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From Fact-Checking to Debunking: The Case of Elections24Check During the 2024 European Elections

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Abstract

Misleading and false information is an issue in the European public sphere. This article analyzes the verified disinformation by fact-checkers during the 2024 European Parliament elections. From the lens of fact-checking, as a journalism practice to fight against disinformation, this research explores the European initiative Elections24Check, a collaborative fact-checking project associated with the European Fact-Checking Standards Network. The research aims: on the one hand, to demonstrate the prevalence of debunking over fact-checking; and on the other, to dissect the thematic nature, format, typology, and deceitful technique of the hoaxes verified during the last European elections. Using content analysis, the sample comprised 487 publications verified by 32 different fact-checkers across a total of 28 countries for one month related to the 2024 European elections. The results present implications regarding the collaborative fact-checking project that made a greater effort to verify other contextual disinformation issues rather than checking disinformation directly involved in the elections and EU politics. Also, this case study revealed the shift in the European fact-checking movement with the prevalence of debunking activity over scrutinizing public statements. Finally, the verified disinformation underscored the continued dominance of text as the primary format for spreading false information and the predominance of content decontextualization. The results of this study aim to deepen the understanding of fact-checking in the European media landscape.

Keywords

debunking; fact-checking; disinformation; Elections24Check; European Union; European Parliament elections

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1. Disinformation in the European Public Sphere

In the "information disorder" era (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), the media system turns towards a hybrid nature. In this sense, social media has decentralized information, becoming a primary platform for self-distributed content. Audiences now determine their media consumption, creating an environment of information overabundance and disinformation. In this article, the term "disinformation" will be used to refer to "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country" (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017, p. 20). Similarly, "hoaxes" will be used to refer specifically to disinformative content.

In this informative scenario, social media is also the main space for the spread of hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and manipulated content, with polarized audiences receiving a daily flood of misleading or erroneous information (Novotná et al., 2023). This ecosystem amplifies disinformation's impact (Lelo & Fígaro, 2021), with platforms exploiting cognitive biases through algorithms that shape public opinion, increasing social media's relevance as a key source of information, especially amid rising public polarization (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

At the EU level, Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023) suggest that reforming the pan-European journalistic model is pertinent, given that we live in a reality marked by disinformation, fake news, and other hybrid threats. In this sense, Duch-Guillot (2016, p. 140) emphasizes that "quality information, rigor, and transparency are the best antidotes against simplification, half-truths, or lies."

Disinformation is as alarming as the lack of information, for it is in ignorance that falsehoods find fertile ground to proliferate. Both have been major challenges for EU communication since the 1980s (Grill & Boomgaarden, 2017). Numerous initiatives and legislative tools at the European level aim to ensure that people can participate in a truly democratic system through free and informed decision-making, without interference and illegal manipulation, such as conspiratorial currents (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024).

The Brexit referendum was the result of decades of media coverage with an exclusionary and sensationalist focus, portraying the Brussels elite as a threat to the sovereignty and economic prosperity of the United Kingdom (Tuñón, 2021). This anti-European disinformation campaign could only be countered with responsible journalism. As Duch-Guillot (2016, p. 142) highlights, "ensuring that Europeans have accurate data at their fingertips will undoubtedly help them confront those who distort reality to suit their destructive tactics".

Faced with the growing problem of disinformation, European public authorities have adopted a dual approach. On the one hand, they have introduced legal measures to strengthen the regulatory framework for tackling the intentional spread of disinformative content. Through this more defined and stringent legal framework, the goal is to create a safe environment where digital platforms assume their corresponding responsibilities (Higgins, 2019).

Since 2018, the EU, aware of the vulnerability of democratic societies to propaganda and disinformation, has promoted a series of targeted initiatives and policy documents to combat these challenges (Tuñón et al., 2025). As part of this action plan, the EU has begun to assign fact-checking organisations a pivotal role.

In this line, the European Commission promoted the creation of an independent high-level group, composed of 40 professionals representing social networks and technology companies, fact-checkers, media, academics, and civil society members, tasked with drafting a report on fake news and online disinformation titled *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*. From a European institutional perspective, this group was charged with "defining and quantifying disinformation, as well as studying possible legal mechanisms and countermeasures to combat it" (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019, p. 247). Concurrently with these efforts, in late 2018 and at the suggestion of the European Council, the high representative and the European Commission introduced the EU Action Plan Against Disinformation. This systemic proposal brings together the efforts of competent authorities in the member states, civil society organisations, fact-checkers, and digital platforms.

Following the aforementioned report, the European Commission welcomed the self-regulatory agreement that established the first European Code of Practice on Disinformation in 2018. This was the world's first voluntary self-regulatory instrument for online platforms, founded on 21 commitments. After a review process, the EU strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation was introduced in 2022. The updated code encompasses 44 commitments and 128 specific measures (European Commission, 2022). Unlike its predecessor, the strengthened Code of Practice functions as a co-regulatory instrument for very large online platforms and search engines, developed within the framework of the Digital Services Act, which has been in force since 2022 (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2023). On 13 February 2025, the Commission and the European Board for Digital Services endorsed the integration of the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation as a Code of Conduct on Disinformation into the framework of the Digital Services Act (European Commission, 2025).

In recent years, two major crises—the pandemic and the war in Ukraine—have jeopardized the so-called "EU fragmented approach towards disinformation" (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023, p. 5). Specifically, the latest EU regulatory responses have been the European Media Freedom Act, in 2023, and the EU Artificial Intelligence Act, in 2024. In a context marked by increasing polarization, the rise of populism is largely due to the significant representation that extreme right-wing parties have recently gained in some European states (Carral et al., 2023; Tuñón-Navarro & Bouzas-Blanco, 2023), and the impact of disinformation strategies, both internal and external to the EU, which have resurged during crises such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Gullo & Tuñón, 2009; Jiménez-Alcarria & Tuñón-Navarro, 2023). The EU seeks to become a bastion of free and independent media to safeguard the European public sphere. This commitment to protecting the rule of law had already led the EU to develop initiatives, including a recommendation on journalist safety and measures to address strategic lawsuits against public participation.

Ultimately, as noted by Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023, p. 8), the increase in the intentional and harmful use of disinformative content during Covid-19 and the invasion of Ukraine has amplified the strategic relevance of this issue, and European policies on this matter are being redefined in the post-pandemic scenario, facing significant internal contradictions. Disinformation has gained prominence on the European policymakers' agenda. However, due to the lack of real involvement by major private digital platforms, the actions to be taken will remain subject to co-regulation through the pre-existing rationale of codes of practice mentioned earlier. Additionally, a geopolitical shift is occurring in EU policy against disinformation. A securitization process, applying security tools and discourse to an issue previously not identified as such, is being promoted. As a result, two opposing (and possibly contradictory) logics—securitization and self-regulation—

coexist and compete when determining the EU's focus and political actions against disinformation. This contrast between a hard-power approach, treating it as a cardinal threat, and a soft-law approach, relying on voluntarism and minimal intervention in the digital media industry, creates dissonance (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2023, p. 8).

This study examines Elections24Check, a fact-checking initiative implemented during the 2024 European Parliament elections, as a journalistic project to safeguard democratic communication processes from disinformation in the European public sphere. By analysing its role in debunking misinformation circulating on social media and verifying public statements, this research contributes to the broader discussion on the capacity of fact-checking in countering information disorders and reinforcing the European project.

2. Fact-Checking Journalism in Electoral Contexts

Fact-checking journalism emerged at the end of the 20th century as a practice to check political discourse during electoral context and to revitalize journalism practice to escape declarative journalism and claim essential attributes of journalism such as rigour or impartiality (Amazeen, 2019). Fact-checking journalism has become a global movement that is joined by both traditional media and new niche digital media, which makes verification their journalistic mission. Koliska and Roberts (2024) explain fact-checking organizations share a normative value system whose epistemology enhances confidence in factually verifiable truth, and this journalistic practice is oriented towards a public service promoting education and training the citizenry to make the public both sensitive to misleading content and able to think more critically about informative content. As of December 2024, the Duke Reporter's Lab at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy recorded 446 fact-checking organisations worldwide (Duke Reporter's Lab, n.d.). In this context, the International Fact-Checking Network reported 143 verified signatories internationally (International Fact-Checking Network, n.d.), while the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) identified 55 verified member organisations at the European level (EFCSN, n.d.).

Rodríguez Pérez (2020) highlights that fact-checking journalism aims to "ensure the accuracy of information shared on social networks and platforms, scrutinize political figures, and transform this information into knowledge that citizens can trust" (p. 244). Media organizations support this latter goal through literacy programs. While fact-checking journalism played a crucial role during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic and in addressing social issues such as migration and environmental challenges, it is during electoral contexts and referendums that this practice is enhanced. Cazzamatta and Santos (2023) describe fact-checkers as "gatewatchers or gatebouncers," as their work involves curating information that has already been published.

In electoral contexts, such as the European Parliament elections, when polarization is accentuated, fact-checking organizations often choose to collaborate and form consortiums as a strategy to combat disinformation, aiming to increase efficiency and effectiveness in light of limited resources. As noted by Bélair-Gagnon et al. (2023, p. 1170), "fact-checking is thus a productive arena for examining truth-seeking knowledge practices in partnership contexts."

Although fact-checking alone will not eliminate the phenomenon of disinformation at all, it remains an invaluable tool for mitigating its immediate consequences (Tuñón et al., 2024). In this sense, several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of fact-checking in correcting misinformation and reducing false or

inaccurate beliefs as well as improving accuracy in issue perceptions (Carnahan & Bergan, 2021; Walter et al., 2019). However, factors such as political knowledge, whether the fact-check is counter-attitudinal or pro-attitudinal, the association with campaign statements, and the perceived credibility of fact-checkers, among others, influence their effectiveness.

2.1. Research Questions

The tradition of collaboration is inherent in the DNA of fact-checking. Several initiatives emerged in European countries, such as CrossCheck (the 2017 French presidential election), Comprobado in the 2019 general election in Spain, and Crosscheck Europe in the context of the 2019 European Parliament election. These collaborative projects aim to be more efficient and effective in curbing misinformation produced by polarized and populist political discourses and a fragmented, interconnected, and digitized information system that embeds social network sites. Palau-Sampio and Carratalá (2021) state this socio-political context "has transformed elections into a breeding ground for disinformation" (p. 110). In this sense, we worded the following research question:

> RQ1: How much of the verified content was directly related to the 2024 European Parliament elections?

The practice of fact-checking increasingly tends to verify viral content rather than to focus on the scrutiny of political discourse because misinformation is growing on the internet and social network sites, which is called the debunking function of fact-checkers (Cazzamatta, 2025; Graves et al., 2023; Verhoeven et al., 2024). Both functions are equally prioritized by fact-checkers across the globe as the main purposes of this journalistic practice (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023). Also, two additional reasons can help explain this shift: their dependence on big tech financial resources (International Fact-Checking Network, 2023) and because debunking online disinformation tends to be less time-consuming than checking political claims (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020), favouring then the debunk task over the fact-checking performance. For instance, in the three initiatives under study by Palau-Sampio and Carratalá (2021), only half of the verified content was related to actions or statements made by politicians. According to this, we phrased the following research question:

> RQ2: To what extent did fact-checkers prioritize checking viral content over scrutinizing political discourse during the 2024 European Parliament elections?

The expected research contributions aim to analyze if the shift of fact-checking organizations that initially prioritized producing fact-checking claims moved towards debunking viral hoaxes. With this purpose, we analyze, as a case study, the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections that included 32 organizations from 28 countries. This particularity is relevant due to the performance of activities embedded with the journalistic culture of fact-checking organizations. Traditionally, fact-checking initiatives assumed a watchdog role to scrutinize political and public discourse from prominent personalities. That means that the watchdog journalistic culture involves the practice of monitoring and holding those in power accountable through journalism. Hence, the prioritized disinformation to be monitored by fact-checkers is that which goes from elites to citizens (top–bottom).

On the other hand, a performance focused more on debunking prioritizes bottom-up content, referring to information shared by social media users that is deemed false or misleading. These activities are more closely tied to the role of intermediaries, assisting platforms with content moderation, flagging harmful content, and identifying problematic information.

Additionally to the electoral context, topics regarding migration, health, science and climate change, and gender emerge as topics affected by misinformation content. We worded a research question as follows:

> RQ3: In which topics were the fact-checkers focused on verifying mis/disinformation? Are these topics directly related to the 2024 European Parliament elections?

Fact-checkers perform this journalistic practice to curb mis/disinformation; journalists assess the content disseminated in the electoral context as false, misleading, or true, among other categories. Wardle and Derakshan (2017) categorized the types of mis/disinformation from the intention to deceive using different formats. These categories (satire, misleading content, fabricated content, false context, etc.) have been widely used to code misleading and fake content according to the type of disinformation and the misleading technique (Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2020; Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023; Salaverría et al., 2020; Sánchez del Vas et al., 2025). During electoral contexts, misleading content tends to generate deceitful narratives with inaccuracies, exaggerations, or false contextualization, as one of the main misinformation techniques that makes it more difficult to separate facts from false (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023). As a global misinformation trend, decontextualization stands out as the primary deception strategy identified by fact-checkers (Cazzamatta, 2024). The verification of imposter and manipulated content is also on the fact-checking agenda.

Additionally, previous studies identified the prevalence of using the text format to disseminate disinformation narratives both in the electoral context (Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022) and in other issues, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2020; Sánchez del Vas & Tuñón Navarro, 2024), migration (Narváez Llinares & Pérez-Rufí, 2022), or gender (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020). According to scholars, disinformation often adopts the text format because it is the simplest to produce and disseminate, requiring less skill and time than manipulating images. Additionally, text is easily accessible, can be tailored to fit the context of different countries, and can be seamlessly combined with other formats, making it an effective tool for widespread distribution. Based on this, we worded the following research question:

> RQ4: What type of disinformation was verified? What techniques of misleading were used by the agents of disinformation? What formats were used to create disinformation content?

3. Method

The research aims to explore the predominance of debunking over fact-checking, while also analyzing the thematic elements, formats, typologies, and deceptive techniques of the disinformation verified during the most recent European elections. To achieve this, content analysis was used as the primary methodology, which is widely regarded as a core research technique in communication studies. This methodology has also been previously used in recent studies on fact-checking and disinformation, such as Salaverría et al.

(2020), Ruiz Incertis et al. (2024), Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón Navarro (2024), and Sánchez-del-Vas and Tuñón-Navarro (2024).

3.1. Sample

The sample of verifications is derived from the collaborative initiative Elections24Check. As indicated on the project's website, which is associated with the EFCSN:

> The project aims to increase cross-country collaboration in detecting and debunking European electoral disinformation across the EU while promoting access for European citizens to verified information so they can make informed decisions in the lead-up to the European Elections in June 2024. (Elections24Check, 2024)

As described in the internal guidebook of the EFCSN, to which the authors have gained access as researchers, the Elections24Check project has a threefold objective. Firstly, it aims to identify and fact-check disinformation and misinformation narratives relating to the 2024 European elections within their respective national contexts. Secondly, it provides a frontend website for free and open access to citizens. Lastly, it offers a comprehensive dataset on disinformation about the 2024 European elections, enabling researchers and institutions to make evidence-based interventions and policy recommendations.

In this context, the European verifiers affiliated with the EFCSN have contributed to the joint database. We requested full access to the complete database from the EFCSN in our capacity as researchers. This repository has enabled us to explore a substantial number of articles, data downloads, and insights into the statistics and narratives essential for understanding electoral disinformation throughout Europe.

To select the research sample, we downloaded all verifications published on the website during the period from 24 May to 24 June 2024 in Excel format via the researchers' platform. This timeframe encompasses two weeks before and after the European elections of 2024 (6–9 June 2024). We consider this period particularly significant given the volume of disinformation regarding the elections, which presents an intriguing area for study. The relevance of studying one month for the analysis of disinformation during electoral cycles is supported by recent research on disinformation in electoral contexts, such as the study by Baptista et al. (2022).

In this regard, we selected all content classified as fact-checks or debunks, excluding explanatory narratives ($n = 5$), publications that fact-checkers themselves classified as "not verifiable" ($n = 4$), or publications rated as true ($n = 40$). Accordingly, once these items were removed from the sample, the resulting sample comprised 487 publications to be studied ($N = 487$), verified by 32 different fact-checkers across a total of 28 countries.

3.2. Variables

We used some variables directly coded by the original dataset such as the type of content verified ("debunk" and "fact-check") and the relation with the EU politics ("direct" and "indirect"). Likewise, in the aforementioned internal guidebook of the EFCSN, the organisation established criteria to unify the standards regarding the direct relationship with the EU, stating that "a claim, political fact-check, debunking article, pre-bunking article,

or narrative report about EU politics or national politics that is affected by European politics." It is worth noting that, although these two variables were based on the coding previously carried out by the fact-checkers, they have been thoroughly reviewed by the authors, and discrepancies have been corrected as necessary. The additional variables, which will be presented below, were coded by two researchers. A pre-test with an $n = 52$ was developed to assure reliability.

In regards to the topic, considering existing research (García-Marín et al., 2023; Verhoeven et al., 2024), we coded this variable into several categories: "economy/finance," "politicians (national context of countries)," "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)," "conflict (Ukraine/Gaza…)," "health/healthcare," "society, justice, and gender," "education," "immigration/race," "environment, energy, science, and technology," and "others" (agreement = 78.8%; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.761$; Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.763$).

As for the format, we coded as "text," "photo/images," "audio," and "video" (agreement = 94.2%; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.912$; Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.913$). When there was a combination of formats, we selected as the main format the one that the fact-checker prioritized, for instance, with references in the title or in the lead.

Concerning the type of disinformation, based on Gutiérrez-Coba and Rodríguez-Pérez (2023), three possibilities were coded: "satire/parody," "misleading content," and "imposter content" (agreement = 94.2%; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.704$; Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.707$). This variable categorizes disinformation based on the nature or intent behind the falsehood.

As for the deceitful technique, based on Gutiérrez-Coba and Rodríguez-Pérez (2023), three possible options were coded: "false context," "manipulated content," and "fabricated content" (agreement = 88.5%; Cohen's $\kappa = 0.799$; Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.800$). It refers to the specific method used to deceive or mislead through disinformation.

4. Results

Firstly, in addressing RQ1, as can be observed in Table 1, of the 487 verifications analyzed, 62.63% ($n = 305$) are indirectly related to Europe, indicating that the content covers themes beyond specific European interests. For instance, these pieces talked about public figures such as the player Mbappé or Scarlett Johansson, conspiracy theories about Covid-19 vaccines and climate change, and international conflicts, among other topics. In contrast, 37.37% ($n = 182$) demonstrate a direct connection to European matters, encompassing topics such as European elections. This distribution highlights the varying degrees of relevance to European contexts within the body of verifications, with a significant majority focusing on broader themes, while a notable portion specifically addresses issues pertinent to Europe.

About RQ2, of the 487 verifications analyzed, 83.98% are classified as "debunks" ($n = 409$), while 16.02% pertain to fact-checking political statements or claims ($n = 78$). These results point out that during the 2024 European Parliament elections, content verified by fact-checkers tended to be associated with the debunking function rather than fact-checking political statements. This distinction underscores the primary focus of the verification efforts of the project Elections24Check, with the majority directed toward addressing general online disinformation. A smaller yet significant proportion is dedicated to scrutinizing political discourse and ensuring the accountability of public figures. This division reflects broader priorities in

combating disinformation in electoral contexts, such as those about the European Parliament, balancing general content verification with the critical task of fact-checking within the political sphere.

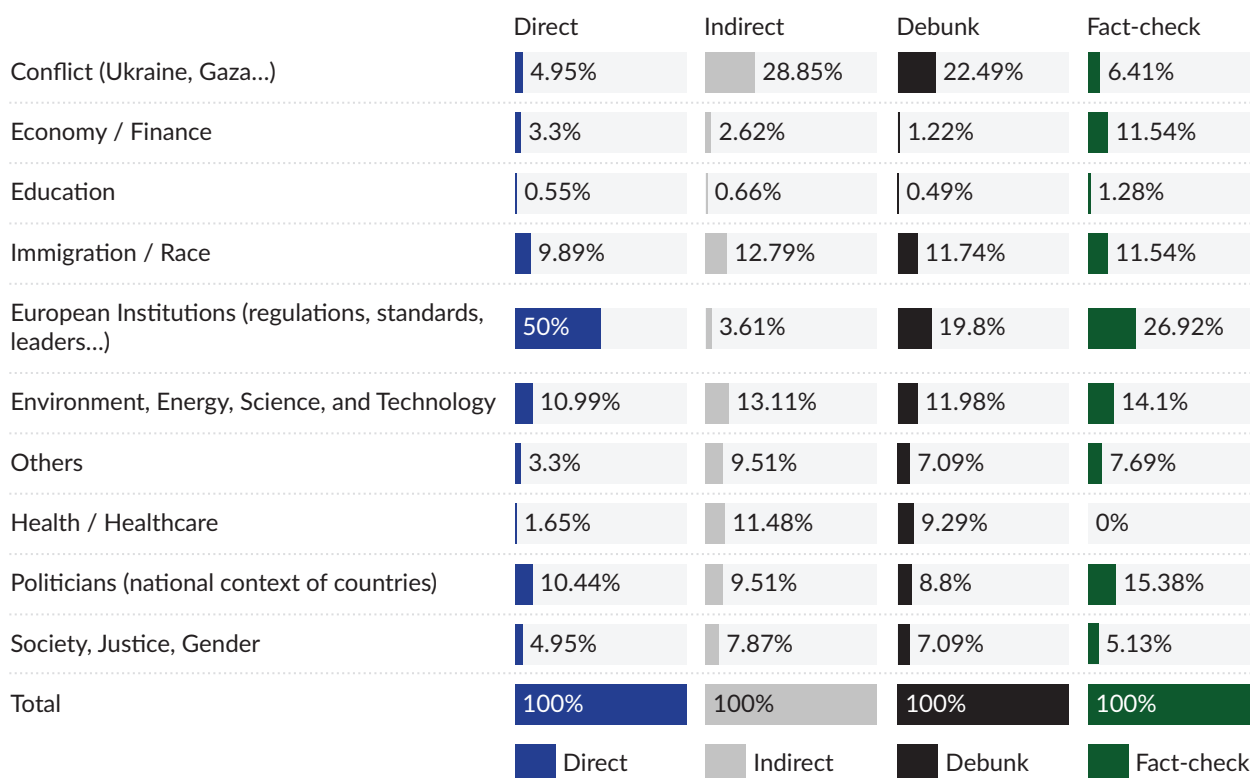**Table 1.** Distribution of type of verified content and EU relation.

Type of verified content	Direct	Indirect	Total
Debunk	133	276	409
Fact-check	49	29	78
Total	182	305	487

We also performed both the Fisher exact test and the Chi-squared test to find out if there was an association between the EU relation to the verified content and the type of content verified. The tests ($\chi^2 = 25.70$; $p < 0.001$; Fisher's exact test = $p < 0.001$) revealed that the proportion of "debunks" directly associated with the EU is significantly lower than expected and considerably higher with its indirect relationship to the EU. At the same time, the proportion of "fact-check" type content with a direct relationship is higher than expected. In brief, we can assert that "fact-checks" tended to be more associated with the European elections than content classified as "debunk."

In regard to the RQ3, the main verified topic was about "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)" (20.94%; $n = 102$), followed by content associated with the "conflict (Gaza, Ukraine…)" (19.92%; $n = 97$), "environment, energy, science, and technology" (12.32%; $n = 60$), and "immigration/race" (11.70%; $n = 57$). The other topics obtained less than 10%. These other minority topics were "economy/finance," "health/healthcare," "society, justice, and gender," and "education," among others.

When crossing the topic with the (in)direct relation with the EU politics (Figure 1), we noted that half of the verified content related directly to the elections is associated with the topic "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)" (50%, $n = 91$; e.g., "Misinformation about the salary of MEPs"), followed by "environment, energy, science, and technology" (10.99%; $n = 20$) (e.g., "EU-funded study finds food grown in home gardens poses environmental threat?"), and "politicians (national context of countries)" (10.44%; $n = 19$; e.g., "Why do the PP and PSOE usually vote the same in the European Parliament?"). The more frequent topics indirectly related to the elections were "conflict (Ukraine/Gaza…)" (28.85%; $n = 88$; e.g., "This video shows a Russian warship off Cuba in 2019, not 2024"), "environment, energy, science, and technology" (13.11%; $n = 40$; e.g., "Photos of Rio de Janeiro from 1880 to 2020 do not disprove the rise in sea level," and "immigration/race" (12.79%; $n = 39$; e.g., "This video does not show 'menas' who assault several stores in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria").

Results also indicate a remarkable difference in terms of observed and expected frequency in several topics from the lens of the (in)direct relation to the EU elections. Verified disinformation about "conflict (Ukraine/Gaza…)" was rarely directly associated with the elections (4.95%; $n = 9$); this topic has a higher indirect relation to the EU than expected. The same pattern also occurred regarding the topic "health/healthcare" (direct: 1.65%, $n = 3$; indirect: 11.48%; $n = 35$). On the other hand, the topic "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)" tends to have a higher relation to the EU than expected. The Chi-squared test disclosed a statistical association between the two variables ($\chi^2 = 173.04$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.596$, $p < 0.001$; coefficient of contingency = 0.512, $p < 0.001$).

	Direct	Indirect	Debunk	Fact-check
Conflict (Ukraine, Gaza…)	4.95%	28.85%	22.49%	6.41%
Economy / Finance	3.3%	2.62%	1.22%	11.54%
Education	0.55%	0.66%	0.49%	1.28%
Immigration / Race	9.89%	12.79%	11.74%	11.54%
European Institutions (regulations, standards, leaders…)	50%	3.61%	19.8%	26.92%
Environment, Energy, Science, and Technology	10.99%	13.11%	11.98%	14.1%
Others	3.3%	9.51%	7.09%	7.69%
Health / Healthcare	1.65%	11.48%	9.29%	0%
Politicians (national context of countries)	10.44%	9.51%	8.8%	15.38%
Society, Justice, Gender	4.95%	7.87%	7.09%	5.13%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Direct — Indirect — Debunk — Fact-check

Figure 1. Relation of the topic with the EU.

When crossing the topic with the type of content verified, the topic "conflict (Ukraine/Gaza…)" represented 22.49% ($n = 92$) of the "debunk" content, followed by "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)" (19.80%, $n = 81$), and "environment, energy, science, and technology" (11.98%, $n = 49$). Regarding "fact-check," the top three topics were "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)" (26.92%, $n = 21$; e.g., "#LegalCheck. PCF program for the European elections: 'We must challenge the principle of primacy of European law over national law, a primacy that is not enshrined in the treaties'"), "politicians (national context of countries)" (15.38%, $n = 12$; e.g., "What Alberto Núñez Feijóo has said and what he has not said about a motion of censure against Pedro Sánchez and the support of Junts"), and "environment, energy, science, and technology" (14.10%, $n = 11$; e.g., "Poland has less water resources than Egypt? False"). In detail, the Chi-squared test disclosed a statistical association between the two variables ($\chi^2 = 45.79$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0{,}307$, $p < 0.001$; coefficient of contingency $= 0.293$; $p < 0.001$). Topics such as "conflict (Ukraine/Gaza…)" and "health/healthcare" were more linked to "debunk" than expected; on the other hand, "economy/finance," "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders…)," and "politicians (national context of countries)" were more associated with "fact-checks" than expected.

Focusing on RQ4, the type of disinformation, the category "misleading content" was the majority (88.09%; e.g., "Germany has not decriminalized possession and sharing of child pornography"), followed by "imposter content" (11.09%; e.g., "No, Marina Sáenz has not said that 'couples should sleep in separate beds' because double beds encourage 'the rape of the male over the female'"), and satire/parody (0.82%; e.g., "A quote attributed to Gabriel Attal by a parody site"). Regarding the technique of deceit, "false context" (decontextualization) became the primary deception strategy identified by fact-checkers during the 2024

European Parliament elections. (59.34%; e.g., "Posting from 2012 about former politician Korun in circulation"), followed by "fabricated content" (32.85%; e.g., "Did Pope Francis congratulate Putin on his victory after the election and agree to visit Moscow?"), and "manipulated content" (7.80%; e.g., "What do we know about the image of Netanyahu's arrest?"). We carried out a Chi-squared test to check whether a relation between "type of disinformation" and "deceitful technique" occurred. We removed the category "satire/parody" ($n = 4$) to ensure the validity of the test. The test revealed a statistical association between the two variables ($\chi^2 = 70.79$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.383$, $p < 0.001$; coefficient of contingency = 0.358, $p < 0.001$).

The most prevalent format of verified disinformation content was "text" (53.59%), followed by "video" (30.80%), "photo/images" (14.17%), and "audio" (1.44%). We executed a Chi-square test to test the association between the format and the deceitful technique—for this test, we removed the category "audio" to ensure the validity of the test. The result revealed a statistical association between the two variables ($\chi^2 = 61.02$, $p < 0.001$; Cramer's $V = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$; coefficient of contingency = 0.336, $p < 0.001$).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As demonstrated by the initiatives and regulatory actions introduced by the EU to combat disinformation, fact-checkers play a pivotal role in the European strategy to address this issue. Notably, the establishment of the EFCSN network, which encompasses the Elections24Check project, was facilitated through funding provided by the European Commission. Additionally, the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation of 2022 seeks to foster a framework of collaboration between signatories and the EU fact-checking community, embedding the contributions of fact-checkers into the platforms of participating signatories (European Commission, 2022). All of this highlights that, with the endorsement of European institutions, fact-checkers are increasingly solidifying their role as key stakeholders in regulatory efforts to combat disinformation.

This article aims to analyze the verified disinformation by fact-checkers in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections, using as a case study, the European initiative Elections24Check, a collaborative fact-checking project associated with the EFCSN. The main objective is to explore in which way fact-checking faced disinformation narratives and which characteristics of disinformation narratives to mislead were disseminated related to the 2024 European Parliament elections.

The first implication of this research lies in the verified content provided by the collaborative project formed by 32 different fact-checking media outlets from 28 European countries, which manifest a great effort to collaborate in curbing disinformation. Although this consortium, as a political fact-checking initiative, clearly had the purpose of combating political disinformation, the majority of verified content flagged as disinformation is indirectly related to EU politics and the elections. Elections are a significant concern in the practice of fact-checking, but the results show this initiative made a greater effort to verify other contextual issues rather than checking disinformation directly involved in the EU Parliament elections. Nevertheless, the viral disinformation issues indirectly related to EU institutions demonstrate how disinformation agents aim to destabilize supranational elections by fostering manipulation through collateral false narratives. In these cases, although the EU is not the primary focus, European institutions maintain an official discourse that is contradicted by such pieces of disinformation. For example, falsehoods about wars, climate change, or immigration serve as illustrative examples.

The second implication of this research is about the prevalence of the debunking activity over scrutinizing public statements (fact-checking function), the original function of the fact-checkers. Although both tasks are in the core purposes of these organizations (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023), this research, developed from the collaborative project Elections24Check, adds a new piece of evidence of this shift that tends to be focused on curbing online disinformation. Some researchers have suggested reasons that may drive this shift, including technology partnerships to receive financial support from tech platforms (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020), news consumption in social media networks (Newman et al., 2022), and the more demanding task of checking claims compared to debunk social media content (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020).

Although the new European Code of Practice on Disinformation encourages signatories to collaborate with fact-checkers, Meta has been doing so since 2016. Under the policies of Meta's third-party fact-checking programme, political speeches are not eligible for verification within this framework. In this context, a significant number of European fact-checkers collaborate with Meta, particularly since the big tech company began recognizing verified membership of the EFCSN as a prerequisite for joining the programme. This helps to explain why a substantial portion of the verification sample in this study involves debunking rather than traditional fact-checks and why much of it pertains to indirect EU topics. This is attributed to the prolific nature of disinformation on social media, which encompasses a wide variety of themes.

Particularly, the actions of Elections24Check follow a common pattern observed in consortia created for electoral coverage (Palau-Sampio, 2024): A greater effort is needed to focus on verifying the claims and actions of politicians and public figures. This role performance diverges from the traditional watchdog role performance of fact-checking journalism. Therefore, this shift highlights the importance of considering whether fact-checking will continue to play a watchdog or monitoring role, or if it will take on an intermediary or even subsidiary role for tech platforms, focusing on cleaning up problematic information. Moreover, reaching large audiences has always been a challenge for fact-checking organizations, and fact-checkers acknowledge that platforms play a crucial role in distributing their fact-checks to the appropriate audiences (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023). However, recent evidence determined that debunking posts about health misinformation (related to Covid-19) obtained lower levels of user engagement on Facebook than fact-checking claims from politicians and public figures (Riedlinger et al., 2024).

Third, more frequently verified topics by Elections24Check were "European institutions (regulations, standards, EU leaders...)," "conflict (Ukraine/Gaza...)," "environment, energy, science, and technology," and "immigration/race." These topics enhance, first, disinformation affected the EU Parliament elections mislead regarding its leaders, policies, and institutions, but also the prevalence of contextual topics such as the war between Israel and Hamas and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Other topics emerge as a source of verification during the time of the electoral campaign such as immigration and the environment as societal issues. Misleading and fake content related to migration tends to promote negative attitudes and racial prejudices against them, often in the form of hate and xenophobic speech. Complementary, climate change and the environment are affected by disinformation through conspiracy theories that deny the greenhouse effect and contribute to scepticism about the incidence of human beings in climate change. Furthermore, and encompassing the purpose of Elections24Check, these topics were related to the elections less than expected and, often, more related to the debunking function rather than the fact-checking activity.

In this context, disinformation is closely linked to topics that dominate the contemporary media, political, and public agenda within the European public sphere. Consequently, it is crucial for fact-checkers to

effectively verify information on sensitive issues that resonate with public opinion. However, an alternative interpretation might suggest that this consortium of journalists prioritized other viral topics from the public agenda shared on social media, potentially due to: (a) the absence of a European public sphere engaging in debates with a pan-European focus on the electoral campaign, which aligns with the second implication, highlighting the prevalence of debunking activities over scrutinizing public statements; (b) a campaign primarily centered on national issues rather than fostering European-wide debate; or (c) journalists' still-developing understanding of the structures, proposals, and political stances of parties and leaders during the electoral campaign. Similarly, and in alignment with the first implication of this study, the thematic diversity of disinformation content highlights how the manipulation of elections through narratives extends beyond strategies directly linked to the European elections. Instead, it involves the use of alternative narratives designed to polarize the population and erode trust in official or institutional discourses.

Fourth, although numerous alarms have been raised about the proliferation of high-tech disinformation, such as deepfakes, the results of this case study underscore the continued dominance of text as the primary format for spreading false information. Precisely, the majority of the verified content corresponded to what has been referred to as bottom-up disinformation (Luengo & García-Marín, 2020); that is, disinformation generated by users or groups to be shared via social media, which may explain why it is the predominant format. Text-based disinformation, characterized as a low-tech method of disinformation production, is notable not only for the speed of their creation and dissemination but also for the relative ease with which they can be fact-checked, owing to their typically lower level of complexity. With the advancement of technology, verifying increasingly complex content necessitates continuous training and the acquisition of new skills by fact-checkers, as well as additional time for effective debunking. Consequently, given that the sample in this study is based on falsehoods previously selected by fact-checking organizations, it cannot be assumed that professionalized disinformation created using AI techniques is absent from the digital sphere. Nonetheless, the prioritization of simpler falsehoods for debunking suggests that their virality exerts a substantial impact on audiences. Prior research has consistently confirmed the prevalence of this format in fact-checking efforts, as demonstrated by Salaverría et al. (2020) and Sánchez-del-Vas and Tuñón-Navarro (2024).

Fifth, another key implication highlighted in this article is the predominance of content decontextualization. The practice of extracting information from its original context to mislead is a widely employed disinformation technique by those who produce hoaxes, as noted by scholars such as Hameleers (2023) and Sánchez del Vas and Tuñón Navarro (2024). This is closely tied to the fourth implication, as the predominance of textual formats—due to their simplicity for virality and verification—parallels the technique of decontextualization, which likewise does not require significant resources, as it relies on the utilization of genuine content or information. Consequently, when such information is incorporated into a different scenario, it loses its original meaning and is reinterpreted to serve the disinformation objectives of those who employ it to deceive audiences. This technique is also closely linked to the type of disinformation being propagated; in this study, misleading content emerged as the most prevalent category among the fact-checks examined. Misleading content is characterized by the distortion or omission of factual information from its original context, making it increasingly challenging to differentiate between truth and falsehood (Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023). In fact, this form of disinformation is particularly detrimental, as highlighted by Allen et al. (2024), who reported the negative impact of factually accurate yet deceptive content on audiences.

In conclusion, this article sheds light on how European fact-checking organizations oriented towards curbing disinformation tend to prioritize the debunking function over the fact-checking activity, aligning with previous findings on how this journalism practice is shifting. Also, the findings associate the prevalence of debunking online disinformation with the indirect relation of the verified content to the EU. This point is crucial because it can represent an inadequate alienation from the mission of this cross-national initiative to fight European electoral disinformation. Moreover, disinformation narratives regarding issues such as conflicts (Russian invasion in Ukraine or the war between Israel and Hamas) were less than expected related to the European elections. Additionally, this article discloses new evidence regarding decontextualization as the principal deception technique used in disinformation narratives and the text as the preferred format to disseminate disinformation narratives verified by fact-checkers.

The limitations of this article primarily arise from the study's reliance on fact-checks sourced from a closed database associated with the Elections24Check project. Consequently, only publications submitted and produced by members of the EFCSN, with which the project is affiliated, were included in the analysis. Furthermore, due to the extensive scope of the selected database and the temporal constraints of the study, geographical factors related to the fact-checkers, as well as other significant variables—such as the sources employed in the verification process, the actors behind the disinformation, and the channels through which verified hoaxes were disseminated—were not considered. On the other hand, due to logistical and time constraints, in-depth interviews with specialized agents could not be incorporated, which would have further enriched the research.

These limitations highlight potential avenues for future research, aiming to broaden the study through the examination of these variables and methodological techniques, among others. Furthermore, applying the methodology to other studies on fact-checking and disinformation during electoral periods, such as the 2024 American elections, could yield valuable insights that would enhance our understanding of the work of fact-checkers and their essential public service role in combating disinformation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Luis Bouza García (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and Álvaro Oleart (Université Libre de Bruxelles).

Data Availability

The authors are continuing to work on the data to produce new research. Researchers or readers interested in the dataset used in this study are encouraged to contact the corresponding author.

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