Recommended Code of Conduct and Ethics & Common Principles for Researching and Monitoring Fact-checking

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… in co-creation with the whole hub and its stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

The report, titled "Recommended Code of Conduct and Ethics for BECID Fact-checkers: Common Principles for Researching and Monitoring Fact-checking," reflects on the first results of a two-year BECID project aimed at combating information disorders and promoting media literacy in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders (BECID) includes experts from the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), supported by the European Commission and associated with the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). The University of Tartu coordinates this initiative, which comprises four universities, four fact-checking companies, media companies' fact-checking units, and the non-profit organisation Baltic Media Literacy Center.

BECID's mission is to unite experts in fact-checking, media literacy, and academic research to detect and analyse disinformation campaigns and provide content and support to mainstream and local media and public authorities in exposing harmful disinformation.

This report serves three primary audiences:

- **Fact-checkers**: It provides them with questions and thoughts on how to approach fact-checking, important principles and professional questions-dilemmas to keep in mind.

- **Researchers:** It offers insights into common principles applicable to assessing fact-checking endeavours in the Baltics.

- **General Public**: It helps those outside the project understand and grasp the BECID project's core aspects.

Feel free to contact our project management team or the author for more information.

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Background

The current state of fact-checking in the Baltics encompasses a variety of entities, including independent fact-checkers and those affiliated with media houses (e.g., Delfi Lithuania, Delfi Latvia, Delfi Estonia, Re:Baltica, 15min.lt, and DebunkEU.org).

Determining whether there are enough fact-checkers in the Baltics is challenging, as we cannot quantitatively measure the amount of disinformation and misinformation or assess if current efforts are sufficient to combat it. Due to their shared history as formerly occupied countries, there is a heightened sense of protectiveness against disinformation, potentially more so than in Western European nations (Roonemaa, n.d.).

As researchers in the BECID project sought to map, analyse, and understand the specificities of the Baltic region, one thing became clear. More research is needed on fact-checking and fact-checkers in the Baltics.

So, what did we find out?

Fact-checking has become increasingly important in recent years, particularly with the proliferation of dis-, mis-, and malinformation on social media platforms. We avoid the term "fake news" because it originated from Donald Trump's efforts to undermine journalism as an institution (Monsees, 2023). We prefer to refer to the overall phenomenon as information disorder, under which the different types of (dis-, mis-, mal-)information fall (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Scholars (e.g., Humprecht, 2020; Schudson, 2011) argue that fact-checkers effectiveness relies heavily on earning the trust of the audience—a challenging requirement that can be at least partly achieved through transparent practices.

We focused on analysing the current efforts in the field to identify efficient ideas and potential research gaps, approaching this task empirically and scientifically. The outcomes of tasks 2.2 and 3.1–3.4, including presentations and literature overviews, revealed several important aspects, beginning with broader societal issues.

National (policy) documents analysis about media literacy by Auksė Balčytienė (Vytautas Magnus University), Andra Siibak (University of Tartu), Agnese Davidsone (Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences), and Signe Ivask (University of Tartu) highlights a significant gap in comprehensive strategies in the Baltic countries to combat disinformation and propaganda. Despite numerous micro-level activities, such as activists meeting with students, creating guiding materials, and training teachers, these efforts often lack cohesive political strategies. Additionally, funding for media literacy activities frequently comes from broader European funds or embassies rather than coordinated national initiatives.

> The main questions addressed include: What is the strategy behind state funding for media literacy? Who is responsible for developing media literacy in the Baltics—ministries, activists, and universities? Who takes the lead and bears responsibility? What are the long-term and short-term action plans if media literacy is considered a safety issue?

Media literacy and resilience are also explored by Kristina Juraitė (Vytautas Magnus University), Dmytro Iarovyi (Vytautas Magnus University), Sten Torpan (University of Tartu), and Ragne Kõuts-Klemm (University of Tartu). They identify critical actors in research papers for building resilience, such as policymakers, academia, and civil society, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts in the Baltic states to counteract challenges. Each country in the region has unique vulnerabilities and strengths, shaped by their individual historical, cultural, and political experiences, which must be considered when developing targeted strategies to combat information disorders. The solutions and interventions discussed, including educational initiatives and fact-checking programs, are vital for building a more informed and resilient public in the Baltics. This research provides a framework for addressing disinformation in the region by describing how it is disseminated, prevented, and countered. It highlights the intricate dynamics of these occurrences and emphasises the need for an all-encompassing, context-specific strategy.

Andres Kõnno and Külli-Riin Tigasson (Tallinn University/Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School) highlight a shift in media literacy towards critical and digital approaches rather than traditional ones. Their analysis explores media literacy from different angles, stressing the need for developing skills in constructing and presenting information in a way that is relevant and accessible to a young audience.

Auksė Balčytienė and Dmytro Iarovyi (Vytautas Magnus University) note in their literature overview and analysis that complex and multiple factors, including climate change, environmental threats, economic challenges, global migration, health risks, post-pandemic issues, Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine, and related geopolitical challenges to security in Europe cause current societal crises. Additionally, there is a growing sense of an impending revolutionary epistemic shift driven by accelerated digitalisation and AI innovations. Elevating digital (media and information) literacy, critical thinking and related ethical decision-making actions to the status of "meta power" is crucial.

So far, the literature and documents overviews and analyses explored the broader, meta-level aspects of media literacy and fact-checking. However, researchers Maia Klaassen, Krista Lepik, Marju Himma-Kadakas (all from the University of Tartu), and Jānis Buholcs (Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences) focused more closely on the specifics of fact-checking. Their literature overview highlighted that fact-checking becomes particularly active during elections and when smear campaigns or conspiracy theories are prevalent, which can destabilise society and undermine peace.

The authors also noted a global interest in fact-checking and media literacy, though there is a noticeable Western bias, with the United States being the most researched country. However, interestingly, significant research has also been conducted in or about Spain, Brazil, and the United Kingdom. From this review, several key themes in fact-checking research emerged:

- **Conceptual Clarity:** There needs to be a unified understanding of fact-checking, highlighting the need for a more straightforward concept.

- **Professional and Journalistic Practices**: Fact-checking is integral to journalism, with fact-checkers playing a crucial role in increasing trust and providing educational outreach. However, they face challenges such as resource constraints and the need for better tools. Fact-checking is recognised as a genre of journalism but also involves personal information hygiene.

- **Innovation, Automation, and New Tools:** This theme focuses on the development and use of AI and machine learning tools for automated fact-checking, platform-specific interventions, and the effectiveness of fact-checking on social media, emphasising the importance of innovative approaches to support and scale fact-checking efforts.

It can be concluded that while Baltic fact-checkers use several tools, most rely on traditional journalistic practices rather than (semi-)automated tools, as noted in the research by Vanessa Vorteil (Tallinn University). A first practical recommendation from our research is to avoid conceptual confusion and use the term "verification" to determine truth, distinguishing professional analysis from personal information management.

The report on the regulation of fact-checking and disinformation in the Baltic States (3.4) explores the practice of disinformation implementation by Baltic media actors. The research was conducted by Jānis Buholcs and Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe from Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Sten Torpan from the University of Tartu, Andres Kõnno and Vanessa Vorteil from Tallinn University, and Auksė Balčytienė and Rimgailė Kasparaitė from Vytautas Magnus University.

In 2022, the strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation emerged, establishing self-regulatory standards for digital service providers to combat online disinformation. It covers advertising, platform integrity, user empowerment, researcher empowerment, and cooperation with fact-checkers. Major platforms like Google, Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok are signatories. Various studies and reports have evaluated the implementation of the Code in different countries, highlighting deficiencies and areas for improvement. The Code of Practice turning into a Code of Conduct highlights a new chapter in the regulative practices we have seen so far.

Latvia

Monitoring the Code of Practice (CoP) on Disinformation in Latvia is based on volunteerism, with no specific institutional oversight mechanisms developed.

Regulatory Framework

- Consumer Rights Protection Center (CRPC): Overseen by the Ministry of Economics, it coordinates the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA). Amendments to the Law on Information Society Services were passed in 2024 to define CRPC's tasks and procedures.
- Emphasis on DSA: Latvia prioritises the DSA over the CoP, with the CRPC focusing on DSA implementation and training.

Current Actions

- Setting up a National Coordinator unit to handle DSA-related tasks, including reacting to complaints, investigating violations, and monitoring digital services.
- Outreach and education activities planned to enhance industry understanding of DSA requirements.

Challenges

- Limited resources and understanding within the industry.
- No Latvian entities are signatories to the CoP and involvement in its implementation is optional for CRPC.

Platform Governance

- Vetted Researchers: Researchers can access platform data by contacting the European Commission or the national coordinator (CRPC).
- Trusted Flaggers: CRPC assigns this status to entities monitoring illegal content on platforms.

Other Involved Institutions

- State Chancellery: Acts as a contact point for public administration, reporting violations and coordinating the security of the information environment.
- Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau: Monitors political advertising on platforms.

- Ministry of Culture: Responsible for media policy but not directly involved in CoP monitoring.
- National Electronic Media Council: Participates in ERGA initiatives to counter disinformation and strengthen democracy in the digital environment.

Estonia

Government Communications

- Significant discussions on disinformation began around 2006–2007, linked to the Bronze Soldier crisis and subsequent cyberattacks.
- Established NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence in Tallinn (2008).
- "Estonia 2035" and the National Defence Development Plan 2031 emphasise strengthening national information resilience.
- The State Chancellery published a guide on handling information attacks in 2019 and an updated governmental communication handbook in 2021 for communication specialists, highlighting the importance of identifying false information and cooperating with journalists.

Other Official Institutions

- Media Literacy: The Ministry of Education and Science initiated a media literacy strategy in 2021, still under development. Media literacy is not a standalone subject in schools.
- Election Fact-Checking: The Estonian Election Committee actively debunks myths about e-voting.
- Science Communication: The Estonian Research Council's strategy (2020-2035) emphasises the importance of fact-checking and critically evaluating information for societal development.

Lithuania

Government Communications

- "Strengthen your Immunity" Campaign (2018–2020): Focused on cyber-literacy for small and medium-sized businesses, online threat awareness, and countering disinformation through various media channels.

Other Official Institutions

- Strategic Communications Department of the Lithuanian Armed Forces: Monitors disinformation threats and publishes monthly reports.

OECD Involvement: Lithuania participates in the OECD Expert Group on Governance Responses to Mis- and Disinformation.

Common Principles for Assessing Fact-Checking: The Code of Conduct

When a fact-checking institution or team wants to be recognised as trustworthy, they can apply for certification from the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) or the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN). Earning this certification means that the fact-checking institution or group has been evaluated against the core principles of trustworthy fact-checking institutions (see Figure 1: Overview of the Code of Principles [IFCN] and the Code of Standards [EFCSN]). In Figure 1, you will see the main principles and how they overlap or differ slightly in their approaches.

(Figure 1. Overview of the Code of Principles [IFCN] and the Code of Standards [EFCSN]).

Aspect	IFCN Code of Principles	EFCSN Code of Standards
Scope	Global, applicable to fact-checkers worldwide	Focused on European fact-checking organisations
Nonpartisanship	Emphasises nonpartisanship and fairness, avoiding political or ideological agendas	Maintains independence but is tailored to the European context, addressing specific regional challenges
Transparency of Sources	Requires detailed references and links to original data	Similar requirements for transparency of methodology and sources, with additional emphasis on editorial guidelines
Financial Transparency	Requires disclosure of funding sources and potential conflicts of interest	Extensive financial disclosures, including all income sources over 1% or 5,000 euros, and mechanisms to ensure independence
Organisational Transparency	Discloses organisational structure and governance	Detailed requirements for organisational transparency, including ownership, governance, and staff roles
Corrections Policy	Strong emphasis on prompt and transparent corrections	A similar commitment to corrections, with a formal compliance and accountability process
Training and Capacity Building	Supports ongoing training and encourages collaboration globally	Offers regular training, mentorship, and support for European fact-checkers, emphasising community building

Compliance Mechanisms	Relies on self-regulation and public accountability	Includes regular assessments by independent experts and a formal complaint procedure
Community Focus	Encourages global collaboration among fact-checkers	Strong emphasis on building a supportive European community for collaboration and knowledge sharing

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) have distinct approaches in their codes of conduct, reflecting their respective focuses or scopes. The IFCN operates globally, establishing principles applicable to fact-checking organisations worldwide. In contrast, the EFCSN is tailored explicitly to European organisations, emphasising regional standards and regulations. Because of this distinction, the EFCSN has a more detailed code of conduct. For example, one of the key differences lies in financial disclosure: the EFCSN mandates more detailed financial disclosures than the IFCN, which aligns with stricter European standards.

Additionally, the EFCSN's requirements for organisational transparency are more comprehensive, including specific templates and disclosures about governance and editorial control. Regarding compliance mechanisms, the EFCSN incorporates regular external assessments and a structured compliance process, whereas the IFCN primarily relies on self-regulation and public accountability. Furthermore, the EFCSN strongly emphasises fostering a supportive community for European fact-checkers, highlighting the importance of regional collaboration and support.

Whether the EFCSN's approach is better than that of the IFCN is impossible to say because they – in all seriousness – are similar yet different and obey different contexts. Autonomy-wise, the IFCN leaves more up for the community to decide, meaning the power lies within the community; EFCSN regulates more from the institutional side of fact-checking.

The Challenges and Dilemmas Fact-Checkers Face: Analysis

Relying on previous research that we have carried out and synthesising what the two leading fact-checking institutions expect, adding on to what research overall says, we put together a chapter with small recommendations and explanations for fact-checkers.

- *The more transparent the Fact-Checkers are with the source selection and explanations on how you checked the information, the more trustworthy they are. It is necessary to keep the trust level towards fact-checking as an institution high.*

Humprecht (2020) examines the extent of source transparency provided by eight fact-checkers across various countries, revealing significant differences among the examined outlets. These differences can be attributed to variations in journalistic professionalism and organisational structures. Source transparency is influenced by factors such as the information environment and the type of fact-checking organisation. In conclusion, the level of journalistic professionalism drives the provision of source transparency.

Fact-checkers in the US frequently provide source transparency, aligning with their pioneering role in the field. It may be attributed to the country's strong polarisation and competition for factual accuracy, which motivates organisations to operate professionally and transparently to engage and persuade their audience. In contrast, European fact-checkers appear less inclined to provide source transparency despite the potential benefits of outstanding professionalism and credibility in the expanding fact-checking landscape. Furthermore, the study indicates that organisations affiliated with the Fact Checker Network tend to operate more transparently. Membership in such networks upholds higher standards, offering valuable resources for information verification, particularly for the public.

- *Working for a newsroom does not automatically make fact-checkers' practices and decisions transparent to the audience. In fact, fact-checkers must be particularly diligent in ensuring they do not assume anything is too obvious to require explanation. Failing to do so can lead to significant confusion.*

Fact-checking is crucial for journalists, although verification skills and routines can differ significantly. Many newsrooms lack established procedures for verifying information from social media (Picha Edwardsson & Al-Saqaf, 2022).

Research among Asian fact-checkers reveals similar trends (Seet & Tandoc Jr, 2024). For example, non-newsroom fact-checkers exhibit greater disclosure transparency by detailing editorial processes, correction policies, funding sources, and team biographies. In contrast, newsroom fact-checkers rely less on these disclosures, assuming that their affiliation with a journalistic organisation inherently conveys their journalistic integrity. Disclosure transparency involves informing readers about the news production process, the journalists involved, and funding sources. It allows readers to understand the perspective of the news story and scrutinise the facts presented.

Another significant finding concerns participatory transparency, which involves engaging the audience in the news production process. Nearly all fact-checkers provide readers with a way to contact them, and a majority invite readers to participate in the fact-checking process by submitting claims for verification. This encouragement of participation gives readers some control over the fact-checking process, marking a departure from traditional news organisations that typically hesitate to involve readers in news production (Karlsson, 2011).

Fact-checking is not exclusive to journalists. Individuals and non-journalistic organisations also contribute significantly to this effort. Fact-checking in journalism involves various stakeholders, such as editors, investigators, social media managers, and advocates, all supported by technological tools and educational workshops (Juneja & Mitra, 2022).

- ▪ *Fact-checkers ideally work as nonpartisan entities; however, in some cases, they may shift to an activist stance. Is it okay? What harm can it do? Another dilemma: Would it help if the fact-checkers openly admit their political biases?*

A study (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023) showed that individuals with less experience in fact-checking tended to adopt an activist role, which contradicts the nonpartisan principle of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Most respondents, however, disagreed with the idea that the purpose of fact-checking involves advancing social causes or taking positions on issues. They emphasised the importance of maintaining clear boundaries between fact-checking and activism, in line with the normative ideals of journalistic independence and neutrality.

Younger journalists, those under 35, prioritise upholding journalism's ideals and commitment to transparency practices in fact-checking. A significant challenge reported by respondents is the reliance on government sources for fact-checking, which raises concerns about the independence and credibility of the process. There is a strong association between a commitment to transparency practices and the civic responsibility of fact-checking, highlighting the importance of accountability and informative transparency in journalistic newsrooms. Young journalists view data journalism and fact-checking tools as potential solutions to disinformation. However, some fact-checkers have differing views about relying too heavily on third-party services without scrutiny (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018).

Opinions vary on labelling false claims as "lies" and perceptions of which political party produces more falsehoods, with a moderate consensus leaning towards Republicans (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2023). While regular fact-checkers tended to disagree with using the word "lie," most occasional fact-checkers and journalists supported its inclusion, highlighting a broader debate within journalism (if it is a lie, it is a lie and should be stated clearly). Despite this, most fact-checking organisations refrain from using "lie" when rating false claims.

Although journalists advocate for transparency and neutrality, a significant majority of respondents disagreed that it is acceptable for fact-checkers to express their political biases openly. It challenges perspectives advocating for "adversarial journalism," where such disclosures are encouraged for "more honest journalism" (Greenslade, 2013). It indicates a particular disparity within the field.

- ***Knowing your biases and blindspots helps you to be a more transparent fact-checker.***

Recognising one's blind spots as a fact-checker is crucial. The theory of cognitive dissonance, which describes the psychological discomfort created when a person encounters information inconsistent with their prior beliefs (Festinger, 2022), helps us understand why confirmation biases occur. To avoid dissonance, people seek content that reaffirms their views and are less likely to trust information that contradicts their understanding (Winter et al., 2016). This predisposition, known as "confirmation bias," affects everyone, including fact-checkers.

Fact-checkers encounter significant challenges, including information overload, necessitating efficient filtering and prioritisation. They also grapple with scalability issues and inadequate tools, making their task more difficult (Micallef et al., 2022). Despite their best efforts, fact-checkers sometimes fail to fulfil their journalistic duties due to limited reach and reliance on others for audience engagement (Singer, 2023).

- ***Rationalising attacks is necessary to be resilient in the work and field.***

It is important to acknowledge that the audience for fact-checks generally falls into four categories: the actively informed, the passively informed, the actively misinformed, and the passively misinformed (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015). It means the audience is fragmented, with only some active participants and some "hidden". So, those who work against or encourage the journalist are the "active" members of the audience.

Research (Flynn et al., 2017)) indicates that providing or forcing "correct information" on someone can lead to pushback. This resistance occurs because it is not just about the

accuracy of the information; it often conflicts with individuals' beliefs and political biases. In simpler terms, such information can challenge deeply held beliefs, leading to a defensive reaction where the source of the "correct" information is attacked, and journalists are labelled as liars or accused of political manipulation.

> ▪ *We do not all interpret codes of ethics in the same way. Additionally, the evolving nature of fact-checking as a profession makes it even more challenging to understand professional norms and expectations thoroughly. It is why relying on established journalistic principles and norms is often easier.*

The evolving role of platforms and fact-checkers offers promise in improving news quality and information rights. Cavaliere's study (Cavaliere, 2020) highlights the fragmented nature of the fact-checking field, revealing significant diversity among services and the measurements or indicators used by signatories. These diversified practices and limited organisational details need to be improved in curation. For instance, some fact-checkers state that they use journalistic principles of fact-checking, while others rely on journalism as a profession to develop their approaches. Even using sources (expert, primary, official, etc.) shows a very diverse picture.

Moreover, there is a discrepancy between fact-checking practices and journalistic accuracy principles, potentially moving away from established norms towards multifaceted standards. While journalism has transparent, standardised practices, the evolving nature of fact-checking calls for new standards aligned with audience interests. Continuing traditional journalism standards in the digital platform industry may be seen as functional equivalence, where similar services are regulated similarly—a common approach of EU regulatory authorities adapting existing frameworks to emerging technologies. However, journalism and digital information services are distinct industries with different business models and social functions: journalism produces news content while platforms distribute it. Platforms offer unprecedented access to information, presenting an opportunity to introduce regulatory standards that prioritise the public's right to receive accurate information.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted by our team, the guidelines from the IFCN and EFCSN codes of conduct and overall research done in the field, here are some recommendations for the Baltic fact-checkers in a nutshell:

- Non-Partisanship and Fairness: Fact-checkers should approach all claims without bias and ensure their assessments are as fair and impartial as possible. They must avoid advocating for political parties or candidates.

- Transparency of Sources: All sources used in fact-checking should be transparently disclosed to allow verification by others. Multiple sources should be used whenever possible to ensure accuracy.

- Transparency of Funding and Organisational Structure: Fact-checking organisations should disclose their funding sources and provide detailed information about their ownership and governance structures to avoid conflicts of interest.

- Transparent Methodology: The methods used for fact-checking should be clearly explained and publicly accessible. It includes the criteria for selecting claims to fact-check and the processes used to verify information.

- Correction Policy: There should be a transparent and publicly available policy for correcting errors. Corrections should be made promptly and transparently marked.

- Editorial Independence: Fact-checkers must maintain independence from political, economic, and other influences. It ensures that external pressures do not sway their work.

- Accountability and Openness: Fact-checkers should be open to feedback and willing to engage their audience about their findings. It includes providing a way for the public to contact them with questions or concerns.

- Regular Updates and Reviews: Fact-checking organisations should regularly update their findings and review their practices to ensure ongoing accuracy and reliability.

- Avoidance of Conflicts of Interest: Fact-checkers must disclose and avoid any potential conflicts of interest that could compromise their integrity and impartiality.

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