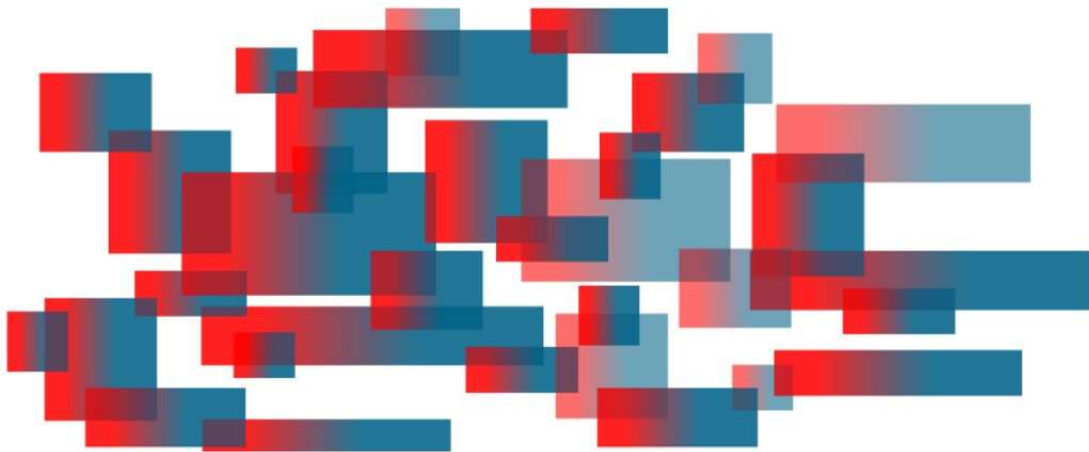


Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe



Survey Report



International
Press
Institute



IMPRESSUM

The Decoding the Disinformation Playbook project

Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

This survey aims to document the experiences of fact-checking organisations and outlets which suffer harassment, focusing particularly on coordinated campaigns against journalists and fact-checkers and their role in European disinformation trends. Faktograf, in cooperation with Tijana Cvjetićanin from the Zašto ne association, in the scope of the **Decoding the Disinformation Playbook project** conducted a survey presented in this report to explore the impact of harassment and disinformation targeting fact-checking organisations in Europe.

The Decoding Disinformation Playbook project is led by International Press Institute (IPI) and implemented in partnership with Croatian fact-checking outlet Faktograf and the German daily newspaper TAZ.

The survey was conducted among the verified signatories of the Code of Principles of the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN)¹ working in European countries (member countries of Council of Europe, Kosovo or Belarus), most of whom were active in the creation of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), and the members of the SEE Check network² in December 2022 and January 2023.³ It collected overall experience with harassment, as well as the descriptions of significant harassment cases of fact-checkers in Europe. Additionally, four case studies will also be published as a part of the Decoding Disinformation Playbook project, detailing two cases of harassment against fact-checking outlets, and two cases of harassment against journalists. The purpose of the case studies is to investigate the techniques, tactics, and protocols of attacks on media as part of disinformation campaigns by political and other actors and narratives that those actors are trying to impose into public discourse.

¹ See The commitments of the code of principles, Poynter Institute, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-commitments-of-the-code-of-principles> and: Verified signatories of the IFCN code of principles, Poynter Institute, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories>

² About us, SEE Check Network, <https://seecheck.org/index.php/about/>

³ Most of the respondents (36 out of 41) were also a part of the EFCSN network's Wide Group – a group of fact-checking organisations included in the creation of the aforementioned European Code of Standards for fact-checkers. (See: The European Code of Standards for Independent Fact-Checking Organisations, European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), August 2022, p 24

<https://eufactcheckingproject.com/app/uploads/2022/10/EU-CODE-EFCSN-.pdf>).

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted online, through a questionnaire with a combination of open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Fact-checking⁴ newsrooms were asked to have the survey filled out by a person who has the most insight into harassment that the outlet or its individual employees face (a person with seniority and/or a position in the newsroom which is most likely to deal with such occurrences). The respondents were instructed to answer the questionnaire even if they haven't had any experiences of harassment.

The survey defined the key terms in the following way:

Harassment: any verbal or physical attack that has occurred in relation to the fact-checking work that the respondents do, including, but not limited, to:

- verbal attacks including threats, inciting violent or retaliatory behaviour, spreading false claims about the respondent or their work, organising or instigating harassment on social networks: coordinated reporting, "trolling", impersonation, "doxing", intimidation, sexual and/or gender-based harassment, mobilising followers or voters against the respondent, offensive or disturbing content and hate speech in messages and comments, stalking, etc.;
- attacks on the respondents' digital assets (hacking and similar) or physical property;
- physical violence against the staff.

Political actors: persons directly involved in party politics or governance, including:

- elected or appointed officials, holding political positions in any branch or level of government;
- persons active in political parties.

Relevant actors: public figures not directly involved in politics, but engaged in public discourse on policy-related topics, such as:

- media personalities such as pundits, analysts, commentators; celebrities and influencers engaging on political or social issues;
- public figures advocating for social or political causes (activists belonging to civil society organisations, groups or movements; religious leaders);
- persons with significant power or influence outside of politics (representatives of large companies, tycoons, investors).

⁴ Fact-checking is understood as "the use of an evidence-based method to verify the accuracy of claims made in the public sphere" (Introduction to The European Code of Standards for Independent Fact-Checking Organisations, European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), <https://efcsn.com/code-of-standards/>)

DATA PRIVACY AND PROTECTION

The survey was conducted via a Google form. The respondents were asked to enter their names and email addresses, which were not shared nor visible to anyone but the researchers. The respondents could choose between three data privacy options and their answers have been used in this report in accordance with their choices:

- consent to the full use of any information provided in the questionnaire (publishing names of people and organisations, locations, descriptions of events, etc.) - 13 respondents (32%) choose this option;
- consent only to the use of information that is already public (news reports published about cases of harassment described in the questionnaire) - 12 respondents (29%) choose this option;
- consent only to the use of anonymised information about specific cases of harassment (descriptions of events may be used, but without naming any persons or specifying locations) - 15 respondents (37%) choose this option⁵.

Overall, a large majority of respondents (66%) opted for some level of restriction in public use of provided information. The highest percentage of respondents (37%) only gave consent to the use of anonymised information. This has put considerable limitations on presenting the qualitative analysis of survey results and some constraints to presenting data obtained through the research. At the same time, the fact that only 32% of the respondents were willing to publicly share comprehensive information about the harassment they experience, underlines research findings about the prevalence and intensity of harassment that fact-checkers face.⁶

⁵ One respondent (2%) did not answer the question, choosing no options.

⁶ It is, however, interesting to see that most of the respondents who have agreed to the use of all the data they provided (11 out of 13), come from the Southern Europe region, where harassment is most intensely present.

FACT-CHECKING OUTLETS: AN OVERVIEW

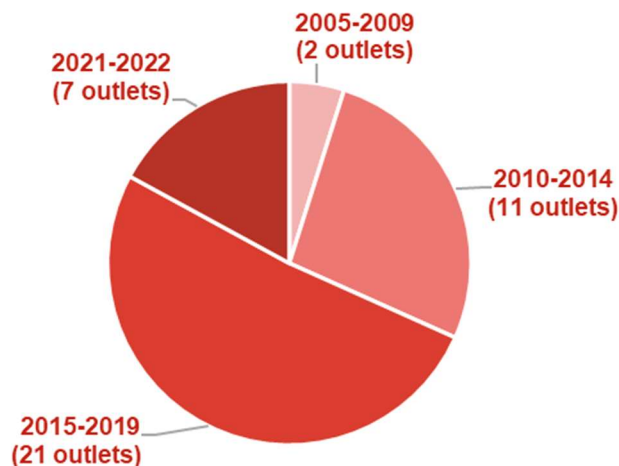
Overall statistics about the respondents / fact-checking outlets

We got responses from **41** fact-checking outlets run by **40** organisations, which come from **28** countries.⁷ Most of the respondents (21) are located in the region of Southern Europe, eight are located in Northern and Western Europe respectively and four are located in the region of Eastern Europe.⁸

Region	Number of respondents
Southern Europe	21 (51%)
Northern Europe	8 (20%)
Western Europe	8 (20%)
Eastern Europe	4 (10%)
Total	41 (100%)

Most of the fact-checking outlets have started working **between the years 2016 and 2019 (26 out of 41)**. Only two outlets were registered before 2010 (both in 2009), and only one in 2021.

REGISTRATION YEARS



⁷ **Organisations** are legal entities, registered as media companies, non-profits, or other types of companies. Fact-checking **outlets** are projects dedicated specifically to fact-checking, either standalone or developed as units of larger organisations.

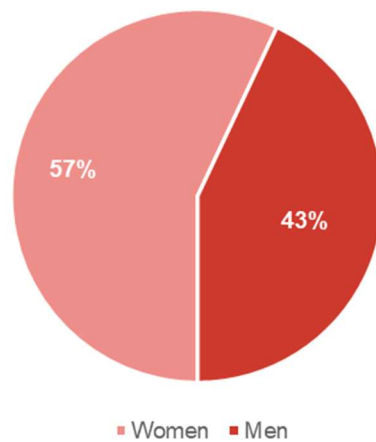
The size and gender structure of newsrooms

About a half of the outlets (21) have 10 employees or less, 10 outlets employ between 10 and 20 people, 7 outlets employ more than 20 people and only 1 has more than 50 people.

Fact checking newsrooms are, on average, composed of 57% women and 43% men. Out of the 39 respondents that answered this question, most (21) have over 50% of women in their staff. There is only one outlet that has 100% women employees.

Women	Number of outlets
1-25%	3
26-50%	15
51-75%	11
76-100%	10

EMPLOYEES BY GENDER



The countries of respondents' primary locations are listed below in alphabetical order: Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom.

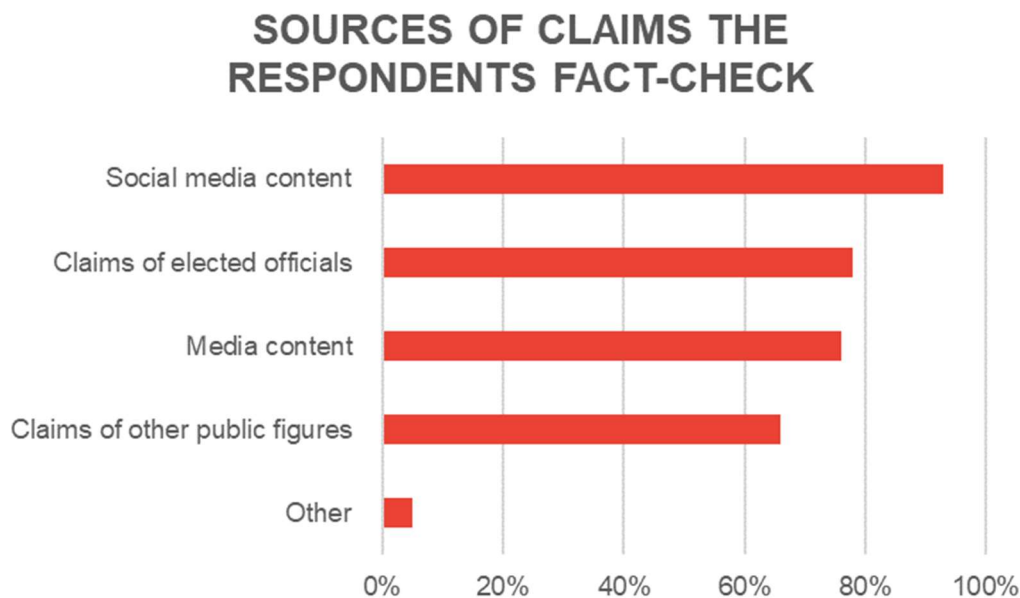
⁸ The categorisation into regions is based on UN geographic regions (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>)

Countries that are classified as Western Asia in the UN scheme have been added into the regions of Southern Europe (Turkey) and Eastern Europe (Azerbaijan, Georgia).

What type of fact-checking do the respondents do?

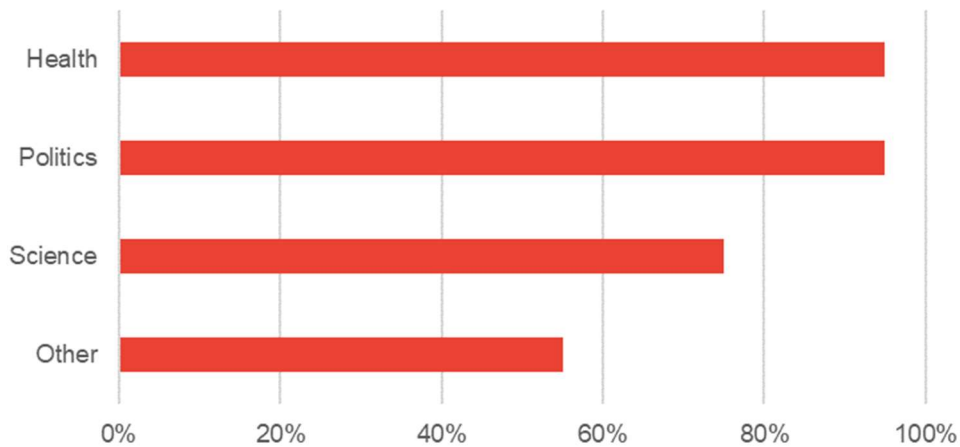
The respondents were asked about the sources of claims they fact check in a multiple-choice question with 4 predefined answers: claims of elected officials, claims of other public figures, media content, social media content, and an open answer that could be added by the respondents.

The large majority of respondents (38 outlets) fact-check **social media content**, 32 outlets fact-check the **claims stated by elected officials**, 31 fact-check **claims published in the media** and 27 outlets fact-check **claims from public figures other than officials**. More than half of the respondents (21) answered that they fact-check **claims from all four types of sources**. One specified that it fact-checks science-related claims from any source.



When it comes to the content of the claims, 21 out of 41 respondents answered the question about topics and areas of interest that they fact-check. **The majority chose all three predefined answers (health, science and politics).**

TOPICS THAT THE RESPONDENTS FACT-CHECK



Cooperation with tech platforms

All the respondents answered the question about partnering with social media/tech companies.

The majority of the respondents (33, 80%) are a part of the Meta company's Third-Party Fact-checking Program⁹, which enables them to rate fact-checked content on Facebook and Instagram.

There are 3 fact-checking outlets that said they are also included in other similar programmes with tech companies. Only one outlet has a partnership of a similar kind that is not with Meta, and 7 respondents said that they are not a part of any such programme.

⁹ Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/mjp/programs/third-party-fact-checking>

EXPERIENCES OF HARASSMENT

Frequency of harassment by public figures

In two separate questions, the respondents were asked about how often they experience any form of harassment by political actors and by other relevant actors.¹⁰ **90% of respondents experienced harassment from political or other relevant actors.** Only four fact-checking outlets (10%) responded that they have never experienced any form of harassment by either a political actor or any other relevant actor.¹¹ More than half of the survey respondents have experienced repeated harassment varying from attacks that have happened “a few times altogether”¹² to “a few times per year”. Taken together, these make up for more than half of the respondents’ answers – about 66% when it comes to attacks from political actors, and about 56% when it comes to other relevant actors.

85% of the fact-checking outlets reported attacks from public figures who are not directly involved in politics but are engaged in political and social issues such as media pundits, analysts, activists or leaders of groups or movements. **29% (12) of the respondents experience very frequent harassment from other relevant actors,** on a monthly or weekly basis.

78% of fact-checking organisations reported being targeted by political actors, half of which were MPs in the opposition party, or members of an opposition party that does not have a representation in the Parliament. **12% (5) of respondents experience harassment by political actors very frequently,** on a monthly or weekly basis.

Overall, harassment from public figures who are not directly involved in politics is somewhat more frequent than that coming from political actors.

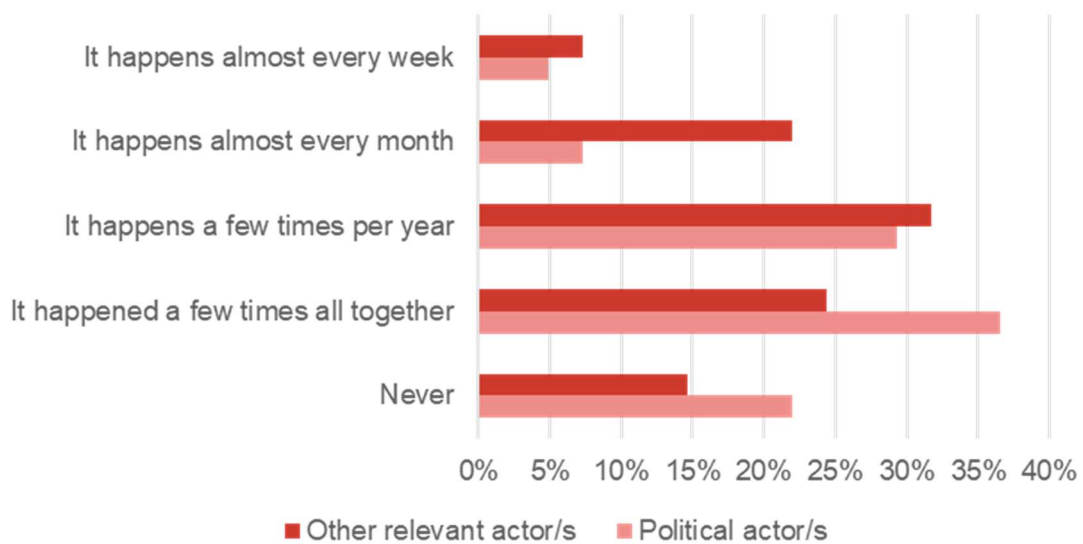
¹⁰ See definition of political actors and relevant actors in the “Methodology” section of this report.

¹¹ Out of those four, one has been working since 2016, while the other three have started more recently (two in 2019 and one in 2020).

¹² Out of the 15 respondents who chose this answer for political actors, two have been working for almost ten years (since 2013 and 2014), seven have started working in 2016–2018 and six have started more recently in 2019–2020. Out of the 7 respondents who chose this answer for other relevant actors, one of them started working in 2013, four started in 2016 or 2017 and two started in 2019.

	How often have you experienced any form of harassment by political actors?	How often have you experienced any form of harassment by other relevant actors?
Never	9 (22%)	6 (14.6%)
It happened a few times altogether	15 (36.6%)	10 (24.4%)
It happens a few times per year	12 (29.3%)	13 (31.7%)
It happens almost every month	3 (7.3%)	9 (22%)
It happens almost every week	2 (4.9%)	3 (7.3%)

FREQUENCY OF HARASSMENT



When the results are grouped into regions, **it is seen that cases of harassment occur somewhat more frequently in the region of Southern Europe**, both when it comes to political actors and other relevant actors.

How often do you experience harassment?	By political actors							
	Southern Europe		Northern Europe		Western Europe		Eastern Europe	
Never	1	5%	3	38%	3	38%	2	50%
It happened a few times altogether	7	33%	3	38%	5	63%	0	0%
It happens a few times per year	10	48%	1	13%	0	0%	1	25%
It happens almost every month	1	5%	1	13%	0	0%	1	25%
It happens almost every week	2	10%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
TOTAL	21	100%	8	100%	8	100%	4	100%
How often do you experience harassment?	By other relevant actors							
	Southern Europe		Northern Europe		Western Europe		Eastern Europe	
Never	2	9%	1	13%	2	25%	1	25%
It happened a few times altogether	5	23%	5	63%	0	0%	0	0%
It happens a few times per year	7	32%	2	25%	4	50%	0	0%
It happens almost every month	6	29%	0	0%	1	13%	2	50%
It happens almost every week	1	5%	0	0%	1	13%	1	25%
TOTAL	21	100%	8	100%	8	100%	4	100%

Given that Southern Europe (SE) is the location of as many respondents as all three other regions together, the comparison was drawn between SE and other regions combined.

How often do you experience harassment?	By political actors				By other relevant actors			
	Southern Europe		Other regions		Southern Europe		Other regions	
Never	1	5%	8	40%	2	9%	4	20%
It happened a few times altogether	7	33%	8	40%	5	23%	5	25%
It happens a few times per year	10	48%	2	10%	7	32%	6	30%
It happens almost every month	1	5%	2	10%	6	29%	3	15%
It happens almost every week	2	10%	0	0%	1	5%	2	10%
TOTAL	21	100%	20	100%	21	100%	20	100%

The most noticeable difference is present in the answers regarding harassment from political actors, which fact-checkers from the Southern Europe region experience much more frequently than in other European regions. Only 5% of SE fact-checkers said that they have never experienced harassment from political actors, compared to 40% of respondents from other regions. The most intense harassment, which occurs almost on a weekly basis, is virtually non-existent in other regions, while 10% of SE fact-checkers said they did experience it.

When it comes to harassment from other relevant actors, the experiences are not as distant, but there are still noticeable differences in the percentage of respondents from the SE region who say that they never experienced harassment compared to other regions (9% in SE and 20% in other regions), and in the percentage of respondents who experience frequent harassment, that occurs almost on a monthly basis (29% in SE region and 15% in other regions).

More than a half of fact-checking outlets keep records of the harassment they experience - 19 out of the 37 who answered this question. Four more respondents described different systems of occasional or partial records they keep, while 14 said that they don't keep records of harassment or attacks that happened to them.

Perpetrators

Among political actors, the fact-checkers reported that they are somewhat more often attacked by **political actors coming from opposition parties in their countries**. 48.5% have had that experience with an MP in the national parliament that comes from an opposition party, 36.4% by a member of an opposition party who does not have a seat in the parliament and 39.4% by a member of a non-parliamentary party.

Members of the parliamentary majority have targeted fact-checkers in 13 cases (39.4%), while members of the government and members of the ruling party who do not have a seat in the parliament have targeted fact-checkers in 8 cases (24.2%) each.

Group	Type of actor	Responses	Total (group)
European Parliament	Member of the European parliament	3	3
Government	Member of the parliament in your country from a majority party	13	36
	Member of the government	9	
	Member of a ruling party, but without a seat in the parliament or government	9	
	Head of state	3	
	Head of government	1	
	Head of parliament	1	
Opposition	Member of the parliament in your country from an opposition party	16	41
	Member of a non-parliamentary party	13	
	Member of an opposition party, without a seat in the parliament	12	
Other	Other	2	2

Five fact-checkers have experienced harassment from political actors in top positions of the government, including a head of state (3 respondents), head of government (1) and head of parliament (1). Out of the five, four come from SEE countries. Georgia is the only country outside of the region where a respondent has experienced this type of harassment. Serbia is the only country where two separate outlets have been targeted by the head of state.

Fact-checkers have also been targeted by public institutions as such. In Albania, the presidential office "reported" the fact-checker to the bailiff office after they sent an information request.¹³

Members of the parliamentary majority have targeted fact-checkers in 13 cases, while members of the government and members of the ruling party who do not have a seat in the parliament have targeted them in 8 cases each.

When it comes to **other relevant actors** who had targeted fact-checkers (public figures not directly involved in politics, but engaged with political and social issues), more than half of the respondents (28) selected **media personalities, pundits and commentators** as those who have committed or incited harassment against them. In 14 cases, harassment was committed or incited by public figures who campaigned or advocated for some social or political causes.

More than a third of the respondents have experienced attacks from actors coming from both the government and opposition parties. There are 3 fact-checkers (9%) who have been targeted by a member of the European Parliament from their country.

Three fact-checkers added that they were harassed by other media (journalists, editors, bloggers, owners of channels that publish disinformation). All three come from the SEE region. All three come from the SEE region, including one from Bosnia and Herzegovina¹⁴ and one from Kosovo, where a fact-checker was targeted by the person running the public broadcaster.¹⁵ While they haven't specifically named them in their answers, other fact-checkers also described being targeted by other media outlets or media-like websites, overtly or covertly connected to political actors. The harassment campaign against Vistinomer from North Macedonia, that started on a news website, had been openly cheered on by former majority party VMRO.¹⁶

¹³ The Presidential Office Refusal to Execute the Court Decision and Pressure on the Bailiff and Court ruling in favour of Faktoje, Faktoje, February 2021, <https://en.faktoje.al/the-presidential-office-refusal-to-execute-the-court-decision-and-pressure-on-the-bailiff-and-court-ruling-in-favor-of-faktoje/>.

¹⁴ The threat made to BiH-based fact-checker Raskrinkavanje came from an editor of Avaz, one of the most popular websites/daily newspapers in the country, eventually prompting IFCN to launch an anti-harassment working group. See: IFCN launches working group to address harassment against fact-checkers, The Poynter Institute, July 2021, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2021/ifcn-launches-working-group-to-address-harassment-against-fact-checkers/>

¹⁵ Drejtuesit e RTK-së humbin betejën me 12 medime online, Kallxo, October 2022, <https://kallxo.com/gjate/drejtuesit-e-rtk-se-humbin-betejen-me-12-medime-online/>.

Relevant actor/s responsible for the harassment:	Responses
Media personalities such as pundits, analysts, commentators; celebrities and influencers engaging on political or social issues;	28
Public figures advocating for social or political causes (activists belonging to civil society organisations, groups or movements; religious leaders)	14
Persons with significant power or influence outside of politics (representatives of large companies, tycoons, investors)	8
Other	4

When asked if the attacks from political or other actors have become more frequent since they have joined a fact-checking partnership with Meta or other platforms, **most of the respondents (18 out of 32 that had answered the question) said that they have increased**. Some added that the increase had been “substantial”, but that it might have been related to other circumstances as well, such as the democratic backsliding, or the fact-checking outlet itself becoming more prominent and relevant. Three respondents noted that it is hard to estimate which factors were most influential because they have been included in Meta’s programme very early on, so they had no basis for comparison.

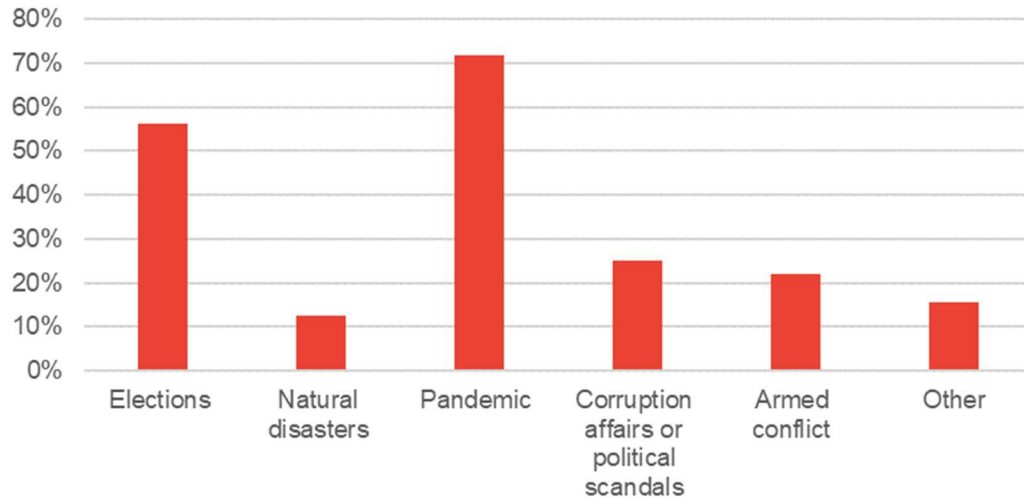
Another factor that was tested as a possible influence on the frequency of harassment were extraordinary events that profoundly influence political and social life and the news cycle. **Unsurprisingly, out of the 5 predefined answers,¹⁷ the Covid-19 pandemic was selected as most impactful** in this regard by the majority of respondents who answered this question (23 out of 32). The election period is also an influencing factor by the experience of about 56% of respondents, while about 22% also marked armed conflict – specifically, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine – as a factor that had influenced the frequency of attacks they encountered because of their work.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hate speech and harassment campaign against Metamorphosis staff continues with impunity: “Should we shoot them or bring funeral wreaths to their homes?”, Meta.mk, December 2020, <https://meta.mk/en/hate-speech-against-metamorphosis-foundation-staff-still-unpunished-should-we-shoot-them-or-bring-funeral-wreaths-to-their-homes/>

¹⁷ The predefined answers were: elections, natural disasters, pandemic, corruption affairs or political scandals, and armed conflict.

¹⁸ In some cases, fact-checkers were even directly targeted by Russian state actors. For example, the embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has singled out the BiH-based fact-checker for debunking the claim about “US biolabs” in Ukraine and accused it of being a US puppet. (See: Announcement regarding the accusations from the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zašto ne, <https://zastone.ba/en/announcement-regarding-the-accusations-from-the-embassy-of-the-russian-federation-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>, February 2023)

PERCEIVED RELATION BETWEEN ATTACKS AND EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS



Channels of harassment

The respondents were asked to mark all the channels and/or places where harassment has occurred, in a multiple-choice question with 10 predefined answers and an open-end option. **The majority of the fact-checkers have been harassed through multiple communication channels.** Out of the 36 respondents that answered the question, 30 have experienced harassment on three or more channels. Only two respondents have experienced harassment on just one channel.¹⁹

The majority **of harassment occurs online, predominantly on social networks**: 32 out of 36 respondents have been attacked on social media profiles, pages or channels owned by the attacker. The second most frequent channel of harassment are **online portals and websites** (29). 25 respondents have received attacks on their own social media pages and 22 through direct written communication (emails, messages).

Verbal communication through phone calls happens considerably less frequently, as is the case with in-person contact. Broadcast media are more often used to harass fact-checkers than print media, and only a few of the respondents have been targeted on press conferences of political or other relevant actors. One respondent has experienced public protests organised in front of their premises.

Where and how were the attacks carried out? (Multiple choice)			
Channel/place	Number of occurrences	Group	Total
Media broadcasts (live TV or radio)	12	Offline (public and private)	34
Print media (columns, comments)	10		
Press conference	3		
Direct verbal communication (phone calls)	9		
Direct in-person contact (street, office)	4	Physical space	5
Public protest	1		
Social networks: on pages or profiles of the attacker	32	Online (public and private)	108
Online publications/web portals	29		
Social networks: On your own pages and profiles	25		
Direct written communication (emails, messages, letters)	22		

¹⁹ Both were online communications: direct written communication in one case, and attacker's social network pages in another.

Types of harassment online

The respondents were asked about the type of online harassment they have experienced in a multiple-choice question with 7 predefined answers and an open-end option.

More than three quarters of the respondents experience harassment online **and most commonly as verbal attacks on social media, which are experienced by 30 respondents** (out of the 35 respondents that had answered this question). Verbal attacks in online media are also relatively common, reported by 23 of the fact-checking outlets that have experienced online harassment.

An alarmingly high number of respondents (25) **have experienced harassment campaigns** which include prolonged and/or coordinated behaviour such as stalking, organised reporting, hate speech, "doxing"²⁰ and similar.

Five respondents have also experienced **attempts of hacking or other attacks on their digital assets**. **Three respondents** have experienced **sexual harassment online** that was related to the fact-checking work that they do.

What types of online attacks against you did political or other relevant actors conduct or instigate? (Multiple choice)	
Types of online harassment	Number of occurrences
Verbal attacks in social media	30
Harassment campaigns (hate speech, organised reporting, "trolling", doxing)	25
Verbal attacks in online media	23
Online stalking	8
Attacks on your online assets (hacking attacks)	5
Sexual harassment online	3
No such experience	3
Other	2

When asked if any of those attacks translated into offline harassment, 32 out of 38 respondents who answered this question responded negatively. The remaining six respondents (15%) had mostly experienced stalking, either at the place of work or even at their private address, three

²⁰ "Doxing" is a term that refers to publishing online personal information without the person's consent, and with malicious intent. This includes identifying information (home address, phone number and similar) that can make a person vulnerable to unwanted encounters, put them at risk or in danger, and/or make them feel that their safety is jeopardised.

have experienced attacks on property and one respondent has experienced physical violence against a staff member.

Have any of these online attacks translated into "offline" harassment? (Multiple choice)	
Types of harassment experienced offline	Number of occurrences
No, this has not happened to us	32
Stalking in person	4
Attacks on your property	3
Physical violence	1

When asked whether they had ever experienced any harassment in the physical space without previous online incitement, most of the respondents once again answered that they have not had such experiences. Only three respondents who said that they were never exposed to some form of online harassment, have stated that they experienced some form of offline harassment or attacks (physical violence, stalking, attacks on property, respectively).

Have any physical attacks/harassment against you occurred without previous online incitement? (Multiple choice)	
Types of harassment experienced offline	Number of occurrences
No, this has not happened to us	33
Attacks on your property	3
Physical violence	2
Stalking in person	2
Other	1

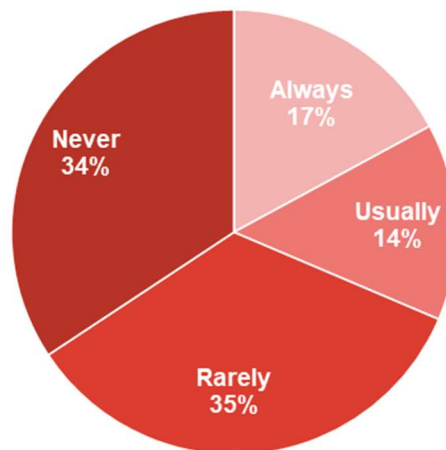
TYPES OF HARASSMENT EXPERIENCED OFFLINE



Institutional environment and legal proceedings

The survey shows that **fact-checkers tend not to report the harassment they experience to the authorities**, even when it manifests as acts that fall under criminal codes in the countries where they work. Out of the 35 respondents who had experienced harassment, 24 (69%) either do not report criminal harassment to the police or do so rarely. Only 17% percent has a habit of regularly reporting these types of attacks to the authorities.

REPORTING TO THE POLICE



When asked about the reasons they do not report threats or similar behaviour to the police, **about a half of the respondents expressed low confidence that the report would have any consequences** (i.e., that the police would react to the report), while some of them felt that the police itself is not credible enough, or that reporting harassment would make things worse.

Some respondents noted that they do not report anonymous online threats, or threats made by fake accounts on social networks because that would be pointless. One respondent answered that they often do not consider the threats they receive as "legally serious enough" to be reported, even if they are "extremely unpleasant". Some of the respondents also note that they do not have enough time to report all the threats they receive, as they happen on a weekly basis. They keep records of all threats, but report only the most violent ones (some have specified that they only report death or rape threats)

When you decide not to report threats or other types of criminal behaviour to the police or prosecutor's office, what is the main reason for such a decision? (Multiple choice)	Number of responses
We do not think the police would act on the report	14 (52%)
We do not find them credible enough	7 (26%)
We feel that would make things worse	3 (11%)
We had bad experiences with reports before	3 (11%)
Other	6 (22%)
Total	27

When asked about the experience they had when they did report violent or other threats, out of the 23 respondents that answered the question, **just one had described any specific legal outcome of the report** - "small monetary penalties" that are occasionally imposed on harassers if they are reported. **Most of the answers indicate that the police either openly say that they cannot do anything, or say that they will investigate with little or no follow up.** If investigations are started at all, they either end abruptly, or "take a very long time, with very limited progress or outcome."

Some respondents noted that the police did act professionally, or that the prosecutor opened an investigation on the threat, but even in those cases there were no legal consequences for the harassers. Such cases either get "stuck" in court, or never even reach it. Additionally, some fact-checkers note that they have been actively discouraged from reporting harassment at times when it was happening most intensely, or that the process itself is too burdensome for them (takes too much time, requires large amount of evidence they need to provide, requires the existence of a specific threat to a single person or, in some cases, the police say they cannot react until "an actual crime" takes place).

Overall, it can be concluded that the legal framework for preventing or addressing harassment is inadequate in most of the countries where the respondents operate, and that there is either no institutional awareness or no will to address harassment of journalists, specifically fact-checkers.

When it comes to the civil procedures, **fact-checking outlets rarely sue their attackers despite receiving an intense stream of threats and other types of harassment which often contain libel or slander.** Out of the 30 respondents who answered this question, 22 said that they never sued anyone, three have won (with two managing to also receive compensation in court), one lost the lawsuit and four cases are still in court, totalling 8 outlets that have sued someone for libel or harassment.

On the other hand, **14 respondents have had the experience of being sued, more often by public figures who are not political actors.** Among the 10 respondents who have been sued more than

once, there are several extreme cases that have faced severe legal harassment, mostly from people or organisations whose claims they have fact checked. One respondent has been sued more than a dozen times, one 9 times, one 7 times and several between 3 and 5 times.

The descriptions of the cases that some of the respondents have given correspond to elements of typical SLAPP lawsuits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), which are defined as "an abusive lawsuit filed by a private party with the purpose of silencing critical speech"²¹. In the majority of cases (76%), the lawsuits are still pending, so the outcomes are unknown. The respondents were not asked about the dates when the lawsuits were filed, so it can not be determined if such a high number is largely due to an inefficient justice system, or because the lawsuits were filed recently. In cases where the court decisions have been reached, they were almost always in favour of the fact-checkers who were sued, lest for one case which the court decided that the article published by the respondent contained "misleading wording", not disputing the accuracy of the fact-check itself.

Among the 20 respondents who answered that they have never been sued, **four have noted that they have, however, repeatedly been threatened with lawsuits, but the threats were not carried out.**

How many times have you been sued?	Number of responses
Never	21 (60%)
Twice or more	10 (29%)
Once	4 (11%)
Total	35 (100%)

The respondents were **more often sued by public figures who are not political actors.** Out of the 15 respondents who answered the question about the type of actor that had sued them, one has been sued only by a political actor, eleven had only been sued by other relevant actors and three have been sued by both types of actors.

Out of the 17 Southern Europe fact-checkers who answered this question, 2 (12%) have been sued once, 8 (47%) have been sued twice or more and three outlets with the highest number of lawsuits (7, 9 and more than 12) come from the Southern Europe region. In total, 59% of respondents from this region had been sued at least once, compared to 33% in all the other regions combined. Looking into the number of times that outlets have been sued, it is twice as high in the SE region: around 35 lawsuits have been filed against 19 SE-based fact-checkers (1.8 per outlet on average) compared to 16 lawsuits filed against 18 fact checkers from all other regions (0.9 per outlet on average).

²¹ See: How to Identify a SLAPP, Coalition Against SLAPPs In Europe, <https://www.the-case.eu/slapps/>

Status of the civil lawsuit	Number of cases
Ongoing	29 (76%)
Dropped or dismissed by the court	5 (13%)
Decided in the favour of the respondent	3 (8%)
Decided in favour of the plaintiff	1 (3%)
Total	38 (100%)

These statistics stand in stark contrast with the fact that fact-checkers are continuously accused of “suppressing freedom of speech and imposing censorship.” In the survey, **30 respondents answered that they have been accused of censorship, stifling freedom of speech, or both**. In reality, it is the respondents who are subjected to attempts of silencing or intimidation, including through legal means.

Additionally, fact-checking outlets seem to receive little or no support from the media communities in their countries. In cases where the harassment against them was public knowledge, the majority of the respondents who answered the question said that they have not received public support from professional journalist associations or similar bodies (19 out of 33), or that other media do not report on harassment they experience (20 out of 32).

The respondents were also asked whether there were any **legal initiatives to ban or in some other ways suppress fact-checking in their countries**. Such attempts were recorded **in four countries** (Croatia, Kosovo, Poland and Spain) **in the forms of announcements or drafts of laws that would have such an effect, or petitions started by the political actors who have publicly shown hostility towards fact-checking**. In two more countries, Georgia and Italy, hints of similar intentions were recorded from political actors, but without explicit statements or calls to action.²² Some of the respondents who opted not to publicly share information from their

²² In Spain, for example, the far-right populist Vox party has (unsuccessfully) initiated a law aiming to “regulate fact-checking” in 2020, while attempting to “summon” representatives of three fact-checking outlets to Congress “to explain how they monitored and verified public statements” and described some of them as “Gestapo that watchdogs the official truth.” The text of the draft law is available at:

https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/BOCG/B/BOCG-14-B-95-1.PDF. For the report on the case, see: Spain: a new law against fact-checking, The Media Freedom Rapid Response, July 2020, <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/News/Spain-a-new-law-against-fact-checking>.

In Croatia, an announcement of a similar kind came from a representative of the right-wing nationalist party Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement), who wrongfully claimed that fact-checkers have the power to decide “what we do or don’t see on social networks.” Stating that this is possible jeopardy of fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution, he announced that his party will “insist on a law that will regulate that area,” but there was no follow-up to the announcement (Bartulica: ‘Krenule su tužbe protiv Faktografa koji zloupotrebljava svoju moć’, Narod.hr, February 2022, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/bartulica-krenule-su-tuzbe-protiv-faktografa-koji-zloupotrebljava-svoju-moc>).

In Italy, another right-wing party, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), wrote in their 2022 election platform that they will fight “the arbitrary censorship of social networks and guaranteeing respect for the freedom of expression by the major communication platforms” (See: Pronti a risolvere l'Italia, Fratelli d'Italia, August 2022,

countries and contexts, said that they are seeing an increase in discourse which presents fact-checking as harmful to public interest²³ and/or as a part of various conspiracies. While they did not yet see any specific announcement or hint of legislative initiatives targeting fact-checking, this rhetoric, coming from right-wing parties, can be expected to become more radical in the near future and perhaps lead to legislative attempts to curb or limit fact-checking. Others have also pointed out that they are witnessing various attempts to curb media freedoms in general, not specifically related to fact-checking.

https://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Brochure_programma_Fdl_qr_def.pdf, p 21). The phrasing may be understood as the intention to limit the fact-checking partnerships of social media platforms, given that the party and the media outlets in its orbit continuously attack fact-checkers and accuse them of "censorship" on social networks (See: Elezioni europee: la mannaia dei "democratici" censori del web, April 2019, <https://www.ilprimato nazionale.it/primo-piano/elezioni-europee-mannaia-democratici-censori-del-web-113941/>).

In Georgia, there was talk about a new media law that would "regulate the spread of disinformation," which, in the local context, may be understood as a plan to curb media freedoms, i.e., to limit critical reporting and/or fact-checking. These statements came in the climate of rising tensions prompted by the government's attempts to limit freedom of assembly, proposing a law that eventually led to protests breaking out in the country's capital Tbilisi. (See: Anti-Western 'People Power' Propose "Foreign Agent" Laws Targeting CSOs, Media. Civil.ge, December 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/520491>).

See also: Gruzijski san za sada odustao od etiketiranja opozicije kao "stranih agenata", Faktograf, March 2023, <https://faktograf.hr/2023/03/10/gruzijski-san-za-sada-odustao-od-etiketiranja-opozicije-kao-stranih-agenata>).

²³ In several cases, fact-checking outlets were reported to the prosecutor's office by political or other relevant actors, in attempts to present fact-checking as criminal activity. More on the specific cases later in the report.

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF HARASSMENT CASES

The survey contained a section where respondents were asked to provide details about individual cases of harassment that stood out in their overall experience. This section was filled out by 26 fact-checkers from 20 countries.²⁴ Three respondents provided detailed descriptions of 2 harassment cases, while the remaining 23 described one case each.²⁵

These cases illustrate what the numbers can not – how and why the newsrooms and individuals are targeted, what tactics are used to intimidate or threaten them and what consequences they may have.

As in the general research results, fact-checkers are largely targeted for the general work that they do and repeatedly attacked ad hominem by the same actors who orchestrate and/or instigate harassment campaigns against them.²⁶ Many of the attacks also came after they published some specific fact-checks which triggered aggressive responses.²⁷ These are particularly related to polarising, politically charged or otherwise sensitive issues, such as debunks of false claims about vaccination,²⁸ armed conflicts,²⁹ statements of powerful people,³⁰ pseudomedicinal claims made as part of anti-LGBT³¹ and anti-abortion movements' campaigns.³²

The attacks described were generally long lasting: out of the 26 responses, 12 cases went on for longer than a year and had been experienced by the respondent as continuous harassment. The seven cases in which the perpetrators were seen as **especially influential, or as persons in positions of power**, were also described as being the most aggressive, lasting the longest, or being a recurring or ongoing campaign (3) and having the most severe consequences for the respondent's organisation (1).

²⁴ One respondent answered only this section of the survey. The information provided by that respondent is used only in this part of the report, and is not reflected in other statistics.

²⁵ One respondent gave a brief description of six significant harassment cases, but did not provide detailed information about any individual case. The respondents mainly described cases that were recurring or still ongoing harassment campaigns (12), most aggressive (8), and perpetrated by a person of particular influence or holding a particularly high office (7). In nine cases, it was a combination of various reasons#.

²⁶ The respondents were given a multiple-choice question about the content of the attacks they chose to describe in this section. In a large majority of the cases (16 of 22 who answered the question), the attacks had multiple focus. Most commonly, these attacks included attacks on the outlet and its general work (18), followed by attacks related to specific fact-checks published by the outlet (11), ad hominem attacks on the staff and attacks on fact-checking in general (10 each). An accuracy rating given to a claim published on Facebook within the TPFC programme was the focus of the attack in 8 cases.

²⁷ The respondents were asked to select the topic of specific fact-checks which triggered the harassment attack described in this section of the questionnaire. Out of the 15 responses, the most represented topics are the Covid-19 pandemic (5), vaccination (2) or both (1), as well as women's and/or reproductive rights (2). Elections, government work, corruption and ethnic/national issues were each selected one time.

Targets and perpetrators

The main perpetrator or instigator of harassment was a man in 17 cases (68%), and a woman in only 2 cases (8%). In 6 cases (24%), the respondents said that there were no main perpetrators because the harassment was carried out by multiple actors (some anonymous) or by a whole organisation rather than any specific person.

Political parties and media outlets were the most represented organisations included in harassment, each appearing in 5 out of 16 answers. Two respondents said they were harassed by groups described as anti-vax, conspiratorial, or pandemic-denying and two mentioned civil society organisations as harassers. Other types of organisations, appearing one time each, were: a public institution, a religious organisation, and a far-right group. In 4 cases, multiple types of organisations were listed as participating in the harassment.

With regard to the political orientation of the perpetrators which belonged to political parties, out of twelve respondents, 9 described the perpetrator as being of right-wing orientation, 2 as centre-right, and only 1 was described as left-wing. All but one were men.

²⁸ A claim that WHO "confirmed" that vaccinated and unvaccinated can equally transmit the SARS-CoV-2 virus (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/svjetska-zdravstvena-organizacija-nije-potvrdila-da-vakcinisani-i-nevakcinisani-podjednako-prenose-virus>); a claim that vaccines are being sprayed from the air, (<https://faktoje.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/marina-stefanllari.png>); an anti-vaccination pamphlet mimicking official information (<https://www.tjekdet.dk/faktatjek/vaccinekritisk-pamflet-ligner-noget-fra-sundhedsstyrelsen-men-indeholder-flere-usande-og>); an analysis of anti-vaccination narratives: (<https://teyit.org/teyitpedia/turkiyede-asi-dezenformasyonu-yanlis-bilgiyi-kimler-yayiyor-iliski-aglari-ne>).

²⁹ Slavlje na godišnjicu bombardovanja posvećeno sportistima a ne "NATO agresiji", Raskrinkavanje, March 2021, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/slavlje-na-godisnjicu-bombardovanja-posveceno-sportistima-a-ne-nato-agresiji>.

³⁰ Analiza tvrdnji Fahrudina Radončića prilikom gostovanja na N1 televiziji, Istinomjer, July 2022, <https://istinomjer.ba/analiza-tvrdnji-fahrudina-radoncica-prilikom-gostovanja-na-n1-televiziji/>

³¹ Yeni Şafak yapımı videoda dile getirilen LGBTİ karşıtı iddialar, Teyit, July 2022, <https://teyit.org/analiz/lgbti-karsiti-argumanlarin-ortak-niteligi-yanlis-bilgi>

³² Lila Rose claim that "abortion is never medically necessary" is inaccurate; it is necessary in certain cases to preserve mother's life, Health Feedback, August 2019, <https://healthfeedback.org/claimreview/lila-rose-claim-that-abortion-is-never-medically-necessary-is-inaccurate-it-is-necessary-in-certain-cases-to-preserve-mothers-life-young-america-foundation/>

Harassment tactics: Disinformation and intimidation

The tactics used to harass fact-checkers largely include online slurs, disinformation, hate-speech, stalking, doxing, trolling and creating an overall atmosphere of persecution on social networks, fringe media and personal outlets of the harassers. **Similarly to the overall results, most of the respondents experienced these attacks through multiple channels, with a large majority happening online and most often on social networks, through profiles and pages of persons or organisations who targeted fact-checkers.**

Where did this attack take place? (check all that apply)	Number of responses
Social networks, through pages or profiles of the attacker	14
Social networks, through comments and direct messages on your own pages and profiles	13
Online publications/web portals	12
Direct written communication (emails, messages, letters)	11
Print media (columns, comments)	5
Direct verbal communication (calls to the office, calls to personal phones)	5
Media broadcasts (live TV or radio)	4
Direct in-person contact (street, office)	2
Lawsuit	1
Press conference	1

As evidenced in this research, the behaviour of influential figures who have large public platforms (media, social media, political parties, public office, etc.) has a ripple effect on the general public and behaviour of private individuals who, whether directly incited or not, become multipliers of harassment against fact-checkers.³³ The attackers usually resort to extensive and repeated mentions of fact-checkers, turning their names, photos, profiles on social networks and contact information (either of individuals or their organisations) into targets of their followers. The images and contact information of fact-checkers is juxtaposed with derogatory

³³ When asked whether the person or organisation attacked them directly or incite others to do so, in 12 cases the answer was "both", in 10 cases it was a direct attack and in one case the perpetrator just incited others to harass the respondent. However, the responses show that direct public attacks have an inciting effect, even if the perpetrator has not made direct "appeals" to harass fact-checking outlets. **In 15 cases (out of the 19 who responded), private citizens and social media users were incited and/or joined in the harassment**, in 2 cases media outlets joined the harassment and in 2 cases it was different types of organisations, as well as private individuals, that responded to the incitement.

and/or defamatory claims about them, adding to the “dog whistle” effect. Descriptions of fact checkers as people who directly harm the followers of the attacker are often stated in second person, contributing to the incitement (*“This is the person who is censoring your posts”*). Another common tactic is mentioning the name of the person in a statement accusing him or her of malicious intent or activity (*“This is *person’s name*, who is preventing us from telling the truth”*). Some versions of these tactics have been reported by several respondents whose pictures have been used to incite harassment against them.

In some cases, the perpetrators directly asked their followers to call or message the fact-checkers and *“tell them how they feel”* about the alleged censorship, or ask them a loaded question about information that is already public (their methodology, funding, or similar). This “permission to harass” has also been noticed in the harassment case of women journalists, as documented in the experience of high-profile investigative journalists and editors targeted for their work.³⁴

Where harassment was directed towards specific individuals, which happened in 10 cases, it was most often the journalists that were targeted (8), followed by members of the fact-checking outlets’ management (4) or newsrooms’ editors (3). Among those cases, 8 targets were women, in one case the target was a man and in one case it was two separate individuals, a woman and a man, who were targeted individually within the same harassment campaign. Overall, out of 11 specified targets, 9 were women and 2 were men. While this sample is small, the disparity is significant enough to point to a conclusion that women are disproportionately targeted by harassment, both in terms of how represented they are in fact-checking newsrooms and compared to the gender of the perpetrators: women make up for 57% of the newsrooms’ staff and 8% of main perpetrators of harassment in the selected cases, but 82% are main targets of ad hominem attacks.³⁵

Additionally, sexism and misogyny are the most common types of hate speech used in the described attacks. **Out of the 10 respondents who said that elements of hate speech³⁶ were present in the selected cases, 9 have experienced sexism/misogyny, paired with homophobia/transphobia in one case, and hate speech based on ethnicity/nationality in two cases.** Five respondents said that they have not noticed any hate speech, but three have described being targeted with disinformation or accusations of “incompetence”, “censorship” or “lying” in their fact-checks.

³⁴ See: Fighting gendered disinformation: how women journalists stand up to dictators, shadowy foreign agents and digital conspiracy networks, International Journalism Festival, April 2023, <https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2023/fighting-gendered-disinformation-how-women-journalists-stand-up-to-dictators-shadowy-foreign-agents-and-digital-conspiracy-networks>.

³⁵ These findings correspond with other research that established online harassment of women journalists to be ubiquitous on a global level.

See, for example: Julie Posetti et.al., The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists, International Center for Journalists / UNESCO, November 2022, https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/ICFJ_UNESCO_The%20Chilling_2022_1.pdf

³⁶ Attacks based on a specific shared characteristic such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religion and similar.

Disinformation is one of the main tactics used to harass fact-checkers, serving to present fact-checking as harmful to public interest or to a particular group.

The content of disinformation used in harassment overwhelmingly includes claims of fact-checkers being "censors" (mostly related to the TPFC programme) and a part of various conspiracies, all together aiming to present them as political actors implementing an agenda, rather than impartial journalists committed to accuracy and facts. The examples provided in the research mostly include accusations of fact-checkers being paid by powerful figures to implement their secret agendas. The supposed conspiratorial "patrons" vary depending on local contexts, but some are present throughout the sample and, again, mostly influenced by the circumstances surrounding the TPFC and the pandemic. They range from specific people such as George Soros, Bill Gates; institutions such as WHO and WEF; political organisations such as the EU or NATO (especially in countries in Russia's sphere of influence); to various unnamed intelligence agencies, or imaginary groups related to large-scale conspiracy theories, such as "Satanist Cabals" or "The World Government."

Another common line of attack where disinformation is sometimes used are accusations of incompetence. Questioning fact-checkers' education, skills, expertise, intellectual honesty, or even the "right" to do fact-checking is often merged with accusations that they contradict scientific facts and established "truths," or that they aspire to position themselves as "highest authority" and "arbiters of truth" over other sources of information, presented as more competent by the attackers.

Both of these tactics are frequently used in the "lawfare" against fact-checkers, where inaccurate claims like these serve as supposed evidence that plaintiffs use in lawsuits, or even criminal complaints filed against fact-checkers. Attempts to portray fact-checking as criminal activity have mostly been recorded in the region of SEE, where it is used to both incite harassment and capitalise on the political potential of widespread anti-vaccination and pandemic denial conspiracy theories.³⁷

³⁷ For example, Mirnes Ajanović, a politician and a lawyer from Bosnia and Herzegovina, has sued two fact-checking outlets (Istinomjer and Raskrinkavanje, both from BiH) and filed criminal complaints against both of them, and another one from Croatia (Faktograf), on the account that they are "acting unconstitutionally in censoring free speech." The announcements of such actions were staples of his political campaign, built upon the notion that he is fighting for freedom of expression and trying to "protect the people from the vaccination lobby."

(See:

<https://www.facebook.com/ajanovic.mirnes/posts/pfbid0outPRf5W9UivGUAWijzFdXSzteAqXsFcmniCXDpciqjX8uHLAA6zoFm5H15JxFNAI>). Notably, censorship and limiting press freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of expression, are defined as criminal penalties in the Article 127 of Croatian Criminal Code (See: <https://www.zakon.hr/z/98/Kazneni-zakon>).

Influencing factors

A lot of the content, tactics and triggers of harassment that European fact-checkers face has developed under the influence of two major “external forces” - the US political right and Russia’s propaganda campaigns, especially in relation to the invasion of Ukraine. One of the cases described in the survey provides a good illustration of how such influences affect and shape the environment in which fact-checkers work and face harassment.

The fact-check was published in 2019 by Health Feedback, a fact-checker working in both Europe and the US, after a USA-based anti-abortion activist made a false claim that abortion is “never medically necessary.”³⁸ The claimant’s response to the fact-check was quickly escalated by a network of right-wing media, pundits and high-profile politicians in the US, who have long made a claim that social networks are “censoring conservative opinions,” a staple of their political campaigns.³⁹ In addition to the unprecedented attack that incited harassment, they also attempted to remove the fact-checker’s IFCN verification, on the accusation that they used “biased sources” to fact-check a medicine-related claim.⁴⁰ This coordinated response had prompted Facebook to remove the objectively undisputed fact-checking rating of the claim, contradicting the standard provisions of the TPFC programme.⁴¹

In this example, a well-coordinated network of institutions and individuals on the right-wing and/or conservative part of the US political spectrum has mounted a highly publicised and politically backed attack on a fact-checking outlet, which then made ripples far beyond the US territory, largely due to the impact it had on a large online platform/social network. Similar

³⁸ Lila Rose claim that “abortion is never medically necessary” is inaccurate; it is necessary in certain cases to preserve mother’s life, Health Feedback, August 2019, <https://healthfeedback.org/claimreview/lila-rose-claim-that-abortion-is-never-medically-necessary-is-inaccurate-it-is-necessary-in-certain-cases-to-preserve-mothers-life-young-america-foundation/>

³⁹ See the letter of four US Senate Republicans (Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, Kevin Cramer and Mike Braun) to Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20230515104653/https://www.liveaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/USSenateLetter.pdf>. See also: Judson Berger, Group slams Facebook and fact-checker, threatens lawsuit over ‘false’ rating of abortion claim, Fox News, August 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/republican-senators-facebook-censorship-pro-life>; and: Christopher Carbone, Republican senators slam Facebook for ‘censorship’ of pro-life content as fact-checking group gets investigated, Fox News, September 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/pro-life-facebook-fact-checker-lawsuit-abortion-false>

⁴⁰ See: Alex Pasternack, How Facebook pressures its fact-checkers, Fast Company, August 2020, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90538655/facebook-is-quietly-persuading-its-independent-fact-checkers-to-change-their-rulings>; and: IFCN concludes its investigation into Science Feedback complaint, Poynter Institute, September 2019, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/the-ifcn-concludes-investigation-about-science-feedback/>.

⁴¹ See: Claudia Koerner, Facebook Took Down A Fact-Check Of An Anti-Abortion Video After Republicans Complained, BuzzFeed News, September 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/claudiakoerner/facebook-fact-check-abortion-video-doctors-medical>; and: Casey Newton, Facebook spiked a legitimate fact check about abortion after Republicans complained, The Verge, September 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/interface/2019/9/12/20861589/facebook-abortion-fact-check-science-feedback-lila-rose-hawley-cruz>

internal “culture wars” and political climate in the US have had a lasting influence on the perception of fact-checking worldwide and the frame in which a lot of the harassment described in this report has taken place.

First and foremost, the TPFC programme started in the US in 2016.⁴² It has been present there the longest and the initial responses it has received have been shaped by internal political culture and circumstances in the States.⁴³ This is particularly true of the negative reactions from the conservative political actors that have paved the way for many that followed in other countries. The claims that fact-checking programmes are “politically motivated censorship,” as seen in this research, remain an almost universally present line of attack.

The hate speech and ad-hominem attacks stemming from this premise often echo the initial responses from the American right that has mocked the various phrasings appearing on TPFC labels or established “tropes” of fact-checkers being “servants” of different totalitarian “masters” who use them to suppress conservative voices.⁴⁴ Variations of such depictions were seen in almost all the cases described by the respondents in this research, and sometimes with distinct local flavours (for example, fact-checkers being called “the new janissaries”⁴⁵ in some countries that were formerly a part of the Ottoman empire).

The Covid-19 infodemic had escalated these premises to a new level, adding phrasings from various highly radicalising conspiracy theories like (QAnon, New World Order, “depopulation”

⁴² Amber Jamieson and Olivia Solon, “Facebook to begin flagging fake news in response to mounting criticism,” *The Guardian*, December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/15/facebook-flag-fake-news-fact-check>

⁴³ In addition to reproductive rights, the Republican Party has actively defended false claims related to other issues such as climate science denial, anti-vaccination propaganda, or the 2020 US presidential elections being “stolen” from Donald Trump, of which the latter led to the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. Fact-checking these issues is being increasingly portrayed as a part of a conspiracy against “conservative views,” with a number of government and academic institutions, media and civil society organisations in the US being recently described as a “censorship industrial complex.” See, for example, the testimony given to a Republican-led committee within the US House of Representatives, where disinformation is described as a “hoax” and efforts to fight it as “censorship ideology” (The Censorship Industrial Complex, U.S. Government Support For Domestic Censorship And Disinformation Campaigns, 2016 - 2022), Testimony by Michael Shellenberger to The House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, March 9, 2023, <https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/shellenberger-testimony.pdf>).

⁴⁴ Design of the label and phrasing of the ratings that appear on fact-checked content on Facebook and Instagram have, for example, been used for various “meme generators” to ridicule and harass fact-checkers (see, for example, Google search results for “Facebook fact-checker meme generator,” available at: <https://bit.ly/3MDeu7t>; or a “fact-checker” tag on an image sharing platform at <https://bit.ly/434u3dO>). Similarly, hundreds of memes portray the “Facebook fact-checkers” as clowns, monkeys, or various caricatural and unintelligent characters from popular culture (see an example here: <https://bit.ly/3MDkmxx>). A lot of such content also implies or explicitly states that fact-checkers are not independent and impartial, but work as “mercenaries” against conservative politics.

⁴⁵ Janissaries were an elite order in the Ottoman army that was populated by boys forcefully taken from Christian families, converted to Islam and turned into soldiers. (See: Janissary, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Janissary>)

and similar) to the catalogue of insults used in harassment of fact-checkers.⁴⁶

The pandemic saw a general increase in harassment against people who fight disinformation and conspiracy theories, and/or publicly advocate for science-based medicine and evidence-based information.⁴⁷ This research also documents how harassment of fact-checkers has significantly worsened after the pandemic broke out, especially for those fact-checking outlets who partnered or have already been partners with social media companies/platforms. Many of the cases described in these responses are related to Covid-19, specifically to vaccination which was one of the major and sometimes dominant targets of the Covid-19 "infodemic".⁴⁸ The harassment has even spread beyond fact-checkers themselves to the IFCN assessors⁴⁹ (journalists, scholars or media experts who evaluate the applications of fact-checking outlets to become verified signatories of IFCN's Code of Principles).⁵⁰

Russia's aggression on Ukraine has also been an influencing factor in harassment against some organisations, mostly those coming from countries where there is a strong political support for Russia. In such cases, the organisations have received intensified threats such as those that

⁴⁶ The political, ideological - and even mythological - repertoire used to harass fact-checkers includes various analogies of the "good vs. evil" dichotomy, where fact-checkers have been presented as being on the side of "Satanism," "globalism vs. sovereignism", repression vs. freedom of speech, Nazism, "genocide against humanity" (in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic) and similar.

⁴⁷ Scientists and journalists were particularly targeted, which has even caused some to leave their fields in order to avoid harassment. In some particularly extreme cases, the consequences were much more grave (see: Austria mourns suicide of doctor targeted by anti-COVID vaccine campaigners, Reuters, July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/austria-mourns-suicide-doctor-targeted-by-anti-vaccine-campaigners-2022-07-30/>)

⁴⁸ See: Tijana Cvjetičanin et. al., Disinformation during COVID-19 pandemic, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, December 2020, https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf

and: Infodemic Covid-19 In Europe: A Visual Analysis Of Disinformation, A fact-checking report by AFP, CORRECTIV, Pagella Politica/ Facta, Full Fact and Maldita.es, July 2020, https://covidinfodemicurope.com/report/covid_report.pdf, p 6.

⁴⁹ Two IFCN assessors from Serbia, both journalists who themselves are not included in TPFC nor involved in fact-checking, were targeted by a prominent conspiracy theorist after his QAnon-related post was fact-checked and rated on Facebook. He posted links to Twitter profiles of the two women whom he described as "these persons who don't allow you to spread the truth about masks, the virus, vaccines, poisoning and spraying from the air, who are banning any kind of accurate text about paedophilia, homosexuality, Satanism, stealing of babies, kidnapping and abusing children by Satanist groups all over the world." This has directly incited harassment that ensued from his followers. (See: Sandulović se iz samo njemu znanih razloga okomio na novinarke iz Srbije - zbog analize "Raskrinkavanja", Raskrinkavanje, October 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/sandulovic-se-iz-samo-njemu-znanih-razloga-okomio-na-novinarke-iz-srbije-zbog-analize-raskrinkavanja>). Another IFCN assessor from Albania was targeted in a similar "side effect" of a harassment of the Albanian fact-checking outlet Faktoje, specifically for his role in, as it was phrased, "certifying them to control and censor the media" (see: <https://www.podiumi.com/2022/10/13/denoncimi-i-altin-goxhajt-delina-fico-dhe-klodiana-kapo-kontrollojne-censuren-mpi-mediat/>).

⁵⁰ See: The advisory board and our pool of assessors, The Poynter Institute, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-advisory-board-and-our-pool-of-assessors> IFCN's verification is important for Meta's Third-Party Fact-checking partnership, as it is "a necessary, but not sufficient condition to have access to that social platform's fact-checking tool." (See: The code and the platforms, The Poynter Institute, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-code-and-the-platforms>)

their offices will be “stormed” or accused of “taking the side of Nazis” (referring to a widespread disinformation trope of the Russian government about Ukraine being a “Nazi state”).⁵¹

⁵¹ See: Darwin Murić, Emir Zulejhić, Ivana Živković, Milovan Nikolić and Vesna Radojević, Global narratives and local actors: 150 days of the war in Ukraine and over 1,500 disinformation in the region, SEE Check, July 2022, <https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/150-days-of-war-in-Ukraine-and-over-1500-disinformation-in-the-region.pdf>; and: Tijana Cvjetičanin et. al., Disinformation narratives in BiH and the region, Zašto ne, February 2023, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2023/03/Disinformation__narratives__in__BiH_and__the__region.pdf

CONCLUSION

Fact-checkers frequently experience attacks from political and other public actors, as well as harassment on social networks. The exposure to intimidation, disinformation and incitement campaigns online is considerable, but largely invisible to anyone outside the "community". It somewhat disproportionately targets women, it is more intense in countries that do not have strong democracies and vibrant media environments, it has particularly escalated during the Covid-19 pandemic, and more so for those who participate in Meta's TPFC programme.

The ubiquity of the problem is visible from many other indicators that go beyond the statistics. In 2021, announcing that it is forming a working group to address harassment against fact-checkers,⁵² IFCN reported that during the previous year "more than 30 organisations have reported some type of harassment and/or threat from political actors or institutions, from publishers and/or from users on tech platforms whose falsehoods are flagged by fact-checkers as a part of their work with social media companies, especially Facebook".⁵³ A year later, another fact-checking network, the newly formed EFCSN, has put a special provision in its Code of Standards to encourage fact-checking newsrooms to "Put in place measures that aim to address the risk of trauma or harassment experienced by staff as a result of the operation's activities, including but not limited to providing training to prevent and identify symptoms".⁵⁴

Fact-checkers stand at the front line of fighting disinformation, which often goes hand in hand with hate speech, fringe politics, antidemocratic and extreme ideologies. Previous research has already established that reporting on disinformation "seems to be a particular trigger" for harassment.⁵⁵ Bad actors who use manipulative tactics to achieve political goals and/or radicalise their target audiences, have already made fact-checkers regular and frequent targets of their online campaigns. Similar is true of actors who use false or misleading information opportunistically, to profit off of existing advertisement models which largely favour clickability over credibility.⁵⁶

However, this vulnerability, which comes with being "first responders" in the struggles against information disorder and its many derivatives, is not sufficiently recognised by relevant stakeholders who have the ability to influence it. As this research illustrates, in most of the cases, neither the media community nor the relevant public authorities are offering support,

⁵² The case that set this process in motion is described in: Bosnian fact-checker received a death threat from a news media editor: "I will blow you up!", *Zašto ne*, July 2021, <https://zastone.ba/en/bosnian-fact-checker-received-a-death-threat-from-a-news-media-editor-i-will-blow-you-up/>.

⁵³ IFCN launches working group to address harassment against fact-checkers, The Poynter Institute, July 2021.

⁵⁴ The European Code of Standards for Independent Fact-Checking Organisations, European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), August 2022, <https://eufactcheckingproject.com/app/uploads/2022/10/EU-CODE-EFCSN-.pdf>, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists*, International Center for Journalists / UNESCO, November 2022, p. 68

⁵⁶ Craig Silverman, Ruth Talbot, Jeff Kao and Anna Klühspies, *How Google's Ad Business Funds Disinformation Around the World*, ProPublica, October 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/google-alphabet-ads-fund-disinformation-covid-elections>

assistance, or an efficient response to threats and harassment against fact-checkers. Moreover, media outlets frequently participate in disseminating disinformation and/or even conduct harassment campaigns against fact-checkers, especially in countries where media capture is significant and information integrity and rule of law are low (as is the case with the SEE region⁵⁷). In such environments, fact-checking is often falsely equated with Meta, and fact-checkers are falsely presented as “censors” who downrank or even remove user content, including that published by media outlets.⁵⁸ This directly contributes to the vilification they already face from conspiracy theorists or political actors. Worryingly, such baseless views have, in some cases, received support from high-profile international organisations aiming to position themselves as “brokers” in the relationship between the media and large online platforms.⁵⁹ Ironically, the same platform that fact-checkers are accused of “censoring”, has proven to be among the most unsafe places for them, permeated with harassment campaigns against journalists dedicated to checking information accuracy. This is likely exacerbated by the fact that Meta’s TPCF is currently the only transparent partnership of that kind, where providing fact-checking services and their use by a particular platform have a visible impact on publishers of disinformation.

This research is focused on “external” elements of the harassment, like content, tactics, perpetrators, channels and circumstances where it occurs. However, in the open-ended question about significant issues not covered in the questionnaire, many respondents mention the psychological effect it has had on them. In some cases, the distress becomes so severe that it starts to threaten the sustainability of the operation itself, due to people quitting their jobs after being exposed to harassment. This chilling effect can only be expected to grow and possibly affect the existing efforts in the fight against information disorder if the circumstances stay the same.

Harassment against fact-checkers, therefore, needs to be recognised as a systemic problem, with full awareness of its intentions to discredit both individual fact-checking outlets and general efforts against disinformation. Online platforms have long ignored problems related to harmful misinformation – and most still do. This has created the feeling of entitlement for bad

⁵⁷ Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2022 Conference Report and Policy Recommendations, Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft e.V. and Aspen Institute Deutschland e.V., January 2023, https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/Think-Tank-Forum-2022_2212199.pdf, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Fact-checking outlets that participate in Meta’s Third-Party Fact-checking Program provide the service of labelling fact-checked content on the platform. Based on these labels/ratings, Meta can engage with mis/disinformation in different ways and take actions like reducing visibility of that content or downrank pages that repeatedly share it, labelling it accordingly, notifying people who try to share it, etc. Meta can also remove content when it violates its Community Standards. Fact-checkers do not remove content, accounts or Pages on Facebook or Instagram, nor do they have access to any of the content moderation mechanisms related to Community Standards. See: Meta’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/mjp/programs/third-party-fact-checking>.

⁵⁹ For example, the inaccurate claim about media reporting being “removed from social media following the flagging by some fact-checkers” appears as an undisputed fact in a short report published by UNESCO, alongside a quote from a journalist organisation representative about the media enduring “censorship and self-censorship” because of fact-checking. (Strengthening the relationship between independent fact-checkers and media outlets: a promise of quality journalism, UNESCO, June 2021, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/strengthening-relationship-between-independent-fact-checkers-and-media-outlets-promise-quality>)

actors who had effortlessly monetised or weaponised hate speech, misinformation and disinformation before any mechanisms were put in place to tackle it. Consequently, fact-checkers who partner with platforms are often seen as a single obstacle to monetise disinformation or use it to mobilise support for political goals. This exposes them to particularly severe attacks that aim to discourage them from the work that they do and, if successful, such campaigns can significantly erode effort and the integrity of information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The harassment fact-checkers experience is a multi-faceted problem, influenced by various factors ranging from political culture and quality of democracy, to media/advertising business models shaped by algorithms of very large online platforms.

The steps to tackle harassment against fact-checkers would therefore need to happen both on the level of 1) creating and implementing systemic measures to ensure information integrity and online safety, to demotivate and prevent such attacks; as well as 2) creating and implementing protocols for rapid-response in situations when attacks occur and there are immediate threats to the safety and wellbeing of fact-checkers.

When it comes to information integrity, it is particularly important that the tech companies make their platforms unwelcoming for bad actors who repeatedly spread disinformation. A consistent commitment to information integrity should be present throughout their products and processes in order to remove incentives to intimidate fact-checkers or retaliate against them. Similarly, other relevant actors need to raise awareness about the importance of fact-checking work for overall information integrity and safety of journalists.

When it comes to rapid response models, they need to be efficient and adjusted to real needs of journalists and other employees of fact-checking operations who are being targeted. It is particularly important to be mindful of the fact that harassment is not any less real or damaging when it occurs online.

These are the recommendations for relevant actors on how to improve systemic conditions and immediate responses for online and overall safety of fact checkers.

Very large online platforms should:

- Create or improve existing mechanisms to protect specific groups like fact-checkers and other journalists dealing with disinformation, targeted for the work they are doing:
 - Maintain communication with fact-checkers and other journalists⁶⁰ about their

⁶⁰ In the context of developing meaningful and efficient mechanisms against harassment, terms such as *journalists*, *fact-checkers* and *employees* should henceforth be understood to also include any member of staff in a fact-checking outlet, other media professionals engaged in anti-disinformation efforts, as well as "any other person with professional or private relations with them" that might be at risk of being harassed because of such relationship (in line with the definition of media actors given in: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Parcu, P., Brogi, E., Verza, S. et al., Study on media plurality and diversity online – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, May 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/529019>; as well as recommendations of European Federation of Journalists on EMFA: Member States must ensure effective protection of sources, <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2023/05/02/emfa-member-states-must-ensure-effective-protection-of-sources/>)

safety and security on their platforms and be responsive to issues raised by them,

- Enable diligent prevention, risk mitigation and rapid response to harassment by creating or improving existing escalation reporting mechanisms,
 - Develop Duty of Care mechanisms for fact-checking organisations engaged in fact-checking partnerships with platforms,
 - Introduce special 'Freedom from Harassment Officers'⁶¹, trained to deal with issues of freedom of expression, content regulation and harassment, with ability and adequate resources to implement rapid response and practical support in cases of harassment,
 - Introduce and implement efficient policies against repeat offenders,
 - Based on experiences with the global pandemic and invasion of Ukraine, co-develop strategies in cooperation with fact-checkers to prevent, respond to and de-escalate harassment that spikes during crisis,
 - In order to foster transparency and avoid misunderstandings about the work of fact-checkers, make the policies on misinformation and/or fact-checking programmes public, clear, simple, straightforward and equally available to all users, regardless of their language, country or region.
- Cooperate with professional fact-checkers and other relevant stakeholders to curb disinformation on all platforms:
 - Create fact-checking partnership programmes to identify and engage with disinformation published on the platforms,
 - Consistently implement provisions of such programmes and partnerships on all content, both "organic" and paid, regardless of the sources the content may come from (politicians, media, public figures, etc.),

⁶¹ See, for example, a recommendation for the platforms to establish "Freedom of Expression Officers" (Judith Bayer et. al, Disinformation and propaganda: impact on the functioning of the rule of law and democratic processes in the EU and its Member States - 2021 update, European Parliament, April 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653633/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653633_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653633/EXPO_STU(2021)653633_EN.pdf), p.14), suggested actions by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (Self-protection measures to respond to threats against journalists, United Nations, April 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Brief-Protection-mechanisms-available-for-journalists_0.pdf) and Practical support offered by Media Freedom Rapid Response <https://www.mfrr.eu/support/practical-support/>

- Discontinue any practice of “whitelisting” any type of sources of disinformation,
 - Co-develop risk assessment methodologies and strategies against proliferation of disinformation that may put election integrity and democratic processes at risk,
 - Co-develop strategies to prevent and respond to proliferation of disinformation during crisis events.
- Create, improve and implement other strong systemic policies against disinformation that include demonetisation of disinformation, consistent reducing of the false/misleading and harmful reach of the content.
 - Improve moderation of dangerous content to protect all users in all languages:
 - Establish rapid response models to support targets of disinformation campaigns, especially in cases that incite violence or other harmful behaviour,
 - Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for harassment,
 - Ensure that proper resources for content moderation exist in all European languages,
 - Create and provide a wide-ranging system of support for those who provide content moderation.
 - Implement these recommendations consistently, transparently and in line with the Code of Practice on Disinformation, across different languages and all regions in Europe (EU, EEA, WB6, Council of Europe).
 - Produce, publish and promote regular and comprehensive transparency reports on the implementation and effectiveness of the above-mentioned mechanisms (duty of care, improved moderation of dangerous content, protection of targeted groups, escalations, actions of freedom-from-harassment officers, consistency of the policies in all languages, etc.).⁶²

⁶² See recommendations on reporting on TPFC programme in: Report on the Facebook Third-Party Fact-Checking programme, Full Fact, December 2020, <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/tpfc-2020.pdf>; and general recommendations on transparency reporting in: The Guide to Transparency Reports, Active Fence, December 2022, <https://www.activefence.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Guide-to-Transparency-Reports-n.pdf>

Political actors and legislators should:

- Develop regulatory framework to enhance media freedoms and to protect journalists, other media workers and their families from intrusive and abusive practices:
 - Introduce effective anti-SLAPP regulation on nation-state and transnational levels,
 - Include Duty of Care into regulatory policies and frameworks for tech companies.
 - Implement recommendations of the European Commission to ensure editorial independence and ownership transparency in the media sector⁶³,
 - Include mechanisms of protection from online harassment in policies on digital security, markets and overall online environment,
 - Update and harmonise legal provisions, including the reporting and investigation procedures, to make them efficient, timely and safe for journalists who report online violence.
- Promote media pluralism, freedom of information and professional journalism and integrity as democratic values by consistently:
 - Recognising and emphasising the value of fact-checking, as well as the value of accurate, timely and contextualised information, especially on important topics that are subject to political debate and in situations of crisis or extraordinary events which are likely to trigger harassment,
 - Being responsible in public communication, refrain from using false and unsubstantiated claims in political discourse, especially during crises and election periods,
 - Particularly refraining from using incitement and disinformation which could encourage aggressive behaviour against fact-checkers and journalists in general,
 - Condemning disinformation and hate speech, regardless of which part of the political spectrum it originates,

⁶³ European Commission Recommendation on internal safeguards for editorial independence and ownership transparency in the media sector, Official Journal of the European Union 2022/1634, September 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022H1634&from=EN>

- Disassociating from political and public figures that engage in harassment of journalists and condemning attacks on journalists in clear and unequivocal terms, especially the scapegoating of those who report on disinformation (zero tolerance policy).

Law enforcement institutions should:

- Take all online harassment seriously, especially if it includes threats and breaches of personal safety, privacy and security (stalking, "doxing").
- Be responsive to reports from journalists and other professionals whose jobs expose them to online violence.
- Develop protocols for rapid response, including cooperation with online platforms to effectively investigate and prosecute harassment occurring on social networks and in digital environments.

Media, journalists, their associations and professional organisations should:

- Show professional solidarity with fact-checkers under attack and recognise attacks against all journalists, including fact-checkers, as equally harmful to media freedoms.
- Report on such cases and do so in a professional manner.
- Ensure that self-regulation is up to date with technological developments and digital environment, as well as implemented continuously in a consistent, timely and transparent manner.
- Advocate for development of regulatory and financial incentives for protection of journalists, other media workers and their families, such as:
 - Introduction of anti-SLAPP regulation
 - Implementation of internal safeguards to protect journalistic standards and capabilities to collect, fact-check and analyse information⁶⁴.
- Promote media literacy and critical thinking, educate audiences on digital and information literacy.
- Support building awareness about harassment.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

- Support building resilience against disinformation and hate speech.
- Refrain from discrediting the work of fact-checkers and/or engaging in disinformation and harassment campaigns against fact-checkers, including false presentation of fact-checking programmes as unwarranted, repressive or hostile toward media freedoms.
- Support fact-checking programmes within media outlets and on online platforms
- Advocate for online platforms to de-incentivise monetisation of disinformation.
- Cooperate with VLOPs, fact-checkers and other stakeholders to produce efficient models to support and promote investigative journalism and professional reporting on their platforms.

Fact-checking outlets should:

- Design internal policies to protect employees and efficiently respond to harassment:
 - Protect and provide support to employees who are directly targeted,
 - Report harassment to relevant stakeholders (law enforcement, platforms, professional associations),
 - Seek support from fact-checking networks and other available safety nets and coalitions when harassment occurs,
 - Collect data that might help investigate immediate attacks, as well as broader networks and actors behind the attacks.
- Be vocal about their experiences and report harassment to relevant actors (platforms, law enforcement, professional associations, news media, civil society), depending on the specific content and channels of the attack.
- Take an active part in public consultations on regulatory and legislative initiatives focused on media freedoms, digital markets, online communication and online safety of journalists.
- Cooperate with other fact-checkers to raise awareness of the harassment problem and share lessons learned and best practices in how to efficiently communicate or report incidents to relevant stakeholders (law enforcement, platforms, professional associations).
- Engage with relevant stakeholders to establish effective and efficient solutions.

- Cooperate with the academic community to encourage and support further research focusing on solutions, with emphasis on:
 - Determining existing practices that fact-checkers employ to protect against harassment.
 - Determining best practices to ensure the wellbeing of their employees and protect them from harassment.
 - Determining the experiences of fact-checkers with harassment on very large online platforms and establishing their needs from VLOPs in terms of online safety and efficient protection against harassment.
 - Establishing attitudes and capacities of other relevant actors and the potential to include them in the fight against online harassment of fact-checkers.
 - Encourage similar and further research on harassment targeting fact-checkers globally and/or in other specific regions.
- Negotiate with online platforms and other commercial and public clients of fact-checking services to include specific provisions related to protection of fact-checkers (such as co-developed risk assessments and rapid response mechanisms).
- Continue following and improving international standards in transparency and integrity defined by IFCN and EFCSN.

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