

FACT-CHECKING DISCIPLINE IN THE DIGITAL INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM: A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This paper aims to explore the structuration of a website that focuses on fact-checking in a “liquid” media ecosystem and to investigate whether this institutionalisation is based on journalistic goals. To understand this phenomenon in Romania, we have chosen the factual.ro website for our case study. Thus, we intend to examine the platform’s distinguishing features, starting from the typologies identified in the literature available and analysing the following aspects: programme documents, the team and how it is organised, the business model, the ways in which information is checked, the impact of the checks conducted in the Romanian digital media, as well as other initiatives aimed at fighting disinformation, like “Dignitas”, “Verificat AFP”/ “Fact Check AFP”, “Check Media”, “Facts, not fake” – Euractiv, “Veridica”, “True Story Project”, “Anti Fake”, “Misreport”, “Rubrika”.*

Keywords: *fact-checking; verification; normative theory; debunking; liquid journalism*

1. An overview of the literature

Awareness of the fact-checking phenomenon has prompted the choice of a two-directional conceptualisation endeavour. The first direction entails clarifying the sociocultural context in which journalism is evolving. We therefore found it useful to survey the theory of reflexive modernisation, liquid¹ journalism, and normative models. The second entails an actual understanding of the fact-checking process, characterised by a certain tendency towards *post factum* identification of the accuracy of information and the emergence of specialised news desks which check political declarations once they have been made public.

1.1. Journalism, between normative theory and liquid practices

As far as the paradigm of reflexive modernisation is concerned, media institutions, like most modern organisations shifting from first modernity (industrial society) to second modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Bauman 2000), are defined by an awareness of the clash between idealised models for interpreting the social world and the social, cultural, and political effects of

¹ Metaphor used by Zygmunt Bauman in the book entitled *Liquid Modernity* (2000) to describe the condition of constant mobility and change he sees in the social structures.

technological progress and innovation, as well as the impact of social practices. Within this theoretical framework, the first kind of modernity is defined from an ideal perspective: uncertainties and the unknown are eliminated, nature is controllable, there is a highly hierarchical and functional bureaucracy (Schifirneț 2016, 61), social life is predictable and centred around the nation state. The effects of industrialisation are however omitted. The second modernity is conceptualised starting from a clear awareness of the limitations of the ideal model, by referring to the resulting phenomena, by necessarily acknowledging risks (Beck 1992), as well as by observing certain solid and liquid manifestations (Bauman 2000) of social practices. The second modernity is characterised by dysfunctional institutions, which are gradually losing credibility, by individualism, imagined communities (Anderson 2006), by both globalisation and localization. Within this paradigm, reiterating the notion of responsibility at the level of social conscience and existence is key since choosing the common good is still regarded as the norm bringing us closer to modernisation and the bridging of gaps, to a functional democracy.

The foundations of media norms were laid during the Industrial Revolution. That was when modern journalism and associated professional values started to take shape, together with democratic access to the press, through the shift from exclusively catering for the privileged to mass distribution. From a normative angle, journalism is defined as a profession in which actions unfold within stable parameters and in accordance with clearly defined rules (Ramirez 2016). The literature defines journalism as the main practice through which modernity helps create social meaning (Hartley, qtd. in Deuze 2008, 850), starting from the premise that the media represent the most important communication infrastructure of public space (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, qtd. in Engelstad et al. 2017, 99). A comprehensive definition of journalistic activity would therefore entail:

the construction and publication of accounts of contemporary events, persons or circumstances of public significance or interest, based on information acquired from reliable sources. (McQuail 2013, 14)

Over time, the notions of “public interest” and “reliable sources” have contributed to the development of an ideal model of journalistic practice in a media ecosystem that often witnesses instances of manipulation, propaganda, disinformation, and excessive commercialisation of messages. The media should provide citizens with the information they need to govern themselves and remain free (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 19), guaranteeing their autonomy in the social processes they are part of. The media also constitute that negotiator of public consent by “motivating the need for political action and [...] legitimizing political decision” (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen qtd. in

Engelstad et al. 2017, 99). In this context the media must not only monitor power but also – and just as importantly – safeguard the space in which the voices of those who cannot express themselves may be heard (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 219). Within normative theory, journalism is therefore defined through “monitoring of bureaucracy, industries, and the state as modernity’s key institutions” and media coverage of hard news as professional apex (Deuze 2008, 850). The role of mediator and supervisor can only be fulfilled by carefully checking information. Journalism is a “discipline of verification” (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 124), performed by contacting reliable sources, stakeholders of circumstances or events. Verification discipline is imperative from the routine production of news to the more complex format of investigations. The strategic ritual of fact-checking (Shapiro et al. 2013, 2) distinguishes journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, and art as the only endeavour that focuses first and foremost on what actually happened (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 124). Likewise, journalists’ means of defence against commercial or political intrusions are confined to their “occupational ideology and news culture” (Deuze 2008, 850), in other words, to normative models often regarded as outdated or idealistic.

Within the liquefied framework of reflexive modernisation, media organisations become unable to control the consistency of public space messages due to the democratisation of communication, driven by the Internet and digital culture, – a phenomenon rife with both positive and negative aspects – as well as by a dilution of journalism as a profession, media products themselves and by the proliferation of user-generated content. The professional practices employed in the field of journalism borrow elements from the cultural models circulating within liquid modernity – “satire and sarcasm, novelty, pastiche, humour and shock” (McQuail, Deuze 2020, 207) – and we can observe a marked tendency to depart from the normative models expected to add a social emancipation dimension to the journalistic act. We can explain these transformations of the liquid digital information ecosystem by means of:

- 1) an environment inhabited not only by amateur and professional content creators but also by hackers, trolls and other forms of artificial intelligence such as algorithms², featuring both homogeneous and heterogeneous products and in which the role played by experts – including journalists seen as experts / elites / intellectuals – is constantly diminishing;
- 2) the emergence of liquid journalism, “a form of (amateur or professional) media work wherein the conditions under which its members act change

² For a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon, see Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory outlining the role of human and non-human actors in communication processes.

- faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines” (Deuze 2008);
- 3) journalists no longer represent the exclusive gatekeepers of the ecosystems and it is up to platform algorithms and aggregators to decide what the public should and (more importantly) should not know: “to be relevant, journalists must now verify information the consumer already has or is likely to find and then help them make sense of what it means and how they might use it” (Dean 2008);
 - 4) newly emerging forms of journalism, such as *activist journalism*, *advocacy journalism*, *radical journalism*, collide with the normative models of journalism;
 - 5) the emergence of “information disorder” (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017, 5), of a “post-truth era” or of a “post-fact world” (Fukuyama 2016), of alternative facts, and of “the parallel state metaphor” (Codău 2019, 346); such terms describe a new fact understanding philosophy deployed in our social world, by widening the gates of interpretation, which subverts the very notion of objectivity; the process of establishing levels of accuracy acquires subjective nuances, which implicitly lead to disinformation;
 - 6) the transition from mediation to mediatisation (Hjarvard 2014, 123) and a decreased content quality management in media organisations resulting from the elimination or compression of certain professions (Silverman 2007, 423);
 - 7) the appearance of liquid (Karlsson 2012, 386-388) and emergent news (Silverman 2015, 7-16), entailing an “everchanging, participatory, multimodal, mosaic and interconnected” process (Karlsson 2012, 388) which renders the environment permeable and facilitates the spread of false content, as well as the platformisation of news production (Nieborg, Poell 2019, 85-86);
 - 8) lower levels of confidence in news media³;
 - 9) economic and political news no longer contribute to social organisation, capitalist democracies no longer display social cohesion and the citizens belong to “hyperlocal” communities or “hyperindividual” personal information spaces (Deuze 2008, 850)
 - 10) the process of news consumption often entails the reconfirmation of the citizens’ own convictions, as a result of limited exposure to other journalistic sources (Vanghelescu, Petre, Trajchevska 2020, 274);

³ According to data published by *Statista.com* in 2021, the highest levels of trust in specialised news media are to be found in Finland – 65%, followed by Portugal – 61%, and the lowest in the USA – 29% and in France – 30%. The data is available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/308468/importance-brand-journalist-creating-trust-news/>

The reconfiguration of the information ecosystem also stemmed from the media's failure to provide appropriate definitions and timely solutions to a series of problems that accompanied them into the second modernity. For instance, during the first modernity, they managed to draw a relative distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, between information and opinion materials. The concept of "objectivity" appeared in the journalistic field in the previous century, in recognition of journalists' biases and as an appeal for journalists to "develop a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work" (Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 127). An important contribution to acknowledge here is Water Lippmann's plea for a more scientific kind of journalism, his opinion being that "[t]here is but one kind of unity possible in a world as diverse as ours. It is unity of method, rather than of aim; the unity of the disciplined experiment" (qtd. in Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 128). The kind of journalism Lippmann wanted shared "a common intellectual method and a common area of valid fact" (Idem). There was not enough time for the entire field of journalism to become professional in the transition between different models of content production, from one channel to another, and these factors led to diminished authority and the partial loss of public confidence. During the second modernity, biases gain further ground, marking a period of even blurrier lines between different content typologies, and the journalist is even more tempted to fulfil other roles: activist, supporter of a cause, propagandist or "misinformer". The appearance of the false content creator, which might be institutionalised as a profession within the information ecosystem, is a particularly worrying notion.

Ulrich Beck constructed his theory of risk society and the implications of uncertainty using the Chernobyl disaster as a starting point. If we consider the evolution of the Internet, the flood of "unverified, half-true, unsourced or otherwise unclear information that constantly circulates in real time" (Silverman 2015, 8) and the resulting "information disorder" (Wardle, Derakhshan 2017, 5) are risks that we need to understand and subsequently identify the means through which we can reduce their possible consequences. In the current pandemic context, the appearance of "infodemics" (Bârgăoanu, Durach 2020, 125-126) reminds us once more of the painfully obvious vulnerability of the information ecosystem. In this respect, we are entitled to wonder "whether journalism adds fuel to these flams or effectively patrols the fragile fences of modernity" (Deuze 2008, 850). The Frankfurt School regarded the mass media as a factor of cultural destabilisation and a means of exerting social control. We can argue that some of the actants orbiting the new informational galaxy, predominantly configured by the Internet, take a stance

against democracy, subverting it, whilst simultaneously imposing a new form of hegemony and social control.

1.2. The proliferation of initiatives aiming to verify the information present in the digital space

The current amplitude of narratives regarding information checking and disinformation might lead those less conversant with the media to regard this as a relatively recent practice. However, as previously noted, fact-checking is one of the normative models at the core of modern journalism and a salient feature distinguishing it from other professions. The practice of checking information already available in the media ecosystem from beyond the news desk appeared in the 21st century, before the emergence of terminology related to information disfunctions (“fake news”, “post-truth”, “alternative facts”, etc.), even though “disinformation is an old story fuelled by new technology” (Ireton, Posetti 2018, 16).

To understand the emergence of initiatives confirming or disproving information after it has become public, it is important to note the current meanings acquired by two concepts: verification and fact-checking. Verification is

The process of establishing the veracity or otherwise of information before it is used in a piece of journalism. Verification might be as simple as making a telephone call to check the accuracy of a claim made in a press release, following links to the original sources of a Wikipedia entry, or checking with a celebrity’s agent to see if a Twitter account in their name is genuine. (Harcup 2014, 319)

In other words, verification concerns the documentation stage in the course of which the journalist determines the accuracy of the information on which the content is to be based; it is an entirely internal process, integral to production, and takes place before public dissemination. In this context errors may emerge from a series of factors, such as: working from memory, making assumptions, and using secondary sources (Carroll 2014, 299).

Fact-checking has two meanings, referring in equal measure to checking one’s information before publishing journalistic materials and to the checks conducted once the materials have appeared / been broadcast or distributed:

1. Establishing the veracity of the information contained within a piece of journalism before it is published or broadcast. Checking facts is something that all journalists are expected to do as part of their job, but it is a particular responsibility of sub-editors, where they still exist. US

media have traditionally employed teams of people (often relatively junior staff) specifically as fact-checkers. 2. A practice of some bloggers and media organizations whereby the veracity of information is investigated after it has been published or broadcast, with the results then being made public. (Harcup 2014, 106)

At the level of discourse, the term ‘fact-checking’ is used interchangeably to refer to both activities mentioned in the definition above. The articulation of the second meaning stems from the need to monitor an institution which in turn supervises democracy, as a disfunction of the checking process conducted at the level of news desks. This paper will make use of both terms. The term ‘verification’ will be employed to describe journalists’ actions preceding the production of journalistic content, whereas ‘fact-checking’ will refer to the process of determining the accuracy of data after the respective content has made an appearance within the information ecosystem, irrespective of whether it is conducted internally, by the news desks themselves, or externally, by a different organisation.

A historical overview of the phenomenon reveals that media organisations managed possible biases and errors in journalistic content internally before launching it, by means of two mechanisms. The first one consisted of proofreading, which ensured daily publications displayed a certain level of linguistic correctness and accuracy and which can be regarded as one of the factors behind the decrease in quality of some publications (Silverman 2007, 392). Even though the proofreader was replaced by a copy editor, some authors opine that this loss “eliminated a layer of checking that has never been fully replaced” (Idem, 397). The second refers to fact-checking, an activity by means of which

fact-checkers take the notes, interviews, and sources used by a reporter and combine them with research, using credible outside sources to verify every fact, statistic, and quote in an article prior to its publication. Checkers look at names, dates, numbers, quotes, descriptions— anything and everything that is verifiable and not opinion. (Silverman 2007, 408)

In the USA, the job of fact-checker flourished within the staff of quality publications – such as *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Newsweek* – in the 1920s and 1930s and was initially performed exclusively by women (Silverman, 2007; Graves, Cherubini 2016; Mantzarlis 2018; Dickey 2019). The technological progress and economic problems faced by some news organisations at the beginning of the 21st century resulted in cuts at the level of fact-checking departments, which either merged with their organisation’s editing department

or were eliminated altogether (Silverman 2007; Mantzarlis 2018). Now, it is “high-brow weekly magazines like *The New Yorker* in the United States or *Der Spiegel* in Germany that still employ dedicated editorial fact-checkers” (Mantzarlis 2018, 81). Others, such as *Time Magazine* or *Newsweek*, have abandoned pure fact-checking and eliminated their research departments, shifting this responsibility onto their reporters, that is adopting the author-checked system, which in turn determined, as in the case of proofreaders, a decrease in the efficiency of content quality management (Silverman 2007). At the same time, there are voices arguing that internal fact-checking should be a distinct activity rather than one assimilated to other editing activities (Carroll 2014). At present, digital content producers tend to favour the *post factum* correction of published materials over conducting a thorough verification prior to publication (Dickey 2019), but there are also areas in which such episodes are supposed to be overlooked and errors are not acknowledged by correcting / updating the material (Silverman 2007). Journalism is thus becoming a field in which human error is not perceived as a risk or is kept hidden in the rush for more traffic / audience. In this respect, there is research proving that “[u]nverified claims attract more interest than corrections or updates” and “[f]ake news articles generate far more shares and social interactions than debunking articles” (Silverman 2015, 61-68).

According to the literature (Mantzarlis 2018, 82), there have been two waves of contemporary initiatives concerning fact-checking. The first wave was triggered when the PolitiFact⁴ platform won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009. The second was marked by the emergence of false content, a phenomenon that monopolised public space discussions during the BREXIT campaign and the US presidential election campaign of 2016. The news platformisation process demands the emergence of such initiatives, given that social networks are the main channels responsible for information disorder, indeed creating the ideal conditions for disinformation to take place.

The practice of checking published content or allegations launched in the public space stems from the awareness that both media institutions and the other actors within the information ecosystem – politicians, for instance – can issue, produce or distribute false content, by mistake or on purpose, but also because news desk checking is outsourced to other actors, alongside its dissolution as a specific activity: “Fact-checkers in this line of work seek primary and reputable sources that can confirm or negate claims made to the

⁴ *PolitiFact* was founded in 2007 in the USA. According to data published on the official website, their “core principles are independence, transparency, fairness, thorough reporting and clear writing” and the reason they publish is “to give citizens the information they need to govern themselves in a democracy.” For further details, visit <https://www.politifact.com/article/2018/feb/12/principles-truth-o-meter-politifacts-methodology-i/>

public” (Mantzarlis 2018, 81-82). Likewise, the process is aimed at debunking – in the case of public declarations – or demystifying – in the case of false content – by publishing the material which analyses and determines the degree of accuracy of the information emitted. As regards fact-checks conducted on political declarations, a survey of the literature available has revealed the existence of three phases: 1) “finding fact-checkable claims”; 2) “finding the facts by looking for the best available evidence”; 3) “correcting the record by evaluating the claim in light of the evidence, usually on a scale of truthfulness” (Mantzarlis 2018, 94).

According to the latest data collected by *Duke Reporters’ Lab*⁵ (Stencel, Luther 2021), 341 projects dealing with fact-checking are being carried out in at least 102 countries and Europe is the continent with the highest number of active fact-checking projects – 98. As far as structure is concerned, worldwide initiatives can be divided into four typologies: the news desk model, the nongovernmental organisation model, the academic model, and the hybrid model (Graves, Cherubini 2016, 8; Stencel, Luther 2021). Approximately half of these projects – 195 – are affiliated to both public and commercial media organisations: at least 37 are affiliated to non-profit groups, reflection groups and nongovernmental organisations; 26 are institutions with academic affiliation; some of the platforms have multiple affiliations and entail inter-organisational partnerships (Stencel, Luther 2021). These initiatives are also facing sustainability problems, in which case most of them become inactive and close down as a consequence of limited financing and expired subsidies (Stencel, Luther 2021). At European level most such projects focus on investigating various political allegations, but also target media content, and fact-checkers regard their activity as a means of political and mass-media reform rather than a journalistic endeavour; the fact-checkers themselves come from a variety of fields, such as journalism, political sciences, economics, law, public policy, and activism (Graves, Cherubini 2016, 6-8).

2. Methodology

The current study relies on a combination of research instruments such as document analysis and thematic content analysis. The research was conducted following the descriptive tradition and entailed the investigation of four corpuses. The first corpus consists of a series of studies focusing on the Romanian media (*Sondaj de opinie la nivel național – CURS, octombrie 2021, Digital News Report 2021, Starea mass-media în România 2020 – Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent / National Opinion Poll – CURS, October 2021, Digital News Report 2021, The State of Romanian Mass-media 2020 – The*

⁵ *The Reporters’ Lab* is a centre for journalism research at the *Sanford School of Public Policy* of Duke University. Its members employ a database to list fact-checking projects which entail checking facts in accordance with journalistic practices.

Centre for Independent Journalism). Another important corpus for the current research is the one resulting from mapping the initiatives aiming to combat disinformation within the Romanian information ecosystem. This stage of the study identified 10 projects (*Factual, Dignitas, Verificat AFP, Check Media, Facts, not fake – Euractiv, Veridica, True Story Project, Anti Fake, Misreport, Rubrika*) which were analysed by means of a grid resulting from an overview of the literature and platform observation, comprising the following items: *status* (active/inactive), *disinformation activity* (monitoring, checking and debunking false statements made by politicians; monitoring, checking and debunking media content produced by third parties; specialised content production; information bulletin production; automated news analysis and aggregating streamed articles from reliable sources), *model* (NGO, news desk, academic, hybrid). The third corpus consists of programme documents (*Constituția Factual, Politica de neutralitate, Politica de rectificare / The Factual Constitution, The Neutrality Policy, The Correction Policy*) and the *factual.ro* website pages featuring information regarding projects, sources of funding, organisational structure, corroborated with LinkedIn profiles pertaining to their human resources and the *online t5.ro* traffic monitoring platform. The final corpus consists of media articles collected by means of a digital aggregator – *Feedly* – from a database of 36 Romanian websites.⁶ We were thus able to identify 65 materials related to the Factual platform, published between 2014 and 2021 on 21 websites: *hotnews.ro, 9am.ro, adevarul.ro, contributors.ro, cotidianul.ro, digi24.ro, dor.ro, euractiv.ro, europafm.ro, evz.ro, gândul.ro, libertatea.ro, pressone.ro, realitatea.ro, revista22.ro, romaniacurata.ro, romania-insider.ro, stirileprotv.ro, wall-street.ro, ziare.com, ziuconstanta.ro*.

3. Fact-check production at *factual.ro*

3.1. The *factual.ro* project within the Romanian media ecosystem

⁶ The 36 platforms included in the database are: <https://www.rador.ro/>, <https://www.mediafax.ro/>, <https://www.news.ro/>, <https://www.agerpres.ro/>, <https://www.hotnews.ro/>, <https://adevarul.ro/>, <https://www.antena3.ro/>, <https://www.wall-street.ro/>, <https://ziare.com/>, <https://business-review.eu/>, <https://www.contributors.ro/>, <https://www.cotidianul.ro/>, <https://beta.dela0.ro/>, <https://www.digi24.ro/>, <https://www.euractiv.ro/>, <https://www.gandul.ro/>, <https://www.libertatea.ro/>, <https://pressone.ro/>, <https://recorder.ro/>, <https://www.romaniacurata.ro/>, <https://www.europafm.ro/>, <https://www.realitatea.net/>, <https://stirileprotv.ro/>, <http://stiri.tvr.ro/>, <https://www.zf.ro/>, <https://revista22.ro/>, <https://www.9am.ro/>, <https://www.ct100.ro/>, <https://www.cugetliber.ro/>, <https://www.dobrogeanews.ro/>, <https://focuspress.ro/>, <https://www.ordinea.ro/>, <https://www.replicaonline.ro/>, <http://www.radioconstanta.ro/>, <https://stiri.litoral.ro/>, <https://www.ziuconstanta.ro/>

According to the latest survey on Romanian institutions conducted by the Centre for Urban and Regional Sociology (CURS),⁷ the population's level of confidence in the mass-media amounts to 30%. Ahead of it come, in ascending order, the National Bank of Romania – 40%, city halls – 42%, the Church – 60%, firefighters – 62%, the army – 65%. In the same context, confidence in the news is rated at 38%, according to the data provided by *Digital News Report 2020*.⁸

According to a recent study published by the Centre for Independent Journalism,⁹ the Romanian media are facing several challenges: loss of credibility; lack of financial resources; the rare occurrence of public interest in journalistic endeavours, generated by the competition between the press and social media; news desks are undersized and editorial specialisation is almost completely absent; experienced journalists have migrated from classical news desks towards new fields or new media initiatives; the new journalistic projects developed over the last few years have limited resources, are unable to meet higher expectations and incapable of scaling or replicating in the medium or long term, most of them relying on an investigative journalism format; the daily news production, which is the most problematic and deficient aspect, continues to be done well in certain areas of traditional media and to fall short in others; the connection between the press and the public becomes increasingly precarious, and there is a marked tendency towards becoming engrossed in the bubbles of one's personal preferences; media consumers display the tendency to reward with donations those journalistic projects which seemingly share their own ideological bubble (Lupu 2020, 1-2).

At present, there are several Romanian initiatives aimed at fighting disinformation: *Factual, Dignitas, Verificat AFP, Check Media, the Facts, not fake* section of the *Euractiv* platform, *Veridica, True Story Project, Anti Fake, Misreport* (Table 1). By mapping the platforms and conducting a thematic analysis of the content they published we were able to identify several types of activities: monitoring, checking and debunking false statements made by politicians; monitoring, checking and debunking media content produced by third parties¹⁰; the production of specialised content focusing on the disinformation phenomenon; press review / information bulletins featuring specialist journalistic materials produced by third parties; automated news

⁷ The full study is available here: <https://curs.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/national-octombrie-2021.pdf>

⁸ The data is available here: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/interactive/>

⁹ The research method employed in this study was the interview, conducted with over 80 journalists, managers, and academics from 22 Romanian towns and cities, between September 2019 and February 2020.

¹⁰ The term 'third party' is used to describe other media organizations that produce content.

analysis and aggregating streamed articles from reliable sources. We can thus observe two tendencies as far as content production is concerned: creating personal content – in the case of platforms with actual teams that can check content, produce news, conduct interviews, etc. – and appropriating content produced by third parties and repackaging it in a different format – in the case of journalistic materials relying on secondary sources¹¹ or newsletters¹². Likewise, some projects focus on checking content with a view to informing and debunking false narratives¹³, others focus on the popularisation dimension of the phenomenon and media education¹⁴. Most platforms are based on the NGO model, as revealed by a survey of the literature, and engage in one activity – *Factual*, *Dignitas*, *Verificat AFP*, the *Facts, not fake* section of the *Euractiv* platform –, or several – *True Story Project*, *Veridica*, *Anti Fake* – (Table 1). Only one of these projects became inactive during our research.

Table 1 – Romanian initiatives aimed at fighting disinformation

Initiative	Status	Activity in the field of disinformation	Model
Factual https://www.factual.ro/	Active (latest post – 18/11/2021)	Monitoring, checking, and debunking false statements made by politicians	NGO model – Funky Citizen
Dignitas https://dignitas.ro/	Active (latest post – 6/11/2021)	Monitoring, checking and debunking false statements made by politicians	Crowdsourcing model
Verificat AFP / Checked AFP https://verificat.afp.com/	Active (latest post – 15/11/2021)	Monitoring, checking and debunking media content produced by third parties	News desk model – Agence France-Presse

¹¹ To observe such a practice, access: *Pe urmele fake-ului: „Deschideți urechea bine”: dezinformarea din podcasturi nu este combătută / Following in the footsteps of the fake: "Open your ear well": misinformation in podcasts is not combated*, Anti Fake - <https://www.antifake.ro/pe-urmele-fake-ului-deschideti-urechea-bine-dezinformarea-din-podcasturi-nu-este-combatuta/>

¹² To examine such a format, access: <https://newsletter.misreport.ro/issues/edi-ia-88-849533>.

¹³ To see an example of false narrative demystification, access: <https://www.veridica.ro/ro/stiri-false/fake-news-oculta-vrea-sa-ascunda-ca-petrica-matu-stoian-a-murit-de-covid-desi-era-vaccinat>

¹⁴ To see an example, access: <https://truestoryproject.ro/menajeria-fake-news/>

Check Media https://checkmedia.ro/	Inactive (last post – 18/03/2021)	Monitoring, checking and debunking media content produced by third parties	<i>Think-tank</i> model – Chamber of Excellence in International Affairs (CEIA)
The “Facts, not fake” section – Euractiv https://www.euractiv.ro/facts-not-fake	Active (latest post – 09/11/2021)	Specialised content production: news, editorials, analyses, interviews	News desk model – Euractiv
Veridica https://www.veridica.ro/	Active (latest post – 17/11/2021)	Specialised content production: news, editorials, analyses, interviews Monitoring, checking and debunking <i>fake news</i> campaigns, disinformation and manipulation	NGO model – The International Alliance of Romanian Journalists association / Alianța Internațională a Jurnaliștilor Români
True Story Project https://truestoryproject.ro/	Active (latest post – 17/11/2021)	Debunking media content produced by third parties Specialised content production: analyses	NGO model – The TRUESTORY PROJECT association
Anti Fake https://www.antifake.ro/	Active (latest post – 17/11/2021)	Specialised content production: news Monitoring, checking and debunking media content produced by third parties	NGO model – The Eurocomunicare Association
Misreport https://newsletter.misreport.ro/	Active (latest newsletter – 16/11/2021)	Press review / Information bulletin	N/A A project undertaken by Codruța Simina and Rubrika
Rubrika https://rubrika.ro/	Active (latest newsletter – 18/11/2021)	Automated news analysis and aggregating streamed articles from reliable sources	N/A

The *factual.ro* website made its first appearance in the Romanian information ecosystem in 2014 and is a project currently managed by *Funky Citizen*.¹⁵ The website represented the first such initiative aimed at fact-checking the country's policies and public declarations and was created in the hope that there might be a public in need of accurate and substantial information, to the detriment of media noise, as well as with a view to stimulating informed debate and analysis and helping politicians develop a sense of responsibility, up to the point of including more provable facts rather than empty talk in their speeches (*factual.ro*).

In addition to its current activities – monitoring, checking, and determining the accuracy of public declarations – *factual.ro* has so far also run a series of special projects which complement its principal endeavour:

1. *Fake news bulletin / Bulentin de fake news*¹⁶ – a weekly show, streamed live on Facebook for a total of 25 episodes; this format was used to cover, with the aid of experts in the respective fields, the 2020 elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and the fight against disinformation;
2. *Governmeter / Guvernometru*¹⁷ – an initiative that measured the extent to which electoral promises had been fulfilled and assessed the ruling party's governing program;
3. *Local 2016 elections / Alegeri electorale locale 2016*¹⁸ – an action aimed at checking the accuracy of the declarations made by the candidates running for general mayor of Bucharest and sectorial mayors, as well as by opinion leaders;
4. *An analysis of the electoral programmes of 2020 City Hall candidates / Analiza programelor electorale ale candidaților la funcția de primar din 2020*¹⁹ – a project that examined the promises made by candidates from the cities of Bucharest, Brașov, Craiova, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Timișoara, Constanța and grouped them thematically according to the field targeted:

¹⁵ *Funky Citizen* is a nongovernmental organisation founded in Romania in 2012. The NGO aims to produce online advocacy instruments with a view to encouraging young people to be active citizens. As per the *2021-2027 Strategy*, the organisation wishes to attract through the projects it has undertaken a varied audience consisting of students, young adults, entrepreneurs, politicians, corporate workers, civil servants, journalists, diplomats. For further details, visit <https://funky.org/despre-noi/obiectivele-noastre/>.

¹⁶ For further details on *Bulentin de fake news*, access <https://www.factual.ro/fake/>

¹⁷ For further details on *Guvernometru*, access <https://guvernometru.factual.ro/metodologie.php>

¹⁸ For further details on *Alegeri electorale locale 2016*, access <https://www.factual.ro/electoral/>

¹⁹ For further details on *Analiza programelor electorale ale candidaților la funcția de primar din 2020*, access <https://www.factual.ro/programe-electorale-locale-2020/>

transport/infrastructure, pollution/environment, urbanism, culture and education, youth and sports, transparency, but also in terms of the mayor's ability to manage certain problems: mixed competences (collaborating with a different authority), with the exclusive aid of the Local Council, outside the mayor's term of office, during the mayor's term of office;

5. *2019 European Parliament Elections / Alegeri Europarlamentare 2019*²⁰ – a project that checked the candidates' declarations and electoral platforms;
6. *Travel Restrictions in Europe*²¹ – a partnership project mapping the terrestrial, air and railway travel restrictions imposed in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on official governmental sources and other sources such as the ones provided by the USA European embassies, Interrail.eu, IATA, The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
7. *Checking the allegations made during Selly's debate with Ecaterina Andronescu / Verificarea declarațiilor din dezbaterile realizată de Selly cu Ecaterina Andronescu*²² – an initiative to analyse the accuracy of allegations made by Ecaterina Andronescu, former Minister of Education, during “Selly Show”, a programme broadcast by Prima TV.

The thematic content analysis applied to 65 articles from other digital platforms allowed us to identify three major material typologies in the Romanian information ecosystem related to the *factual.ro* project.

The first one comprises articles in which the platform is mentioned or introduced as an example of good practices as far as fighting disinformation is concerned:

- *adevarul.ro - Fenomenul știrilor false, armele epocii post-adevăr. Ion M. Ioniță: „Știrile false și manipularea în masă vor fi extrem de greu de controlat”*²³/*The fake news phenomenon, the weapons of the post-truth era. Ion M. Ioniță: “Fake news and mass manipulation will be extremely difficult to manage”*; *De la Trump la Putin sau Dodon, același homo politicus fake news maker*²⁴/*From Trump to Putin or Dodon, the same fake news maker homo politicus*;

²⁰ For further details on *Alegeri Europarlamentare 2019*, access <https://www.factual.ro/europarlamentare/>

²¹ For further details on *Travel Restrictions in Europe*, access <https://factual.ro/travel/#/>

²² For further details on *Verificarea declarațiilor din dezbaterile realizată de Selly cu Ecaterina Andronescu*, access <https://www.factual.ro/ecaterina-andronescu-la-selly-show/>

²³ The article is available here: https://adevarul.ro/news/societate/fenomenul-stirilor-false-armele-epocii-post-adevar-ion-m-ionita-Stirile-false-manipularea-masa-vor-extrem-greu-controlat-1_58c3c6d75ab6550cb8391ed7/index.html

²⁴ The article is available here: https://adevarul.ro/international/in-lume/de-trump-putin-dodon-acelasi-homo-politicus-fake-news-maker-1_59479cdd5ab6550cb848f5fe/index.html

- [digi24.ro](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/fenomenul-fake-news-ce-spun-autorii-site-urilor-considerate-mincinoase-in-romania-685968) - „Fake news”. Ce spun autorii site-urilor considerate mincinoase în România²⁵ / “Fake news”. What the authors of websites regarded as full of lies have to say for themselves.

The second typology is that of the materials in which Factual members are interviewed or cited as experts:

- [pressone.ro](https://www.pressone.ro/elena-calistru-factual-declaratiile-politice-false-sunt-mai-daunatoare-decat-teoriile-conspiratiei-sau-propaganda-26) - Elena Calistru (Factual): Declarațiile politice false sunt mai dăunătoare decât teoriile conspirației sau propaganda²⁶ / Elena Calistru (Factual): False political statements are more damaging than conspiracy theories or propaganda;
- [euractiv.ro](https://www.euractiv.ro/facts-not-fake-coronavirus/elena-calistru-fenomenul-infodemiei-a-explodat-in-perioada-pandemiei-19934) - Elena Calistru: Fenomenul infodemiei a explodat²⁷ / Elena Calistru: The infodemic phenomenon has exploded;
- [dor.ro](https://www.dor.ro/dor-18-elena-cea-buna/) - Elena cea bună²⁸ / Good Elena.

The third typology comprises articles that use fact-checks conducted by Factual as their sources of information:

- [digi24.ro](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/finante-economie/factual-declaratia-lui-a-tutuianu-privind-impozitele-marilor-companii-este-fals-a-sumele-sunt-eronate-672103) - Dezbateri Ponta-Iohannis. Runda a II-a, în presă²⁹ / Ponta-Iohannis debate. The 2nd round, in the press; Factual: E falsă declarația lui A. Țuțuianu privind impozitele marilor companii³⁰ / Factual: Is A. Țuțuianu’s declaration regarding the taxes paid by large companies false?; Dispută Grindeanu - Cioloș. Cine a atras zero euro fonduri în mandatul său?³¹ / Grindeanu – Cioloș dispute. Who attracted zero European funding for his term?; Factual.ro: De ce minte Firea când spune că nu poate demola Cathedral Plaza³² / Factual.ro: Why is Firea lying about not being able to demolish Cathedral Plaza;

²⁵ The article is available here: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/fenomenul-fake-news-ce-spun-autorii-site-urilor-considerate-mincinoase-in-romania-685968>

²⁶ The article is available here: <https://www.pressone.ro/elena-calistru-factual-declaratiile-politice-false-sunt-mai-daunatoare-decat-teoriile-conspiratiei-sau-propaganda>

²⁷ The article is available here: <https://www.euractiv.ro/facts-not-fake-coronavirus/elena-calistru-fenomenul-infodemiei-a-explodat-in-perioada-pandemiei-19934>

²⁸ The article is available here: <https://www.dor.ro/dor-18-elena-cea-buna/>

²⁹ The article is available here: <https://www.digi24.ro/special/dosare/cotroceni-2014/dezbateri-ponta-iohannis-runda-a-ii-a-in-presa-321043>

³⁰ The article is available here: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/finante-economie/factual-declaratia-lui-a-tutuianu-privind-impozitele-marilor-companii-este-fals-a-sumele-sunt-eronate-672103>

³¹ The article is available here: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/disputa-grindeanu-ciolos-cine-a-atras-zero-lei-in-mandatul-sau-674033>

³² The article is available here: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/factual-ro-de-ce-minte-firea-cand-spune-ca-nu-poate-demola-cathedral-plaza-760177>

- adevărul.ro - *Declarația falsă a lui Piedone despre avizarea clubului Colectiv. Acordul de funcționare trebuia anulat*³³/ *Piedone's false statement about the Colectiv club authorisation. The operating permit should have been cancelled; Tăriceanu a mințit pe tema proceselor pierdute de România la CEDO*³⁴/ *Tăriceanu lied in the matter of the trials Romania lost at the ECHR;*
- hotnews.ro - *Postarea lui Cîțu despre avizele CES a fost verificată. Factual: Afirmatia lui Florin Cîțu este falsă.*³⁵ / *Cîțu's post about the CES approvals has been checked. Factual: Florin Cîțu's statement is false.*

In addition to these types of materials of central importance to our corpus, we have also identified materials which cast these fact-checking projects in an unfavourable light – evz.ro: *Inițiativă periculoasă de cenzură. Un grup de tineri frumoși și liberi din Sibiu vrea să limiteze libertatea de exprimare*³⁶ / *Dangerous censorship initiative. A group of beautiful and free young people from Sibiu want to restrict our freedom of expression*, as well as materials in which the *factual.ro* platform is mentioned as contextual information – adevărul.ro: *FOTO Ghid antipropagandă și anti-fake news, lansat de asociația Forum Apulum în cadrul festivalului CivicON Alba Iulia*³⁷ / *Antipropaganda and anti-fake news photo guide launched by the Forum Apulum associations during the CivicON festival of Alba Iulia*. We would have expected the materials collected to be more numerous, given the length of the interval covered by the data collection process: 2014-2021. The 65 articles identified reveal the platform's limited impact on the content produced by third parties from the Romanian information ecosystem.

Another important aspect relating to the way the platform is structured resulted from the investigation of data regarding the platform's visitors (Figure 1). This analysis revealed a low website traffic. Between November 2020 and October 2021, the average number of unique monthly visitors was 7,054. One

³³ The article is available here: https://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/declaratia-falsa-piedone-despre-avizarea-clubului-colectiv-documentele-primarie-arata-neconcordante-1_5638a2cdf5eaafab2c43ee79/index.html

³⁴ The article is available here: https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/tariceanu-mintit-tema-proceselor-pierdute-romania-cedo-1_58b99e985ab6550cb8ffe6d7/index.html

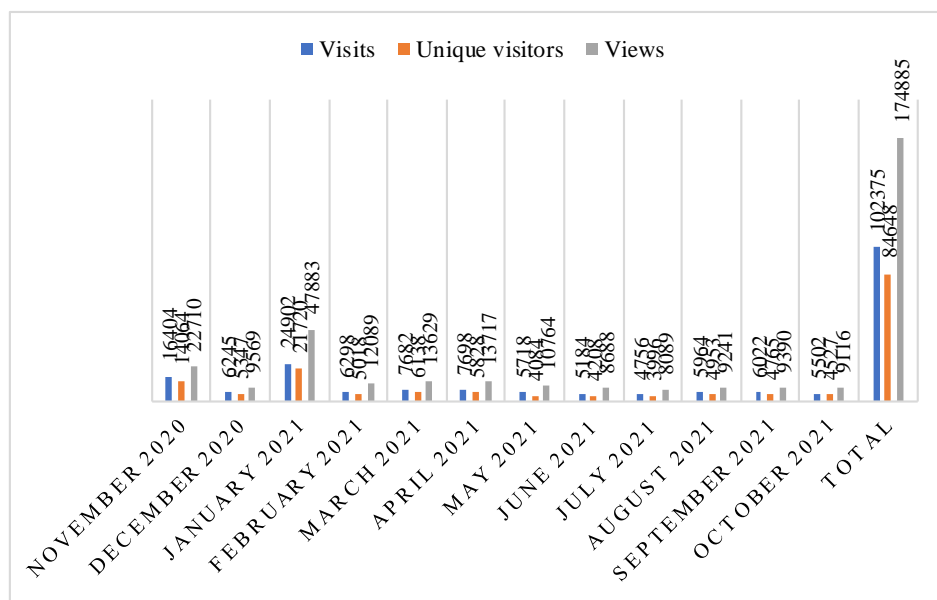
³⁵ The article is available here: https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-finante_banci-24617463-postarea-lui-citu-despre-avizele-ces-fost-verificata-factual-afirmatia-lui-florin-citu-este-falsa.htm

³⁶ The article is available here: <https://evz.ro/un-grup-de-tineri-frumosi-si-liberi-din-sibiu-vrea-sa-limiteze-libertatea-de-exprimare.html>

³⁷ The article is available here: https://adevarul.ro/locale/alba-iulia/foto-ghid-anti-propaganda-anti-fake-news-lansat-asociația-forum-apulum-cadrul-festivalului-civicon-alba-iulia-1_5a2e834a5ab6550cb814b23a/index.html

of the factors at work behind these figures might be the platform’s niche nature, but we have not been able to identify data regarding the personal profile of those accessing the website to be able to corroborate this.

Figure 1 – Website traffic on the *factual.ro* platform. Source :



www.t5.ro³⁸

3.2. The *factual.ro* emergent fact-check production model and the content quality management policy

According to the data yielded by document analysis, the *factual.ro* fact-check discipline is influenced by five factors: programme documents, human resources, content production, content distribution and financing mechanisms (Figure 2).

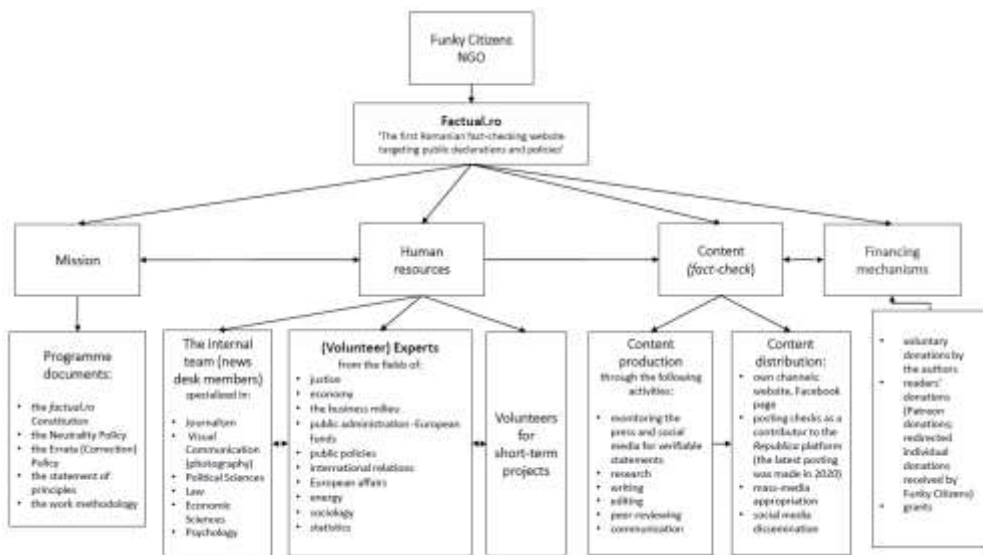
The first factor, that of programme documents, highlights the guidelines in accordance with which the project’s activity unfolds and constitutes a self-regulating mechanism and content quality inner management instrument. These programme documents also fulfil the public engagement role of the mission undertaken. The *factual.ro* Constitution³⁹ is the framework document, incorporating the Neutrality policy and the Errata policy, the actual fact-check work methodology and the statement of principles. It follows that the normative model employed by *factual.ro* aims to develop by means of

³⁸ The statistics are based on the daily *Google Analytics* reports, made available with the domain administrator’s permission. The data can be consulted here: <http://t5.ro/traffic/193409734/lunar/>

³⁹ The full document is available here: <https://blog.factual.ro/constitutia-factual-ro/>

practice an organisational culture that takes shape through news desk values – *public interest, equidistance, transparency and integrity*, – through a work flow which entails a well-articulated fact-checking discipline – methodological standards regarding verifiable information and factual information, source quality, news desk roles and functions, the ability to trace relevant content production activities, and error acceptance as a natural part of the process: ‘We rarely err, but when we do, we endeavour to update as soon as possible, so as not to spread misinformation’ (*factual.ro*).

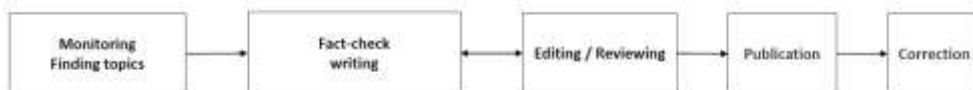
Figure 2 – The *factual.ro* emergent fact-check practice model



The human resource policy works in three directions: that of the internal team – the news desk, that of experts and a third of volunteers recruited to work short-term on specific projects. Starting from an analysis of information regarding the type of higher education pursued collected from their *LinkedIn* profiles, we discovered that news desk members are graduates of bachelor’s programmes which enabled them to specialise in *journalism, visual communication (photography), political sciences, law, economic sciences, psychology*. This confirms the tendencies identified in the literature as far as the heterogenous nature of fact-checkers’ professional training is concerned. Likewise, the team of experts comprises graduates from fields such as *political sciences, communication and public relations, publicity, international relations, law, philosophy*. As far as the volunteers recruited for special projects are concerned, we were unable to find sufficient data to build a likely profile.

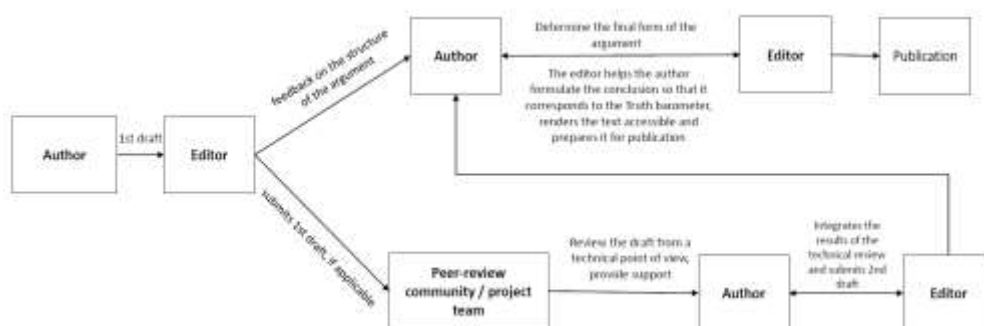
The analysis of work methodology enabled us to identify the following stages of production: monitoring the press and social media / finding topics, documentation / research, fact-check writing, editing / peer-reviews, publishing, correcting (Figure 3). This standardised process reveals that the production model combines practices from the fields of journalism and academia – the latter being represented through the peer-review component.

Figure 3 – Factual.ro fact-check stages of production



The topic-identification stage involves monitoring media sources – news agencies, newspapers, blogs, official Facebook pages, official sources – press releases and declarations made by state institutions, parliamentary and governmental stenographic records, and public events – debates, press conferences. The writing process is also standardised. Each fact-check must conform to a structure⁴⁰ comprising: *Context* – the original declaration transcript content and fragments indicating the context; *What is being checked* – a presentation of the declaration segment which can be verified in terms of accuracy; *Check* – a presentation of factual information relevant to the subject, selected and systematised, provided with hyperlinks, occasionally making use of infographics; *Conclusion* – a presentation of the results of the check which entails disproving or confirming the declaration(s), using Truth barometer values: *true, partially true, distorted, false, change of mind, impossible to verify*.

Figure 4 – Fact-check writing workflow



⁴⁰ A fact-check example is available here: declaration made by Attila-Zoltán Cseke, UDMR, Minister of Health - <https://www.factual.ro/declaratii/cseke-attila-despre-descresterea-vaccinarilor-dupa-respingerea-certificatului-verde/>

The writing process entails author-editor symmetry. Once the draft material has been written, the editor provides feedback on the argument's structure, helps the author formulate the conclusion in accordance with the Truth barometer and prepares the text for the general public. If the text needs to be peer-reviewed, the editor approaches the team of experts, representing fields such as *justice, economics, the business world, public administration, European funds, public policies, international relations, European affairs, energy, sociology, statistics*. The experts conduct a technical review of the fact-check articles and offer guidance – additional information, access to other resources, etc. The workflow is illustrated in Figure 4. The Factual methodology imposes a fact-check execution deadline of 10 days – ‘Work timing – ideally, no more than 10 days should elapse between the moment a declaration is made and the fact-check publication (so as to be both factual and timely). Both the author and the editor must ensure that this deadline is met.’ (*factual.ro*).

As regards the distribution of the content created, we have identified several mechanisms: posting on one's own channels – the website, the Facebook page⁴¹; posting quality checks as a contributor to the *Republica* platform (the latest posting was made in 2020)⁴²; mass-media and social media dissemination.

Our research has outlined the following sources of funding: voluntary donations made by the author team, citizens' donations (Patreon donations; redirected individual donations received by Funky Citizens), grants – non-reimbursable financing won from the Open Society Institute Foundation, The Civic Innovation Fund / Fondul de Inovare Civică, TechSoup Europe, The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bucharest.

4. Conclusions

The two modernities represent repositories of both positive and negative social effects. The information ecosystems pertaining to the first and second modernity are equally polluted. Manipulation and propaganda endeavours will always seek appropriate channels enabling them to fulfil their aims. No channel is safe from attempts to tamper with its original purpose, which can evidently be a noble one. Journalism is a profession like any other in which mistakes can occur and, in the words of Dan Gilmor, “We are human. We have biases and backgrounds and a variety of conflicts that we bring to our jobs every day” (qtd. in Kovach, Rosenstiel 2021, 126). Even though we regard normative models as utopian scenarios, they are the only ones that can bring

⁴¹ An example of a fact-check distribution on Factual's Facebook page can be accessed here: <https://www.facebook.com/factual.ro/photos/a.657540664305631/5244390378953947/>

⁴² The articles posted by *Factual* on the *Republica* website can be accessed here: <https://republica.ro/autor/factual>

us closer to the quality content we all wish for and help maintain a clean information ecosystem. In this respect, the attempt to make the fact-checking discipline professional again is of tantamount importance.

The *factual.ro* project reveals a tendency to innovate the mechanisms through which sources of information can help a citizen become autonomous in a democracy. Moreover, the project comes in the wake of several Romanian initiatives aimed at modernising and revitalising the information ecosystem. The initiative's low impact on the Romanian digital media confirms an older problem: it is impossible for new projects to enter the mainstream consumption circuits. In other words, *factual.ro* is more of a niche digital product, with markers indicative of quality content, meant for media-literate social actors, possibly belonging to a specific ideological bubble. Even though *factual.ro* does not have an exclusively journalistic mission – given that it follows the guidelines of good governance and the active citizenship of its mother organisation, the production processes help configure a normative model merging elements borrowed from journalistic practice, sociologic methodology and academic publications, a model convergent with Lippmann's views. Thus, the quality management policy applied to content produced by *factual.ro* requires a degree of fact-checking practice discipline based on news desk values, standardised processes and methodologies, clear conceptualisations, a dual team – comprising authors / editors and experts – which can cover the editorial flow in an articulated way, as well as a combination of sources of funding which, in theory, helps the structure remain neutral.

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