

Abstract

The focus of this dissertation is on the description of the fact-checking process and methods as implemented on the Demagog.cz portal during the 2018 presidential campaign. Its objective is to evaluate the limits, benefits and specific forms of fact-checking within the context of the Czech Republic because the portal is the only Czech project exclusively focused on this activity.

The research used the methods of ethnomethodologically informed ethnography that allows to study fact-checking in the environment where it is commonly done and to base the research findings on interpretations made by the portal members themselves. Video recordings of the coordinator's computer screen taken during the described activity were also used as research data. In order to clarify those parts of the process that could not be directly observed, the potential of metapragmatic awareness was harnessed by posing additional questions to the coordinator, studying his comments on individual statements and recordings of the communications among project experts that took place in the portal's administrative system. The fact-checking procedure was demonstrated with examples of both published and unpublished statements.

Research has shown that the limits of the fact-checking activities on Demagog.cz reflect the limits of fact-checking as such, for example, with respect to the preference consistently given to the legal interpretation framework resulting in the most unambiguous possible assessment of a statement. It differs from other fact-checking projects in seeking to select all (with specified exceptions) factual statements from a determined political communication and in renouncing any conclusions regarding politicians' motives for making the given statements. In real practice, such assumptions are only partially met, for example only those factual statements are selected that are remarkable for the reader (the selection filters that can be identified for them are similar to those applied within the concept of news values).

The fact-checking on the Demagog.cz portal works on several basic idealizing assumptions – that it is possible to verify almost all political statements from publicly and on-line available sources, trace the primary on-line source to each statement, and extract facts from political communications and cleanse them of the opinion-based components of the communication. A common problem is also the accumulation of several facts in one statement, while the fact to which the evaluation will pay the greatest attention is determined by the project

coordinator. From the research point of view, the most interesting is the category titled as ‘misleading’ that is used to evaluate other aspects of the factual statement than its truthfulness.

The position of fact-checking within the context of the Czech Republic is unique in the role it plays with respect to evaluated politicians, mass media and its readers. In order that he could build independence, its coordinator does not establish any relations with the evaluated politicians. While seeking cooperation with public media, he considers the way how the other mass media work with sources to be insufficient. The presentation of the project on the website shows a number of journalistic features. In addition to this formally conceived official presentation, the project representatives communicate with their main target group informally on Facebook.

In order to define the position of the project even more precisely, the presented work outlined the differences between fact-checking applied on the Demagog.cz portal and other activities aimed at verifying the statements of politicians – projects combating disinformation, investigative journalism, and critical analysis of political ideology. The research has shown that fact-checking serves primarily to improve orientation in the current abundance of information. When combined with the above-described activities, it may promote electoral and political accountability, however it is not in itself a cure against the ills of the current post-truth policy.

The research focused mainly on the project coordinator, therefore it would be beneficial to deepen it by describing the process from the perspective of ordinary verifiers of statements, trainees, and the methodologist who supervises the project in the long term.

Key words

fact-checking, checking of facts, factual statements, political communication, categorization, ethnomethodologically informed ethnography, metapramatic awareness