

FACT CHECKING IN CROATIA: TOPIC SELECTION AND DEBUNKING ROUTINES AT FAKTOGRAF.hr

MATO
BRAUTOVIĆ

REPORT

IMPRESSUM

Author:

Mato Brautović, University of Dubrovnik

Graphic design:

Sven Sorić

Bojan Crnić

Publisher:

Gong

Executive Director:

Oriana Ivković Novokmet

Mihanovićeveva 14

10 000 Zagreb

e-mail: gong@gong.hr

web: www.gong.hr

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Pro-fact: Research, education, fact-check and debunk COVID-19 related disinformation narratives in Croatia

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University of Dubrovnik,

Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing and Faktograf.hr

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PRQ-FACT

EDMO
European Digital Media Observatory



GONG

FER

fpzg
Forum for Press and Journalism Studies

Centar za istraživanje
i razvoj u
komunikacijama

FAKTOGRAF.HR



SUMMARY

This report is part of the research activities carried out within the project Pro-fact: Research, education, fact-check and debunk COVID -19 related disinformation narratives in Croatia, funded by the EU grants for small-scale online media. The aim was to identify Faktograf's practice of selecting topics for debunking as a basis for selecting the sample for further analysis of disinformation networks and sources through social network analysis, dynamic network analysis and content analysis.

Key findings:

- The editor-in-chief of Faktograf is responsible for selecting the disinformation to be debunked
- In the case of Faktograf, the selection of disinformation to be debunked is based on the criteria of spread and capacity of disinformation, severity of disinformation, and influence on elections
- In the case of Faktograf, users also suggest disinformation to be debunked
- Facebook tools and partnership programs influence selection, but have no alternative
- Other platforms do not provide access to data or help fact-checking organizations

INTRODUCTION

As checking content shared online against the truality of the claims presented in them is out of the scope of our research, we decided to lean our research (Brautovic, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c) on the established practice of using debunks created by fact-checking organizations as a starting point for further analysis. This approach raised some questions. Naimly, research conducted by Uscinski and Butler (2013) found that fact-checking is failing, among others, in its selection of disinformation for fact-checking, because it is not based on random samples, but contrary, on subjective decision of the fact-checkers. As such, the choice itself can be subjective and biased.

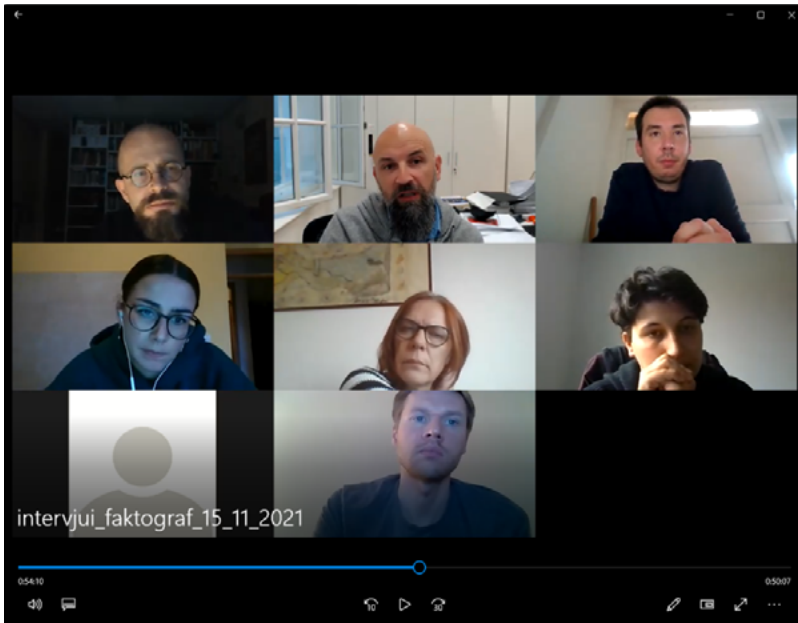
“...without explicit selection criteria, fact checkers’ own biases would invariably affect their choice of which actors and which statements to check. The end result of this would be to make political actors look much more truthful or dishonest than they might actually be.” (Uscinski, 2015, p. 244)

On the other hand, Michelle Amazeen (2015) critiqued the work of Uscinski and Butler (2013), noting that impeccable practice plays an important role in democracy. In line with Amazeen, and against Uscinski’s harsh qualification, we wanted to explore the practices of Faktograf, as our further research is highly dependent on the selected sample. To do so, we developed the following research questions:

- Rq1: How does Faktograf.hr select topics for debunking?
- Rq2: What tools are used to help fact checkers do their work?
- Rq3: How is the collaboration between Facebook and other platforms with fact-checkers?

METHODOLOGY

For this study, we used an online focus group as a research method, which was conducted on November 15th, 2021. The focus group consisted of four representatives of Faktograf.hr: Petar Vidov (editor-in-chief), Ana Brakus (executive director), Sanja Despot (deputy editor-in-chief) and Ivana Živković (communication editor). The focus group was led by two researchers, professor Nebojša Blanuša from the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, and Mato Brautović, professor from the University of Dubrovnik. Also present was researcher Matej Gjurković. The focus group started at 11:00 and ended at 12:32, and was conducted using the Zoom conferencing tool. The focus group protocol (see Annex) was initially developed by Marijana Grbeša, professor from the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, alongside professor Nebojša Blanuša and professor Mato Brautović.



RESULTS

TOPIC SELECTION & ROUTINES

The editor-in-chief of Faktograf is responsible for the selection of topics. As an everyday working activity, in the morning, the editor-in-chief routinely analyzes insights from Facebook, as well as from alternative, pseudo, and mainstream media. Usually, there are several trending disinformation and the editor-in-chief selects those to be debunked based on the following criteria:

- Prevalence of the disinformation
- Capacity for spreading
- Severity of the disinformation
- Influence on elections

Prevalence and capacity of the disinformation is determined based on data coming from Facebook's tools and editor in chief experience.

“As an editor, I follow what's happening online day by day, using some of the tools provided to us mainly by Facebook. With these tools, I can basically track what is going viral in Croatian. So, what is being shared and in what number, what has just arrived, so there is a big fast growth to reach other users. Based on that, I assess what the priorities are. And, of course, how serious this disinformation is. So we are looking at disinformation that are potentially dangerous to human health, vaccines, pandemics in general. And disinformation that can impact election campaigns. If someone is running an online campaign whose goal is to use disinformation to steer voters in a certain direction.” (P. Vidov)

Part of debunkings were initiated by Faktograf's users, who can suggest the disinformation for the debunking. Faktograf introduced a new option for the users to suggest a topic for debunking in February 2020.

“From February 2020, we started collecting and recording user requests, and we created a dedicated section. And since we started collecting, we have published more than 300 debunkings based only on reader requests. And that was very useful at the beginning of the pandemic, because user queries were an indicator of how widespread something was, and it was hard to tell just from the numbers on Facebook.” (I. Živković)

Faktograf's editor in chief was aware that his routine of selecting disinformation for debunking was a specific strategy, based on his experience about the damage of fear-arousing narratives to prevent viral dissemination of disinformation.-

“At some point, I am going to make an assessment that we are going to look at something that's not as widely used yet because I think it has potential to be shared. The selection process itself is always a trade off of what is more important at a particular point in time when you are looking

at something that has already become widespread. On the other hand, you may have the opportunity to deal with something that has not yet spread very widely, and in my experience so far, my guess is that it will, and then it would rather go after it to suppress the spread of that disinformation than to deal with something that has already spread widely because a lot of people have seen it. I can not change that. Basically, I make those kinds of assessments based on what kind of narrative it is and how it is conceived, for example, that something is going to kill you.” (P. Vidov)

TOOLS USED

Faktograf’s fact-checkers use two software tools. The first is an interface created by Facebook that detects the spread of disinformation in the similar language area. This tool is available only to fact-checking organizations which signed the contract with Facebook. The second is the Crowd Tangle tool, which is used to spot the disinformation which became viral - transferring from marginal to mainstream.

The Editor in-chief is aware of the limitations of Facebook’s tools, and he is hoping that EDMO will produce a general tool that will help fact-checkers to monitor all critical places online.

FACEBOOK COLLABORATION AND OTHER PLATFORMS

Faktograf is focused on disinformation on Facebook because it is the most popular social media platform in Croatia, while Twitter is too small, and YouTube does not provide support in conducting fact-checking.

“First, Facebook gives us some insights that help us do our jobs. No one else gives us access to it. Secondly, Facebook is the most popular social network in Croatia, there is no doubt about that. And now, theoretically, we could monitor some Telegram groups and find out what’s going on there and deal with it, but that’s a bit pointless. Telegram has a limited reach. With Facebook, we can point out to people that they are seeing disinformation. That’s the purpose of this program - to reduce the reach of disinformation. Once fact-checkers flag a piece of content as disinformation, the people who shared it receive a message from Facebook informing them that it is disinformation and directing them to the correct information. That’s why the focus is on Facebook.” (P. Vidov)

Faktograf is aware of limitations of cooperation with Facebook but they point to the damage caused by other social media platforms.

“The advantage is that we work with Facebook, and the disadvantage is that we work with Facebook. We just get some information, we get some

data, actually a whole range of data, while we are not allowed to share some data. I would like to see us focus a little bit on other platforms that are doing almost the same damage. Lately, that's been YouTube in particular, which has done so much damage during the pandemic that it's just not normal, and it goes completely under the radar. They are not providing any information. It's completely unknown how their algorithm works." (A. Brakus)

Fact checkers are aware that YouTube removes the disinformation but without any explanation that is causing even more confusion.

"The video simply disappears, adding to the confusion and helping the conspiracy theorists, who then claim that their content was removed because it was true and escaped YouTube's scrutiny. They argue that YouTube censors found out at the last minute and removed it. So that creates total confusion, it's completely non-transparent." (A. Brakus)

CONCLUSION

Although the practice of fact-checking is limited, due to the standardization imposed by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the partnership with the Facebook platform (Third-Party Fact-Checking Program), it represents a good starting point for conducting research that seeks to shed light on the phenomenon of disinformation. However, opening up other platforms, particularly YouTube and TikTok, would provide greater insight into the phenomenon. Based on the data collected in the focus group, we can conclude that the Faktograf.hr disinformation database is a reliable (and only) source for identifying the source of disinformation on Facebook and other platforms in Croatia.

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ANNEX

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

SELECTION OF DISINFORMATION FOR DEBUNKING

- How is fact checking going, do you have any protocols?
- What channels/platforms do you debunk?
- How do you select disinformation for debunking, in terms of content and relevance of news, i.e. how do you select it?
- How do you ensure representativeness in the selection?

DEBUNKING PROCES

- What does the debunking process look like? Is it standardized?
- Describe for us the standard procedure.
- What sources do they use for debunking? How reliable are these sources on the basis of which they debunk the disinformation claims, and how do they evaluate them?
- Is there a standard form for what a debunking should include?

TOOLS

- Do you use a tool to detect disinformation? And, if so, which one?
- Describe any difficulties you have using different tools.
- How do you use the CrowdTangle tool to detect disinformation? Can you give us a glimpse of how you use it (print templates or similar)?

COLLABORATION WITH FACEBOOK

- What role does the partnership with Facebook play in detecting and debunking disinformation?
- Describe any difficulties you encounter when working with Facebook?

FOLLOW OF DEBUNKING

- Is there stigmatization of sources (channels, organizations, and individuals) as a result of your work?
- To what extent do you yourself contribute to the visibility of disinformation (e.g., when they single out insignificant 'news' stories that do not have a wide reach, but ensure that they become visible by publishing them on their channels)?

ABOUT AUTHOR

MATO BRAUTOVIĆ is a professor at the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Dubrovnik. He is an author and co-author of many books, book chapters, and scientific papers in professional journals in the field of his expertise – media and war, journalism, internet history, online disinformation, digital methods, and social media. Professor Brautovic has a long and rich experience with scraping, cleaning and analyzing big data, going back to 2006, when he conducted his first social network analysis (SNA).

The Project ‘PRO-FACT: RESEARCH, EDUCATION, FACT-CHECK AND DEBUNK COVID-19 RELATED DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN CROATIA’ is tackling disinformation related to COVID-19 on multiple levels by a multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach. Through research, awareness raising, and capacity-building methods, the project comprehensively approaches the social, political, and health problem of spreading disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19. Through its activities, it aims to effectively expose COVID-19 related disinformation campaigns in Croatia, strengthen the Croatian multidisciplinary team capacities for detecting and combating disinformation campaigns, and to increase media literacy competencies of Croatia journalists and the general public. The coordinator of the project is Gong, while the partner organizations are: Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb, University of Dubrovnik, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing and Faktograf.hr.



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Mato Brautović

Zagreb, 2022.