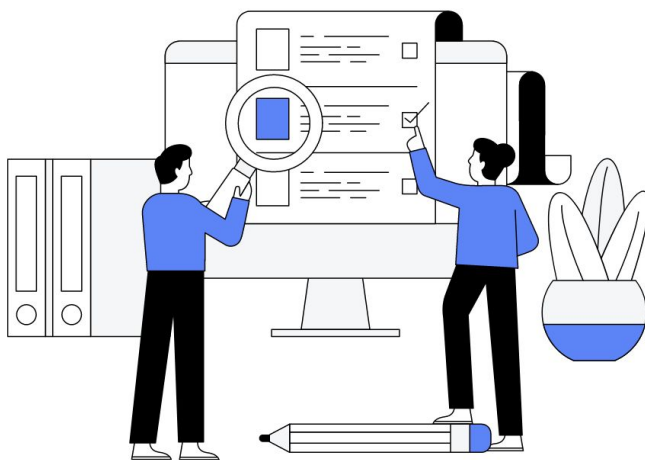


Fact-checking processes in Lithuania: The current situation and what could be improved?

Kristina Berksun

February 6, 2024 ·



Disinformation not only has a strong negative impact on a global or national scale, damaging our democracies. It also badly affects individuals, inciting distrust, fear and confusion. It can cause danger to people's health or even lead to death as well.

While fact-checking is one of the most effective tools in the fight against disinformation, and fact-checkers are working widely, still stronger and tighter collaboration between different organisations and individuals could be implemented to ease this job, the results of semi-structured interviews with

professional fact-checkers in Lithuania conducted during the project BECID show.

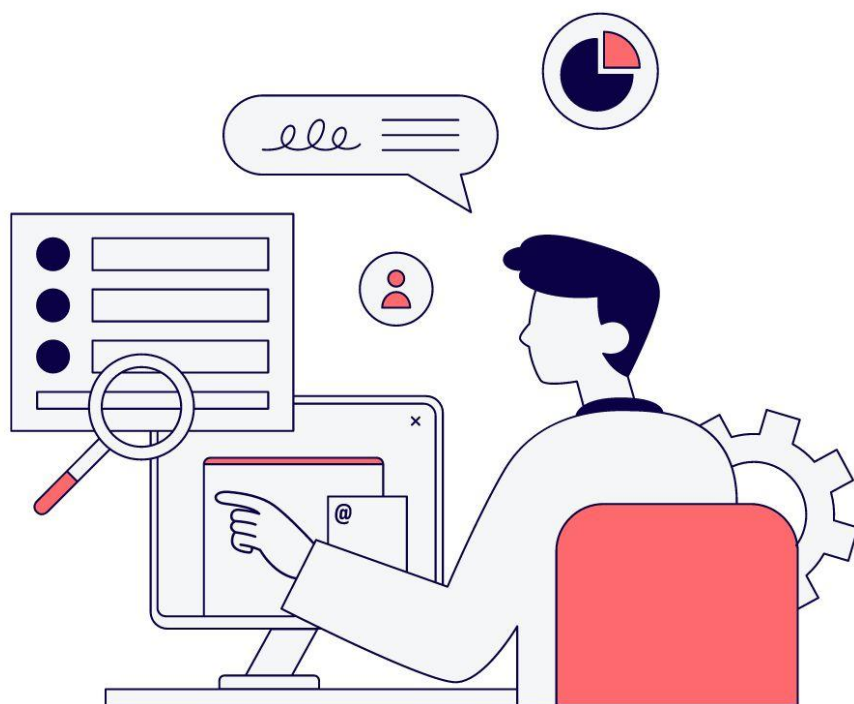
Can everything be checked? Main principles, topics and ways of dissemination

The fact-checking is not legally defined in Lithuania and the fact-checking community here remains relatively small. There are independent and separate media and NGOs' projects working on fact-checking in Lithuania. Three main projects conducted by media outlets include: Lie detector (**Melo detektorius**, DELFI), Verified by 15min (**Patikrinta 15min**, 15min) – both belong to **IFCN** – and LRT Facts (**LRT faktai**, LRT). NGOs working on publishing information about fact-checking, organising training (mostly MIL related), reporting on disinformation include such organisations as **Media4Change**, **DIGIRES**, **Debunk.Eu**, **Civil Resilience Initiative**, and **ResPublica**.

There are no formal rules of fact-checking at the national level. Fact-checkers follow public information law, also code of ethics, applied to all journalists. Fact-checkers, who belong to **IFCN** or **EDMO**, also follow their rules and methodologies. The main principle that fact-checkers follow is that there must be more than three sources, there cannot be any emotion or conflict of interests, there must be denial of information but not a person who spreads such false information.

The main topics that fact-checkers in Lithuania are dealing with are science and health, since fake news in these fields cause the most harm to society. Such topics include: COVID-19 vaccines, narratives on vaccines filled with nanotechnology, micro schemes that work through 5G, as well as some other conspiracy theories. The war in Ukraine also receives a lot of attention. There are a lot of narratives on the negative influence of the West and EU. A lot of disinformation about climate change is coming to Lithuania as well. Very

often the fake news that spreads in the USA or other Western Europe countries, starts to spread in Lithuania as well after a couple of months. Fake news creators of Lithuanian often just copy fake news from abroad.



Only reliable primary sources, research data, information from scientists, experts, scientific studies, academic journals, scientific data are relied upon when checking the facts. As well as, information published by the official authorities of the country to which the disinformation relates. Official information from institutions and research are the two main sources on which false information is refuted. On some occasions prestigious news media outlets are used as sources as well. There are also cases when it is impossible to check the information because it might be predictions, conspiracy theories or there is no possibility to check it impartially. Fact-checking in Lithuania is communicated through columns on news portals (articles, reports) dedicated to fact-checking, as well as through their social networks. Some fact-checkers also communicate through collaboration with

different projects or on their own profile of social media if the material that was checked could have a hazardous impact to society.

Expanding the role: from fact-checkers to MIL educators

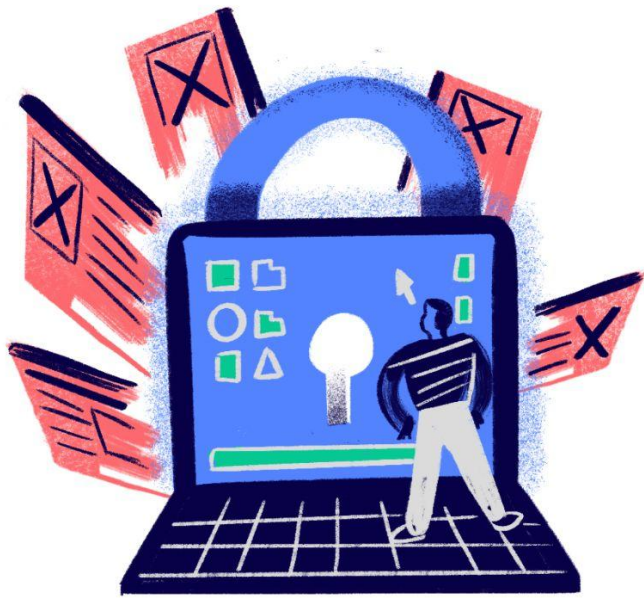
The functions of a fact-checker include not only searching for fake news and debunking it, limiting the distribution of incorrect, untrue information, informing and protecting the public from harmful information, but also educating the audience to prevent it from fake news and manipulations, especially related with health.

Moreover, fact checkers are important MIL educators. They engage in activities that help develop people's media literacy skills, such as organising training and meetings for students, journalists, librarians, doctors and other interested groups. The role of a fact checker shifts from the framework of ordinary journalism to the field of educator, consultant on disinformation issues.

When it comes to educating the audience, one of the most important things is to explain the process of manipulation that people would know and in future could understand if someone is trying to manipulate them.

Essential but thorough process: specific capacities needed

Fact-checking requires high level professionalism and specific capacities. Fact-checkers need strong analytical, sourcing and verification skills, along with the ability to efficiently navigate the media and handle large volumes of information. A fact-checker must be proficient in using a variety of tools, interpreting statistical data, comprehending the structure of scientific articles, grasping academic sources, and maintaining a general understanding of developments in the world of science.



Professional fact-checkers often need to sift through hundreds of pages from diverse sources and utilize open-source intelligence tools (OSINT) to verify a single piece of information. Fact-checkers also must be up to date and constantly cultivate their skills, knowledge, to develop competencies. Since fact checking is closely related with digital technologies and ways to simplify the process of fact checking, fact checkers are always updating their knowledge, attending training sessions and adding new tools that would improve their job.

Debunking false claims and substantiating factual accuracy requires fact-checkers to rely exclusively on credible primary sources, research data, official records, and insights from researchers and experts. This thorough process, although essential, is time-consuming and demands effort, especially when considering availability of experts for commentary or clarifications. The overabundance of misleading claims and conspiracies and outright lies demands continuous monitoring and attention.

Emotional pressure and flows of negative information every day

The increasing spread of dysfunctional online content and information manipulations, along with a growing demand to discern truth, also results in excessive workloads, heightened stress, and even exposing fact-checkers to hate speech and online attacks.

Fact checkers mostly get threats through social media. There are people who negatively comment on almost every message that fact checkers publish on social media. Sometimes fact checkers get calls to the court because of the mistake they did or just because someone did not like the information they announced.

There are cases when some social media groups collaborate and make group attacks to fact checkers by sending messages with negative information, insults, etc. For some fact checkers it is just too hard because of emotional pressure and flows of negative information every day, so they decide to leave this job.

Collaboration as a way to ease the processes and increase the digital resilience

Despite being a small and highly specialized group, fact-checkers in Lithuania do engage in various forms of cooperation both regionally and internationally. Prominent examples include collaborations within the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders (**BECID**), a regional initiative affiliated with the European Digital Media Observatory (**EDMO**), whereas on a global scale the International Fact-Checking Network (**IFCN**) stands out. However, the level of interconnectedness at national and local levels remains significantly limited. While there are instances of cooperation and information exchange among fact-checkers (some things cannot be explained without collaboration), the majority continue to operate in relatively autonomous forms.



Considering how cooperation could facilitate fact-checking processes and improve the quality of work, it should be more promoted and encouraged in various ways.

One of the examples of fact-checkers and academics, NGOs collaborating to increase the digital resilience of the society and fight against disinformation is Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience **DIGIRES**, operating in Lithuania.

The DIGIRES project was started as a common initiative between academia, media organisations and independent journalists with an overarching goal to detect, analyse, prevent and curb disinformation activities in Lithuania and beyond. Since the beginning of the project till today, a team of highly qualified experts are closely collaborating with media organisations, independent journalists, the scientific community and the general public to increase the digital resilience of the society.

This case shows that fact-checkers greatly benefit from establishing collaborative partnerships with academic researchers across diverse fields. These collaborations not only accelerate fact-checking misinformation and

disinformation but also facilitate the exploration of innovative fact-checking formats, leveraging technologies such as artificial intelligence and novel technical solutions. Furthermore, such partnerships assist in tailoring fact-checking strategies to diverse audiences, including digitally underprivileged and vulnerable groups, optimizing communication methods for enhanced reach.

DIGIRES proves that the envisioned collaborative initiatives between fact-checkers and academic researchers hold the potential to enhance trust in journalistic institutions, contributing to the development of digital resilience. By combining the skills and strategies of fact-checkers in tackling information disorders together with the scholarly precision of interdisciplinary academic research, a comprehensive approach can be developed to counteract the spread of information disruptions effectively.