



D4.9 – Journalists’ responses: Case studies comparative report

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This report presents and analyses the comparative results of an investigation conducted in late 2023 and early 2024 on journalism and its relationship with the issue of dis/misinformation in 7 different countries – Poland, Norway, Croatia, Spain, Iceland, Italy and Bulgaria. The research is based on the theoretical framework and methodological guidelines developed by Working Group 4 of the RECLAIM project, specifically outlined in WP4 Framing Paper and in WP4 Deliverable 4.8 (Journalists’ Responses: Design and Planning of Interviews).

1. Introduction

In recent years, politically and commercially motivated disinformation has increasingly fuelled mistrust of political representatives, the media and ultimately democracy itself, with worrying consequences.

In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary chose the term “post-truth” as the word of the year, defining it as “relating or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford English Dictionary 2016). While this definition may seem incomplete, the fact that it was chosen as the word of the year is indicative of the increasing prominence that “fake news”, “alternative facts”, conspiracy theories and the deliberate spread of disinformation have assumed in many Western democracies and beyond. Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when entire populations were gripped by uncertainty and existential fear, disinformation was no longer confined to narrow ideological communities but spilled over into the wider public sphere.

The growing threat of disinformation to security, trust in democracy, pluralism and social cohesion makes it more important than ever to develop adequate counterstrategies. Measures have been taken at both national and European level to monitor and combat disinformation, highlighting the growing importance of fact-checking and the need to invest in professional journalism. While there is consensus on the need to support evidence-based information through institutionalised news providers, the available capacities and responses provided by established journalism and media organisations across Europe vary widely. It is crucial to understand how journalists from different regions of Europe identify the problem, define responsibilities and envisage possible solutions.

Scholarly works have increasingly focused on several key dimensions of post-truth phenomena. Among them, it is worth mentioning the media through which such false content proliferates, notably social networking media (e.g., Conrad 2021); the legislative mechanisms attempting to prevent them, exemplified by recent European regulatory interventions (e.g., Bouza García and Oleart 2023); the normative considerations surrounding these phenomena, such as debates over the concept of truth and the transformation of the public sphere (e.g., Trenz 2023); and the impact of misinformation on traditional journalistic practices (e.g., Michailidou, Eike, and Trenz 2022; Mayerhöffer et al. 2022). This report contributes to these strands of academic research with a strong focus on journalism. It provides primary data and normative insights through a novel comparative empirical analysis. As detailed in the RECLAIM Deliverable 4.8, the empirical research involved a series of semi-structured interviews with professional journalists from Italy, Norway, Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria, Iceland, and Spain. These interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024 and were centred on the problems of fake news and disinformation in journalism, as well as the measures that should be taken to combat these phenomena. They covered different types of media outlets, including public service broadcasting, legacy newspapers, tabloids and alternative media (for more information on methodology, case selection and interview questions, see *D4.8 Journalists’ responses: design and planning of interviews*).

Based on this new empirical data, this report aims to understand the actions and countermeasures taken by journalists and media outlets to uphold quality standards, preserve journalism’s integrity, and regain citizens’ trust in the face of the fake news backlash of the last decade. What are the main challenges journalists face in their daily work regarding disinformation, and what are the most effective countermeasures they employ?

Additionally, the report investigates patterns of transnational cooperation among journalists to combat fake news and attacks on media pluralism. What defines these patterns? What are the underlying values and principles? How far do they extend geographically, and what role do transnational organisations play in these acts of solidarity?



Finally, the report examines the role of the European Union's policies and institutions in this context. What do journalists think about the role of the EU, and what new policies and/or legislation would they like to see implemented by the EU?

This report proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the diversity of European media landscapes and the legacies of national media systems that continue to shape journalistic responses to the disinformation challenge. Second, we provide a selective overview of anti-disinformation measures initiated by journalists and news organisations in our sample of countries. Third, we investigate evolving forms of transnational cooperation among journalists that may facilitate the fight against disinformation. Finally, we ask journalists about their expectations regarding the EU regulatory framework, its potential to combat disinformation, and its possible restrictions on media freedom and independence.

2. The Diversity of European Media Systems

The selection of countries where journalists were interviewed reflects the pluralism of media landscapes in Europe. While media independence is generally accepted as important in Western democracies, and standards of truth, accuracy, and objectivity are widely accepted as cornerstones of good journalism, significant context-dependent differences and disagreements on how best to achieve these objectives persist. Journalism is embedded in each country's political culture and economy, shaping opportunities, professional practices, and expectations in its output.

Iceland and Norway are classical examples of the North European or democratic-corporatist model of media systems, characterised by strong professionalisation of journalism, high circulation of news products, and a robust public service orientation in the news (Gunnar and Valgerður 2021; Eli and Rune 2021). Italy and Spain represent the Mediterranean or polarised-pluralistic model, with weaker levels of professionalisation, lower circulation, and significant state intervention in public broadcasting and journalism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Poland, Croatia, and Bulgaria pertain to more recently democratised media systems, where media pluralism remains more restricted, with strong divisions between state and private outlets often providing competing information, a largely unregulated, neoliberal media markets (Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010) and growing polarisation (Tóth et al. 2023).

It is also important to consider that news circulation is often simply facilitated or restricted by factors such as country size and geography. For example, Iceland, with its population of only 382 thousand, boasts a considerably smaller media market compared to Italy, which has a population of 60 million. Consequently, this influences the diversity of available information. Iceland, for instance, has only one national daily newspaper, Morgunblaðið, following the closure of the second national daily, Fréttablaðið, in early 2023 (Gunnar Ólafsson 2023).

Additionally, variations arise in the degree of centralization within political systems, impacting both the media and the provision of local and national news. Norway, for example, maintains a historically decentralised media system, with local media playing a significant role in the dissemination of information. In Spain, regional newspapers play a key role in responding to the information demands of autonomous communities.

Another distinguishing factor is the extent of legislative regulation governing journalistic practice, ranging from relatively stringent systems, such as Italy, to more liberal frameworks, as can be found in Spain and the two Nordic countries. In Italy, professional journalists must meet the requirements set by the journalists'



association (*Ordine dei Giornalisti*), which supervises the Register of Journalists. Registration with this body is mandatory in order to practise the profession, and it plays a crucial role in regulating and protecting the integrity of its members' conduct. This requirement sets Italy apart from other countries where journalistic freedom is also protected by the constitution, but journalistic work is less regulated by the authorities. While less regulation can foster a more dynamic media market, it can also make it more challenging to litigate against journalists for matters related to their profession, such as the dissemination of misinformation, as seen in the case of Spain.

Another significant divergence lies in the level of public support provided to newspapers, which can be in the form of direct funding or indirect subsidies, such as tax breaks or discounted raw materials. In comparative journalism studies, the Nordic countries are distinguished for their extensive press subsidies aimed at ensuring news diversity and distribution. However, in recent years, this practice has faced significant scrutiny, with overall support levels found to be declining (Andersson, 2023). What often goes unnoticed is that Mediterranean countries also provide substantial public support to news organisations. Italy, in particular, stands out, allocating approximately €88 million in public funds to direct subsidies alone in 2021, with indirect support also being significant (Dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria 2021). However, criticisms have been raised in Italy regarding the selection process for beneficiary newspapers. Rules intended to benefit local publications or those managed by journalist cooperatives are frequently circumvented, resulting in funds being allocated to newspapers that at first glance would not meet the requirements.

This being said, the trend towards media system convergence, predicted by Halin and Mancini (2004) in their groundbreaking study 20 years ago, finds proof in our comparative study, even though differences persist. For instance, there is a common tendency towards media ownership concentration, where companies increasingly control multiple media outlets and operate with oligopolistic practices, negatively affecting pluralism. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Spain, where oligopolistic concentration has led to limited competition in the media market, as well as in Italy, which has witnessed a concentration of media ownership in recent years (exemplified by various acquisitions of publications by the GEDI group controlled by the Agnelli family, and by the entrepreneur and right-wing politician Antonio Angelucci). A similar trend can also be observed in Croatia, Poland and Bulgaria, albeit with the added aspect of significant foreign capital involvement in the ownership of national media outlets.

In addition to the challenge to pluralism posed by ownership concentration, there is the issue of political polarisation. This overall trend is notably prevalent in some countries, resulting in the growth of partisan press. An exemplary case is Poland, where the media landscape remains deeply divided between liberal and pro-European publications on the one hand, and national-conservative ones on the other. This polarisation tends to assert itself and consequently prevail over the typological differences among newspapers (such as the distinction between tabloids and quality newspapers), making these differences more nuanced. Another example is Bulgaria, where journalists and media outlets are deeply divided by their positioning towards Russia.

Furthermore, media organisations in all countries are facing the challenge of digitalisation, which has a profound impact on established media business models. There is a widespread tendency for news consumers to gather information and news stories from the digital word, not necessarily from traditional newspapers in their digital versions, but from a multitude of sources and channels, often conveyed through social networks. Social media platforms thus gain significance as information providers, with journalists increasingly relying on digital advertising. Established media in different countries face different risks but also test out new opportunities for online journalism. Iceland and Norway stand out in this regard, with

investments in digital journalism and a higher proportion of news consumers accessing information via social networks (Schröder et al. 2020; Jóhannsdóttir 2021).

Digitalisation further affects and reshapes established journalistic working practices and routines because online news requires a different timing compared to daily print news. Journalists across all the selected countries deeply complain about the accelerated work pace and the enhanced competition about who gets out news stories first. This digitalization-led “need for speed” often emerges as one of their main concerns in the challenges that their profession faces. It has profound implications for ensuring quality standards of journalism, as there is often insufficient time for thorough source checking and investigation, thus facilitating the spread of misinformation.

3. Anti-Disinformation Practices

Main takeaways

- **Different post-truth phenomena (e.g., fake news, subtle disinformation, and misinformation) have different causes.**
- **Media organizations (with some exceptions) do not have training, policies or institutionalized procedures specifically aimed at countering disinformation.**
- **Systematic verification of news content by people other than the original author is considered important.**
- **Disinformation presents an opportunity for a high-quality business model that prioritizes reputation building through thorough explanation of news.**
- **The best anti-disinformation strategy remains good old-fashioned journalism: rigorous investigation, journalistic skill and adherence to the traditional rules of quality journalism.**
- **Journalists are divided on the usefulness of fact-checking services.**

Journalists from different backgrounds were interviewed as ‘experts’ with first-hand experiences in confronting the disinformation challenge and developing counterstrategies. Many displayed familiarity with political and/or academic debates on disinformation, embracing a diversity of perspectives and not necessarily agreeing on a single problem definition and perception. Journalists’ critical awareness is also reflected in their capacities to put the disinformation phenomenon in a historical and cultural context. The misinformation and fake news challenge is in no way considered to be a new phenomenon, as the vast majority of our respondents elaborate in the interviews. They argue that the novelty rather lies in the dissemination process characterising this phenomenon today. According to them, the unique traits of contemporary information — speed, information overflow and digitalization — profoundly influence the ways in which contemporary disinformation emerges.

In this discussion, social networking media consistently emerged as a crucial factor in the proliferation of new forms of disinformation. When asked about this role of social media, journalists’ responses shifted between structural and actor-specific explanations. In the former, journalists regard social networking media as the root cause and primary source of disinformation. In the latter, social networking media are viewed as tools employed by promoters of fake news, who strategically use them to disseminate

disinformation. In other words, journalists saw social media as either the *engine* of fake news and disinformation production, or as a *vehicle* for fake news and disinformation dissemination. The first structural attribution was often given by journalists working for tabloid or right-wing populist outlets, who claim that journalists can sometimes become victims of misinformation as they use social networks as their main news source and inadvertently fall into disinformation. In the words of an Italian journalist, “we must understand that the primary source of all current news is social networks”. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, journalists from progressive, alternative and non-mainstream newspapers largely prefer an actor-specific attribution of causality, also blaming traditional journalism for the spread of false, biased and out-of-context content.

The discussion surrounding accountability for post-truth phenomena frequently emerged in the interviews as also linked to the polarisation of major media outlets, with journalists becoming more partisan and positioning themselves in the debate. This often leads to the violation of the rule of impartiality, as journalists spread inaccurate news in alignment with the partisan stance of the publication and/or the publisher. This process is well explained by a Polish journalist, who suggested that polarisation leads journalists to take a position, thus slipping into “identity-based media information” (i.e., partisan press), which results in the decline of journalistic standards and ultimately favours misinformation. It is not necessarily about classic fake news, but rather about selective, distorted and biased news.

Our respondents also make frequent reference to the difference of two modes of disinformation content: the low-quality, biased, decontextualized and misleading information, on the one side; and the fabricated, more overtly false “fake news” on the other. The latter are often defined by journalists as a phenomenon confined to online echo chambers, such as in the form of so-called conspiracy theories, with some of our respondents downplaying its severity.¹ Instead, they indicate the first type of disinformation as the most pressing issue, because it is more “subtle” and extends beyond digital bubbles, affecting mainstream information sources and contributing to the overall decline in traditional journalism standards. In this perspective, disinformation is not something that happens at the margins but at the core: Established newspapers carry full responsibility and cannot simply put the blame on so-called alternative news. As a Spanish journalist put it, “the greatest element of disinformation is still traditional media”.

Both types, although markedly different, are still categorizable as forms of disinformation: the first due to journalistic malpractice, political bias or intent of manipulation, and the second due to the fabrication of news stories with their disruptive effects. Moreover, there was nearly unanimous consensus among journalists that contemporary journalistic work is also hindered by limited time and resources, leading to the inadvertent spread of false information. The rush to publish first often prevents proper fact-checking of sources, which may result in the unintentional propagation of fake news. They cited instances of low-quality or incorrect information stemming from human error, primarily due to specific working conditions. This aligns closely with the English concept of “misinformation” (Armitage, Rachel, and Vaccari, 2021), even though some languages spoken by interviewees lack a clear distinction between disinformation and misinformation.

One respondent, for instance, described disinformation as a more frequent problem in foreign news, where fact-checking is more difficult and journalists rely on foreign sources and lack the resources and time for thorough verification. Especially in more recent war coverage, this has been a problem, and many journalists acknowledge that they occasionally made mistakes and thus were responsible for the spread of incorrect information.

¹ A partial exception arises here in the case of Bulgaria, where various journalists have contended that fake news originating from Russian propaganda transcended online echo chambers, infiltrating the mainstream debate as well.

In terms of strategies to combat disinformation, a relevant answer that emerged in numerous interviews is the absence of training, specific guidelines or institutionalised procedures to prevent and counter disinformation within the media organisations for which the journalists worked. While these outlets often have general working guidelines and ethical codes, most of them do not have anything specific to address the problem of disinformation and fake news. This is the prevailing situation, although there are exceptions, particularly among Spanish and Polish news organisations, where the presence of anti-fake news training or structured procedures for content verification is relatively more common.

Notably, news agencies across countries are a partial exception in this regard, demonstrating a heightened focus on the accuracy of their information. In the workplace of news agencies, this is manifested through a systematic review of news content by individuals other than the original author. Journalists working for news agencies attribute this emphasis on accuracy to the necessity of maintaining contracts with newspapers, as well as the personal responsibility of writing news pieces that will be published across various media outlets, often without additional verification. In the words of an Italian journalist from ANSA, the leading news agency in the country, “working for ANSA requires extra attention when disseminating news because you know that it will likely be picked up by all Italian newspapers, often without verification. Therefore, you have extra responsibility. If you spread fake news, you are at much greater risk in ANSA because there is more accountability”. Having articles read by individuals other than the author before publication is often considered an important practice for maintaining high-quality information by journalists across various outlets. However, this practice is increasingly undermined by contemporary fast-paced workplaces, which restrict its systematic use.

In the absence of professional training, initiatives against fake news often rely on self-initiative. Such self-initiatives are seen by some journalists as the preferred response to disinformation, as they do not risk conflicting with the principle of journalistic independence. It was noted that journalists often took a defensive stance when confronted with the challenge of disinformation in the interviews. They claim to avoid disinformation in their own work and to invest in fact-checking accuracy when writing their own stories, but they rarely openly confront the purveyors of disinformation.

In terms of individual strategies adopted by journalists to mitigate misinformation, the most common response among those interviewed was that, ultimately, to prevent both intentional and unintentional disinformation, it is essential to return to the classic standards of ‘quality journalism’. In this sense, the best operating strategies remain rigorous investigation, journalistic skills, and ethical standards of accuracy and objectivity. Not all journalists, however, have shown a marked inclination to actively prevent the spread of false or low-quality information in every aspect of their work. Differences emerged between journalists who have developed a political awareness of the disinformation challenge and others who tended to downplay the problem. This divergence could lead to increasing polarisation within the professional field of journalism, with some journalists either indifferent to the issue, denying its significance, or even profiting from the creation and dissemination of fake news.

The discussion on disinformation challenges and potential countermeasures also led many journalists to reason over journalism business models, with the traditional model of high-quality journalism considered to be increasingly at odds with contemporary market requirements. According to them, profitability in today’s media landscape often necessitates faster work from journalists, leaving fewer resources for in-depth investigation. Moreover, contemporary business models often require journalistic content to be tailored to social media engagement strategies, which prioritise a “click-mentality” and minimise contextualization, while also employing a more emotive language. This point emerged in most interviews, with journalists from alternative and high-quality outlets expressing greater concern about it. This finding aligns with academic assertions regarding a certain degree of “tabloidization” of broadsheet newspapers



in recent years, if not in terms of content, at least in terms of writing style and content promotion (Wasserman 2019).

While our respondents agreed that the disinformation challenge makes journalism even more indispensable there were differing opinions regarding the viability of professional journalism prioritising reputation-building through high-quality standards within the current media system. Many argued that there are two distinct business models: one embraced by most newspapers, which prioritises speed and being first to report online, and another that values reputation-building and thorough news explanation through high-quality journalistic practices, even if it means being the last to report. Opinions among journalists regarding the viability of the second model varied, with some emphasising its significant potential while others expressed scepticism about its ability to extend beyond a niche market. However, regardless of the question of the potential of this second business model to materialise, there is an awareness that the spread of disinformation presents an opportunity to relaunch quality journalism that meets the growing demands for accurate and verified news, amidst the flood of low-quality over-information. Notably, this business model has grown significantly in recent years, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when people sought trustworthy and high-quality information.

However, this practice may potentially carry risks, as argued by one respondent. As he explained, while it is true that disinformation may prompt a search for quality information, as observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, it also risks diminishing pluralism by delving into the slippery terrain of “truth”. Journals that adopt an anti-disinformation high-quality business model may end up positioning themselves as holders of the truth, potentially neglecting the diversity of interpretations of facts.

Finally, journalists held partially divergent views on the topic of fact-checking services. Some supported it, praising external and independent organisations for performing this task, while others viewed it with suspicion, suggesting that these agencies sometimes exhibit their own political bias and therefore reproduce a partisan divide. There was also disagreement on whether journalists need external fact-checkers, as they are themselves supposed to perform this task. In the words of a senior Italian journalist: “if we think about it, fact-checking is absurd, because, in reality, fact-checking is at the heart of the journalist’s work. That is, the journalist cannot provide unverified news, and yet now there are separate entities fact-checking the news given by journalists. It is the height of absurdity”. However, most journalists also recognized that, ultimately, fact-checking is essentially well-resourced journalism, and its proliferation is indicative of an overall decline in the quality of information. Accordingly, rather than increasingly relying on external fact-checking services, some journalists argued that the focus should be on (re)incorporating fact-checking practices into their journalistic work.

4. Transnational Journalism Collaboration

Main takeaways

- **There is limited awareness of the existing forms of transnational journalistic collaboration.**
- **There is broad agreement on the usefulness of transnational cooperation to counter disinformation, although it is not seen as a panacea.**
- **Practical challenges include the competitive news market, which sometimes hampers collaborative efforts, limited use for domestic news, and collaboration mainly limited to elite newspapers.**
- **The most important transnational collaborations are often informal, developed through rapid, bilateral relationships between journalists in different countries.**

Transnational cooperation among newspapers and/or journalists has traditionally been promoted not as a primary tool to combat disinformation, but as a tool to facilitate transnational information flows and to facilitate investigative journalism across borders. This has been particularly relevant in foreign or EU news coverage (Heft et al. 2019). Traditional patterns of regional cooperation or language affinities also play a role as emerged in our interviews, for example in the case of Croatia, where journalists maintain stronger ties with the neighbouring countries of former Yugoslavia, or in the case of Spain, with bilateral cooperation with Portuguese media.

The use of transnational journalism collaboration as a means to counter disinformation is a relatively new concept. Broadly speaking, our respondents indicated a limited awareness of the various forms of collaboration available and the opportunities they present. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents view transnational collaboration as an important tool in combating misinformation and advocate for its promotion and encouragement. However, their assessment is tempered with a pragmatic view, acknowledging its usefulness while not regarding it as a panacea.

While acknowledging the importance of reinforcing transnational collaboration, journalists also highlight practical challenges stemming from established journalistic norms. Respondents noted that engaging in such collaboration often demands high levels of skill and available resources. Consequently, participation tends to be confined to prominent newspapers and elite journalists, exemplified by those involved in the Alliance of Leading European Newspapers (LENA).

Commercial pressures within the competitive news market can also hinder collaborative efforts, as various journalists have noted. The imperative to break exclusive stories can lead media outlets and journalists to hesitate in sharing information crucial for collaborative fact-checking and mutual support. Finally, the usefulness of international cooperation in covering domestic news, which many journalists consider primary in their daily work, remains very limited. It comes as no surprise that journalists covering foreign politics were the ones expressing the strongest support for transnational cooperation. This reflects the importance of such cooperation in covering global issues, while also highlighting its limited impact on national reporting.

Disparities in the adoption of this practice have emerged both across nations and within different types of newspapers. Interestingly, none of the Icelandic journalists reported any involvement in transnational collaborative efforts, which may be attributed to the small size of the media market in the country. However, even in other countries where such partnerships are present, they remain relatively uncommon. They are more prevalent among broadsheet newspapers and press agencies, whereas tabloids, small publications, and those with right-wing populist leanings are less likely to engage in such endeavours.

Moreover, it is important to note that two distinct forms of transnational cooperation emerged from the interviews. The first is a more classic top-down, structured approach, often formalised within newspaper consortia like LENA, which includes some of the publications where the interviewed journalists are employed, such as *El Pais* in Spain or *La Repubblica* in Italy. However, this type of collaboration is rather exceptional, as most interviewed journalists do not work for newspapers involved in such consortia. Furthermore, some interviewees have questioned the tangible impact of these transnational alliances, perceiving them as having low concrete consequences and loosely connected to the issue of facing disinformation. Finally, as highlighted by a Bulgarian journalist, there is the risk that such EU networks may be perceived in peripheral countries as part of foreign external interference to the national public sphere.

Conversely, the second form of transnational cooperation is more informal and spontaneous, emerging through rapid, bilateral relationships between journalists. This approach was prevalent in the interviews, with many respondents acknowledging their engagement in such informal networks. They typically reach out to journalists they know from foreign countries via email or messaging apps when working on stories related to those regions, considering this practice particularly important to counter the risk of falling into fake news. This practice was often presented as a particularly effective measure in checking dubious sources, avoiding misinformation, and enhancing the overall quality of news reporting. Its informal nature allows for meeting the working speed required by contemporary journalistic practices, making it a valuable tool in today's fast-paced media landscape.

5. The Impact of EU Policies

Main takeaways

- **There is a lack of awareness of EU initiatives to combat disinformation, with partial exceptions in Croatia, Poland and Bulgaria.**
- **Existing EU policies in this area are often seen as irrelevant.**
- **Not all journalists were in favour of a greater role for the EU in their work.**
- **Some journalists were in favour of a greater role for the European Union, but for very different reasons.**
- **There is a widespread view that the EU should continue its attempts to regulate digital platforms, especially social networks, and further increase its regulatory power.**

When discussing the role of EU institutions in their journalistic work and in journalism overall, the majority of journalists across countries and media types shared lack of awareness regarding EU initiatives aimed at safeguarding journalism and combating disinformation. Journalists generally lacked information about European policies and did not perceive them as relevant to their daily work. Only journalists in Croatia, Poland and Bulgaria showed slightly higher awareness of EU policies and bodies compared to their counterparts in the West.

This lack of perception of the European Union as relevant to journalists' work went hand in hand with divergent opinions on what the European Union should do to be more present. First, not all journalists were actually in favour of increasing the presence and role of the European Union in their work. Some, especially those working for right-wing newspapers, prioritised the nation-state and argued that anti-disinformation regulations should be handled at the national level. Conversely, journalists with strong liberal views expressed scepticism about public intervention, whether at the national or European level, as explicitly stated by some Polish journalists.

Secondly, some journalists did advocate for a more significant role for the European Union, but their reasons vary widely. Suggestions included organising programs to enhance media literacy among news consumers, providing direct financial support to newspapers, making the European Ombudsman more effective and relevant, and imposing financial penalties on those spreading fake news. Remarkably, media funding mechanisms similar to those found in Scandinavia were suggested by Bulgarian journalists as a flexible funding mechanism that the EU could replicate to support bottom-up initiatives in EU countries and raise trust in the media. This pluralism of suggestions and ideas is not surprising, as it displays the absence of debate and reflection about possible roles of the European Union in their work, resulting in journalists often not having strong pre-formed opinions on EU policies.

However, there is a notable exception to the preceding discussion that warrants careful consideration. Indeed, many journalists across various countries have identified one specific policy domain where they more consensually advocate for EU action: the regulation of digital technologies, particularly social networking media. The proliferation of misinformation through social media has not only emerged as a significant concern for numerous journalists but also as an area where the majority of respondents have expressed their support for EU interventions in addressing this issue.

Many have argued that national governments struggle to regulate powerful transnational digital conglomerates. This has convinced journalists of the superior capacities of the European Union as a supranational regulatory authority. Some journalists praised the measures already initiated by the EU in this domain, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), while many others had only superficial knowledge of these measures, regarding them as positive but with minimal impact. Overall, regardless of their level of knowledge, most journalists acknowledged the positive aspects of these measures but also advocated for more decisive action from the EU in this area.

Finally, some journalists noted that current European regulations on information and the digital sphere primarily focus on requiring major platforms to filter out fake news, potentially granting them even more power. Instead, they argued that European policy intervention should target algorithms and that the DSA provisions on algorithms' transparency and control should be bolder. This is because algorithms are perceived as deliberately designed to promote polarising news that generates engagement at the expense of quality and balanced information. This, in turn, triggers some of the negative changes happening to media outlets in order to remain profitable, such as click-bait strategies and the use of polarising and emotional language, as explained earlier in this report.

Conclusion

This report highlighted the tangible impact of disinformation and the erosion of journalistic standards on European media systems, albeit with varying degrees and intensities. Consequently, it underscores the need for increased attention from policymakers, both at the national and European levels. High-quality, fact-based journalism — while remaining mindful not to veer into absolutist notions of “truth” that may compromise pluralism — is crucial for the effective functioning of the public sphere, which, in turn, is fundamental for our democracies. It is not an overstatement to assert that a decline in the quality of journalism ultimately leads to a decline in the quality of democracy.

However, our empirical study also clearly reveals that “post-truth” is a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon, manifesting in various forms. The diverse forms of disinformation highlighted by the journalists we interviewed, although all falling under the decline of journalistic standards, differ from one another. Therefore, they hold significant heuristic value at both academic and policy levels, as they present distinct causes, consequences, and potential solutions and counterstrategies. Table 1 summarises the different disinformation phenomena as emerged from the accounts of the interviewed journalists.

Table 1. Disinformation challenges according to journalists

Disinformation phenomena	Typical Form	Main Causes	Main Source
False content	Online fake news, conspiracy theories	Economic profit and/or political manipulations	Social networks, alternative media
Subtle disinformation	Biased, out-of-context, selective news coverage	Political polarisation, partisan press, media ownership	All
Misinformation	Unintentional spread of disinformation	Digitalization, increased time speed	Traditional media

As the European news landscape grapples with these multifaceted challenges, the risk of triggering both inter-national and intra-national journalism fragmentation seems concrete.

At the intra-national level, this fragmentation arises from differing approaches to addressing post-truth issues. While some journalists actively combat them, others downplay their relevance, move towards appeasement with their negative consequences, or even benefit from them. These schisms are partly due to structural changes in digitised media markets, where low-cost, instantly accessible online news proliferates, but meticulously fact-checked investigative journalism also gains relevance.

At the inter-national level, this fragmentation emerges in the contrast between the higher adherence to professional standards upheld by the Nordic countries and the growing erosion of these standards witnessed in the majority of other countries under consideration. In these countries, structural phenomena such as political polarisation and ownership concentration have a stronger impact and raise greater concerns about the integrity of journalism.

Ultimately, the precarious state of media outlets – suffering from increased work speed, political polarisation, ownership concentration, and the need to adhere to unregulated digital platforms' algorithms – opens the door to the diffusion of disinformation across the entire European Union, albeit with varying degrees of intensity between countries and types of newspapers. Comprehensive public policies aimed at mitigating the spread of disinformation should therefore focus on addressing these underlying structural trends of the media system that characterise our challenging times.

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