# Tracking down the truth: Fact-checkers in South East Europe

How do journalists in Europe deal with so-called fake news and disinformation? Which tools can they use to verify text and audio-visual media content? For the first time, the Media Programme South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) organised a workshop regarding the topic of fact-checking on the 18th of February in Tirana, Albania.

Luise Mosig

In 2017, the German dictionary Duden added the term "fake news" to their vocabulary. By then, it was clear that the spreading of disinformation had become a serious issue, threatening the credibility of journalists, and ultimately, our democracy itself. The KAS Media Programme brought together journalists from all over South East Europe as well as Germany, Italy and Brussels (EU) with the objective of exchanging ideas and presenting each other fact-checking initiatives from the region to fight fake news.
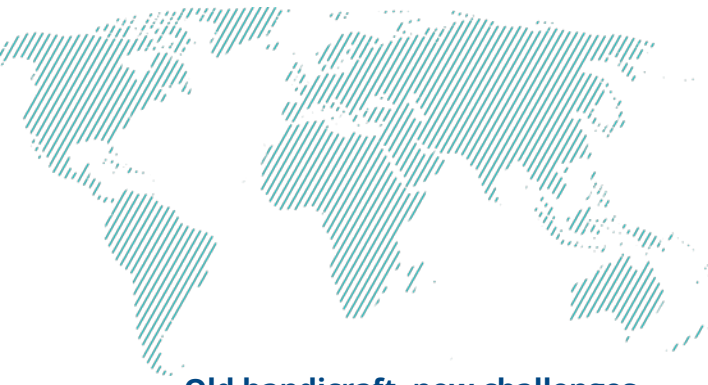
Old handicraft, new challenges

„Fact-checking may come across as a new challenge, but actually, it has been one of the journalist's key tasks for decades: Collecting information and verifying it before publishing. This process is part of the natural responsibility of every media outlet and journalist. Their readers, listeners and viewers need to be able to rely on the fact that they receive verified and truthful information." – With these words, **Hendrik Sittig**, head of KAS Media Programme South East Europe, opened the event. It was organised in cooperation with the Albanian Media Institute directed by **Remzi Lani**.

During a speed pitching session, the eleven participants presented their respective projects and talked about the situation regarding disinformation in their countries. "Especially in the run-up to elections, we witness an increase of fake news", said **Vladimir Petreski**, managing editor at the North Macedonian NGO Metamorphosis. Social media such as Facebook don't provide enough support for fighting disinformation, he stated, because they have not yet developed effective mechanisms to contain the rapid spread of fake news.

Most of the time, Facebook doesn't react at all or with major time delay to user reporting, **Victor Spinu** from Moldova explained. He has developed a desktop add-on called "Trolless" which marks fake accounts, that have been reported but not yet deleted, with a warning icon. This technique helps users to identify fake content immediately when scrolling through their timeline.

How to fact-check?

On top of marking fake profiles, the participants discussed other measures to check the veracity of media content. **Leone Hadavi**, journalist and contributor to the investigative journalism network Bellingcat, explained his technique of open-source investigation, using an example from a 2019 #EUarms research project. Freely accessible websites like Google Earth and YouTube can serve as key tools for verifying locations, images and videos.

Serbian journalists **Milena Popovic** (editor-in-chief of the online portal Istinomer) and **Milica Saric** (editor-in-chief of the investigative NGO CINS) stressed the importance of reliable journalism, especially taking into consideration the upcoming parliamentary elections in their country. They both fact-check statements of politicians on a regular basis, revealing false claims and the misuse of numbers and facts. Most fake news is deliberately put into wrong context to serve political purposes. "Responsible journalism needs to question every number and every word", appealed Popovic and Saric to their colleagues.

Possible funding models

Profound journalism depends on stable financing. In his presentation, **Patrick Gensing** introduced the fee-financed public-service broadcasting system of Germany and talked about his personal experience with the spread of disinformation. He is head of "faktenfinder" (engl. "fact finder"), an online portal that verifies facts and numbers for the German public broadcaster ARD.

"Speed cannot be the most important currency in journalism, we do not have to be the first, but we have to be right. The most important thing is to take time for research." – Patrick Gensing, head of faktenfinder, tagesschau.de (ARD).
Source: KAS MP SEE

In contrast to the German media system, most public-service broadcasters in South East Europe find themselves under major political pressure and therefore cannot act as independently as public broadcasters like ARD and ZDF in Germany.

„Money is not the problem, but the people's mistrust in the media", stated **Jasna Jelisic**, head of the Western Balkan Task Force in the Strategic Communication Division of the European External Action Service. The organisation aims to combat Russian media propaganda in the Balkan countries. According to Jelisic, media projects from the region – given that they rest on an innovative idea – should not face difficulties obtaining EU funding. However, if this is not the case, many initiatives have trouble establishing themselves. Victor Spinu summarised: "The public is not willing to support responsible journalism, for example by crowdfunding."

18 people from 12 different countries came together for the workshop in Albania's capital to discuss fact-checking.

Source: KAS MP SEE

Fake news, false reporting and disinformation

One of the key findings of the round table is the necessity to sensitively deal with terms: Originally introduced by journalists, the phrase "fake news" has been captured by politicians to declare news acting against their interests as false. "Misusing the term for political purposes fuels fears among the people", said Jasna Jelisic, calling for a stricter terminological differentiation. Patrick Gensing, too, warns about fake news as deliberately spread disinformation. This should not be confused with false reporting which usually originates from human mistakes. Both fake news and false reporting can spread insecurity and thus weaken the public discourse.

Many speakers concluded that the times when simple clickbait headlines and wrong numbers twisted the facts are long gone. Behind various fake news, there is a systematic network of political actors and internet trolls who create fake profiles, fake websites and even fictional organisations, serving propaganda narratives. On top of that, so-called deepfakes, technically manipulated images and videos, have started to pose a dangerous threat to journalism.

All participants agreed on one particular point: To combat this machine of fake news, journalists have to rely on good networking. Only by exchanging experience and cooperating with each other they can successfully face the dangers coming from fake news in the future. The latest event of KAS Media Programme has certainly contributed an important part to this current challenge.