

The gatekeepers of truth:

How journalists deal with the challenges of disinformation

Written in the context of BENEDMO, the Flemish-Dutch hub of the European Digital Media Observatory.

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Introduction

Disinformation¹ is not a new phenomenon, but the scope and speed with which it is spread in the digital information landscape have increased considerably in recent years.² Moreover, with the advent of increasingly sophisticated technologies, tools have become available that allow for the fabrication of disinformation in the blink of an eye. Examples include deepfake generators that create movies and videos that are barely distinguishable from the real thing, and AI chatbots like ChatGPT that generate easily readable texts. This has raised concerns among several parties, including academics, journalists and education specialists.^{3,4,5}

Disinformation can hinder journalism practice: journalists can be drowned out by disinformation, become targets of manipulation, and be the subject of disinformation.⁶ Moreover, given their essential role in gathering, selecting and presenting accurate information, journalists unquestionably play a crucial role in combating disinformation. In this endeavour, they face the ongoing challenge of constantly adapting to innovations. This report identifies the knowledge and skills that can aid journalists in navigating the continuously evolving spread of manipulated information.

This inventory has been compiled within the framework of BENEDMO, the Flemish-Dutch initiative dedicated to monitoring, investigating and combatting disinformation, operating as a part of the European Digital Media Observatory. The objective of this inventory is to ascertain the potential role of BENEDMO in increasing journalists' knowledge and skills pertaining to disinformation. One of the means employed by BENEDMO to combat disinformation involves increasing media literacy among the general public. Consequently, this report also briefly examines the possibility of journalists contributing to this endeavour.

Chapter 1 discusses the impact of various technological advancements on the professional practices of journalists and the manner in which journalism and the media landscape have evolved in response. It further examines the challenges encountered by journalists in relation to fact-checking and the verification of online disinformation. Subsequently, Chapter 2 details the specific knowledge and skills imparted to journalists in the field to equip them against disinformation. This is elucidated through an inventory encompassing journalism schools, broadcasting entities, newspaper publishers, and professional journalist organisations. These parties were asked about their perspective on the role of journalism in increasing the media

¹ The terms 'disinformation' and 'manipulated information' are used frequently in this report. By disinformation, we mean inaccurate information spread with the intention to cause harm. By manipulated information, we mean inauthentic information, regardless of the intention with which it was spread.

² Burkhardt, J. M. (2017). Combating fake news in the digital age. *Library Technology Reports*, 53 (8), pp. 5-9.

³ Emmery, R. (2023). *De 'hallucinaties' van ChatGPT: hoe artificiële intelligentie neptitels citeert als bronnen*. Retrieved from <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/03/24/chatgpt-nepbronnen/>

⁴ Hsu, T., Thompson, S.A. (2023). *Disinformation researchers raise alarms about A.I. Chatbots*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/technology/ai-chatbotundatedsinformation.html>

⁵ Thompson, S.A. (2023). *Making deepfakes gets easier and cheaper thanks to A.I.* Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/12/technology/deepfakes-cheapfakes-videos-ai.html>

⁶ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training*, p.9.

literacy of their audiences; a topic expounded upon in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents recommendations to define and expand the role of BENEDMO more comprehensively.

BENEDMO has formulated a definition⁷ of 'resilience to disinformation' for this report. Owing to their understanding of the media landscape and fundamental journalistic skills, journalists typically exhibit greater resilience to disinformation compared to the general public. Furthermore, we expect journalists to play a more active role in recognising and flagging disinformation. This is articulated as follows:

Journalists equipped to combat disinformation possess the following attributes:

- 1) an **awareness** of the existence of disinformation, an understanding of the diverse interests that may be at play, and an appreciation of the implications for their own roles as participants within the information landscape;
- 2) the **knowledge and skills** to recognise disinformation, along with basic proficiency in verification techniques to identify the manipulation of information;
- 3) a **professional action perspective**, enabling them to report on disinformation without exacerbating distrust in journalism; and the potential to contribute to the media literacy of the general public.

⁷ Definition of 'resilient to disinformation': "People who are resilient to disinformation have (1) an awareness of the existence of disinformation and why it occurs, (2) the knowledge to recognise disinformation (to some extent) in terms of content as well as its creation and dissemination, and (3) they possess an action perspective that enables them to effectively respond to disinformation (such as not further spreading, ignoring, reporting, contradicting, warning others and so forth)."

Chapter 1 | A new digital world: the development of the news landscape

In recent decades, journalism has undergone profound transformations driven by technological advancements. These developments have had a significant impact on the dissemination of news and information. In today's digital media landscape, information of all types, including disinformation and manipulated content, can spread with unprecedented speed and reach. While this phenomenon offers numerous advantages, it also poses distinct challenges, particularly when it comes to averting potential harm in society stemming from disinformation.⁸ In 2016, the term “fake news” gained widespread recognition, primarily in response to the US presidential elections at that time. This period witnessed a noticeable surge in disinformation related to the elections, which rapidly spread across various social media platforms.^{9,10} To date, there are worldwide concerns about the spread of disinformation through digital channels and its potential impact on public opinion. These concerns have intensified more recently, partly due to advancements and the increased prevalence of AI-generated content such as ChatGPT, deepfakes and social bots.^{11,12} ^{13,14} Indeed, these technologies provide novel means for manipulating information and disseminating disinformation.

Although the 2022 Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that the majority of the Dutch and Flemish populations have a high level of trust in the news, a year earlier, it indicated growing concerns “about what is real or fake on the internet” in the Netherlands.^{15,16} Furthermore, the spread of disinformation appears to be increasingly tarnishing the reputation of journalists, raising questions about the relevance and effectiveness of the journalistic profession.^{17,18,19} Additionally, disinformation is, at times, employed specifically against professional journalists and media organisations with the aim of undermining their credibility and integrity. Accusations of implausibility or deliberate dissemination of false information are

⁸ Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, pp. 58-59.

⁹ Bovet, A. & Makse, H.A. (2019) Influence of fake news in Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. *Nature Communications*, 10(7). Retrieved from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-07761-2>

¹⁰ Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(2).

¹¹ Bell, E. (3 March 2023). A fake news frenzy: why ChatGPT could be disastrous for truth in journalism. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/03/fake-news-chatgpt-truth-journalism-disinformation>

¹² Silverberg, D. (14 February 2023). Could AI swamp social media with fake accounts? *BBC News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-64464140>

¹³ Hsu, T. & Thompson, S.A. (2023) Disinformation Researchers Raise Alarms About A.I. Chatbots. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/technology/ai-chatbotundatedsinformation.html>

¹⁴ Dekker, N. & Van Rosmalen, L. (7 April 2022). Deepfakes zijn niet meer weg te denken uit de informatieoorlog. *Argos*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vpro.nl/argos/lees/onderwerpen/artikelen/2022/deepfakes.html>

¹⁵ Nieuwsgebruik.be (undated). *Key Trend 4: Vertrouwen in nieuws is hoog al groeit vertrouwenskloof*. Retrieved from <https://www.nieuwsgebruik.be/key-trends/vertrouwen-in-nieuws-is-hoog-al-groeit-vertrouwenskloof>

¹⁶ Dutch Media Authority. (2021). Digital News Report: Netherlands 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.cvdm.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Digital-News-Report-Nederland-2021.pdf>

¹⁷ Digital News Report (2022). *Reuters Institute*. p. 67. Retrieved from https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News_Report_2022.pdf

¹⁸ Reuters Institute. (2022) Digital News Report, p. 91

¹⁹ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, p. 34.

frequently wielded as weapons to discredit journalists in today's 'post-truth' society, where objective facts hold less sway than emotions.²⁰

While recent technological advancements have opened up numerous new possibilities, they have also necessitated adaptations in the field of journalism as a professional practice. These changes have introduced several fresh challenges for journalists, particularly in the realms of public engagement, the growing avenues for disinformation dissemination, and the evolution of verification techniques within journalism. Consequently, there is a pressing demand for journalists and media professionals to effectively respond to these emerging technologies and innovations.

1.1 The impact of technological advancements on the journalism industry

1.1.1 The journalist: from gatekeeper to gate-opener

For a considerable period, the core task of journalists has been to provide the public with information and to decide which information is worth viewing.²¹ Consequently, journalists have often been described as “gatekeepers” since they wield a certain level of control over the information disseminated by news organisations.²²

Traditional journalism practices have operated within a hierarchical structure where a select group of professionals and stakeholders determine the information that reaches the public. To achieve this, journalists often relied on expert knowledge during the process of gathering and verifying news sources.²³ However, the emergence of digital media environments during the development of the internet led journalists in the 1990s to contemplate a concept known as ‘gate-opening’.²⁴ This concept represented a shift away from closed selection practices for newsworthy content within their publications.²⁵ Instead, journalists endeavoured to foster consumer participation by enabling readers to comment on the content featured on news websites.

The process of gate-opening has evolved significantly, thanks in part to the technological developments of this century. While journalists have been producing online content for news websites and digital newspapers for many years, in the early 21st century, it was common practice to have news articles printed before posting them on the internet. It was only around 2016 that media organisations and journalists began to prioritise publishing articles and news online.²⁶ As a result, media organisations now distribute their articles through their own social media channels.

²⁰ Hameleers, M. & Tulin, M. (2022). Making fact-checks work: Evidence-based recommendations for practitioners. BENEDMO, p. 5. Retrieved from <https://benedmo.eu/2022/12/07/1376/>

²¹ Singer, J. (2014). User-generated Visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space. *New Media & Society*, 16(1), p. 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813477833>

²² Singer, J. (2014). User-generated Visibility, pp. 2-3.

²³ Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). Journalistic Source Discovery: Supporting The Identification of News Sources in User Generated Content. In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21)*, p. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445266>

²⁴ Singer, J. (2014). User-generated Visibility, p. 4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Puijk, R. (2021). Local Newspapers' Transition to Online Publishing and Video User Experiences from Norway. *Journalism Studies*, 22(9). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1922303>

As a result, a preference has emerged in both the Netherlands and Flanders for consumers to use social media as their primary source of news, with access to news increasingly determined by personalised notifications or recommendation algorithms.^{27,28} This shift has also altered the role of journalists within the media ecosystem. They are no longer the sole providers of information on current public issues but are now viewed as responsible for identifying “credible, authoritative voices in a noisy world,” as much of the online content is no longer subject to the traditional quality criteria of news publishing processes.^{29,30}

1.1.2 The news consumer: from passive reader to creator

The evolution of social media platforms over the past decade has significantly increased consumer participation. The era of one-way traffic for broadcasting news is long gone. Today, the public can instantly share various types of information on a global scale through platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. This transformation has turned news consumption into a collaborative social experience, allowing people to share articles and links online, exchange recommendations and opinions, and independently decide which information matters to them without the need for news organisations or journalists to act as intermediaries.³¹

While readers may still largely rely on journalists as the initial gatekeepers, they also expect to have the ability to fine-tune journalists’ choices by determining the relevance of each article to themselves. This has resulted in a two-step gatekeeper process today, where readers have become “active recipients” of the news.^{32,33}

The audience has not only become active recipients but also co-producers of news content. Advanced technologies have significantly reduced the barriers to content creation and publication, enabling anyone to produce articles online and distribute information digitally. This has bypassed the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists.³⁴ Furthermore, social media platforms have greatly expanded the audience’s reach.^{35,36} This essentially means that individuals, regardless of their education, professional qualifications, or work experience, can compete with professional journalists to draw attention to specific topics and issues.³⁷ In some cases, this could be detrimental to journalism and society as a whole, as the absence of journalistic principles and verification standards in digital environments may facilitate the spread of disinformation.

While it has become more accessible for individuals to produce and share information online,

²⁷ Newman, N. et al. (2022). *Digital News Report 2022*.

²⁸ Cauwenberghs, J. & Ouaamari, S. (15 June 2022). De Vlaming haalt nieuws vooral online, maar last ook meer pauzes in: 5 lessen over ons mediagebruik na corona. *VRT NWS*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/06/13/digital-news-report-2022/>

²⁹ Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). *Journalistic Source Discovery*, p. 2.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Singer, J. (2014). *User-generated Visibility*, p. 5.

³² Ibid., p. 6.

³³ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, pp. 58-59.

³⁴ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, p. 56.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.61- 62.

³⁶ Pietsch, J. & Sorabji, D. (2021). *State of the Art Report into Data-Driven Journalism Report*. *Medianumeric*, p. 59.

Retrieved from <https://blog.euscreen.eu/2022/02/publication-of-state-of-the-art-report/>

³⁷ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, pp. 58-59.

professional journalism remains distinct from other forms of communication. Journalists adhere to journalistic codes that are designed to facilitate the collection and verification of information. These codes also promote professional accountability and transparency, which can contribute to building trust in journalism among the general public.^{38,39} Transparency in journalism can be achieved by showing news consumers the work processes employed and outlining the responsibilities of journalists within an organisation.

1.1.3 Journalistic use of user-generated content

Despite the potential risks, the many digital changes have also created new opportunities for journalists and media professionals. Recent research has indicated an increase in the use of social media sources at major news organisations such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.⁴⁰ Additionally, the digital expansion of social media in recent years has provided access to information sources and tools that are valuable in countering disinformation.⁴¹ User-generated content (UGC) on social media, for instance, can be a significant resource for journalists. It can serve as a starting point for engaging in research and reporting or even act as a source for verifying specific information.^{42,43,44,45}

UGC, in the journalistic context, is also referred to as “eyewitness media.” This term pertains to media sources shared online by individuals who have witnessed an event.⁴⁶ It includes various forms of content such as photos, video footage, posts and comments shared on social media, weblogs and forums. With the widespread use of smartphones, news is now instantly reported, and nearly every event is documented in some manner through online platforms. As a result, this type of media content is becoming an increasingly significant component of journalism.

Consequently, journalists are faced with the task of navigating a digital landscape abundant with information, while traditional journalism practices, typically employed to discern the relevance and reliability of information for producing high-quality reporting, are not evolving at the same rapid pace.⁴⁷ This presents a challenge for traditional news organisations, as they must maintain their reputation for reliable reporting while demonstrating their ability to keep up with a news cycle increasingly influenced by UGC.⁴⁸

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). *Journalistic Source Discovery*, p. 3.

⁴¹ Pietsch, J. & Sorabji, D. (2021). *State of the Art Report into Data-Driven Journalism Report*, p. 74.

⁴² Tolmie, P., Procter, R., Randall, D. W., Rouncefield, M., Burger, C., Wong Sak Hoi, G. Zubiaga, A. & Liakata, M. (2017). Supporting the Use of User Generated Content in Journalistic Practice. *CHI 2017: Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, p. 3632. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025892>

⁴³ Zampoglou, M., Papadopoulos, S. & Kompatsiaris, Y. (2016). Web and Social Media Image Forensics for News Professionals. *The Workshops of the Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 10(2), p. 159. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v10i2.14845>

⁴⁴ Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). *Journalistic Source Discovery*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Tolmie, P. et al. (2017). Supporting the Use of User Generated Content in Journalistic Practice, p. 3632.

⁴⁶ Zampoglou, M. et al. (2016). *Web and Social Media Image Forensics for News Professionals*, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Tolmie, P. et al. (2017). Supporting the Use of User Generated Content in Journalistic Practice, p. 3634.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

UGC also poses the risk of disseminating misleading information on a significant scale, as the information shared on social media is not always reliable.^{49,50,51} This risk is particularly pronounced when individuals or groups launch deliberate online disinformation campaigns with the intent to cause harm.⁵² Hence, it is crucial for journalists to comprehend the strategies employed in the creation and dissemination of disinformation, as well as the tactics necessary to detect such disinformation campaigns.⁵³

1.2 Dissemination of manipulated information on social media

The proliferation of manipulated online information has made it increasingly challenging to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information. Consequently, the lines between fact and fiction have become blurred, leading to public confusion regarding how to discern disinformation from factually accurate information.⁵⁴ This effect is exacerbated in digital environments by integrated algorithms on social media platforms, which can amplify the dissemination of disinformation.^{55,56} Indeed, when disinformation and erroneous claims are published, social media often ensures the rapid and wide distribution of this type of misinformation, which is a cause for concern.^{57,58} For instance, there has been a surge in the distribution of inaccurate, malicious, and propagandistic content that pretends to be legitimate news. This content is then further disseminated through self-established 'trust networks' of online connections.⁵⁹ Consequently, it becomes nearly impossible to retract or completely remove misinformation from the digital realm, even if journalists succeed in debunking these sources of disinformation.

An important point to keep in mind is that there has been relatively limited research conducted on the actual impact of algorithms on the behaviour of social media users. As a result, it is not currently feasible to make definitive conclusions in this regard.⁶⁰ Indeed, there is currently no consensus among scientists on the effects of exposure to different viewpoints on someone's ideological perspectives.⁶¹ On the one hand, the increasing use of social media and personalised news content could potentially act as a 'filter bubble' or 'echo chamber,' reinforcing one's existing beliefs. However, there is a growing body of empirical research suggesting that the impact of filter

⁴⁹ Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). *Journalistic Source Discovery*, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Pietsch, J. & Sorabji, D. (2021). *State of the Art Report into Data-Driven Journalism Report*, p. 60.

⁵¹ Tolmie, P. et al. (2017). *Supporting the Use of User Generated Content in Journalistic Practice*, p. 3632.

⁵² BENEDMO (2022). *Benedmo Fact-checking User Research and Research Method*, p. 16. Retrieved from <https://benedmo.eu/2022/09/09/benedmo-fact-checking-user-research-and-research-method/>

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁴ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, p. 33.

⁵⁵ Bontcheva, K. & Posetti, J. (2020). *Balancing Act/Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression*, p. 61

⁵⁶ Pietsch, J. & Sorabji, D. (2021). *State of the Art Report into Data-Driven Journalism Report*, p. 60.

⁵⁷ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ Pietsch, J. & Sorabji, D. (2021). *State of the Art Report into Data-Driven Journalism Report*, p. 60.

⁵⁹ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, p. 62.

⁶⁰ Bontcheva, K. & Posetti, J. (2020). *Balancing Act/Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression*, p. 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

bubbles and echo chambers may be overestimated, and that only a small proportion of people actually turn to sources of disinformation.^{62,63}

1.2.1 Tactics for disseminating disinformation

Many tactics are employed to disseminate disinformation in the digital realm. One such strategy is sockpuppetry, where an individual assumes a false identity by creating and managing fake accounts on social media platforms. This can be achieved using various methods, including the use of AI-generated profile photos or through imitation, where the fake profile matches the profile of a real person.⁶⁴ A relatively recent case of sockpuppetry that impacted both Flanders and the Netherlands involved a fabricated Twitter message attributed to virologist Marc Van Ranst (KU Leuven) in 2020. The message falsely claimed that it was a deliberate choice to allow elderly individuals in residential care centres to perish rather than hospitalising them.^{65,66} Although this forged tweet had already been debunked by the Flemish weekly Knack at the time, it gained significant traction in the Netherlands in 2022, shortly after Van Ranst had appeared as a guest in the Dutch parliament.

Another tactic employed to disseminate disinformation online is trolling. Frequently, this involves manipulating the social dynamics of online interactions through the use of troll accounts.⁶⁷ A pertinent example of the danger posed by such accounts was observed in 2021 when a group of COVID-19 sceptics began to circulate false and misleading information about the virus in a coordinated manner.⁶⁸ This collective, referred to as 'The Digital Army,' exhorted individuals through the application Telegram to create fictitious accounts on social media platforms for the purpose of disseminating disinformation. The Telegram group, boasting approximately 800 members, provided not only fallacious information regarding the COVID-19 vaccine but also furnished guidance on the creation of anonymous accounts on various social media and news websites. Email addresses of GGD [municipal health service] testing locations were additionally disseminated within the Telegram group, alongside the residential address of Diederik Gommers, a member of the Dutch Outbreak Management Team. Certain members of the troll army were also identified as having affiliations with far-right organisations. In addition to this Telegram group, there was a chat group comprising around 150 members wherein certain individuals formulated plans to engage in harassment offline.

There are numerous other tactics – including hashtag spamming, keyword squatting, source hacking, and swarming – that can be employed to widely disseminate false or misleading

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Törnberg, P. (2022). How digital media drive affective polarization through partisan sorting. *Social sciences*, 199(42).

⁶⁴ BENEDMO (2022). *Benedmo Fact-checking User Research and Research Method*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁵ Cauwenberghs, J. (23 May 2022). *Vervalste tweet Marc Van Ranst gaat na twee jaar ook viraal in Nederland*. VRT NWS. Retrieved from <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/05/23/check-van-ranst-tweet-rusthuizen/>

⁶⁶ Eeckhout, K. (2 September 2020). *Factcheck: Nee, de tweet over ouderen in woonzorgcentra was niét van Marc Van Ranst*. Knack Factcheck. Retrieved from <https://www.knack.be/factcheck/factcheck-nee-de-tweet-over-ouderen-in-woonzorgcentra-was-niet-van-marc-van-ranst/>

⁶⁷ BENEDMO (2022). *Benedmo Fact-checking User Research and Research Method*, p. 19.

⁶⁸ Pointer (2021). *Misinformation en privacy: Nederlands trollenleger verspreidt en coördineert desinformatie over vaccin*. Retrieved from <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/nederlands-trollenleger-verspreidt-en-coordineert-desinformatie-over-vaccin>

information.⁶⁹ It is, therefore, imperative to ascertain the credibility, quality and relevance of online content. At the same time, strategies should be pursued to mitigate the dissemination of disinformation.⁷⁰

1.2.2 Fact-checking as a response to disinformation

Fact-checking has emerged as a viable and efficacious method for reducing the dissemination of disinformation.⁷¹ Presently, in excess of 400 teams globally are actively engaged in fact-checking endeavours. Over a span of six years (2016-2022), the number of organisations dedicated to fact-checking has doubled.⁷² This principle, originating in America, was pioneered by organisations such as Snopes (established in 1994), FactCheck.org (2003) and Politifact (2007), which employed fact-checking to counter the unchecked dissemination of politicians' quotes in newspapers. Today, the scope of fact-checking extends beyond political claims, encompassing assertions from a broad spectrum of sources. The practice has also been incorporated into the media landscapes of both Flanders and the Netherlands.

Indeed, fact-checking is often a valuable method for critically verifying sources, documenting the process of gathering sources and accurately reporting the information found.⁷³ Fact-checkers play a crucial role in providing transparency within the professional media landscape through this verification method. Fact-checks also have clear positive effects. They can guide the public toward more reliable sources or provide valuable information about verification processes. Additionally, they can enhance media literacy among readers and public trust.⁷⁴

The common approach and method shared by fact-checkers and journalists involves the checking of claims.⁷⁵ Fact-checkers typically accomplish this by predominantly referencing primary sources that either corroborate or contradict a claim. They also consider sources that offer contextual information. Fact-checkers assess the reliability, quality and methodology of each source they investigate. The final fact-check report presents the findings and includes links to the original sources.^{76,77}

It is, however, crucial to acknowledge that the verification tools employed in fact-checking are not flawless. These methods need continuous adaptation, maintenance and evolution, particularly in

⁶⁹ BENEDMO (2022). *Benedmo Fact-checking User Research and Research Method*.

⁷⁰ Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). *Journalistic Source Discovery*, p. 1.

⁷¹ PEN America. (2017). *Faking News: Fraudulent News and the Fight for the Truth*, p. 11.

⁷² Stencel, M., Ryan, E., and Luther, J. (2022). Fact-Checkers Extend Their Global Reach with 391 Outlets, but Growth Has Slowed. Duke Reporters' Lab. Retrieved from <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checkers-extend-their-global-reach-with-391-outlets-but-growth-has-slowed/?print=true>

⁷³ Hameleers, M. & Tulin, M. (2022). *Making fact-checks work: Evidence-based recommendations for practitioners*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Hameleers, M. & Tulin, M. (2022). *Making fact-checks work: Evidence-based recommendations for practitioners*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Graves, L., & Cherubini, F. (2016). The rise of fact-checking sites in Europe. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/rise-fact-checking-sites-europe>

⁷⁶ Het staat op het net, maar klopt het wel? Vind hier de check! (undated) *Factcheck.Vlaanderen*. Retrieved from <https://factcheck.vlaanderen/werkwijze>

⁷⁷ Zo gaat Nieuwscheckers te werk. (undated) *Nieuwscheckers*. Retrieved from <https://nieuwscheckers.nl/over-ons/werkwijze/>

light of the rapid advancements in digital technologies and the growing trend of online news gathering by media consumers.⁷⁸ Furthermore, journalists and fact-checkers should exercise caution when publishing their fact-checks to avoid contributing to public scepticism. While journalists aim to uncover the truth, fact-checks also serve as a kind of warning to readers that not all information can be trusted. Research suggests that a warning about misinformation may unintentionally make people more sceptical, even of reliable sources of information.^{79,80}

1.2.3 Challenges faced by journalists when using verification tools

Despite the array of tools, services and methods developed in recent years for verifying online sources, they do not always seem to provide optimal support for journalists' work processes.^{81,82} In 2017, quantitative research conducted by the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) revealed that social media verification tools are still relatively underutilised by newsrooms worldwide.⁸³ The ICFJ surveyed over 2,700 journalists and newsroom managers across more than 130 countries, finding that only 11% of all respondents were actively using verification tools for social media. It was observed that many newsrooms still perceive social media verification as a challenge for journalists, as 46% of the surveyed newsrooms provided training sessions on social media investigations and verification. However, only 22% of the surveyed journalists found these training sessions to be useful.

Qualitative studies in the past have delved into the verification techniques employed by journalists for their online sources, revealing a certain ambivalence among journalists.⁸⁴ On the one hand, there is a desire within media organisations for well-executed verification processes to ensure the accuracy of publications. On the other hand, some verification techniques, such as manual verification and non-automated fact-checks, are time-consuming and may not always be feasible due to the pressure to publish reports quickly. Consequently, the surveyed journalists exhibited a strong preference for using social media content generated by "trusted" users, such as other reputable news organisations or government agencies.⁸⁵ These organisations instilled a sense of trust and reliability.⁸⁶ However, to avoid compromising between verification and swift publication, journalists would benefit from efficient and user-friendly tools for the verification processes.^{87,88,89}

⁷⁸ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, p. 103.

⁷⁹ Hameleers, M. & Tulin, M. (2022). Making fact-checks work: Evidence-based recommendations for practitioners, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Van der Meer, T., Hameleers, M. & Ohme, J. (2022). Can Fighting Misinformation Have a Negative Spillover Effect? How Warnings for the Threat of Misinformation Can Decrease General News Credibility. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2187652>

⁸¹ Zampoglou, M. et al. (2016), *Web and Social Media Image Forensics for News Professionals*, p. 160.

⁸² Wang, Y. & Diakopoulos, N. (2021). *Journalistic Source Discovery*, p. 1.

⁸³ Thomson, T. J., Angus, D., Dootson, P., Hurcombe, E. & Smith, A. (2020). Visual Mis/disinformation in Journalism and Public Communications: Current Verification Practices, Challenges, and Future Opportunities. *Journalism Practice*, p. 942. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1832139>

⁸⁴ Tolmie, P. et al. (2017). Supporting the Use of User Generated Content in Journalistic Practice, p. 3638.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Brandtzaeg, P. B., Lüders, M., Spangenberg, J., Rath-Wiggins, L. & Følstad, A. (2016). Emerging Journalistic Verification Practices Concerning Social Media. *Journalism Practice*, 10 (3), p. 323. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1020331>

⁸⁸ Tolmie, P. et al. (2017). Supporting the Use of User Generated Content in Journalistic Practice, p. 3638.

⁸⁹ BENEDMO (2022). *Benedmo Fact-checking User Research and Research Method*, p. 33.

Despite the passage of several years, it seems that support for verification tools within media organisations remains suboptimal. A recent study conducted by BENEDMO examined the requirements of fact-checkers in terms of tools and methods, with the objective of enhancing their availability to fact-checkers, journalists and the general public in the Netherlands and Flanders.⁹⁰ This investigation brought to light several challenges and reaffirmed, as seen in previous studies, that only a small percentage of the developed verification tools and techniques are currently being used by fact-checkers.⁹¹

Chapter 2 | Inventory of knowledge and skills acquired

In order to assess whether journalists would benefit from additional knowledge and skills to effectively deal with disinformation, it is essential to first gain an understanding of what journalism courses and organisations consider to be important in terms of knowledge and skills. Equally important is an examination of what is currently being taught to students and professionals through various educational programmes, and how journalists are being prepared or retrained to enhance their proficiency in these areas. Our specific interest lies in evaluating awareness of the existence of disinformation, the ability to recognise disinformation, and the possession of an action perspective. Furthermore, we aim to explore whether the adoption of verification techniques can be promoted within media organisations and journalistic environments.

To gain insight into the current state of journalism practice and education in the Netherlands and Flanders, we contacted professionals from media companies, journalism programmes, and professional journalism organisations. They were asked to complete a questionnaire (see appendix), and thirteen of them took part. Additionally, we conducted two in-depth interviews with journalists and one interview with a consultant specialising in news literacy in education.

Furthermore, we sought to determine whether and to what extent journalists can play a role in increasing media literacy among the general public. Given the more active role of news consumers in today's digital landscape, where journalists have transitioned from gatekeepers to gate-openers, we aimed to explore whether it is the responsibility of journalists to actively contribute to the media literacy of their audience.

2.1 Inventory of actors in journalism

2.1.1 Media landscape and journalism courses

To determine which organisations were contacted for this inventory, we have provided an overview of the key actors in the Flemish and Dutch media landscapes.

BENEDMO is a consortium of Flemish and Dutch partners. To gain a deeper understanding of the context, we present a concise overview of the media landscape in each country, followed by a

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

description of fact-checking activities in both regions. When discussing the media landscape in Belgium, we prioritise specific Flemish data, as Walloon data may not be applicable. In conclusion, we have compiled information on journalism courses offered in Flanders and the Netherlands. Our focus is solely on courses with a primary emphasis on journalism, excluding media studies programmes where journalism is an additional component.

The media landscape in Flanders

Belgium has a population of 11.6 million, with approximately 60% of its inhabitants being Dutch speaking. The Belgian media landscape is divided into two distinct markets: Flanders and Wallonia. Media concentration is a recent phenomenon in Belgium, where media groups or large conglomerates are formed through acquisitions, exerting significant control over the market. In Flanders, the media landscape is currently dominated by five major media groups, with the top three being DPG Media, Mediahuis and VRT. These Flemish media groups also have a presence in the Dutch market. Belgian media groups have acquired a substantial portion of Dutch newspapers and publishing houses in recent times.

Within Flanders, DPG Media is responsible for publishing publications such as *België Noord*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*. Similarly, Mediahuis publishes *De Standaard*, *Het Belang van Limburg*, *Het Nieuwsblad* and the *Gazet van Antwerpen*.

In 2022, online media emerged as the most significant news source for Belgians, capturing the attention of 77% of the population, in contrast to television (60%) and print media (31%). Among online sources, *Het Laatste Nieuws online* led the way, with 47% of the Flemish population reporting weekly usage, followed by *VRT NWS online* and *Het Nieuwsblad online*, with 40% and 25% usage, respectively.⁹² However, traditional news media, encompassing print newspapers and radio and television news broadcasts, witnessed a modest yet noticeable decline in 2021 compared to the figures from 2020.⁹³ In radio, television and print media, *VTM* emerged as the prominent news provider, with a weekly usage of 42%, closely followed by *Eén* (VRT) with 41%. These figures are followed by *Het Laatste Nieuws*, with a weekly usage of 30% of the population.⁹⁴

In addition to salaried journalists, the ‘*Vademecum voor zelfstandige journalisten*’ [Vade mecum for self-employed journalists]⁹⁵ revealed that as of April 2022, approximately a quarter (23.8%) of professional journalists work as freelancers. Furthermore, the number of freelance journalists has seen a slight increase, with 721 freelance journalists working in Flanders in 2023.⁹⁶

The media landscape in the Netherlands

The Dutch news media landscape is characterised by a robust public broadcaster, NPO

⁹² Newman, N. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*.

⁹³ Sevenhant, R., Stragier, J., De Marez, L. & Schuurman D. (2021). *Imec.digimeter 2021: Digital trends in Flanders*. Retrieved from <https://www.imec.be/sites/default/files/2022-05/IMEC-Digimeter-2021.pdf>

⁹⁴ Newman, N. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*.

⁹⁵ VADEMECUM: Voor zelfstandige journalisten. (2022). In *Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten*. Retrieved from: [https://journalist.be/publicaties/vademecum/vademecum-voor-zelfstandigen#:~:text=How%20is%20it%20with%20tax,on%20our%20site%20\(sign-up\)](https://journalist.be/publicaties/vademecum/vademecum-voor-zelfstandigen#:~:text=How%20is%20it%20with%20tax,on%20our%20site%20(sign-up)).

⁹⁶ Information was provided through VVJ Secretariat on 3 April 2023.

(Nederlandse Publieke Omroep) and a highly concentrated newspaper ownership, with two Belgian companies, DPG Media and Mediahuis, owning some of the largest titles. In the Netherlands, DPG Media publishes, among others, *AD*, *Trouw*, *Het Parool* and *de Volkskrant*, while Mediahuis is responsible for titles including *De NRC*, *De Telegraaf*, *De Limburger* and *Noordhollands Dagblad*.

Online news, as in Flanders, is the primary news source for the Dutch. NU.nl has a weekly usage rate of 42% among the population, followed by *NOS nieuws* (30%) and *AD* (28%). In radio, TV and print, NOS leads as the primary news provider with a weekly usage of 60% of the population, followed by RTL and SBS with a weekly usage of 31% and 22% of the population, respectively.

Alongside major commercial media entities such as RTL and SBS, the Netherlands has a distinctive system of public broadcasters, consolidated under the Dutch Public Broadcasting Service (NPO). Within the NPO, NOS primarily focuses on news, parliamentary reporting and sports, while NTR is responsible for cultural, educational, children's and ethnic programming. These organisations enjoy a privileged legal status with designated funding. Moreover, the broadcasting system features five-year renewable licenses and funds allocated to 11 other public broadcasting entities and television organisations and radio stations within the NPO. Most of these member-based public broadcasters are almost 100 years old.

Besides established news organisations, many media professionals in the Netherlands are self-employed. Data from the Trade Register indicates that as of 1 January 2023, 7,049 freelance journalists were registered with the Chamber of Commerce.⁹⁷ Although there has been a slight increase in the number of freelance journalists compared to 2022 (+1.7%), it remains relatively lower than in previous years.

Fact-checking

Fact-checking is a journalistic approach aimed at countering the spread of disinformation. Fact-checkers may be integrated into traditional media organisations, or they may operate independently outside traditional media structures.

Fact-checking in Flanders

Belgium was a blind spot in Europe when it came to fact-checking until a few years ago.^{98,99} Until 2018, mainstream Flemish outlets, like the *De Standaard* newspaper,¹⁰⁰ only sporadically published fact-checks, lacking established guidelines for the practice.^{101,102} One notable exception was the

⁹⁷ *Weer meer freelance journalisten erbij, maar de groei zwakt af.* (2023, Jan 12). Villamedia. Retrieved from: <https://www.villamedia.nl/artikel/weer-meer-freelance-journalisten-erbij-maar-de-groei-zwakt-af#:~:text=In%20the%20journalism%20remains%20with%204%2C77%20percent>.

⁹⁸ *Fact-Checking.* (undated). Duke Reporters' Lab. Retrieved from <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking/>

⁹⁹ Tardáguila, C. (18 September 2019). Why doesn't Belgium show up on the fact-checking world map? Retrieved from <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/why-doesnt-belgium-show-up-on-the-fact-checking-world-map/>

¹⁰⁰ *Factcheck.* (undated). De Standaard. Retrieved from <https://www.standaard.be/tag/factcheck>

¹⁰¹ De Vocht, P. (2019). *Niet alle factchecks zijn factchecks.* Retrieved from <https://www.scriptiebank.be/scriptie/2019/niet-alle-factchecks-zijn-factchecks>

¹⁰² Billiet, J., Opgenhaffen, M., Pattyn B. & Van Aelst, P. (2018). *De strijd om de waarheid.* Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Sciences and Arts. Retrieved from <https://kvab.be/nl/standpunten/de-strijd-om-de-waarheid>

magazine *Knack*, which has featured a regular fact-checking column in its weekly publication since 2012.¹⁰³

Over the past five years, the fact-checking landscape has seen significant growth, especially in Flanders. In 2019, *factcheck.vlaanderen* was established as a result of a collaboration between journalists, educators and the AI company Textgain.¹⁰⁴ The project marked the first independent fact-checking platform in Belgium dedicated entirely to fact-checking.¹⁰⁵ *Knack* magazine expanded its fact-checking editorial team to publish articles online in addition to a weekly fact-check in print. Since 2020, the magazine has partnered with Meta, the parent company of Facebook, as part of its external fact-checking programme.¹⁰⁶

The news service of Flemish public broadcaster VRT also established its own fact-checking editors in 2020.¹⁰⁷ This team is part of the DDT cell, a specialised group of journalists focusing on Data, Disinformation and Technology.¹⁰⁸

Knack, *factcheck.vlaanderen* and *VRT NWS* are recognised members of the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).¹⁰⁹ Since 2022, fact-checks from *factcheck.vlaanderen*, *VRT* and *Knack* have been collected by *deCheckers*, a new initiative that doesn't conduct fact-checks itself but compiles them on a website, promotes them on social media and explains them on Vlaamse Radio 1.¹¹⁰

Fact-checking in the Netherlands

Fact-checking in the Netherlands has seen various initiatives come and go over the past decades, often coinciding with election periods when media organisations set up short-term projects to fact-check claims made by politicians. However, these fact-checking sections tend to be short-lived and often disappear after election time.

*De Volkskrant*¹¹¹ and *NRC*¹¹² had fact-checking sections that lasted several years, but they no longer publish regular fact-checks. Occasional fact-checks still sporadically appear in *NRC*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, *De Volkskrant* discontinued its 'Klopt dat wel?' [Is that right?] column, and

¹⁰³ *Alles wat u moet weten over de Factcheck van Knack*. (undated). Knack. Retrieved from <https://www.knack.be/alles-wat-u-moet-weten-over-de-factcheck-van-knack/>

¹⁰⁴ PDE. (28 April 2019). *Factcheck.Vlaanderen van start*. Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten. Retrieved from <https://journalist.be/2019/04/factcheck-vlaanderen-van-start>

¹⁰⁵ *Factcheck.Vlaanderen*. (undated). Retrieved from <https://factcheck.vlaanderen/>

¹⁰⁶ Van Leemputten, P. (26 March 2020). *Knack in zee met Facebook voor Belgische factchecking*. Retrieved from <https://datanews.knack.be/ict/nieuws/knack-in-zee-met-facebook-voor-belgische-factchecking/article-news-1581563.html>

¹⁰⁷ Van Bakel, L. (29 March 2022). *Hoe werkt de Check-redactie van VRT NWS?* VRT NWS. Retrieved from <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2022/03/16/hoe-werkt-de-check-redactie-van-vrt-nws/>

¹⁰⁸ *Disinformatie*. (undated). In Sections. VRT NWS. Retrieved from <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/rubrieken/desinformatie/>

¹⁰⁹ *Verified signatories of the IFCN code of principles*. (undated) IFCN Code of Principles. Retrieved from <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories>

¹¹⁰ *deCheckers home page*. (undated) deCheckers. Retrieved from <https://decheckers.be>

¹¹¹ *Klopt dat wel?*. (undated). De Volkskrant. Retrieved from <https://www.volkskrant.nl/dossier/klopt-dat-wel->

¹¹² *NRC Checks*. (undated). NRC. Retrieved from <https://www.nrc.nl/rubriek/nrc-checkt/full/>

fact-check-like articles on the pandemic were published as regular articles and in the science editors' blog. At the start of the Ukraine war, both *De Volkskrant*¹¹³ and NOS¹¹⁴ appointed teams to verify war footage. Both media outlets published several studies, but the number of publications stalled during the course of 2022.

NU.nl introduced its fact-checking section, NUcheck,¹¹⁵ in 2017. The catalyst for this initiative was a collaborative programme initiated by Facebook in the same year, which involved fact-checkers scrutinising posts on the social media platform. Initially, both NU.nl and Nieuwscheckers participated in this programme.¹¹⁶ However, Nieuwscheckers ceased its involvement in early 2018. NU.nl continued its fact-checking efforts independently. However, NU.nl withdrew at the end of 2019.¹¹⁷ This decision was driven by Facebook's policy, which did not permit the fact-checking of claims made by politicians. NU.nl objected to this in principle. Subsequently, NU.nl maintained the fact-check section on its own website and had a dedicated fact-checker. However, starting in 2022, NU.nl no longer employs a regular fact-checker and the 'NUcheckt' column is now provided by different editors on an irregular basis.

Pointer, the investigative editorial division of KRO-NCRV, periodically publishes fact-checks in its online column called 'Pointer checks.' In addition, the editors produce video series on YouTube that deal with false claims and misinformation.¹¹⁸ Pointer has collaborated in recent years with *Nieuwscheckers* and other media outlets, including *ANP* in 2022 and *AD* in 2023, on "fact-check marathons" leading up to elections in the Netherlands.¹¹⁹ It is worth noting that Pointer does not have dedicated fact-checkers; instead, several journalists within the organisation are responsible for this task.¹²⁰

Professional organisations

This report also looked at professional organisations that serve journalists by providing support on various issues that can impact journalism, including financial, political, legal and employment-related matters. These professional organisations often organise meetings and training sessions to enhance the quality of journalism. Below is a summary of key information concerning each professional organisation, including their target audience and size: In Flanders, the largest professional organisation is the Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten (VVJ),¹²¹ which boasts 2,726 members.¹²² This organisation encompasses both professional journalists and

¹¹³ *Op zoek naar de feiten in oorlogstijd*. (undated). *De Volkskrant*. Retrieved from: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/kijkverder/v/2022/feiten-van-de-oorlog-v484352/>

¹¹⁴ *De verhalen achter oorlogsbeeld*. (undated). NOS. Retrieved from: <https://nos.nl/collectie/13895-de-verhalen-achter-oorlogsbeeld>

¹¹⁵ *NUcheckt*. (undated). NU.nl. Retrieved from: <https://www.nu.nl/nucheckt>

¹¹⁶ *Facebook gaat in Nederland samenwerken met factcheckers*. (2 March 2017). Villamedia. Retrieved from: <https://www.villamedia.nl/artikel/facebook-gaat-in-nederland-samenwerken-met-factcheckers>

¹¹⁷ *NU.nl stopt als laatste partij met factcheckprogramma van Facebook* (27 November 2019). NU.nl. Retrieved from: <https://www.nu.nl/tech/6013044/nunl-stopt-als-laatste-partij-met-factcheckprogramma-van-facebook.html>

¹¹⁸ *Pointer Checkt*. (undated) Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/onderzoeken/pointer-checkt>

¹¹⁹ *Factcheck-marathon Provinciale Staten-verkiezingen 2023*. (2023) Retrieved from: <https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/onderzoeken/factcheckmarathon>

¹²⁰ Information was provided through Pointer on 23 March 2023

¹²¹ *Over de VVJ*. (undated). Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://journalist.be/vvj>

¹²² Information was provided through Secretariat of VVJ on 3 April 2023

freelancers. The VVJ is affiliated with the General Association of Professional Journalists (AVBB),¹²³ which is an umbrella organisation that also includes the French-language organisation Association des Journalistes Professionnels (AJP).

The Association of Investigative Journalists (VVOJ) focuses specifically on investigative journalists, is active in Flanders and the Netherlands, and has 6,000 members.¹²⁴ The VVOJ encourages knowledge exchange and discussions among journalists, as well as the development of new and digital research techniques.

In the Netherlands, the Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ) is the largest professional organisation, representing over 8,000 members.¹²⁵ These include both freelancers and employees in the publishing sector, at broadcasters, and in photojournalism.

At the local level in the Netherlands, the Foundation of Dutch Local Broadcasters (NLPO) operates as a trade organisation for approximately 240 local broadcasters.¹²⁶

Journalism courses

In addition to media companies, fact-checking organisations and professional organisations, journalism courses in Flanders and the Netherlands were also examined. These include both universities of applied sciences programmes (bachelor's) and university programmes (master's). The information about these courses was gathered from the websites of the respective educational institutes. Below is a summary of essential information regarding the focus of the courses, which may include cross-media aspects, specialisation and emphasis on theory or practice. Special courses with a specific focus on disinformation are also briefly mentioned.

HBO courses in Flanders

Six universities of applied sciences (HBO) in Flanders offer a journalism programme. These are AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp,¹²⁷ HOWEST University of Applied Sciences,¹²⁸ Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Ghent,¹²⁹ Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts,¹³⁰ Thomas More in Mechelen¹³¹ and PXL in Hasselt.¹³²

¹²³ AVBB. (undated). Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://avbb.be/>

¹²⁴ Over de Vereniging. (undated) Retrieved from: <https://www.vvoj.org/over-vvoj/over-de-vereniging/>

¹²⁵ De NVJ. (undated) Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.nvj.nl/nvj-0>

¹²⁶ Over NLPO. (undated) Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.nlpo.nl/overnlpo>

¹²⁷ Journalism. (undated). AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: https://www.ap.be/opleiding/journalistiek?gclid=Cj0KCOjwLPWgBhDHARIsAH2xdNe6gksJyPV09JMCmU9GDWqPuYINito2UZs8S7swmG-d5U7nIYZe7jwaAriXEALw_wcB

¹²⁸ Journalism Bachelor's. (undated). Howest. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from:

<https://www.howest.be/nl/opleidingen/bachelor/journalistiek>

¹²⁹ Journalism Bachelor's. (undated). Artevelde University of Applied Sciences. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from:

<https://www.arteveldehogeschool.be/nl/opleidingen/bachelor/journalistiek>

¹³⁰ Professional Bachelor's in Journalism. (undated). Erasmus University of Applied Sciences. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.erasmushogeschool.be/nl/opleidingen/journalistiek>

¹³¹ Professional Bachelor's in Journalism. (undated). Thomas More. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from:

<https://www.thomasmore.be/opleidingen/professionele-bachelor/journalistiek-overzicht/journalistiek>

¹³² Bachelor's in Journalism. (undated). PXL. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from:

<https://www.pxl.be/journalistiek?highlight=bachelor%2c%20journalistiek>

These six HBO programmes describe on their website that with the theoretical and practical knowledge of various media formats - including radio, internet, photography, podcasts, television, newspapers and magazines - students are trained to become versatile and cross-media journalists. In the final year, AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp and Howest provide the opportunity for students to specialise in audio, video or image. All six university of applied sciences courses prioritise the development of practical journalism skills. Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Thomas More, PXL Hasselt, AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp and Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen also arrange practical assignments in collaboration with external parties from the journalism field. Additionally, Thomas More Hogeschool, in partnership with Journalism Fund Europe, offers a Postgraduate programme focused on International Research Journalism (IRJ).¹³³

University courses in Flanders

In addition to courses at universities of applied sciences, two universities offer a journalism course: the KU Leuven¹³⁴ and the Vrije Universiteit of Brussel,¹³⁵ both of which offer a master's in journalism. Besides master's courses, there are two specialisations in journalism. Ghent University offers a one-year specialisation in Journalism within the Master of Science in Communication Studies programme.¹³⁶ KU Leuven also has a specialisation in 'Journalism in the digital society' within its Master's in Communication Studies¹³⁷.

The Master's in Journalism at KU Leuven provides students with the opportunity to specialise in a specific medium (radio and TV journalism, print and online, and social media) and in various journalistic themes (e.g., foreign affairs, culture, economics, justice, lifestyle, politics, sport, science). The specialisation in 'Journalism in the Digital Society' within the Masters of Science in Communication Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel focuses specifically on changes in the media landscape. At the Vrije Universiteit van Brussel, students are expected to specialise in either text media or audiovisual media in the second semester. The 'Journalism' specialisation within the Master's in Communication Studies at Ghent University takes a broad approach, where students acquire knowledge and skills across various journalistic genres and formats.

The above programmes at Ghent University, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and KU Leuven emphasise both the development of practical journalistic skills (e.g., writing skills, source research, audiovisual production, design) through assignments and internships at newsrooms, as well as journalistic skills at the academic level (e.g., 'evaluation of news sources,' 'organisation of editorial

¹³³ *International Research Journalism*. (undated). Thomas More. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.thomasmore.be/en/node/153>

¹³⁴ *Master's in Journalism*. (undated). KU Leuven. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.kuleuven.be/opleidingen/master-journalistiek#Over>

¹³⁵ *Journalism*. (undated). VU Universiteit Brussel. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.vub.be/nl/studeren-aan-de-vub/alle-opleidingen/bachelor-en-masteropleidingen-aan-de-vub/journalistiek/programma>

¹³⁶ *Master of Science in Communication Studies (Journalism)*. (undated). University of Ghent. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://studiekiezer.ugent.be/master-of-science-in-de-communicatiewetenschappen-journalistiek/2023>

¹³⁷ *Journalism in the Digital Society*. (undated). KU Leuven. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://soc.kuleuven.be/fsw/toekomstigestudenten/mastercom/journalistiek-leuven>

departments,' 'professional ethical aspects of journalism' and 'insight into the workings of the digital (platform) society').



HBO courses in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, four universities of applied sciences offer HBO (higher professional education) courses in journalism. These are Windesheim in Zwolle,¹³⁸ Ede University of Applied Sciences,¹³⁹ Fontys University of Applied Sciences in Tilburg¹⁴⁰ and HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht.¹⁴¹

The four universities of applied sciences adopt a cross-media approach, wherein students engage in independent work on journalistic productions. Furthermore, the programmes also teach students practical skills. Two of these courses underscore on their respective websites the importance of reflection on the role of a journalist. Ede University of Applied Sciences places emphasis on the societal responsibility that students bear as prospective journalists, while the bachelor's programme at Fontys University of Applied Sciences in Tilburg concentrates on conducting research into the role of journalism within society.

University courses in the Netherlands

There are four universities that offer a master's in journalism: the University of Groningen,¹⁴² Erasmus University Rotterdam,¹⁴³ University of Amsterdam¹⁴⁴ and Leiden University.¹⁴⁵ The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam offers the Media and Journalism track within the Bachelor's of Communication and Information Sciences.¹⁴⁶

At the University of Amsterdam, students can choose between two specialisations: 'Journalism' and 'Research and Editing'. The 'Journalism' programme focuses on journalistic writing. Students delve into the domains of national (daily) newspapers and other digital journalistic platforms. Conversely, on the 'Research and Editing' track, students acquire skills in conducting research for audiovisual media, encompassing current affairs programmes, documentaries, educational television productions and web content.

¹³⁸ *Journalism in Zwolle (fill-time)*. (undated). Windesheim. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from:

<https://www.windesheim.nl/opleidingen/voltijd/bachelor/journalistiek>

¹³⁹ Ede University of Applied Sciences, Journalism. (undated). ROC Netherlands. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.roc.nl/default.php?fr=details&id=2069&inst=110>

¹⁴⁰ Journalism. (undated). Fontys University of Applied Sciences. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://fontys.nl/Studeren/Opleidingen/Journalistiek-voltijd.htm>

¹⁴¹ *Journalism (Full-time)*. (undated). HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.hu.nl/voltijd-opleidingen/journalistiek/tijdens-de-opleiding>

¹⁴² *Journalism (NL)*. (undated). University of Groningen. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: https://www.rug.nl/masters/journalism-dutch-taught/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwIPWgBhDHARIsAH2xdNcsxVlWHrxUBNj7a0qi1DD_EgO1p3XlAIHO4DJyCfiWyd6MSmM9-9ElaAgEKEALw_wcB

¹⁴³ *Waarom deze studie, Media & Journalistiek*. (undated). Erasmus University Rotterdam. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.eur.nl/master/media-journalistiek/waarom-deze-studie>

¹⁴⁴ *Dual Master in Journalism and Media (Media Studies)*. (undated). University of Amsterdam. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from:

<https://www.uva.nl/programmas/duale-masters/journalistiek-en-media-mediastudies/journalistiek-en-media.html>

¹⁴⁵ *Journalism and New Media (MA), Media & Journalism*. (undated). Leiden University. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/onderwijs/opleidingen/master/media-studies/journalistiek-en-nieuwe-media>

¹⁴⁶ *Media en Journalistiek*. (undated). Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://vu.nl/nl/onderwijs/bachelor/communicatie-en-informatiewetenschappen/Traject/media-en-journalistiek/Inhoud>

The undergraduate courses comprise both practical and academic components. They emphasise the acquisition of journalistic skills through the application of cross-media techniques, fostering linguistic proficiency and honing analytical capabilities. Scientific reflection and research methods are covered extensively in all university programmes. Students also learn to critically analyse the current media landscape, employing a variety of scientific theories to assess the impact of globalisation and the digitalisation of media on the industry.

Programming related to disinformation in Flanders and the Netherlands

In the field of disinformation, there are several Dutch universities of applied sciences participating in fact-checking initiatives. From 2008, students at Tilburg's Fontys Academy of Journalism were involved in fact-checking media reports, primarily through *FHJ Factcheck*. After a break of several years, the project has been revived and is now operating under the name FACTORY.¹⁴⁷

Following *FHJ Factcheck*, Leiden University introduced a similar initiative in February 2009 called *Nieuwscheckers*. The current fact-checking editorial team comprises both professionals and students.

Dutch journalism courses at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and Fontys, as well as Flemish journalistic education at AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp, Artevelde University of Applied Sciences and Thomas More, actively participate in the EUfactcheck project organised by the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA). HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp play key roles in the website's main editing and the project team. This project is part of the EJTA, where various journalism programmes in Europe collaborate to teach students fact-checking. EUfactcheck focuses on fact-checking topics that are pertinent to Europe.

The actors summarised

Publishers and broadcasters

Two major Belgian players, DPG Media and Mediahuis, own the majority of newspaper and news website titles in both the Netherlands and Flanders. A notable difference between the two regions lies in the regulation of public broadcasting. The Netherlands boasts a unique system of broadcasters who are collectively responsible for providing public content, although NOS remains the sole public news provider. In contrast, Flanders has VRT, an organisation that represents public broadcasting. In both the Netherlands and Flanders, news reaches consumers primarily through online platforms. Moreover, both regions have a substantial number of freelancers, with the Netherlands standing out for its particularly high number of registered freelance journalists.

¹⁴⁷ FACTORY. (undated). FACTORY Powered by FHJ. Retrieved on 31 March 2023 from: <https://factory.fhj.nl>

Fact-checking organisations

Many fact-checking initiatives have emerged independently from traditional media organisations. Traditional media have made efforts to incorporate fact-checking into their practices in various ways, often as temporary projects. In Flanders, fact-checking has found a stable place within the public broadcaster VRT, where a dedicated fact-checking team has been established.

Professional organisations

In Flanders, the VVJ, and in the Netherlands, the NVJ, are the largest professional organisations overseeing the quality and independence of journalism. Additionally, the VVOJ focuses on investigative journalists in both the Netherlands and Flanders, while the NLPO targets local broadcasters in the Netherlands.

Courses

In both Flanders and the Netherlands, a cross-media approach forms the core of courses at universities of applied sciences. University master's programmes in both regions emphasise the development of practical and scientific skills. Three universities of applied sciences in Flanders, as well as three universities of applied sciences and one university in the Netherlands, participate in the EJTA's EUfactcheck project.

2.1.3 Selection of actors

We approached experts from organisations and invited them to participate in our questionnaire. These organisations provide knowledge and practical skills through various courses, programmes and training sessions designed for journalists. These can be categorised into the following groups:

- **Journalism courses:** courses offered by both universities and universities of applied sciences. These play a crucial role in shaping the journalists of the future.
- **Journalistic practice:** major broadcasters and publishers of multiple news titles. They have a clear view of the practical situation and align their internal training programmes with the journalistic field, thereby reaching a wide audience. For instance, DPG Media's Campus attracts around 1,500 participants annually.
- **Professional organisations for journalists:** these play a vital role in upholding and enhancing the quality of journalism. They offer programmes aimed at the professional development of journalists. Their educational programmes are accessible to a diverse range of journalists, including freelancers.

A pragmatic selection was made from the organisations within these groups, with the aim of achieving diversity across Flanders and the Netherlands. This diversity encompasses broadcast and newspaper journalism, universities and universities of applied sciences, as well as regional and national coverage. Furthermore, the selection of organisations from the practice group and the professional organisations was based on the educational programmes they offer.

From each selected party, the programme coordinator or the developer of the educational offerings was approached. It is assumed that these individuals possess the expertise regarding the

competencies and knowledge required in professional practice. Additionally, they likely develop the vision for the educational programmes and have insight into the educational offerings they use to compile these programmes. The table below outlines the organisations in the Netherlands and Flanders that participated in the inventory:

	The Netherlands	Flanders
Journalism courses		VU Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
	Leiden University	KU Leuven
	HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht	HOWEST University of Applied Sciences
	Windesheim University of Applied Sciences	AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp
Journalistic practice	NOS	VRT
	DPG Media	
Professional organisations for journalists	Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ)	Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten (VVJ)
	Dutch Local Public Broadcasters Foundation (NLPO)	

2.1.4 Questionnaire

Through an online questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions, organisations were asked whether disinformation was explicitly or only implicitly addressed in the educational programmes they offer and how this is manifested. The aim is to gain insight into whether and how attention is given to increasing awareness of the existence of disinformation, and possibly whether the role of journalism in that polluted information landscape is discussed.

Additionally, we asked which knowledge and skills journalists need to identify, debunk and report on disinformation. To gain an idea of the offerings, we asked them what educational programmes (training sessions, workshops, webinars, etc.) they offer to journalists to work on the skills and knowledge mentioned. The aim with this question is to understand the tools journalists are given to recognise disinformation and whether an action perspective is offered.

The respondents were also asked which teaching materials they used and whether all the materials they needed available were available to them. This specifically refers to whether they experience gaps in the offerings.

We also asked respondents about their perspective regarding the role of journalists in increasing media literacy among the general public, and what they offer to provide journalists with tools to fulfil this role. The answers to the questions on media literacy are discussed separately (4.3).

The questionnaire was adapted slightly for each target audience to align the questions to the respondents' specific fields of practice.

2.2 Survey results: education about disinformation

2.2.1 Journalism courses

The journalism schools in the Netherlands that completed the questionnaire were HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Leiden University and Windesheim University of Applied Sciences. In Flanders, KU Leuven, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen (Howest) and AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp participated in the inventory.

Vision and offerings

The topic of disinformation is covered in all courses, but the extent and manner of implementation vary.

The responses reveal that awareness of disinformation is addressed on all courses. It is discussed in subjects such as 'introduction to journalism,' 'basic journalistic techniques' and various contemplative subjects on the media landscape and media ethics. Other examples mentioned include 'new media,' 'research' and 'journalistic research.' As Carien Touwen of HU summarises: "Obviously, it is a prominent topic in all kinds of discussions about journalism and education. It indirectly appears in all subjects where students have to conduct research or investigation.

Leiden University even offers a full minor on the topic of disinformation: 'Disinformation and Strategic Communication in Global Media.' The learning objectives of this minor include understanding the concepts of disinformation and misinformation, interpreting the significance of (digital) media in creating and spreading disinformation and misinformation, and developing a framework for addressing the issue of disinformation in elections.

Interestingly, fact-checking is mentioned in six out of the seven courses, with five of them specifically offering fact-checking as a subject. One respondent indicated that the 'basic journalistic techniques' course component includes an element on fact-checking.

When asked whether recognising and verifying disinformation is a specific learning objective in the curriculum, there are different responses. Carien Touwen from HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht explained that fact-checking is part of the National Professional and Training Profile of the Netherlands within the competency of news gathering and research, and that all journalism universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands comply with it. Gonnie Eggink from Windesheim also mentions that while verifying the reliability of information is an objective, the same does not apply specifically to recognising disinformation. "We approach it more broadly than just

disinformation.” The answers from both respondents indicate that disinformation is a topic where the role of the journalist (to be) is once again being questioned within courses.

“Anyone in the Netherlands can call themselves a journalist since journalists do not take an oath similar, for instance, to doctors. In other words, the code appeals to the morality compass of journalists, but there are no penalties for ‘violating’ it. I actually think that journalists claim to possess these competencies (of fact-checking) because it is a standard part of their daily routine to verify information. It has become so ingrained in their approach (routine) that they seldom consciously contemplate it anymore. I am specifically referring to news journalism here, not investigative journalism.”

Gonnie Eggink, Lecturer in Journalism Studies and researcher at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences

In the elaboration of learning outcomes, courses can naturally emphasise and thus allocate a more prominent role to fact-checking. In essence, fact-checking is synonymous with the traditional journalistic skill of ‘verification,’ which underpins all journalistic research. However, in today’s era, it has assumed greater significance and demands an increasingly specialised knowledge and skill set.

Carien Touwen, Senior lecturer and international coordinator, School of Journalism Utrecht

At Leiden University, the verification of disinformation takes a central role within the curriculum. Jaap de Jong explains that this emphasis is reflected in the learning objectives. It is integrated into both the minor in Journalism and New Media, specifically in the subjects ‘Introduction to Journalism’ and ‘Science Journalism,’ and the Master’s in Journalism and New Media, in the subject ‘Fact-checking.’ Additionally, it forms part of the Leiden minor ‘Disinformation in a Global Context.’ Michaël Opgenhaffen from KU Leuven emphasises that students should be able to identify claims worthy of fact-checking, conduct thorough verification, and develop these into comprehensive fact-checking articles. Similarly, at VUB, students are given fact-checking assignments.

When asked about the essential knowledge and skills required for recognising, debunking, and reporting disinformation, all programme coordinators emphasised the significance of source assessment. According to them, it is crucial to possess and apply criteria for assessing reliability. This includes the ability to effectively determine the credibility of information and identify trustworthy sources. Four out of seven respondents also highlighted the importance of innovative techniques, such as Open Source Intelligence (OSINT), statistical analysis, fact-checking methodologies, the discovery of fact-checking tools, additional expertise in primary sources, and access to various tools and techniques for image verification.

In the context of recognising disinformation, it is said that having knowledge of society and current affairs is important (HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Leiden University and AP Antwerp). Knowledge of news creation is also mentioned (Windesheim), along with information literacy (Leiden University).

On reporting disinformation, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht emphasises the importance of journalists being able to present arguments and evidence, master knowledge of genres and apply attractive forms of presentation. Additionally, journalists need to know how to reach and engage audiences. The selection of appropriate platforms is also mentioned (HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht). According to KU Leuven, it's crucial for journalists to understand how to effectively disseminate their fact-checks, as "Simple publishing them on a website is no longer sufficient," says Michaël Opgenhaffen. AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp underscores the importance of storytelling skills in this context.

The majority of programmes mention that, apart from relying on the expertise of internal instructors, they also incorporate the knowledge of external experts and agencies in the development of their educational offerings.

Availability of teaching materials

Four out of the seven courses mention that they have ample resources available to provide future journalists with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Some specific examples of materials mentioned, in addition to standard assignments and lectures, include the in-house developed digital information tool [Dipster](#) (Howest), the workshops conducted by Medialab [Quindo](#), a webinar hosted by the Province of West Flanders, games and challenges provided by the OSINT network Bellingcat, and the international EU fact-checking project EJTA (European Journalism Training Association), where courses collaborate in cross-national teams to conduct fact-checks. Six of the seven courses surveyed report that they invite external speakers to provide education related to disinformation.

Two courses express the need for enrichment of their current offerings, including more games, guest lectures, workshops and exercises. Three courses suggest that existing disinformation resources could be better utilised. For example, Gerti Wouters, the curriculum officer for the Journalism course at HOWEST University of Applied Sciences, suggests that the materials could be integrated more systematically into the curriculum. Additionally, Wouter Frateur from AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts Antwerp mentions the need for time to review and implement materials.

2.2.2 Internal training at broadcasters and publishers

In the Netherlands, NOS and DPG Media have completed the questionnaire. In Flanders, VRT has completed the questionnaire. VRT was also contacted by telephone to provide additional oral explanations.

ANP, a Dutch news agency, was not directly approached to complete the survey. However, due to its significant knowledge and experience in information verification, ANP was contacted by phone to gain insights into its professional practices.

Vision and offerings

The questionnaire reveals that the NOS, DPG Media and VRT regularly provide training sessions on the topic of disinformation. For example, DPG Media organises courses for journalists on ‘fake news’ and provides training on image verification techniques. The NOS states that some of their training sessions delve in greater depth into the topics of checking facts and conducting research. They also organise meetings on OSINT (public source research) where colleagues update each other on new developments.

The VRT organises multiple courses for journalists on fact-checking, data analysis and multimedia development. These courses cover the fundamentals of various verification techniques, with a significant focus on image verification. Understanding online platforms and databases is also considered crucial in debunking disinformation. In addition to these workshops and courses, VRT has created a manual for journalists, providing a step-by-step plan for independently verifying claims. According to Luc van Bakel (VRT) and Yordi Dam (ANP), these supportive resources are essential.

“I believe that the average journalist currently lacks sufficient knowledge of social media and OSINT techniques. I am confident that these techniques will become essential skills for journalists in the coming years. This doesn’t require in-depth expertise, but rather a fundamental understanding of how to initiate internet research, for instance. These skills are becoming progressively more critical.”

Luc van Bakel, investigative journalist and VRT fact-checking team editor-in-chief

“I now lose a whole day when things need to be verified. I think a lot of those skills could eventually end up in journalists’ toolboxes as well. Of course, specialists are needed for the difficult things that require expertise or many techniques or tools. My team now does the same as data specialists in editorial, while other colleagues also interpret figures. Therein lies a role for internal education.”

Yordi Dam, Editor-in-Chief of Data and Graphics at ANP

When asked what knowledge and skills are considered important in recognising, debunking and reporting disinformation, the three media organisations emphasised the importance of carefully conducting source research as an essential component. Anouk Tijssen from the NOS adds that

basic journalistic skills also play a role in dealing with disinformation, such as good preparation and probing during interviews. Van Bakel from VRT points to a general current affairs knowledge and digital literacy of journalists: “How do you recognise the source of a photo? What other media can you consult? Who owns certain web pages? These are the questions that are essential for every journalist.” Finally, journalistic organisations talk about applying verification techniques aimed at checking images.

At DPG Media, the programme offerings are determined through discussions with internal managers in so-called ‘needs discussions’. Sometimes trainers contribute suggestions that are taken into account in the development of educational offerings. NOS and VRT say they develop offerings based on external knowledge and agencies in addition to internal speaker knowledge.

Availability of teaching materials

The three organisations have ample resources to provide journalists with the knowledge and skills in the field of disinformation. According to Kris Croonen from DPG Media: “Our total package comprises over 50 different courses. These are not all about disinformation; they are also about ‘technical’ skills.” DPG Media offers training in the form of courses (half or full day) or webinars, during which journalists are provided with useful tools. The NOS states that the focus in training sessions lies on research methods and source research, including how to interpret figures. VRT states that it is not the availability of material, but rather the time and scheduling of journalists that pose the biggest obstacle.

Despite both indicating that they currently have sufficient resources, the NOS and DPG Media see opportunities for further development of internal learning trajectories for journalists. Croonen: “One possibility could be to collaborate with other media groups.” Tijssen writes that a greater focus on source research is conducive to recognising, debunking and reporting disinformation: “A fixed one-day training course on how to thoroughly research your sources would be a good addition, whether it’s images or statements from a politician.”

2.2.3 External training by professional organisations

In the Netherlands, the Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten (NVJ) and Stichting Nederlandse Lokale Publieke Omroepen (NLPO) completed the questionnaire. In Flanders, it was completed by the Vlaamse Vereniging van Journalisten (VVJ).

Vision and offerings

The NLPO and NVJ state that they cover the topic of disinformation in their training sessions for journalists. The NVJ say it gives training sessions on data journalism, investigative journalism and artificial intelligence, where disinformation is discussed among other subjects. The NLPO says that the topic of disinformation has been integrated into its (online) journalism training sessions in a broad sense. According to Michael Wesselink from the NLPO, the topic deserves additional (specific) attention within course offerings.

When asked about the knowledge and skills considered important in recognising, debunking and

reporting disinformation, both organisations mention the significance of basic journalistic skills, including the application of the 5 Ws (*who, what, where, why, when*). Dolf Rogmans from the NVJ also highlights the importance of “knowledge of the new platforms and information flows” as a crucial element in applying these basic skills. The NLPO also considers understanding the creation of disinformation to be an important aspect for journalists to better deal with disinformation.

Availability of teaching materials

None of the organisations indicate that they require additional resources to provide journalists with knowledge and skills about disinformation. The NLPO indicates that more use could be made of existing resources.

2.2.4 Analysis of results: education on disinformation

When analysing the responses from the three groups of respondents, several points become evident:

Disinformation is considered important both in journalism courses and in internal and external training, but the way in which it is addressed varies. Most respondents mention the importance of teaching specific fact-checking techniques related to disinformation, including OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) and image verification, alongside general journalistic skills.

Knowledge about the dissemination of fact-checks and about the actors that spread disinformation and their potential motives are not mentioned often by respondents, with a few exceptions. And while presenting information about disinformation in an attractive manner and effectively disseminating it are addressed, reflection on the role of the journalist in the evolving news ecosystem is not explicitly mentioned. This pertains broadly to the knowledge and skills related to the impact of reporting, such as reporting with integrity and reporting without polarisation.

New media and platforms are mentioned explicitly only twice in the respondents’ answers. For instance, the NVJ regards this knowledge as crucial for journalists to perform their work accurately: “Understanding new platforms and information flows is essential to be able to apply ‘general’ journalistic skills.” In the minor ‘Disinformation in a Global Context’ at Leiden University, students gain insight into how digital media contributes to the creation and dissemination of disinformation. Equipped with this knowledge, students are encouraged to critically evaluate strategies for combating disinformation. Consequently, the course considers knowledge of new platforms to be not only a component of journalism practice but also a means to combat the spread of disinformation.

Several organisations express the necessity for additional resources to enhance the knowledge and skills of both current and future journalists in dealing with disinformation. This need in journalism courses is aimed at enriching the current offerings with, for instance, games, guest lectures, workshops, exercises and techniques. Broadcasters and publishers focus primarily on organisational changes, such as offering fixed one-day training sessions and collaborations with

other media entities. Several parties note that there are sufficient materials, but that these resources are underutilised.

2.3 Survey results: media literacy of news consumers

In the survey, we also asked whether there is a significant role for journalists in increasing the public's media literacy and if so, what kind of skills and knowledge would be needed for that, and whether they are provided with those.

2.3.1 Journalism courses

The surveyed programme coordinators from universities and universities of applied sciences have different views on the possible role of the future journalist in increasing media literacy among the general public. Some indicate that this is not the role of journalists but of the government and education, while others doubt the role of the journalist in this. Leiden University covers media literacy in the minor Disinformation. However, this minor discusses the role of education and governments in increasing media literacy, rather than the role of journalists. Gerti Wouters from Howest indicates that media literacy is covered fragmentarily across various subjects but could be addressed more structurally within the programme.

Three of the seven courses indicate that journalists may indirectly contribute to news consumers' knowledge by being transparent about source use, but that contributing to this media literacy is not a goal in itself within the courses. KU Leuven's Michaël Opgenhaffen, for instance, explains that it is difficult to estimate the impact of newsmakers on news consumers, and therefore no concrete steps are taken within the course.

The types of skills that the courses name to support journalists in the potential role of increasing media literacy among the public can be categorised as follows:

1. Careful journalism practice and transparency. Specific examples include publishing hyperlinks to resources. Transparency in research methods is also mentioned.
2. Regarding disinformation reports. Disinformation can be news in itself, it is written. Checking claims by politicians is also specifically mentioned.
3. Providing clarity and context, such as knowing what audiences need and what they can still learn about.

The latter two points emphasise that students need the skills to deliver this kind of information in an engaging way.

2.3.2 Internal training by broadcasters and publishers

DPG Media and NOS indicate that they do not see increasing media literacy among the general public as a learning objective within their learning programmes. Both Tijssen and Croonen write that increasing public media literacy is achieved by being transparent about source justification and research methods. DPG understands transparency to mean the following: 'Providing good meta-information', 'mentioning uncertainty or doubt about sources', and 'if possible, specifying why certain authorities remain silent or do not provide comments.' Moreover, 'giving opponents a

voice' and 'critically presenting scientific arguments to interviewees' are considered important. Transparency appears to be an important starting point at ANP to encourage readers to critically examine data:

“Data comes from somewhere. We try to explain that well, especially with surveys. But also with things that are registered. Consider, for example, the drop in crime. Then you can say: it’s becoming safer. But you can also say that people are hardly filing reports anymore. We look to see if these nuances exist. What the data says and what it doesn’t say. With figures, I find that transparency is important. We also do this to dispel the idea that people might come to this conclusion themselves and then think that the research is completely off.”

Yordi Dam, Editor-in-Chief of Data and Graphics at ANP

VRT considers the media literacy of the general public to be a direct learning objective within its learning programmes, and this is on the agenda both editorially and internally. According to Van Bakel: “The fact that we are so concerned with media literacy is also because we are a public broadcaster and see that as one of our duties. It is one of our key points to focus even more on media literacy next year.” To contribute to public media literacy, Van Bakel considers ‘simple language’, ‘step-by-step explanation of a story’ and ‘clear source acknowledgment’ important in journalists’ reporting. In addition to these competencies in journalistic storytelling and reporting, VRT also employs various means to make readers, viewers and listeners more media literate. For instance, there are specific videos with tips on recognising disinformation and identity fraud, as well as internet-related issues such as phishing and passwords.

VRT publishes tips on how to recognise disinformation and, together with *KNACK* and *Factcheck.Vlaanderen*, is part of *DeCheckers*, a non-profit organisation that aggregates and distributes fact-checks from the three journalistic organisations. This collaboration primarily takes place on social media by, for example, contributing to public discourse on Twitter with factual information.

2.3.3 External training provided by professional organisations

The professional organisations indicate that they give little or no attention to the role of journalists in increasing media literacy among the general public. Michael Wesselink, for instance, says the following: “Dealing with new media and having knowledge of it is important for everyone, but imparting that knowledge is not a core task of local broadcasters.” However, the NVJ is actively working to integrate this topic into existing learning initiatives by emphasising the role of journalism in society alongside general journalistic skills.

2.3.4 Explanation from a news literacy perspective

Fifi Schwarz, former director of *Nieuws in de klas* [News in the classroom], producer of

Nieuwswijsheid at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, and founder of nieuwswijsheid.nl, has been delving into news literacy for years. We asked her over the phone for further explanation. She believes that while journalists play a role in increasing media literacy among the general population, they should not shoulder this responsibility alone. Instead, she suggests that the emphasis should shift away from the concept of disinformation (“how not to do it”) and towards understanding journalistic processes (“how to do it”):

“When it comes to disinformation, journalists would be wise to shift their focus away from disinformation itself and its precise definition. Refuting inaccurate information presented as fact often primarily draws attention to that inaccurate misinformation. Show readers, viewers and listeners how things really are, and offer background information and explanation. Show how stakeholders try to frame issues.”

Fifi Schwarz, former director of *Nieuws in de klas*, producer of *Nieuwswijsheid* at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, and founder of nieuwswijsheid.nl

Additionally, Schwarz emphasises that journalists can increase news literacy among news consumers by being news literate themselves. “Immerse yourself in your readers. Focus primarily on what they already *know*, rather than what they *find*, and what they do with new information. This involves journalists daring to deviate from what the public supposedly wants to know. Rather than telling people what they want to hear, journalists should present the facts as they are and explain why they are relevant. Furthermore, it is important for journalists to be transparent about the choices they make in their reporting. While journalism is often associated with objectivity, it is essential to recognise that journalists are individuals who select topics and angles based on certain considerations. Acknowledging that reporting is influenced by perspectives is a vital element in increasing both their own news literacy and that of news consumers.”

2.3.5 Analysis results: media literacy of the news consumer

The surveyed programme coordinators hold varying perspectives on the role of journalists in increasing media literacy among the general public, as outlined below. While some argue that it is not the journalist’s responsibility, others, such as NVJ and Howest, would like to dedicate more time and attention to this aspect.

The majority of respondents believe that increasing the public’s media literacy is inherent to following journalistic practices, such as being transparent and conducting thorough source research. Several courses emphasise the importance of increasing the general public’s resilience by examining the journalist’s role in society, addressing disinformation as news, employing fact-checking techniques and thinking about reporting methods. This may involve engaging storytelling and providing additional context. An exception is VRT, which seeks to contribute to the public’s media literacy by offering educational materials to readers, listeners and viewers,

alongside fact-checking and transparent source research.

Increasing the public's media literacy is not currently part of the learning programmes at journalistic organisations.

Chapter 3 | Standout observations and recommendations: the role of BENEDMO

The aim of this report is to explore the role that BENEDMO can play in increasing journalists' knowledge and skills related to disinformation. Chapter 1 offers insights into the contextual factors that influence journalists' work. Chapter 2 provides insight into the vision and approach of various actors involved in the education and continuing education of journalists. Chapter 3 discusses standout observations related to the intersection of these two chapters: areas where the approach may not align completely with the evolving context and the challenges faced by the surveyed actors in this regard.

These are presented on the basis of several standout observations from the data, divided across the three elements of the description of journalists who are adept at dealing with disinformation: they have (1) an awareness of the existence of disinformation, (2) the knowledge and skills to recognise disinformation, and (3) a professional action perspective. Each finding is accompanied by an explanation of how BENEDMO's expertise and objectives can help bridge these gaps. Additionally, three overarching standout observations and findings are shared.

3.1 Findings related to dealing with disinformation

1. Awareness that disinformation exists and what this means for the journalist

Journalists can encounter disinformation through various avenues. The adoption of user-generated content in journalism, while valuable, carries the risk of deliberate disinformation campaigns initiated by actors with malicious intent. Comments and video images on social media can, for instance, serve as initial sources and leads for news stories, enabling journalists to establish new contacts and gather information about specific situations. However, this practice also exposes journalists to disinformation. Consequently, it is important for journalists to be aware of the existence of disinformation and comprehend the strategies used to generate and disseminate it.

The survey of actors involved in journalism practice reveals that internal learning programmes

primarily emphasise the specific skills required to debunk disinformation, while placing far less emphasis on raising awareness of the existence of disinformation and its potential impact on journalistic practice. However, education does tend to focus extensively on disinformation as a phenomenon in itself.

Recommendations:

- **Embed basic knowledge about and reflection on disinformation in verification workshops**

In training sessions for journalists, even when focusing on verification techniques and other skills, it is important to allocate sufficient time to reinforce basic knowledge about the phenomenon of disinformation. This basic knowledge should include topics such as the social consequences of disinformation, potential drivers behind the spread of disinformation, known techniques for generating disinformation, and the mechanisms and strategies employed in disseminating disinformation. BENEDMO gives various workshops and training sessions for journalists and can embed this into the offerings. Additionally, opportunities could be provided for collective reflection on how disinformation impacts the role of journalists.

- **Enrich the network with current scientific research findings**

Scientific research on disinformation is continually evolving and it is important to keep the industry informed of the latest research findings. This may include insights into how online platforms contribute to the spread of disinformation. As a multidisciplinary consortium with a European network, BENEDMO has a clear view of relevant research and experience in translating it for a broader audience. The most important studies can be covered through newsletters, conferences and training sessions.

2. Knowledge and skills to recognise disinformation

While the basic principles of checking sources do not change due to disinformation, the way the 5 Ws (*who, what, where, when, why*) can be answered has evolved. Modern journalists possess digital skills to answer all of these questions. Journalists often work under significant time constraints, requiring them to have efficient and user-friendly tools for easy information verification.

The surveyed actors indicate that they place a strong emphasis on using verification skills in response to disinformation strategies. However, a major challenge arises from the abundance of available tools. Respondents find it challenging to determine which tools are worth their attention and which should be excluded. Programme coordinators also face difficulties in incorporating these tools into training sessions. Journalists have limited time in their daily routines to learn and master numerous tools. Therefore, it remains essential to offer clear and manageable training in this regard.

- **Provide insight into the tools on offer**

Previous research conducted by [BENEDMO](#) examined the tooling needs of fact-checkers, who can be considered pioneers in verifying online information for journalistic productions. Only a small fraction of the available verification tools and techniques are used in practice.

Fact-checkers are unlikely to invest time in mastering a new tool unless there is a strong indication of its effectiveness. Typically, they discover new tools through informal discussions with colleagues. BENEDMO can play a role in facilitating a more structured transfer of these findings. For example, partner Bellingcat has an up-to-date toolkit that provides guidance on the proper use of tools. Additionally, consortium partner VRT is working on a simplified toolkit that supports journalists in choosing tools through a decision tree. Once developed, this toolkit can be made accessible to training courses and journalists. The consortium may also explore whether additional guidance is needed to provide a more comprehensive overview of the tools on offer.

The dissemination of disinformation on the internet has been greatly influenced by the emergence of social media networks. This can be problematic because a significant portion of consumers rely on social media as their primary source of news. Interestingly, in the survey responses, knowledge of social media and an understanding of algorithms are barely mentioned. However, this should receive the necessary attention. In doing so, it is worth remembering that there is a huge variety of platforms that appeal to different audiences and operate in different ways.

- **Transfer knowledge about (alternative) social media**

BENEDMO, in collaboration with associate partners such as Textgain, Bellingcat, Pointer, Nieuwscheckers, Knack, and Factcheck Vlaanderen, possesses extensive knowledge of (alternative) social media. While TikTok and Twitter are often the first social media platforms that come to mind, other platforms like 4Chan, Reddit and Telegram are still often overlooked. The BENEDMO partners have experience in infiltrating, scraping, monitoring and archiving various platforms.

Furthermore, these partners are well-versed in the ethical and legal boundaries associated with journalistic research on social media. The consortium can facilitate the transfer of this knowledge through means such as sharing best practices and initiating practical social media workshops. Additionally, BENEDMO could explore the possibility of creating a comprehensive reference work on social media knowledge.

3. Professional action perspective

In addition to recognising and preventing the unintended spread of disinformation, it can also be relevant for journalists to report on disinformation. For example, training courses often focus on writing fact-checks, and traditional journalistic formats can be used to report on disinformation.

The survey results show that respondents pay attention to how journalists present their information, with a focus on the attractiveness of reporting and reach. However, what is not explicitly mentioned is the potential unintended consequence of reporting on disinformation, namely the risk of fostering scepticism towards reliable sources of information.

One aspect that is explicitly mentioned is the importance of providing transparency about the sources used. Additionally, transparency about methods is an element that fact-checkers have extensive experience with but is less common among journalists. Describing the process of verification and fact-checking can have positive effects on public media literacy and potentially

increase trust in established journalism.¹⁴⁸

- **Share knowledge on effective and transparent reporting on disinformation**

BENEDMO has already published a white paper containing science-based recommendations to enhance the impact of fact-checks and address potential resistance. These findings can be applied to various formats beyond fact-checks. The knowledge has already been shared with fact-checkers and journalists through workshops, webinars and newsletters, and there is potential to expand its reach even further. A second white paper provides insights into achieving greater and more effective reach, especially on social media. These specific tips can also be shared with journalists and fact-checkers. Furthermore, BENEDMO's fact-checking partners maintain transparency about their methods. They describe their verification practices in fact-checks and create explainer videos and manuals to explain their procedures. BENEDMO can play a role in documenting best practices, contributing to discussions about the desired level of transparency in journalism.

The survey results reveal varying perspectives on the role of journalists in increasing media literacy among the public. Some respondents believe it is not a journalist's responsibility, while others consider it part of their role. Furthermore, a distinction can be made between media funded by public sources and other media. For instance, the public broadcaster VRT focuses on increasing media literacy by using simple language, providing step-by-step explanations of a story, and ensuring clear source citations. Additionally, VRT creates video instructions to help readers recognise disinformation.

- **Facilitate conversations on media literacy and the role of the journalist**

There is no consensus on the journalist's role in increasing media literacy. With (associate) partners such as the Media Literacy Network, Mediawijs and various journalistic organisations, BENEDMO has the knowledge and expertise to facilitate discussions on this topic and explore possibilities together with network partners. For example, VRT, ANP and Pointer invest in various 'media literacy projects' and can share their findings.

3.2 Overarching findings

The above recommendations fall within the previously stated objectives: awareness, knowledge and skills, and a professional action perspective. In addition, there are findings that are overarching in nature. These relate to the educational offerings, methodologies, and media professionals in general.

A small proportion of programme coordinators indicate a need for additional materials to teach their students on the subject. A larger proportion feels that there is enough material, but that it is especially difficult to select and implement it. Both groups of respondents mentioned that they frequently invite external speakers.

¹⁴⁸ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation*, pp. 58-59.

- **Provide insight into the available educational offerings**

BENEDMO has built a strong network. A large proportion of network members are involved in developing educational programmes for journalists (current or prospective). BENEDMO can utilise this network to provide a more comprehensive overview of the offerings. For instance, by facilitating knowledge sharing among programme coordinators and summarising their findings in a report. BENEDMO partners also have extensive experience in teaching, conducting workshops and providing training themselves, making them suitable for guest lectures. Additionally, the consortium itself plans to organise a number of workshops and training sessions.

Two of the survey responses mentioned ethics as a subject of the educational programme. The use of digital tools in disinformation research may raise ethical issues. Consider, for example, the use of AI and the updated Code of the Raad voor de Journalistiek [Council for Journalism] regarding this.¹⁴⁹ Another example is the handling of personal data obtained when scraping social media posts.

- **Raise awareness of ethical issues**

BENEDMO regularly addresses ethical issues of this nature. The consortium can play a role in increasing awareness of these ethical concerns, for example, by documenting case studies in newsletters and on the website, as well as incorporating discussions on this topic into network meetings and workshops.

Local journalism plays a crucial role in the media landscape by keeping people informed about local developments, events and issues. These journalists are closely connected to their readers and sources, facilitating the dissemination of information in specific regions or cities.

Regional journalistic organisations often operate with limited budgets, relying on volunteers and inexperienced journalists. This situation underscores the need to enhance the position of local journalists in the evolving media landscape, equip them with tools to address disinformation and raise awareness about their role.

Additionally, freelancers constitute a significant portion of the journalistic workforce in both Flanders and the Netherlands. It is likely that they are not adequately reached through large publishing houses and broadcasters, as these organisations focus primarily on training their permanent employees. Given the substantial presence of freelancers, it is essential to provide them with knowledge and resources to effectively combat disinformation.

- **Reach freelancers and regional journalists**

BENEDMO has previously organised training sessions on verification techniques and disinformation for media professionals. These training sessions can be adapted with

¹⁴⁹ Raad voor de Journalistiek. (undated). *Nieuwe richtlijn over het gebruik van artificiële intelligentie in de journalistiek*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rvdj.be/nieuws/nieuwe-richtlijn-over-het-gebruik-van-artificiele-intelligentie-de-journalistiek>

examples from their working practice and can be tailored to the knowledge and needs of local journalists. For reaching freelance journalists, BENEDMO sees the possibility of seeking collaborations through professional organisations that reach a large group of freelancers. This can be done, for example, by giving guest lectures at their conferences and inspiration days.

3.3 Conclusion

BENEDMO sees many opportunities to strengthen journalists' awareness, knowledge, skills and action perspective on disinformation. The type of role BENEDMO envisions can roughly be divided into three groups: facilitating conversations and knowledge sharing between other partners, organising training sessions and workshops and creating insight. The following nine actions are where BENEDMO may be able to focus its efforts:

1. Embed basic knowledge about and reflection on disinformation in verification workshops
2. Enrich the network with current scientific research findings
3. Provide insight into the tools on offer
4. Transfer knowledge about (alternative) social media
5. Share knowledge on effective reporting on disinformation
6. Facilitate conversations on media literacy and the role of the journalist
7. Provide insight into the available educational offerings
8. Raise awareness of ethical issues
9. Reach freelancers and regional journalists

In the recommendations, suggestions have been made for the role that BENEDMO can take on based on the consortium's expertise. The consortium will have to weigh up where it has the greatest clout and where the greatest impact can be made so that the available resources are allocated for the right priorities.

Appendix | Inventory questionnaire

Vision

- Is disinformation a *subject* within the course/learning programmes? In what way is disinformation addressed?
- Does the course/learning programmes pay attention to the role of (future) journalists in increasing the media literacy of readers, listeners and viewers? In what way is this addressed?
- Is *recognising* and *verifying* disinformation a learning objective of the course?
(*This question was only asked of journalism courses*)

Knowledge and skills

- What *knowledge* and *skills* do you consider important in recognising, debunking and reporting on disinformation?
- What *knowledge* and *skills* do you consider important regarding the role of the (future) journalist in increasing readers' media literacy?

Current offerings

- What *resources* (such as workshops, games, exercises, specific techniques, etc.) are currently offered to strengthen the above skills and knowledge?
- Based on which *sources* or *expertise* are the current offerings based? (such as own teachers/employees, external speakers, agencies, etc.).

Resource inventory

- Are there sufficient *resources* (such as workshops, games, exercises, specific techniques, etc.) to impart the above knowledge and skills?
- What additional *resources* (such as workshops, games, exercises, specific techniques, etc.) does the course/organisation need to impart the above knowledge and skills?
- How much demand is there among your employees for training sessions that cover the above skills? (For example, specific requests, number of participants, etc.)
(*This question was only asked of professional organisations, publishers and broadcasters*)