Fact|Check

Key points for digital research and verification

"Verification means
permanent
learning"

Stefan Voss, Verification Officer (dpa)

Dear Reader,

Regardless of whether we're in Germany, Ukraine or anywhere else in the world, we're inundated with information every day. Only 10 years ago, most of this information still came from established media organisations. Today we read much of it in social media from sources that aren't always trustworthy, and in many cases the content isn't correct. There has been a manifold increase in the number of channels and sources that journalists have to monitor and check. That makes it all the more important for media professionals to master and apply the basics of digital research and verification.

The German foreign ministry promotes cooperation with civil society in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Russia, for example in order to strengthen pluralistic media sectors and within them to boost the **resilience against false media information.** That has led to cooperation between German news agency dpa and Ukrainian news agency Ukrinform. In addition to regular meetings within EANA, the European Association of News Agencies, and a journalist exchange programme, an online workshop on the subject of verification took place on four dates in autumn 2020. Ukrainian media representatives and dpa editors got to know each other and exchanged information on methods and practical tools that can be used to quickly verify and evaluate text reports, photos and videos in everyday work.

The need for such skills is huge – even before the surge in disinformation related to the corona pandemic this year, "fake news" and conspiracy theories had been rapidly spreading across social networks like Facebook or Twitter. Targeted disinformation, manipulation and false reports are aimed at unsettling people, stirring anger and sowing fear. That gives journalists all the more reason to act: "You will need skills like digital research, logical thinking, years of experience in fact-checking and a lot of persistence. **The more journalists are able to follow this path, the more successful our free societies will be in the fight against disinformation,"** said Stefan Voss, who spoke to the workshop participants about his work as a dpa verification officer.

This whitepaper gives you a first overview of the topic of verification as well as practical tips for handling information. We hope you find it interesting and useful!

Nicole Wehr & Jan-Nikolas Picker (dpa-Custom Content)
Nataliya Kostina (Ukrinform)

Checklist:
Analyse content

In our work as journalists we're confronted with dozens of reports each day and have to decide quickly whether to write about the information they contain. Ever more people are sharing content via social networks like Facebook or Twitter. The proportion of so-called User Generated Content (UGC) online is increasing – and with it the proportion of information that is not necessarily credible. That makes it all the more important for journalists to take a close look.

Checklist

→ **What exactly can be seen?** Take a step back, look at the content and ask some basic questions.

→ **Healthy common sense:** try to understand the logic of the content. Images are often retouched or shown in the wrong context.

→ **Teamwork helps:** the more eyes, the more associations.

→ **Check the sender:** is the number of followers plausible? Is the account name spelt correctly? Does it have the verified badge?

→ **Original or copy?** Is the content new or is it a screenshot? The latter is easily put in the wrong context. Find the original source.

→ **Watch for details:** what does the vegetation look like in the photo or the video – does it match the season? If a shadow is visible: does the position of the sun match the supposed time? Are there clues in the image such as licence plates, letter boxes or street names? Are there points of reference that can be cross-checked with other images from an objective source such as Google Satellite View? Is the relationship between foreground and background realistic? From which angle was it taken?

→ **Find comparable content:** if something spectacular happens in a public place there is always more than one image or report about it on the Internet. Trawl social networks for similar content.

→ **Blurring is suspicious:** beware of poor image quality or low resolution – images with unclear outlines are easier to fake. Note: modern smartphones generally take very good pictures.

Small tools
with a big impact

Search by Image

WHAT?
- simple tool for a conducting reverse image searches

HOW?
- as a browser add-on available e.g. for Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox

- once the add-on has been installed right-click on any image to launch the reverse search

- searches the most popular search engines Google, Bing, Yandex, TinEye and Baidu

WHY?
- helps to identify the source and to establish the context of images found e.g. in social media

TiP

Always use and compare several search engines when searching the Internet, as the results may be different

Wayback Machine

WHAT?
- the digital archive of the Internet; more than one billion web pages are backed up there every day

HOW?
- available as a browser add-on, e.g. for Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox; after installation simply click on the add-on on any page

- alternatively, it can also be accessed via http://web.archive.org/

- enter the URL to be checked in the search window and select the desired date in the timeline

WHY?
- lets users travel into the past to be able to reconstruct the content of a website on a specific date

- can help to check facts/statements that have since disappeared from a website/profile

IMPORTANT:
- This only works for days on which someone else saved a website. Smaller niche sites may only yield few results.

YouTube Transcription

WHAT?
- a YouTube service that shows you the automatically created transcription of many videos right next to the clip

HOW?
- click on the three dots on the right below a video and open the transcript

- in rare cases there are problems with the automatic speech recognition

- works best when voices are easy to understand and not overlaid by music for example

WHY?
- in long speeches it helps to quickly find a specific quote or keyword without having to watch the whole video

Tweetdeck

WHAT?
- a Twitter dashboard that makes it easier for users to track multiple accounts simultaneously

HOW?
- available at https://tweetdeck.twitter.com/

- after logging in on Twitter you can create several columns with different search parameters

- click on the „+"-symbol on the left edge and select the desired category, e.g. to search by hashtag or to track tweets from individual accounts

- for each column you can apply your own filters, e.g. whether only verified accounts should be displayed or whether a minimum number of interactions is required

WHY?
- helps to keep track of Twitter and monitor multiple searches simultaneously

- can be easily set up for any topic

From the social media post to
fact check

A fact check verifies claims that are spread, for example, in social networks. **It should help people to form an opinion based on facts.**

The outcome of a fact check can vary: **the claim is**

→ correct

→ incorrect

→ partly incorrect

→ misleading

→ taken out of context

Journalist comes across questionable content.

- Frequently, false reports are shared via social networks on the Internet.

Journalist analyses the content.

- **Who is the sender?**
  In social media, look for verified badges, date, time and engagement numbers.

- **What is the central message?**
  Is it really a claim – or an opinion? Is the statement socially relevant?

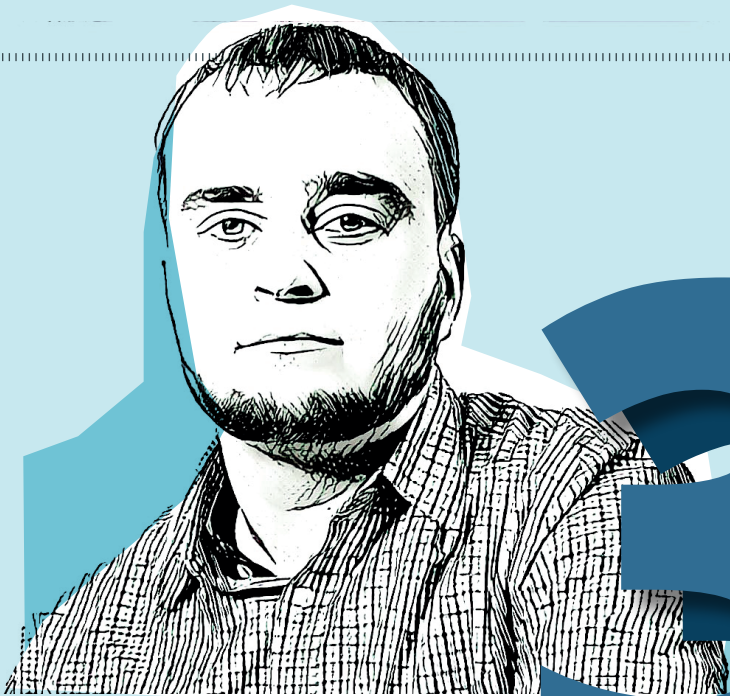- **What does the post refer to?**
  What is the source?

Journalist starts the research.

- Is there any current, official information about it?

- Call or write to the person/sender concerned and ask about the claim.

- For events: were others also present and did they share information on the Internet?
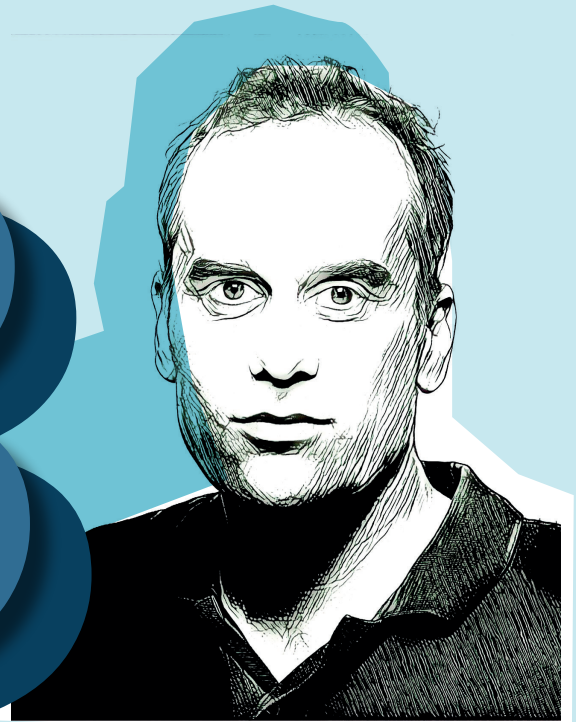
Journalist writes a fact check.

- **Claim:** what is it about? What is the context?

- **Evaluation:** why is the claim right or wrong?

- **Facts:** what can be proven about the claim?

- **Contact:** how do I contact the fact-checkers if I have any questions?

3 Questions

Artem Laptiiev
fact-checker at StopFake

Stefan Voss
head of verification at dpa

Verifying claims day by day and at times dealing with crude conspiracy myths: what motivates you to work as a fact-checker?

The main incentive is to get many people to read our fact checks and exposures of fake news or conspiracy theories. Thousands of social media users can spread information, for example about self-medication. If at least some of them will see the disproof and understand that it can be dangerous for their health, this motivates me. The same goes for fakes that create tension in society. Sometimes a very 'stupid' fake can outrage a large number of people. At the same time, after reading the fact check, the tension can be eased for some. The most pleasant thing for me is to hear an argument on the street where someone calls out:

'This is a fake! I read about it ... '

Fact-checking is an inherently journalistic activity.

We meticulously check whether a claimed fact is really true. Basically, every journalist is also a fact-checker. In a democracy, everyone has the right to form his or her own opinion via media reporting that is based on facts. False claims and manipulation – especially on the Internet – jeopardize this information privilege. I find it very motivating to expose lies and manipulation. The topics that fact-checkers deal with every day are often unpleasant. But the importance of this work for a vibrant democracy makes up for that.

What is essential in your work as a fact-checker?

"The most important thing in our daily work is critical thinking and impartiality."

Every fact-checker must doubt all the news and ask questions about the report, photo or video. Even a tiny detail can make it clear that the news is fake. At the same time, you have to stay neutral. All fact-checkers are human and they have their point of view, but this should not be reflected in their work.

"Fact-checkers must master their journalistic craft to perfection."

It's not just about being able to apply the latest techniques of Internet research. The fundamental virtues of journalism are key: understanding the text, proper research and the ability to express the information gained from it in a correct as well as objective line of argumentation. In their work, fact-checkers must be able to ignore their personal view and their stance on certain (political) issues. Objective fact-checking isn't targeted against certain groups. It's always only about what was claimed – and not about who claimed it.

During the four workshops organised by dpa and Ukrinform you talked about your experiences and answered questions from the participants. What learnings did you take away from those discussions?
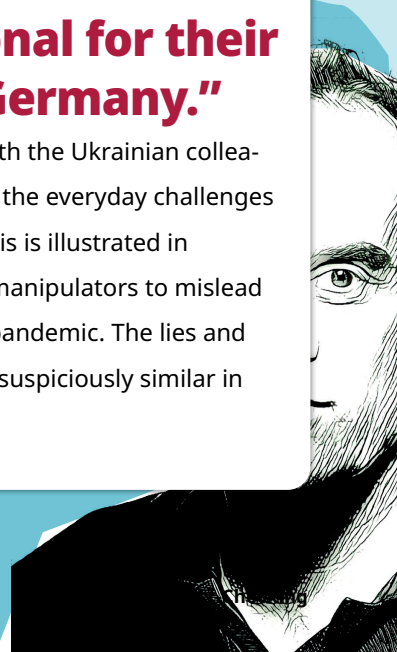
"The increasing spread of deep fakes scares me."

They are not a big issue in Ukraine yet, but I think that will change soon. To be ready, it is necessary to get prepared now. I also like the idea voiced in the workshop of each media outlet assigning one fact-checker. It would be a valuable solution that could minimise the number of unintended fakes in reputable media

On the one hand it quickly became clear how different the situation is in the two countries for journalists and especially fact-checkers. Ukraine faces enormous challenges after the serious conflicts in recent years. Disinformation campaigns aim to convince the population that Ukraine is a failed state.

"The way Ukrainian journalists are dealing with these challenges is also very instructional for their colleagues in Germany."

But the intense discussions with the Ukrainian colleagues also showed how similar the everyday challenges confronting journalists are. This is illustrated in particular by the attempts of manipulators to mislead the population in the corona pandemic. The lies and half-truths on this subject are suspiciously similar in Ukraine and Germany.

Hey Google, ...

The most important Google operators and settings **for a faster online verification**

... show me results on the website of the United Nations!

→ | site:un.org | ✕ | 🔍 |

... show me only pdf files on the website of the United Nations!

→ | site:un.org filetype:pdf | ✕ | 🔍 |

... show me websites that contain these search terms and a number between 1980 and 1985

→ | coronavirus infection 1990..1995 | ✕ | 🔍 |

... show me if this Twitter/Facebook account is linked on a website!

→ | site:un.org https://twitter.com/antonioguterres | ✕ | 🔍 |

... show me sites from Ukraine (site:.ua) where the words "Klitschko" and "coronavirus" appear no more than four words (AROUND (4)) apart from each other!

→ | klitschko around (4) coronavirus site:.ua | ✕ | 🔍 |

... confine this search to a date range!

→ | klitschko around (4) coronavirus site:.ua | ✕ | 🔍 |

🔍 All   📰 News   🖼 Images   ▶ Videos   🛍 Shopping   ⋮ More   Settings   Tools

Any time ▾   All results ▾

✓ Any time
Past hour
Past 24 hours
Past week
Past month
Past year
Custom range...

...litchko-lyashko-and-secon... ▾

...and "Second League". How do mass media ...

...tschko and Lyashko are competing almost equally by number of ... In
...e **coronavirus** and the fine **for** "coffee ...

...o general ▾

...OVID-19 cases detected, four people die in ...

... new cases of **coronavirus** disease **COVID**-19 were ... including
seven doctors, Kyiv Mayor Vitali **Klitschko** has reported. ... World Bank to allocate **about** $100
mln to Ukraine **for** purchase of **COVID**-19 vaccines, ...

MORESkills, Scepticism

Workshops show how important verification is

What are the local peculiarities of fact-checking? Who is behind alleged fakes and with what intention are they distributed?

Some 60 Ukrainian workshop participants – media professionals, NGO staff and journalism students – addressed these questions with the two fact-checking experts of dpa and StopFake. In the course of the discussions, it became clear how important verification is in Germany and Ukraine respectively and what similarities there are in approach, but also how different the challenges are facing journalists in the two countries.

The corona pandemic has highlighted once again how fast fake reports spread across social media and how dangerous they can be to public health. The Internet is particularly rife with global conspiracy theories and "fake news" reports about the corona virus. Before the pandemic, it tended to be mainly local, political fake news items and manipulative reports that frequently didn't spread across borders, the experts said in the discussion. The focus in Ukraine was on reports about annexed Crimea, the occupied Donbass region or propaganda about Ukraine as a "failed state."

A basic understanding of verification is essential in newsrooms to aid public debate and to ensure a high standard of journalism. Unfortunately however, many media outlets lack the necessary know-how – and professionally trained staff or even a fact-checking team are even more rare. They are urgently needed because most journalists don't have enough time to deal with complex cases in addition to their everyday duties.

In the end, everyone agreed that by now, basic **verification skills** and a **critical approach** aren't just important for journalists. Everyone using social media should read claims shared there with a degree of scepticism and ideally obtain information from various sources.

Participants' voices

Hirano Takashi

As an editor in the Japanese service of Ukrinform I decide what news we translate. When I come across dubious information, I discuss it with my colleagues. The knowledge gained from the workshop will help me to analyse such cases better in future. I think it's important to stop deliberately distributed fakes – meaning disinformation – and to improve the quality of our work. After all, it's not unusual for unintentional misinformation to creep in.

I think the biggest challenges in Ukraine aren't technical. What is much more worrying is bias in people's minds – that also applies to journalists. It's also problematic that people increasingly only obtain their information from media they themselves deem trustworthy. Some news sites abuse this trust by deliberately spreading disinformation and thereby manipulating the opinions of their readers on important social issues. Overall, I think it's important to show readers how to check facts themselves so that they can assess information more objectively. Time is pressing, because manipulation techniques like deep fakes are getting better and better. We must be prepared for this, not only technically. Basically, we must take a critical look at all the information we come across.

Maryna Bludsha

I feel a need to be well prepared in a world with powerful flows of disinformation. I like to learn and think that knowing how to verify specific content is must-have knowledge for everybody nowadays, especially for journalists. Even Facebook users have to know that their posts can be falsified in a minute, without any graphic editing programme

Olga Budnyk

As a journalist it's part of my job to check facts. Often this can take quite a long time. I would prefer to use only official sources but that's not always possible. I have already taken part in a fact-checking course in Ukraine. At this workshop, I wanted to learn more about the experiences and approaches of experts from abroad – I found the discussion very useful

Olesia Demash

I am studying journalism and have already attended a few courses on fact-checking. We Ukrainians are often confronted with Russian propaganda and myths about war in Eastern Ukraine. It was interesting to learn about the challenges facing countries with established, free media. Although I am still in training to be a journalist, I would like to get to know the best tools for checking facts now, so that I can work professionally in the future and publish only true information.

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