

How Latvian fact-checkers work

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Fact-checking has become one of the prominent ways in which the spread of false or misleading information is being countered. During the last decade, several Latvian organizations have developed their fact-checking capabilities to evaluate information circulating in the information environment. This article explores the approaches that Latvian fact-checkers utilize in this job, including the choice of statements to be verified, their methods, and outcomes.



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Who is the fact-checker?

It is not easy to draw the border between fact-checking and other information evaluation activities because fact-checkers have different approaches to this work. Recognizing this diversity, it is essential not to take a too restrictive approach when delineating the field.

For this article, eight people from five organizations—mostly media outlets but also an NGO—were interviewed, representing the majority of those active in this field. To be included in the sample, one did not need to self-identify as a fact-checker—the most important criterion was that this person evaluates publicly available content for truthfulness and produces media publications that present the results of such analysis.

For some interviewees, fact-checking is their primary job, but it is not uncommon for fact-checking to be just one of the activities they do as journalists or non-journalistic researchers. Even those who work as fact-checkers for journalism media do not always have their main professional background in journalism. Professional experience in the media definitely helps to do this job, but so does education and skills in other fields, such as international relations or science.

What is a fact-checking publication?

Perhaps the most widely recognized is the “classic” fact-checking format, in which a specific claim or statement is analyzed, and a verdict (true, false, or something in between) is issued. However, some fact-checkers go further and aim to show the connection between the statement in question and larger disinformation narratives. Another approach is the production of extended analytic materials that explore the diffusion of falsehoods—in Latvia, the focus of such publications is on Russian propaganda. Rather than focusing on debunking specific messages, fact-checkers who work in this way attempt to

inform the audience about how propaganda and disinformation work. In contrast to “classic” fact-checking, which reacts to what has already been said, these fact-checkers attempt to take a preemptive approach.

Social media are one of the most important venues where audiences encounter topical information. Therefore, including fact-checks, fact-checking organizations are experimenting with communicating the results of their work in a way that best suits the social media environment. For example, they may produce short videos that present their findings. However, even if successful, such experiments can mostly be a supplement rather than a substitute for text-based publications. “One can talk about new formats, about producing videos, but in videos, it is not possible to include links to the research papers, references, and graphs that [the audience] can explore,” explained one interviewee. “An article in which everything has been substantiated is the basis of fact-checking.”

How do fact-checkers choose claims to verify?

The dominant sources of statements that need to be checked are (1) the statements by politicians and other influential public figures and (2) popular posts on social media.

Politicians have a major influence on the public information environment, and by following and evaluating their statements, fact-checkers hold officials accountable. However, one does not need to hold a public office to be influential. Some people are highly successful in finding large audiences on social media, but being popular on social media obviously does not make one right. Because of this, fact-checkers analyze what is happening on various social media platforms and pay attention to widely shared claims, especially those that can be potentially harmful—for example, may endanger people’s

health. Over time, fact-checkers develop lists of “usual suspects”—those who routinely spread questionable information—and explore their communication channels to learn what these actors are up to.

Each fact-checking organization has its own approaches to finding and selecting the materials to be checked. Fact-checkers are largely unable to monitor the information space in its entirety and have only developed general guidelines rather than strict formulas regarding what is important and worthy of analysis plays a role. One journalist emphasized that the merits of selecting one statement for analysis over another are evaluated on a case-by-case basis: “[Within the newsroom] we discuss whether it is worth [taking this case], maybe we have already written about this twice—do we need to cover it the third time?”

This explanation highlights another essential element of fact-checking—it is a collective endeavor. Typically, more than one person participates in each stage of the work—selecting statements, identifying the appropriate sources for verification, and drafting the final version or article. Therefore, the verdict given about a particular statement is not one person’s judgment but represents the consensus of the fact-checking newsroom.

In addition, two Latvian fact-checking organizations are currently part of international organizations—the International Fact-Checking Network or the European Fact-checking Standards Network. These organizations require their members to observe common principles and standards or work but also facilitate cooperation among fact-checkers.

How do fact-checkers arrive at their conclusions?

At the core of fact-checking is the evaluation of a public statement against the most trustworthy and up-to-date knowledge that is currently available. The

ability to locate and understand such knowledge is one of the most critical skills of a fact-checker.

The central sources that fact-checkers use are scientific articles, official Latvian or international statistical databases, reports by reputable media, and input from experts in a particular field.

Sometimes, the verification work is straightforward. For example, an official may claim that something was said or done years ago, and fact-checkers may then look up public records to see if there is any evidence of this. “If one says that he or she supported something a decade ago, we browse the archive [of a news agency] and examine whether this person has said anything about the given topic,” said one fact-checker.

Similarly, if someone cites statistical data, fact-checkers may examine whether the claim is substantiated. When consulting scientific studies, fact-checkers must be aware that research papers can show contradictory results. Therefore, they try to rely on the general consensus among scientists on the given topic rather than what a single research article says. However, sometimes not enough scientific evidence exists to be sure about how things actually are, and the insight one gets from studying the available body of research about the issue may be much less certain than someone popular on social media makes it to be. “If in society one side is being presented as the right one, then showing that contradictions [in scientific studies] exist is also fact-checking,” explained an interviewee.

The trickiest part of the work concerns cases where concrete data are unavailable—for example, the particular aspect is not measured by statisticians and research studies about it have not been conducted. In such situations, fact-checkers may need to rely on circumstantial evidence and decide what the most likely explanation is: the one in the original statement or

the one that the fact-checker deduced from the available information. Some fact-checkers rely on the opinions of experts in a particular field. Still, it is also common to abandon cases in which the desired level of unambiguousness was deemed impossible to reach.

The problem of the unavailability of all the desired evidence is particularly pronounced in the work of those fact-checkers whose main objective is the analysis of disinformation and propaganda narratives. Understanding how propagandists work and what they try to achieve requires connecting the dots and independently interpreting the emerging picture. Years of experience working on the topic and a breadth of background knowledge are crucial to arriving at a justified conclusion.

It helps that the burden of proof lies on those who make claims. If those who issue dubious statements do not present reliable evidence and fact-checkers also are unable to locate it, there is a good chance that the claim is not true.

What are fact-checkers able to achieve?

Fact-checkers provide verified information to the public, but they are aware that the audiences of the claims they check are not necessarily the same as those who read their analysis. However, it is not the only thing that counts.

“The aim is to get off the fence those who do not yet fully believe [the falsehoods], but may come to believe,” said one fact-checker. “We won’t be able to change the minds of those who are already convinced [by the falsehoods], but we try not to let fall into the abyss those who do not believe yet—but might.” Furthermore, fact-checkers who cooperate with Meta and check information on Facebook contribute to limiting the reach of the claims that prominent disinformators make.

Face-checkers feel that they have had an impact on how politicians and other public officials make statements. Knowing that they may be fact-checked, they become more careful regarding what they say. “We have educated some politicians that they need to think more thoroughly about what they say because they’d hardly like to see that afterward the media report that they have lied,” noted one interviewee. However, other interviewees said that sometimes the change is not in the substance but in delivery—people may adopt a vaguer style of expression, which is harder to fact-check. Fact-checkers obviously cannot singlehandedly solve disinformation. However, each fact-checking material they produce is a piece of trustworthy information that accumulates and contributes to bettering the information environment.