community and enhance collective viewpoints.

Focusing on links that direct readers to other fact-checking organizations that have already conducted the same or similar verifications on the same topic, it is evident that independent organizations are the primary contributors to establishing connections among like-minded media both domestically and internationally. Figure 2 illustrates the frequency with which the analyzed organizations provide outbound links to their peers. The thickness of the arcs on the circumference indicates the organizations that provide the most outbound links, while the direction of the arrows represents the cited organizations. Independent organizations—Polígrafo (69), Maldita (60), Full Fact (55), Newtral (55), and Correctiv (30)—are the most frequent providers of outbound links to further verifications conducted by other fact-checkers. Additionally, the Portuguese online newspaper *Observador* (50) and the global news agencies DPA (23) and Reuters (36) also provide outbound links to related verifications.

Interestingly, AFP—also an EFCSN member—does not provide any outbound links to similar verifications conducted by other fact-checkers, while Reuters is cited much more frequently (60 times) by several organizations than it cites others (36 times). Both Reuters and AFP are the most cited organizations, likely due to their roles as global news agencies, receiving significant citations even from the German DPA (8.7% and 30.4%, respectively). Within Germany, there are notable connections and citations between DPA and Correctiv, as well as with the Austrian organization Mimikama. The fact that DPA, as a global news agency, and Correctiv, as an independent fact-checking and investigative journalism venture, are not in direct competition may enable higher levels of interconnectivity through hyperlinks. In the UK, stronger cross-border connections are evident, with Full Fact and Reuters citing prominent US organizations such as Snopes, PolitiFact, and the Associated Press (AP). The French AFP is also highly cited.

In Spain, Newtral and Maldita, both independent units, do not cite each other, although they occasionally reference EFE (around 3%). Spanish independent organizations connect through hyperlinks with leading global news agencies—Reuters and AFP—and, to a lesser extent, with independent organizations in Latin America, such as Chequeado, Animal Politico, and Colombia Check. Finally, Portuguese organizations, two of which operate within legacy and competing newspapers, also do not cite each other. Instead, they opt to link to global news agencies—AFP and Reuters—and leading US organizations such as PolitiFact, Lead Stories, and Snopes. However, they also provide links to Brazilian organizations such as Lupa, Aos Fatos, and UOL Confere. Here, it is evident that despite shared values, organizations operating within the same borders—especially in Spain and Portugal—remain competitors.



**Figure 2.** Similar verifications carried out by other organizations.

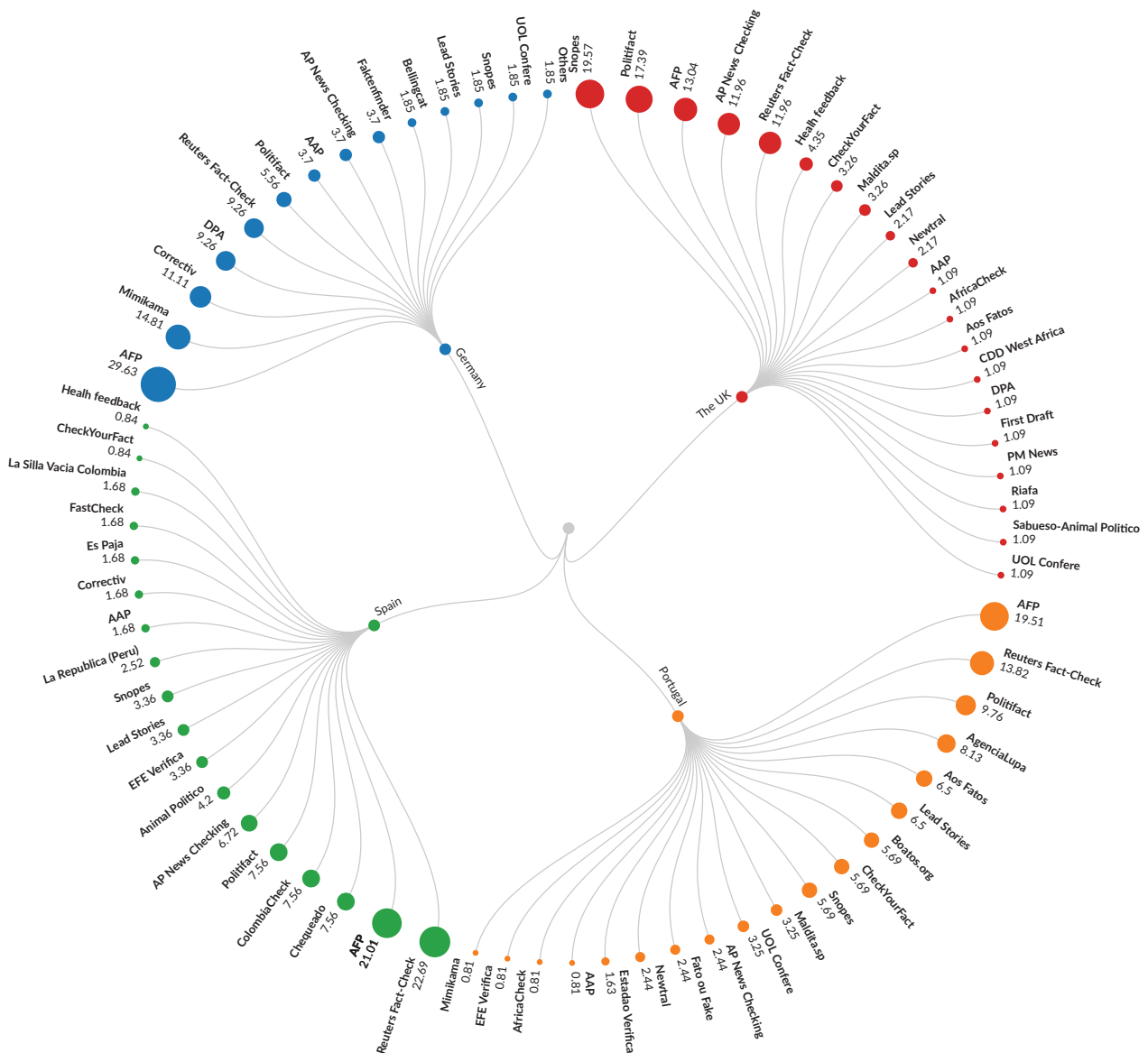
## 4.2. Opinion Leaders

Some findings from the previous section have already identified certain “opinion leaders” within the European fact-checking landscape—namely, prestigious national and international fact-checking outlets that serve as sources of information and frames of reference for their peers. Similar to media analysis organizations (Media Tenor, 2019) and further studies on journalistic homophily in social networks (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019), we assess opinion leadership through mentions of fact-checking organizations within verification articles.

Analyzing the data without further differentiation among countries or organizations, the European global news agencies emerge as the most cited outlets—AFP (20%) and Reuters Fact-Check (15.50%)—followed by

US organizations such as PolitiFact (10%), Snopes (8%), and AP (6%). When mapping the fact-checking field through the presence and connections within the Global Fact annual meetings, Lauer and Graves (2024, p. 9) show that AFP and PolitiFact, among others, hold a prominent position in this mapping, which partially explains our results. The role of Reuters and AP as opinion leaders may be associated with their journalistic profile and reach as global news agencies, even though they are not as deeply involved in the fact-checking community. In this case, it is clear how hyperlinks can also be seen as a barometer of journalistic authority in the field, even if attention is not mutual, as demonstrated by the case of global news agencies.

Nonetheless, country-specific differences and profiles must also be considered (Figure 3). The prominence of US organizations is significantly more pronounced within the UK, where Snopes (20%) and PolitiFact (17%) are the most frequently cited, followed by AFP (13%) and AP (12%). Portugal and Spain exhibit similar patterns,



**Figure 3.** Outbound hyperlinks across countries in percentage. Note: The percentage of mentioned organizations is calculated within each country, meaning 100% is based on the data for each individual country.



placing substantial importance on Reuters (14% and 23%, respectively) and AFP (19.5% and 21%, respectively). They also demonstrate, albeit to a lesser extent, a focus on independent organizations from Latin American countries with shared language and historical ties, such as Lupa (8%), Aos Fatos (6.5%), and Boatos (5.6%) in Brazil, Chequeado (7.5%) in Argentina, or Colombia Check (7.5%). In Germany, Reuters holds the same significance as the German DPA (both at 9%), followed by local organizations such as Correctiv (11%) and the Austrian Mimikama (14%; refer to the Supplementary Material for cross-table). In general terms, despite regional variations, we note that some organizations—such as PolitiFact, Aos Fatos, Lupa, and Chequeado, which are considered the core of the fact-checking network with different leadership roles as discussed by Lauer and Graves (2024)—are also regarded as opinion leaders by their international peers in Europe.

### 4.3. Scope of Verified Falsehoods

Although some connections among like-minded fact-checking outlets, both domestically and internationally, can be inferred through their hyperlink strategies, patterns of citation and connection may also reflect the scope of verified information, as shown in Figure 4. In terms of geographic focus, Germany (43%), Portugal (46%), and Spain (46%) exhibit similar patterns, with nearly half of their verifications addressing regional or national issues, as indicated by the data. The UK stands out as an outlier, with only about 20% of debunked falsehoods being related to national concerns. This variation is largely due to Reuters, where just 6.3% of verifications focus on national topics. In contrast, the proportion is higher for Full Fact (45%) and BBC (32%), aligning more closely with other countries. Outbound hyperlinks are more common in verifications of international disinformation, global issues, or cases with national–international linkages, which justifies the higher frequency of cross-border connections. Fact-checkers operating abroad are not direct competitors in the national market for attention, and organizations can also establish cross-country connections.

International verifications—those addressing falsehoods related to other countries—show similar proportions in Germany (33%), Portugal (35%), and Spain (31%), while the UK leads with 55%, as shown in Figure 4. Global issues involving transnational organizations, multinational companies, or deterritorialized concerns

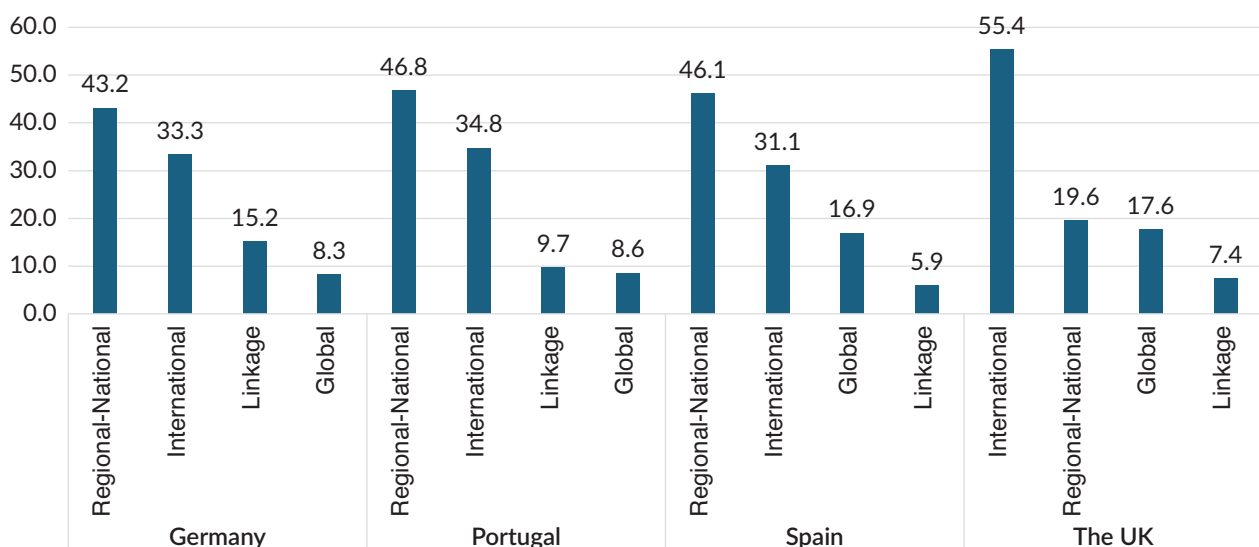


Figure 4. Scope of verified information within countries.

without a specific country focus, such as climate change or the pandemic, were found at comparable levels in Germany (8.3%) and Portugal (8.6%), and at higher rates in Spain and the UK (both around 17%).

These findings underscore the transnational nature of disinformation. When examining the countries involved in falsehoods verified by European fact-checking organizations, Ukraine and Russia dominate, primarily due to the outbreak of war in 2022. This “information war” and the complexities of verifying war-related claims (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024) likely account for the increased reliance on verification services from global news agencies like Reuters and AFP. In the UK and Portugal, Ukraine (16% and 17%, respectively) and Russia (14% and 13%) are prominent but rank second and third respectively (Figure 5). In the UK, most verified information concerns the US (31%), while in Portugal, Brazil leads (18%), likely due to its 2022 presidential election. These findings explain the UK’s frequent outbound hyperlinks to US organizations and Portugal’s links to Brazilian outlets. The US also plays a significant role in falsehoods verified by German fact-checkers. These patterns reveal that, consistent with earlier studies of news



**Figure 5.** Top 10 countries involved in falsehoods verified by fact-checking organizations in Europe (in percentage).

geography, fact-checking organizations prioritize falsehoods related to countries at war, global powers like the US, nations with shared colonial histories, and neighboring states, such as Austria, Italy, and Switzerland in Germany's case. Nonetheless, regardless of scope, independent organizations such as Maldita, Polígrafo, Full Fact, Newtral, and Correctiv (see Figure 1) are more likely to provide outbound links, assisting readers in locating relevant content.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Hyperlinks can improve the effectiveness of online news by enhancing transparency in the newsgathering process (Coddington, 2012). This statement holds particularly true in the case of fact-checking organizations in their fight against disinformation. Fact-checkers transparently provide all referenced sources and materials used in the verification process, allowing readers to reproduce the verdict themselves, thereby strengthening the validity and trust in their verification practices. Nonetheless, beyond enhancing transparency and establishing credibility by providing the foundation for fact-checkers' assertions, hyperlinks are also coordinated actions to amplify mutual perspectives, encourage a spirit of togetherness in the fight against disinformation, and form communities of like-minded outlets across and within countries. Thus, this article explores how European fact-checkers hyperlink themselves either as a source of information or as further suggested readings on similar debunked disinformation. Within this context, the article also examines which fact-checking organizations are regarded as opinion leaders, i.e., prestigious outlets that serve as central nodes within the transnational fact-checking network. In the US context, Graves (2016) observed that fact-checkers are less concerned than their traditional media counterparts about being scooped or uncovering a novel angle on a previously challenged issue. Within the most prominent US organizations, a significant overlap in claims was identified among units, and they frequently reference each other's work in their published articles. To assess this relationship within Europe and expand the scope of the research on fact-checking practices, we manually content-analyzed 1,976 publications from January to December 2022 among 12 organizations operating in Portugal, Spain, Germany, and the UK.

In addressing RQ1, this study provides evidence that primarily independent European outlets are better positioned to establish a transnational fact-checking landscape through their hyperlinking practices. With regard to links to fact-checking organizations as sources of evidence used during adjudication, it is noted that fact-checking units within established legacy media rarely utilize hyperlinks to other fact-checking organizations. When they do, they predominantly link to pages within their own fact-checking desks' websites. This observation aligns with previous studies highlighting the infrequent use of citational outbound links by journalists (Karlsson et al., 2015; Ryfe et al., 2016; Stroobant, 2019). In contrast, independent fact-checking organizations exhibit a stronger sense of community by providing significantly more outbound hyperlinks to their peers, which supports our H1. Maldita, Full Fact, Newtral, and Correctiv are identified as the most active in referencing other organizations during their verification processes. It is clear that hyperlinking practices—in line with current studies (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019)—may vary depending on the type of organization.

In a similar vein, independent organizations—particularly Polígrafo, Maldita, Full Fact, Newtral, and Correctiv—are more inclined to establish both national and international connections by providing outbound hyperlinks to similar verifications conducted by other fact-checkers. But to whom are they linking precisely? Reuters and AFP emerge as the most frequently hyperlinked organizations for further reading, likely due to their status

as global news agencies. They even receive substantial citations from the German DPA, highlighting how hyperlinking practices can serve as an indicator of journalistic authority recognition. Within Germany, notable connections exist between the DPA and Correctiv, as well as with the Austrian organization Mimikama. In the UK, stronger cross-border links are evident, with Full Fact and Reuters citing prominent US organizations such as Snopes, PolitiFact, and AP. In Spain, although Newtral and Maldita do not cite one another, they occasionally reference EFE. Spanish independent organizations also hyperlink to leading global news agencies, such as Reuters and AFP, and, to a lesser extent, to independent organizations in Latin America, like Chequeado, Animal Politico, and Colombia Check. Similarly, Portuguese organizations do not cite each other, opting instead to link to global news agencies—AFP and Reuters—and leading US organizations like PolitiFact, Lead Stories, and Snopes, while also linking to Brazilian organizations such as Lupa, Aos Fatos, and UOL Confere. Due to their distinct nature, European global news agencies, along with independent organizations outside of Europe, are not typically considered direct competitors in their national markets. As a result, they are more likely to be hyperlinked, further demonstrating that organizational differences influence linking behaviors (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019).

Regarding opinion leadership (RQ2)—defined as the role of influential fact-checking units that others rely on for information and as a reference for their own verification practices (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991)—our analysis reveals that European global news agencies, particularly the French AFP and the British Reuters Fact-Check, are the most frequently cited outlets overall. They are followed by US organizations such as PolitiFact (10%), Snopes (8%), and AP (6%). The reasons for the strong reliance on European news agencies are twofold. First, these agencies have long been regarded as established and reliable media sources without being in direct competition with their clients (Rantanen et al., 2019). Second, the disinformation landscape in 2022 was heavily shaped by the information war sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where some claims were exceedingly difficult to verify due to distance from the battlefield or language barriers (Dierickx & Lindén, 2024). This likely increased attention to these global news agencies, which are better equipped to cover global conflicts and have also made significant investments in fact-checking units and AI-assisted verification tools for detecting and verifying online disinformation (AFP, 2024). Nonetheless, opinion leadership patterns and journalistic co-orientation vary across countries. In the UK, for example, US organizations are particularly prominent. In contrast, Portugal and Spain place greater emphasis on Reuters and AFP, while offering relatively less focus on independent organizations from Latin American countries. In Germany, Reuters and DPA are equally significant, followed by local organizations such as Correctiv (11%) and the Austrian Mimikama (14%).

Finally, in examining the geographical scope of verified falsehoods by European organizations (RQ3), Germany, Portugal, and Spain show similar trends, with nearly half of their verifications focusing on regional or national issues. In contrast, the UK stands out as an outlier, with only about 20% of debunked claims relating to national matters. Outbound hyperlinks are more prevalent in verifications addressing international disinformation, global issues, or cases with both national and international dimensions, which explains the higher frequency of cross-border references. When dealing with international or deterritorialized falsehoods, hyperlinked organizations tend to be based abroad and are not in direct competition with the verifying organizations in their home countries. Additionally, these hyperlinks establish cross-border connections. When analyzing the countries most frequently involved in verified falsehoods, Ukraine and Russia dominate, largely due to the ongoing war that began in 2022. In the UK, most verified information pertains to the US, while in Portugal, Brazil emerges as the leading source, likely reflecting the

country's 2022 presidential election. These trends clarify the UK's tendency to link to US organizations and Portugal's connections to Brazilian fact-checking outlets.

These findings contribute to the literature on fact-checking by expanding the scope of research beyond overstudied countries within liberal systems, focusing on a relatively under-analyzed aspect of their verification practices—namely, hyperlinking practices as a strategy to create a transnational community based on shared values. Independent fact-checking organizations play a crucial role in establishing such a transnational fact-checking network through hyperlinking practices; however, linking to national competitors remains relatively rare, a phenomenon that warrants further investigation. Additionally, this study contributes to link studies by providing new evidence from the fact-checking domain, complementing prior research on linking patterns in journalism (Coddington, 2012; Karlsson et al., 2015; Ryfe et al., 2016), political parties (Ackland & Gibson, 2013), right-wing outlets (Heft et al., 2021), and NGOs (Shumate & Lipp, 2008). Lastly, it advances disinformation studies by empirically demonstrating the transnational character of the disinformation problem and how fact-checking organizations align and connect to address it.

Despite its contributions, this article has several limitations. First, it defines opinion leaders solely through peer recognition, overlooking audience perceptions of these organizations' prestige. Future research should incorporate audience perspectives. Additionally, further studies should assess whether the hyperlinking practices identified here apply to other fact-checking formats, such as investigative or explanatory articles, or if they vary by verification topic. Expanding the analysis to include additional European countries would also enhance the findings. Moreover, Meta's withdrawal of support for third-party fact-checking introduces uncertainty into the EU and global fact-checking landscape, necessitating further analysis. The EU's response will be pivotal in shaping fact-checking efforts within and beyond Europe (for insights on EU regulation, see Ó Fathaigh et al., 2025, and Monaci & Persico, 2025). This disruption of partnerships contradicts the Digital Service Act and the reinforced Code of Practice on Disinformation, which require collaboration between researchers, platforms, and fact-checkers, alongside fair financial contributions to verification efforts. Researchers should now examine the impact of this politically motivated decision on the EU's informational environment.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material available here: [https://osf.io/vwsxt/?view\\_only=81b5c51bb9884381ba3d894caba7ff69](https://osf.io/vwsxt/?view_only=81b5c51bb9884381ba3d894caba7ff69)

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