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The Fact-Checking Initiatives in the EU: A Diverse Ecosystem Against Disinformation

Mar García-Gordillo [1], Rubén Rivas-de-Roca [2,3], and Mathias-Felipe de-Lima-Santos [4,5,6]

[1] Department of Journalism II, University of Seville, Spain
[2] Department of Communication Sciences, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain
[3] Department of Communication, Carlos III University of Madrid, Spain
[4] School of Communication, Society and Culture, Macquarie University, Australia
[5] Department of Communication, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain
[6] Digital Media and Society Observatory, Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp), Brazil

Correspondence: Rubén Rivas-de-Roca (rubenrafael.rivasderoca@usc.es)

Abstract

Disinformation in Europe is a significant challenge to democracy. The pan-European conversation faces a landscape dominated by misleading or false information targeting the EU. In response, various public institutions have been promoting fact-checking initiatives. Our research analyzes the fact-checking initiatives developed by these institutions at national and regional levels. This study identifies and describes organizations ranging from dedicated initiatives, such as VerificaRTVE in Spain and ARD-Faktenfinder in Germany, to news media and fact-checking platforms funded by public money. Our analysis is based on nine semi-structured interviews with professionals conducting fact-checking across the EU. We explored topics such as content selection criteria, audience involvement, collaboration with stakeholders, dissemination practices, and the evolving role of AI in supporting these activities. Results highlight a growing number of fact-checking initiatives, particularly those associated with public service media, with AI increasingly integrated into their operations. However, our findings also reveal concerns related to the pace of digital transformation and limited resources. This research provides insights into the future of fact-checking in Europe, where public fact-checking efforts and media literacy initiatives remain underdeveloped. Our study contributes to ongoing discussions about the creation of a robust European Public Sphere, arguing that public institutions can play a pivotal role in mitigating disinformation within a shared space for democratic deliberation.

1. Introduction

The rise of digital disinformation is a massive problem that threatens Western democracies, shaping a fragmented and disrupted public sphere (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Terms such as "information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) or "fake news" (Tandoc et al., 2018) have become frequent when analyzing the media landscape. "Misinformation" and "disinformation" are often used interchangeably, but they refer to distinct phenomena. While the first involves the unintentional sharing of false or inaccurate information, disinformation refers to the deliberate creation and dissemination of false information with the explicit goal of deceiving the audience. While both forms of deceitful content can cause harm by distorting public understanding, disinformation is particularly concerning due to its strategic nature in influencing public opinion and undermining trust. In this study, we will focus on "disinformation" to highlight the intentionality and coordinated efforts behind false information campaigns, which are central to our investigation (de-Lima-Santos & Ceron, 2023). The proliferation of these false messages goes beyond social media and has to do with a technological universe in which algorithms and users are prompted to create fake news (Baptista & Gradim, 2021). As stated by the literature, the economic and technological structures of social media platforms led to the emergence of digital communication that prioritizes false media messages (Anderson, 2021).

The proliferation of disinformation has contributed to widespread distrust in the news media (Lewis, 2019). Further, on a regulatory approach, this challenge has also catalyzed the emergence of specialized fact-checking initiatives as an attempt to combat disinformation (Graves, 2016). These organizations have been developing newer relationships with their audiences through, for example, media literacy programs and more transparent verification processes (Chaparro-Domínguez et al., 2024). Europe has become a pioneer in fact-checking, with numerous initiatives emerging to verify political claims and online social media content (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). The democratic significance of these projects is evident in their role in countering disinformation disseminated by right-wing populist parties across Europe (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2024).

The EU has become a primary target for disinformation campaigns, a phenomenon that coincides with rising Euroscepticism stemming from tensions between cosmopolitan and national values (Caiani & Guerra, 2017). While EU-related discourse has reached unprecedented levels of politicization (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2019), the spread of disinformation threatens the development of a European Public Sphere (EPS)—conceived as an interconnected network for transnational debate (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022). Research has demonstrated both the role of reliable information in fostering trust in EU institutions (Brosius et al., 2019) and the crucial function of professional journalism in combating false content (Lecheler et al., 2024).

In this context, fact-checking platforms have increasingly been established by both independent organizations and public institutions, employing professional journalists dedicated to verification work. This study aims to map fact-checking initiatives across EU member states, with particular attention to public

service media (PSM) organizations due to their commitment to social values (Horowitz et al., 2022), while also encompassing other publicly funded fact-checking operations. The research pursues two main objectives: (a) identify and examine these fact-checking projects (O1); and (b) investigate their operational strategies and practices, including audience engagement mechanisms and AI implementation (O2).

This exploratory analysis focuses specifically on publicly funded fact-checkers within the broader landscape of European fact-checking organizations that have emerged in recent years. Thus, we pose the following research questions:

> RQ1: Which fact-checkers are promoted by public institutions within the EU?

> RQ2: How is the working of these fact-checking organizations in terms of practices and routines?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Actions Against Disinformation in National and Supranational Entities

The growth of disinformation has caused concern among public institutions, news media, and journalists since it poses a risk to democratic systems (Ferreras Rodríguez, 2020; Tuñón, 2021). In this sense, some initiatives have been launched. At the institutional level, the International Program for the Development of Communication of UNESCO approved the Media Development Indicator as a framework to evaluate the media landscape and its impact on society (UNESCO, 2008). In Europe, the EU Media Freedom Law came into force in 2024. This document preserves the media independence to safeguard democratic values (Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024, 2024). To this end, the European Commission has carried out several projects to protect citizens from mis- and disinformation, including a code of good practices (European Commission, 2022).

The emergence of fact-checking represents a return to journalism's foundational principles of verification (Graves, 2016). In this context, fact-checking networks have assumed a role in promoting fact-checking efforts. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), established by the Poynter Institute (Florida, USA) in 2015, now encompasses more than 170 fact-checking organizations worldwide, providing support through networking, training, and collaborative initiatives. Similarly, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) works to advance and maintain rigorous verification standards and media literacy across Europe. This networked approach to fact-checking has contributed to the observed convergence of verification practices and content across national boundaries (Cazzamatta, 2024).

Similarly, the EU has implemented various initiatives to combat disinformation, with the European Commission and European Parliament taking leading roles through targeted funding programs. Among them, the Media Pluralism Monitor serves as a comprehensive assessment tool for evaluating threats to media pluralism. The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) has also established regional hubs that foster collaborative approaches to countering online disinformation. These hubs function as interdisciplinary networks, connecting fact-checkers, media literacy specialists, and academic researchers to analyze and address disinformation challenges through coordinated efforts.

PSM play a vital role in combating disinformation (Fieiras Ceide et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Martelo et al., 2023), leveraging both their higher levels of public trust and established reputation to enhance the effectiveness of their initiatives. The strong presence of public media across Europe further amplifies their potential impact (Rivera Otero et al., 2021). According to Rodríguez Castro and Pérez Seijo (2024, pp. 42–48), PSM organizations focus their efforts on five key areas: (a) strengthening their information mission, (b) developing verification initiatives, (c) promoting media literacy, (d) creating content for young audiences, and (e) addressing national security concerns. A notable example of cross-border collaboration is the Journalism Trust Initiative, spearheaded by Reporters Without Borders and supported by various public media organizations, including VerificaRTVE (Spain), BBC Verify (UK), and NRK (Norway).

For its part, the EU's role in countering disinformation also covers legal measures. With the adoption of the Digital Services Act (DSA), these measures were taken for the first time at the EU level (Eskens, 2024). This author points out how the DSA was completed by the Political Advertising Regulation and the European Media Freedom Act, both shaped by a vision of disinformation as a changing and external threat. Beyond that, the DSA, issued in December 2020, marked a turning point since it proposes a digital services market based on digital sovereignty (Turillazzi et al., 2023), in which protection from disinformation is critical. Even though not all the actors agree to this legislation, the DSA establishes a new relationship between audiences and platforms fueled by the principles of content moderation and freedom of expression (Cauffman & Goanta, 2021).

Taken together, the convergence of institutional initiatives, fact-checking networks, and PSM efforts represents a comprehensive European approach to tackling disinformation. Furthermore, the multi-stakeholder strategy, combining regulatory frameworks, collaborative verification networks, and trusted public media organizations, demonstrates the EU's commitment to preserving information integrity and democratic discourse. As disinformation continues to evolve, the coordination between these various actors and initiatives becomes increasingly crucial for ensuring informed citizens.

2.2. The Role of Fact-Checking

Fact-checking journalism has established itself as a distinctive form of verification, employing systematic and replicable methodologies to assess the veracity of potentially false information (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2018). While fact-checking methods have shown a tendency toward standardization, European fact-checking platforms must navigate the diverse journalistic traditions and practices that exist across EU member states (Picard & Salgado, 2015). This challenge is particularly significant as disinformation campaigns consistently portray the EU as a failed project (Kermer & Nijmeijer, 2020), potentially undermining the development of a shared European identity. These challenges are further complicated by the persistent structural crisis affecting Europe's media sector, such as media concentration and language barriers (Trappel et al., 2015).

In this complex media landscape, fact-checking initiatives may offer an innovative pathway against disinformation. Andersen and Søe (2020) argue that fact-checking should transcend mere technical verification to foster democratic dialogue about the validity of arguments. These initiatives are part of a realignment of journalistic practices to respond to disinformation, including activities that adapt to emerging technologies like AI. Nevertheless, the fact-checking industry presents some limits, as is determined by the disinformation landscape.

Fact-checking assumes that society prefers fact-based information over misleading narratives. On this matter, some authors reflect on the extent to which these actions could be effective in a digital context in which individual reality is prioritized over consensus (Vinhas & Bastos, 2021). One of the problems of fact-checking is its ephemeral character, but at the same time, it contributes to clearing up the validity of specific messages. As the effectiveness of fact-checkers is not completely evidenced, the literature also discusses the importance of educational activities (Dumitru et al., 2022). Indeed, media literacy training is a key strategy for some fact-checkers to reach different generational publics, to make them aware of disinformation processes.

Although verifying information means returning to the origins of journalism, there is a huge debate at the EU level to define the way to fight disinformation (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019). Additionally, traditional fact-checking processes, while thorough, often struggle to keep pace with the volume and velocity of information dissemination in the digital age (Graham et al., 2020). On this backdrop, the potential of PSM to mitigate the impact of disinformation in Europe has already been tackled (Horowitz et al., 2022), but there is a lack of empirical research that unravels the working of fact-checkers across the EU, singularly regarding initiatives fostered by public institutions. Most academic studies focus on the performance of independent civic fact-checking platforms, whose business model is unlike conventional journalism (Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020). As fact-checking may enhance the quality of European digital conversation, our study sheds light on the weight of public initiatives within the lists of fact-checkers in the EU, exploring their practices in comparison.

3. Methodology

Our study of the fact-checking initiatives is based on a triangulation of research techniques, combining website content analysis (Herring, 2010) with in-depth interviews. First, we triggered a list of fact-checkers through the following databases: Code of Principles of the IFCN, belonging to the Poynter Institute; EFCSN; and EDMO. Projects that are signatories of at least one of these networks were included, but we also expanded the number of research items with a snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) aimed at professionals working on fact-checking across Europe. Specifically, we contacted journalists from fact-checkers that we knew in person or through their public activity and asked them to mention prominent colleagues and fact-checking organizations. This allows us to retrieve an overview of the fact-checkers placed in the EU.

Our data collection happened between 2023 and 2024. On average, each interview lasted 45 minutes. They were conducted in Portuguese, Spanish, and English, the languages spoken by the authors.

Then, we applied a website content analysis on the available information of each fact-checking initiative. The analysis was conducted over three months: July, August, and September 2024. To this purpose, we developed an analysis template, considering the country of origin, type of company, international networks in which they are registered, and the weight of public fact-checkers within the country. Additional items such as the scope (European, national, or regional) and the implementation of media literacy actions were considered. The study of fact-checking platforms through a template has already been carried out in Southern Europe (Ufarte-Ruiz et al., 2020), providing a detailed description of its characteristics.

The country of origin of each initiative is relevant because it determines the audience's expectations of journalistic verification, which could be explained in the context of media systems and political cultures

(Cushion et al., 2021). Besides that, we take all the fact-checkers into account to assess how important public initiatives are in frequency comparison, although only these public ones are content-analyzed exhaustively. The strong social value of these entities, especially remarkable in PSM to enhance an inclusive public sphere even in disrupted times (Iosifidis, 2011), and their need for accountability to citizens make them a convenient object of study for delving into the mitigation of disinformation in Europe.

Regarding the goal of analyzing the internal workings of fact-checkers, we conducted in-depth interviews. This method is appropriate for exploratory research since it gives knowledge of the reasons that grounded particular practices (Valles, 2014). Our fieldwork was carried out between February 2023 and May 2024 through online interviews. Nine interviews were held (four from public organizations and five from private ones), at which we found a possible saturation point as the informants did not bring new data.

Even though the article's focus is on public fact-checking initiatives and singularly PSM, our purpose is also to compare the practices of these organizations and private ones in Europe that receive public funding. There may be differences between the logic of these media, but at the same time, it is relevant to know how the public's money is used. Hence, the second phase of research includes both entities.

The participants were selected based on their positions as people in charge of the fact-checking platforms. We include different types of companies to check potential divergences between public and private, as well as different EU countries. These organizations were selected because our mapping of fact-checkers reveals that they could be implementing interesting actions in terms of verification, considering other factors such as the number of organizations. For instance, Germany was reported three times due to its great presence of fact-checkers.

Besides that, the non-probabilistic and snowball sampling allowed us to reach additional respondents who were assessed as relevant by the participants. This strategy was useful to address the most important people and organizations according to professionals involved in the sector. Table 1 shows the list of interviewees and their details.

A thematic analysis was used to identify common patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following the phases suggested by these authors: familiarization with qualitative data, production of initial codes, search and

Table 1. Respondents and their organizations.

Code	Organization	Name	Type	Country
R1	ARD-Faktenfinder	Patrick Gensing	Public	Germany
R2	CORRECTIV	Caroline Lindekamp	Private	Germany
R3	Demagog	Aleksy Szymkiewicz	Private	Poland
R4	Deutsche Welle	Julie Bayer	Public	Germany
R5	*Jornal Polígrafo*	Filipe Pardal	Private	Portugal
R6	Maldita.es	Ximena Villagrán	Private	Spain
R7	Pagella Politica	Tommaso Canetta	Private	Italy
R8	VerificaRTVE	Borja Díez-Merry	Public	Spain
R9	VRT NWS	Chaja Libot	Public	Belgium

review of themes, and drafting the report. The interviews were structured into three sections that tackle several items: content selection criteria, audience involvement, collaboration with stakeholders, dissemination practices, and the increasing role of AI in addressing fact-checking tasks. All the qualitative information was managed through Atlas.ti software version 9, following our interview guide (Table 2).

Table 2. Interview guide.

Sections	Questions
1. Fact-checking practices	1. How do you choose the content that you verify?
	2. Are the audiences involved in the fact-checking task? How do you engage them?
	3. Do you collaborate with other stakeholders in the fight against disinformation?
	4. Is there a dissemination strategy to spread the fact-checked content and, therefore, avoid the spread of disinformation? If so, how does it work? What role do social media platforms play in dissemination practices?
2. The role of technology	5. Has your company developed new professional roles, derived from changes in the type of disinformation, such as deepfakes?
	6. Is there some kind of bot or automatic tool that you use to identify or verify content? Is it developed in-house or is it a third-party tool?
	7. In your opinion, which phases of the verification process can be replaced by AI tools? What role do you think AI will play for fact-checking?
	8. Are you concerned with ethical principles in implementing technological solutions? Do you know how to address them?
3. Future developments	9. Do you participate in any activity of media literacy to prevent disinformation?
	10. What do you think might be the future challenges to mitigating disinformation?

4. Results

4.1. Mapping of Fact-Checking Initiatives in the EU

According to our research design on projects featured in the IFCN, EFCSN, and EDMO databases, 74 fact-checkers were found in the EU. Of all of them, only 18 (24.3% of the total) were public initiatives. In this sense, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden do not have this kind of projects. Therefore, most EU countries (19) only have private fact-checkers.

However, these private organizations are usually non-profit entities that resort to public funding. For instance, Faktiv (attached to *Profil* magazine) in Austria counts on funds from a local body (Wiener Medieninitiative der Wiener Wirtschaftsagentur). At the EU level, many fact-checking projects have some funding from EU institutions, particularly the European Commission. Concretely, 20 Minutos Fake off is linked to the DE FACTO observatory, which is the EDMO hub in France. Another example is the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re: Baltica (Latvia and the Baltic countries), which mixes investigative journalism and fact-checking thanks to competitive grants for cross-border journalism such as those funded by the European Commission.

Moreover, other platforms operate in several countries and collaborate with different media outlets against disinformation. dpa Deutsche Presse-Agentur (private) verifies false media content from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (non-EU country); meanwhile, AFP Fact Checking (public) is a French unique initiative that puts the new agency's efforts together to check fake news all over the world.

Regarding the public field, Table 3 presents key characteristics of the public fact-checking projects across the EU. Most of them are fostered by PSM, with a few initiatives from radio (Piloting Radio-FACT-Checks in Bulgaria and franceinfo.fr in France) and TV (Les Révélateurs de FranceTv in France). It should be noted that some PSM fact-checkers collaborate within the framework of European Perspective, which is a shared project coordinated by the European Broadcasting Union between 17 PSM outlets (Rodríguez-Castro & Arriaza-Ibarra, 2023). A look at the VerificaRTVE website reveals a section of European Perspective, with news content verified by franceinfo.fr or BR24 #Faktenfuchs.

Beyond PSM, there are three projects developed by news agencies funded by public money: APA—Austria Presse Agentur, AFP Fact Check, and EFE Verifica. It is noteworthy how several initiatives have not signed their membership to any of the main international fact-checking networks. In the same vein, in most countries,

Table 3. Public fact-checking projects by EU countries (available data in September 2024).

Country	Name	Type	IFCN	EFCSN	EDMO	% of public initiatives within the country
Austria	APA—Austria Presse Agentur	Agency	Yes	Yes	Yes	50%
	Fakten mit profil (faktiv and ORF III)	PSM	No	No	No	
Belgium	VRT NWS (Flanders)	PSM	No	Yes	No	50%
	Faky (Wallonia)	PSM	No	No	No	
Bulgaria	Piloting Radio-FACT-Checks	PSM (radio)	No	No	No	50%
France	AFP Fact Check	Agency	Yes	Yes	Yes	50%
	franceinfo.fr	PSM (radio)	Yes	No	No	
	Les Révélateurs de FranceTv	PSM (TV)	No	No	Yes	
Germany	Bayerischer Rund.—BR24 #Faktenfuchs	PSM	Yes	No	No	50%
	Deutsche Welle	PSM	Yes	No	Yes	
	ARD-Faktenfinder	PSM	No	No	No	
	HART ABER FAIR faktencheck	PSM	No	No	No	
	SWR3 Faktencheck	PSM	No	No	No	
	ZDF heuteCheck	PSM	No	No	No	
Hungary	Lakmusz	EC project	Yes	Yes	Yes	50%
Lithuania	LRT Faktai	PSM	Yes	No	No	25%
Spain	VerificaRTVE	PSM	No	No	Yes	33%
	EFE Verifica	Agency	Yes	Yes	Yes	

public initiatives represent half of the initiatives in the country. These figures are lower in Lithuania (25%) and Spain (33%). This evidence shows that public projects have an important weight in the nations in which they are present.

Considering the scope, a national dimension is prioritized, but four fact-checkers follow a regional approach: VRT NWS (Flanders), Faky (Wallonia), #Faktenfuchs from Bayerischer Rundfunk BR24 (Bavaria), and SWR3 Faktencheck (southwest of Germany). VRT NWS is developed by VRT as the public broadcaster for the Flemish Community in Belgium, covering the region of Flanders. Its counterpart in the French Community (Wallonia) is RTBF, which produces Faky. In Germany, two national broadcasters coexist: ARD and ZDF. Likewise, ARD is a consortium of regional public broadcasters, such as BR in Bavaria or WDR in North Rhine-Westphalia. This peculiar composition explains why Germany is the European country with the largest number of aforementioned fact-checkers.

Following the above, the presence of regional public initiatives seems linked to the political organization of the country since both Belgium and Germany are highly decentralized states. In the private sector, we only found one regional initiative (Verificat in Catalonia), which also belongs to a decentralized country like Spain. According to its website, Verificat receives public and private funding without further details. In terms of funding, it was detected that AFP Fact Check (France) and Lakmusz (Hungary) are doing fact-checks co-funded by the European Commission. In any case, Lakmusz was first created as an EC project to fight disinformation in the illiberal Hungarian context (Toomey, 2018).

Finally, the analysis of media literacy reveals that these actions are scant present in the public fact-checking initiatives (see Table 4), at least on their websites. Based on available information, we observe that media literacy ranges from self-verification tools (Faky or VerificaRTVE) to recommendations (Deutsche Welle) or courses to ameliorate the knowledge of fake news. Media literacy is key because it contains a double dimension of training journalists and citizens, empowering the audience. This is the reason why the EU assesses media literacy as a necessary measure against disinformation (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023).

Even though EU institutions recognize the importance of media literacy, the public fact-checkers did not seem so committed to making citizens part of the management of disinformation. The four media literacy actions detected are in Belgium, France, Germany, and Spain, whose PSM are big organizations, with many employees and a huge budget. In the cases of AFP Fact Check and Deutsche Welle, the media literacy

Table 4. Media literacy actions in the public fact-checkers (available data in September 2024).

Name	Description	Website
Faky	Self-verification tool of keywords, articles, and images	https://faky.be/fr
AFP Fact Check	Digital courses on fact-checking training supported by Google News Initiative	https://digitalcourses.afp.com
Deutsche Welle	Tips from the Deutsche Welle fact-check to recognize and verify fake news	https://www.dw.com/en/dossier-how-to-spot-fake-content-online/a-67738458
VerificaRTVE	Availability of a self-verification toolbox with many free instruments	https://www.rtve.es/noticias/verificartve/herramientas-de-verificacion/avanzadas

materials are accessible in English to reach a wider public. This overlaps with the public value of those news media, contributing to developing a multilevel solution to combat disinformation in European territory.

4.2. European Fact-Checking Initiatives in the Digital Age: Strategies, Technology, and Collaboration

4.2.1. Approaches and Practices to Fact-Checking

European fact-checking organizations employ diverse strategies, blending manual, automated, and collaborative approaches to combat disinformation. These strategies are often tailored to their contexts and resources. For example, R4 from Deutsche Welle has "a fact-checking unit. However, it's not focused on fact-checking [verifying] internal reports. Instead, it's more about finding content to fact-check and then reporting on that."

These initiatives have developed sophisticated approaches to combat disinformation in the digital era, prioritizing content based on its potential impact, virality, and public interest. As explained by one representative from ARD-Faktenfinder (R1), this prioritization involves carefully assessing "how widespread the misleading content has become, what immediate harm the messages in question could cause, whether multipliers are involved in spreading misleading content, and the risk of making the misleading content more known."

Some of these initiatives have very structured routines to deal with the contents that come from the public. The process of identifying and verifying potentially false information has become increasingly collaborative and technologically driven. Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and TikTok play a crucial role in content monitoring. Some organizations confine their monitoring to tools from these companies. For R2 from CORRECTIV, being "part of Facebook's partnership program, allows us to automatically detect potential misinformation through their tool. Apart from that, we search manually across social media platforms, such as Twitter, Telegram, and TikTok."

Many organizations have begun to leverage user participation as a key strategy, with Demagog reporting that "20–30% of the content [they] verify" (R3) comes directly from user submissions through their website and social media channels. Innovative approaches have emerged, such as CORRECTIV's "Check It" tool and Maldita.es' automated WhatsApp chatbot, which allow users to submit potential disinformation. R7 from Pagella Politica mentioned that they "focus mainly on political statements," but they launched "another project, 'The Facta,' which deals with non-political disinformation." This project relies heavily on user-generated content submitted via WhatsApp or other social media platforms.

Organizational structures have evolved to meet these challenges, drawing parallels to Fordist principles of efficiency and specialization. Demagog, for instance, has divided its editorial team into "two distinct sections"—one focused on "political claims" and another on general "fake news" (R3). This compartmentalization mirrors the industrial approach of streamlining tasks to increase output and maintain control, optimizing fact-checking efforts through specialized processes.

4.2.2. Technological Innovation and the Role of AI in Fact-Checking

Technology, particularly AI, has become an increasingly important tool in this landscape. R9 from VRT has an "innovation department that has been working on AI-related projects for a long time." They established an AI team across VRT that collaborates "with different departments, primarily news-related, but also with technical teams working on other software and media tools" (R9).

Maldita.es has implemented an "AI-powered system to identify content for fact-checking via WhatsApp" (R6), representing a new paradigm in information verification. This approach echoes the evolution from traditional labour models, with AI functioning as an extension of human capacity. However, crucially, human oversight remains essential. As R1 from ARD-Faktenfinder emphasized, "Human intelligence is always needed to fully understand and explain the ambiguity of statements and their context."

Similarly, Maldita.es uses an AI-powered system to "identify content for fact-checking via its chatbot-automated WhatsApp" (R6), which aligns with the evolving relationship between humans and machines. In the same way that Fordism relied on the mechanization of labour to boost production (Hudson, 2021), AI now functions as an extension of human capacity, automating the detection of such information at a massive scale (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). Yet, just as Fordist assembly lines still required human oversight and intervention, Maldita.es' system still relies on human fact-checkers to verify the AI's findings. This collaboration between AI and human fact-checkers mirrors the blend of automation and human labour that characterized Fordism's industrial processes, where machines increased efficiency, but human workers maintained quality control. The transition from purely human-driven fact-checking to a hybrid AI–human model reflects the broader shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production, where labour divisions are integrated to manage the complexities of modern information ecosystems.

Besides developing their tools, some organizations use "simple publicly available tools such as Google Images, Yandex and TinEye for reverse searches" (R8). There also was mention of other third-party tools like "Trint to transcribe interviews and testimonies" (R8). As the digital landscape continues to evolve at a rapid pace, these organizations face a growing need to adopt technologies that can keep up with the rapid changes in the AI age. While out-of-the-box tools offer quick solutions, their long-term viability can often be a cause for concern. These tools, designed with broad usability in mind, may initially seem like the perfect fit for small to medium-scale projects. However, as the needs of the project evolve, the limitations of these solutions often become apparent. Customization options may be restricted, preventing the tool from adapting to more specialized requirements. This can be particularly problematic for projects that experience growth or require the integration of more complex systems (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2021).

Moreover, this scalability issue is compounded by the fact that many of these tools are not designed with long-term sustainability in mind. Their reliance on external vendors means that any changes in pricing, product offerings, or service support could have a direct impact on the success of the project. This includes the risk of shifts in the vendor's business model, which may lead to unexpected cost increases, changes in subscription plans, or the introduction of new pricing structures. These changes can put a significant financial strain on the use of these tools that were initially budgeted for stable, predictable costs (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2021). Ultimately, the security and privacy features of such tools may not always align with the evolving regulatory landscape, leaving projects vulnerable to compliance issues.

4.2.3. Collaboration and Networks in Combating Disinformation

Collaboration with other institutions has also emerged as a fundamental strategy in combating disinformation. These organizations are increasingly working together, sharing resources, best practices, and verified information across domestic and international networks. This includes partnerships with academic institutions, such as Maldita.es' collaboration with the University of Granada, and international projects like AI4Media and AI4Trust, which aim to develop advanced tools for media practitioners. "NoFake" project is a project from CORRECTIV that "involves collaboration with three university partners, and we aim to explore new ways of fact-checking, including finding ways to make the process more efficient, and combining fact-checking with media literacy training" (R2).

In the same vein, Deutsche Welle and VRT were partners in a large European project called AI4Media, and Demagog highlighted their participation in AI4Trust, both projects aim to develop AI tools to help fact-checkers and media practitioners. As R6 from Maldita.es stated, "the fight against disinformation is a team effort" and that collaboration is necessary for success. R1 "collaborates with different stakeholders to get substantial information and understand complex contexts, including fact-checkers and experts from the scientific community." For example, R1 "collaborates with other fact-checkers and experts from the scientific community. We also work with different stakeholders to get substantial information and understand complex contexts," but there is no way to verify that this collaboration is helpful to the public.

Commonly outlined by the respondents, international networks like the IFCN and the EFCSN also play a critical role in facilitating this collaborative approach. As R6 from Maldita.es noted, "the fight against disinformation is a team effort," highlighting the collective nature of modern fact-checking initiatives. The comprehensive European approach involves a convergence of institutional initiatives, networks, and governmental efforts to mitigate the impact of disinformation.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Rooted in the theoretical framework that connects disinformation with democratic disruption (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), fact-checking emerges as a crucial mechanism for addressing the intentional spread of falsehoods and restoring public trust in media. Fact-checking, particularly through publicly funded and institutionalized initiatives, not only reaffirms journalism's foundational principles of verification (Graves, 2016) but also aligns with the democratic goals of the EU, ensuring a shared, factual basis for transnational discourse. To examine the fact-checking initiatives boosted by public institutions in the EU, this study identifies these fact-checkers and describes their characteristics, analyzing their internal working comparatively. Our study contributes to the current literature on fact-checking, providing two conclusions that follow the objectives and research questions defined.

First, regarding RQ1 on which fact-checkers are promoted by public institutions within the EU, our evidence points out that public fact-checkers mean only almost a quarter of all fact-checking initiatives in the EU, but they have a certain importance in the countries where they are present. These public fact-checking projects mostly belong to PSM and are not always signatories of international fact-checking networks. In addition to that, public fact-checkers tend to focus on a national scope, with some exceptions in highly decentralized states such as Belgium and Germany. In these countries, media literacy actions appear, along with France and Spain. This finding illustrates how media literacy is limited to big PSM within the European public field.

Considering RQ2 on how the working of these fact-checking organizations in terms of practices and routines is, our second contribution offers qualitative information on the practices of fact-checking, showing how the systematic and replicable methodologies used by fact-checking initiatives—combined with their collaboration with public institutions—enable these initiatives to address the pervasive challenge of disinformation targeting the EU. This is particularly significant in light of the rising levels of Euroscepticism and populist narratives that portray the EU as a failed project (Kermer & Nijmeijer, 2020). Disinformation threatens not only to undermine trust in EU institutions but also to weaken the shared identity and collective consciousness required to sustain an EPS (Nieminen, 2009).

PSM fact-checkers, such as VerificaRTVE in Spain or Deutsche Welle in Germany, have demonstrated that collaboration with other stakeholders—academics, independent media, and even international organizations—can amplify their efforts to combat disinformation. These partnerships foster a networked approach to verification, which is increasingly necessary in a media landscape characterized by the rapid and transnational spread of disinformation. Moreover, the convergence of various institutional efforts, such as EFCSN and EDMO, alongside national and regional fact-checking initiatives, underscores the comprehensive approach the EU has taken to tackle disinformation. However, while countries like Germany, France, and Spain have strong public and private fact-checking initiatives, many other EU countries lack sufficient public fact-checking mechanisms. This uneven landscape can hinder the development of a pan-European fact-checking network capable of addressing disinformation at the transnational level. Furthermore, the slow pace of digital transformation and limited financial resources faced by many of these initiatives pose an ongoing risk to their sustainability and scalability.

Nevertheless, the integration of AI into fact-checking processes offers a potential solution to some of these challenges. As highlighted in our interviews, AI tools are increasingly used by fact-checking platforms to streamline content verification, allowing them to process large amounts of data and detect disinformation more efficiently. Platforms like Maldita.es in Spain, which uses an AI-powered chatbot to identify false claims, demonstrate the potential of technology to enhance fact-checking efforts. However, it is essential to recognize that while AI can ameliorate the speed and scale of fact-checking, it cannot replace the nuanced judgment of human fact-checkers. The collaboration between AI systems and human fact-checkers (Guzman & Lewis, 2020), therefore, represents a hybrid approach that leverages the strengths of both to achieve more accurate and timely verification.

In short, the data reveals a strong commitment of the journalists involved in fact-checking. PSM are the main origin of public fact-checkers initiatives, but news agencies also play a role. Some of these initiatives (public or private) have the particularity of applying an international approach that reaches several countries, which may be useful in shaping a common social conversation. The existence of a well-informed citizenry in Europe depends on these measures against disinformation, as the EU institutions acknowledge (European Commission, 2022).

Taking these insights, this study contributes to the scholarly debate on the consolidation of fact-checking, pointing to the need for innovative strategies for achieving better results against disinformation. Prior qualitative scholarship outlines the rise of fact-checking projects in European areas such as the Mediterranean countries but with difficulties in connecting with the audience (Rodríguez-Martelo, 2021). Similarly, our analysis is aligned with early research on the verification carried out by PSM (Fieiras Ceide

et al., 2022) but also considers the role of the country in which fact-checking is produced (Cushion et al., 2021).

Some limitations should be acknowledged, such as the collection method. Some fact-checking initiatives could be missed as we only focused on well-known databases (IFCN, EFCSN, and EDMO), together with snowball sampling. For instance, if we had examined the organizations listed in the Duke Reporters' Lab database, we might have located additional public initiatives in other countries such as the Netherlands, where Checkt has been developed within a program from the Dutch public broadcasting company KRO-NCRV. Besides that, fact-checking supposes a changing sector in which projects are constantly transforming.

We seek to provide an overview of the public fact-checkers in the EU, putting the work about private non-profit organizations on this matter. Nonetheless, another limitation is that our classification derives into a mix of different entities (platforms, PSM departments for verification with a website, self-checking tools developed by a PSM, TV content, etc.), making it difficult to compare them.

Addressing disinformation from a public perspective means a strong responsibility, with an impact on the health of European democracy. Our results reveal that eight EU countries have public fact-checking initiatives, with special support from PSM. In this regard, the fake news targeting the EU can be mitigated (Caiani & Guerra, 2017), but public funding has effects on fact-checking organizations, particularly regarding press freedom and potential risks to democracy. Our study has implications for future research, which may expand this work by comparing the contents of public and private fact-checkers and connecting these findings with the internal strategies disclosed by the interviewees. While these organizations are likely to have good intentions, the scholarship should address the balance between public support and independence to avoid potential conflicts with freedom of the press, as the relevance of fact-checking is increasing.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Mar García-Gordillo (PhD) is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Seville and coordinator of the research group Communication & Social Sciences. She is the director of the RTVE-US chair. Previously, she served as director general of communication at the University of Seville. Her main lines of research focus on communication and political journalism, with special attention to international politics and the European Union, information quality, and gender studies.

Rubén Rivas-de-Roca (PhD) is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Santiago de Compostela and a member of the research group Novos Medios. He worked before at King Juan Carlos University and the University of Seville. He has been a visiting scholar at universities in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Portugal, and also at Carlos III University of Madrid (Spain). His research focuses on the study of political communication, local and new digital media, as well as on the European public sphere.

Mathias-Felipe de-Lima-Santos (PhD) is a researcher, journalist, and technologist. He has worked with institutions across Oceania, Europe, and Latin America. Previously, he contributed to major European research projects, including Human(e) AI, AI4Media, and JOLT, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie European Training Network project. Mathias-Felipe co-edited *Journalism, Data and Technology in Latin America* and the forthcoming *Fact-Checking in the Global South* (Palgrave Macmillan). His research explores how technological innovations are transforming journalism, media, and online social networks.