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Regional Facts Matter: A Comparative Perspective of Sub-State Fact-Checking Initiatives in Europe

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Abstract

After a significant surge of active fact-checking organisations over the past decade, fact-checkers now operate in more than 100 countries. Although the fact-checking movement is diverse, the majority of organisations function at a national level. However, some organisations operate on a sub-state scale, based either on community or geographic region. These fact-checkers investigate statements relevant to specific populations that might otherwise go unaddressed. In Europe, signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network are active in regions with federal or devolved power. This study brings a comparative analysis of regional fact-checkers in Europe, combining qualitative interviews with editors and managers of these organisations with complementary document analysis. Our findings highlight how organisational formats influence fact-checking motivations, the difference in scope between political fact-checking and debunking routines, and the collaborative relations regional fact-checkers maintain with national and international organisations. This article contributes to the debate surrounding the global fact-checking movement by raising awareness of regional and local fact-checking, which helps address so-called fact deserts.

Keywords

boundary work; Europe; fact-checking; journalistic practices; local misinformation; regional media

1. Introduction

Fact-checking, as a specialised practice of assessing the truth of public claims, has grown into a genre more widely practised than ever before. Today, there are more active projects in more countries than ever: an increase from 96 in 37 countries in 2016 to 417 in 108 countries in 2023 (Stencel et al., 2023).

Fact-checking initiatives have adopted similar, transnational practices (Verhoeven et al., 2024), tailored to specific contexts (Lauer, 2024). The field is "related to but distinct from traditional journalism" (Graves & Mantzarlis, 2020, p. 585), and also encompasses civil society practices (Cheruiyot et al., 2019). In line with this, Cherubini and Graves (2016) distinguish two organisational models. In the "newsroom model," fact-checking units are integrated into the existing newsrooms of established media organisations. The second, the "NGO model," includes newly created non-profit organisations dedicated to fact-checking, as well as projects from existing NGOs and universities. These are independent organisations that do not always identify as journalists. Meanwhile, meta-organisations like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) emerged as gatekeepers of the credibility of fact-checking, by developing a Code of Principles, and representing fact-checkers to the outside world (Lauer & Graves, 2024).

Another development is the so-called "debunking turn" (Graves et al., 2023). While fact-checking initially focused primarily on investigating political claims, efforts now predominantly target social media content (T. Van Damme, 2021), with an emphasis on debunking viral hoaxes from anonymous sources.

A final element highlighting the field's diverse nature is the geographical focus of fact-checking. According to Duke Reporter's Lab (Stencel et al., 2023), more organisations are active in multiple countries compared to 2016. Large media agencies, such as Agence France-Presse and non-profits like Africa Check, have expanded the scope of their fact-checking activities. For instance, Africa Check started in South Africa but now also has fact-checkers in Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal. Agence France-Presse is arguably the biggest provider of fact-checks, producing content for more than 80 countries through its partnership with Meta.

Conversely, there are also sub-state fact-checking initiatives focusing only on a part of a country. Based on either community or geographic region, such initiatives investigate statements that are relevant for a specific population. Examples include NewsMeter, which fact-checks in the Indian regions of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, while Décrypteurs in Canada and El Detector in the USA focus on French and Spanish language communities, respectively.

The geographical scope is important for studying the profession of fact-checking, as previous research indicates that political and media spheres shape how the transnational practice of fact-checking adapts to different places in the world (Lauer, 2024). Amazeen (2020) found that the number of active fact-checkers is associated with highly democratic regimes. Fact-checking is often a response to political and journalistic failures in such countries. Moreover, the degree of journalistic professionalism in a country predicts a higher use of source transparency by fact-checkers (Humprecht, 2020). The diversity of the media landscape also matters. In diverse media systems, new organisations take a complementary role, whereas organisations in less diverse landscapes tend to adopt leading roles (Cheruiyot et al., 2019). Lastly, technology, such as internet accessibility (Amazeen, 2020), can affect the presence of fact-checking.

This study focuses on such regional fact-checking endeavours in Europe, which, to the best of our knowledge, have not previously appeared in the literature on fact-checking. We examine regional fact-checkers in Europe, where many regions possess varying degrees of devolved power, influencing important decisions that impact citizens' lives. While there are differences in political and media cultures between European countries, there are also many pan-European institutions. Studying the practices of regional fact-checkers is important due to the potential issue of so-called local fact deserts—regions without active fact-checkers, where local authorities face limited accountability for their statements. We explore the

prospects for regional fact-checking in Europe by examining the motivations for fact-checking within regional contexts, funding opportunities, and relationships with other fact-checkers at different geographical levels. This analysis is conducted through a literature review, document analysis, and interviews with existing regional fact-checking initiatives. Our findings suggest that regional fact-checking can complement the transnational fact-checking field. While regional fact-checkers have a unique approach in terms of the scope of their work, they are not significantly different from national fact-checkers in other respects.

2. Fact Deserts

Regional elections and parliaments are often overlooked by national fact-checking organisations. In the past, concerns have arisen over so-called "local fact deserts" (Stencel & Iannucci, 2017). A report by Duke Reporter's Lab (Ryan et al., 2022) found that there are many states in the USA without active fact-checkers. As a result, politicians and officials in these states are rarely held accountable for the accuracy of their statements.

The lack of fact-checkers at a sub-state level is concerning. It can be argued that precisely the local level is particularly prone to misinformation for at least three reasons: Firstly, a decline in local media leaves certain communities without access to local news—a phenomenon known as "news deserts" (Abernathy, 2018); secondly, social media increasingly serve as sources for local news; and thirdly, local authorities often lack the resources to tackle such problems.

In Europe, local media face issues due to greater media centralisation, a more digital information environment, and a low willingness among the public to pay for local news (Verza et al., 2024). The digital transition has not yet compensated for the decline in traditional local media (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018), as social media platforms are often more appealing to advertisers than local media by offering targeted reach (Ardia et al., 2020).

At the same time, we know that social media have become a dominant channel for finding local news (Barclay et al., 2022). Since social media can spread unreliable local news, it leaves communities vulnerable (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022). For example, Barclay et al. (2022) found that community members in the UK often mistrust unverified local news posts on social media, such as rumours circulating in hyperlocal Facebook groups. In the USA, concerns emerged over so-called "pink slime" journalism: websites that mimic traditional local news outlets yet publish highly partisan, often algorithmically generated articles intended to gain traction on social media (Moore et al., 2023).

A report from the European Committee of the Regions (Zamparutti et al., 2022) warns against disinformation at the local level, as it is less frequently addressed in EU disinformation policy. At the same time, regional authorities generally have fewer resources to respond to disinformation compared to the national level. Consequently, the report recommends establishing local networks of fact-checkers. Other researchers have also proposed collaborations between fact-checking organisations and local journalists (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022). This collaboration could benefit fact-checkers, as local journalism tends to be more proximate, trusted, and connected to its audience—qualities that may benefit tackling disinformation (Fernández-Barrero et al., 2024; Park, 2021). In this way, regional and local fact-checkers can assume the role of local watchdogs (d'Haenens et al., 2019) by confronting and holding local elites accountable (Ferracioli et al., 2022). Indeed, evidence suggests that the mere presence of fact-checkers deters politicians and other powerful actors from making unfounded statements (Lim, 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

Since small-scale fact-checking has the potential to overcome local fact deserts, the objective of this study is to focus on the prospects of such regional fact-checking initiatives, considering their motivations, areas of focus, and sustainability. Accordingly, the following research questions will guide this study:

> RQ1: What are the motivations for starting fact-checking at a regional level, and how do they relate to regional political and media contexts?
>
> RQ2: What content is relevant to fact-checking at a regional level?
>
> RQ3: Are regional organisations viable: where do they get funding, and how can they position themselves in the fact-checking field?

3. Case-Selection

3.1. Selection of Regional Fact-Checking Initiatives in Europe

European regions in this study refer to the meso level (see Keating, 2017), situated between the state and local levels. This study looks at active signatories of the IFCN Code of Principles (n.d.) at this regional level, as listed on the IFCN website. We counted 73 organisations based in the continent of Europe that are listed as verified signatories, or in the process of renewal. Only six of them (8%) specifically focus on a particular region within a country. For regions with multiple signatories, the longest-running initiative was selected, which was only the case for Flanders. We further included a region where an organisation was in the process of becoming a verified signatory for the first time. As a result, six European regions with active signatories were identified.

Two initiatives are regional public service media. #Faktenfuchs is the fact-checking unit of BR24, the digital news platform of the Bavarian public broadcaster Bayerische Rundfunk (BR). Faky is the unit of Radio-télévision belge de la Communauté française (RTBF), the public broadcaster for the French-speaking community in Belgium. In Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, the magazine *Knack*, owned by the Roularta Media Group, has a dedicated fact-checking section. All three initiatives fall under the "newsroom model" typology. FactCheckNI (Northern Ireland) and Verificat (Catalonia) are independent non-profits dedicated to fact-checking. Both are clear examples of the "NGO model." The Scottish investigative journalism platform The Ferret has its own Fact Service section. The organisation is more akin to the civic "NGO model," being a not-for-profit cooperative owned by its reader members.

Details of the organisations are summarised in Table 1. The initiatives came into being between 2012 and 2021. *Knack* has the longest track record, followed by FactCheckNI, while Faky is the latest addition. The number of employees involved with fact-check activities, part- or full-time, ranges from two to seven, which is in line with the global median of recognised fact-check initiatives (IFCN, 2024). All organisations publish fact-checks on a regular basis. *Knack* and Verificat are the biggest in terms of employees and fact-check output, publishing an average of four to five fact-checks per week, compared to one by FactCheckNI, Faky, and The Ferret.

The following sections provide background information regarding the political context and media systems in the selected regions.

Table 1. Overview of regional fact-checking initiatives in Europe.

	Parent organisation	Region	Country	Founding year	Organisational model	Employees in fact-checking	Main publication language	Average fact-checks per week (2023)
#Faktenfuchs	BR	Bavaria	Germany	2017	Newsroom: public broadcaster	7	German	2.2
Verificat	—	Catalonia	Spain	2019	NGO model	7	Spanish, Catalan	4.3
Knack Factcheck	Roularta Media Group	Flanders	Belgium	2012	Newsroom: for profit	7	Dutch	5.2
FactCheckNI	—	Northern Ireland	UK	2015	NGO model	2	English	1
The Ferret Fact Service	The Ferret	Scotland	UK	2017	NGO model	2	English	1
Faky	RTBF	Belgian French-speaking Community	Belgium	2021	Newsroom: public broadcaster	5	French	1.2

3.2. Power Devolution

All six regions where the selected organisations operate have a degree of administrative and cultural autonomy. Belgium and Germany have federal systems, whereas Spain and the UK are decentralised states. The six regions have political jurisdiction, interest groups, and a party system that differs from the state level (Fitjar, 2010). However, they vary in terms of wealth, regional identity, and ideological leanings (see Keating & Wilson, 2014).

In Germany's federal state, power is shared between a central government and federal states, Länder, which have a high degree of autonomy (Loughlin et al., 1999, pp. 63–90). Power is divided into centralised federal matters, regional devolved matters, and competing matters between the two levels (Burgess, 2006, pp. 95–97). Länder negotiate their joint interests in the Bundesrat, the legislative body with elected representatives of the 16 states. Belgium has been a federal state since 1993, following multiple constitutional reforms (Burgess, 2006). Power is devoted to three territorial regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), and three language communities (Flemish, French, and German). Regions and communities overlap, but hold distinct powers and governments (Keating, 2007), except in Flanders, where the region and Dutch-language community are merged. Centralised powers are limited to essential state-building matters, such as finance and justice.

In these federal states, power is devolved symmetrically: Regions or communities share the same powers. This is not the case in Spain and the UK. Spain is a decentralised unitary state where 17 autonomous regions and two cities have devolved matters. Devolution is asymmetric, meaning that transferred powers differ between regions. Following the Spanish Constitution of 1978, the "historic nations" with distinct languages,

like Catalonia, have more autonomy (Keating, 2007). The Spanish state can limit devolved powers through framework laws. The UK is considered a union of nations rather than a unitary state (Loughlin et al., 1999), where Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales have had independent legislatures since 1999. As in Spain, power devolution is asymmetric, with each region holding different devolved powers. The Scottish Parliament holds the most extensive powers.

3.3. Media Systems

The way power is devolved also determines the level at which media regulation occurs. German public service media in Germany are entirely decentralised (Verza et al., 2024). Media legislation there is managed by individual federal states, resulting in distinct media laws with inter-state arrangements (Medienstaatsvertrag, 2020), which ensures that media regulation across Germany is not fragmented, and beholds independence. In Belgium, media legislation and public broadcasting are devolved matters for language communities. The Belgian media landscape is entirely split into a French-speaking and Dutch-speaking market. Both language communities have a different duopoly for the newspaper publishers and broadcasting industry (K. Van Damme, 2017).

In Northern Ireland and Scotland, the situation is different, as media regulation remains with the UK parliament (McNair, 2007). The BBC and ITV are UK-wide broadcasters, but have local branches in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, local titles compete with regional editions of UK newspapers (Blain & Hutchison, 2016). According to Ofcom (2024), Scots are particularly interested in news about their own region. Northern Ireland has a mixture of (partisan) local newspapers, UK titles, and press from the Republic of Ireland (Ramsey & McDermott, 2020).

The Catalan media market is rather hybrid, with popular Catalan and Spanish brands, regulated by both Catalan and Spanish media regulators (Alonso, 2016). Regional media, with its own languages and cultures, was a high priority for Catalan reformers during the democratic transformation (Gunther et al., 2000). Financial support for media comes from the region, rather than the state. The most-read newspapers in Catalonia, in print and digital, are a mixture of Spanish and regional publications (López López et al., 2023). Some of the most popular newspapers publish dailies in both Spanish and Catalan.

Table 2 indicates the media system categorisations for the countries involved, based on Hallin and Mancini's (2017) classical typology. Germany's media landscape is categorised under the democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), characterised by a high reach of the press market, significant political parallelism, high regulation, and strong professionalism. Meanwhile, Spain is an example of the polarised pluralistic model, with a low reach of the press, high political parallelism, high regulation, and lower journalistic professionalism.

For Belgium and the UK, the models are less clearly defined. The UK was first categorised within the liberal model, featuring a strong press with a small role of the state. Later analyses (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016) consider the UK media system democratic corporatist like Germany. Media in Belgium were originally classified as democratic corporatist as well, but later moved to the liberal model, after deregulations and less parallelism. A recent analysis (Humprecht, Castro Herrero, et al., 2022), which included aspects of digitalisation, reaffirms the corporatist landscape of Germany and pluralist model of Spain, and places Belgium and the UK in a hybrid cluster between these two ideal types.

While indicative for the regions, it should be noted that these classifications are based at the national level. For instance, the press in Catalonia is stronger than in other Spanish communities, with a wide range of media outlets (Prado, 2015). There can also be differences within linguistically segmented markets, such as Belgium (Bonin et al., 2020). And, for some regions, media boundaries are blurred by a significant penetration of outlets from other countries, such as French news media in Wallonia and Irish media in Northern Ireland.

3.4. Political Context

While the six regions have a distinctive regional party system, the political agendas and the levels of distinctiveness differ. Historically, there have been tensions between German Länder based on geography (north and south) and economy (east and west), but contrary to other countries in this study, Germany is not considered a nationally divided society (Keating, 2007). In Bavaria, the political party landscape is dominated by the Christian Social Union, the sister party of the national Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU), but secessionism is not part of its agenda (Sturm, 2018).

In Belgium, political parties run in distinct language groups, except for one bilingual party. Most French-speaking parties operate in the federal parliament within political families alongside their Flemish counterparts. In Flanders, two major parties are considered separatist. However, secessionism in the Flemish population is limited compared to Scotland and Catalonia (Liñeira & Cetrà, 2015).

The Catalan party system consists of a mixture of both instances of Spanish national parties and a plurality of Catalan nationalist parties. The independence question is a central issue in the Catalan political debate (Keating & Wilson, 2014; Liñeira & Cetrà, 2015). Tensions particularly increased around the contested independence referendum in 2017.

In Northern Ireland, politics are shaped by a divide between nationalists, who seek unification with Ireland, and unionists, who wish to remain part of the UK. The 1998 peace agreement introduced power-sharing (see Lijphart, 1996), requiring the Northern Ireland executive to have majority support from both blocs. Meanwhile, Scotland has a mixture of UK parties, and a well-established independence movement, politically dominated by the Scottish National Party, which campaigned for Scottish independence during the 2014 referendum, ultimately won by the “no” side. Unlike in England and Wales, a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU during the Brexit referendum.

3.5. Concerns About Fake News

To assess levels of concern about fake news, trust in news media, and the use of social media as the primary news source in the selected regions, we used data from the 2024 Digital News Report of the Reuters Institute (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al., 2024). We have summarised the population proportions for these indicators in Table 2. The survey data show different concerns between regions. In Bavaria, the share of the population that is concerned is, similar to the German national average, relatively low, while trust in news is high. Broadcasting media remain a stable source for news consumption, with BR, the parent organisation of #Faktenfuchs, playing an important role (MedienNetzwerk Bayern, n.d.).

Table 2. Proportion of the population concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet, overall trust in news media, and use of social media as the primary news source.

Region	Country	Media system categorisation	Concerned about fake news	Overall trust news media	Social media as the primary news source
Bavaria (*N* = 320)	Germany	Democratic corporatist	43.4% (38.0%—49.0%)	48.0% (42.4%—53.5%)	14.3% (10.5%—18.4%)
Catalonia (*N* = 328)	Spain	Polarised pluralistic	67.9% (62.6%—72.7%)	29.3% (24.5%—34.3%)	25.6% (20.8%—30.6%)
Flanders (*N* = 1171) *	Belgium	Hybrid	45.8% ▼ (42.9%—48.6%)	50.8% ▲ (47.9%—53.7%)	14.7% (12.7%—16.9%)
Northern Ireland (*N* = 50) **	UK	Hybrid	69.5% (56.1%—80.1%)	46.8% (34.5%—60.3%)	19% (9.9%—32%)
Scotland (*N* = 170)	UK	Hybrid	73.1% (66%—79.3%)	31.9% (25%—39.1%)	14.4% (9.7%—21%)
French-speaking community (*N* = 854)*	Belgium	Hybrid	57.4% ▲ (54.1%—60.7%)	35.4% ▼ (32.3%—38.7%)	15.9% (13.6%—18.7%)

Notes: Proportions that differ at < .05 with the rest of the country are indicated with an arrow; * = for Belgian regions, the variable for language is used; ** = low sample size for Northern Ireland (*N* < 100). Source: Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al. (2024).

In Belgium, there are stark differences between the Flemish and the French-speaking communities. Trust in news is lower within the French-speaking community than in Flanders, while concerns about fake news are higher. However, trust in both Flemish and French-speaking public broadcasters remains relatively high (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al., 2024). The French-speaking market experiences a strong penetration of news media from France, especially television (Van Leeckwyck et al., 2017). This can make the French-speaking part susceptible to disinformation originating from France (Alaphilippe & EU DisinfoLab, 2023).

Catalonia particularly stands out. The relatively low trust and high social media usage in Catalonia reflect Spain's political pluralist model (Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020). In Scotland and Northern Ireland, concerns about fake news are also high. Data from Ofcom (2024) indicate that social media consumption is higher in Scotland than in other UK regions. It has been documented that both the Catalan and Scottish independence referendums sparked misinformation on social media (Vicente & DisinfoLab, 2023). The Brexit referendum also exemplified a case in which the Scottish public often felt ill-informed, due to a lack of facts (Baxter & Marcella, 2017). According to the Reuters Institute, the sharing of news stories on social media peaked during these key events (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, et al., 2023). Lastly, in Northern Ireland, digital media in the past decades amplified inflammatory content from dissident unionist and nationalist voices (Young & Reilly, 2015). Initially channelled to fringe websites, these voices later gained traction through social media (Reilly, 2020).

4. Methodology

To answer the research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of the selected fact-checking initiatives. For each organisation, we interviewed two people in an editorial or management

position. Table 3 provides an overview of their positions. The sample is limited due to the small target population. As the research population is very specific, and the sample relatively homogeneous, research suggests that saturation is reached faster in identifying common themes, as they share similar experiences related to the research topic (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017).

Table 3. Overview of interviewees.

	Role participant 1	Role participant 2
#Faktenfuchs	Journalist, former lead	Lead fact-checking
Verificat	Head of projects, co-founder	Head of content, co-founder
Knack Factcheck	Editorial coordinator	Lead fact-checking
FactCheckNI	Editor	Managing director, co-founder
The Ferret Fact Service	Lead fact-checking	Journalist director
Faky	Lead fact-checking	Head of news and sports

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a short topic guide with predefined questions. The primary themes addressed were: (a) the motivations behind establishing a new fact-checking section within an existing organisation or creating a standalone fact-checking entity (RQ1); (b) the content selection process, such as determining what is relevant for their region and readership (RQ2); and (c) organisational aspects, including funding sources, relationships with other fact-checkers, and partnerships (RQ3).

A qualitative descriptive method was used to analyse the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), which emphasises active listening and allows respondents to elaborate on their responses. All interviews were conducted by the first author, whose own background in fact-checking facilitated the interview set-up and interpretation of the data (O'Reilly, 2012). The interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes, were conducted online, and recorded with permission. They were then transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method provides a structured approach to derive meaningful insights from the data while offering sufficient flexibility. The analysis process involved identifying relevant passages, assigning initial codes to segments, refining these codes, and selecting representative quotes that illustrate key findings. Thematic patterns and subthemes were then identified by comparing similarities and differences, and organised into a coherent framework, as presented in the findings section. Additionally, data from the interviews were supplemented by publicly available secondary sources, such as website content, policy reports, and documents from fact-checking and media organisations like the IFCN.

5. Findings

5.1. Motivations to Start Fact-Checking

The non-profits' motivations for starting their fact-checking activities are related to controversial events specific to the region. FactCheckNI was established in 2015, first as part of the NGO Northern Ireland Foundation, later becoming a non-profit organisation on its own. The co-founders conceived the idea as a response to the experiences of the current director's own academic research. Interviews with community workers, regarding young people rioting, revealed that "social media became a real issue." Online rumours and misinformation exacerbated tensions between republican and unionist communities:

> We were being told that paramilitaries and people with nefarious intentions were effectively kind of misleading people on Facebook….And then we had a period of very protracted tensions around parades and protests at that time. So there was a parading issue up in North Belfast and it was being tweeted, like the whole thing was being tweeted. It was based on updates again, people misleading people or indeed just generating kind of heat on them and getting people out in the streets. So myself and my husband were sitting in East Belfast and said what can you do about this? How can you get people to think more critically? (FactCheckNI2)

Elsewhere in the UK, The Ferret started its Fact Service in 2017, following the referenda on Scottish independence (2014) and EU-membership (2016) and online misinformation circulating during these events. They felt there was a gap to be filled in an environment with only partial or partisan coverage of the Scottish context: "A lot of the misinformation and disinformation in Scotland surrounds Scottish independence, and that is barely reported" (TheFerret1).

The co-founders of Verificat noticed a similar gap in Catalonia surrounding the tensions during and after the contested independence referendum in 2017. The organisation was founded two years later, in 2019, anticipating the City Council elections in Barcelona. At the same time, the political organisers of the referendum, considered illegal by the Spanish government, were facing detention. The idea was born to establish a Catalan-specific fact-checking organisation, publishing bilingual fact-checks in Spanish and Catalan:

> The most important element was that the City Council election of Barcelona was coming up at the very same time. So was the political tension. And these elections were funnily interesting in a sense. They were an All Star team of candidates, with really big names….The point is that the big Madrid fact-checkers were covering the conflict, you know, more on the side of daily disinformation, especially when there was a lot of unrest in the streets….But like political fact-checking that specialised on Catalan politics was not there. (Verificat1)

Thus, fact-checkers of the NGO model wanted to fill the gap for region-specific, non-partisan reporting. The foundation of new non-profits reflects discontent with regional journalism and political discourse as a motivation to start fact-checking (Amazeen, 2019). Such initiatives understand fact-checking as a more civic resource (Lauer, 2024, p. 118), which is also expressed in the extensive training programs that FactCheckNI and Verificat provide in addition to their fact-checking work.

The situations for fact-checking organisations in Belgium and Bavaria, regarding setting up their fact-checking units, are different. The reasons are, in the words of the lead fact-checking of *Knack*, more "mundane," coming down to "a management decision" (Faktenfuchs2), following a more general awareness of the problem of misinformation. Table 4 shows the different motivations and rationales according to the different organisational models, in line with previous research (Graves, 2018; Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020).

BR24 launched #Faktenfuchs in 2017. The fact-checking team in part emerged from Factfox, a tool developed for a hackathon, for the newsroom to have easy access to answers to frequently asked questions and then to react in online communities. They note that their newsroom felt the need to react to events like the US elections of 2016, and were looking for a way to respond: "BR kind of thought 'OK, we have to react before it happens here, we have to get in touch with people who might believe in disinformation, at least encounter disinformation'" (Faktenfuchs1).

Table 4. The causes and rationales of fact-checkers by organisation type.

	Cause	Objective	Rationale
NGO model	Events surrounded by misinformation: local elections (Verificat), independence referenda (Verificat, The Ferret), Brexit referendum (The Ferret, FactCheckNI), protests, communal tensions (FactCheckNI, Verificat)	Feed public discourse with factual information, stimulate critical thinking	Peace-building (FactCheckNI), fill gap in non-partisan region-specific reporting (Verificat, The Ferret)
Newsroom model	Organisational reshuffle, growing awareness of problems related to misinformation (#Faktenfuchs, Faky), inspiration from other media (*Knack*)	Feed public discourse with factual information, stimulate critical thinking	Duty of public media (#Faktenfuchs, Faky), democracy-building (*Knack*)

At RTBF, the realisation of "large information manufacturing plants or troll factories" (RTBF2) led the board to launch their fact-checking project Faky. First, the idea was to create a platform to share fact-checks from all the French-speaking media in Belgium, but it eventually resulted in their own fact-checking section at the RTBF news site. Fact-checking is one of the achievements put forward in the contract that the broadcaster has with The government of the French Community: "Fact-checking is written in the document, so this is something we need to do (RTBF1)."

Knack has an online fact-checking team since 2019, after it partnered with Meta's third-party fact-checking program. But the magazine has already published a weekly fact-check column in print since 2012:

> At the time, there was a reshuffle planned for *Knack* magazine….And so I was asked "of the new things that are going to come here, is there any of that that you would like to do?" And the fact-check section actually came about that way, which was an idea we had then borrowed from elsewhere. (Knack2)

Regional news media see their fact-checking activities as an extension of their journalistic duties and practices. When existing regional media organisations add a fact-checking section to their newsroom, fact-checking at a regional level is a logical outcome. This is not to say that it arises as a matter of course. All organisations stress that it is also a matter of having the right people at the right time. For instance, all German states have their own public broadcaster, but only in Bavaria did the public broadcaster introduce a dedicated fact-checking team. According to #Faktenfuchs "it's a very personal thing, you know, whether you have somebody who pushes that for a broadcaster, if you don't have that, it doesn't happen" (Faktenfuchs1).

5.2. Scope of Fact-Checking Work

5.2.1. Regional Statements vs. Borderless Hoaxes

RQ2 focused on what kind of content is relevant to fact-checking at a regional level. In other words, what makes a fact-check regional? Being a regional unit does not necessarily seem to make a difference in *how*, but rather on *what* gets fact-checked. Most respondents indicate that the boundaries to decide when content

is relevant at a regional level "most of the time is clear" (Faktenfuchs2) or "are obvious if you are familiar with the region" (FactCheckNI1). However, in strategies for choosing topics, we can distinguish three types of fact-checked content related to this scope: political content, hoaxes on social media, and a hybrid of the former two.

The first type of content consists of political speech or statements made by other public figures. Here, fact-checkers investigate statements made by people *from* the region, such as a member of the regional parliament, or *related to* the region, such as a statement about the local economy. For this kind of content, the regional angle is straightforward. A second type of content consists of hoaxes on social media. This concerns more global disinformation, like anti-vax claims or AI-generated photos of Donald Trump. This kind of misinformation can be shared all over the world, and is harder to determine as regional. According to the interviewees, topics with an international angle can also have a regional relevance, as "disinformation doesn't care that much about geographical boundaries" (Knack2). Fact-checkers will investigate such content if they assess that it also circulates among citizens in the regions, for example in local groups on Facebook.

These two types of content reflect the distinction made by Graves et al. (2023) between political fact-checking and debunking. We also identified a third option, where both types overlap. In these cases, an international hoax adapts itself with a regional twist, which makes it relevant to be fact-checked. Such content can have a different loading depending on the region:

> A bit of misinformation might be really linked to the right in the UK but then might be slightly linked to more people on the left in Scotland, just because of the context being different….Recently, a bit of misinformation about [people identifying as cats] was happening at a school in Aberdeen, in Scotland. And you know, so that sort of stuff is obviously like international in some ways, but has Scottish context. (TheFerret1)

All respondents indicate the importance of political fact-checking: "It's our DNA and we believe that our representatives are accountable for what they say" (Verificat2). The reviewed organisations also fact-check content on social media platforms, although to different degrees. The difference between statements made by officials and viral posts on social media not only requires different skills, it also differs in *scope*. While political statements are mostly limited to the regional or national level, viral content has an international, cross-border character, as was the case with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic in 2020 marked a shift towards debunking more global hoaxes, e.g., about vaccines. At its start, #Faktenfuchs concentrated on more everyday topics and "urban legends," with the criterion that it had to be really rooted in Bavaria. That changed during the pandemic: "It was so dominant as a disinformation topic, but it was definitely not regional anymore….We couldn't exclude topics anymore that weren't Bavarian. So we had to broaden our field" (Faktenfuchs1).

At RTBF, the pandemic triggered the start of their dedicated fact-checking section Faky because it "highlighted the fact that we needed…to try to get the right information to people that are more on social media" and "raised awareness among RTBF leaders and also, I think, among political leaders" (RTBF2).

The non-profit organisations also debunked "borderless" misinformation about Covid-19, but for them it was more of a temporary exceptional period, than a permanent shift in their scope. The Ferret "still kept up kind

of quite broad focused looking at different Scottish political issues and stuff like that as well" (TheFerret2). For FactCheckNI the Covids-19 period marked the importance of international fact-checking collaborations, "because we were all fact-checking similar things" (FactCheckNI2).

5.2.2. Language-Bounded Misinformation

In multilingual regions or countries, the distinction between political claims and viral hoaxes manifests itself in yet another way. Here, misinformation on social media seems to be more language-specific. In Belgium, fact-checking political statements might sometimes overlap with the other language community. But when it comes to debunking social media content, it has more in common with neighbouring countries that share the same language. Flemish fact-checkers of *Knack* detect claims from the Netherlands, as "disinformation circulating in the Netherlands that also concerns Flemings will sooner or later also start circulating in Flemish or Belgian Dutch-language Facebook groups. And then it will also come on our radar" (Knack1). For RTBF, on the other hand, there is a link with France. This can also make things complicated, "because French-speaking people on social media, you don't always know if they are French or Belgian" (RTBF1).

Misinformation on social media in Catalonia seems to mainly circulate in Spanish, rarely in Catalan, because "if you're a disinformer, you want to work in Spanish because it's the second most spoken language in the word" (Verificat1). In line with this, Verificat points to a report (Plataforma per la Llengua, 2023) showing that those who speak Catalan as their first language tend to do online searches more in Spanish than in Catalan. Language thus plays a role in the different types of fact-checking content. The kind of content determines the language in which it is shared. In turn, this affects where disinformation comes from, and which audience a fact-check is relevant for.

5.2.3. Audiences

Fact-checking content that circulates beyond borders can also attract audiences beyond borders. FactCheckNI has seen some articles reaching readers in the US, Verificat in Latin America, and RTBF in French-speaking African countries. On the other hand, #Faktenfuchs reaches a specific Bavarian audience, which might be a reason to fact-check something that is already being investigated by national organisations.

Fact-checking organisations have been trying out and developing new formats to present their fact-checks, and ways to engage with the public. FactCheckNI, for instance, shares visuals on their social media channels showing the claim and the fact-check's verdict. Fact-checks from *Knack*, RTBF, and other fact-checkers in Belgium, are collected and disseminated by deCheckers, a non-profit organisation that is founded by *Knack*'s fact-check lead. deCheckers tracks down misinformation on social media, and responds to such posts with relevant fact-checks. They also have a WhatsApp tip line by which users can ask questions or send suggestions, which deCheckers passes on to Belgian fact-checking outlets.

From its start, Faktenfuchs has been using BR's social listening tool to monitor online information that is trending in the region: "We train the program to only look topics that people in Bavaria are discussing. Basically, we do that by feeding the tool with the towns and villages and regions in Bavaria and with Bavarian politicians and so on" (Faktenfuchs1). Its fact-checks are also disseminated by BR's other channels, like radio.

Verificat collaborates with regional newspapers that publish their fact-checks and data stories. The organisation is also the Spanish coordinator of the Teen Fact-Checking Network, in which high school students actively participate in their newsroom. Lastly, The Ferret has its podcast "For Fact Sake" which dives into fact-checks, disinformation stories, and feature interviews with fact-checkers from other organisations.

5.3. Funding and Collaborations

5.3.1. Sources of Funding

RQ3 examined whether regional initiatives are viable in terms of funding and their position in the international fact-checking landscape. Based on the interviews and analyses of available material, four different forms of funding can be distinguished: (a) direct government donations, (b) public or private grants, (c) partnership with Meta, and (d) subscriptions.

As public broadcasters, RTBF and BR are financed by the regional governments through licence fees. The general news budgets are also the resources for their fact-checking work. This can be considered a sustainable funding source, although budgets can change by government reforms, and can restrict access to other funding. BR is not allowed to receive external funding. RTBF also has a small additional project-related budget.

The most common sources are public or private grants, especially non-profit organisations that rely on this funding source. Verificat receives funding from several private and public institutions for their fact-checking activities. In addition, they offer consulting work and write for other Catalan media. To apply for funding in Northern Ireland's context, FactCheckNI positions itself on its peace-focused work, receiving funds for cross-community building, including a fund from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. Finding grants can be challenging, as it often relies on projects that are limited in time, which requires organisations to find new grants on a regular basis. A possible advantage for regional organisations is that grants can be found on multiple levels: "We so far managed to get funding pretty well, both from the regional side and the European level. We don't work at state level, but there's not much funding work in Spain anyway" (Verificat1). On the other hand, Verificat and The Ferret mention the presence of "bigger brothers" in their country, i.e., established fact-checking organisations in Spain and the UK that operate at a national level. This reduces the need for funders to invest in regional organisations:

> If you're a big company or a big foundation and you want to work and have visibility and you're working with disinformation in Spain, you'd rather go with Newtral and Maldita because they have much bigger audiences and community. (Verificat1)

Only FactCheckNI and *Knack* are part of Meta's external Fact-Checking Program. At the time Meta was expanding the program, they were the only verified signatories of IFCN of the six initiatives we spoke to. Meta was not specifically looking to include regional initiatives, but rather "wanted to cover the geographical map a bit" (Knack2). By now, all languages of the six regions, including Catalan, are covered by other organisations in Meta's program.

Meta's partnership constitutes the main part of the fact-checking budget of *Knack*. *Knack*'s owner Roularta Media Group receives the partnership's funds, and in turn, pays *Knack*'s fact-checking work. But their fact-checking work is not paid directly from that budget. It also includes government funding and Roularta's general turnover. The partnership is a relatively sustainable funding source, but there are concerns expressed by *Knack* that if Meta stops their program, their fact-checking section might fade out. Another disadvantage is that it limits the content of fact-checks, as no political content is allowed. For FactCheckNI, that is the reason that they keep their input for Meta minimal: "They don't allow us to do political speech, and I would say 90% of our work is political speech. So it's very hard for us" (FactCheckNI2).

Finally, The Ferret Fact Service is funded by a mix of funding from philanthropic grants, from contributions to other media, and from membership fees. As a cooperative, members pay to become part owners, which gives them a consulting role and the right to appoint board members. They also get access to all the investigative journalism without the paywall. But paywalls are not used for fact-checks. They are freely accessible to the public, which "is one of the standards for fact-checking of the IFCN" (TheFerret2).

5.3.2. Relations With Other Fact-Checkers

All selected initiatives maintain contact with other fact-checkers in their country and beyond. However, the extent of partnerships between organisations varies. *Knack* and Verificat, the largest organisations in terms of fact-check output, seem to be more involved in international fact-checking projects and explore various ways to enhance the impact of their work. In Spain, for example, fact-checkers collaborate to fact-check general elections:

> We've been working with all of them on different projects and we're in a very good relationship with all of them. I think we're also liking this situation. We don't really compete in the same space and that makes a lot of sense, actually trying to do things together. (Verificat1)

Likewise, various media and fact-checking organisations from Belgium and the Netherlands collaborated to fact-check campaigns ahead of the June 2024 elections. However, both organisations see no need for a formal merger between French- and Dutch-speaking fact-checkers.

Other organisations are less involved in formal partnerships but maintain informal relations with other fact-checkers. In Germany, fact-checkers hold bi-monthly meetings online to discuss shared issues, "like hate mail we receive, about dealing with AI-generated content. It's more on a meta-level" (Faktenfuchs2). The Ferret and FactCheckNI also consulted existing organisations before launching their own fact-checking services, and noted that they have a sort of unwritten agreement with UK-wide fact-checkers who do not often fact-check content specific to Scotland and Northern Ireland. FactCheckNI is also in contact with fact-checkers from the Republic of Ireland and anticipates cross-border fact-checks on the debates related to a possible referendum on Irish reunification:

> We don't need another Brexit, we don't need another ill-informed debate….Everybody's claiming there's going to be a referendum in the next 10 years. So yeah, I think that we need to steel up or toughen up for that one….Misinformation doesn't stop at the border and you have this now real creeping of you know issues of migrants and all in Dublin and that's been reflected in discourse in the North. (FactCheckNI2)

The fact-checking movement is generally regarded as an international movement open for inter-organisational collaborations and learning through practice (Brookes & Waller, 2023). Alongside the aforementioned IFCN, the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), founded in 2022, serves a similar meta-institutional role at the European level. There are also local hubs of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), launched by the European Commission, that enable fact-checkers to collaborate with each other and with other relevant stakeholders. Table 5 shows that network membership varies between organisations.

Table 5. Overview of membership for different international fact-checking networks.

	IFCN signatory	EFCSN signatory	Part of EDMO network
#Faktenfuchs	Yes	No	No
Verificat	Yes	Yes	Yes
Knack Factcheck	Yes	Yes	Yes
FactCheckNI	Yes	Yes	N/A
The Ferret Fact Service	Yes	Expressed interest	N/A
Faky	Expressed interest	Expressed interest	Yes

#Faktenfuchs and RTBF also work together with other public broadcasters on fact-checking via the European Broadcasting Union. And The Ferret regularly invites international fact-checkers to appear in its podcast. These international gatherings are seen as invaluable for fact-checkers. However, some participants noted that smaller organisations find it challenging to attend due to limited resources and staffing.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides a comparative perspective from six fact-checking initiatives operating in six different regions in Europe. The study explores the prospects of fact-checking at a smaller scale level, and builds on existing literature regarding the profession, adding an angle that goes beyond state or interstate levels.

Although regional fact-checking in Europe is rare, it is not a new phenomenon. The organisations examined in this study have been active for between three and 12 years, successfully positioning themselves as established players within a transnational fact-checking landscape. This study indicates that fact-checking at a regional scale does not require different practices, attitudes, or skills compared to national-level fact-checking. Regional fact-checkers adhere to the same international standards and maintain both informal relationships and formal partnerships with national and international organisations. This suggests that the presence of multiple fact-checkers within a single country does not create competition, but rather complements each other. Funding can be challenging, but this is not unique to regional initiatives. According to an annual survey of the IFCN, securing funds to sustain operations is a widespread issue for fact-checkers (IFCN, 2024). In this regard, the organisational differences—between the NGO models and Newsroom models—seem to outweigh the regional aspect. However, regional fact-checking differs in terms of the scope of its content, which must be locally relevant, ranging from political speech in the region to hoaxes circulating in local social media networks.

While the sample size limits the ability to make broad generalisations, the findings echo those of Stalph et al. (2023) on local and regional data journalism in Germany. Indeed, data journalism and fact-checking share similarities in how they challenge traditional journalistic boundaries by embracing broader civic objectives

(Cheruiyot et al., 2019). In this sense, fact-checking aligns with certain aspects of local journalism that audiences value (Meijer, 2020), such as addressing topics of local significance, fostering regional awareness, and engaging with audiences. If local news deserts continue to expand in Europe—resulting in further declines in the quality and quantity of local news, and with social media becoming primary sources of local information (Verza et al., 2024)—it seems likely that the NGO model will emerge as the dominant model for new regional fact-checking initiatives. This is particularly true in regions with polarised political and media systems, where new initiatives could arise to fill the void left by a lack of reliable, region-specific information. Indeed, this was an important driver for the non-profit organisations interviewed. However, addressing the gap left by traditional local media does not happen automatically (d'Haenens et al., 2019), factors such as having the right people at the right time are equally crucial.

The goals of the fact-checking organisations studied indicate a democracy-building approach (Amazeen, 2020). However, assessing the actual impact of such regional initiatives on local communities and political accountability is beyond the scope of this study. Research has shown that fact-checking positively influences the accuracy of statements made by politicians (Lim, 2018) and can help reduce polarisation (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). Yet, others have noted that fact-checking sometimes risks taking a confirmatory role, where its findings reinforce beliefs already held rather than challenging political elites (Steensen et al., 2024). Further research might explore how fact-checking can effectively act as a local watchdog. For example, by replicating Nyhan and Reifler's (2015) experiment in other, regional contexts.

On a broader scale, previous research by Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst (2020) examined the relationship between different media systems and the level of resilience to misinformation. Countries with a polarised pluralist model tend to be less resilient due to high levels of societal polarisation, populist communication, and reliance on social media for news consumption. Since these factors may vary across regions within a single country, future research could delve deeper into the differences in media systems at the regional level, particularly in relation to online misinformation.

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In the past, one of the authors has worked as an intern for FactCheckNI, and has written articles for *Knack* as a freelance journalist.

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