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Public communication disruption and information accuracy

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Abstract

This paper aims to offer a critical discussion of the various complexities within the emerging field of fact-checking, mainly emphasizing on its central tenets and trends. It also describes some relevant methodological dimensions and empirical insights, presenting the Greek landscape consisted by fact-checking initiatives either based solely on investigative journalism or combining social and journalist research with machine learning, as well as initiatives employing only web-based analytics and verification platforms. The paper concludes that one should not consider fact-checking as a panacea against any type of inaccurate information that hits the public sphere (propaganda, fake news, deep fakes), but rather as a method that seeks to provide a coherent framework for the assessment of any important piece of public information, and has a -at least- two-fold aim: first, to upgrade the quality of information circulating in the public sphere, and, second to familiarize the public with the rationale of testing the validity of the information they consume through their daily media “diet”.

Keywords: fact-checking, public communication, fake news, information accuracy, Greece

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1. Introduction

Although “fake news” is not a new phenomenon (Walter et al., 2019; Andersen and Obelitz Sørensen, 2020, p.126), the advent of social media has brought a major increase in the circulation of biased information or outright false news (Marietta, Barker and Bowser, 2015, p.578; Barrera et al., 2020, p.7). Due to the proliferation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, with the decline of traditional news outlets and the spread of online information, a sort of “infodemic” has come to the fore, which is replete of disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, and conspiratorial myths.⁴ So, many people around the world are baffled about what exactly is the “truth” with respect to political debates and the public sphere.

In addition, the increasing political polarization in many western societies counts both as cause and effect of the fake news spreading; polarization arises from a mixture of extant socio-economic inequalities, mostly affecting the losers of globalization and breeding a seeping “silent counter-revolution” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) that feeds identity politics and status anxiety. Such dynamic fosters divergent moral emotions which make many people feel like being members of antagonistic “moral tribes” (Haidt, 2013, pp. 364-366).

On a more general plane, within the postmodern condition of Western societies, the subjects are experiencing the loss of a steadfast rational and moral canon guiding their judgment (Bauman, 1993, pp. 9-10). Since “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” bringing on de-legitimation and radical suspicion towards “preestablished rules” (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 37, 81), individuals become all the more aporetic and distrustful of the offered ideological truths. In this sense, contemporary western societies appear as “post- ideological” and “post- deontic” (Lipovetsky, 1992). There is

⁴ Interestingly, the term (or the metaphor) “infodemic” was not coined until 2003, when first appeared in a commentary for the *Washington Post* in the context of the SARS outbreak, and rapidly rose after the WHO adopted it in February 2020 (Simon & Camargo, 2021, pp. 2-3).

no doubt, then, why “post-truth” has become such a popular catchphrase in the political discourse of our times.

All in all, social grievances, political polarization, widespread cynicism *qua* distrust, moral relativism, the intensifying commercialization of the news media seized by infotainment, the mediatization of politics and the concomitant *politainment*, make up a perfect storm to trigger the crisis of public knowledge. This crisis not only contains a plethora of fake news and discourses about “alternative truth”, but is conducive to nativism, angry populism and anti-politics (Brubaker, 2017). Undermining the very idea of public interest and the sense of a political cultural common ground, it directly erodes republican values and democratic citizenship.

Provided that fake news travels through social media six times faster than true stories (Dizikes, 2018), it tends to create an informational ecosystem where the breakdown of trusted information sources is the rule. This is a major challenge for the democratic public sphere with the question being whether the post-truth phenomenon and especially fake news will be curtailed over the next ten years or so. A means to start improving the current information environment by changes that reduce the spread of lies, rumors, and other misinformation online is fact-checking practices.

It is not accidental that soon after the outbreak of the pandemic -around which innumerable rumors and lies have been spread in digital platforms-, the European Commission has taken action against misinformation which requires coordinated response from EU countries, EU institutions, digital platforms, news media, and citizens themselves (European Commission, 2020a). Among its initiatives is the Code of Practice on Disinformation, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), an official hub for fact-checkers, academics and other stakeholders, and a European Democracy Action Plan (setting the framework for a rights-based Digital Services Act package) with guidelines for obligations and accountability of online platforms in the fight against

disinformation (European Commission, 2020b). In addition, the EastStratComm Task Force in the European External Action Service was set up and, in line with this, in 2018 the Commission outlined self-regulatory tools to tackle online disinformation (European Commission, 2019). Notably, in the beginning of 2018, the French President Emmanuel Macron [announced](#) his intention to introduce legislation to curb misinformation during the country's election campaigns, with a clear aim at Russian propaganda (Robert and Stupp, 2018).

Undoubtedly, apart from the increased inaccurate information offered in the (digital) public sphere, i.e., the “supply side”, there is also the “demand side” of fake news. The “demand for disinformation” is tied to the psychology of information consumption and opinion formation. Especially relevant are the core issues and theories associated with cognitive bias, such as attitude polarization, confirmation bias, source confusion, and illusory correlation (Rauch, 2021). These conceptions show why users seek out and believe some sources of information, whether online or offline, while rejecting others, no matter how (in)accurate the published information is. Understanding the demand side factors is pivotal for creating educated and powerful responses to the spread and utilization of disinformation (Wooley and Joseff, 2020, p. 6), and it enables us to think critically about the efficacy of various countermeasures, such as media literacy and investigative journalism.

In this regard, ex-post fact-checking may fill in as a way to assist publics understand the manner in which data and news announcements pass on content of dubious veracity, considering the inadequacy of conventional news coverage to hold political actors responsible for the accuracy of their claims (Amazeen, 2016). In the late 80s and early 90s, it was said that democracy is under threat because of widespread distrust, political apathy and decreasing voter turnout (Dalton, 1988). In the early 21st century, it seems that these trends are still active, coupled by the crisis of public

knowledge, which is mainly triggered by fake news, demagoguery, and unprecedented socio-economic inequalities.

In this paper, first, we discuss the main tenets of the theoretical debate on fact-checking as a means to cope with the crisis of public knowledge and the concomitant erosion of democracy. Second, we explore the landscape of the Greek public sphere over the last ten years and the initiatives taken to counteract misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

2. Main tenets of the fact-checking debate

2.1 Where it comes from and how it is defined

As an integral part of professional ethics, the practice of (ex-ante) checking facts has long been present in journalism. Yet, the establishment of dedicated fact-checking organizations is a rather recent phenomenon mostly implemented during the digital era of mass communications, driven forward by pioneering implementations such as PolitiFact and FactCheck.org (Robertson, Mourão and Thorson, 2020, p.218). The closest predecessor of fact-checking practice is Adwatch features, developed in the USA in early 1990s by many television stations and newspapers as a response to the high negative emotionality of ad campaigns against Michael Dukakis, during the 1988 Presidential election. The idea was to help voters to refute false claims made by candidates and to deconstruct an advisement's sensationalism and sentimentalism (Milburn and Brown, 1997). Adwatch initiatives were developed on the assumption that the press has a responsibility to hold politicians accountable and, in this respect, there were suggestions that the Adwatch practice should be extended to other types of political discourse beyond political commercials. In the meantime, that was doable with the advent of the internet and the establishment of sophisticated fact-checking organizations.

Fact-checking is an online activity focused on investigating the veracity of political claims, employing a form of “scientific objectivity” (Robertson, Mourão and Thorson, 2020, p.234) through the examination of any available relevant information. More specifically, it is viewed as the practice of “systematically publishing assessments of the validity of claims made by public officials and institutions with an explicit attempt to identify whether a claim is factual” (Walter et al., 2020, p.2). These assessments are made through investigation of primary and secondary sources, in order to help users decide on the credibility of online content (Amazeen, 2015, p.4; Brandtzaeg and Følstad, 2017, pp. 4-5; Brandtzaeg, Følstad and Chaparro Domínguez, 2018; York et al., 2020, p.959). Essentially, fact-checking is a journalism/social research hybrid.

Fact-checking services can be divided into three broad categories based on their area(s) of concern: political and public statements (fact-checking of politicians), online rumors and hoaxes (responding to the need for debunking services), and focus on specific topics or events, which combines the two previous categories emphasizing at the same time on a specific occurrence (Brandtzaeg and Følstad, 2017, pp.66-67) (e.g., the invasion of Trump supporters into the Capitol). Due to its unique format and contribution to the political sphere, fact-checking has become increasingly popular throughout the last decade (Ackland and Qwynn, 2021, pp.30-34). In our knowledge-based approach, we deem the term “(public) information accuracy assessment” more suitable as it focuses either on facts, or discourses as facts, and seeks to evaluate the validity and the accuracy of the published information on any given (debatable) issue of public interest, aiming at educating the publics and enhancing the quality of public dialogue through transparency and the dissemination of qualitative information.

Yet, as long as “fact-checking” has become *terminus technicus* we will use either term as alternates. Be noted, however, that the rapid spread of fact-checking practices is both success and

weakness. On one hand, it is a “democracy-building” tool to cope with fake news and any sort of inaccurate information; on the other hand, its domain becomes all too vague since “fake news” is a very broad and poorly understood term covering everything from fabrications, fakeness, falsity, lies, deception, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, conspiracy theory, satire, (ideological) bias, or just anything with which one disagrees. “Trying to fight all of them simultaneously under the same heading is bound to fail” (Andersen and Obelitz Søe, 2020, p.6).

2.2 Modus operandi

Information accuracy assessment uses hybrid techniques stemming from both journalistic and social research methods moving along three basic stages: (i) selection of facts/statements to check, (ii) collection of evidence, and (iii) decision. Often, a fourth stage is added, implemented right after the selection of facts/statements/content to check, the contact with the speaker whose statements are to be scrutinized. Each of these stages comprises of multiple sub-steps. For instance, checkable information selection includes choosing claims “from countless public utterances”, separating facts from opinions, sorting out newsworthy/check-worthy information, and filtering verifiable facts. These steps, that need to be carefully implemented, designate a method having its own epistemic rationale (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018, p.971).

The proper conduction of this assessment requires quantitative and qualitative social research skills, the ability to “read”, analyze and combine different sets of data (Choi and Haigh, 2019, p.628), the ability to assess the validity and possible biases and/or limitations of the different sources/data utilized during the information assessment process, the ability to critically assess any given socio-political context, and the ability to report on the findings in a scientific/impartial way by explicitly referring to all different steps undertaken during the information accuracy assessment process (and sources used), along with the limitations existing in each information accuracy

assessment task. On top of that, the detailed report, the basic output of the information accuracy assessment effort, may well serve a double aim: first, to evaluate the validity of any given publicly articulated statement/piece of information on (controversial) issues of public interest, using scientific discourse and, second, to educate the wider public (Amazeen, 2019; Amazeen, 2020), as well as to promote its active involvement in the process of testing the accuracy of information. Its mission is to strengthen civil society in relation to the digital realm and to reinforce collective knowledge on issues of information evaluation and management in the new media environment. For all its ambition toward educating the public, improving political behavior, and upgrading journalism, the procedure of accuracy assessment has not been totally successful at changing people's beliefs⁵, with high partisans often succumbing to misinformation (Amazeen, 2020).

2.3 Ambivalent effectivity

There is a wide range of research -being predominantly focused on the US context (Nieminen and Rapelli, 2019, p.296)- seeking to evaluate the effects of fact-checking on public dialogue (Walter et al., 2020, p.351). The relevant results demonstrate the ambivalence of the perceived effectiveness of fact-checking. On one hand, fact-checking is deemed corrective of the information received by individuals, reducing dis-/misinformation, contributing -at the same time- to the improvement of political knowledge (York et al., 2020, p.958). It is also argued that fact-checking can reduce the likelihood that politicians will make inaccurate claims, thus reducing the dissemination of inaccurate information in the public sphere (Amazeen, 2019; Amazeen, 2020). In experimental research on the effects of fact-checking, participants were expressing more factually accurate beliefs after exposure to fact-checks (York et al., 2020, p.972), even when those

⁵ Likewise, Adwatch's potential was not fully realized since, as indicated by research, it did not increase viewers' thinking of the issues depicted in the ads (Milburn and Brown 1997, pp.178-9).

fact-checks targeted their preferred candidate (Nyhan et al., 2020, p.956). Thus, it has been demonstrated that fact-checking messages may positively affect beliefs, irrespective of political ideology, pre-existing positions, context (campaign vs. routine), and whether it refutes the entire false statement or just parts of a statement (Walter et al., 2020, p.17).

On the other hand, it is argued that fact-checks may have limited effects or even be counterproductive, particularly when a misperception is notable or summons solid signs, like partisanship or outgroup participation. In addition, the sheer volume, the multiple forms and speed in the production and distribution of online misinformation makes it challenging (or even impossible) for fact-checkers to keep up (Brandtzaeg, Følstad and Chaparro Domínguez, 2018). Let alone that it is disputed whether fact-checkers are consistent in their conclusions and whether their methods are reliable (Nieminen and Rapelli, 2019, p.296).

More to the point, much of the relevant literature focuses on the effects of fact-checking in terms of altering people's opinions and/or support for politicians making inaccurate claims. In sum, the literature proposes several cognitive mechanisms to explain how individuals can prioritize favorable or coherent information even if it is inaccurate or unreliable (Walter et al., 2020, p.4). Factual knowledge is disconnected from policy conclusions and voting intentions of voters. While fact-checking helps to improve knowledge of facts, it does not necessarily reduce the support for a politician articulating inaccurate claims. Moreover, information checked for its accuracy, can even move (partisan) voters closer to (extreme) policy positions, despite providing more accurate facts. While the utilization of even wrong measurable numbers gives validity to the assertion of a political actor, there have been instances when people recollect just the fundamental message of the assertion -along with the obtrusiveness of the examined subject- and base their decisions on impressions brought about by this message rather than on the numbers mentioned. This means that

the possible impact of the political campaign messages is not limited to facts and figures; the campaigns' impact stems from its narrative and peripheral cues (Barrera et al., 2020, pp.7, 25, 36, 56).

The expected effective intervention in improving political knowledge and reducing belief in misinformation is measured mostly in experiments that require participants to read fact-checking messages that they may not normally choose to consume. Nevertheless, the literature on political polarization and selective exposure doubts the fact that partisans look for content that challenges their views (Shin & Thorson, 2017, p.234).

The selective perception of fact-checking conclusions is quite more intense when it comes to partisans. Partisans are motivated reasoners, and political affiliation is an important “prior attitude” that undermines the effectiveness of fact-checking (Jarman, 2016, p.13). In these occasions, people will probably accuse the fact-checking organization of political bias, will point out the reliance of the report on anonymous sources, or they will “reveal” a secret agenda seeking to undermine their favorable politician. If a fact-checking report refutes key information in their already established reality frames, partisans will reject the new information because it will contrast their already formed mental schemes (e.g., individuals opting for a free-market model will reject any fact-check supporting the improvement of a health care system through state regulation) (Walter et al., 2020, p.4). Under these terms, factchecks are unlikely to diminish meaningfully the strong attachments people have to their party's candidate in a campaign context with partisan cues. Fact-checking effects may be stronger, however, in elections with weaker partisan cues and less well-known candidates (Shin and Thorson, 2017; Nyhan et al., 2020, p.957).

In the contemporary digital interactive communication environment, exposure to news depends significantly on what your friends/acquaintances share on social media. Consequently, the

visibility of fact-checking messages is affected by selective sharing. In the occasions where selective sharing tendency, the dissemination of fact-checking reports on issues of public interest becomes rather limited (Shin and Thorson, 2017, p.234). According to Ackland and Gwynn (2021, p.29), “attempts to correct falsifications may even perpetuate misinformation spread, particularly within ideological groups”.

The possible effect of the fact-checking reports depends upon whether fact-checking sources are seen as “experts” or as “peers”. A correction tweet from a relevant institution (expert) reduced misperceptions, while a correction tweet from a random user (peer) did not, indicating that an expert fact-checker would be more effective. In addition, empirical evidence underlines the importance of (digital) acquaintances. News stories posted by a Facebook friend were more likely to generate interest in seeking further information than those from non-friend sources. Relevant research also suggests that there are key differences in whether friends were perceived to be opinion leaders or not, with perceived opinion leaders having a positive effect on information seeking (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020, p.691). Therefore, the alleged credibility of a fact-checking source appears to be crucial for the effectiveness of its output.

2.4 The audience reach of fact-checking services

Another aspect of the debate regarding fact-checking refers to the relationship between information accuracy assessment organizations and their audiences. In general, despite the effort of fact-checkers to reach a wider audience, evidence indicates that people are not that familiar with their work, that fact-checks constitute a rather small portion of websites visited, that a limited number of people share fact-checks (Shin and Thorson, 2017), and that -when shared- they are shared selectively on social media for political reasons (Robertson, Mourão, Thorson, 2020, p.219). Most of the research done in this area comes from the USA as well; just as the assumption

held by Tunstall (1977) some decades ago that the “media are American” so one can at least effectively claim that research on fact-checking organizations is American as well.

Analysis of survey data from a U.S. sample shows that liberals and liberal/mainstream news consumers are more aware of, positive toward, and likely to report using fact-checking sites. Conservatives are less positive and conservative news consumers see such sites as less useful to them. Findings indicate that while specific combinations of predictors of awareness, attitudes, and behavior vary, fact-checking sites have a particular appeal to liberals and liberal/mainstream news consumers. Thus, fact-checks become part of a pattern of ideological news consumption and sharing, with Democrats sharing fact-checks favorable to them and filtering out those which are not (and vice versa for Republicans). Finally, some audience members, particularly conservatives, have very negative attitudes toward fact-checkers (Brandtzaeg, Følstad and Chaparro Domínguez, 2018).

On top of the ideological biases on behalf of the public, research in the U.S. has shown that fact-checkers are often accused of being partisan, usually in favor of Democrats. Other critics argue that fact-checkers practice a form of “false equivalence,” portraying both (U.S.) parties as equally deceptive in order to avoid charges of bias (Graves, 2016, p.519). Still, the most serious and sustained critique of fact-checking is that political fact-checking is hopelessly flawed because “the subject matter of politics is often complex, ambiguous, and open to a variety of conflicting interpretations” (Graves, 2016, p.519).

In the eyes of the U.S. audience, fact-checkers are perceived as partisan actors in a divided media system. Major fact-checking organizations, such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and FactCheck.org, have been “identified” as leftist, suggesting that conservatives perceive such outlets as part of the left-leaning media (Robertson, Mourão and Thorson, 2020, pp.222, 234), though those on the left

do also complain about fact-checks (Graves, 2016). The consequence of this selective use of fact-checking reports may be to “further polarize audiences as well as undercut trust in the process of fact-checking”, since fact-checks may be used as partisan weapons to undercut the “other side” (Robertson, Mourão and Thorson, 2020, p.218-219).

Insofar as use of fact-checking sites indicates awareness, evidence suggests that those more likely to be aware are those with higher education, who are more liberal, more interested in and engaged with politics, and who consume more news (Shin and Thorson, 2017). There are mixed results when it comes to the role that age plays, with visitors to fact-checking sites likely to be younger (Gottfried et al., 2013), but sharers of fact-checks likely to be older (Robertson, Mourão and Thorson, 2020). Apart from the demographics (younger age, higher education), research has shown that fact-checking awareness can be predicted by higher political interest, more frequent political discussion, higher political efficacy, political ideology (liberal/non-conservative), and more frequent news media use (Robertson, Mourão and Thorson, 2020, p.221).

2.5 Critique on fact-checking methods

Fact-checking has not escaped critique regarding its methods, especially when it comes to the rationale behind the choice of statements/information to be fact-checked and the “verdict” of the fact-checking reports regarding the accuracy of the scrutinized statements/information. These issues are directly related to the inherent complexity of discourse itself since meanings can be conveyed with the use of practically countless utterances and the consequent “openness” in the possible ways of interpreting public discourse and the conveyed information. Several authors criticize the different criteria on which fact-checkers choose the claims to assess (Nieminen and Rapelli, 2019) (some researchers opt for a more concrete definition of a “fact-checkworthy” claim)

(Lim, 2018, p.6) and the differences in the accuracy “scores” assigned in the fact-checked statements.

In addition, the interpretation of a claim by the fact-checkers may be controversial (Uscinski, 2015). The low rate at which different fact-checkers agreed when evaluating the same statements in this scoring range suggests that providing objective information about candidates’ honesty is quite difficult. Measuring the accuracy of political statements, a binary “accurate-inaccurate” outcome for any statement under scrutiny deduces the complexity of (public, political) discourse and thus undermines the fundamental scope of fact-checking, which is to provide as accurate information as possible (Ackland and Gwynn, 2021, p.33).

Another fact-checking characteristic that can undermine the effectiveness of the assessment is lexical complexity. Fact-checking organizations have to keep a rather delicate balance, discussing complex issues, while simultaneously attempting to effectively “translate” the information to the general public. Complex language can be perceived as elitist, potentially alienating audiences. Yet, though simple language can make fact-checking more accessible, it can also compromise its perceived accuracy and impartiality for politically sophisticated audiences (Walter et al., 2020, p.6). The delicate balance between detailed scientific discourse and effective communication with the public further underlines the hybrid (journalistic and social research) as well as interpretive nature of fact-checking and the need for fact-checkers that have significant experience in the fields of journalism and social research, so as to be capable of presenting in a simple (but not simplistic) way all the necessary evidence that are used to evaluate the accuracy of any given piece of information.

3. The landscape information accuracy assessment in Greece

Interestingly, recent empirical research (Humprecht et al., 2020) shows that policy responses and interventions to improve (accurate) political knowledge as well as to increase resilience to online disinformation need to consider sociocultural variations, structural particularities and differing media environments, including levels of societal polarisation, populist political communication and economic incentives to produce fake news. All the above arguably create varying levels of susceptibility to disinformation, with Greece being highly vulnerable (OECD, 2019, p.147).

In particular, Greece's political, economic and (fragmented) media environment reinforces anti-elitism, mistrust of expert knowledge and news media, and a belief in conspiracy theories (Humprecht et al., 2020). More than so as the Greek communication system is an exemplary case of polarized pluralism characterized, among others, by intense political parallelism and poor journalist professionalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012). As a consequence of these combined influences, citizens get easily exposed to disinformation and, therefore, obtain inaccurate perceptions of reality. This is in sharp contrast to many Western and Northern European countries (e.g., Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands), where citizens are evidently less exposed to (and less willing to disseminate) disinformation on social networking sites and digital platforms (see Neudert et al., 2019).

In the same line, according to the most recent wave of World Internet Project – Greece (WIP-GR), the Greek internet users indicate that they are frequently exposed to online disinformation and appear highly skeptical as far as the reliability of online information is concerned. Yet, they seem to perceive themselves as rather capable to do information accuracy assessment, that is, to distinguish fake news on the net. In specific, as WIP-GR shows (Tsekeris et al., 2020), more than seven out of ten users state that they can distinguish fake news, while only 2.5 out of ten deny that

they have such ability during web browsing.⁶ Nevertheless, this is a self-declaration and the assumption that “by preferring to make their own research when they spot a potential fake news, the Greek users act like fact checkers [and] (t)hey chose to adopt a more active role; instead of using fact checker software or website, they make their own individual research on the web” (Mavridis, 2018, p.35) is certainly in need of further investigation.

To be sure, detailed fact-checking (or proper source-checking) is considered as an increasingly difficult task within the attention economy (Patel, 2017; see also Bavel et al., 2020). Fact-checker websites are not so popular in Greece, and the Greek users, amidst the distrustful emotional climate of the country over the last ten years or so, seem to mistrust relevant platforms and “believe that the main responsible actors to counter the spread of fake news on social media are the users and the social media platforms themselves” (Mavridis, 2018, p.34-35).

In this vulnerable digital environment, *Ellinika Hoaxes* can be characterized as the most robust and sustainable so far fact-checking media outlet (an IFCN member and certified Facebook fact-checker) in Greece since 2013. It uses in combination professional fact-checkers (journalists) and crowdsourcing strategies⁷ (but not “automated” or “algorithmic” fact-checking), aiming to combat disinformation and validate the factual veracity of news and other online content through debunking fake news on a wide variety of topical issues, such as politics, public health, migration, science, technology, social networking phenomena, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and conspiracy “theories” (or conspiracy narratives). *Ellinika Hoaxes* is based on IFCN value principles (commitment to non-partisanship and fairness, as well as transparency) and has arguably shaped

⁶ Yet, according to Newman et al. (2019), the Greek media landscape appears vulnerable to fake news and disinformation, something which is arguably linked to Greek users' strong preference towards online news consumption: “in the long-tail list of the most visited websites are a number of news websites or blogs that regularly engage in dangerous conspiracy theories” (Newman et al., 2019, p.87).

⁷ According to the platform's claims, “some readers also send us preliminary research or suggestions regarding the research the platform could pursue, practices that are welcome but not necessary. In any case the platform declares that users' participation is of the utmost importance” (Lamprou et al., 2021, p.424).

“different perspectives in the Greek mediascape and fake news control” (Lamprou et al., 2021, p.418).

Especially in the current pandemic condition, the ethics of the digital mediascape is intertwined with the ethics of public health. In other words, the viral spread of conspiracy narratives and pseudo-science (e.g., pseudo-medical news) in the fragmented infosphere is something that undoubtedly endangers the vaccination campaign and the lives of many in the community. For that reason, the Greek government has launched a webpage, within the unified state portal gov.gr, aimed to deconstruct various popular myths and fake news about COVID-19 (gov.gr, 2021).

In Greece, moreover, not much serious analytical attention has been paid to the dynamics of fact-checking, which still seems to be underexplored (Patrona, 2018) and largely underestimated as a professional field or an academic endeavor or an institutional practice. Nevertheless, two institutional developments in Greece can be considered as relevant to the topic.

First, following an EU Recommendation on election cooperation networks, online transparency, protection against cybersecurity incidents and fighting disinformation campaigns, in 2019 the Hellenic Parliament voted for a national election network, involving national authorities with competence for electoral matters and authorities in charge of monitoring and enforcing rules related to online activities relevant to the electoral context. The main purpose of the national election network is to protect country’s electoral process from being exposed to malicious actors via politically motivated mass online disinformation campaigns, including by third countries, with the specific aim to discredit and delegitimize elections. The latter has been recognized as growing threats to EU democracies. Second, in February 2021, the Greek Government launched the National Commission for Bioethics and Technoethics (NCBT- bioethics.gr), as an independent advisory body of experts, to explore ethical, legal and social issues raised by current technological

developments, including digital information and media ethics. In February 2022, the NCBT published a Recommendation on measures to tackle disinformation amid the COVID-19 pandemic (NCBT, 2022).

All in all, within the national context, fact-checking (as a non-regulatory initiative) remains an uphill battle in Greece (factcheckerlegalsupport, 2020) and the journalists are still facing a plethora of challenges (such as attacks by extremists), albeit the country has made some strides when it comes to press freedom in recent years (factcheckerlegalsupport.org, 2020). Moving forward, fact-checkers must also effectively face the general challenges of low public trust, decreased civic engagement, and the self-perpetuating vicious circle between polarization, populism and disinformation.

Having in mind all the parameters that could influence the design and implementation of a fact-checking project, as well as the merits and limitations of fact-checking presented in the relevant literature, a research team compiled by the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE), the “Athena” Research Centre, and the Laboratory for Social Research in the Media of the Communication and Mass Media Department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens undertook the task to design and implement a fact-checking structure under the title Check4facts that combines automated ML methods and a team of experienced social researchers and journalists who are responsible for assessing the validity of publicly articulated political statements concerning the issues of refugees/immigration and delinquency/crime. The Check4facts project has received funding by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI/ELIDEK).

There are also a few similar initiatives which are, however, quite more technologically oriented. Funded by the Cordis EU program, the application “In Video Veritas” (inVID) developed

by the Information Technologies Institute (ITI) of the Centre for Research and Technology Hellas (CERTH), is designed to check the validity of news videos, especially those appearing on YouTube⁸. Part of the Digital News Innovation Project funded by Google, the application ‘Check-it: Clearly Visualizing Fake News on Social Media’, developed by the Foundation for Research and Technology, visualizes fake news on social media⁹. The system submits news stories to several fact-checking tools, including fact-checking sites and lists of known fake news sources – scoring them automatically on whether they are real or fake. In addition, there is the Civic Information Office (CIO), which identifies itself as “a community of software engineers, researchers, journalists, academics and acclaimed professionals, focusing on creating technology and research products for the public interest”, having support by iMedD (Incubator for Media Education and Development – a Stavros Niarchos Foundation spin-off). CIO’s primary objective is to join a network of experts on mis/disinformation techniques and track online disinformation mechanisms and processes in real-time. Both, at local level and internationally.¹⁰ Finally, the Institute of Communication and Computer Systems (ICCS) participates in the “Social Truth” project funded by the Horizon 2020 EU program. The project develops automated analytical and assessing tools to check online news.¹¹

In terms of educating and developing skills related to fact-based reporting, there is the so-called ERUM project, a European initiative which addresses the need for the development of students’ key transversal competences in terms of media literacy, evidence-based communication and resilience to dis/misinformation. It also intends to strengthen the capacity of media experts vis-a-

⁸ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/687786>

⁹ <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/dnifund/dni-projects/check-it-visualizing-fake-news-social-media-round-4/>

¹⁰ <https://cvcio.org/#about>

¹¹ <https://www.iccs.gr/?s=Social+Truth>

vis evidence- and research-based communication.¹² The project is run by various Universities around Europe, and in Greece by the School of Journalism and Mass Communications of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. ERUM collaborates with EU-factcheck, an initiative of the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA) that seeks to fight misinformation about European policies and topics. Journalism students from all over Europe factcheck claims made by politicians and others and rate them.¹³

4. Discussion

Fact-checking is not panacea, a catch-all solution in terms of addressing all the issues stemming from fake news and their repercussions. In our view, fact-checking's major task is to provide as accurate information as possible, not to change people's political orientations and preferences. In addition, fact-checking is about correcting (if necessary) false/inaccurate information, not about fighting propaganda. Propaganda is a communicational eco-system and/or strategy, which seeks to disseminate its own doctrine and frame a specific "reality" according to the interests of the propagandist (Poulakidakos, Veneti & Frangonikolopoulos, 2018; Staal, 2019). The dissemination of inaccurate information might constitute a part of any given propaganda strategy. Likewise, accuracy assessment (fact-checking) is not focused on "propagandists". Its purpose is not to establish 'who lies most' but to provide information about claims that appear in public (Nieminen and Rapelli, 2019, p.304) and to provide clear and rigorously vetted information to consumers so that they may use the facts to make cognizant choices in voting and other essential decisions (Amazeen, 2015, p.4).

¹² <https://projects.uni-foundation.eu/erum/>

¹³ <https://eufactcheck.eu/fact-checks/>

Nevertheless, fact-checking could become a tool of social influence because if politicians feel that their voters are likely -even to a limited extent- to be affected by exposure to fact-checking messages, they, might change their rhetoric and actions (Walter et al., 2019). In that sense, it holds political personnel accountable because if their statements will be subjected to robust scrutiny, they might be less likely to make, or repeat, false claims. Of course, whether politicians will take into serious consideration the verdicts of fact-checking organizations regarding their statements, is dependent upon the political culture and the specific context of an electoral period (e.g., polarization rate) in any given political system. It also depends on the sustainability of fact-checking initiatives which is contingent upon their adequate funding beyond short-term financial support provided by EU or other (inter)national programs; at the same time, it depends on fact-checking organizations' institutional independence rendering them a civil society stake holder of utmost importance, especially in the digital era.

One last -important- remark on fact-checking, related to the process of selecting statements or news items to fact-check, is the rationale behind this selection. Even though this process has been critically approached as rather subjective, and it can't be otherwise to a certain extent, one should take heed to not misunderstand the subject matter of fact-checking; fact-checkers do not check only information pre-conceived as inaccurate, but they scrutinize various pieces of information labelled as important on any given issue, either accurate or inaccurate ones. At the end of the day, the accurate information will be assessed as such. In this regard, by also disseminating accurate information, apart from its monitory role, in the long run, information accuracy assessment could help reduce the "general distrust" and cynicism (Buckingham, 2019; Demertzis, 2020) expressed towards the Media and political personnel, which constitute the nihilistic ideological basis of conspiracy theorists that significantly undermine the "quality" of contemporary democracies.

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