

# ROCKS OF RELIABILITY: JOURNALIST'S TOOLS FOR TACKLING DISINFORMATION

Skopje  
2023



**Publication title:**

Rocks of Reliability: journalist's tools for tackling disinformation

**Publisher:**

Institute of Communication Studies,  
17-1-1 Jurij Gagarin, Skopje  
[www.iks.edu.mk](http://www.iks.edu.mk)

**Published by:**

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**Edition:**

ResPublica 

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**Editor:**

Associate Professor Zaneta Trajkoska, PhD

**Original title:**

Препознај и спречи: новинарски алатки за справување со дезинформации

**Design:**

Tatjana Koceva-Spirova

**Place and year of publication:**

Skopje, 2023

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# INTRODUCTION

We live in a time when technology has “hijacked” everyday face-to-face communication almost completely. Every individual today can very easily push information because we live in an online world or so-called network society full of media and social networks that make it possible. Disinformation or false information that is spread deliberately or unintentionally has become a growing problem in the media environment brought by the new era.

Various kind of false information is often spread for various reasons, including political, economic, or personal gain. It can be spread through traditional newsrooms, social media and personal blogs. Regardless of the reason or channel, the impact of disinformation can be severe, including damage to democracy. It can cause confusion, undermine trust, and harm indi-

viduals and societies. Therefore, it is essential to have a systematic approach to tackling disinformation. This includes being aware of the sources of information, checking the accuracy and credibility of the information, and spreading accurate information to counter disinformation.

More news is available now than ever before. However, significant amount of people consume no, or a very limited, amount of news. Even amongst those who are regular audience a substantial proportion answer that they sometimes or often avoid news content. Furthermore, studies indicate that news avoidance is growing over time despite an increasing supply of journalism output. News avoidance mainly is a problem for the traditional news media. News organisations need readers, listeners, or viewers to generate advertising revenues,

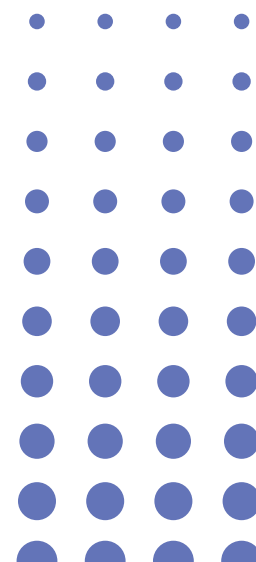


sell subscriptions and maintain their societal relevance. But news avoidance is also a problem for democracy because news consumption has a positive impact on people's knowledge of society and politics as well as on their political engagement and participation.

The future of traditional media will largely depend on whether they succeed in regaining the trust of citizens who are overwhelmed with information. Therefore, it is very important that journalists and their associations work in accordance with ethical standards and values that will enable the audience to distinguish between what is reliable information and what is disinformation. In that direction, it must be noted that although there

is a code for journalists in Macedonia, it should be constantly upgraded to meet the challenges that the new era brings. In addition, work should be done on increasing the quality of the work of journalists and editorial offices, given that in most of them the journalistic code is an unread story.

With this guide that the Institute of Communication Studies prepared within the project Using fact-based journalism to raise awareness and counter disinformation in the media space in North Macedonia, we are trying to contribute to increasing professionalism in media and increasing reliable media content, which is the only way to reduce the negative impact of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation on democracy in our country.



## *Basic Values*

In the age of disinformation it is essential for professional journalism to stick to its basic values. Those values define what makes journalism different from all other forms of publishing media content. Although there is still a debate regarding which are the basic values on which the journalistic profession is founded, there is a consensus that independence, autonomy, objectivity, accuracy, transparency and constructiveness are the key foundations.

### **a. Independence**

Independence is one of the crucial values in journalism and tackling disinformation. It underscores not being influenced by external interests and agendas, such as political or corporate interests. It entails not becoming seduced by sources, intimidated by power, or compromised by self-interest. On a deeper level it speaks to an independence of spirit and an open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity that helps the journalist see beyond his or her own class or socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, gender or ego. Just like having independent judges, having independent journalism is an essential part of democracy.

### **b. Autonomy**

Autonomy is related to independence. Autonomy exists on three distinct analytical levels: first the institutional level, referring to journalism as a whole, being independent from other societal institutions such as the state and the market; second, the individual level, referring to individual journalists having discretionary creative and decision-making power in their own work; and third the organizational level, referring to the workplace level, where individual preferences are frequently mediated by institutional constraints. In general, journalism research has focused mostly on analyzing autonomy on the institutional and individual levels and less on the organizational level.

### **c. Objectivity**

Objectivity is mostly defined as expressing or using facts without distortion by personal beliefs, bias, feelings or prejudice. Journalistic objectivity has been generally understood to mean much the same thing. More recently, objectivity is mainly considered as a method of understanding. This involves having a genuine respect for the facts, consulting multiple sources, asking tough questions, weighing evidence, being open-minded, making the whole process as transparent as possible. Therefore, objectivity explicitly refers to the working method, not to the ambition of being able to present a neutral or viewless outcome of the journalistic process. Objectivity does not entail that fully neutral or viewless perspective should be presented; it explicitly refers to the working method which should be objective.

### **d. Accuracy**

Journalists cannot represent “the” truth, but being accurate and getting the facts right remains a cardinal principle of journalism. Accuracy means presenting information that is true and correct; it is the foundation upon which everything else is built: news, context, interpretation, debate. In tackling disinformation, it is essential to ensure that the presented information is accurate and supported by evidence. This involves fact-checking and verifying the sources of information, as well as openly acknowledging any uncertainties or limitations in the information.

### **e. Transparency**

Transparency entails being open and honest about the journalistic process and any potential conflicts of interest. In tackling disinformation, it is essential to disclose any affiliations or biases that may influence the presented information. It involves openness about sources of information and acknowledging any potential biases or limitations in the information, openness about funding, openness about the method that was used and the key choices that were made, openness about important mistakes or omissions. Transparency is advocated as an effective way to combat disinformation as well as to counter the ongoing decline of trust and credibility in the news media.

### **f. Constructiveness**

Constructiveness means presenting information in a way that is helpful and productive, rather than divisive or harmful. In dealing with disinformation, it is essential to promote constructive discourse and to encourage critical thinking about possible solutions for common problems. Constructive journalism is an approach that aims to provide audiences with a fair, accurate and contextualized picture of the world, without overemphasizing the negative and what is going wrong. It can be seen as a response to polarization, sensationalism and negativity bias.

# 03

## *Standards for reliable journalism*

In the rising sea of disinformation, professional journalism should be a beacon of reliability. Reliable journalism is accurate, trustworthy, unbiased, balanced and pluriform. Reliable journalists are independent and they avoid conflicts of interest; they do not hold public positions, give media advises or have financial interests in other organisations.

In this section the main standards for reliable journalism are identified, in three categories:

- I. Sources,
- II. Presentation,
- III. Post-Production.

### **I Sources**



#### **a. Verification**

Verification is the essence of reliable journalism; respecting the facts and the right of the public to know the truth is its first duty. Therefore:

- All key elements of a story, such as claims from sources, names, dates & places, facts & figures, should always be checked and double-checked.
- Wherever possible, multiple sources should be used and all evidence should be weighed in a transparent and open-minded way.



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## b. Completeness

For reliable journalism, getting the facts right is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Even right facts can tell an incomplete and therefore misleading story. Therefore:

- All important information should be processed in the story; all relevant facts and viewpoints should be included.

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## c. Reliability of sources

Reliable journalism needs reliable sources to start from. Therefore:

- Preferably, first-hand information from own observation is used.
- If second-hand sources are needed, these should be known and considered reliable. Considerations include whether the source itself received the information first-hand, and whether the source's knowledge is up to date.

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## d. More than one source

Reliable journalism enfolds the saying: one source is no source. Therefore:

- A story should not be based on one single source. However, if this is really inevitable, the source should be credible beyond any doubt.
- Stories should always be balanced by giving all the people involved ample time for a fair hearing.

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## e. References/Protection of sources

Reliable journalism is transparent about sources, but if needed also protective. Therefore:

- To the maximum extent possible, make clear to your audience who/what your sources are, what the authority of your sources is, and what interests or motivations your sources may have.
- Journalists should be very reluctant with using vulnerable sources, such as people with mental limitations, children, and victims of crimes, accidents or disasters.
- If anonymity is needed, the contact information of the source should always be given in safe custody to the editor in chief.

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## f. Paying/Accepting money

Reliable journalism is independent of financial incentives. Therefore:

- Paying sources for information should always be avoided;
- Accepting money from sources should always be avoided; including accepting payments for travelling.

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## g. Under cover/hidden devices

Reliable journalism should only use fair methods to obtain information. Therefore:

- Always make yourself known in advance as journalist, and be clear about your journalistic intentions.
- Do not steal information (including photo's, video, data, documents and so on), nor use stolen information.
- An exception can only be made in case of an important social abuse that can only be demonstrated by using covert methods/devices.



## II Presentation

### a. Dramatizations/Reconstructions

Reliable journalism presents the news in an honest way. Therefore:

- Citations must be accurate and precise, and should always be used in the context in which they were given.
- Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors without mention must be avoided at any time.
- Words, images, audio, video should never be fabricated or substantially altered.
- Sensationalism should always be avoided.

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### b. Distinction between facts and opinions

Reliable journalism distinguishes itself from other media-practices by distinguishing factual information from normative statements. Therefore:

- In the presentation of news, a clear distinction should be made between facts and opinions.
- Information from press releases of interest groups – including political parties, business organizations or government – must be clearly marked as such.

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### c. Context

Reliable journalism puts facts in perspective. Therefore:

- News facts should be put in a relevant context that gives them meaning.
- Backing elements, such as audio or images, should always match the context and content of the story.

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## d. Balancing

Reliable journalism acknowledges that reality is not black and white, but has many shades of grey, and even many colours. Therefore:

- News products should indicate which groups and interests, and therefore perspectives, are involved in a certain news event or development.
- For as much as possible, the various perspectives should be present in the story.

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## e. Polarization

Reliable journalism strives to tell the whole story, not just show the extremes at both ends. Therefore:

- Magnifying contrapositions or conflicts in order to create news should be avoided.
- Focusing on only excessive standpoints should be avoided; attention should be given to the broad middle-ground and to nuances.
- Over-simplifying differences in standpoints should be avoided; attention should be given to the considerations and argumentation that lie behind the standpoints.
- Mentioning personal characteristics, such as nationality, religion or ethnicity, can easily lead to stigmatization and should be avoided, unless it has clear relevance for the story.

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## f. Privacy

Reliable journalism respects the integrity of individuals. Therefore:

- In publications the privacy of persons should be respected, unless there is a clear societal interest that weighs heavier.
- The privacy of people with a public profile is an exception to this rule for as far as their public life is concerned. Details about their private life can only be disclosed if there is a clear and provable relation with their public functioning.



## III Post-production

### a. Transparent about methods/choices

Reliable journalism acknowledges that transparency enhances trust. Therefore:

- When requested by the public, clear insight should be given in the methods that were used and the major choices that were made during the journalistic production phase.
  - This can also be done if not explicitly requested, for instance in case of stories that might be experienced as controversial.
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### b. Corrections and additions

Reliable journalism strives to be complete and without errors. Therefore:

- The public should be actively invited to provide corrections and additions
  - If a journalistic product is (imputable) incomplete or contains false information, this should be acknowledged generously, and be corrected adequately, publicly and as fast as possible.
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### c. Accountable for choices and impact

Reliable journalism takes responsibility for the choices that were made during the journalistic production process as well as for the impact a news story has on sources, users and society at large. Therefore:

- Accountability for choices and impact should be guaranteed by establishing easy accessible and inviting procedures for asking questions or filing complaints by sources or users.
- On the individual level journalists should show an attitude of openness to criticism.
- On the level of the news organisation a special public's editor or ombudsman should be present.

# 04

## *Guidelines for working with material from third parties*

(User-generated content, Social Media, Other news media)

### 4.1 Verification

Verification is the essence of reliable journalism. In the current news ecology, where established news media and social media live side by side, the importance of verification is considerably increasing. Especially when using material from third parties, such as content from users, from social media or from other news media, it is vital to verify that the content is accurate and not been scraped, sliced, diced, duplicated or reposted with different context.

#### a. Original source

It is vital to be critical when taking over a source that is used or mentioned by a third party. Therefore:

- Identify the original source.
- When in doubt, contact the source for further information and verification.
- With the original source identified, check information about the content (including location, date and approximate time) and about the author/originator of the content.

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## b. Corroboration through other sources

The second step is to challenge a source and its content. Therefore:

- Challenge the source by asking questions such as: “How do you know that?” and “How else do you know that?”.
- Triangulate content with other content, such as reports, photos and audio/video recordings.

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## c. Provenance of a website

Using information from websites has become common practice, although even apparently reliable sources of information on the web may not always be accurate. Therefore:

- Always check the ‘About’-page to find out who is running the website and what is their objective.
- Verify if this information is genuine and true.

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## d. Domain name

Websites are not always what they appear or claim to be. A site that looks well produced and has an authentic-sounding domain name may still be a political hoax, false company or satirical prank. Therefore:

- Always start with a [‘Whois’](#) lookup on the domain name to find out who has registered the URL.
- Check the Internet archive to get a feel for the overall history of the site, organization, or person reporting the information.
- Check the site’s Google Page Rank. If the page rank is high, it is more likely that credible sites have been linking to it.

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## e. Name-check

Groups can be rather easy to find online, but it's often more difficult to find an individual person. Therefore:

- Start by building a dossier on the person you're trying to locate or learn more about.
- Try checking a name through public profiles, for instance social media profiles. A YouTube item that includes a website URL can lead to a person's address, mail and personal telephone number, via the tool ['who.is'](#).

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## f. Reverse-image search photo's

Images can be very powerful, but are rather easy to manipulate. Therefore:

- When dealing with images and videos, use [Google Image Search](#) or [TinEye](#) to perform a reverse image/video thumbnail search. If several links to the same image pop up, click on "view other sizes" to find the highest resolution/size, which usually is the original image.
- Check to see if the image has any EXIF data (metadata). Use software like [Photoshop](#) or free tools such as [Fotoforensics.com](#) or [Findexif.com](#) to find information about the model of the camera, the timestamp of the image and the dimensions of the original image. Beware that such data can be influenced by the manufacturer's settings.

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## g. Motivations or interests behind creating or sharing

Understanding motivations or interests behind creating or sharing content, or at least having some sense of it, is an essential element of the verification process. Therefore:

- Check if the person that captured a photo or video is or is not an accidental bystander.
- Check if the person did attend an event with the objective to capture it from a particular perspective
- Check if the person's profile or social media use suggests a background as an activist or agitator.
- Check if the person is affiliated with an organization or (online) community that has a special interest.



## 4.2 Accuracy

Accuracy is not only a matter of getting the facts right, although that is the first mission in journalism. Accuracy is also about the getting the right facts: all the relevant facts should be included to get at the truth. This is not only the case for one's own work, but also for the material that is used from other parties.

### a. Unbiased sources

Being critical about source bias is important in various stage of the journalistic process: during the initial search for sources, during story development and in later evaluation during editing and presentation. Therefore:

- Establish what are the biases of the source(s) that the other party has used.
- If the range of viewpoints is skewed, a sufficient variety of sources should be added by yourself.

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### b. Complete material

When dealing with facts, it is important to always ask oneself: whose facts am I dealing with? Accuracy also means: getting the whole story. Therefore:

- Always check if the information that is coming from third parties is complete and no important and relevant facts or viewpoints are missing.

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### c. Sufficient support for the headline and lead of the story

In journalism the headline and lead are meant to draw the user into the story, by highlighting the essence of it. In practice, the desire to draw attention sometimes leads to over-emphasizing the controversial or sensational elements. Therefore:

- When using a story of other parties it should be checked whether or not the headline and the lead accurately represent the content of the story.

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### d. Sufficient balance

Accurate reporting also means that stories are sufficiently balanced. Sometimes a story has two sides that are equally important, but often the situation is more complex – with more sides and different weights. Therefore:

- When using material of other parties, it should be checked if the material is sufficiently balanced in such a way that relevant sides are included and consciously weighed.

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### e. Bias

Human beings have a subconscious tendency to seek and interpret information and other evidence in ways that affirm their existing beliefs, ideas, expectations, and/or hypotheses. When using material from third parties this subconscious tendency can play an even more important role, as using material from third parties often goes through a less rigorous procedure than gathering own material. Therefore:

- Rigorously test and verify every fact or assertion of fact of third parties before you publish, so you'll be able to stand by the accuracy of your work later.
- Actively seek for additional, contrary information.

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## f. Controversial facts and quotes

Accuracy is always indispensable for reliable journalism, but certainly in the case of controversial facts and quotes. Therefore:

- Before publishing controversial material from third parties, it should be double-checked.
- If a thorough double-check is not possible, be transparent about it. Explain why it could not be double-checked and why you decided to publish it anyway.

# 05

## *Verification tools*

The 24/7 news cycle and rise of social media and user-generated content require us to gather and report as events unfold, making swift decisions about whether information has been sufficiently verified. Digital tools give us new ways to find and reach sources. Databases and ubiquitous cellphones with cameras give us massive amounts of documentation to seek and assess. Successful verification results from effective use of technology, as well as from commitment to timeless standards of accuracy.

We can use different tools to find contact details and profiles of users who are active on social media, to check if a particular image is a real depiction of what's happening or to verify if something actually happened where the crowd said it happened?

With these guidelines we highlight several tools that could help journalists in verifying sources and data. They are structured as follows: a. Verifying identity, b. Geolocation and c. Verifying images.



### **Verifying Identity:**

[AnyWho](#): a free white pages directory with a reverse look-up function.

[GeoSocial Footprint](#): a website where one can track the users' location "footprint" created from GPS enabled tweets, social check ins, natural language location searching (geocoding) and profile harvesting.

[LinkedIn](#): through work history and

connections LinkedIn can provide additional means to track an individual down and verify the person's identity or story.

[Muck Rack](#): lists thousands of journalists on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Quora, Google+, LinkedIn who are vetted by a team of Muck Rack editors.

[Numberway](#): a directory of international phone books.

[Person Finder](#): one of the most well-known open source data-banks for individuals to post and search for the status of people affected by a disaster. Whenever a large scale disaster happens, the Google Crisis Team sets up a person finder.

[Pipl.com](#): searches for an individual's Internet footprint and can help identify through multiple social media accounts, public records and contact details.

[Rapportive](#): this Gmail plugin gives users a profile of their contacts, including social media accounts, location, employment.

[Spokeo](#): a people search engine that can find individuals by name, email, phone or username. Results are merged into a profile showing gender and age, contact details, occupation, education, marital status, family background, economic profile and photos.

[WebMii](#): searches for weblinks that match an individual's name, or can identify unspecified individuals by keyword. It gives a web visibility score which can be used to identify fake profiles.

[WHOIS](#): finds the registered users of a domain name and details the date of registration, location and contact details of the registrant or assignee.



## Verifying places:

[Flickr](#): search for geolocated photos. [free-ocr.com](#): extracts text from images which can then be put into Google translate or searched on other mapping resources.

[Google Maps](#): an online map providing high-resolution aerial or satellite imagery covering much of the Earth, except for areas around the poles. It includes a number of viewing options such as terrain, weather information and a 360-degree street level view.

[Google Translate](#): can be used to uncover location clues (e.g. signs) written in other languages.

[Météo-France](#): France's meteorological agency makes freely available Europe focused radar and satellite images, maps and climate modelling data.

[NASA Earth Observatory](#): the Earth Observatory was created to share satellite images and information with the public. It acts as a repository of global data imagery, with freely available maps, images and datasets.

[Wolfram Alpha](#): a computational answer engine that responds to questions using structured and curated data from its knowledge base. Unlike search engines, which provide a list of relevant sites, Wolfram Alpha provides direct, factual answers and relevant visualizations.



## Verifying images:

[Foto Forensics](#): this website uses error level analysis (ELA) to indicate parts of an image that may have been altered. ELA looks for differences in quality levels in the image, highlighting where alterations may have been made.

[Google Search by Image](#): by uploading or entering an image's URL, users can find content such as related or similar images, websites and other pages using the specific image.

[JPEGsnoop](#): a free Windows-only application that can detect whether an image has been edited. Despite its name it can open AVI, DNG, PDF, THM and embedded JPEG les. It also retrieves meta-data including: date, camera type, lens settings, etc.

[TinEye](#): a reverse image search engine that connects images to their creators by allowing users to find out where an image originated, how it is used, whether modified versions exist and if there are higher resolution copies.

# EPILOGUE: RAISING RELIABILITY

The context in which professional journalism operates, has changed in many respects in the 21st century. These changes are manifold and sometimes contradictory, but they can be summarized as a transition from a mass media environment to a network environment. New technology has put an end to the monopoly of the settled news media, in which the journalist was the central gatekeeper; it has enabled the spread of time and again new (social) media, which have served as a vehicle for an almost limitless growth of ungrounded opinions and unverified information.

The transition to a network society is still under way, but it is clear that the changing environment brings many challenges for 21st century journalism to the forefront. How to stay of value in an environment where news is abundant and concentrated attention is scarce? How to make sure the public sees the difference between right and wrong

information, and between reliable and unreliable news sources? How to stay connected with the public? How to stay trustworthy in the years to come?

The increasing spread of false information strengthens the conviction that the network society needs reliable journalists that serve the public by:

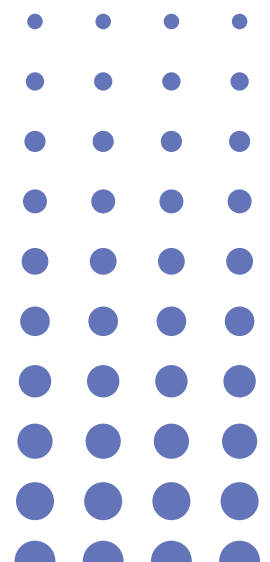
- providing a truthful insight into important political, economic and socio-cultural events, issues and developments;
- stimulating and strengthening an open and respectful public conversation, free from hate speech, harassment and threats.

These are tasks for independent professionals and should not be given in the hands of amateurs, algorithms or artificial intelligence.



Disinformation is a disruptive force in society. A society that isn't sure what is true, cannot function. How can professional journalism help society to deal with disinformation? There are several answers to this question. Journalism can help by debunking false articles/statements of others, through post-production fact-checking. It can help by exposing the producers of false information and explaining the system behind disinformation. It can help by building up the public's immunity for false information through raising people's level of news literacy.

Next to this, it is essential that professional news media keep creating their own narrative, that can counter the false information of others. In their famous book 'The Elements of Journalism', Kovach and Rosenstiel state: "In the end, the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction or art." Truthful information can drive out false information, but only if professional news media are willing to invest in raising their reliability.





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