

Fighting

Disinfo

Norma

ction

Research Seminar
of the Hungarian
Digital Media Observatory

26 – 27.
01. 2023

CEU, Budapest campus,
15. Nador street

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Laurens Lauer

(University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

Similar Practice, Different Logics – Fact-checking around the World

Fact-checking organizations around the globe offer a colorful picture: although united by a quite similar core practice of verification, they employ it within very different visionary frameworks and organizational settings. Their missions, pursued agendas, and maintained activities vary accordingly, so does the understanding of what a fact-checker is and ought to achieve. Of course, fact-checking approaches worldwide have experienced harmonization through transnational exchanges and cooperation that have been fostered by the association into the International Fact-Checking Network and its Code of Principles in particular. However, the involved initiatives still focus on their very diverse national discourses primarily and are highly shaped by the conditions of their media-political environment. This interrelation is hence paramount in understanding the diversity of fact-checking and its potential to address shortcomings in the domain of public communication.

This talk addresses this peculiar situation by examining how the idea of fact-checking is employed in different political-media environments. Drawing on an institutional viewpoint, it rests on a multi-level, multi-method approach to compare six fact-checking initiatives in four different countries (Argentina, Georgia, Italy, USA). The results reveal three foundational institutional logics of fact-checking – academic, civic, and journalistic (with the possible extension of a political one) – that shape the initiatives' actions and their ability to legitimize them within the given political-media environment. Their emergence, thereby, crucially depends on three key factors: the professional resources in journalism available, the media industry's political independence, and the degree and form of societal polarization, whose particular manifestations pave the way to substantial explanations for different fact-checking approaches.

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Eric Karstens

(freelance researcher, Germany)

Disinformation as a challenge for the journalistic profession

Adopting the perspective of journalism practice on mis- and disinformation -- while leaving the greater societal and political repercussions aside for a moment --, perhaps the most important consideration is how they impact the credibility of, and trust in, a journalist or media outlet. What can be done to guard against intentional smear campaigns and attempts to undermine quality coverage, and how can accidental mishaps or damaging spillover effects be prevented? What are the potential pitfalls of fact-checking and how might they be mitigated? Keeping defences up and remaining sane in the process puts high requirements on journalists, editors, and publishers, and calls for broad situational awareness. This talk, and the ensuing roundtable, will discuss journalists' heuristics and how they relate to current scientific knowledge.

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Ferenc Hammer

(Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary)

When facts somehow just don't bite enough –
Patterns of circumstances around low-impact
journalism

The proliferation of hybrid media operations and systems around the world has scaled up the importance of journalistic work around contested facts, let that work be any breed of watchdog journalism, investigative reporting, fact checking, or debunking disinformation. While most commentators and theorists focus on the changing modus operandi of fact-related work of journalists or other fact- and data miners in an immensely globalizing and densely meshed digital world, somehow the result of the work may appear just typical in public imagination: Sweating and embarrassed politicians in front of TV cameras, resigning public officials, perhaps new pieces of legislation to be promulgated to address the issue at stake, politicians get in prison, Watergate and Pulitzer Prize, and perhaps the scandal would influence the issue agenda at the next election. In my talk I examine examples from various political cultures when the consequences of such journalistic work do not necessarily entail such dramatic changes in politics and public affairs and I aim to offer concepts that may highlight structuring forces behind the stubborn blunt fact that investigative reporting or fact checking victories often just don't bring about change.

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Václav Štětka

(Loughborough University, United Kingdom)

News consumption, populism and disinformation media ecosystems: lessons from the Illiberal Turn project

Proliferation of disinformation counts amongst the most pressing challenges facing contemporary democracies. The region of Central and Eastern Europe is currently heavily saturated by political disinformation and conspiracy theories, successfully exploited by populist and illiberal political actors. Using data from population surveys (N=4,096) collected in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia between 2019-2020 as part of the “Illiberal Turn” project, this paper sheds light on the extent of exposure to disinformation and beliefs in conspiracy theories in the four countries, as well as on the links between these beliefs and news sources. The results suggest that the disinformation ecosystems differ considerably from country to country, and that digital platforms and disinformation websites are not necessarily the most important channels of disinformation, with the government-controlled or affiliated media playing a significant part as well. The paper also focuses on identifying the sociodemographic groups that are most at risk from being influenced by disinformation, and considers the implications for media literacy initiatives in the region and beyond, and for the prospects of combating disinformation campaigns in the context of polarization and illiberalism more generally.

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Róbert Takács

(Institute of Political History, Hungary)

Press Fake News vs. Fake News Press. Fake News and State-Socialist Information Policy

From 1948 a state controlled Soviet type media system was forged in Hungary, whose basic structure was left constant until the late 1980s in spite of the remarkable changes after 1953. In this public sphere, the problem of fake news emerged in different ways than today. However, the notion of fake news existed, and its main role was to fill in the information vacuums stemming from insufficient news coverage. Its significance was great enough to influence the information policy of the party. The paper also addresses in what other ways the problem of fake news appeared in the Kadar era.

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Dariia Opryshko

(University of Münster, Germany)

Ukrainian fact-checking experience

Main talking points

- Fact-checking is a golden rule of journalism.
- Russian aggression in 2014 as a trigger for the development of fact-checking initiatives. Firstly, these initiatives were aimed on checking and refutation of distorted information and propaganda about events in Ukraine that were disseminated in mass media. Afterwards, they became think tanks for analysis and systematization of Russian propaganda.
- Main Russian disinformation narratives, identified by fact-checking organizations. Their development (before 2014; 2014-2022; 2022 and afterwards).
- Influence of civil fact-checking initiatives on the Ukrainian state policy.

Fighting Disinformation



26 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Fanni Tóth

(Loughborough University, United Kingdom)

Understanding the ‘Enemy’: Selective News Consumption and Political Polarization in Eastern Europe

In recent years, links between selective news exposure and political polarisation have attracted considerable attention, though evidence of the extent and impact on political polarisation is far from unanimous. To address this puzzle, this presentation uses a media repertoires approach to investigate selective news exposure and polarisation in four Eastern European countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia. Using a combination of population surveys, expert surveys and qualitative interviews collected in 2019/2020, we identify five types of news repertoires based on their relative openness to counter-attitudinal sources. We show that whilst selective news repertoires are not overly prominent, there are significant cross-country differences, with the more selective repertoires more prominent in countries characterised by higher levels of polarisation. Furthermore, we also find that the selection of news sources is in line with people's electoral (and to a lesser extent ideological) preferences, though exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can also be strongly correlated with political and ideological leanings. Our qualitative data suggest that this is because exposure to counter-attitudinal sources can reinforce attitudes, and potentially contribute to polarisation. Qualitative data also highlight the influence of environmental factors (e.g., family), and suggest that selective news consumption is associated with normatively different conceptions of media trust.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Bernd Holznagel

(University of Münster, Germany)

Press freedom and Fact-checking

Main talking points

- Freedom of the press gives the publisher the right to determine the journalistic orientation of his press product. This also applies to the online editions.
- The publisher is therefore free to carry out fact-checking or not. He/she can also use external service providers for the fact check.
- But the press also has a "public task". The press takes on the role of a "public watchdog", clarifying grievances in society and promoting public discourse. This task of the press results from the objective legal side of the freedom of the press.
- National press laws or codes of ethics applicable to the press provide that the press has a duty of journalistic due diligence. This obliges the press to do research and find out what is true and not true. Furthermore the press is also obliged to correct errors in the reporting.
- It is constitutionally not excluded that the legislature puts requirements for a fact check procedure into force. This did not happen yet in Germany. Recently, however, there has been a discussion about what requirements for fact-checking result from the law on unfair competition.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Gergely Gosztonyi - Gergely Ferenc Lendvai

(Eötvös Loránd University - Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary)

Deepfake'd - a form of political disinformation and the legal implications of deepfake

Deepfake is one of the biggest challenges of our digital age, both socially and legally (Westerlund 2019). Faking people and events can even be live nowadays (Farish 2021). Although it has a historical precedent (retouching, censorship), it has never been seen on such a scale by humanity. Is this really the 'renaissance' of visual communication (Graber, Stenberg, Vaccari)? In the presentation, the two speakers will (1) introduce deepfake, (2) describe the effects of deepfake, and (3) seek to apply the tools provided by the law to remedy the problems. The presentation will discuss the role of artificial intelligence (Pantserev 2020) and the harmful and dangerous uses of deepfake in terms of effects (revenge porn, fake news). It will also provide a legal comparison of current and potential solutions. The presenters will identify deepfake as both a technological tool and a tool for political deception and outline the social and legal controversy surrounding it. The presentation will also focus on the most famous examples of deepfake, the regulatory attempts in the US in recent years (DEEPFAKES Accountability Act) and the solutions to the issue in the new European regulatory environment (Digital Services Act - Digital Markets Act) (trusted flaggers, monitoring, VLOP/VLOSE).

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Gábor Poltyák

(Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary)

Punishing lying - chance or risk?

At first sight, " truth " and " law " are not far apart. Much of legal procedure is aimed at establishing the true facts of a particular case and, on the basis of those facts, determining the truth of the case. Yet, in seeking the boundaries of speech, it is easy to run into the concept of censorship if we claim that lying is forbidden. The legal battle against disinformation is about the dilemma of whether we can give a public body the power to definitively determine whether a claim is true, given that this power is very easy to abuse, or whether we can live with the growing number of deliberate and unintentional public lies that can seriously distort our political, consumer, health and other choices, even causing serious individual and social harm. The presentation will focus on this constitutional dilemma, presenting the related, highly controversial practice of the Hungarian Constitutional Court.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Stephan Ruß-Mohl

(European Journalism Observatory - Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland)

Disinformation, Cultural Hegemony and Journalism in the Attention Economy

Several game changing trends are shaping digital journalism and Western democracies and contribute to the increase of disinformation:

- The immediate measurability of attention provided by audiences (clicks, ratings)
- Algorithms providing to audiences news according to their individual preferences and prejudices and thus creating filter bubbles.
- Expecting news at zero cost, decreasing willingness to pay for subscriptions, and shrinking advertising income has led to floods of low-cost news. Trials to reverse the trend and introduce paywalls lead to increased attention towards paying audiences.
- Paying audiences can be roughly divided in two groups: A large crowd of users expecting to be serviced according to their own confirmation biases - contributing to the growth of “cultural hegemony”. And much smaller target groups who are experts in their specific fields and need to be informed continuously about what is “really” going on in their professional environments - creating new markets for deep, unbiased information.

All these trends are technology driven. However, they affect deeply how citizens get informed, and likely also how they make decisions in their daily lives as consumers and voters.

The author argues that disinformation is not only about fake news and true or false information. Becoming victims of disinformation starts with the selection of news, with biased under- and overinformation. This is why factchecking is important, but not enough: To fight disinformation, journalism must engage in much more self-investigation, explaining to audiences why news is news and how news is generated - making much more transparent the limited role reporters and editors in newsrooms can play in the ongoing process of generating news and disinformation.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Péter Bajomi-Lázár – Kata Horváth

(Budapest Business School – Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary)

Two media systems and journalistic cultures in one country in the light of hungarian journalists' views on fake news

We argue that in Hungary—a country evincing a very high level of political polarization and a very low level of public trust in the media—two media systems have emerged with two distinct journalistic cultures. The journalists of the state media system play a collaborative role, while those of the market media system a monitorial role. Based on in-depth interviews with award-winning journalists and editors-in-chief, we explore how media professionals perceive the problem of fake news and suggest that fake news accusations have been instrumentalized, or weaponised, as a discursive strategy to discredit the rival understanding of ‘good journalism.’ According to our findings, journalists think that fake news stories, including disinformation campaigns serving Russian interests, are widespread in Hungary and make the voter unable to decide which of the competing media narratives is more accurate. Because of a high level of political polarization and a low level of public trust in the media, the Hungarian case shows like a magnifying glass some of the journalistic problems associated with fake news.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Raluca-Nicoleta Radu

(University of Bucharest, Romania)

Fact-checking in Romania: effects are issue and context dependent

Romanian audiences have access to media products that are the result of different types of fact-checking initiatives: a fact-checking platform, part of international networks (Factual), a newsletter on false news (Misreport), targeted initiatives from the government (the RoVaccinare Facebook page), a program of the public service television (Breaking fake news). We can add debunking courses in journalism schools, in different universities, an NGO program for undergraduate teachers, on media literacy, different talks and workshops for journalists and other stakeholders. Are these instruments enough to fight the tide of disinformation and propaganda?

My intervention will focus on audience research results, to highlight the influence of the context on moderating the effects of different fact-checking initiatives. I am using data on interactions with content from Facebook, the most influential social platform in Romania.

When comparing the interactions on Facebook, with content about the protests against the Government, in 2017, and with content about the COVID-19 pandemic, several research results are readily available: (1) Institutional distrust is a factor in accepting or not disinformation about a public interest issue, (2) Miracle solutions against disinformation, such as education or media literacy, do not work. Disinformation effects are context dependent, and (3) Vocal, strong reactions against disinformation are not dependent on how abstract or personal a public issue feels, but on perceived communication context and feedback.

In order to understand why so many people were helpless, in front of COVID-19 related disinformation, I analyzed further the interaction data on content about prevention methods. My results show how parasocial opinion leaders created echo chambers about COVID-19, how these echo chambers supported trolling behavior, for radicalized Facebook users, how they polluted the public discussion and how they made dialog impossible for social groups that ended up identifying each other as the enemy.

These and other research results may help journalists, fact-checkers, public officials and educators understand the mechanisms of disinformation and propaganda, at audience level. A better understanding may increase the effects of fact-checking and debunking efforts, in order to create the conditions of a civilized debate on key public issues, we would all benefit of.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Gábor Tóka

(Central European University, Hungary)

Election Polls in The News: What Is at Stakes, What Is New, and What Is Commendable Good Practice?

My presentation focuses on why and how low-cost operations can contribute to shape the information environment during election campaigns according to three key objectives.

The first is to deliver accurate information about likely election outcomes and generate more public trust in the existence and knowability of a common frame of reference in something called the truth than would otherwise exist.

The second is to make not easily accessible, often privately held information about likely election outcomes far more broadly available and comprehensible, and thus reduce information asymmetries between the broader public and privileged groups of investors, especially on financial and political markets. This, in turn, should reduce shocks that can create malfunctions in economic and political markets with harmful implications for the public good.

This first two objectives are goals on their own but also a tool in the pursuit of the third, democratic objective. This consist in enabling the public to generate an election result that is as good a reflection of underlying preferences among citizens as possible.

I start with reviewing what effects published elections polls may have and why they raise public concerns. Here I also contemplate criteria for what makes information about an uncertain future development more and less accurate. I then examine old and new technological, financial, and political obstacles to election polls serving the public good as expected by conventional arguments in favor of press freedom. Finally, I consider various practices developed to deal with these challenges and try to evaluate their effectiveness in improving the situation on the ground. Throughout the presentation I build on anecdotal evidence from the US, Hungary, and Romania, not the least on my own personal experience with building poll aggregators and providing services to news media outlets in the last two countries.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Wouter Frateur

(University of Applied Sciences Antwerp, Belgium)

EUfactcheck.eu. Students become factcheckers

EUFACHECK is the fact-checking project of the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA) that intends to build a sustainable curriculum unit on fact-checking within a European network of Journalism schools.

Through factchecking European political claims and trying to tackle misinformation, we want our students and our public to grow a deeper insight and interest in democratic processes, both on national and European level. EUFACTCHECK wishes to motivate fact-based debate in the EU and to stimulate media and information literacy.

EU parliamentary elections

The first factchecks were produced in the run up to the 2019 European parliamentary elections. In the last three years, the 20 participating schools produced about 300 factchecks and 160 blog posts (27 November 22). In blog posts, students also reflect on the fact-checking process, on their journalistic experiences and skills, ...

In the autumn of 2020 students produced the first cross-national factchecks: schools from different countries set up cross-national fact-checking groups where students brought in the perspectives of experts of both countries.

Factcheck flowchart

To work within a uniform framework by using a uniform methodology, the 'factcheck flowchart' was developed. It is a unique 3-steps didactic tool, that leads students through the fact-checking process and gives them information about shortcomings or uncertainties in the claim, the so-called warning lights. The process starts with an analysis of the claim to fully understand it. Being aware of the capacity and affiliation of the author of the claim and of the experts to be consulted is the next step. The final step is the actual factcheck: students talk to experts, check statistics, find numbers, etc.

Meanwhile, EUFACTCHECK aims at evolving into a consistently cross-national project with schools working together closely. In my presentation, I would elaborate on lessons learned, students' insights and the future of the project.

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

Miguel Crespo

(Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal)

Journalists train K-12 teachers and help them planning, implementing, and monitoring

Media Literacy projects and fight disinformation: a Portuguese experiment (2017-2023) expanding across borders

The project 'Media Literacy and Journalism: pedagogic practices with and about media' is focused on training teachers in media education. Since its arrival to the field, in partnership with the Portuguese Ministry of Education, 146 journalists and other media professionals have worked with 230 teachers, who have developed ML activities with around 2000 preschool children and K-12 students. Firstly, journalists helped teachers design projects adapted to their schools and communities. After the training, they continued to offer teachers regular support and monitored the developments. Therefore, some of the projects extended beyond the training course and are still ongoing.

The training courses showed the following:

- I. teachers are really interested in attending ML training;
- II. teachers are very demanding and this was the reason why other journalists rather than regular trainers were asked to participate in the training sessions, thus meeting the teachers' needs (e.g.: video production);
- III. activities and projects move more easily and faster when someone from the school board is attending the training;
- IV. the projects (e.g.: school radio, online and printed newspapers, TV documentary, social media pages run by students, debates, trainings on disinformation) need regular monitoring;
- V. most of the developed activities are replicable.

In the future, more broadened ME training courses could be developed, updated, and revised, according to the available outcomes. There is a growing number of teachers trained in schools, and more journalists trained and available to support schools, through both the Media Literacy and Journalism

Fighting Disinformation



27 January 2023

Budapest, CEU Nador Building

website (<https://associacaoliteracia.pt>) and the formal NGO association created to manage the project. Lessons learned, the transformation of in-class training to remote learning, and the expansion of the target to pre-school and primary grades are also key.

To replicate this project abroad, through IBERIFIER – Iberian Digital Media and Disinformation Observatory (the Portuguese and Spanish EDMO hub), we must first refer that we should focus more on the intervention model and less on the developed activities. Having the stakeholders working in partnership, it is crucial to proceed with certified teacher training (e-learning or b-learning), reduce contact hours and increase the number of asynchronous hours, as well as interpersonal relationships outside of synchronous sessions (among trainees and trainers and trainees). It is also key to train the trainees on online learning and on Preschool and primary school. Finally, it is crucial to produce data collection instruments, co-create assessment tools and monitor resources, and ensure that trainers are available to work with teachers in an ongoing logic.

The basic assumptions have been tested, evaluated, and proved. Through IBERIFIER, these ML activities and previous experience was shared with Spain, first, and with the Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and Asia from 2023 onwards. So, we are expanding the Media Literacy in Practice actions, promoting democratic culture online, and transforming global cyber governance through digital citizenship education.

The chosen approach succeeded. On the one hand, this encourages and supports teachers to tailor their ML school projects rather than offer ready-made ML projects. On the other hand, it makes journalists available to support the development of those projects, monitored by academics and the Ministry of Education itself. And the results were positive on three levels: i) improving the performance of practitioners (teachers, journalists, other); ii) ensuring the sustainability of the projects created; and iii) informing policy makers.