

Eurostat: Stats in a Wrap

Fact-checking and trust in times of fake news

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SPEAKERS

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Jonathan Elliott

Stats in a Wrap, the podcast series from Eurostat.

Jonathan Elliott

Welcome to Stats in a Wrap, the podcast all about statistics from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. Today in the wrap café we're in political mood and contemplating the meaning of truth. Do you trust what you read in the media? Do you trust your elected political representatives to always tell the truth? And what do you do if you want to check the truth of their claims? This is a bumper year for elections.

We've just had the Indian poll with nearly a billion people eligible to cast their ballots. There's the European parliamentary vote just gone of course, and everyone knows Americans will choose their president in November. But there are also democratic mandates being sought in Algeria, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia, Chile, Jordan, Georgia and Lithuania. In fact, there are 64 major elections globally in 2024.

And by some estimates, nearly half the world's voters will have chosen their political representatives before the year is out. Informed debate has never been so important. But the job of informing debates with accurate reporting and balanced analysis is a tough one, as never before journalists have to battle with disinformation and misinformation online, as voters try to get to grips with the issues that affect them.

The mainstream media and the professionals of fact-checking organisations are fighting back and of course supporting them are the official statistics bodies whose lifeblood is accuracy. To help us understand the world of political misinformation, news reporting, fact-checking and the work of official statisticians, we have four highly qualified individuals in the wrap café today.

Paweł Terpiłowski is chief editor of the Polish fact-checking organisation Demagog and a governing board member of the European Fact-checking Standards Network. Welcome, Paweł.

Paweł Terpiłowski

Hi, Jonathan, thank you for having me.

Jonathan Elliott

And we have Kerstin Hänsel, who is Head of Communications Strategy and Social Media at Destatis - the German Federal Statistical Office. Welcome, Kerstin.

Kerstin Hänsel

Hi, thank you for the invitation.

Jonathan Elliott

And from Eurostat we have our very own Dean Vuletic, an Information and Communication Officer. Welcome, Dean.

Dean Vuletic

Thank you, Jonathan. It's a pleasure to be here.

Jonathan Elliott

And last, by no means least, is Francis Elliott, who has kindly volunteered to share his experience with us today. Francis has been immersed in British politics the whole of his professional life and was for eight years until 2021 the political editor of the Times, so knows a thing or two about elections and political coverage and had a ringside seat at the political theatre of the Brexit vote and its aftermath, and the onset of the COVID pandemic, both not exactly free of misinformation. He also happens to be my brother, and still agreed to come on the show. Welcome, Francis.

Francis Elliott

Jonathan. Hi, how are you?

Jonathan Elliott

Wonderful to have you here. I'm sure it's gonna be great fun. Let me just dive in first of all with Paweł. Paweł, tell us what fact-checking is. It's a lot more than those two simple words. And it seems to have developed into a major professional field. So just give us a working definition of fact-checking. What is it?

Paweł Terpiłowski

Thanks, Jonathan. First of all, I would like to agree with you that those words are very simple in a way and this fact-checking is, at the same time, very simple and also complicated work to be honest. At the bottom of it it's only about verifying facts. And in fact-checking - if the information is true or wrong based on credible sources.

We're dealing with an ever-increasing amount of misinformation and disinformation that is happening all around the internet. And also on the media, we are also seeing the increasing level of mistrust towards legitimate media, towards mainstream media, towards legacy media. And that's where people are starting to turn their information consumption - to social media platforms, to other sources of information. And that's where fact-checking is really coming into place.

Jonathan Elliott

So, on that subject, tell us a bit about Demagog and how you work. You obviously have a team behind you, and you're a part of the founding leadership. So perhaps just tell us a little bit about Demagog and how it works.

Paweł Terpiłowski

Demagog is the first Polish fact-checking organisation, started in 2014. And we started working strictly focusing on political fact-checking. We fact-checked political claims and also fact-checked promises made by politicians to basically set up an environment that...an organisation that somewhat keeps their politicians accountable for their work and for the things that they are saying.

Jonathan Elliott

How do you actually reach people to correct their misapprehensions about something, say, like COVID vaccines, or expose or debunk myths about immigration? Because presumably most people who use social media don't also then check the Demagog website to see whether they've seen something that's correct or not. How do everyday people encounter Demagog in Poland?

Paweł Terpiłowski

We cooperate with social media platforms like Meta and TikTok in order to actually provide the information, the credible information, our content, to the users on those platforms. When you experience a misinformation that we are fact-checking on Facebook for instance, there is a label that links to our article, you can read it, learn about why this particular piece of information is false or manipulative or partly false.

We are also trying to promote media literacy among all various groups in our society. In order to build strong misinformation or resilience it's not only about fact-checking, it's not only about debunking, it's also about critical thinking. We have to be vigilant, we have to stay focused, we have to stay critical. And basically, our goal is that everyone can become a fact-checker, and everyone should be a fact-checker in their own lives.

Person on Street 1

Our society is living faster and faster, the news are changing all the time. And in the world of social media, TikTok, Instagram and co. you have many unverified information that are just provided, and people believe in that.

Jonathan Elliott

Kerstin, let me come to you, you're at Germany's official statistics organisation, Destatis. And just like Paweł, obviously you're seeing a lot of information, traffic, conversations, dialogue, sort of chat on social media.

It's not the traditional role for official statistics bodies to get involved in that kind of world of informal dialogue between individuals chatting about what's going on in the world of politics and news. But you are getting closer to that - just tell us a little bit about how Destatis is engaging particularly with social media?

Kerstin Hänsel

You're totally right. It's not the way of communication that we were used to over decades. In former times, up to the year 2000, we mostly published our data, and we defined ourselves as data providers. And nowadays, it's true, we totally have to set up a new way how we communicate our data. And this is very much in line as Paweł said, the need to help people understand our data, to put data in the right context, to explain methodology, to answer questions in case of misunderstanding.

Jonathan Elliott

Just explain to us a little bit about what happened during COVID-19 at Destatis. How did that impact your understanding of misinformation and disinformation? Did it sort of signal a sea change? And did you then start to rethink because of COVID-19?

Kerstin Hänsel

We were all very much influenced by what happened during COVID-19, yeah. And I guess nearly every part of civil society, of institutions, we all had to realise that how important data is and reliable data is and as well, how we as official institutions have to deal and have to communicate our data.

And I guess, in Germany, in particular, for us, it was the first time that we were confronted with distrust. I mean, disinformation we never really had a problem with - based on misunderstandings, or wrong interpretation of statistics or these cases. And then all these discussions about the reliability and the truth of data came up during COVID.

At that time, we started to realise that it is not only necessary to have reliable data - of course, this is the basis - but it is also very, very important that you open up and do not close your communication, you have to open up, you have to explain complexity.

And you really have to help people understand that statistics sometimes only is a way to approach to truth and that it's not truth in itself. And there can be mistakes in statistics as well. This was our lesson learned. And this is what we now try to integrate in our daily communication on social media.

Jonathan Elliott

The issue of trust is fascinating. We know in public attitude surveys that trust has declined in traditional media, it's declined in government. And there persists the illusion among some people that statistical institutes like yours are actually an arm of government, that you're not independent, that you take orders from government politicians.

Do you find that? I mean, has that been your experience that you actually have to keep telling people: "No, we are the awkward people who publish statistics when we know it's right and we don't take our instructions from politicians". How does that stack up? Is that what you find?

Kerstin Hänsel

Yes, indeed, this is what we are confronted with from time to time, that we are only part of the system. Denying it and telling we are politically independent doesn't help that much. Because if people do not trust in your institution, you won't really succeed by convincing them: 'But you can trust us!' What we think is that it's more important to behave trustworthy, in a trustworthy way.

And that means, not that much telling that you are trustworthy, but open up, show transparently what you're calculating, show the options and the limits that statistics offer for decision-making and talk about data and be open for dialogue.

Jonathan Elliott

Dean, if I could bring you in here, Eurostat, like Destatis, has as its unique selling point: Reliability and independence. And one of your briefs at Eurostat has been monitoring and ensuring quality. Could you

just set out for us why this thing 'quality' is so important to maintain trust and independence in statistical organisations and how do you go about maintaining it?

Dean Vuletic

Well, quality is crucial for maintaining trust and independence in statistical organisations, because it ensures the reliability, accuracy and credibility of the data. High-quality statistics are fundamental for informed decision-making by governments, businesses and the public.

And when users have confidence in the data, they can trust that policies and analyses based on this data are sound and effective. Eurostat maintains quality in its statistics through a robust framework that accompanies several key components. There's this European Statistics Code of Practice, which outlines principles such as professional independence, impartiality, and objectivity, and sound methodology.

Eurostat implements the Code of Practice through a quality assurance framework that represents a collection of methods, tools, and good practices. And then there are peer reviews that evaluate and enhance the quality of statistics produced by both Eurostat and the national statistical institutes.

Person on street 2

There is quite a lot of pressure on newspaper organisations to put out a lot of news in a very timely manner, which makes it kind of difficult to do enough, especially in times where we're flooded with potentially false and generated media. So, I would say the newspaper organisations might lag a little bit behind its times.

Jonathan Elliott

I'd like to bring in Francis now. You've sat through Brexit, you saw the COVID-19 pandemic kick off and the threat that that brought to the British National Health Service, the NHS, always a political football. You've had to report the politics of very many different issues in public life, but fact-checking as an activity has increased over the years.

And I am just wondering to what extent that has impacted your work and the work of your colleagues? And does it help you or hinder you? I mean, is fact-checking even relevant to the mainstream media?

Francis Elliott

I'll let you into a secret. Most journalists are absolutely terrified of any stories with a number in it. We are by selection words people, not 'numbers' people, and many of us are borderline innumerate. So, to start with full disclosure, I feel slightly nervous being in an online room with statisticians, but, you know, I'm sure you'll let me out of here alive. The confessions don't stop there. I mean, you know, I have made, I've made some bad mistakes with numbers in my career, it's really awkward.

And if I could bring a journalist perspective to this - we don't set out to be wrong on the whole. And it's always embarrassing when we are. The rise of the fact-checker is, to my mind, just a good thing. And in the UK, we have a couple of organisations like Pawel's. We also have the BBC, which has just recently started investing quite significant amounts of money in something called 'BBC verify'. Brexit and COVID, I think was a hugely conditioning kind of experience.

Brexit was brutal: trading of partial, half true statistics, the most famous of which is probably that 350 million pounds is sent to the EU every week, that could alternatively be spent on the NHS. And that didn't account for the fact that some money was sent back in rebate.

So, it was a gross, not net figure. Fairly, fairly straightforward, simple lie, some would say. Because it assumed itself, it was a weird, it was almost like a meta story - the more that the opponents screamed about the fact that this was a wrong figure, they ended up just amplifying the original figure. You actually get rewarded for poor behaviour.

Jonathan Elliott

Yes, indeed, there's that saying, isn't there, that a lie has travelled twice around the world before the truth gets his boots on. I think it was coined in the 19th century. So, it's sort of...I find that somewhat reassuring.

Francis Elliott

And what really shocked me the other day was: even after people have been shown that something is wrong, they still have a more negative opinion. So, you say something false about you. And then it's demonstrated that's false, but it doesn't reset to 100%. It's back to 95%.

Person on street 3

The years have passed, we understand that a lot of fact-checking is not even...it's political. So, it's based on whatever the person who is fact-checking is doing, what their political view is.

Person on street 4

I'm not sure if those organisations are independent, there's always an issue of funding and so on. I believe there is a lot of honest effort there to be independent. But at the same time, I think it's...finally we need to as humanity admit that there is no objective objectivity outside any opinion, outside any ideology.

Jonathan Elliott

One of the interesting things you were talking about, Francis, was how disinformation, once it's out there, it's hard to correct. It has a sort of zombie life even after you've killed it with the facts. There it is, carrying on! Paweł, can you just help us out here with this extraordinary approach to countering disinformation with something called pre-bunking.

People have actually used the metaphor of an inoculation against the viral spread of disinformation. Tell us a bit about what pre-bunking is, and how it works in protecting people from disinformation or giving them a perspective that allows them to sort of not be that impressed by it. Can you just talk us through pre-bunking?

Paweł Terpiłowski

Pre-bunking is our effort of trying to prevent the misinformation from happening in the first place. Like, we are trying to make...basically vaccinate people for disinformation or for misinformation. Analysing the trends, analysing the narratives, analysing what we are predicting may become important, may become relevant in the public discourse for the upcoming weeks or months, especially during the periods like elections.

And when we are doing this, we can actually somehow predict the false narratives that may arise or may amplify themselves by the use of political actors and other actors. And then we are basically trying to provide the information before the disinformation takes place, and provide, you know, trying to assess what people are actually interested in, what are the questions that we need to answer for them.

Jonathan Elliott

I have seen some extremely polished, well-made videos that Demagog made with the support of the Google Jigsaw project. And they were directly pre-bunking disinformation. In this case about Ukrainian refugees coming to Poland. Can you just talk us through some of the examples of how pre-bunking has worked in a real-life context at Demagog?

Paweł Terpiłowski

Yes, this campaign that we did with Jigsaw was before the Polish parliamentary elections. And there were huge concerns and narratives around undermining the integrity of elections, credibility of the elections. And one of the main driving narratives that we've observed was that people were starting to believe or starting to spread information that Ukrainian refugees coming to Poland from Ukraine, escaping from the war, will actually be eligible to vote in those elections.

And thus will manipulate the outcome, the elections will become a great fraud. And we knew that those narratives were based on some information that were manipulated but otherwise, they were true.

For instance, that the Ukrainians were getting their personal numbers, which is like ID number in Poland, that you need to have in order to attend any formal business, or social security, etc. etc. In no way this can translate into being eligible to vote because you don't have citizenship. So, this was quite obvious and quite easy narrative to debunk or pre-bunk in that regard.

Jonathan Elliott

I would expect it did work. But were you able to measure how much or whether it worked? I mean, they are very persuasive short videos, really quite easy to take in and understand, and they're very engaging. But do you think they actually worked?

Paweł Terpiłowski

I think it's hard to measure it, quite frankly, like we don't have still enough capacity to actually measure the, you know, effectiveness. We have other issues in Polish-Ukrainian relations, that can actually influence the Polish perception of Ukrainians. And this is actually happening right now.

So, we are seeing the decrease of support towards Ukraine, and towards the EU, in general, in Poland, because of the political issues: because of the issues with the European Green Deal, agricultural issues, the imports of agricultural products from Ukraine, the grain issue that we had in Poland. So those are the, you know, factors that come into the very complicated situation that makes the overall assessment of such campaigns quite hard to quantify.

Person on street 4

In the European election, for sure, people could spread misinformation, because it's, like, personal interests, I guess. It's, it's difficult to judge.

Jonathan Elliott

I talked a little bit earlier about the fact that we're in a bumper year for elections, nearly half the world's voters are going to the polls. Kerstin, I have to ask you: we've had the European Parliamentary elections, and you've got three state elections in Germany in September coming up. Do you find that there are hot button issues at election time that trigger statistical claims? And then you have to sort of step in and put the records straight, so to speak.

Kerstin Hänsel

In terms of disinformation, it's always about climate change, about migration, about gender pay gap. But it's not different from what is going on, in general.

Jonathan Elliott

How do you manage at Destatis to appear independent when debates heat up, and you're facing different claims and counterclaims and arguments where people are claiming that right is on their side, and they've got all the facts. Do you have to put information out there that clarifies these debates at election times?

Kerstin Hänsel

We do not change our dissemination habits. This is one part of the political neutrality. We cannot avoid talking about issues and we cannot start talking about special issues around elections. We always release the data if new data is available.

So, this is part of our political neutrality that we are not focusing on which data is now needed to prepare the elections or discussions around elections, because the data themselves can be very political if you release them at different days or different occasions.

Person on street 5

I think normally, journalists just want to have the scoop, to have the last information. So, they, maybe sometimes they don't really care about if the information is real or not, or maybe if it's really accurate. So, they just want to tell the scoop, and then maybe they check later on.

Jonathan Elliott

Francis, when you're gearing up for an election in the UK, a national election. What was the atmosphere like in your team? How did it change? Did it feel like you're all jockeys kind of waiting for the start of a race? Or how did your work change in terms of handling contested facts and having to deal with people ringing you up at all hours, half bullying you, half manipulating you? How did you handle all of that?

Francis Elliott

How does it change? I mean, it just, it just does become a lot more tense. And you know, you're not just within the teams and, you know, that this is your kind of moment. Your coverage of these three to four weeks is going to be how you are judged by your bosses.

It's also tense between the different party. I as political editor, I would get shouted at pretty much every night when the paper dropped, by one or the other of the main parties in the UK. And I considered it a badge of honour, if that happened, and I want to be shouted at by both of them. But it didn't make for a pleasant period. It's not, it's not kind of - right.

Jonathan Elliott

Yes, I mean, if you're annoying both sides at the same time, you can be pretty sure you're getting it right, can't you?

Francis Elliott

I took particular pleasure if they were annoyed, because I had not fallen for some obvious piece of spin.

Jonathan Elliott

Paweł, the media is very politically polarised in Poland, you have essentially to be just like Francis, at Demagog, a friend to no one, you're in the business of putting the record straight and telling people when they've got it wrong. How do you handle Demagog's position within the Polish media ecosystem?

Paweł Terpiłowski

The situation is very tense in Poland in terms of that. People tend to listen only to the media that is aligned to their ideology, to their political spectrum, to their political point of view. We are trying to build the bridges and not the gaps.

We are trying to make this conversation between the media and also provide people with you know, additional context and to encourage them even to read the media that they don't agree with in order to get better understanding of the situation and not fall into this, you know, rabbit hole disinformation bubble. But it's hard.

Jonathan Elliott

Fact-checking as a professional practice has developed rapidly over the last few years. I mean, the pre-bunking work with Jigsaw and Google, for example - highly, highly professionalised and slick and looking very, very good. You've been in this field for 10 years now, Paweł. I mean, how has it changed both in Poland and in, you know, other European countries, your sort of international network?

Paweł Terpiłowski

Obviously, there was a quite a huge development of fact-checking work in those years. We've actually developed very high level of standards for our work - international standards, so for International Fact-Checking Network, which is like the global organisation that gathers all of the fact-checking community, and we have to adhere to, basically prove ourselves that you know, we are credible, we are transparent, we are non-partisan in our work.

We are currently building a common repository facilitated by the, you know, European Fact-Checking Standards Network, which is the Elections24Check that gathers all of our fact-checks, all of our work in the context of European elections, but also in the context of European Union in general. This is very well-made repository that I all encourage to check. All of our organisations from Europe are committing to this effort.

Such cooperation, such projects were also present during the COVID pandemic. There was a CoronaVirusFacts Alliance that was a global collaborative work of all the fact-checkers around the world on COVID misinformation. With that kind of relations, with that support from other fact-checkers from other countries I think our work is much better and we can also detect and track misinformation in a more effective way.

Person on street 6

Do we need fact-checking? So, in my opinion, especially in today's times, it's incredibly important because of the large language models and social media and uncensored - which is, of course also good - but arises the risk that a lot of fake news is being published and especially in politically, let's say turbulent times, this might be quite a problem.

Person on street 7

AI is producing whatever you need, whatever you want. That's the biggest, let's say, problem.

Jonathan Elliott

And now, no conversation about data can be complete without reference to artificial intelligence these days, especially as the problem of increasingly convincing so called deep fake videos are now just part of the propaganda weaponry of political disinformation.

Just before the European Parliamentary elections, the European Commission's Vice-President and transparency boss Věra Jourová went so far as to ask European political parties to pledge that they would not use deep fakes in their campaigns. Paweł, could you just tell us a little bit about how AI, machine learning and so on has impacted your work and the work at Demagog? Can you just talk us through that?

Paweł Terpiłowski

Yes, everybody's talking about AI today, and all of the claims that AI will be replacing us, especially in the context of journalism, I think it's quite false. Because from my perspective, from my opinion, we are still years and years away from the point that AI will actually be able to assess the, for instance, very complicated political context of the situation, in a way that only humans are capable of doing right now.

So obviously, AI is or can be, in the future, very supportive of our work, can facilitate our work in various ways. But it will never replace us, it will always, in my opinion, be supplementary to the core work that we are doing. And I think that we are still far away from machines and AI taking over the world in terms of fact-checking.

Jonathan Elliott

Fantastic. Okay, Kerstin, you talked a little bit earlier about webinars on statistical and data literacy, helping people to kind of unpack 'number stories' for journalists and things like that. So, tell us a bit about how Destatis is helping to raise levels of data literacy, numeracy, and statistical literacy.

Kerstin Hänsel

We've done it for over 10 years, but we never called it 'data literacy' or 'help against disinformation', this just came up the last years. As an example, we have quite a good e-learning on our website, which help to get to a basic standard of knowing statistics: there's an advanced part for students and we have webinars for journalists about how to avoid frequent mistakes, very low level, very easy. It is for everyone just easy to get familiar with statistics and to increase statistical know-how.

Jonathan Elliott

Dean – the dissemination unit at Eurostat are the publicists of the organisation effectively, tell us a bit about how they communicate Eurostat's work, especially as it relates again to this thing called quality, which is so central to fact-checking and everything being completely correct.

Dean Vuletic

The major way in which Eurostat disseminates its data is through the online database, the website and various digital publications which are designed to be user-friendly and easily accessible to a broad audience. And they include detailed metadata and methodological notes to provide context and enhance understanding of the statistics presented.

Continuous improvement is another cornerstone of Eurostat's quality strategy involving regular updates to methodologies, the adoption of new statistical techniques and staff training, so that staff stay abreast of best practices and technological advances. I should point out that when it comes to journalists Eurostat provides a multilingual user support for everyone, but which journalists in particular can use to get answers to their questions about European statistics.

And I should emphasise that Eurostat is part of the European Commission's efforts to tackle disinformation and foreign information manipulation. We've just had the European elections and with regards to those, Eurostat set up a special data and fact-checking corner for the elections. It was available for a limited time period, and it served journalists and fact-checkers.

It gave them answers about data and statistics on the EU. So, when journalists and fact-checkers had questions, they could send an e-mail to Eurostat, and they received a quick response to their inquiry. So, this was a service set up especially for the European elections.

Jonathan Elliott

Well, we're out of time, unfortunately. It just remains for me to say thank you very much to our wonderful guests. I'd like to say particular thanks to Paweł Terpiłowski at Demagog: Paweł, it's been great to have you on the show. Thank you for joining us.

Paweł Terpiłowski

It's been a pleasure, Jonathan.

Jonathan Elliott

Also, a big thanks to Kerstin Hänsel from Destatis - the German Federal Statistics Office. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Kerstin Hänsel

It was a pleasure. Thank you.

Jonathan Elliott

And Francis Elliott, former political editor of the Times, thank you brother, for coming on and giving us the benefit of your wisdom. I wish we could have talked more.

Francis Elliott

I learned a lot, thanks a lot.

Jonathan Elliott

Fantastic. Okay. And finally, Dean Vuletic from Eurostat. Thank you very much also for joining us today.

Dean Vuletic

Thank you, Jonathan. It's always a pleasure to be part of your podcasts.

Jonathan Elliott

And thank you, everybody, for a wonderful discussion. Very, very stimulating. If you've enjoyed Stats in a Wrap, don't forget to follow us on social media and share our adventures with friends and colleagues where the show can be found on Spotify, Apple, Google, and all the usual places.

And of course, join us for the next edition, when we'll be dishing up more flavoursome insights from Eurostat. This time about how stats is being helped by technology, especially artificial intelligence, which also goes by the less glamorous name of, well: applied statistics. Join us then, but for now, goodbye.