

Latvian Fact-Checkers and the Contested Field

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Fact-checking is a genre of journalism that examines public claims and issues a verdict about their truthfulness. In the contemporary information environment that is open to a wide variety of information sources, including false and misleading ones, fact-checking helps the public to better evaluate the information they may encounter in either mass media or social media.

However, a positive view of fact-checking is far from universal. It has faced opposition from politicians — especially those whose claims have been refuted — and from audience members who reject fact-checkers' authority to say whether something is true. Research shows that labeling problematic content, including adding fact-checks, is a promising intervention with many challenges (Morrow et al., 2022). Still, some studies have pointed to problems with how fact-checking is carried out. For example, their methodologies are not immune to flaws (Uscinski & Butler, 2013; Nieminen & Sankari, 2021), and different fact-checking organizations may arrive at different judgments (Lim, 2018; Marietta, Barker, & Bowser, 2015). A sign of shifting attitudes toward fact-checking was this year's announcement by the social media company Meta that it will stop fact-checking on Facebook and Instagram (Kaplan, 2025). After years of working with independent fact-checkers, Meta's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, announced that "the fact-checkers have just been too politically biased and have destroyed more trust than they have created." Such sentiments highlight the need for continued analysis of fact-checkers' practices concerning selection, analysis, and assessment of claims.

The empirical basis of this paper consists of eight semi-structured interviews with Latvian fact-checkers from five organizations. These interviews represent the majority of those who work in the fact-checking field in Latvia.

Findings suggest that fact-checking newsrooms largely operate based on unwritten principles developed through practice. An exception is newsrooms that are part of the International Fact-checking Network or European Fact-checking Standards Network, which require member organizations to communicate how they operate to the public. When selecting which claims to evaluate, they consider such criteria as the popularity and potential impact of the claim, its origins, and relevance to the themes the organization works with (such as Russian propaganda), among others. However, there are no exact formulas that govern the selection of claims. Situational journalistic judgements also play a role in the selection process, such as whether the claim connects with a broader theme currently topical in the media or whether the analysis of the particular claim would be relevant to the readers. Verifiability of a claim plays a key role — they tend to discard those in which they are unable to arrive at reasonably certain conclusions.

Fact-checking is a collective endeavor. Each stage — case selection, sourcing, and argument development — typically involves at least one additional person besides the lead journalist. It is not uncommon for fact-checkers to receive input from other colleagues in the newsroom. Fact-checkers usually do not collaborate with colleagues from other Latvian fact-checking outlets. However, fact-checkers who are part of the International Fact-checking Network occasionally exchange help with their foreign colleagues.

Although fact-checking typically involves rendering a judgment ("false," "likely false," "lacks context"), fact-checkers do not necessarily perceive themselves as providers of "100 % truth." They accept that they are reliant on sources, which may have some limitations, and

that, in journalism, some interpretation is inescapable. They reconcile this tension by interpreting their task as presenting the public with the most trustworthy evidence they have been able to gather and disclosing their methodology, which allows the public to make up their own minds about the claim.

It can be concluded that while fact-checking is not immune to mistakes, evaluating fact-checking output requires media literacy. Without considering how various information sources can be arranged hierarchically based on their trustworthiness, how journalism works, and how cognitive biases influence the perception of information, those who dismiss fact-checking may be misdiagnosing this genre.

Keywords

fact-checking, journalism, correcting misinformation, Latvia