# Press agencies as fact-checking tools in media education on disinformation. A case study of the TASR in comparison with the APA

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*Quality journalistic work based on strategies for consistent verification of information and external fact-checking activities of media professionals play an important role in suppressing the occurrence and dissemination of disinformation in the online space, and in the recovery of the information ecosystem as part of a wider social space. Therefore, the emerging support initiatives of media institutions, especially key centers of accumulation and distribution of information in the media space related to fact-checking, are significant. Fact-checking is also a special tool for the development of media competences in the process of media education. Media education as a teaching about the me-*

*dia and their phenomena is considered to be one of the core educational mechanisms of "immunization" against fake news, and an activator of the critical approach preventing their occurrence.*

*The focus of this study is to present the results of qualitative-quantitative research, based on the analysis and comparison of two case studies – web platforms of press agencies focused on fact-checking. A particular research intention was to find out how they are becoming a tool of media education on disinformation. This is in line with the core categories of media competence development with an emphasis on the development of critical thinking. A case was the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) in cooperation with the French press agency AFP and their platform Hoax servis, and APA-Faktenchecks of the Austrian press agency.*

*Qualitativ hochwertige journalistische Arbeit, die auf den Strategien der konsequenten Informationsüberprüfung und externen Faktenprüfungsaktivitäten von Medienfachleuten beruht, spielt eine wichtige Rolle bei der Unterdrückung des Auftretens und der Verbreitung von Fake News im Online-Raum. Das gilt gleichfalls für die Sanierung des Informationsökosystems als Teil eines größeren sozialen Raums. Daher sind aufkommende Unterstützungsinitiativen von Medieninstitutionen hinsichtlich Fact-Checking bedeutend, insbesondere von Zentren der Sammlung und Verbreitung von Informationen im Medienraum. Fact-Checking stellt gleichzeitig auch ein besonderes Instrument zur Entwicklung von Medienkompetenz(en) im Prozess der Medienbildung dar. Medienbildung als eine Form des Lernens über Medien und ihre Phänomene gilt als einer der zentralen Bildungsmechanismen der „Immunisierung" gegen Fake News und kann das kritische Handeln des Einzelnen befördern.*

*Der Fokus dieser Studie liegt auf der Präsentation der Ergebnisse einer qualitativ-quantitativen Forschung, basierend auf der Analyse und dem Vergleich von zwei Fallstudien zu Webplattformen von Presseagenturen, die auf Fact-Checking ausgerichtet sind. Die besondere Forschungsintention lag in der Frage, wie diese Plattformen zu einem Instrument des medialen Lernens über Desinformation werden; und dies im Einklang mit den Grundkategorien der Medienkompetenzentwicklung und vor allem der Entwicklung von kritischem Denken. Die untersuchten Plattformen sind „Hoax servis" der slowakischen Presseagentur TASR in Kooperation mit der französischen Presseagentur AFP und „APA-Faktenchecks" der österreichischen Presseagentur APA.*

## 1. Disinformation – media education – fact-checking – interdependencies

Online disinformation, as a type of information disorder (Wardle/Derakhshan 2017), is one of the most threatening for the quality of the media and social space due to its deliberate untruth and harmfulness. According to Communication from the European Commission *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach* COM(2018)236 of 26/04/2018 disinformation is defined as

verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policymaking processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security (European Commission 2018: 3–4).

This type of information takes the form of false context, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content (Wardle/Derakhshan 2017: 20). The problem of such information in the form of circulating fake news or some groups of hoaxes lies in the distortion or manipulation of the very reality as well as the recipient's perception and evaluation of reality. It is particularly problematic due to its potential to inadequately influence people's attitudes and behaviours, and leading them to think and act differently than they would if they were properly informed (Southwell/Thorson/Sheble 2018: 2, in: Guo, Vargo 2018: 3). This has serious consequences for the fulfilment of the fundamental rights of the individual and his/her functioning in support of democratic social processes and, especially in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the threat to the health of citizens.

The extent of the dissemination of such content representing the reduced quality of information online and the extent of its social impact on shaping public opinion in various areas has resulted at the international level in the development of several strategic initiatives and measures aimed at regulating the problem. These include a comprehensive action plan of the European Commission, or its expert group, to address the dissemination and impact of online disinformation in Europe and to ensure the protection of European values and democratic systems. It includes proposals for central strategies and responsible actors in the fight against various types of disinformation (A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation 2018). They attribute the role to the media and

journalists themselves, as well as to the recipients of the media, by developing tools that strengthen their ability to counter disinformation and promote their media and information literacy as a defense (European Commission 2018: 5). Media literacy, or media competence, as an output of media education in relation to deliberately false and harmful information, includes the development of an individual's ability in interaction with media contents, such as:

- sovereign orientation in various written and spoken communications together with the ability to quickly distinguish essential, factual information from "information ballast";

- recognition of hidden meanings, manipulation techniques, inaccurate, incomplete information and statements;

- distinguishing a serious, verified message / statement from a subjective, factless communication (Niklesová 2010: 24).

At the same time, it indicates the ability of an individual to determine the type of media statements offered, to assess their credibility and to evaluate their communication intention, or to associate them with other statements (Mičienka/Jirák 2007: 9). The concept of Media and Information Literacy – MIL emphasizes the need to develop the ability to recognize and distinguish quality journalism from pseudo-journalism (information of dubious quality), the ability to recognize and resist manipulation in connection with disinformation presented as news (Ireton/Posetti et al. 2018: 70). Media education and development of media competence in this area specifically includes:

- knowledge of the media environment and its elements, including those that threaten the functioning of the media ecosystem so that the

individual is able to understand the organizational, economic, political, technical conditions of the media in a wider social (global) context and their impact on the individual or society;

- media evaluation – development of analytical and reflexive-evaluation skills in relation to media content, especially the key ability of critical thinking, which is a prerequisite for judicial and prudent media consumption (Petranová 2013: 468). It includes distinguishing values, ideologies, orientation in value systems mediated by the media and detection of possible manipulative influences (Kačinová 2015: 65).

Fact-checking tools as a pragmatic methodology of journalism, understood at the same time as a strategy supporting the development of an individual's media competence, become special tools for developing an individual's ability to resist fake news (Lotero-Echeverri/Romero-Rodríguez/Pérez- Rodríguez 2018: 296). Strengthening fact-checking capabilities in the traditional meaning of journalistic work concerns internal fact-checking procedures prior to publication, and, in the newer sense, denoting stories that publicly assess the veracity of statements made by politicians, journalists, or other public figures (Graves/Amazeen 2019).

Internal fact-checking, which is the essence of journalism, has a history. According to Graves and Amazeen, as a special editorial practice carried out by specialists, it reflected the growing importance of the duty of accuracy in professional journalism circles as a result of the Progressive Era. In the 1920s, the first fact-checking departments arose in Time magazine and The New Yorker, and the practice later expanded to other American magazines (2019: 3). In the European context, one of the most famous and prestigious fact-checking newsrooms belonged to the German news magazine Der Spiegel. The role of the independent profession of

fact-checkers and verifiers, or even "researchers", has gradually become a routine responsibility of editors and authors.

The practice of external fact-checking is historically linked to "political" fact-checking on the Internet. Organisations specialising in this have been established in several countries around the world since the first websites appeared in the United States in early 2000 (Graves/Amazeen 2019: 1). The first professional political-news platforms included FactCheck.org in 2003 and PolitiFact (awarded the Pulitzer Prize two years after its creation) and The Washington Post's Fact Checker in 2007. Gradually, major news outlets, such as The New York Times, CNN, BBC, Le Monde, O Globo and others, began to conduct the political fact-checking. According to the *Duke Reporters' Lab* in North Carolina, which maintains a database of global fact-checking sites, approximately 353 fact-checking organizations or platforms are active worldwide (Duke Reporters' Lab 2022).

Currently, large hubs are being created in the European context, including external fact-checking activities and research in the given area. An example is the European project CEDMO (*Central European Digital Media Observatory*) based in Prague, co-funded by the European Commission through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). It is focused on identifying, investigating and clarifying the causes and impact of information disorders, especially disinformation in Central Europe, particularly in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. It brings together four universities and one research institute from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland,

five fact-finding organizations (including the French news agency AFP) and one technology company. It is part of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network and is one of eight European research centres on disinformation.

Thus, Internal and External fact-checking are central tools in the context of spreading online disinformation. This is part of overcoming the current crisis of the quality of journalistic practice and the accompanying reduction of the importance and power of the traditional, in particular news, media and servers. Serious work with facts and their verification is a tool for strengthening the quality of media work, thus playing a key role in the need to maintain a good brand and customer confidence (European Commission 2018: 28). External fact-checking re-emphasizes the position of fact-checkers as a journalistic profession, and is therefore a tool to increase its reputation with the audience. As part of the necessary measures to strengthen the work of journalists and the position of journalism, it can be seen as part of actions aimed at re-establishing a new dialogue between journalists and the audience, which helps to restore their confidence (Pérez Tornero et al. 2018: 228). The purpose of the external practice of fact-checking, or verification of information, as a specific service to the public, is to check the extent to which public discourses are or are not conditioned by available facts. In addition to analysing information sources and using other techniques (e. g. data confrontation), fact-checking seeks to provide citizens with more information to understand reality and to make a critical analysis of events. Be-

sides providing data and access to information, members of society are encouraged to make more informed decisions and be less receptive to potential attempts at manipulation by political party leaders, business and other companies or social actors, including media professionals (Echt 2014: 6). Undoubtedly, this also fulfils the educational dimension.

Fact-checking becomes a special tool for developing the key quality of media education – critical thinking, which is necessary to distinguish information from pseudo-information or disinformation. This, in turn, is a tool for the recipient's proactive approach to media disinformation. Critical thinking is associated with a certain degree of scepticism in accepting the truth of media content, that is to say, with a certain healthy, not destructive attitude of doubt. It means, recognizing that "everything can be viewed from different angles and that everything can be interpreted from different starting points" (Nutil 2018: 101). At the same time, however, it is an individual's ability to decide when and to what extent the information is (may be) true, when it is misleading or false, or to reveal the causes and intentions in the background. Critical thinking is a tool that allows you to assess, that is, to confirm or refute the truth of the statements presented and the correctness of the arguments, while the mind acts with a certain "caution" (Moore/ Parker 2009: 3), but at the same time it reaches certainty in judgment. More generally, critical thinking allows for the examination and testing of various circumstances, contextual factors

and connections related to a media communication or its content, and for taking one's own stand (Kačinová 2019: 72–73).

UNESCO (Ireton/Posetti et. al. 2018: 76) recommends in its publication *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation : Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* the approaches of P. Facione and his work *Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*. In this approach, critical thinking involves developing a whole set of core skills:

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| *Interpretation* | Comprehension and expressing the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, criteria. |
| *Analysis* | Identification of intended and actual inferential relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions and other forms of representation intended to express belief, judgment, experience, reasons, information, opinions |
| *Evaluation* | An assessment of the credibility of a statement or other representations which are accounts or descriptions of a person's perception, experience, situation, judgment, belief, or opinion; and to assess the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among statements, descriptions, questions. |
| *Inference* | Identify and provide elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; to form conjectures and hypotheses; to consider relevant information and to educe the consequences flowing from data, statements, principles, evidence, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions. |
| *Explanation* | Ability to present the results of one's own reasoning in a coherent way. This means giving others a complete view of the results in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based, also |

| | |
|---|---|
| | presenting one's reasoning in the form of cogent arguments. |
| *Self-regulation* | Self-consciously to monitor one's cognitive activities, the elements used in these activities and the results educed from the application of one's own analytical and evaluation skills, as well as the assessment of one's own inferential judgments in order to challenge, confirm or correct one's reasoning or one's results. |

*Table 1: Key cognitive skills of critical thinking according to Facione (2013, p. 5–7)*
*(conf. Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction. Peter A. Facione, principle investigator, The California Academic Press, Millbrae, CA, 1990).*

These are key qualities in our research topic as well.

## 2. Press and news agencies and fact-checking

Press and news agencies play a key role in the media sector for searching, processing and making information available. In the broader impact and fulfillment of their public mission, including diverse customer groups and the general public, their offers are subject to quality requirements such as accuracy, objectivity, relevance, fastness and comprehensibility (Agenturjournalismus 2016). The common shared value system of all agencies is a commitment to provide reliable, fact-oriented and impartial news (Vyslozil 2014). In doing so, they create a counterweight to social media coverage, especially the disinformation scene. Within the circular cycle of working with information, they naturally become verifiers of information in accordance with the qualities guaranteed by them, especially in providing external fact-checking services. Currently, the world's major news agencies have fact-check-

ing projects available to the public. These are, for example, AP Fact Check, Reuters Fact Check, Efeverifica, dpa-Faktencheck and others.

The external services of press agencies in the field of fact-checking are based primarily on the guarantee of internal fact-checking. For example, AFP claims that fact-checking has been a core element of its work as a global news agency for more than 180 years (AFP 2021a). At the same time, they rely on professional verification teams specialized in disinformation and interdisciplinary fact-checking, including tools for automatic verification of online content in audiovisual texts. Also in accordance with European recommendations, voluntary partnerships are currently being formed with social media platforms and external fact-checking initiatives (European Commission 2018: 28). Examples of such projects can be found across the media sphere. The fact-checking project of the French AFP, cooperating with Facebook, occupies a special position.

AFP, as the world's third largest agency, has a state subsidy to fulfil its service of providing impartial news in the public interest in France as well as abroad. The fact-checking project in the form of a portal focused on verifying facts and statements was created in response to the spread of online disinformation and false allegations during the campaign before the presidential election in France in 2017 (AFP 2021a). Since then, it has grown into a leading global project available in 24 languages (as of October 16, 2021) for the public and the media. It aims to provide factually verified

conclusions about online circulating information in social media posts, news, videos or public statements. Its activities are provided by a network of fact-checking editors distributed across the continent and a worldwide network of journalists based in Paris, Hong Kong, Washington DC, Johannesburg and Sydney, Manila, Dhaka, Bangkok, Delhi, Seoul. Through regional editors and collaborating journalists, it captures not only global but also partial cultural contexts, including the Slovak one (since February 2020). It is provided by one Slovak fact-checker, a journalist co-operating with 5 foreign editors.

The work of fact-checkers is governed by the principles of journalistic conduct, according to the key principles of the AFP World Agency, the AFP Charter and the IFCN code of principles of Poynter Institute (The International Fact-Checking Network), of which the AFP is a signatory. These commit to accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, independence, integrity, transparency in financing, operation, working methodology as well as procedures for publishing any corrections. The criteria for selecting a post that becomes subject to fact-checking are posts with regard to the breadth of sharing and penetration into the public debate, editorial interest, but also specific thematic connotations. In particular, information or disinformation, potentially endangering the health or lives of citizens, and those damaging democratization processes, violating human rights such as hate speech or racist acts, are subject to verification. As AFP is part of Facebook's third-party fact-checking programme, posts reported by Facebook users as

false are also subject to verification. Confirming a post as false through a special label reduces its accessibility and dissemination on Facebook. As part of this task, the AFP is a Fact-Checking partner of Facebook in 18 European countries (Michalopoulos 2021).

In Slovakia, the application of the project outputs is provided in collaboration with the Slovak press agency TASR, which was the subject of our analysis in comparison with the project of the Austrian press agency APA.

## 3. Methodology

The aim of our qualitative-quantitative research is to analyze and compare two case studies, fact-checking web platforms of news agencies, with a special research intention to find out how they become a tool for media education on disinformation. This is in accordance with the basic categories of the development of media competence and, in particular, critical thinking according to P. Facione (2013). A case was the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) in cooperation with the French press agency AFP and their platform Hoax servis, and APA-Faktenchecks of the Austrian press agency.

The time period was from 29.04 2020 to 31.07.2021, while the beginning of the research corresponds to the date of establishment of the Slovak platform. The basis was the information published on the above platforms and we paid special attention to the following analytical units:

- Objectives of the fact-checking platform,

- Subject and topics of fact-checking in the context of the total number of units verified,

- Structure of factenchecks and derivable methodological procedures and fact-checking tools within media education on disinformation.

# 4. Results

## 4.1 Objectives of the platform

### 4.1.1 TASR/AFP Hoax servis

According to Act No. 308/2008 on the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic, TASR is defined as a "public, national, independent, information institution that provides a service to the public in the field of news" (§ 2). As part of its priority tasks, it is in the public interest to make available and store news information about important events in Slovakia and around the world for the public, including the main Slovak media, which are customers of the agency service. For its service to the public, it has set up an internet news portal *Teraz.sk*, which includes a portal for detecting hoaxes: *Hoax servis*.

The superior and primary goal of the fact-checking project, which is provided in cooperation with the AFP, is the fulfilment of the public interest in connection with the mission and goals of the institution. According to Vladimír Puchala, Director General of TASR:

> The importance of public agencies, which provide verified information based on facts, is growing at this very time of hoaxes and demagoguery. The TASR brand is a guarantee that everyone can rely on the information marked with our abbreviation 'tasr'. On one level, we fight against un-

truth with quality of our sources and information. On the other hand, we also want to be active in detecting hoaxes. The AFP verification program also makes sense for us in the fact that both TASR and AFP are agencies that are subsidized from public funds and perform tasks in the public interest (TASR 2020a).

The platform responds to this need especially during the Covid pandemic. The date of its creation, as well as the specified intention and thematic distribution of posts prove it. The platform is intended to reveal fake news about the coronary crisis and other hoaxes distributed on social networks, websites, platforms worldwide (TASR 2020a), but available mainly among Slovak users.

The destination of products (in the form of identified and marked hoaxes) for its customers has a clear purpose in addition to the general public – the media and journalists who purchase services, but also special target groups of the public in fulfilling the educational purpose of the project. This is proven by the placement of the project as part of the TASR educational project *TASR in each school.* This is a unique project in Slovakia to support the media competence of primary and secondary school pupils and teachers, which has been operated by the Slovak Press Agency since 2009. Within it, TASR makes its news agency service, archives and photo service and other databases available free of charge to schools in Slovakia for non-commercial use. This is for teaching media education, civic education, extracurricular activities, such as the creation of school media, especially school magazines. It also makes available the web portal *skolske.sk*, with a universal content management system, enabling students and teachers to

publish their texts on the portal under the mentoring of TASR. These activities are one of the results of the implementation of the *Concept of Media Education in the Slovak Republic in the context of lifelong learning*. It is a central conceptual document defining the main goals and key actors in the comprehensive implementation of media education in the educational system in Slovakia. At the same time, the intention is to use the TASR Hoax servis within the teaching of the subject *agency journalism* in the study program *mass media studies* at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication of the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. That is, in the training of future media professionals. The course is taught in external cooperation by the director of TASR. It is also expected to be used in the education of mayors of towns and municipalities in Slovakia – *TASR Academy.* Its implementation is therefore part of several levels of school and out-of-school education in Slovakia.

### 4.1.2  APA–Faktencheck

Similar to TASR, APA – Austria Press Agency is "the national press agency and leading information service provider in Austria" (APA 2020a). In contrast, it is a privately organized but equally independent company (from the state, government, political and economic institutions and groups) (APA 2021b). Its basic mission is to provide quality news, information and IT services to the media, political institutions and companies (APA 2021c). APA Faktencheck is a multimedia editorial division of APA. It consists of a team of

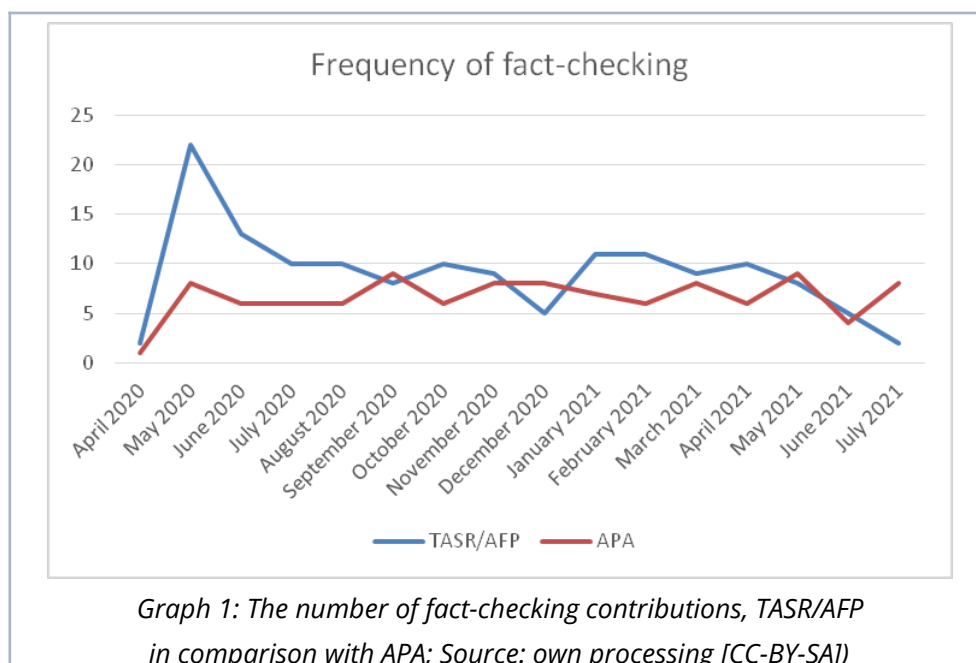fact checkers certified by the "International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) Signatory".

The aim of APA-Faktencheck is to offer reliable assistance in evaluating and assessing controversial information. This is in response to the current problem of insufficient distinguishing of factuality of information concerning both media professionals and private individuals. In the case of journalists in particular, it responds to the need to strengthen their resilience to online disinformation strategies, which, due to technical progress and the growth of distribution channels, pose a particular challenge to their work with information. The project offers independent scrutiny of certain claims and transparent disclosure of the verification process. It is intended to enable readers to form an opinion on complex and controversial topics based on rational approaches and facts. Emphasis on objective facts is perceived as an ideal tool for combating unfounded prejudices and preventing attempts at manipulation. The APA also aims to provide readers with an overview of research methods in the digital age (APA 2020b).

The defined goals, similarly to the Slovak agency, combine public interest and educational intentions, which is implied mainly by expanding knowledge about fact-checking and strategies for critical approach to disinformation among journalists, but also the general public. APA also activates them. It envisages involving the recipients in the work of the platform – through feedback for the

fact-checking team on already verified facts, or proposing topics for fact-checking.
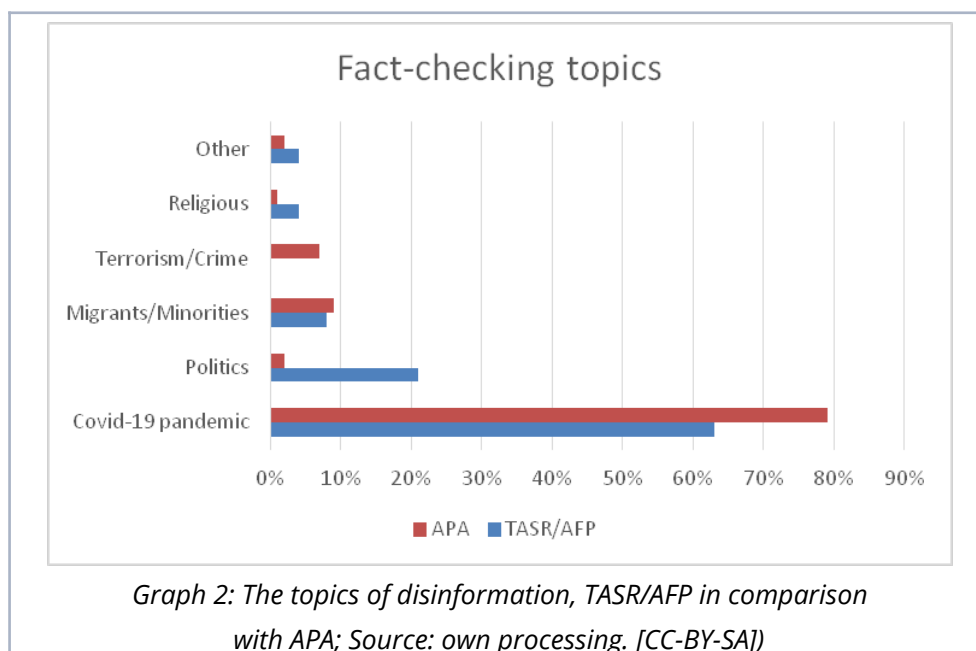
## 4.2  Subject and topics of fact-checking

The total number of published debunked contributions is represented by Graph 1. For the research period of 29.04.2020 – 31.07.2021, there were a total of 145 contributions on the Slovak TASR/AFP platform (8.5 contributions per month) and 106 contributions on the Austrian APA platform (6.2 contributions per month). Although the numbers for APA are lower, it should be noted that in the case of one "factencheck", several mutations tend to accumulate, which carry the controversial information of the "case study". In the case of the Slovak model, it is based almost exclusively on one disseminated contribution of a "case study" hoax.

*Graph 1: The number of fact-checking contributions, TASR/AFP*
*in comparison with APA; Source: own processing [CC-BY-SA])*

In the case of TASR/AFP, the subject of fact-checking are mainly photographs, videos and statements contained in them, or their descriptions, as well as posts / statuses on social networks as hoax carriers or other publicized disinformation. In the case of APA Facebook-Posting, articles from alternative and serious media, viral studies. Compared to the Slovak project, there is less emphasis on the examination of visual disinformation. The APA fact-finding criteria emphasize the breadth of coverage : "it can take place in all thematic areas and in all areas of life relevant to society" (APA 2020b). A certain extent is essential, i. e. that the statement affects the formation of public opinion and the verifiability of the claim.

In terms of identifying specific disinformation topics, the results of the analysis presented in Graph 2 show, in both cases, that those that are inherently thematically related to the Covid-19 pandemic, predominate. This is in line with the objectives of the platforms and the current state of dissemination of disinformation, as the pandemic in particular has brought a massive increase in malicious information. In the case of TASR/AFP, this was over 60 % of contributions, in the case of APA almost 80 %. At the same time, this category was the carrier of other sub-topics. It included disinformation that described the whole pandemic as a fake, mitigating its danger, criticizing the imposed measures (lockdown), including criticism of the actors who pushed for their definition, such as public authorities (government, politicians, hygiene officials) or disinformation expressing protest against these measures. For example, in the form of fabricated protests. In the case of APA in particular, it includes politically tuned fake news about non-compliance with approved anti-covid measures by specific politicians as a form of criticism or pointing out the absurdity of these measures. Furthermore, there are posts denying the effectiveness of testing and vaccination or criticizing their tools, including the dissemination of disinformation about their dangers. It also included false or manipulative posts about wearing protective masks and FFP2 respirators. In the case of TASR/ AFP, the second largest group (21 %) were political disinformation contributions of a national nature, directed against the person and actions of members of selected government political parties (including the President). But also aimed at discrediting the EU

and US and, at the same time, pro-Russian and pro-Putin-oriented, possibly related to US foreign policy (US elections), etc. These are typical narratives of the disinformation scene in Slovakia. In the case of the Austrian news agency, a similar group consisted of contributions from the domestic political scene (2 %). After Covid topics, the most represented topic in the case of APA (9 %), and the third in the case of TASR / AFP (8 %), was disinformation about migrants and minorities. In particular in the context of the refugee crisis and Austria's asylum policy, including the criminalization of refugees / migrants (APA). Moreover, in the case of Slovakia, directed against the Roma minority. The common topic of both platforms was disinformation in connection with the death cause of the Afro-American Georg Floyd in the USA. Disinformation related by its nature to terrorism or crime (such as the London Bridge assassinations in June 2020 or in Austria in November 2020) (APAs) occurred in 7 %. In the case of Slovakia, such contributions were not represented by a separate category. Disinformation with religious themes accounted for 4 % in TASR/ AFP, and 1 % in APA. 4 % of the contributions of the Slovak press agency and 2 % of the Austrian press agency discussed other topics.

*Graph 2: The topics of disinformation, TASR/AFP in comparison*
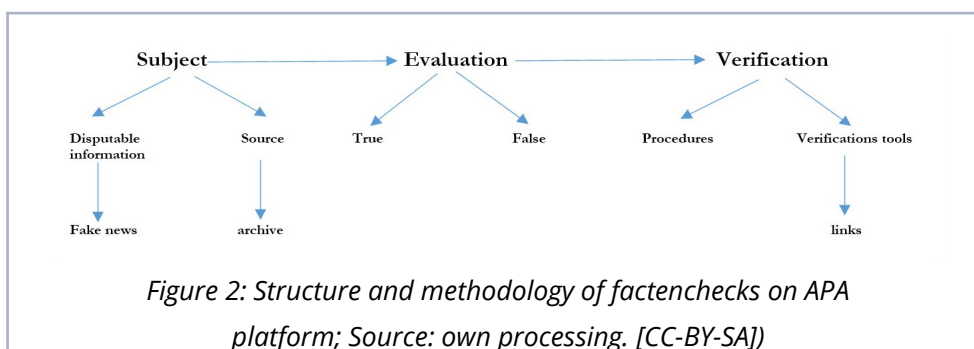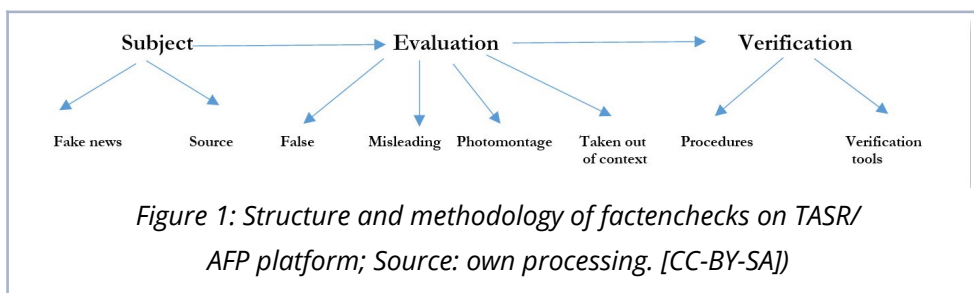*with APA; Source: own processing. [CC-BY-SA])*

## 4.3 Structure of factenchecks and the derivable methodological procedures and fact-checking tools within media education on disinformation

In our research, we focused in particular on the extent to which both analyzed platforms are a tool for the development of evaluative (critical) thinking in relation to online disinformation. The development of the core qualities according to the above-mentioned scheme of P. Facione (2013) is implied in the structure of Faktenchecks of TASR/AFP and APA and is based on the applied methodological procedures and fact-checking tools. In addition, in the case of the APA project, the fact-checking methodology is explained directly on the platform. Its transparency is high, it is also more structured according to the core steps (within the description of each case, the individual steps are marked). In the case of

the TASR/AFP project, the methodological procedures can be clarified through a demonstrated analysis of the structure of the hoaxes themselves, or supplemented by studying the methodology on the French AFP website. From there, some cases contained on the TASR/AFP platform are selected and processed. The TASR/AFP project website itself does not provide information on the applied methodological procedures.

The structure and methodology of factenchecks (information verification) for both platforms can be illustrated and compared as follows:



*Figure 1: Structure and methodology of factenchecks on TASR/*
*AFP platform; Source: own processing. [CC-BY-SA])*



*Figure 2: Structure and methodology of factenchecks on APA*
*platform; Source: own processing. [CC-BY-SA])*

4.3.1 Subject

**TASR/AFP** – The starting point is a description and demonstration (interpretation) of the hoax case, which is marked with the heading *"TASR and AFP draws attention to the hoax".* So that the case can be understood. The source or origin of the doubtful or false claim is identified. As stated above, the TASR/AFP mainly factchecks video posts or photographic posts, with problematic descriptions or statuses spreading on the Internet, social networks (especially Facebook), but also problematic statements of various well-known public figures circulating in the media environment. Especially within alternative Facebook groups and alternative media (in rare cases also in serious media). The sources are identified. However, not in the form of concrete user accounts that spread disinformation, but using general statements and anonymously, for example: "according to the post shared ... ", "private Facebook profile", "Slovak Facebook users", or names of alternative disinformation media and Facebook groups. In rare cases, concrete user accounts are identifiable after a thorough analysis of the photo, documenting the disinformation. In the case of TASR/AFP project, the source of dissemination is sometimes only outlined by general data on the source of occurrence and the degree of virality, for example "More than 6,000 users of the social network Facebook shared a post in October ..." At the same time, this data makes it possible to understand the significance of the topic that is the subject of fact-checking.

**APA** – Controversial information disseminated on social networks, which is the subject of an evaluation, is submitted in such a way as to make the relevance of the choice for fact-checking and the subject matter of the dispute understandable (What who said?). It is interpretation of a fake news case, while almost always the exact sources of dissemination are identified (Where is the information disseminated?). These are also archived. There are links to specific posts (accounts) of social network users (example of Social-Media-Postings), articles of alternative as well as serious media.

### 4.3.2 Evaluation/Inference

**TASR/AFP**

The outcome of the verification process is communicated to the user by marking the post as a hoax (in the title), including marking it with a label as "not true", "misleading", "taken out of context" or "photomontage" (see Figure 1 – hoax demonstration). In rare cases, the label does not appear next to the image, or the general designation "hoax" is used. The evaluation is included at the beginning of the text and in the text in symbiosis with the verification process.

*Figure 3: Hoax demonstration on the TASR/AFP platform. Title: Does the vaccine attract magnets? Not true. Subtitle: COVID-19 vaccines do not cause magnets to be attracted to the injection point.[CC-BY-SA])*

**APA** – users are presented with an evaluation – the result of fact-checking, which should help them in evaluating the truth/falsity of information (news); a verified answer to the questions what is true and what is false and why it is communicated; In the case of false news, the corrective is placed immediately to prevent the news to be unrefuted for a long time. The evaluation is also evident in most cases from the title of the contribution. Within the APA-Faktencheck structure, it is stated in the "Einschätzung" section.

### 4.3.3 Verification

**TASR/AFP** – demonstrates and explains the details of verification procedures and tools in the form of publicly available information and sources (quotes, statements, expert opinions, representatives of reputable institutions), to which references are placed in the text; presents analysis and evidence of case evaluation, which are based on clarification of the facts necessary to make a correct judgment; enables a logical evaluation of the sustainability/unsustainability on the designation of a case as a hoax or false news; the verification process is transparent, but there are no links on which it would be possible to verify the sources and it is necessary to search for them if you are interested.

**APA** – a detailed overview of verification procedures and steps are provided, including sources of the search and clarification what facts are basis of the evaluation; a detailed analysis and comparison of the arguments within the case is presented, data and evidence are demonstrated in a transparent manner in order to be able to consider and draw relevant conclusions or judgments. I. e. confirmation or rebuttal of the assessment of the truthfulness/falsity of the information, including the judgment that it is impossible to absolutely assess the truthfulness/falsity of the information. Thus, at the level of gradation as predominantly correct or predominantly incorrect or not evaluable information, or possible individual evaluation of several parts of the statement (APA 2020b) Verification tools (Quellen) are archived in the form of multiple links to the documentation on which the evaluation is

based. This makes the process more transparent and credible. This process is part of the "Überprüfung" and the APA-Faktencheck structure.

### 4.3.4 Fact-checking tools

Both projects offer traditional journalistic tools for verifying information. In APA project, there are applied the published Faktenchecks rules, in TASR/AFP there is applied the AFP verification methodology and tools explained on the platform https://factcheck.afp.com/ in Methodology section. We selected those that could be identified in the analysis of TASR/AFP and APA fact-checks structures. These are mainly the following tools:

- searching for the origin of a statement or quote – using an online search engine, confrontation with reliable sources (official transcripts, audio-video recordings, checking a person's online account), contacting background sources for first-hand information (TASR/AFP), (e. g. contacting politicians or their spokespersons for an opinion when reviewing policy statements), checking of Social-Media-Postings is problematic (APA)

- confrontation of information with other official and credible sources – in verification of quantitative data – official statistics, original research, etc. (TASR/AFP; APA)

- putting conflicting sources in contrast (APA; TASR/AFP)

- consultation with experts – depending on the nature of the problem, provided by various authorities; (TASR/AFP; APA), for example, journalists of fact-checker team – experts on the topic, region, language, global team of AFP fact-checkers

- cross-checking of information (as a core principle in both cases).

### 4.3.5 Verification of images and videos

The TASR / AFP project, in particular, largely works with a circulating problematic video or photography as the subject of fact-checking. The AFP methods (AFP 2021 b) are the following:

- Reverse image search via Google Chrome; *InVID/We Verify Chrome plugin* (co-authored by the agency) – allows you to cut video into individual images and reverse search for these images; allows you to search Google, Bing (Microsoft), Yandex (Russian search engine), TinEye (as shown, not keywords) and Baidu (Chinese search engine) databases;

- obtaining the original photograph to reveal possible manipulation;

- visual tracking (e. g. signboards on shops, street signs, architecture, vegetation, license plates) to identify the date, time and place of origin of the photograph, e. g. Google Maps, Google StreetView; Yandex Maps

- verification of the connection between the image and the information, e. g. the date of publication and related facts (such as the weather);

Although detailed and explicit information on the APA project procedures is not available on the website, the analysis of the structure shows that similar basic procedures are applied, or it is assumed as these are traditional means of fact-checking of images.

## 5. Discussion

External fact-checking should enable critical analysis of events and provide instructions on how to properly understand the reality that is becoming the subject of manipulation, and fabrication. It also should stimulate the identification and judgment of media

tools of disinformation. Thus, to enable the analysis of the ways, but also the causes of incorrect work with facts, or parading pseudo-facts as truth with which a person is confronted on a daily basis in the social media environment. Learning to distinguish between true and false information disseminated by the media, as well as knowing the background of their creation and distribution, is considered crucial in the context of "Post-factual society" based on post-truth discourse. It is significant in the broad societal context of the occurrence of devaluation of the value of true information. The need to acquire verification skills, as well as a deeper critical insight into the work of serious as well as alternative media, thus reactivates the need for media education. In terms of fulfilling its goals, education for the development of media competences can become an effective tool in the fight against the spread of disinformation, a tool to prevent their negative impact at the individual and community level. From the results of our analysis of web platforms of the Slovak and Austrian press agencies focused on fact-checking, it is clear that the media institutions themselves, which are on the pulse of news dissemination across the media system, can be a good tool for media education.

## 6. Conclusion

The main research objective was to find out how the Slovak press agency TASR in cooperation with the French press agency AFP and their platform *Hoax servis* and the Austrian press agency APA with *APA-Faktenchecks* are becoming a tool for media education

on disinformation. Furthermore, it should be in line with the core categories of the development of media competence and, in particular, critical thinking. In both projects, promotion of the core categories was identified.

A.    At the level of extending the media knowledge:

- are a learning tool to distinguish between true and false information according to the basic categories: sources, facts, news, images/videos and methodological or technological means of verifying them,

- offer insight into the work of fact-checkers – by publishing transparent information on applied procedures and criteria; this is more evident on the APA website; however, in the case of TASR/AFP, this is also clear from the analysis of the contribution structure,

- emphasize the need for rational approaches and objective facts in forming opinions on complex and controversial topics, which is a necessity against unfounded prejudices and attempts at manipulation (explicitly in APA, implicitly in TASR/AFP projects),

B.    At the level of support for critical thinking against media disinformation

Both platforms are a tool for developing the core skills of critical thinking according to the categories: Interpretation, Analysis, Evaluation, Inference, Explanation, Self-regulation (Facione 2013). Greater openness can be identified in the Austrian process. The Faktenchecks submit controversial information for assessment, in some cases with a relatively open result regarding the assessment of truthfulness or falsity. In the Slovak project, also in the intended and declared objectives, it is primarily a matter of providing demonstrable evidence as to why in the case of debunking (verified) news it is a hoax (in various degrees of falsity). The last of the categories of critical thinking, Self-regulation, is contained at the level of perceived quality in the person receiving the con-

tent of the platform. Its anticipated acquisition should be a natural outcome of the working on the verification procedures, contained on the platforms.

## Acknowledgement

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