

"I NEVER PUT MY NAME ON A DOORBELL"

REPORT ON HOW
FACT-CHECKERS IN EUROPE
PREPARE, REACT, AND
COMBAT DISINFORMATION
AND HARASSMENT IN
ELECTION CYCLES

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a year since we documented the experiences of European fact-checking organisations and outlets on harassment, focusing particularly on coordinated campaigns against journalists and fact-checkers and their role in European disinformation campaigns.

The pioneering survey, developed by Tijana Cvjetičanin (Association Why not?) in cooperation with Faktograf and the International Press Institute, presented in the report [“Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe”](#) showed that 90 percent of fact-checking organisations that participated in the survey experienced smear campaigns and online abuse from politicians, government officials, media pundits, and public figures. Out of 41 fact-checking outlets that participated in the survey, 70 percent that experienced online harassment were subjected to campaigns which include prolonged and/or coordinated behaviour such as stalking, smear campaigns, hate speech, “doxing” or gender-based violence, among others.

Extraordinary events that profoundly influence political and social life and the news cycle were one of the factors we tested as a possible influence on the frequency of harassment.

Unsurprisingly, out of the 5 predefined answers, the Covid-19 pandemic was selected as the most impactful in this regard. The election period is also an influencing factor by the experience of about 56 percent of respondents.

Since elections are a far more common occurrence than global pandemics, and can be considered as “crisis events” in the fact-checking community due to increased levels of disinformation surrounding them, we wanted to learn more about the preparation that goes into covering elections from a fact-checking perspective.

We are now building on the results of our previous research in hopes of learning more about how fact-checkers in Europe prepare, react, and combat disinformation and harassment in preparation for elections.

Faktograf and the International Press Institute selected 6 fact-checking outlets and analysed how they prepare to counter the attacks by political actors and public figures during electoral periods.

After the European elections, the same organisations were contacted to determine the effectiveness of the measures and explore the dominant electoral disinformation narratives that constituted the attacks.

This report is a result of those conversations.

METHODOLOGY

The foundation of this report rests on twelve semi-structured interviews with key personnel from six fact-checking organisations across Europe. These interviews were designed to explore diverse aspects of preparation and response strategies to disinformation during election periods. Each interview followed a semi-structured format allowing for both guided questions and open-ended responses, which facilitated an in-depth exploration of specific practices while accommodating the unique experiences and perspectives of the respondents.

The semi-structured interviews were set up using four different sections:

- Section 1: Monitoring election-related disinformation
- Section 2: Election fact-checking
- Section 3: Risk assessment and response
- Section 4: Protocols and support

Data from these interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes, challenges, and strategies across different organisations. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the landscape of fact-checking during electoral cycles.

We interviewed 6 people from 6 different fact-checking organisations that differ in terms of size, scope, geographic location, and have different capabilities and structures within their respective organisations.

Those selected were interviewed twice - once before the European parliamentary elections were held, and once after the elections were concluded. This resulted in 12 interviews in total. Javier Luque (IPI) and Ana Brakus (Faktograf) conducted the interviews, while Milica Kovačević (Centre for Democratic Transition, CDT) provided the expertise for the development of the interview protocols, the structure of the interviews and the final overview of this report.

Interviewees were allowed to choose the level of anonymity for this report, and one organisation chose to stay any-

mous due to the level of harassment faced. This organisation is from the CEE region and will be identified as such in this report.

The five other participants are:

- Bronwen Roberts – AFP Fact-Check Europe Coordinator
- Paweł Terpiłowski – Chief Editor at Demagog (Poland)
- Thomas Hedin – Editor-in-Chief at TjetDet (Denmark)
- Filipe Pardal – Director of Operations at Poligrafo (Portugal)
- Thanos Sitistas – Founder of Greece Fact Check (Greece)

MAIN FINDINGS

MONITORING AND FACT-CHECKING OF ELECTION-RELATED DISINFORMATION

Fact-checking organisations employ a combination of technologies, collaborative networks, rigorous methodologies, and transparent practices to ensure the integrity of information during critical election periods.

Depending on the size and resources, organisations use different approaches to monitor election-related disinformation. **Some of them employ various standard fact-checkers systems like CrowdTangle, and different AI tools for daily monitoring of social media and other platforms, but they also rely on their readers for tips.** Organisations monitor most of the social media platforms, but the extent of this monitoring often depends on the use of the particular social media platform in each country. **Sometimes, they incorporate systems that can also monitor radio and TV. Typically, the same systems used in everyday work are used during elections.**

Thomas Hedin (TjetDet) describes different systems they are using in their daily work: *Like every other fact-checking organisation, we face challenges in effectively monitoring social media platforms, so we use various systems for this purpose. Besides relying on the human oversight of our team and readers who tip us off to potential claims to fact-check, we utilise several automated systems to survey social media accounts. Tools like CrowdTangle are common, and we use others, including AI-based systems. Recently, we started testing a new system from a Norwegian company that can also monitor claims on TV and radio. The system tries to fact-check claims by analysing text or audio. It can locate claims within the content, although its success varies. One useful feature is the ability to paste text into the system, which then scans and identifies claims within lengthy documents, helping journalists quickly pinpoint relevant sections.*

Fact-checking organisations emphasise the importance of specialised team structures that enhance their ability

to monitor and counteract election-related disinformation effectively. These teams often include roles dedicated to digital monitoring, content verification, and rapid response, illustrating a tailored approach to the unique demands of election periods.

Filipe Pardal (Poligrafo) describes how they have set up the team: *We created an internal task force to monitor all TV debates and campaign events involving our politicians. Specifically, a fact-checker compiled daily updates on the activities and speeches of the leaders of two biggest parties. In addition to fact-checking, we produced detailed reports on their day-to-day campaign actions, focusing on the disinformation spread during their discourses. Our task force operates with teams working in the morning, evening, and night to provide comprehensive coverage of all televised debates and campaign events.*

Thomas Hedin (TjetDet) described the innovation they set up for the European elections: *We have two journalists dedicated specifically to fact-checking the European Parliament. Their role includes studying the results of our automatic monitoring system and determining which claims to fact-check. Traditionally, during elections, our focus has been on misinformation among candidates, but this time, we're also targeting foreign disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing voters. We've established two systems: one for local candidates and another for foreign disinformation, reflecting the complexity of monitoring both sources. Given Denmark's significant support for Ukraine, we anticipate potential disinformation campaigns targeting us, in addition to the usual EU-wide disinformation efforts.*

Most of our respondents stressed that they prioritise European elections in their work, treating them as a form of a crisis.

Bronwen Roberts (AFP Fact-Check Europe), which was the largest organisation interviewed, explained that they prioritise elections but are mostly using the same monitoring process as in any other situation: *We have a special focus*

on European elections, but we're not doing anything particularly new. We're using the same monitoring tools we use throughout the year and journalists use their own sources and lists with a special focus on elections. They're in touch with AFP bureaus, and each fact-checker collaborates with a bureau to discuss election-related issues. We also communicate with each other and sometimes get flags from organisations like Edmo. This is all part of our usual monitoring process, but this time, we're emphasising that everyone should prioritise election-related content.

The importance of continuous monitoring of purveyors of disinformation was also emphasised by Thanos Sitistas (Greece Fact Check): *It is important knowing which individuals, media, and social media accounts are frequently peddlers of disinformation, especially during these elections and regarding Western disinformation. Then we can connect the dots. For instance, we found where it started, where it went, how it evolved, and so on. This is not always easy; finding the origin can be challenging. But it's good to see how it spreads and evolves. So we've established a comprehensive understanding of the networks that spread disinformation, and we monitor them. We don't wait. The goal is to pick up the narrative before it goes viral and fact-check it early to curb its spread. If you know the source and where it's going to come from, you can dodge a bullet, so to speak.*

In some countries disinformation is primarily imported rather than locally created, requiring some **organisations to allocate more resources to monitor disinformation from other countries**. As **Thomas Hedin** (TjetDet) explained: *Denmark and Nordic countries are not frequently targeted by disinformation campaigns compared to central and southern European countries. However, by monitoring these regions, we can often predict what disinformation might spread here, as we tend to import disinformation from other countries. Monitoring our colleagues' findings gives us a heads-up on potential disinformation that could spread locally.*

Another issue is that disinformation trends are often cyclical and bad actors tend to re-seed and re-amplify content that has previously generated high engagement. As a result, **some organisations analyse their archives and previous analysis in order to prepare for narratives that may emerge during election periods.**

Thanos Sitistas (Greece Fact Check): *In order to tackle disinformation, we must know the general narratives that will pop up. And we do know them because we've seen most of them before. We focus on pre-emptively identifying disinformation trends. This involves analysing past elections to predict and prepare for the types of disinformation likely to resurface.*

Similarly, the **Editor-in-Chief** (CEE organisation) stressed out the importance of preparations and prebunking: *We prepare for the upcoming political speech, and can anticipate the main topics so we have drafts ready. In the past, our approach was internal—a way to ensure we could swiftly publish once the speech was delivered. However, this year, we decided to extend this preparation to our readers. We published a pre-briefing article advising our audience to be mindful of these key topics and aware of common manipulation techniques that might be employed during such addresses. The aim is to empower our readers with information ahead of the official fact-checking analysis. This proactive step not only serves to inform, but also aims to equip our community with the tools to critically engage with political speech.*

Prebunking is also used by Demagog: *We are also involved in education and prebunking. Therefore, we publish articles that provide verified information about electoral processes: how to vote, when to vote, the obligations required for voting, eligibility criteria, how to cast a vote, and more.*

Electoral campaigns can be hectic, disinformation can be flowing all around and fact-checkers, aiming to respond quickly to emerging disinformation, may sometimes make mistakes, which can trigger new cycles of harassment.

Editor-in-Chief of a CEE based fact-checking organisation operating under high levels of harassment highlights the need for robust verification processes to protect both the integrity of their work and the safety of their team: *Given the intense scrutiny and harassment we face, our fact-checking process is designed to be as thorough and transparent as possible while protecting the identities of our team members. We never compromise on the accuracy of our work, even if it means taking additional time to verify claims.*

Also, with a huge amount of information, **it is crucial to choose what will be fact-checked.** **Pawel Terpiłowski** (Demagog) explains how they prioritise during elections: *When we are in the campaign period, we focus on claims that undermine election integrity, especially those targeting candidates or involving deepfakes. These actions undermine the free and fair election process. Additionally, we pay attention to the campaign itself and the narratives circulating around it.*

The amount and the speed of events during campaigns make **collaborations both within and across organisations pivotal during elections.**

Bronwen Roberts (AFP Fact-Check Europe) explains how collaboration works within a large media outlet: *One of our strengths is that we're in so many languages so we can share information. And often if you see something in one language, it's going to end up in another. It means we can do a lot of cooperation in looking for shares of disinformation on various platforms and also looking for experts that we want to talk to try and put that into context and get the evidence that we need to show that it is not true.* **Partnerships with other media outlets, fact-checking organisations, and digital platforms enhance the reach and impact of fact-checking efforts.** These collaborations are often formalised through networks and consortia, enabling a coordinated response to disinformation campaigns. Their proactive and adaptive approaches not only help counteract misinformation but also bolster public trust in the electoral process.

Before the EU elections the **European Fact-Checking Standards Network** created a hub called “[Elections 24 Check](#)”. Their database was a first of its kind and it gathered and categorised fact-checked information for European countries and citizens ahead of the 2024 European Elections. This database was commonly referred to by the organisations we interviewed as a best practice example.

Paweł Terpiłowski (Demagog) described the benefits of participating in joint fact-checking initiatives, such as Elections 24 Check, which pool resources and expertise from multiple organisations: “*Participating in joint fact-checking projects like Elections 24 Check allows us to share resources and expertise, making our fact-checking efforts more comprehensive and effective.*”

Organisations share their work across various social media platforms, depending on their user base. Some lean on their newsletters, while others even have national TV programmes or partnerships with TV and radio stations where they promote their fact-checking work.

Bad actors adapt to technological advances, and they do it quickly. Fact-checkers must also understand and use these technologies to their benefit.

RISK ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE

Across the globe, fact-checkers and journalists frequently face orchestrated campaigns aimed at discrediting their work. These campaigns can involve coordinated attacks through social media, threatening emails, doxxing (publishing private information online to incite harassment), and even legal intimidation. Of course, the frequency and intensity of those campaigns vary by region with the research: [Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe](#), showing that harassment is notably more intense in the southern and eastern European countries.

Disinformation campaigns targeting fact-checking media can become particularly intense during election periods. **Political actors often use narratives about censorship to undermine the trustworthiness of fact-checkers.**

Thanos Sitistas (Greece Fact Check) describes this: *When we fact-check things that are related to the core of their ideology, then they will definitely target us. They will claim that you’re trying to censor them. They will say: “Those people are censoring us. They won’t let us express our opinion. Who do they think they are? Who gave them the right? What are their credentials?” The narrative of fact-checking as censorship is widely spread and although it was debunked a number of times, it is still used by the disinformation purveyors.*

In some cases, there are also **narratives labelling fact-checkers as foreign agents or claiming they are paid by figures such as George Soros**. Also, in the countries with democratic deficits, laws often work against independent journalism. The **Editor-in-Chief** of the CEE organisation describes this situation: *Historically, pressures on journalists often intensify after elections, particularly when a majority victory fosters confidence to pass restrictive press laws. However, this election cycle has shown early signs of challenges, with new laws threatening press freedom emerging earlier in the year. We’ve observed actions targeting independent media, including harassment from government-affiliated entities and coordinated campaigns by pro-government influencers. While political opposition typically draws the spotlight during elections, journalists also face discrediting attacks, often linking them to external financing sources. This tactic has steadily grown over the years, posing a recurring threat to independent journalism, and signalling ongoing challenges ahead.*

The level of risk associated with EU elections-related disinformation and harassment during the election period was generally assessed as medium to high. National parliamentary elections were generally considered to have a higher risk index.

Thanos Sitistas (Greece Fact Check): *National elections in Greece are highly polarised and intense, often leading to targeted attacks by social media troll armies from specific political parties. This aggressive behaviour contrasts with European elections, which are more relaxed and less likely to result in such targeted harassment.*

Our interviews with European fact-checking organisations reveal that the **most common risks they face during election periods include general harassment, targeted dis-information campaigns, and threats from far-right and nationalistic organisations.** This is in line with our research [“Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe.”](#)

Common security concerns for these organisations revolve around online harassment, which typically occurs via emails and social media platforms.

PROTOCOLS AND SUPPORT

The risk assessment and response strategies of the fact-checking organisations we interviewed show a **variety of approaches and stages of development in their internal anti-harassment policies, but almost universally, there is a significant emphasis on supportive measures and informal guidelines and procedures to ensure the safety and well-being of journalists and fact-checkers facing online threats.**

Some organisations have structured harassment protocols or guidelines, some have onboarding trainings on harassment, others do real-time monitoring, and offer psychological and legal support. Other organisations reported that they haven't been targeted much in the past, but they are noticing a shift and rise in attacks, especially from far-right political actors. As a result, they have started to consider developing protocols for these kinds of situations. Most organisations don't employ specific security measures before elections.

Additionally, some organisations implement various technical measures such as anti-hacking solutions for their web-

sites, frequent change of passwords, two-factor authentication, hiding private phone numbers, securing social media accounts, changing door locks, secret addresses, etc. and technical and IT safety services are usually outsourced.

Some fact-checking organisations plan on testing their digital security protocols before campaigns really heat up.

Bronwen Roberts (AFP Fact-Check Europe) describes their training for new journalists: *When journalists join us, they undergo training to raise awareness about the potential harms of working with graphic or disturbing online content. This training also teaches them ways to disengage and manage stress to prevent it from affecting their well-being and work. We emphasise the importance of reporting any harassment or distressing experiences to their managers, which are taken very seriously and escalated if necessary. In some cases, we report incidents to the police. This process is consistently followed, no matter the electoral period.*

Additionally, **organisations seek to direct attacks at the organisation as a whole, rather than targeting individual journalists.**

Thanos Sitistas' (Greece Fact Check) approach involves assuming full responsibility for the published content to shield his less experienced colleagues from direct harassment. This approach not only protects his team, but also centralises the backlash to a more experienced individual who is better equipped to handle such pressures. Moreover, Thanos advises his team not to engage with harassers, a tactic aimed at avoiding escalation and reducing the emotional toll on the team.

A similar approach is taken in Demagog. Here is how **Pawel Terpiłowski** described their workflow: *First of all, we don't disclose the authors of a specific fact check or debunk, because we are trying to mitigate the risk of harassment personally targeting the author of a specific article.*

This way Demagog “guides” harassment to be directed at the organisation as a whole or its key public figures, rather

than individual staff members. This approach reduces personal risk for editors and other non-public personnel since their names are not attached to specific articles.

Additionally, **Thanos Sitistas**⁷ (Greece Fact Check) describes his organisation's approach to maintaining anonymity and security, stating that his newsroom is based in an undisclosed location. He also added an additional security measure: *I never put my name on a doorbell.*

Filipe Pardal (Poligrafo) explained that: *When this harassment is directed at our journalists on social media networks, we archive the offence, the insult, or threat. And in these cases, only in these cases, we block the user on whatever social network is, and report it to the platforms.*

Regarding keeping data on harassment, Demagog, for example, maintains a dedicated Slack channel to monitor and archive instances of harassment, whether on social media, via email, or other communication forms. This information is reviewed by the executive board to make informed decisions and adapt strategies accordingly. In cases where harassment escalates to personal threats, Demagog provides legal consultation to affected individuals, aiming to prevent further escalation and address the situation effectively.

Most organisations interviewed don't hesitate to report the incidents to the authorities.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FACT-CHECKING NATIONAL AND EU ELECTIONS

An important subject that came up during interviews is the difference between fact-checking national and EU elections. They differ in the type of narratives, disinformation and the intensity of harassment.

The key differences in misinformation narratives between national and EU elections often stem from the scope of governance and the direct impact perceived by voters.

Around EU elections, misinformation narratives in specific member states tend to focus on broader themes like sovereignty, international relations, and EU-wide policies such as trade and immigration, which may feel more abstract to the average voter.

During national election campaigns, narratives are more localised and tailored to specific communities or regional issues. They often involve immediate and tangible issues like local economic conditions, public safety and healthcare.

During the interviews, several dominant misinformation narratives emerged, often reflecting broader socio-political contexts and specific concerns related to electoral cycles. These narratives vary significantly between national and EU elections, revealing different focuses and targets that align with the scope and influence of the respective electoral bodies.

Here are some key findings from our conversations with 6 fact-checking organisations.

Disinformation of EU Elections

Sovereignty and supranational governance: Misinformation narratives often emphasise themes of national sovereignty being undermined by EU institutions. This includes narratives suggesting that the EU imposes unfavourable policies on member states, eroding national autonomy.

Immigration and border policy: EU elections see significant misinformation around immigration policies. Narratives typically paint the EU as either too open or too strict on immigration, depending on the political slant of the misinformation source.

Misrepresentation of EU policies and functions: There's a widespread misunderstanding and misrepresentation of how EU policies are made and implemented, which is exploited in misinformation campaigns. These often include exaggerated claims about the EU's influence on daily life and legal systems of member states.

Disinformation of National Elections

Political character assassination: Misinformation often targets individual politicians or local political parties, focusing on scandals, misquotes, or out-of-context information to discredit candidates. This is more prevalent in national elections where the political dynamics and candidates are well-known to the local electorate.

Voter fraud and election rigging: Claims of rigged elections or voter fraud are prevalent in national contexts, especially in regions with recent histories of electoral disputes or political instability. These narratives aim to undermine trust in the electoral process and the legitimacy of the government.

"LIGHT 'EM UP OR SHUT 'EM DOWN"
MAIN FINDINGS

Economic misinformation: False information is common on national economic policies, taxation changes, and financial subsidies. This type of misinformation seeks to sway voter opinions based on their economic interests and concerns.

The targets of disinformation

National elections: Directly targets politicians and local leaders, often through personal attacks or scandal amplification.

EU elections: Targets are often impersonal, focusing on institutions or policies rather than individuals, except for high-profile EU figures.

"LIGHT 'EM UP OR SHUT 'EM DOWN"
MAIN FINDINGS

FACT-CHECKERS TIPS & TRICKS FOR SURVIVING ELECTIONS

Monitoring and fact-checking election-related disinformation

Build trust and make your work transparent

Tip: All fact-checking organisations have dedicated sections on their pages that explain methodologies used, as well sections dedicated to transparency of financing and organisational structure. Make sure these sections are up to date ahead of the elections. If you do not have it - create a Frequently Asked Questions page. This will allow your audiences to learn more and save time for your team when responding to questions that keep coming up.

Set up teams with specific roles in the election monitoring process

Tip: Establish an internal task force to monitor all political events and debates closely. This team operates in shifts to cover various times of the day, ensuring continuous monitoring.

Tip: Make sure that you plan ahead on how to rotate your team members, taking into account that rest periods are necessary. Campaigns can last a long time.

Intensify standard monitoring practices as the election approaches

Tip: Be aware of the difference between fact-checking national and EU elections and prepare your monitoring activities accordingly.

Tip: Prioritise any significant disinformation related to the elections.

Tip: Don't forget that disinformation spreads through traditional channels as well, and different audiences consume news differently.

Tip: Employ various systems, including AI tools, to monitor social media and other platforms for election-related disinformation. This can include a system that can also monitor radio and TV.

Tip: Create dedicated spaces within monitoring tools centred specifically on elections. Creating new lists of relevant actors to be monitored can be useful, but also needs to be continuously updated to save time and manage resources.

Learn from the past in order to anticipate

Tip: Go through your archive, make sure you understand past trends and recurring narratives.

Tip: Create a set of prebunking pieces that can speed up your work during the campaign.

Tip: Create prebunking articles to help your audience navigate most viral and common narratives.

Do not sacrifice accuracy for speed

Tip: No matter how intense the campaign is, never compromise on the accuracy of your work, even if it means taking additional time to verify claims.

Tip: Mistakes can happen. Update your Corrections policies and trust that your audience will appreciate owning up to mistakes - it shows that you are human and trustworthy - accountability matters.

Collaborate!

Tip: Collaborate both within and across organisations. Make partnerships with media outlets, other fact-checking organisations, and digital platforms to enhance the reach and impact of fact-checking efforts. These collaborations can be formalised through networks and consortia, enabling a coordinated response to disinformation campaigns.

Tip: Have a great new idea? Explore who in the community did something similar, reach out, share information. The fact-checking community is one of the most collaborative out there.

Stay up to date, implement new technologies

Tip: Bad actors adapt to technological advances, and they do it quickly. Make sure you understand these technologies and use them to your advantage.

Risk assessment and response

The time to prepare and test is before the elections

Tip: Do your risk assessment, no matter how many elections you have worked on.

Tip: When harassment occurs, or your organisation faces DDoS or other types of security breaches it is important to know what to do - who to reach out to and when. Make written protocols and policies on dealing with harassment and safety checklists. Creating protocols may seem to be strict and boring, but you do need them.

Tip: Test your digital security protocols before campaigns really heat up.

Tip: Create supportive measures for your journalists and make sure that they are aware of them and feel comfortable in using them.

Protocols and support

Take a dynamic approach

Tip: Remain open to adapting the organisation's strategies based on staff feedback and emerging threats. Stay responsive to the evolving nature of online harassment and disinformation campaigns by adjusting support mechanisms to serve the needs of your staff better.

Protection of less experienced journalists

Tip: Consider that experienced editors assume full responsibility for the published content to shield less experienced colleagues from direct harassment. This approach not only protects the team, but also centralises the backlash to a more experienced individual(s) who is better equipped to handle such pressures. That individual should have access to mental health support and a constant feedback loop with other senior members of the team. They cannot do it on their own.

Tip: Advise the team not to engage with harassers, a tactic aimed at avoiding escalation and reducing the emotional toll on the team.

Anonymise the work of fact-checkers when needed

Tip: If necessary, work from an undisclosed location.

Tip: Consider not disclosing the authors of a specific fact check or debunk. This way you will "guide" harassment to be directed at the organisation as a whole or its key public figures, rather than individual staff members. This approach reduces personal risk for editors and other non-public personnel since their names are not attached to specific articles. Take into account what organisations such as the EFCSN and the IFCN recommend.

Track and investigate the harassment you face

Tip: It is important to track and monitor harassment and have data in case of escalation. It can be a table, word document and/or Slack channel. Archive and save screenshots.

Tip: [The Guide to Decoding Disinformation](#) offers a step-by-step approach to identifying the tactics, techniques and procedures behind disinformation campaigns, increasingly used to silence critical reporting and erode public trust in fact-based news. The guide aims to help journalists and fact-checkers preserve the integrity of their work.

Report threats to the authorities

Tip: Sometimes, it is necessary to report the most serious threats. Although the situation with respect to trusting the authorities is not the same everywhere, you need to protect your team from further harassment or possible escalation.

Tip: Keep track of what you reported and when. Always include and consult your legal team on what steps to take.

Include security and mental health assistance in your budget

Tip: Funders often don't understand the levels of harassment that fact-checking organisations face. Try to include financial assistance in the budget and have an explanation ready on why it is needed.

Support each other and communicate

Tip: Before things heat up, remind your colleagues about existing support measures and encourage them to share and seek support if anything worrisome happens.

Tip: If possible, the person being targeted should not be the point-person in dealing with the attacks. Try to take care of your co-workers and share the burden.

Tip: Reach out to the fact-checking community and keep the community informed. Issues faced by fact-checking organisations are often similar. The community is there for you to offer support and guidance. No, you are not alone.

CONCLUSION

The research and interviews conducted with various European fact-checking organisations before and after the EU Parliamentary elections have provided invaluable insights into their methodologies, challenges, and strategies for countering election related misinformation, while keeping their newsrooms safe.

It is evident that while there is a robust framework in place for monitoring and combating disinformation, the landscape of electoral disinformation is continually evolving. This means that countermeasures also need to constantly evolve.

The collaboration among fact-checking organisations, as highlighted by Thanos Sitistas from Greece Fact Check, proved to be instrumental in staying ahead of disinformation trends. This collaborative effort, facilitated by networks such as the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) and the Elections24 database, allowed fact-checkers to anticipate and address disinformation narratives more effectively.

The integration of these shared resources significantly bolstered the capacity of smaller fact-checking entities, providing them with the necessary tools and information to counteract disinformation swiftly.

Throughout the interviews, a recurring theme was the adaptation and refinement of monitoring tools and methodologies. Organisations like AFP Fact-Check Europe and TjetDet emphasised the importance of both manual and automated systems in identifying and addressing false claims. These systems, coupled with dedicated teams operating in shifts, ensured comprehensive coverage and rapid response to disinformation during critical periods.

The establishment of specialised roles, or establishing a specific workflow for combating election related disinformation was deemed useful by large fact-checking organisations, but could prove crucial with organisations with smaller teams and more limited resources.

One notable observation was the variation in disinformation narratives between national and EU elections. As discussed by Thomas Hedin from TjetDet, Filipe Pardal from Poligrafo and Thanos Sitistas from Greece Fact Check, EU elections often saw broader themes such as sovereignty and EU policies being targeted, while national elections were more focused on localised issues and personal attacks on politicians.

This distinction underscored the need for tailored approaches to monitoring and fact-checking depending on the electoral context. The significance of understanding local political climates and historical disinformation trends was emphasised by multiple interviewees, highlighting the importance of contextual awareness in combating misinformation.

The interviews also shed light on the harassment faced by fact-checkers, a significant concern highlighted in the initial survey. While the intensity and nature of harassment varied, the strategies to mitigate these risks were consistent.

Fact-checkers employed protocols such as anonymising authorship, maintaining undisclosed locations, and providing psychological support to affected team members. The proactive steps taken by organisations to safeguard their staff, including reporting serious threats to authorities, were crucial in maintaining the integrity and safety of their operations.

While covering the EU elections, fact-checking organisations experienced harassment and were a target of coordinated campaigns. The expectations that far-right politicians and actors were going to be the primary perpetrators were correct.

For example, Poligrafo, a Portuguese fact-checking organisation, faced multiple threats including those from neo-Nazi groups targeting journalists by name.

The experience of dealing with harassment, as shared by Thanos Sitistas and Filipe Pardal, reinforced the necessity of developing robust internal policies and support systems.

Many, especially smaller fact-checking organisations have not yet developed those policies, and it is the aim of this project not only to research, but also to help combat harassment against fact-checkers. That is why we developed the "[Guide to Decoding Disinformation](#)" - a step-by-step guide to identify the main components of disinformation attacks targeting journalists and news outlets.

In this report, we offer tips and tricks that have evolved within organisations that have been dealing with harassment and election integrity related fact-checking for years now.

Fact-checking organisations must be equipped with adequate funding for psychological support services and legal assistance to address the emotional and legal ramifications of harassment. This need is yet to be fully recognised and addressed in the philanthropic and donor community. By prioritizing these areas, funders and donors can play a crucial role in safeguarding the mental health and security of fact-checkers, thereby ensuring their continued ability to uphold the integrity of information and contribute to a well-informed public.

The evolving tactics of disinformation actors, such as those observed in Operation Overload, require fact-checkers to be vigilant and adaptable. The experience gained from the 2024 EU elections will undoubtedly inform future strategies, ensuring that fact-checking organisations remain resilient and effective.

In conclusion, the collective effort and shared knowledge among European fact-checking organisations have created a robust defence against electoral disinformation. While challenges persist, the ongoing commitment to collaboration, innovation, and safety will continue to empower fact-checkers in their crucial role within the democratic process. The ability to adapt to new threats, maintain rigorous standards, and support of fact-checkers in their work is essential to preserving the integrity of elections and public trust in the media.



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