BENEDMO trend report 2 (Nov. '23)

Outcomes and background of fact-checks published by BENEDMO partners in the second year of cooperation.

Ferre Wouters (KU Leuven)
Yordi Dam (ANP)

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About the trend report

In this trend report, you will find an analysis of the fact-checks conducted by BENEDMO's consortium partners in the period from September 2022 to August 2023.

All fact-checks conducted by BENEDMO partners (Knack, Nieuwscheckers, VRT NWS and Factcheck Vlaanderen) were compiled through an automated database, which was manually checked and adjusted where necessary. These fact-checks were categorised based on their publication period, the topic of the claim and the verdict of the fact-check. This report focuses on eight different, frequently occurring common themes.

This is the second edition of the BENEDMO trend report. The first edition covered the period from September 2021 to August 2022. Data collection and processing were conducted by Ferre Wouters (KU Leuven), while analysis and visualisations were carried out by Yordi Dam (ANP).
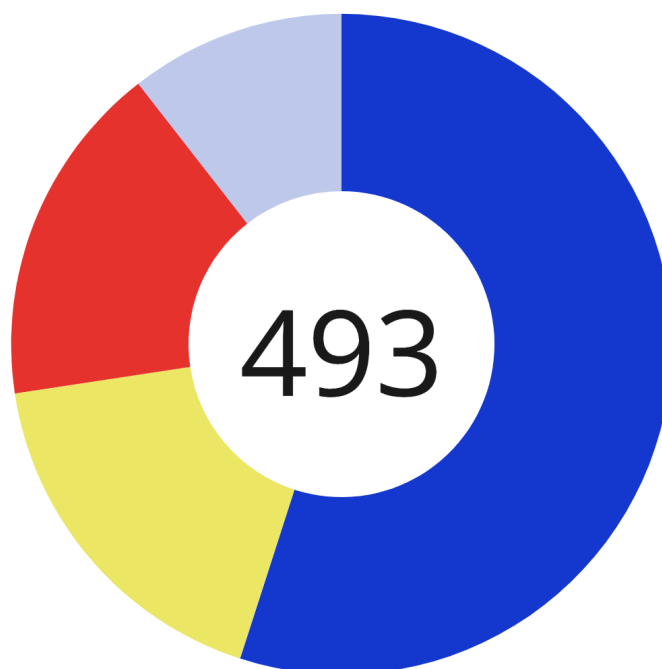
Fact-checks broken down by partner

In the second year of the collaboration, four partners within the BENEDMO consortium published fact-checks. The chart below provides a breakdown of the fact-checks conducted by partners from September 2022 to August 2023.

During that period, a total of 493 Dutch-language fact-checks were published. Of these, 410 were conducted by Flemish media, specifically Knack, VRT NWS and Factcheck Vlaanderen. An additional 83 fact-checks were conducted by Nieuwscheckers, a specialised fact-checking initiative affiliated with Leiden University in the Netherlands.

Number of factchecks published by BENEDMO-partners, by medium
Between the 1th of September 2022 and the 1th of August 2023

■ Knack ■ Factcheck.vlaanderen ■ VRT ■ Nieuwscheckers

493

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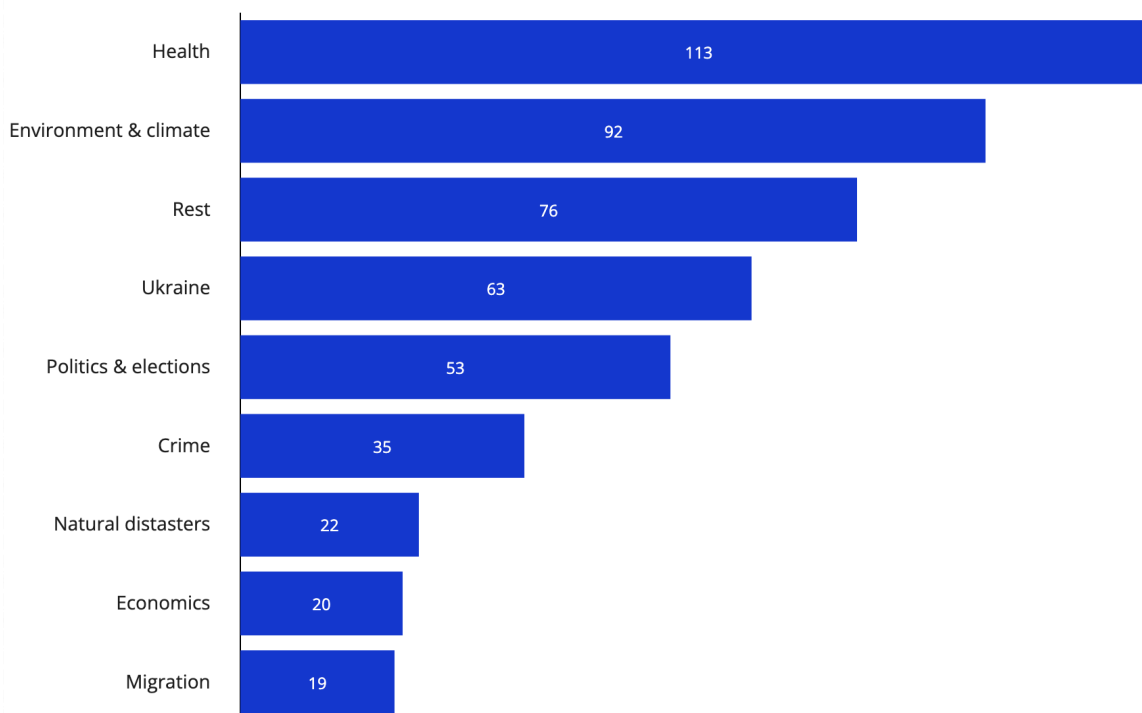**Fact-checks broken down by theme**

The five most common main themes during the period from September 2022 to September 2023 were as follows: health (113 fact-checks), environment and climate (92), the war in Ukraine (63), politics and elections (53).

Most common themes in BENEDMO-factchecks, totals

Between the 1th of September 2022 and the 1th of August 2023

Theme	Count
Health	113
Environment & climate	92
Rest	76
Ukraine	63
Politics & elections	53
Crime	35
Natural distasters	22
Economics	20
Migration	19

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One in three health-related fact-checks still involve disinformation concerning coronavirus vaccines, but numerous health claims were also checked beyond that. These claims encompass a wide variety of medical issues, ranging from toothpaste to sitting down to urinate. Some claims are seasonal: during the summer months, fact-checkers investigated several erroneous claims about sun protection.

Factcheck: Geen bewijs voor hogere kans op lymfeklierkanker na mRNA-vaccinatie

Een Belgische studie gaat viraal nadat berichten op social media het aandragen als bewijs dat het mRNA-vaccin van Pfizer kanker zou veroorzaken. Dat klopt niet. De studie rapporteert het overlijden van één proefmuis aan lymfeklierkanker, maar toont geen verband met vaccinatie. Er is dan ook geen verschil in het aantal gevallen van lymfeklierkanker voor en na de vaccinatiecampagnes tegen Covid19.

Example about health on social media

Under the 'other' category, there is a wide range of topics. This includes claims that capitalise on certain events, such as the Qatar World Cup. Additionally, fact-checks on gender identity are quite frequent, with 16 articles on this subject.

Factcheck: Neen, VDAB heeft het woord "vrouw" niet verboden in vacatures

Op sociale media maken mensen zich boos op de Vlaamse arbeidsbemiddelaar VDAB. Die zou niet toelaten dat vacatures gepubliceerd worden met het woord "vrouw" erin, wat ertoe zou leiden dat scholen en zorginstellingen met "Onze-Lieve-Vrouw" in hun naam geen vacatures meer kunnen plaatsen op de VDAB-website. De werkelijkheid ligt enigszins anders.

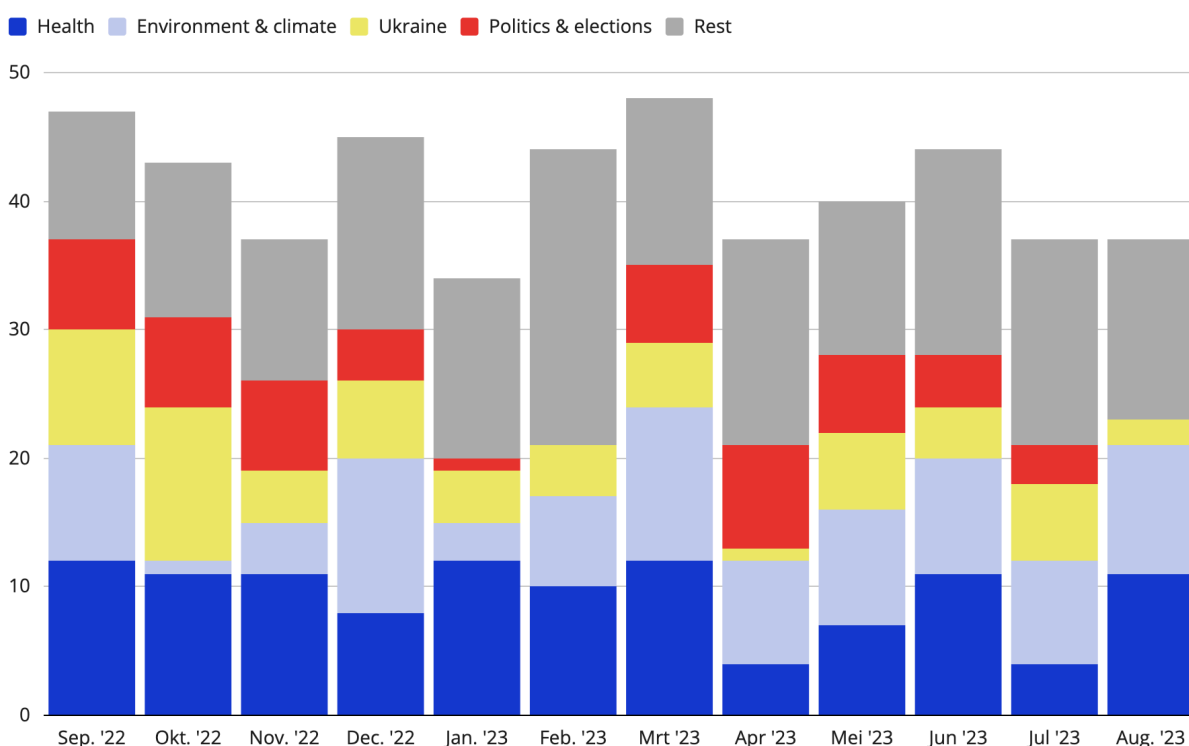*Example of 'other' category: gender*

Themes over time

On a monthly basis, BENEDMO partners published an average of 41 graphics. Health and the environment, as well as climate, are themes that generate fact-checks every month. It is also notable that the number of fact-checks about Ukraine is steadily decreasing. In 2022, Ukraine was still the main theme on which fact-checks were conducted. To illustrate, in the last four months of last year, there were as many fact-checks about Ukraine as in the first nine months of 2023. Nine fact-checks were specifically about generative AI, particularly with AI-created photos and videos. All these claims were judged to be untrue.

Most common themes in BENEDMO-factchecks, monthly
Between the 1th of September 2022 and the 1th of August 2023

■ Health ■ Environment & climate ■ Ukraine ■ Politics & elections ■ Rest

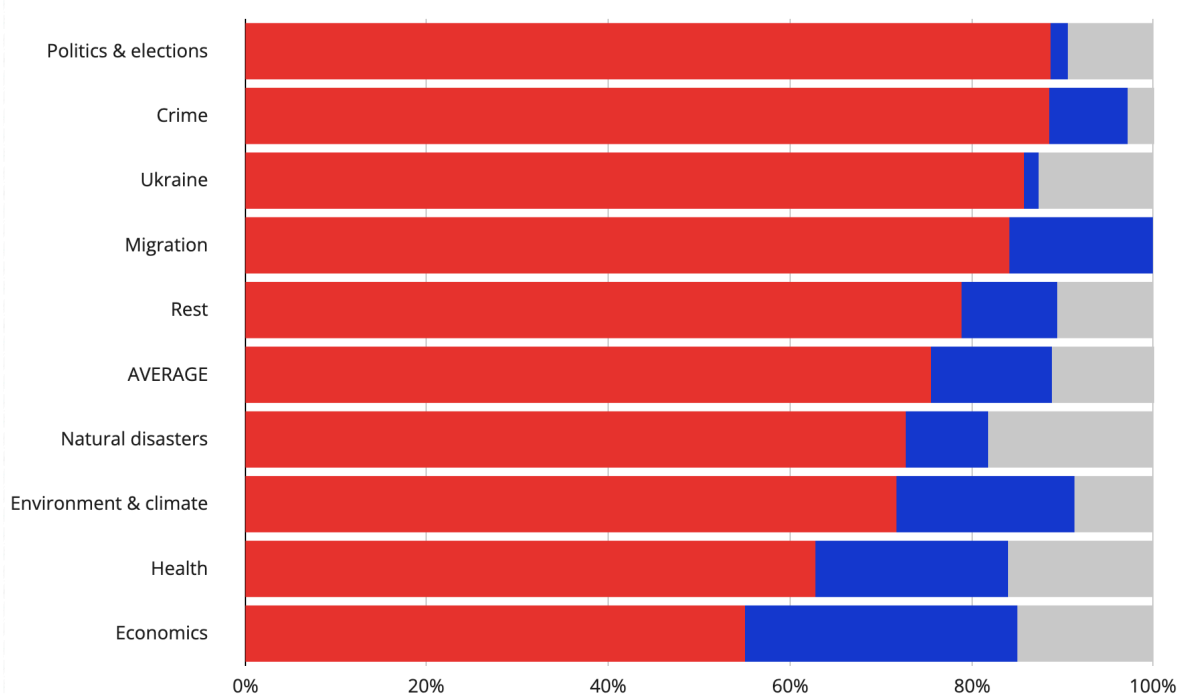Door het ANP   Created with ANP/LocalFocus

True or false?

Out of nearly 500 fact-checks, 66 were rated as 'true'. No evidence could be found in 55 cases. The majority, which is 372 publications, were eventually given the final verdict of 'false', which is almost three-quarters of all published checks. Additionally, the breakdown by theme shows that claims about politics and elections, crime and the war in Ukraine were checked relatively often, and a high percentage of them (89%, idem and 86%, respectively) proved to be false. On the other hand, reports on economics had a more balanced outcome, with 30% of the checks being true and a narrow majority being false.

Final verdict factchecks, by theme

Numbers are percentages | Between the 1th of September 2022 and the 1th of August 2023

■ False ■ True ■ No evidence

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In particular, checked information about elections and protests often appears to be unfounded, with fact-checkers being able to determine that they are fake. Politicians are discredited through the use of manipulated audio or images, or old videos may be taken out of context to convey a message. An example of this is the questioning of the election results in Brazil in October 2022.

Factcheck: Virale video toont geen recent Braziliaans protest maar manifestatie uit 2021

Op sociale media circuleert een filmpje waarop een mensenmassa te zien is, die zaterdag 12 november in de hoofdstad Brasilia massaal de straat opgingen tegen de recente verkiezingsuitslag. Dat is onzin: de video is oud en werd gemaakt tijdens een Bolsonaro-manifestatie op 7 september 2021.

Example about elections with 'false' verdict

Viral images related to disasters can pose a greater challenge for verification, often leading fact-checkers to more frequently conclude that there is insufficient evidence. These situations arise when, for instance, the cause of the disaster is not yet known. In February, unverified images circulated regarding earthquakes in Turkey, and in August, similar issues arose with regard to forest fires in Hawaii or Greece. However, such challenges also extend to disasters that occur closer to home.

Factcheck: Geen bewijs dat een elektrische auto de brand op het vrachtschip voor de Waddeneilanden heeft veroorzaakt

Verschillende media hebben gemeld dat de zware brand op een schip voor de kust van de Nederlandse Waddeneilanden zou zijn ontstaan door een elektrische auto. Die conclusie blijkt voorbarig en is waarschijnlijk gebaseerd op de verkeerde interpretatie van een uitspraak van een woordvoerster van de Nederlandse kustwacht. De oorzaak van de brand is op dit moment nog niet bekend.

Example about disasters with 'no evidence' verdict
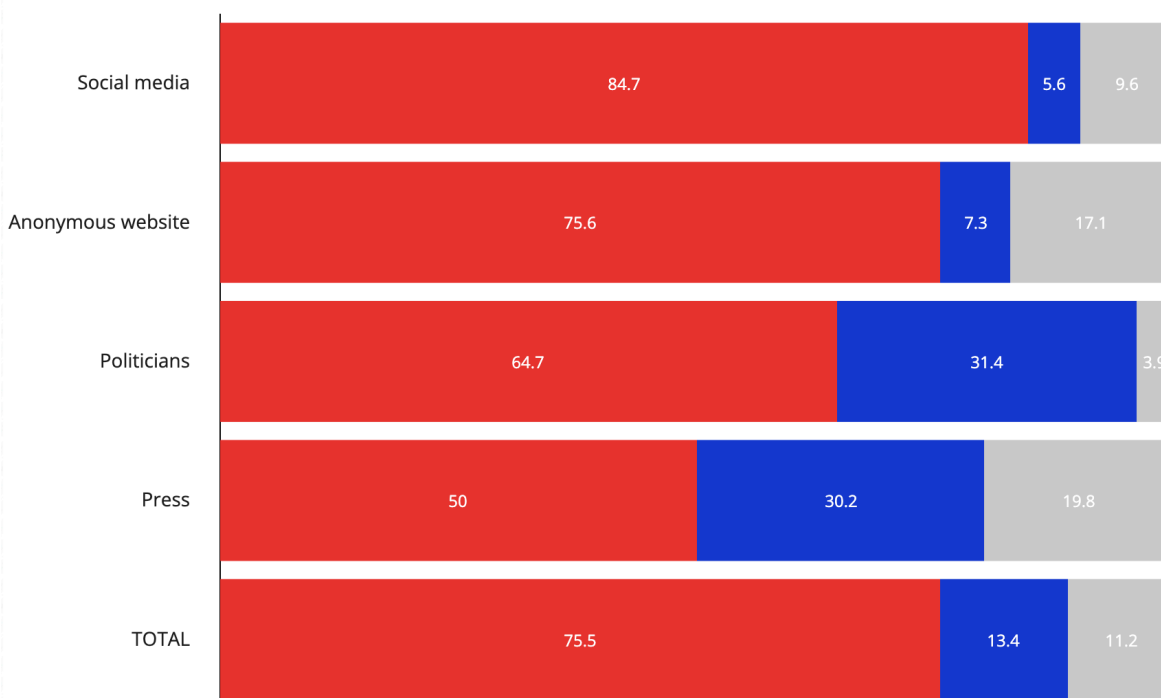
The source of the checked claims

Most published fact-checks, as in 2021 and the first three quarters of last year, are based on posts on social media. Out of the 493 checks (61 per cent), 301 originated from posts on sites such as Twitter, TikTok or Telegram. Fact-checks based on articles in other media followed at a distance (86 times), as did fact-checks based on statements by politicians (51).

Claims on social media most often turn out to be false. A staggering 85 per cent of all fact-checks conducted in response to a post on social media were labelled as 'false'. Anonymous websites (75 per cent found to be false) and politicians (65 per cent false) are also frequent sources that, after fact-checking, are found to spread misinformation. Of the claims made in the 'traditional press', half were found to be false.

Final verdict factchecks, by source of the claims

Numbers are percentages | Between the 1th of September 2022 and the 1th of August 2023

🟥 False 🟦 True ⬜ No evidence

Source	False	True	No evidence
Social media	84.7	5.6	9.6
Anonymous website	75.6	7.3	17.1
Politicians	64.7	31.4	3.9
Press	50	30.2	19.8
TOTAL	75.5	13.4	11.2

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Various subjects of the checked claims originate from distinct sources. For instance, images of protests typically originate from social media, while economic statements often stem from different channels, such as politicians.

> **Factcheck: Energie kost per jaar gemiddeld 205 euro meer in Brussel dan in Vlaanderen**
>
> Volgens Vlaams parlementslid Robrecht Bothuyne (CD&V) betaalt een gezin in Brussel gemiddeld 166 euro per jaar meer aan energie dan een gezin in Vlaanderen. Dat cijfer klopt als je enkel kijkt naar wat de energieleveranciers aanrekenen. Maar als je alle kosten in rekening neemt – zoals belastingen en netwerkkosten – is het verschil groter. Een Brussels gezin betaalt dan bij een gemiddeld verbruik 205 euro meer dan in Vlaanderen.

Example of a politician's statement about the economy

Statements in the form of articles tend to revolve around topics like health or the climate. Erroneous claims regarding climate frequently centre on sustainable measures or products, such as electric vehicles and meat substitutes. Fact-checkers encounter such articles on anonymous conspiracy websites as well as in mainstream media.

> **Factcheck: Geen vleesloos straatbeeld: Haarlem beperkt deel van reclameruimte**
>
> Mediaberichten wekken de indruk dat in Haarlem een algemeen verbod op vleesreclames van kracht wordt. Dat is niet zo: alleen abri- en zuilreclame voor vlees uit de bio-industrie wordt de komende jaren beperkt. De claim dat vleesreclame uit het Haarlemse straatbeeld zal gaan verdwijnen, klopt ook niet met de rest van het gemeentelijke reclamebeleid.

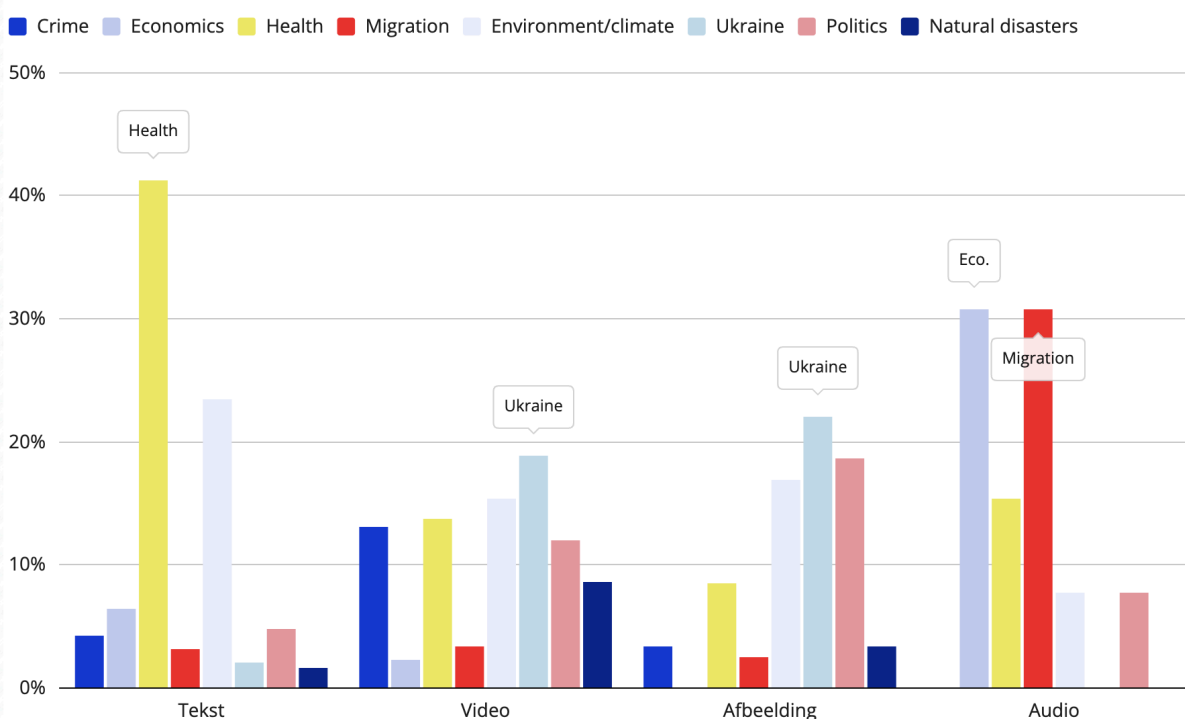*Example of mainstream press about the climate*

Fact-checks broken down by claim format

BENEDMO partners conducted fact-checks based on various formats of information dissemination, including text, video, audio and images. Out of the 493 fact-checks conducted, 187 were based on text-based articles, 175 were from video sources, 118 involved verification of images and 13 were related to audio recordings.

When analysing the data by theme, notable differences emerge in terms of the format on which the fact-checks are grounded. For instance, a significant proportion of all the text articles that were checked focused on health. In contrast, the war in Ukraine saw more fact-checks centred around photographic and video material. Migration and the economy were two themes where audio files were relatively more frequently fact-checked, although these numbers were relatively small in absolute terms.

Factchecks broken down by format

Figures in % of the number of published checks on this theme | For each format that has been checked, the most common theme has been highlighted | Theme 'other' not included in the graph

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Fact-checks of viral images often respond to contemporary events. For instance, in July, there were instances of misleading video images circulating, purportedly depicting protests in France. However, these videos were found to be from entirely different locations.

> **Factcheck: Nee, deze video toont geen brandende bibliotheek in Marseille**
>
> Online circuleert een video waarin een brandende bibliotheek in de Franse stad Marseille te zien zou zijn. Dat klopt niet. De video toont een brand in het centrale postgebouw in de Filipijnse hoofdstad Manila, die begin mei woedde en het gebouw volledig vernielde.

Knack

Example of video about protest

Other sources were found to be entirely fabricated using artificial intelligence. In the context of the war in Ukraine, erroneous reports emerged from fabrications in ChatGPT's search results or virtual images generated using tools like Midjourney.

> **Factcheck: Neen, dit is geen Oekraïens kindslachtoffer van een raketaanval: het is een beeld gemaakt met artificiële intelligentie**
>
> Een pakkend beeld van een jongetje in een jas met Oekraïense vlag gaat al enkele dagen viraal op sociale media. Het zou gaan om een slachtoffer van de recente Russische raketaanval op een appartementsgebouw in de Oekraïense stad Dnipro, met tientallen doden en gewonden tot gevolg. Maar de afbeelding is geen echte foto: ze is gemaakt met een beeldgenerator op basis van artificiële intelligentie (AI).

vrt nws

Example of image about Ukraine

Conclusion

The four consortium partners conducting fact-checks have exceeded the number of publications in BENEDMO's first year of operation (2021/2022), with a total of 493 publications compared to 482 in the previous year. The shift in thematic focus is noteworthy. While the first year of BENEDMO was dominated by fact-checks related to the war in Ukraine, there appears to be a shift towards themes like climate and health in the recent period.

The fact that three-quarters of the claims investigated were found to be incorrect, and even 85 per cent of the investigated claims on social media, demonstrates that the fact-checkers' efforts to combat disinformation remain crucial.