

FACT-CHECKING IN A POLARIZED WORLD

With the speed at which information is circulating, disinformation is bound to change our lives in profound ways. Although some may seem harmless, every time a piece of false information touches someone, it leaves an impact. Dedicated and independent fact-checking organizations have been trying to reverse this negative trend to create value, and fight information disorder as a whole. These platforms are determined to explain that accurate information is accessible by anyone, and that no one needs to become an authority. However, organizations that do not agree with this idea can quickly become a target, especially in polarized societies. The only thing that can save us from being targeted is to provide transparency by engaging with our community and creating an impact on society.

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While stuck in Saturday traffic, I had a conversation with a taxi driver, hardly hearing each other through transparent tarpaulin due to COVID-19 measures. The conversation reminded me why we need to fight misinformation, and how it can affect people's lives. While talking about the challenges of the pandemic, he said, "I drink lots of water every day. The virus remains in the throat for 3-4 days, and the doctor told me that if I drink plenty of water, the virus will pass into the stomach and be expelled from the body." This was one of the first claims that we analyzed and fact-checked after the official announcement of the first coronavirus case in Turkey. But obviously, this claim has still been affecting people's lives. It has become kind of a "zombie" content that pops up every once in a while, and cannot be "killed" by any means. Then, the topic of the conversation switched to the so-called most powerful families who "control the world", namely the conspiracy theories which are fueled by our cognitive biases and psychological vulnerabilities. It appeared that the taxi driver believed these families had deliberately spread the virus as part of their grand plans. I am not sure to what extent I was able to change the driver's ideas or replace his ideological predispositions with real facts during our 40-minute chat. However, the conclusion we need to draw from this is clear: Poor critical thinking habits and the lack of media literacy in Turkey are both real concerns. The polarization, ideological tendencies, mistrust in news media, and sectoral problems also fuel the information disorder and further reveal the seriousness of the problem.

Before Turkey announced its first coronavirus case, Teyit encountered some information on televisions that the virus did not harm people who had Turkish genes, or that kalle-pache soup prevented coronavirus infection. Television, which is still seen as the main source of information, provided a good ground for the spread of misinformation. In parallel with this, according to the results of our online research published in July 2020, television news programs was the top source of misinformation (by 49 percent) stated by participants.¹ The main reason for this result may be that many fake experts were on the screen, leading viewers to question who the "trusted" expert actually was. Astrologers, conspiracy theorists, and doctors, with no expertise in virology, were arguing about the novel coronavirus, failing to care about public health.

The Political Environment Teyit Was Born Into

The infodemic² has generated a flow of misinformation that the whole world needs to figure out. However, to understand the particular issues of misinformation in

¹ Mert Can Yılmaz, "Pandemi Sürecinde Yanlış Bilgi Sorunu: Yanlış Bilgi, Haber Tüketimi ve Teyit Etme Davranışları [The Problem of Misinformation During the Pandemic: Misinformation, News Consumption, and Fact-Checking Behavior]," *Teyit*, July 2020, <https://md.teyit.org/file/arastirma-yanlis-bilgi-haber-tuketimi-teyit-etme-davranislari.pdf>

² An excessive amount of true or misinformation, more precisely a rapid spread of mostly health-related information.

Turkey, it is first necessary to understand its political atmosphere.

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A year before we decided to found Teyit, 500 people had lost their lives due to bombings and explosions in Turkey.³ We were living in big cities, where the security measures taken could not be considered normal. Our traumas were moving from offline to online and vice versa. Messages sent via WhatsApp about places that would be attacked reached us after they circulated among our relatives and their messaging groups. The messages spread panic in the country. Having those false warnings of possible attacks on their minds, people felt anxious walking on the streets. We were also concerned about how misinformation was affecting the lives of innocent individuals. We witnessed a case like this following the Reina nightclub attack during New Year’s celebrations. The photographs of an innocent person, who allegedly attacked the Reina nightclub, were shared on social media and broadcasted on television.⁴ Worst of all, the passport information of another innocent individual, purportedly showing the attacker, was widely shared on the Internet. Another person in Pendik was lynched in the middle of the street because of his likeness to the attacker. The harmful content disseminating online immediately affected our real lives.

Teyit was established particularly to tackle and prevent the spread of misinformation during times of crisis and trauma. While working on Teyit, a coup d’état was attempted in Turkey. This was a clear demonstration of the environment Teyit was born into and what we would be struggling with in the future. Photos and videos presented with false or no context did not just appear on our timelines, but also had an impact on our psychology as well as social values, and affected our political leanings.

After Teyit was established, we strived to prevent people from consuming misinformation during four elections and a referendum. Throughout the elections, we realized that the problem of misinformation began to pervade an increasingly polarized society. Political polarization was deepening with the help of mainstream media,

³ İrem Köker, “Türkiye’deki Saldırıları: 18 Ayda Yaklaşık 500 Kişi Yaşamını Yitirdi [The Attacks in Turkey: Almost 500 Lost Their Lives in 18 Months],” *BBC Türkçe*, 21 December 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-38365351>

⁴ Mehmet Atakan Foça, “Fotoğrafın, Reina Saldırganına Ait Olduğu İddiası Doğru Değil [The Claim That The Photo Belongs to the Reina Attacker Is Not True],” *Teyit*, 23 October 2018, <https://eski.teyit.org/fotografın-reina-saldırganına-ait-olduğu-iddiası-dogru-değil/>

while discussions on social media were widening the gap. Fact-checking platforms like Teyit also attracted attention during these periods, as such times concern the vast majority of society and increase the need for accurate information. During the elections, when emotions take over and campaigns and propaganda increase day by day, with the help of online platforms, digital advertisements, search engines' features, and algorithms, the environment becomes highly vulnerable to disinformation. For instance, while following the 2017 Turkish Constitutional Referendum, we realized different propaganda techniques being used. And we encountered them again during the 2019 Turkish local elections.⁵ We also observed that these techniques evolved, changing forms.

Since 2016, the Turkish army has had five cross-border operations in Syria. While all the aforementioned was happening, another cross-border operation was being carried out. Photos and videos, allegedly from the operations, were shared on the Internet and news channels. We published fact-checks, using online verification tools, and concluded that the photos and videos were presented in a false context. In that period, video games were taken as real and were reported on television channels in Turkey, where they were broadcasted as breaking news.⁶ During the operations, official news sources also did their “own fact-checking”—sharing the correct non-viral photos with false context.⁷ This example had fully demonstrated that fact-checking activities are necessary to keep a political arena in Turkey. This was also the time when we realized fact-checking platforms had to find solutions for impartiality. In these periods, it was very important to convey that images could be shared with false contexts by anyone. Everyone has a part in polluting the information environment.

After the civil war in Syria, four million Syrians had to migrate to our country, one of the most important outcomes of the decisions taken by the Turkish government. During this period, the refugees too had to deal with fake news along with other challenges. Teyit tried to combat misinformation on subjects related to the Syrian refugees and their migration processes.⁸ Political polarization and conflict in Turkey ended with mutual propaganda, where the impact of Syrians' migration to

⁵ Mehmet Atakan Foça, “#Seçim2018 Sahte Haber Karnesi: Kaç İhbar Aldık Kaçını Doğruladık [#Election2018 Fake News Report: How Many Complaints Did We Receive How Many Did We Confirm]?” *Teyit*, 10 July 2018, <https://teyit.org/secim2018-sahte-haber-karnesi-kac-ihbar-aldik-kacini-dogruladik>

⁶ Gülin Çavuş, “Videonun Afrin'deki Operasyondan Sıcak Görüntüleri Gösterdiği İddiası [Claim That the Video Shows Fresh Footage from the Afrin Operation],” *Teyit*, 24 January 2018, <https://teyit.org/videonun-afrindeki-operasyondan-sicak-goruntuleri-gosterdigi-iddiasi>

⁷ “Barış Pınarı Harekatı Aleyhine AA Fotoğrafıyla Manipülasyon Yapma Çabası [Attempt to Manipulate Operation Peace Spring with AA Photo],” *Anadolu Agency*, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/baris-pinari-harekatı-aleyhine-aa-fotografıyla-manipulasyon-yapma-cabasi/0>

⁸ Mehmet Atakan Foça, “Türkiye’de Yaşayan Suriyelilerle İlgili İnternette Yayılan Yanlış Bilgiler [False Information that Spreads on the Internet about Syrians Who Live in Turkey],” *Teyit*, 21 September 2017, <https://teyit.org/turkiyede-yasayan-suriyelilerle-ilgili-internette-yayilan-22-yanlis-bilgi>

Turkey were constantly mentioned in political debates, especially during elections. Incriminating and inaccurate information targeting disadvantaged groups on the Internet has seriously harmed our initial intention to live together. The widespread misinformation online has even turned into physical violence against Syrians.⁹

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Governments’ diplomatic decisions and priorities affect and change the misinformation atmosphere on social media. For example, when a political agenda about Uyghur Turks emerges, photos claiming that the Chinese torture Uyghurs begin to be shared. The spread of false photos and videos is not the only consequence in such cases. When then Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek shared false photos about the Rohingya crisis on his Twitter account, a diplomatic crisis occurred.¹⁰ Şimşek wanted to draw attention to the tragedy in Rakhine with a tweet he shared on 29 August (which he later deleted). He attached four photos to the tweet. The diplomatic decisions of Turkey and its interest in the issue led to the emergence of photos with a false context. In reality, the photos had nothing to do with what was happening in Rakhine. One of the photos was a ferry accident in Myanmar, while the other was of people entering the Lahore Canal to cool off. During diplomatic talks between Myanmar and Turkey, the false photos on the Internet led to Myanmar’s State Counsellor warning about content that creates disinformation.¹¹

Impartiality of Fact Checkers Depends on the Community They Engage With

Between all these conflicts, elections, operations, and the Syrian refugee problem, fact-checkers have expanded their scope of work while trying to stay neutral as fact-checking organizations. The secret of being a fact-checking platform that no one likes but still appreciates is clear: being faithful to one’s principles. There are International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) policies that fact-checking organizations, such as Teyit, are signatories to.¹² Within this framework, there is a badge

⁹ “Ankara’da ‘Tecavüz Söylentisi’ Üzerine Suriyelilere Saldırı: Bir Mülteci Yaralandı [Attack on Syrians over ‘Rape Rumor’: One Refugee Injured],” *Diken*, 4 July 2017, <http://www.diken.com.tr/ankarada-tecavuz-soylentisi-uzerine-suriyelilere-saldiri-bir-multeci-yaralandi/>

¹⁰ Mehmet Atakan Foça, “Diplomaside Yanlış Fotoğraf Krizi: Mehmet Şimşek, Myanmar ve Türkiye [Photo Crisis in Diplomacy: Mehmet Şimşek, Myanmar, and Turkey],” *Teyit*, 30 September 2017, <https://teyit.org/diplomaside-yanlis-fotograf-krizi-mehmet-simsek-myanmar-ve-turkiye>

¹¹ Myanmar State Counsellor Office, “The State Counsellor discussed the issue of Rakhine State with President Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey,” *Facebook*, 5 September 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/state.counsellor/posts/1113877308746484>

¹² “IFCN Code of Principles,” *Poynter*, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org>

renewal process that is conducted by independent auditors every year to ensure that the platforms are still loyal to the principles. Signatory organizations try to deserve this badge every year. The IFCN's information on Teyit is as follows:

This badge confirms Teyit was deemed compliant with the IFCN principles when subjected to the established vetting process and evaluated by external assessors. Through this process, an organization must exhibit a commitment to nonpartisanship and fairness, transparency of sources, transparency of funding and organization, transparency of methodology, and a commitment to open and honest corrections.¹³

To prove its impartiality, the primary value of a fact-checking platform must be transparency. Since its foundation, Teyit, as a social enterprise, has been emphasizing the importance of having an impact-oriented approach. At the top of our long-term plans for this impact-oriented journey, we imagine a world where everybody practices critical thinking skills, is able to think like a fact-checker, and is equipped with the necessary digital tools. What is necessary to achieve this goal, as we always say, is to empower users and make them a part of the journey. The most valuable relationship between a fact-checking organization and its followers is to be able to share the responsibility of investigating and researching with its readers. One of the most frequent questions we are asked is: "Who will check fact-checkers?"¹⁴ The answer is simple: You. Because fact-checking platforms should not dream of becoming an authority, instead, dream to make accurate information available to everyone in a democratic way. This reminds us that fact-checking platforms can make mistakes too, and therefore should have a policy of correction in advance. Thus, fact-checking platforms should recognize that they are not free from being checked, and should further encourage their readers to fact-check along with their own fact-checkers.

How Teyit Works

All information and evidence that Teyit examines and evaluates are obtained from public, accessible, and easily understandable sources. The evidence has to ensure that everyone can reach the same conclusion (e.g., the claim being true or false) by repeating the same steps we take. In the past four years, Teyit has tried different methods to make sources more visible and direct the reader's attention to the original evidence. With the launch of our new website, we finally found a way to display our sources and evidences while increasing their visibility. Furthermore, we are

¹³ "Teyit," *Poynter*, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/profile/teyit>

¹⁴ Mehmet Atakan Foça, "Teyitçiyi Kim Teyit Edecek [Who Will Fact-Check the Fact-Checker]?" *Teyit*, 10 June 2017, <https://teyit.org/teyitciyi-kim-teyit-edecek>

meticulous about transparently sharing the tools and methods we use in our articles as well. We refrain from hiding what we know, and we aim to spread verification methods; these ideals force Teyit to find different ways. For instance, in our latest video series called, “Teyit Yolu”, we try to raise awareness on geolocation tools and applications, such as Google Maps and Marine Traffic. The most important part of our work is to show the methods that help us fact-check.

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Transparency of Selection Criteria

Teyit is also transparent in its selection process of which claims to fact-check. Transparency of the selection criteria is an important factor in maintaining impartiality. Suspicious information to be investigated by editors is not chosen arbitrarily; it is selected based on three criteria: importance, virality, and urgency. For this reason, there is a section called, “Who Shared?”, which reveals the engagement with suspicious information on different social media platforms in Teyit’s every fact-check. Readers can also find the contents that are reviewed by the editors and writers in a separate section called “Open Office” on the website. This method proposed by Teyit has not been practiced by other fact-checking platforms yet, but it is frequently mentioned as an exemplary transparency step. It is extremely crucial for us to be able to share the selection criteria with our followers. If we can show how we choose a claim to analyze, we would be better able to include readers in the process, and show how we work to maintain objectivity. Fact-checkers should not create content for the benefit of any individual or institution. As people need guidance about accessing accurate information, acting in the public interest is a duty of fact-checking platforms. Teyit employees, therefore, cannot be members of any political party or take part in election campaigns. Maintaining neutrality in our work regardless of our worldviews is a necessity.

Financial Transparency

Financial transparency is the second transparency step required to maintain and prove neutrality. Fact-checking organizations must clearly demonstrate their financial resources on their websites and annually display their expenditures in accordance with the IFCN principles. Yet, financial transparency is a difficult step in many countries,

including Turkey. Among the few institutions that are able to achieve financial transparency, we see fact-checking platforms that are all signatories of IFCN. There is always a question mark in the minds of the readers about institutions that cannot clearly demonstrate their income sources. In their ethical values, fact-checking platforms should ensure that the funding institutions and organizations will never have any influence on the content produced. Otherwise, the platform may turn into a propaganda tool for organizations that do not adhere to these principles and want to take advantage of the power of fact-checking.

Editorial Transparency

Editorial transparency is one of the main transparency steps Teyit has determined for itself to realize its dream of transforming readers to fact-checkers. Our editorial process is built on solid methodological foundations. We look for at least two pieces of evidence to qualify suspicious content as true or false. The content is checked afterwards by at least two editors and then forwarded to the chief editor. Although this mechanism prolongs the process, it reveals the reliability of the fact-checking platform. Teyit—and every reliable fact-checking platform—has a responsibility to the reader to ensure that no information is left out, that every clue is taken into consideration, and that the fact-check is finalized appropriately.

Platforms Should Not Determine the Standards of Fact-Checking

The third-party fact-checking program carried out by Facebook is one of the most important developments that fueled the debate about the impartiality of fact-checkers.¹⁵ With this program, Facebook aims to prevent misinformation on its platforms by working together with fact-checking organizations, which are all IFCN signatories. The claims are analyzed, investigated, and fact-checked before the results are posted. Any viral claim or analyzed content on Facebook or Instagram are rated by fact-checking platforms. The publishers are sanctioned if the content is labeled as “false” by fact-checking platforms. The sanctions have serious consequences, such as reduced interaction and distribution and inability to advertise. At this juncture, fact-checking platforms must deal with the process transparently, include all the resources and evidence in their fact-checks, and ensure that they treat everyone equally and impartially.

Technology companies have been increasingly appearing at the center of discussions around US presidential elections. If the problem is misinformation, then technology companies just apply a plaster to the wound. Sometimes, it is the fact-checking

¹⁵ “Facebook’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program,” *Facebook*, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/third-party-fact-checking>

organization's responsibility to rip off the plaster, causing the wound to bleed again in order to heal it appropriately. This makes fact-checkers targets, can block their efforts, and hamper their work. The right strategy for fact-checking platforms would be to benefit from the resources of social media companies. But these platforms, which have prioritized transparency, have some difficulties in collaborating with such companies. Some technology companies are reluctant to share data and do not tend to reveal why some decisions are taken. For this reason, the only way for fact-checkers to maintain their neutrality is to hold on to their methodology and prove that they are working beyond the debates driven by technology companies.

Conclusion

Polarized societies struggle even more in distinguishing false news due to the massive amount of rapidly spreading information. In times like these, any potential negative outcome and damage that disinformation can cause to democracies, economies, and human rights should be taken into consideration. Therefore, fact-checking organizations should embrace transparency as the most fundamental element of their efforts. Financial and editorial transparency, increased engagement with followers, and the capacity to create a community will determine the fate of fact-checking platforms and societies alike.