

### ***D.5.3.***

#### ***Information verification standards among POL media specialists***

#### **Report**

#### **Self-description of the community of fact-checkers**

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## 1. Research objectives and methodology

Fact-checking is considered one of the important activities in the context of fighting with disinformation. According to the DUKE Reporter's Lab report, there were 341 active fact-checking organizations in the world in 2021, just over half of them were non-profit organizations. Their activities have resulted in hundreds of analyses and reports published on the websites of these organizations, as well as in growing public recognition of fact-checkers and fact-checking. Their activities are also extensively subsidized by the European Commission and other institutions, reflecting the important role attributed to them. Some fact-checking organizations also cooperate with private entities. It is worth noting that fact-checkers maintain relatively extensive relations with each other at the international level. In the context of the presented study, it is particularly important to note that certain activities and tendencies can be observed in this environment, which allow it to be treated as a distinct professional community, referring in its activities to a relatively consistent identity and self-description, including ethical values.

An institution that establishes professional standards on a transnational scale is the International Fact-Checking Network, operated as part of the Poynter Institute (<https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/articles-ifcn/>). The IFCN not only publishes data and reports on the functioning of the industry in most European countries and globally, but also conducts training courses and workshops to develop professional competence. Most significantly, from the perspective of this research, it employs a code of ethics, which it expects its members to adhere to, and provides guidance for its implementation. Currently, 107 verified fact-checking organizations are active institutional members of the IFCN. It is worth noting that a condition for maintaining membership in the network is that the organization regularly undergoes an evaluation of the professional standards it applies (based on the aforementioned code of ethics).

The aim of the research was to reconstruct the self-description (identity) of the fact-checker community in Poland, with a particular focus on the relationship of this self-

description to the self-description of journalism. The analyses were conducted in the context of the assumptions of the theory of the profession as a symbolic community.

Four research problems were formulated in the context of the planned study, which was then the basis for designing the tool, namely an in-depth interview scenario. These problems are as follows:

1. How do the fact-checkers work (daily routines, challenges, good practices, what tools do they use)? How do they practically carry out their professional tasks?
2. What are the stories and personal motivations of the fact-checker(s) (how did they get to this point, what drives them, what frustrates them, what was the most difficult situation they encountered in the context of their work)?
3. How do the fact-checkers define their profession (social role, tasks, key competencies, future of their profession, relationship to journalists, institutional location, and public perceptions)?
4. How do the fact-checkers define disinformation (threats, causes, mechanisms, counteraction)?

Based on the research problems formulated in this way, an interview scenario was created (supplemented in the presentation below with information on which questions were linked to a specific research problem).

1.

Tell me what you do for a living, what type of institution you work in, what specifically falls within the scope of your activities?

Describe one day of your work/work activity? Do you work every day? Do you work according to some kind of schedule? Who/what regulates your professional activity?

Where do you get topics for fact-checking?

What method do you use (how do you proceed step by step)? How does the information verification process work?

What happens to the results of your work? Where and how are the results of your work published afterwards? Is this method of publication satisfactory to you?

What do you consider to be the biggest professional challenge for fact-checkers?

What are the main principles that guide you in your work?

Who or what is a role model, an authority for you?

What are the main mistakes a fact-checker can make?

What tips would you give to your younger colleagues?

What are good practices in fact-checking (give a specific example)?

2.

How did you get into this profession? Why did you get into it?

In your daily work - what frustrates you the most?

In your daily work - what drives you the most, what gives you satisfaction?

What is your worst experience in relation to the work of a fact-checker?

What do you consider your personal greatest success, your discovery, your best experience and why?

3.

How do you define fact-checking?

What do you think is the most important task of fact-checkers? Where does their role end (e.g., is it just fact-checking or also publishing, educating, etc.)?

What values guide your work - what is most important to you in what you do, what goals do you set for yourself?

What does fact-checking bring to society? What is its mission?

What are society's expectations of fact-checking? Do you think they are adequate (achievable, in line with what the industry really does)?

How do you think the work of fact-checkers is socially appreciated?

When are you proud of your work?

When do you feel disappointment about your work?

Do you think fact-checking is already a profession?

Is it possible to talk about a community of fact-checkers?

Are fact-checkers in contact with each other, do they know each other or maintain relationships? If so, in what way?

In your opinion, what is the relationship between fact-checking and journalism? Are they similar, do they differ, how?

What is the relationship between these communities like at the moment, in your opinion?

What should the ideal cooperation between journalists, media and fact-checkers look like?

What, in your opinion, should be the ideal situation for employing a fact-checker (e.g., a member of the editorial board, an external collaborator of the medium, a person completely

outside possibly supporting the activities of the editorial board, someone working in complete isolation from the journalistic community)?

Do you think that - generally in Poland and around the world - fact-checkers are objective in their work?

Do you think that - in general, in Poland and around the world - fact-checkers are independent in their work?

How do you imagine the future of fact-checking? Do you think it will gain importance, develop, or rather not? How will it evolve?

What is, in your opinion, the main problem of your environment? What irritates you?

What is, in your opinion, the strength of your environment?

4.

How do you define the category of disinformation?

What, in your opinion, are the main reasons for its spread?

What, in your opinion, are the main trends in disinformation today?

What are the main threats posed by disinformation?

How can disinformation be countered? What is the role of fact-checking in this context?

The study was conducted using the in-depth interview (IDI) method. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with representatives of the fact-checker community in Poland. On average, an interview lasted for about 60 minutes, with the shortest lasting 32 minutes and the longest lasting 94 minutes. The interviews were conducted both offline and online (in a ratio of 40% to 60%). The interviews were conducted with the representatives of all relevant fact-checking organizations in Poland, including in particular:

1. Konkret24 (5)
2. FakeHunter (4)
3. AFP (2)
4. Demagogue Association (6)
5. Others: fakehunter.pl, Pravda Association (3)

Most of the people interviewed live and work in Warsaw, but 3 of them came from other cities (Krakow, Wroclaw, and Poznan).

In the following part of the study, the recorded audio material was transcribed and analysed according to the research problems indicated above.

## 2. Results

### Professional practices

Two basic professional models have been identified in the fact-checking community. The first involves working in a fact-checking team affiliated with a larger media institution, while the second involves activity in an NGO-like institution, which is limited, in principle, to fact-checking activities. The people employed according to the first model, although, it is worth noting that they work in organizationally separate units, enjoying relative autonomy, nevertheless have a sense of strong connection with their parent editorial office (2, 11). They also admit that they happen to carry out assignments for checking provided information coming from other organizational units of a given media institution (3, 10). They consider this to be completely normal as well as reasonable (3, 11). The people employed in the second model, in addition to fact-checking activities, often undertake activities of an educational and training nature. Occasionally, they are employed on a volunteer basis. It is worth noting that work in larger fact-checking associations often mimics editorial work - there are editorial colleges, for example (10,2), but fact-checkers working in this way have a greater sense of freedom in selecting materials for analysis (11,7). The people employed according to the first model work in organizationally separate units and enjoy relative autonomy, but nevertheless have a strong sense of connection with their parent editorial office (2, 11). They also acknowledge carrying out assignments for checking provided information coming from other organizational units of the same media institution (3, 10), considering it completely normal and reasonable (3, 11). The people employed in the second model, in addition to fact-checking activities, often undertake educational and training tasks. Sporadically, they work on a volunteer basis. It is worth noting that working in larger fact-checking associations often resembles editorial work, with editorial boards, for example (10,2), but fact-checkers working in this way have a greater sense of freedom in selecting materials for analysis (11,7).

Professional fact-checkers work every day and definitely focus their professional activity on fact-checking (this is their priority, this is how they define their professional identity: 3, 17). Fact-checking structures operating within complex media institutions operate on a relatively rigid schedule, often tied to the work of other departments of the institution (4, 7). The people employed by associations have more organizational freedom, but most

often also operate according to a certain schedule, which in this case is more the result of self-regulation (10, 13). This schedule includes checking social media (and other sources) for disinformation content on a daily basis, then deciding which material to analyse (usually after consulting with colleagues/colleagues in the organization). Data verification activities are then implemented. The verification work, depending on the complexity of the problem, takes from several hours to several days. Often, several tasks are carried out simultaneously. One interviewee describes the process as follows: 7, 5.

In addition to social media, the messages which are supposed to be verified come from traditional media and other departments of the media institution (in model one). It is relatively common for the topics to be suggested by acquaintances or to come from audience submissions sent through the relevant channels provided by fact-checking portals: 8, 7.

The verification process begins with the use of online tools. These are usually publicly available tools. Fact-checking institutions working with media entities have access to their resources, so in this case the range of tools is sometimes wider. An important and constant part of the process is checking information sources, including scientific sources and publicly available databases. This is followed by talking to an expert and/or sending an inquiry to an institution.

The results of fact-checkers' activity are published on portals dedicated to fact-checking. It is worth noting that even if a team of fact-checkers works as part of a larger media institution, the results of the team's work are not published in other channels available to editors (although they are sometimes used in larger editorial materials). The results of fact-checking investigations are also published on the institution's social media. According to interviewees, this method of publication limits the possible reception of their work, making the results niche and difficult to access for the general public (11.7). 80% of the interviewees declared that they would gladly accept an offer to publish the results of their work (in addition) in other ways (for example, in traditional media).

The following issues were among the most significant challenges interviewees mentioned (in order of frequency of indication):

- "the deluge of disinformation" (feeling helpless in the face of the number of fake news stories) (13.3);
- the low public resonance of their work (9.4);



- the feeling that their work has no tangible effect (i.e., it does not contribute to changing attitudes toward disinformation) (16, 5);
- situations of personal attacks on themselves or specific attacks on their work (3,2);
- the carelessness of public figures when it comes to spreading disinformation messages (18.5).

The main principles guiding the work of interviewees included:

- not being guided by their own views in the selection of materials to check and during the process: 17,7; 8,8;
- not succumbing to external pressures: 9,7; 8,5;
- absolute adherence to verified facts: 25,6; 12,7;
- avoiding dealing with statements that are purely opinion-based (e.g., statements by politicians): 10,11; 18; 7.

Interviewees were unable to formulate an answer to the question of authority in their profession (7.5; 13.7). This is probably due to the fact that the profession is relatively new, so there are no established personal role models within it. On the other hand - the specific nature of fact-checkers' work causes them to remain, so to speak, in the shadow of their "investigations," which is not conducive to building individual recognition. Similarly, it was difficult for interviewees to point out specific good practices in fact-checking. Most often, it was emphasized that, in general, all fact-checking organizations operating in Poland (whose representatives were interviewed - see above) "do a good job" (11.8; 18, 7).

Mistakes that result primarily from biases, including biases related to personal views, were among the most serious mistakes a fact-checking specialist can make (14.9). Strongly negative comments were made about situations in which someone refuses to fact-check a given piece of information because of his or her worldview or political sympathies (17.4). Checking statements in which someone expresses his or her views was also considered a significant mistake. Situations in which fact-checking is carried out carelessly ("without 100 percent certainty": 19.8) and when its presentation does not allow the recipient to reproduce the process of verifying the information were also identified as particularly problematic (20.7).

## **Motivations and career paths**

The paths of ending up in the fact-checking profession are varied and clearly linked to the specifics of the institution where the interviewees work. In general, the following can be distinguished:

1. Re-branding from a previously held position as a journalist.
2. Graduation from college (most often in political science) and starting to work (volunteer) in a fact-checking institution, with no previous journalistic experience.
3. Interest in new technologies and working (volunteering) in a fact-checking institution, without previous journalistic experience.

In the first case, taking up professional fact-checking tasks was most often associated with the separation of a relevant department in a media institution (2.5; 9, 4). In the second and third cases, interviewees point to personal motivations - interest in politics and social life (11.6), irritation caused by people's belief in disinformation (17.5), awareness of the widespread harmfulness of this type of divisiveness and the desire to counter it (11.7).

A fundamental source of daily frustration for the representatives of the profession is a sense of the growing complexity of the disinformation phenomenon and their powerlessness to combat it (3, 7). The interviewees also feel that the social and political mechanisms currently being observed encourage disinformation behaviour, which in turn causes growing feelings of discouragement and irritation on their part (4, 9). Situations in which recipients do not understand (and thus irrationally fail to acknowledge) that a given message is disinformation in nature were also found to be particularly frustrating (18, 9). In the quoted statements, the issue is not even so much that fact-checkers feel personally affected by the often aggressive reactions to their work, but rather that they feel even the most insightful analysis cannot convince those who already hold strongly entrenched worldviews and beliefs. At this point, interviewees also frequently pointed to a growing sense of discomfort (or even threat) about the emerging trend of SLAP-type lawsuits against fact-checkers (and journalists) (19, 10). Given the generalized responses to the question about the main sources of frustration, it is not surprising that interviewees found it difficult to point to specific examples of their worst professional experiences. The answer to this question most often led to general considerations regarding the aforementioned difficulties (for example: 11, 9).

While the sources of frustration tend to be generalized, sources of satisfaction are most often associated with the reactions of individuals, often friends or family members (12, 11). Gaining a wide audience through a text published by a particular fact-checker is also considered a

source of satisfaction (7, 11). Fact-checkers are more likely to share their personal successes, speaking about the feeling that, for example, they saved a particular person's health or life, or contributed to someone moving away from views based on belief in conspiracy theories, such as within their own family (2,13; 5, 11;; 9, 13,;11, 11).

### **Defining the profession**

Defining fact-checking did not pose any difficulty for any of the interviewees. A common definition that emerged was that it involves checking information for accuracy (11, 18; 2, 17; 19; 18). It is noteworthy that the interviewees took this answer completely for granted; they clearly felt competent in its scope and in discussing it. Verifying information was considered the most important task of fact-checkers (16, 15; 13, 14; 20; 19). Tasks related to publishing and conducting media education were not typically included in the profession's scope. It is worth noting that with the spontaneous answer, there was no reference to a broader mission (e.g., providing the truth about the world to audiences), but rather a reference to specific activities, individual tasks, performed according to a specific procedure and using specific tools.

Responding to the directly asked question about values, fact-checkers most often indicated (in order of being mentioned):

- truth (7,17);
- objectivity (4,15);
- independence (12,18);
- fairness to the recipient (15,18);
- social responsibility (17, 19).

Note that this is a set of values characteristic of journalistic ethics as well.

Fact-checkers, when asked about the mission of their profession and what its implementation brings to society, indicated that fact-checking helps to reach the truth about the world / reality most often (5,19). In this view, the abstractly understood mission of fact-checking is, on the one hand, to work for the right to information understood as an important value in democratic societies (7,18), and, on the other hand, to protect individuals and social groups from the consequences of being influenced by disinformation messages (9,20).

Fact-checkers, when asked about how they perceive public expectations of their profession, returned to themes related to the right to information. Some of them admitted at the same time that they "hadn't thought about" this issue (20, 20). In general, however, they declared that social expectations of fact-checkers - in their opinion - are adequate and feasible for representatives of this community (18, 20).

For the most part, interviewees declared that they had a sense of appreciation for their work. However, these declarations were not unequivocal. One could say that fact-checkers feel appreciated on a private, individual level (as authors/authors of individual materials), but have a sense of being undervalued on a systemic scale - by society as a whole (as well as by politicians, traditional media, PR professionals, etc.). Here is a representative statement in this context: 19, 19. The reason for their pride in their work as fact-checkers is the great social (media) resonance that their particular publication will generate. As they declare, they follow the data closely, and it is for them an indicator of their professional success (12, 20). Disappointment, on the other hand, is associated with a situation in which a fact-checker investigation that required effort and commitment was carried out, but did not receive wider public (media) reception and involvement (12, 21).

The vast majority of interviewees agreed with the thesis that fact-checking already constitutes a separate profession. When asked to justify such an opinion, they pointed to the specific set of competencies needed to practice this profession (14, 19); to the functioning and recognition of its name (6, 20); to the existence of professional organizations and relations between individual representatives of this profession (15, 19), to the existence of specific media genres associated with this type of professional activity (15,21). Interestingly - few negative answers to whether fact-checking is a separate profession came from people working in fact-checking departments of larger media institutions. Such people most often declared that fact-checking is a form of journalism, a kind of return to the sources (4, 20) because journalism - in the opinion of the interviewees - should be precisely about checking information and striving to present the truth and the world (3, 19).

The interviewees agreed with the thesis that one can already speak of a fact-checker environment. However, when asked whether this environment has the character of a community, whether they keep in touch with each other, cooperate, exchange experiences, they were less clear in their answers. Most indicated that there are some contacts between specific people that they "associate" with each other, but are unlikely to cooperate on a larger

scale (16, 18). They also do not undertake joint activities for the constitution and separation of professions. Interestingly, many interviewees pointed out that the integration of the fact-checker community is stronger, so to speak, across national borders than within specific countries (26, 17). On the other hand - only two interviewees were able to mention the aforementioned professional association by name. The situation of a relatively extended international community is probably related to the specifics of financing the activities of fact-checking organizations. This is a significant difference from the journalism community, which tends to remain confined in national "bubbles."

The question about the relationship between fact-checking and journalism was one of the most difficult ones for the interviewees. In general, there were several types of answers:

- fact-checking is a type of journalism (as opposed to the identity journalism that is now being popularized) (3, 21);
- fact-checking is "real journalism," as classical journalism has moved away from its mission, the essence of which was and should be to show the truth about reality: 11, 21;
- fact-checking is a profession that is completely or significantly different from journalism, although it alludes to similar values (different, for example, through the way it verifies information and collects data; employment structure; genres; modes of publication): 20,19; 24, 17; 27; 20.

According to the interviewees, it is difficult to speak of the existence of a stabilized relationship between the journalistic community and the fact-checker community. This fact was a subject of frustration for the interviewees, who repeatedly stressed that journalists and broadcasting institutions make insufficient use of their work and the data they collect (25, 25; 27; 30; 15; 29). It was also pointed out that traditional media happen to spread disinformation messages (27, 31). In general, - interviewees expressed critical opinions about modern journalism and the media. At the same time, however, they stressed that this is largely the result of processes independent of the journalists themselves. This is a characteristic statement in this regard: 28, 30.

In response to the question of what the ideal relationship between fact-checkers and the media should look like, or the ideal situation for the employment of a fact-checker (e.g., a member of the editorial board, an external collaborator of the medium, a person completely from the outside possibly supporting the activities of the editorial board, someone acting in complete isolation from journalistic circles), most of the interviewees emphasized in the first

sentence that all these forms are acceptable to them, all of them have their advantages and disadvantages. In the situation of having to opt for any of them, they most often considered that the best (from the perspective of work efficiency, but also professional stability) was the form of employment, either as a member of the editorial board, or as a freelancer, but permanently cooperating with the editors.

Fact-checkers expressed an unequivocal belief that representatives of their community are independent and objective. While recognizing the dangers of, for example, dependence on a media institution, they also pointed out that the high standards of the work of individual fact-checkers and that fact-checkers somehow protect them from becoming dependent and losing their objectivity. The interviewees perceived a certain bias in terms of which part of the political scene in Poland is "fact-checked" more often and more thoroughly, but stressed that this has a factual justification, stemming from the party that governs the country. At the same time, it was declared that the environment reacts very negatively to any lack of objectivity and bias that could manifest itself in the work of fact-checkers. Here are some characteristic statements: 9, 31; 17, 28; 22; 36.

The interviewees were optimistic about the future of fact-checking, in the sense that the profession will evolve due to the explosion of disinformation. In response to the question about evolution, the most common points were:

- the rise of technology and increasing automation;
- the rise of OSINT-type tools;
- the increase in the importance of media education.

When asked about possible problems they observe in their environment, fact-checkers primarily expressed concern about its political polarization (3, 33; 17, 32). This fear precisely concerns the mechanisms currently observed in the media, which are deemed very harmful by the interviewees for the media and journalism, not transferring to the fact-checker environment. According to the interviewees' statements, such a situation has not yet occurred (4, 32; 16, 30). However, from the perspective of an observer, it should be emphasized that many interviewees, at various points in the interviews, pointed to an emerging environmental fracture, which directly results from the media institutions with which the fact-checking organizations in question are affiliated. Concerns were also expressed about the fact that the funding system for fact-checking organizations could lead to increased competition and potential conflicts (11, 32).

## **Defining disinformation**

The interlocutors pointed without hesitation and doubt to the definition of disinformation, which states that it is a deliberate action aimed at misleading the recipient about the facts (1, 22; 7, 28; 11, 17; 15, 15; 19, 21). It is noteworthy that such a professional definition, on the one hand, coincides with the dominant way of defining disinformation in social discourse; on the other hand, it clearly correlates with the professional practice of the studied environment. The interlocutors are, of course, well aware of the diversity of this phenomenon (20, 21), but they emphasize that in order to maintain the clarity of professional standards, it is necessary to strive to define it as precisely as possible (17, 24). In this regard, it is especially important to be aware that the disinformation that a fact-checker should/can deal with concerns facts and is disseminated intentionally, certainly or with a very high degree of probability (1, 23; 8, 26; 11, 12; 13, 15; 18, 21).

The main causes of disinformation were identified as (in order of indication):

- the activities of politicians and political parties (11, 27);
- activities of foreign states and interest groups (10, 24);
- lack of public awareness and media competence (17, 22);
- the specifics of social media and the specifics of the audience's use of information messages (2, 27);
- financial mechanisms (3, 22).

Due to the geopolitical situation at the time of the interviews, Kremlin activity was considered the most important trend in disinformation. In a more systemic sense, the development of new technologies (2, 30, 19, and 25) and the increasing polarization of society (16, 22) were also pointed out. All interviewees stressed that disinformation is a dynamic and changing phenomenon and responds to prevailing information trends (4, 27; 12, 22; 20, 30). Thus, its changes are directly related to broad social, economic and political changes, but also to media trends and changes of a technological nature.

The vast majority of respondents, in a spontaneous response, recognized disinformation as a threat in itself (here is a representative statement: 6, 27). Only later was it possible to get a broader perspective and inquire about disinformation as a cause of other threats of a political, social or cultural nature. In this case, growing polarization and social

aggression (16, 28), inability to discuss and compromise (9, 26) were identified as the main threats. Specific examples were given of tragic situations led to by "information politics" based on disinformation and fuelling mutual aggression (18, 27; 19, 24; 20; 22). Another indication was the breakdown of democratic societies and the emergence of significant disruptions in democratic systems based on access to information and participation in rational debate (1, 29; 11; 30; 17; 32). Finally - the third group of issues was related to the tragic consequences of which the trust in disinformation can lead individuals (e.g., in relation to their health or life or financial investments): 7, 30; 11, 29; 16; 28.

Media education was identified -by all interviewees -as the main tool for countering disinformation (it is a typical statement: 7, 33). This was followed by indications of:

- nation-state policies (e.g., regulations): 9,33;
- supra-national activities (e.g., European Commission): 7, 31;
- cooperation with technology entities: 11, 34;
- activities of fact-checking organizations: 13, 33);
- research on disinformation: 2, 31.

As can be seen, the role of their own activities was not rated very highly by fact-checkers. In this context, they pointed out, first of all, the low public interest in this activity (8, 35) and the impossibility of checking all disinformation messages circulating in the information environment (11,35; 17, 38). Therefore, as many interviewees declared, fact-checkers should increasingly be engaged in media education and spreading their skills to the average media audience (especially social media): 1, 37; 11, 34; 17; 36; 19; 33).

### **1. 3. Conclusion/ discussion**

The main conclusions of the study can be summarized as follows:

- the community of fact-checkers has a relatively stabilized professional consciousness, based on clearly defined procedures, genres, and skills that are necessary for the profession;
- the fact-checker community can be considered a symbolic professional community in the sense that it defines itself obviously in terms of values; however, it must be emphasized that these values are not original to the value system in journalistic ethics;
- the important point is that these values are operationalized in professional practice in the form of a coherent set of recommendations for professional conduct;



- the fact-checkers community has a strong sense of connection with journalism as a profession, but it is associated with a rather critical assessment of the current state of journalism and the media; the specific perception of the relationship between journalism and fact-checking depends on the employment model in which the fact-checker works;
- in general, two models of employment of fact-checkers in Poland can be distinguished - within a media institution and within an association; the implementation of one or the other model has a significant impact on the professional awareness of individuals;
- fact-checkers have a sense of high ethical standards of their profession, consider themselves objective and independent;
- the environment is concerned about the polarization it observes (and negatively eyed) in the journalism industry.

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