Chapter 2

Countering misinformation in and from the newsroom

How digital platforms redefine journalistic practice and the democratic role of news media

Eva Mayerhöffer, Marinella Belluati, Brooks DeCillia, Leen d'Haenens, Alice Fubini, Wai Han Lo, Enrique Núñez-Mussa, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, & Rossella Rega

Abstract

Based on evidence from the 18 countries included in the 2021 Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM), this chapter provides the first comparative analysis of whether and how the issue of online misinformation is being interpreted and dealt with in newsrooms around the world. We analyse to which degree news media view online misinformation as a challenge that needs addressing and what measures they take to avoid relaying online misinformation. Moreover, we study how news media form part of broader societal and regulatory initiatives to counter misinformation. The chapter identifies different national approaches to the news media's ways of addressing online misinformation, and we discuss potential future avenues for research and regulatory action.

Keywords: misinformation, newsroom, journalistic practice, fact-checking, platformisation

Introduction

Online mis- and disinformation – that is, the unintentional or deliberate spread of false and misleading information – has been identified as a crucial threat to democracy in the digital age (e.g., European Commission, 2021b). Even though concerns for misinformation have always accompanied the relationship between information and news sources, the fact that news production, dissemination, and consumption increasingly rely on online and social media platforms have reinvigorated these concerns (e.g., Gulyas, 2017; Hermida, 2016; Newman et al., 2019; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Most recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the concern for widespread misinformation circulated on digital platforms has reached a truly global scale (Nielsen et al., 2020). For the purposes of this chapter, we refer to the broader phenomenon of misinformation as false or

misleading information, irrespective of intent.

So far, public and scholarly debate on online misinformation has mainly focused on the affordances of social media platforms, the role of alternative news media, as well as automated bots and trolls, with the role of leading news media receiving less attention. We argue in this chapter that leading news media is a critical actor in both the proliferation and the containment of online misinformation. Put differently, any societal attempt to counter misinformation must acknowledge the critical role of leading news media as a part of the problem *and* the solution.

Thus, leading news media are critical in understanding online misinformation, but the reverse argument is true, as well: An understanding of how news media adapt their routines and redefine their role in response to misinformation is needed to fully grasp the role of news media in the digital age. It is against this background that the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) has been extended in its 2021 edition (see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c) to include an indicator on how leading news media protect and defend produced content against misinformation on digital platforms and social media. It has also become clear during our data collection and analysis that the impact of online misinformation on the news media's contribution to democracy is not limited to the question of protecting news content alone. Indeed, when talking about the news media in democratic terms, the specific question of how news media avoid relaying misinformation almost immediately raises the question of how news media more broadly seek to counter the spread of misinformation. As we argue in this chapter, both aspects are premised upon the overarching question of whether news media accept online misinformation as a challenge to their work in the first place.

MDM Indicator and related research question addressed in this chapter:

(F10) Misinformation and digital platforms (alias social media)
How do leading news media protect and defend their content against misinformation delivered through digital platforms and social media? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 29)

Based on evidence from the 18 countries included in the 2021 MDM, this chapter provides the first comparative analysis of how newsrooms around the globe view and address online misinformation. We analyse whether news media view online misinformation as a challenge that needs addressing, whether measures are taken to avoid relaying misinformation online, how news media seek to contribute to countering online misinformation more broadly, and news media's role in regulating misinformation. We conclude by identifying different national approaches to the news media's role in countering online misinformation and discussing potential future avenues for research and regulatory action.

News media in an age of information disorder and platformisation

Modern democracies face what has been described as a state of information disorder, resulting from the complexity and scale of available information in an increasingly digitally connected world. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017: 5), this information disorder is characterised by three distinct types of potentially harmful information: misinformation (false information shared unintentionally); disinformation (false information intentionally distributed to cause harm); and malinformation (genuine information distributed to cause harm, for example, by making private information public). While these types of information are not new, they are exacerbated by social media, whose functioning mechanisms (i.e., selection, monetisation, and commodification; see van Dijck et al., 2018), technological features, and affordances provide fertile ground for the spread of misleading or false information. Misinformation has been found to be disseminated more than factual content on social networks (Del Vicario et al., 2016).

Research on information disorder often focuses on types of actors assumed to be particularly involved in the dissemination of false, misleading, and harmful information, including extremists, radical political groups, anonymous networks, social bots, trolls, as well as alternative and hyper-partisan media (Guess & Lyons, 2020). Yet, the journalistic practices of leading news media are also being challenged by this emerging information disorder. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that leading news media themselves have experienced fundamental changes in their distribution and production practices. In addition to the increasing platformisation of news, contemporary journalism is challenged by increasingly scarce economic resources, a more participatory media environment, a round-the-clock global news climate, an expectation of journalistic multitasking and multiskilling, a rise in churnalism, and not least, an alleged state of post-truth politics (Davies, 2008; Pickard, 2020). These multiple and interconnected challenges amount to a situation in which adherence to the journalistic core tasks of source verification and fact-based reporting becomes increasingly more difficult – including in established quality news media organisations.

The rise of the Internet and the growing importance of social media as a platform for journalistic research and dissemination has changed traditional news production routines and practices, posing new challenges for legacy media organisations. Media industries have begun to rethink their publishing activities by adopting new measurements of values and success, based primarily on web analytics. The shift of readers to social networking sites is forcing the media to look for new business models and to identify editorial growth strategies that enable more substantial use of new digital platforms. While the traditional

editorial model was based on the idea of providing quality information to the public through original reports and background research, today a different model, based on the number of clicks, has been established (Christin, 2020). Unlike the editorial model focused on providing content, the click-based model is built on the idea of journalism as an act of communication in dialogue with online readers: A news item can spread quickly in a network if many users (nodes) share (distribute) it (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019).

The most critical issue is how the platformisation of news has influenced the quality of journalism and its fundamental principles and criteria, such as journalistic independence and the value of accurate and comprehensive news coverage. The realisation of such values in journalistic activities has been put under pressure by the influence of algorithms. In the platform ecosystem, algorithms shape the process of curation and selection of news, and the imperatives in this context are publishing more, publishing faster, and attracting the engagement and participation of users. The visibility of news organisations' content is highly dependent on audience activation, and the number of clicks received from each article has emerged as the new criteria with which to evaluate the content's success. The highly digitalised mediascape thus offers favourable conditions for the circulation of misleading content (Himma-Kadakas, 2017).

The vital role of news media to fact-check stories and produce quality and in-depth news reports is moreover challenged by increased resource constraints. The traditional business model of news is weakened as the funding model of commercial news media is being replaced (Phillips & Witschge, 2012). More readers migrate online, and so too does advertising revenue, of which global companies such as Google and Facebook claim increasingly larger shares of at the expense of legacy news outlets (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017).

Developing adequate measures to address misinformation under scarce resources can be a particular problem in smaller media markets and for smaller news outlets. Puppis (2009) highlights how small media systems lack resources compared with larger systems, resulting in various limitations on the production side. Research has shown that resource constraints at small news outlets mean that journalists often have little to no time to investigate and fact-check their stories, resulting in "superficial, shallow and reactive" reporting (Ólafsson, 2021).

Online misinformation as an issue of concern in the newsroom

The platformisation of news and increasingly scarce resources put news media arguably at greater risk of contributing to the dissemination of misinformation. Within the newsroom itself, the issue of misinformation not only presents a challenge of maintaining journalistic quality in the digital age, but more fun-

damentally pushes journalists and editors to rethink their working routines, as well as their role in a democratic society.

As for working routines, online misinformation becomes relevant as a question of journalistic sourcing practices. The growing importance of social media not only motivates news media to publish on these platforms, but also to use social media to identify and contact sources, as well as to relay and cover information circulated on these platforms (e.g., Van Leuven et al., 2018; von Nordheim et al., 2018). Here, we propose that the journalistic answer to online misinformation can be described as reactive: When journalists rely on social media content, for which sources are often not easily identifiable and verifiable, they are met with the task of figuring out ways to safeguard themselves from disseminating false and misleading information while remaining attentive to the important issues and debates increasingly found on social media.

The phenomenon of online misinformation also affects the democratic role of news media. First, journalists and editors are faced with a question of trust, given that increasing misinformation and the concern for fake news threatens to affect audience trust in leading news media (Newman et al., 2019; Ognyanova et al., 2020). Second, in line with the countering of misinformation being identified as one of the fundamental societal challenges of our times, addressing such challenges becomes a question of democratic responsibility for the media. Consequently, news media may seek to contribute proactively to countering misinformation at a societal level – through creating awareness and educating their audiences about the existence and perils of misinformation, on the one hand, and through publicly fact-checking and debunking potential misinformation, on the other.

Indeed, the fact-checking of (third-party) information has become a normative demand posed to the media on par with classical roles of serving as a watchdog of the powerful or serving as a neutral disseminator of information (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2019). Yet, the scholarly evidence about fact-checking's efficacy in restoring audience trust and correcting factual misconceptions remains mixed. Plenty of research (Barrera et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2016; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Walter et al., 2020) questions the effectiveness of fact-checking. Notably, Walter and colleagues' (2020: 367) meta-analysis of fact-checking concludes that "the effects of fact-checking on beliefs are quite weak" or "negligible". While fact-checking can improve an audience's factual knowledge after being exposed to inaccurate and misleading information, it does not have a real effect on policy conclusions or support for political candidates (Barrera et al., 2019), whether due to biased reasoning or mere laziness (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Research is likewise inconclusive on whether fact-checking can even backfire, leading audiences to believe incorrect information (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wood & Porter, 2019). Finally, research has also suggested that overt fact-checking does not necessarily help to reinstate the audience's trust in

news content. For example, Clayton and colleagues (2020) found that tagging news article headlines with "rated false" lowers the perceived accuracy of the article in the audience's mind more than a "disputed" label.

In this light, so-called second-generation fact-checkers – such as Africa Check, Latin American Chequeado, and UK-based Full Fact – have moved beyond just simply producing fact-checks (Full Fact, 2019). These organisations, in collaboration with political actors and civil society, go further by pressing for corrections, using regulatory mechanisms to stop the spread of misinformation, and attempting to change systems and cultures that allow misinformation to spread. This type of fact-checking has transformed from information and education transmission to advocacy, directly challenging the actors and organisations that peddle misinformation.

Comparing MDM misinformation scores and contextual factors

In this chapter, we provide the first comparative analysis of how newsrooms around the globe view and address online misinformation. To do so, we draw on interviews with journalists and editors from leading news media in the 18 countries participating in the 2021 MDM (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c). Interviewees were asked to report how their news media outlet protects and defends their content against misinformation delivered through digital platforms and social media. Interviews were conducted in an open manner, and many interviewees also commented on their perception of online misinformation's role for their work beyond specific protection and defence mechanisms. The information obtained through interviews has been supplemented with and qualified through external document research, expert interviews, as well as relevant research literature (for methodology, see Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a).

Interviews and field research were conducted in early 2020, that is, immediately before or during the early stages of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing concerns for a so-called infodemic, defined by the World Health Organization as a state of "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak" (World Health Organization, 2021: para. 1). Thus, our chapter is not able to systematically account for whether the concerns for an infodemic have led to a changed and renewed take on the challenge of online misinformation in newsrooms around the globe. We will, however, address potential implications of Covid-19 in the final discussion of the chapter.

The individual country teams have rated the obtained information for each national context, based on the following point scale (Trappel & Tomaz 2021a: 29):

3: control by specially trained experts is in place, algorithm-based tools are also used

2: information from doubtful platform sources must undergo specific checks

1: there are regular internal meetings to discuss potential misinformation

0: single journalists decide on their own when including content originating from digital platforms

The country score, as well as important contextual information for each of the 18 countries can be found in Table 2.1.

The reported MDM country score corresponds most directly to what has been described as reactive strategies to online misinformation in the newsroom. The interviews and additional research reveal further important aspects pertaining to

Table 2.1 *2021 MDM misinformation scores and contextual factors*

Country	MDM score (0–3 points)[a]	Social media as source of news (% used in the last week)[b]	Audience concern for "fake news" (% concerned or very concerned)[c]	Orientation of governments' anti-misinformation actions[c]
Australia	1	45	62	soft (awareness)
Austria	1	45	40	–
Belgium	3	40	44	soft (awareness)
Canada	3	50	61	soft (awareness; monitoring in connection with election)
Chile	2	71	67	hard (sanctions planned)
Denmark	2	45	39	soft (awareness, monitoring)
Finland	2	39	52	–
Germany	2	34	38	none targeting online misinformation; hard sanctions for hate speech
Greece	1	67	61	–
Hong Kong	2	57	45	hard (sanction)
Iceland	1	–	–	–
Italy	1	47	52	hard (awareness, sanction)
Netherlands	2	39	31	soft (awareness)
Portugal	2	57	75	–
South Korea	2	26	59	hard (sanction)
Sweden	2	46	47	soft (awareness)
Switzerland	2	45	44	–
United Kingdom	2	40	70	soft (awareness)

Comments: Orientation of governments' anti-misinformation actions includes all identified government actions with a clear misinformation focus – based on raw data (Poynter, 2021 and authors' research).

Source: [a]Trappel & Tomaz, 2021c; [b]Newman et al., 2019; [c]Poynter, 2021

the question of how news media approach the issue of misinformation, which we present in a qualitative and exploratory manner in the following sections. First, we explore how aware journalists and editors are of the problem of misinformation in the first place. We then discuss which reactive strategies are employed to safeguard newsmaking from online misinformation. Lastly, we consider the role of leading news media in the societal attempt to counter misinformation.

Countering online misinformation in the newsroom
Awareness and problem definition

Countering online misinformation in the newsroom starts with problem awareness. The first part of our analysis thus addresses the question of whether and how leading news media in the different countries perceive online misinformation in the first place. One parameter in this regard is whether the problem has been identified as a crucial threat in public and political debate in the respective countries. In most of the 18 participating countries, public awareness of and concern for misinformation exist to a large extent (see Table 2.1), a sentiment that is also felt among journalists.

In connection with specific trigger events, broader concerns for misinformation translate to a more imminent problem awareness and subsequent action in the newsroom. Such events can be recent examples of coordinated efforts to misinform the population, as it has been the case for Finland in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (Standish, 2017). Elections are another typical example of a heightened awareness for misinformation in the newsroom. In the run-up to the 2019 Canadian federal election, a national poll found that nine in ten Canadians thought they had fallen for fake news (Thompson, 2019), and Canadian journalists and news organisations appeared to share these concerns and acted accordingly (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021). As a veteran Canadian journalist interviewed for the MDM stated:

> Most news organisations, the CBC and I think The Globe and Mail and The [Toronto] Star and some others thought that misinformation and disinformation would be a big issue in the [2019] election campaign. And so, we had someone assigned to that beat. And I think other publications did, too. But I think we discovered that there, in fact, wasn't very much. And the studies I've seen have shown that there wasn't an awful lot and that the biggest distributors of disinformation and misinformation are political parties and candidates. And so, they [journalists] didn't really have an awful lot to do.

Concerns for widespread misinformation are also high in countries experiencing a polarised political climate and social unrest. In our sample, two cases stand out: the 2019 anti-government protests in Hong Kong (Lo & Wong, 2021), as well

as the 2019 social protests in Chile (Núñez-Mussa, 2021), where news content has been found to be particularly vulnerable for disseminating misinformation about the protests. As one interviewed Chilean journalist said:

> We started to take fake news seriously during the 2019 protests. After a few days, we created a fact-checking team, which not only produces publishable articles, but also verified any dubious information received in the newsroom.

Yet, the concern for online misinformation is not equally present in all the countries under study. In countries where the public (at least pre-Covid-19) is less concerned about misinformation, the matter is also considered less urgent by journalists and editors. In Iceland and Austria, the interviewed journalists believed that misinformation on digital platforms was currently of minor relevance and importance. They said that misinformation could be a problem and cause potential harm, but most did not see it as much of an issue in their countries. To them, developing mechanisms to prevent, identify, and avoid misinformation was not considered a priority. In Iceland, several editors and journalists highlighted the smallness of the society as a factor that makes fact-checking a manageable task, providing a more positive view on the previously mentioned vulnerability of smaller media markets and outlets (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021). As one interviewed Icelandic editor put it: "It is not necessary to have any guidelines on this with local reporting since it is so easy to fact-check everything you do. It is easy to reach everyone".

While many journalists and editors interviewed for the MDM project are aware of the specific danger of misinformation arising from online and social media communication, others are more reluctant to accept it as a new or specific problem. As an interviewed editor at a Danish public service station put it:

> Misinformation – what is that in the first place – is this not something that has always existed? […] We should also be careful to not blow up some kind of monster that maybe isn't a monster after all, but just a condition that always has been there.

Similarly in Greece, an interviewed journalist stated: "Ever since the advent of journalism, misinformation has always existed". Whether online misinformation is seen as a specific and new challenge for journalism or just a continuation of the old problem of propaganda, spin and public deceit is consequential for the ways that newsrooms choose to tackle the issue. The Greek journalist quoted above continued by saying:

> So, we follow the basic principles of the code of conduct. We make sure to double-check a piece of news, and carefully choose our sources, etcetera. We haven't made any changes because fake news is in fashion.

In the next section, we take a closer look at how leading news media react and adapt to the problem of misinformation.

Everyday actions to check and validate information:
Reactive strategies

Most newsrooms of leading news media in the countries included in the 2021 MDM project are on a high-alert level when it comes to acting against misinformation. Yet, in most countries, specific defence mechanisms have not been institutionalised nor seen as a priority. The measure of choice against misinformation is rigorous journalistic work, and many of the interviewed journalists and editors are confident that it is still possible to rely on their established journalistic skills to identify misinformation. As a Danish editor put it in an interview: "Misinformation can be fought with precisely what journalism is all about – to check and validate incoming information, before you proceed with this information in your reporting". Experience is cited as one reason for this approach, as an interviewed Italian newspaper editor stated:

> Over the years we have gained so much experience that the alarm bell rings and then a more in-depth verification is carried out, and this often allows us to eliminate the risk of publishing a false news story, without any particular support in terms of tools and expertise.

Still, many journalists and editors acknowledge that traditional journalistic methods must be adapted to the digital era, and that an extra layer of caution is needed when information originates from social media. A rather defensive strategy that some apply is to avoid adopting information stemming from social media, whenever possible. As one interviewed Danish newspaper editor said:

> We are aware about misinformation in the respect that we are careful about simply adopting information coming from social media into our reporting – but sometimes, we still need to, especially if it concerns politicians' statements on social media.

In an alternative, more offensive manner, editors and journalists instead acknowledge the need for extra verification when information originates on social media. In the words of a Canadian journalist who was interviewed: "I think there's double, more double- and triple-checking going on, especially stuff that appears on social media that appears real, to not just assume it's real".

There seems to be widespread confidence that fact-checking of social media content is still within the realm of the individual journalist. This is also backed by a 2018 survey of journalists' working practices in the United Kingdom, which revealed that a large majority of journalists felt they had the necessary skills to verify social media sources (Spilsbury, 2018).

While many interviewees were rather defensive about the appropriateness of their skills, some acknowledged the fragility of relying on individual journalists for fact-checking. Two recurring problems hindering verification and accuracy were mentioned: a lack of skills alongside a resistance to change, especially among older journalists, and time pressure. In the words of an interviewed Italian editor-in-chief:

> We have an enemy to fight against, which is not only disinformation, but also time, because the biggest mistakes, at least in the mainstream media, are made on the assumption of lack of time to make verifications.

Most media outlets do not have specific guidelines for verifying information originating from social media. Exceptions can be found in the editorial guidelines of the British BBC and the Canadian CBC, which contain a series of guidance notes outlining the corporations' policies on online newsgathering, social media, and Internet research (Moore & Ramsay, 2021; Taylor & DeCillia, 2021).

Internal fact-checking: Specialisation and automatisation

Several countries, such as Belgium, Canada, Germany, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, appear to have a more systematic approach to internal fact-checking of digital and social media content than the remaining countries in the 2021 MDM project. In Germany (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021) and the United Kingdom (Moore & Ramsay, 2021), this approach at least partly stems from dedicated fact-checking efforts introduced to newsrooms in a pre-digital era, especially within investigative journalism. Respondents in, for example, Canada (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021) and Australia (Dwyer et al., 2021) highlight the introduction of training courses in social media reporting and verification that can be offered by the media organisation itself, by industry organisations, or by professional associations dedicated to data and investigative journalism. These courses denote the individual skills and responsibilities of individual journalists rather than sophisticated organisational policies. In many cases, internally appointed fact-checkers are seen as either too expensive or dispensable, given that fact-checking is seen as a central task of the journalist. As one senior columnist from an Australian media outlet put it while being interviewed:

> There is training on how to detect misinformation. But logic and experience provide more effective [screenings]. Internal fact-checkers are too expensive for most media organisations. This must be done by the journalist.

In other countries, specific training of individual journalists is still largely absent. As one Icelandic journalist summed it up in an interview: "In general, I don't think online journalists fact-check their stories well enough. We have not received any training in how to fight false or misleading information".

For countries with a more systematic approach to fact-checking and social media verification in the newsroom, we identify different types of strategies, applied to varying degrees. Most frequently reported is the introduction of small teams or task forces for fact-checking content from digital platforms. Many German newsrooms have specialised – although small – teams for this task (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021). More institutionalised fact-checking in the shape of special internal units can also be found in most editorial offices in Switzerland (Bonfadelli et al., 2021). Two specific kinds of events appeared to be particularly relevant for the choice to introduce dedicated fact-checking teams and specialists. One was times of social unrest, with an associated risk for increasing misinformation. An example comes from Chile, where some media in 2019 made temporary changes to their teams so more journalists could do fact-checking (Núñez-Mussa, 2021). The other kind of event that might require specialised teams is elections. As an editor at a Danish morning newspaper stated in an interview:

> We had a task force in connection with last year's national election that should have an eye on cases of misinformation in connection with the election, because one could be concerned that this could become a problem. It became clear, however, that misinformation was not a problem and the task force ended up spending their time with other things.

Moreover, fact-checking task forces seem to be most common among public broadcasters. In Flanders, Belgium, for example, the public broadcaster's Data Disinformation and Technology unit supports their journalists, specifically regarding misinformation and data journalism (Hendrickx et al., 2021). In Greece, where the institutionalisation of the verification process by experts or special units is still emerging, the public broadcaster ERT takes the lead in this development (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021). Perhaps surprisingly, this is not the case in the Netherlands, where privately owned news media have been seen to invest more time and staff in fact-checking than public broadcaster NOS, where specific fact-checking is more often done by individual journalists (Vandenberghe & d'Haenens, 2021). A second approach to internal fact-checking is to bring specially trained verification experts, such as data scientists and programmers, into the newsroom. In our sample, it is particularly South Korean media that report this as an emerging tendency (Kim & Lee, 2021). The use of algorithmic solutions for automated detection of potentially false and misleading information, on the other hand, does not seem to have caught on in newsrooms yet, at least not beyond the stage of initial testing. While many interviewees expressed curiosity and interest when asked about such solutions, some also expressed doubt, for example, an editor at a Danish newspaper:

> I want to say, the more tech-giants' platforms are run based on algorithms, the more I come to believe that our place in democracy is a different one, and that is the human assessment of a story's validity, as well as the human responsibility to treat the story in an ethical and professional manner.

Where algorithm-based detection tools are used, they are often implemented for other purposes, for instance, screening user comments. The automated detection of potential misinformation is thus still mostly in the hands of certified fact-checking organisations and networks. Some media organisations, for example, in Switzerland and Germany, do, however, collaborate with these external fact-checking organisations in a more institutionalised manner to fact-check incoming information.

Interestingly, collaboration with external fact-checkers appears more profound, where it is about covering instances of online misinformation rather than protecting news content from being based on misleading or false information. This will be elaborated in more detail, as we turn to more proactive, society-oriented approaches to counter online misinformation.

Countering misinformation at the societal level
A proactive approach

"Our whole business is built on fighting misinformation", said one interviewed Australian online editor. The 2021 MDM researchers interviewed journalists and editors about the reactive strategies outlined above, that is, their organisations' attempts to safeguard newsmaking from increased misinformation found on digital platforms. Yet, the interviews also revealed that journalists and editors did not necessarily think only in reactive terms when the term "online misinformation" was mentioned. Where the relevance or novelty of the phenomenon wasn't entirely dismissed (which was commonly the case in Iceland, Italy, and Austria), the interviewees' reactions were frequently not only about protecting newsmaking, but also about contributing to protecting society from misinformation. One example in this respect is a focus on audience awareness and literacy, that is, efforts to inform and educate audiences about the existence of online misinformation. The Finnish public broadcaster Yle, for example, has invested in new ways of increasing audience awareness and understanding of troll tactics by developing an online game which lets you play the role of a hateful troll. Trollitehdas [Troll Factory] was first released in Finnish in May 2019 and turned out to be so popular that an international version in English was released only a few months later (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021). During Canada's 2019 federal election, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's news service developed a chat bot to help news consumers spot so-called fake news (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021).

In the following part of our analysis, we extend the original MDM focus by pointing to two other aspects that address leading news media's role in societal efforts to combat misinformation: news media's participation in fact-checking initiatives and news media's role in regulatory ambitions to counter misinformation.

News media's role in fact-checking initiatives

The number of fact-checking initiatives has been steadily and rapidly increasing worldwide over the last few years. In its 2021 edition, the annual census of fact-checking projects by the Duke Reporter's Lab confirmed 290 active fact-checking projects around the globe (Stencel & Luther, 2020a), a number that was updated four months later to 300, almost double the number of projects registered in 2016. A particularly significant increase occurred in Asia, South America, and Europe (Stencel & Luther, 2020b).

While fact-checking initiatives might seem ubiquitous, the participation of news media in them varies substantially. At a global level, most initiatives are carried out by non-profit organisations dedicated mainly to producing verification articles (64.3%), whereas for-profit media outlets (28.6%) and academic projects (7.1%) are in the minority (Funke, 2018). These numbers are coherent with Graves's (2016) thesis, which understands fact-checking as a genre by itself. Fact-checking initiatives have matured to develop a specific method for reporting and presenting information, for example, with polygraphs and verdicts, and more relevant, a code of principles. Moreover, as the Poynter Institute – a critical player in the spread and standardisation of ideal practices for fact-checking projects – argues, "the low cost of online distribution, the increasing availability of open data and growing distrust in mainstream media has meant many fact-checking projects originate from outside traditional journalism" (Mantzarlis, 2016: para. 9). Empirical research on the professional self-understanding of fact-checkers points to a shared ethos of producing journalism centred on its civic mission (Galarza-Molina, 2020; Graves & Konieczna, 2015; Martínez-Carrillo & Tamul, 2019; Núñez-Mussa, 2019; Singer, 2020).

The journalists and editors from the MDM sample of leading news media mainly agree that fact-checking is a fundamental practice in their reporting. However, the different media vary in the degree to which they carry out specialised fact-checking projects themselves or join efforts with independent or academic fact-checking initiatives. In addition to differences in awareness of misinformation and budgetary and human resources, the maturity of a country's broader fact-checking ecosystem is a decisive factor. If there are several or more developed projects and high awareness, it is more likely that leading news media will establish a partnership or create a fact-checking project. Where there are

strong independent actors, mainstream media will likely collaborate with them. An example is found in Portugal, where the Portuguese fact-checking website Polígrafo started a partnership with the leading television channel SIC on a 30-minute weekly programme on prime time (Fidalgo, 2021). Moreover, in countries with strong public service media, their fact-checking units are frequently among the most prominent media-driven initiatives in the country, for example, German ZDFheuteCheck and ARDFaktenfinder (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021), or Danish Detektor (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021). In emerging fact-checking ecosystems, the partnership between fact-checkers and news media is less developed. An interviewed Greek journalist described the collaboration with fact-checking organisation Greek Hoaxes: "The burden [of fact-checking] rests upon 'Hoaxes' here in Greece. It is a credible source in my opinion, rather than a partnership".

Based on MDM interview material, as well as external data provided by Poynter/IFCN and Duke University's Reporters' Lab, we can roughly divide the countries included in the 2021 MDM into four groups, based on the involvement of leading news media in national fact-checking ecosystems.

The first group is comprised of weakly developed fact-checking ecosystems with a low-level of involvement of leading news media. Fact-checking is done on a small-scale (e.g., student-driven) basis, and registered fact-checking projects are either non-existent (Iceland) or conducted by international news agencies, so the news media organisations do not have internal fact-checking units, nor do they collaborate with external fact-checking initiatives (Hong Kong and Austria).

The second group is emerging fact-checking ecosystems with one or few independent fact-checking projects, where collaboration with selected leading news media is mostly temporary or through funding (Belgium, Greece, and Finland). In Finland, for example, leading newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* collaborates with the fact-checking initiative Faktabaari.

The third group is made up of well-established, small- and medium-sized fact-checking ecosystems, in which most fact-checking initiatives were originally founded or are currently run by leading (frequently public service) news media (Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, and Canada).

Finally, the fourth group has fully developed fact-checking ecosystems with several projects, collaboration between independent initiatives and established leading news media, and a focus on both political and social media misinformation (Germany, the Netherlands, Chile, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Portugal).

In the United Kingdom (FullFact), Germany (Correctiv), Italy (PagellaPolitica), Denmark (TjekDet), and Greece (Greek Hoaxes), we moreover find so-called second-generation fact-checkers, which also emphasise educational, collaborative, and research-oriented activities.

News media's role in regulatory ambitions
to counter misinformation

It has been widely acknowledged that an effective regulatory approach to misinformation requires the adoption of a multi-level and multi-stakeholder perspective. This implies the adoption of a regulatory strategy that first, integrates different geographical levels (supranational, international, national, and local), and second, builds on a networked perspective that includes all public and private actors that are and should be involved in the fight against misinformation. Examples of such an approach can be found in the CEPS policy paper for the European Parliament that highlights the need for a transition from self-regulatory options to co-regulatory ones, the empowerment and the support of end users, and finally the implementation of artificial intelligence in media and journalistic practices (CEPS, 2018). A second example is the report prepared by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) for the Council of Europe, which recommends the adoption of a multiple and interdisciplinary framework to contrast information disorder: The different perspectives should be technological, social, media-centric, educational, and normative. Likewise, the expert group on fake news created by the European Commission has pointed out several interconnected and mutually reinforcing responses that aim to provide long-term actions adopting a multi-level and multi-stakeholder strategy, specifying the importance of matching media literacy with the role of platforms, news media, and fact-checking organisations (European Commission, 2021a).

Media organisations and journalists are regularly addressed as key stakeholders in these approaches, next to platform providers, academic researchers, fact- and source-checkers, and civil society organisations. As such, the European Commission expert group's recommendations include several responses directly or indirectly targeted at news media, including the development of tools for empowering journalists to tackle misinformation, the enhancement of transparency of online news, as well as measures to safeguard the diversity and sustainability of the European news media ecosystem.

However, the policy and regulatory measures currently in place in the countries under study do not yet put a particular emphasis on news media organisations (Poynter, 2021; see also Table 2.1), but primarily target citizens and audiences (especially through media literacy campaigns, but also through online reporting portals, such as in Italy), and to a lesser degree platform providers. Only a few countries (South Korea, Hong Kong, Chile, and to an extent, Germany) have laws against and sanctions for the dissemination of false, misleading, or otherwise problematic content online in place or are planning to do so (Poynter, 2021). While such laws and sanctions are often proposed and designed with other groups in mind, they also apply to leading news media.

The role of leading news media in tackling misinformation has received somewhat more attention in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The most

recent UNESCO social media campaign to combat the spread of conspiracy theories in connection with Covid-19 not only targets users, but also specifies specific guidelines for journalistic reporting (UNESCO, 2021).

Commonalities and differences between countries

Our analysis represents an exploratory endeavour into how the issue of online misinformation has had an impact in newsrooms around the world. With a few exceptions, leading news media are aware and concerned about the issue and the dangers online misinformation poses to the journalistic profession, as well as to society at large. Our analysis also shows that this increasing awareness has not been translated into a coherent and systematic approach to tackling misinformation in most countries. Across countries, many journalists and editors have been hesitant towards or even actively resisting the idea that traditional journalistic routines and skills may fall short when it comes to the fact-checking of social media content. As such, the fact that algorithmic solutions for detecting problematic content (as they are used by professional fact-checkers) have not found their way into the modern newsroom is not necessarily a result of lacking awareness, knowledge, or resources, but of the shielding of conventional journalistic fact-checking as a professional core skill.

Still, our analysis has revealed different national approaches to online misinformation in newsrooms around the globe. The differences appear rather unsystematic when considering potential explanatory factors. For one, the size of the media system is not irrelevant, as the relatively more-developed approaches in Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom and the lack of systematic approaches in small states like Iceland show. Yet, a more individual and "old-school" approach to online misinformation also prevails in larger countries, such as Italy, and some of the more innovative takes on the matter can be found in smaller media systems, such as the Netherlands.

In some countries, for example, Finland, Chile, and Hong Kong, a perception of outside interference as well as political turmoil has emerged as a decisive factor in a change of attitude towards online misinformation in the newsroom, which may also be decisive in mustering awareness and resources for more systematic approaches to internal and external fact-checking. Yet, whether the leading news media have started to take active measures to tackle online misinformation does not always mirror the level of concern for fake news and misinformation in the general population, as the comparison with the Reuters Institute Digital News Report data shows (Newman et al., 2019; see Table 2.1). One example in this respect is Australia, where journalists and editors, in line with the general population, acknowledged the severity of the problem, but where specific measures and strategies appear more elusive.

Finally, reactive and proactive strategies vis-à-vis online misinformation do not necessarily go hand in hand. Indeed, when asked about their take on the importance of misinformation for newsmaking, some journalists and editors were more prone to think in lines of safeguarding their own reporting, while others immediately "jumped" to a more proactive understanding of safeguarding society from misinformation. Especially in countries with a heightened concern for political misinformation (such as Canada, Chile, or Hong Kong), news media may indeed be more focused on developing fact-checking as a journalistic genre than on integrating automated fact-checking and social media verification in journalistic processes.

Conclusion

We set out to interview journalists and editors associated with leading news media in 18 countries around the globe in early 2020, that is, before and in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our continuous observation of and dialogue with news media organisations in the participating countries suggest that the global concern for an infodemic in connection with Covid-19 has not left newsmakers unaffected – both in what regards a reactive and proactive stance on online misinformation. In a reactive fashion, the concern has led to renewed awareness that online misinformation during the pandemic poses an immediate risk for news coverage of Covid-19. In a proactive fashion, the concern underlines the need to reflect on news media's role in societies characterised by information disorder. How are news media to report on instances of false or even conspiratorial information flourishing online? Should news media avoid giving this type of information a platform? Should they inform and educate their users about the dangers of unverified information or actively seek out problematic material to debunk? In their recent overview, Tsfati and colleagues (2020) point out that there has not been enough focus on how leading news media might be a key culprit in spreading misinformation. By covering false and misleading information in their reporting, journalists can greatly expand its dissemination, even though the purpose is, in fact, to counter it.

Time (and the next edition of the MDM) will tell whether this heightened focus on online misinformation will lead to a more profound change in how leading news media tackle the phenomenon. Our results show that disruptive events (such as political turmoil or suspected foreign campaign interference) certainly have the potential to redefine how aware journalists and editors are of misinformation in the first place, and how they interpret their internal procedures, as well as their societal role, in the wake of this challenge. Covid-19 has pushed this concern to a truly global level.

Our results also show that the capability for news media to implement adequate routines and procedures to address the issue of online misinformation remains highly contingent on structural constraints, such as resources, time pressure, or the offer of specialisation and training – not least in small media markets and outlets. Still, we argue, a general heightened sense of awareness for the issue is a sine qua non. Such heightened awareness also includes the fact that it is indeed the reactive approach that needs addressing. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that it is easier for journalists and editors to resort to more proactive, societally oriented strategies – which speak to journalistic role perceptions connected to the news media's democratic role in society – rather than pointing to potential deficiencies in the newsroom.

Finally, the fear of an infodemic has intensified the debate about the need for more regulatory intervention. While most countries in the MDM project (pre-Covid-19) used only soft regulatory measures, if any, to address the problem of misinformation, harder measures – such as increased transparency requirements for platform providers and sanctions for the dissemination of false or hateful content – are now introduced in several countries. One example in this respect is Switzerland, where the government has recently started to discuss introducing a law targeting online misinformation and hate speech. While multinational actors, particularly the European Commission, have been rather active and visible in the fight against online misinformation, a truly multidimensional and networked strategy in which leading news media play a central part is still missing. How the regulatory perspective continues to develop, not least the adoption of a multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach, will be an important element to monitor in future research, particularly in the next MDM project.

So far, individual news organisations largely seem to address this challenge in isolation, and collaboration within the media sector, as well as with other stakeholders, is only emerging. Yet, leading news media have a crucial role to play in the fight against online misinformation, also outside times of turmoil and crisis.

Alice Fubini; "Awareness and problem definition" by Wai Han Lo and Eva Mayerhöffer; "Everyday actions to check and validate information: Reactive strategies" and "Internal fact-checking: Specialisation and automatisation" by Jón Gunnar Ólafsson and Leen d'Haenens; "News media's role in fact-checking initiatives" by Enrique Núñez-Mussa and Brooks DeCillia; and "News media's role in regulatory ambitions to counter misinformation" by Marinella Belluati and Alice Fubini. All authors contributed to the revisions of the chapter.

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