

April 2020

FACT-CHECKERS AND FACT-CHECKING IN TURKEY

H. Akin Ünver | EDAM, Oxford CTGA & Kadir Has University

FACT-CHECKERS AND FACT-CHECKING IN TURKEY

H. Akin Ünver | EDAM, Oxford CTGA & Kadir Has Üniversitesi

INTRODUCTION

In less than a decade, fact-checking around the world has grown into a new democratic practice, creating its own social and political institutions. Although the global awareness of, and demand for fact-checking grew after the 2016 US election and following European elections, the practice is as old as journalism itself.¹ Fact-checking is generally viewed as one of the main antidotes against the scourge of disinformation and fake news.² However, fact-checking can also produce unintended results. There is still insufficient evidence to support the claim that fact-checking leads to a change in beliefs among the target audience.³ Even in cases where there is an observable relationship between fact-checking and change in beliefs, this effect isn't uniform and its effectiveness can significantly vary.⁴ There

are even studies that demonstrate that fact-checking can, in fact, further entrench the initial effect of disinformation.⁵ Furthermore, the relationship between fact-checking and disinformation yields varied results across different political cultures and national media systems,⁶ necessitating more in-depth focus and more extensive study of their interaction in different nations.

As one of the most polarized,⁷ information-constrained⁸ and censorship-prone⁹ OECD countries, Turkey's position in the broader global disinformation and fact-checking ecosystem merits greater focus as the Turkish context yields significant findings and relevant results for other emerging markets and democratically backsliding nations.



This research has been made possible by funding obtained from the US-based Chrest Foundation for the project "Digital Media Ecosystem in Turkey: Actors, Interests and Politics".

-
- 1 Spivak, Cary. "The fact-checking explosion" *American Journalism Review* 32, no. 4 (2010): 38-44.
 - 2 Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston. "The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions." *European journal of communication* 33, no. 2 (2018): 122-139.
 - 3 Wintersieck, Amanda L. "Debating the truth: The impact of fact-checking during electoral debates." *American Politics Research* 45, no. 2 (2017): 304-331.
 - 4 Nyhan, Brendan, Ethan Porter, Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Wood. "Taking fact-checks literally but not seriously? The effects of journalistic fact-checking on factual beliefs and candidate favorability." *Political Behavior* (2019): 1-22. Margolin, Drew B., Aniko Hannak, and Ingmar Weber. "Political fact-checking on Twitter: When do corrections have an effect?." *Political Communication* 35, no. 2 (2018): 196-219.
 - 5 Brandtzaeg, Petter Bae, Asbjørn Følstad, and María Ángeles Chaparro Domínguez. "How journalists and social media users perceive online fact-checking and verification services." *Journalism Practice* 12, no. 9 (2018): 1109-1129.
 - 6 Amazeen, Michelle A. "Journalistic interventions: The structural factors affecting the global emergence of fact-checking." *Journalism* (2017): 1464884917730217. Rashkin, Hannah, Eunsol Choi, Jin Yea Jang, Svitlana Volkova, and Yejin Choi. "Truth of varying shades: Analyzing language in fake news and political fact-checking." In *Proceedings of the 2017 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, pp. 2931-2937. 2017.
 - 7 Bulut, Ergin, and Erdem Yörük. "Mediatized populisms| Digital populism: Trolls and political polarization of Twitter in Turkey." *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 25.
 - 8 Coskun-Tuncel, Aras. "Privatization of governance, delegated censorship, and hegemony in the digital era: The case of turkey." *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 5 (2018): 690-708.
 - 9 Yesil, Bilge. "Press censorship in Turkey: Networks of state power, commercial pressures, and self-censorship." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7, no. 2 (2014): 154-173.

Since the emergence of 'new journalism' in the 1890s and the invention of the tabloid, fact-checking and verification practices have been an integral part of the editorial workflow. Through much of the 20th century, fact-checking has been one of the primary duties of the investigative journalist or the fact-finding/investigation offices of newspapers with several editorial safeguards that were put in place to prevent the publication of news containing flawed/misleading information.¹⁰ The current proliferation of fact-checking initiatives, as a separate institution that exists outside the confines of mainstream newspapers and television newsrooms, goes back to the 1990s, with the emergence of earlier examples of standalone fact-checking such as Snopes and Spinsanity.¹¹

The widening of the digital fact-checking ecosystem, however, started by the end of 2001, as an attack against mainstream digital news in the United States. As digital communication technologies progressed, the information overload brought about by the web and digital communication has begun to overburden the traditional editorial office. News outlets were forced to produce ever-increasing quantities of news and verification, as a result of which pre-Internet fact-checking and verification procedures have become too slow.¹² This has led to a string of under-investigated reports and analyses in the mainstream media ecosystem, drawing ire from news consumers and independent 'citizen journalists'. Ken Layne, an American conservative blogger who was then running

the LA Examiner - a critical alternative news outlet of the Los Angeles Times - issued a criticism and challenge in his blog: 'we can fact-check your a**'.¹³ He suggested that existing verification mechanisms of mainstream news networks were lagging behind the speed of digital interconnectedness, and had to be verified externally because similar internal mechanisms were now defunct.¹⁴ This challenge became a wider rallying cry as more bloggers and pundits from the technology and politics-related blogger ecosystem popularized the term.

The essential message of this digital movement was that the digitization of news had rendered networks less careful with their verification workload due to rapid and high-volume reporting. This speed-focused editorial priority was rendering classical editorial processes weak and unable to adapt to the changing dynamics of the Internet age.¹⁵ Instead, Ken Layne's movement argued that the society had to establish an independent system of crowdsourced news verification that would 'correct' the mistakes of mainstream news networks and hold these outlets accountable. This movement has gained such traction and attention that it has contributed to the emergence of a new ecosystem of dedicated 'fact-checking platforms', such as FactCheck.org (2003), PolitiFact, MediaMatters (2004), NewsBusters (2005) and gradually spread across the world as the demand for fact-checking skyrocketed.¹⁶

¹⁰ Mindich, David TZ. Just the facts: How "objectivity" came to define American journalism. NYU Press, 2000. Muñoz-Torres, Juan Ramón. "Truth and objectivity in journalism: Anatomy of an endless misunderstanding." *Journalism studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 566-582.

¹¹ Amazeen, Michelle A. "Revisiting the epistemology of fact-checking." *Critical Review* 27, no. 1 (2015): 1-22. Graves, Lucas, and Michelle A. Amazeen. "Fact-Checking as Idea and Practice in Journalism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. 2019.

¹² Lowrey, Wilson. "The emergence and development of news fact-checking sites: Institutional logics and population ecology." *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 376-394. Van der Haak, Bregtje, Michael Parks, and Manuel Castells. "The future of journalism: Networked journalism." *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 16.

¹³ Graves, Lucas. "Deciding what's true: Fact-checking journalism and the new ecology of news." PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2013. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8XG9Z7C>

¹⁴ Lowrey, Wilson. "The emergence and development of news fact-checking sites: Institutional logics and population ecology." *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 376-394. Amazeen, Michelle A. "Practitioner perceptions: Critical junctures and the global emergence and challenges of fact-checking." *International Communication Gazette* 81, no. 6-8 (2019): 541-561.

¹⁵ Le Masurier, Megan. "What is slow journalism?." *Journalism practice* 9, no. 2 (2015): 138-152. Heider, Don, Maxwell McCombs, and Paula M. Poindexter. "What the public expects of local news: Views on public and traditional journalism." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2005): 952-967.

¹⁶ Graves, Lucas. *Deciding what's true: The rise of political fact-checking in American journalism*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

FACT-CHECKING IN TURKEY

The most significant increase in Internet penetration in Turkey came between 2006 (18.2%) and 2009 (36.4%).¹⁷ As Internet access widened, social media use - both in terms of the number of users and the volume of content generated - proliferated substantially.¹⁸ This rapid increase in connectivity has led to an explosion of online forums and social media groups that contributed heavily to the transformation of information-seeking habits of Turks from all age groups.¹⁹

Eventually, such groups and fora became major outlets of urban legends and misinformation, creating the need for platforms that could verify and fact-check these claims. Initially, the nature of mis-/disinformation in Turkish digital ecosystem had little to do with politics. Many problematic claims orbited around public health issues such as vaccination, food security and conspiracy theories about pharmaceutical companies. Such conspiracy theories proliferated significantly around early 2009 with the onset of the H1N1 'Swine' Flu. A flurry of distorted information flooded the net about the nature of the flu, from the allegation that it was 'lab-created' deliberately as a form of bioweapon, to conspiracy theories that asserted that pharmaceutical companies created it to sell vaccines. The widespread popularity of these claims at a time of a global health emergency has led to the formation of the first few Turkish fact-checking initiatives.

Arguably the first fact-checking initiative that is still active today in Turkey, YalanSavar.org was established in this misinformation environment. Launched in 2009 by a group of scientists and science enthusiasts, the platform started off to debunk false claims and pseudoscientific content related to the Swine Flu on the web and social media. Earlier fact-checking and debunking content of the group focused on the H1N1 vaccine, how it works with the immune system

and criticism of the anti-vaxxer content online. Gradually, the group expanded its work by focusing on debunking the Turkish anti-vaxxer movement, as well as many popular false beliefs related to the vaccination of kids.²⁰ Following its growing popularity, it further broadened its verification agenda on the use of antibiotics, food allergies, and cancer. Over time, the group debunked a large number of cases related to homoeopathy, allergies, cell phone radiation, astrology and health gimmicks.

The platform was established and is still led by Dr. Işıl Arıcan - who leads the Ambulatory EMR Services at Stanford Children's Health in Palo Alto, California. Other members include Dr. Kaan Öztürk (computer scientist), Dr. Aysu Uygur (embryologist), and Dr. Çağrı Yalçın (mitochondrial diseases), making up a team of 11 scientists and experts.²¹ The initiative operates on a strict commitment to independence, and for that reason continues its work as a self-funded platform. It refuses to host advertisements on their website or to open up to other sources of external funding. Members of the group regularly appear on TV to contribute to public debates on health and science-related issues and the platform runs regular podcasts on popular health debates.

Another initiative that has a claim to be among the first in Turkey was 'Muhtesip' (watchdog), which was established in 2009 but became active in 2010. It started as an initiative designed to fact-check columnists on print media as in their view, the overall quality of the columnist ecosystem was deteriorating. The group's mission was defined as *"the main go-to platform for people disdainful of columnists that [blur without evidence], aren't knowledgeable on issues they write about and don't bother to do research and learn."*²² In another interview, one of the group's founders explained their purpose as to deter false and under-researched claims

¹⁷ Turkey Internet Users. Internet Live Stats: <https://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/turkey/>

¹⁸ Dođramacı, Esra and Damian Radcliffe. 'How Turkey Uses Social Media'. Oxford University, Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2015. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/essays/2015/how-turkey-uses-social-media/>

¹⁹ Torlak, Omer, Behçet Yalın Ozkara, Muhammet Ali Tiltay, Hakan Cengiz, and Mehmet Fatih Dulger. "The effect of electronic word of mouth on brand image and purchase intention: An application concerning cell phone brands for youth consumers in Turkey." *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness* 8, no. 2 (2014): 61. Kurtuluş, Sema, Erdem Özkan, and Selen Öztürk. "How do social media users in Turkey differ in terms of their use habits and preferences?." *International Journal of Business and Information (IJBI)* 10, no. 3 (2015): 337-364.

²⁰ A complete archive of the platform's posts and debunking content can be found at: <https://yalansavar.org/tum-yazilar-kategorilere-gore/>

²¹ A list and bios of the platform's members and funding disclaimer can be found at: <https://yalansavar.org/yalansavar-sik-sorulan-sorular/>

²² A mission statement can be found on the group's website: <https://www.malumatfurus.org/hakkinda/>

by columnists and to limit the spread misinformation created by the opinion-makers of major newspapers.²³ Muhtesip was closed in 2015 due to the political turmoil in Turkey, and its founders started a new initiative called 'Malumatfuruş' (know-it-all) to carry on with their initial goal of debunking newspaper columnists. Unlike most other fact-checking initiatives in Turkey, Malumatfuruş views the mainstream media as a source of disinformation and argue that mainstream media claims have to be constantly monitored by external platforms. In their view, the mainstream media environment has grown lazy over the 2000s, both by newspapers employing columnists that are themselves lazy, yet popular, and also by failing to fact-check their claims internally, thereby failing one of their core editorial purposes.

Malumatfuruş team prefers to remain anonymous and their debunking content is written under aliases. Other than the fact that the team is mostly identical to the founders of 'Muhtesip' a decade ago, not much is known about their background and identity.²⁴ The members of the team are active employees in civil service, law, IT and publishing sectors; the fact that all members contribute to Malumatfuruş as a

side job remains a strong incentive to remain anonymous. When verifying the claims of randomly-selected, continually rotating pool of columnists, the investigators rely on open-source content such as newspaper archives, public reports and open-access government statistics. The group has fact-checked more than 6800 columns from a total of 670 outlets (newspapers, news websites and news blogs). The site maintains an active, publicly-accessible dataset of all of the columnists it has verified since its emergence in 2015.²⁵

According to site data, the most frequently debunked columnists, as of 30 March 2020 have been Abdurrahman Dilipak (Yeni Akit), Ahmet Hakan (Hürriyet), Bekir Hazar (Takvim), Bülent Erandaç (Takvim), Emin Çölaşan (Sözcü), Engin Ardıç (Sabah), Ergün Diler (Takvim), Ertuğrul Özkök (Hürriyet), Halime Gürbüz (Türkiye Newspaper), Hilal Kaplan (Sabah), Hıncal Uluç (Sabah), Mehmet Barlas (Sabah), Soner Yalçın (Sözcü), Yılmaz Özdil (Sözcü) and Yiğit Bulut. The initiative remains strictly self-funded and isn't open to any form of crowdsourced funding initiative, advertisements or any other grants in order to retain its claim to objectivity.

²³ Uzunoğlu, Sarphan. "Malumatfuruş: Köşe yazarları yanlış bilgi paylaşıyor ve düzeltmiyor." *Journo*. 1 March 2017: <https://journo.com.tr/malumatfurus-kose-yazarlari-yanlis-bilgi-paylasiyor>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The dataset can be found at: <https://www.malumatfurus.org/kose-yazarlari/>

Platform URL	Date created	Headquarters	fact-checking role	Chairman/ Director	Declared Team Size ²⁶	Funding Scheme (2019)	IFCN member
YalanSavar.org	2009	San Francisco, CA	scientific fact-checking, pseudoscience debunking	Dr. Işıl Arıcan	11	Self-funded, no ads	No
Malumatfurus.org	2009	Istanbul	newspaper columnist fact-checking	Not listed	6	Self-funded, no ads	No
EvrinAgaci.org	2010	Lubbock, TX	scientific fact-checking, pseudoscience debunking	Çağrı Mert Bakırcı-Taylor	32	- Crowdfunded (Patreon) - Product Sales (Agora Science Market) - Google Ads - Sponsored content	No
DogrulukPayi.com	2014	Istanbul	political statement verification	Batuhan Ersun	11	- Private Donations - National Endowment for Democracy - Poynter Institute of Journalism - Consulate General of Sweden, Istanbul - Embassy of Germany, Ankara - Interest from past investments - Crowdfunded (Patreon)	Yes
Teyit.org	2015	Istanbul	news debunking	Mehmet Atakan Foça	28	- Heinrich Böell Stiftung - US Embassy, Ankara - Facebook - European Climate Foundation - Media for Democracy - Crowdfunded (Patreon)	Yes
gununyalanlari.com	2015	Istanbul	news debunking	Not listed	Not listed	- Bosphorus Center for Global Affairs (government-funded)	No
FactCheck.TR	2015	Istanbul	news debunking	Not listed	Not listed	- Bosphorus Center for Global Affairs (government-funded)	No
Doğrula.org	2017	Unspecified	news debunking	Not listed	Not listed	Unspecified	No

Table - 1: A General Overview of the Main Fact-checking Platforms in Turkey.

²⁶ The list includes declared volunteers (including unpaid), in addition to the core team size under payroll.

What is the IFCN?

International Fact-checking Network (IFCN) belongs to the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, which is a media and journalism-focused educational institution based in Florida, United States. IFCN was established in 2015 in order to create a global network of fact-checking initiatives, and also to establish a degree of accountability and standardization to the practice of fact-checking. Its establishment came after a growing need to coordinate and link the efforts of fact-checkers from around the world and to encourage best practices in fact-checking by monitoring and auditing its members regularly. Fact-checking initiatives apply to be an IFCN member by offering key information such as their team composition, fact-checking performance and financial structure available for external verification and assessment by third parties. The anonymous external assessors evaluate a group's IFCN application by assessing their expertise, funding stream, team size and specialization, and prior

performance in fact-checking. Successfully completing this process and becoming an IFCN member implies that the fact-checking organization in question is transparent and objective in its fact-checking and follows a specific, explainable methodology in its verification processes. Major platforms such as Facebook and Google recognize IFCN members as the main go-to sources in fact-checking across different countries, languages and media cultures. To that end IFCN membership is both a quality stamp and an externally-verified objectivity assessment mechanism, which grants members greater influence over battling disinformation across major media platforms. There are 77 verified and active IFCN members worldwide and there are two IFCN signatories in Turkey: Teyit.org and Doğruluk Payı. All verified IFCN signatories are listed on ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories along with their applications and external assessment scorecards.

The group views political polarization as the most problematic driver affecting news and columnist quality in Turkey. As polarization deepens, newsreaders select messaging and content that reinforce their echo chambers and actively seek out columnists that can 'score points' against the other side, leading to the proliferation of writers that regularly make bombastic, yet unverified claims. This public demand, in turn, reduces newspapers' incentive to correct, pressure or fire these misleading columnists, contributing to the corruption of the news and opinion ecosystem, according to the platform.²⁷ Further troubling for the group has been the complete absence of remorse on the part of the columnists that have continued to disseminate occasional disinformation, even after being fact-checked by Malumatfuruş. Most feedback the group got from columnists has been negative, blaming the platform of 'insolence' and being 'puppets' of various political parties. Pro-opposition columnists have blamed the platform for being pro-government, whereas pro-government columnists accused the group of being a puppet of 'foreign interests'.²⁸ Furthermore, having their claims debunked publicly

hasn't changed public popularity or respectability of any columnist, nor did the newspapers issue any warnings to their columnists or published corrections on behalf of them. Although such negativities haven't yet deterred the platform, they explain a lot in terms of the toxic information and media environment in the country; both on the supply and demand side of information.

About a year after the advent of *YalanSavar*, another science-focused debunking platform began its operations. On 5 November 2010, Evrim Ağacı (evrimagaci.org) was established by an Ankara-based students' union with an interest in evolutionary biology at the Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ). The starting goal of this initiative was to mount a rigorous and well-argued critique against creationist arguments in digital space, that have been expressed frequently and widely on several popular social platforms in the late-2000s.²⁹ In January 2011, the group opened its first public account on Facebook, increasing its exposure and rapidly turning into a digital hub of popular science, evolutionary biology and genetics research that directly took

²⁷ Uzunoğlu, Sarphan. "Malumatfuruş: Köşe yazarları yanlış bilgi paylaşıyor ve düzeltmiyor." *Journo*. 1 March 2017: <https://journos.com.tr/malumatfurus-kose-yazarlari-yanlis-bilgi-paylasiyor>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ An extensive interview with the platform's founder can be accessed at: <https://journos.com.tr/evrim-agaci>

on creationist authors and arguments.³⁰ For several years, the group's Facebook page became its primary outlet and public interface; for a while, Evrim Ağacı communicated with its followers only on that platform. Founders of the initiative have both produced written content to debunk misinformation regarding the theory of evolution and also actively engaged with follower questions, responding to as many questions as possible on their Facebook page. The initiative began archiving the most frequently asked questions over the years, writing extended Facebook articles with citations that responded to those questions. As the number of these Facebook articles and follower responses grew, the group opened its first webpage - evrimagaci.org in December 2012, which hosted all of their posts and responses into a coherent corpus of debunking content.

Having started as a self-funded initiative, Evrim Ağacı began receiving funding and scientific support from the European Society for Evolutionary Biology in April 2012. This has enabled the group to expand its staff and content production volume, gradually expanding its verification agenda into food science, virology, astronomy, physics, philosophy and psychology. In time, the platform introduced a number of additional public engagement projects. These are the Scientific Dictionary³¹ (an interdisciplinary Turkish-language science dictionary), Diagnosis Catalogue³² (a database of all diagnosed illnesses in the world, along with a blog post defining their main characteristics), Quotes³³ (an archive of the most famous quotes by the leading scientists in human history), Gelincik³⁴ (or 'Weasel', an interactive demonstration of Darwin's genetic algorithm), PhD2³⁵ (a science public engagement project) and Agora³⁶ (Turkey's first 'science market' of books, tools and equipment). These projects add to the platform's revenues, but the platform itself isn't a for-profit entity. The group also has a partnership with Boğaziçi University, where it organizes regular meetups and seminars.

In 2019, Evrim Ağacı kicked off a new initiative called 'EA Akademi', which is a list of curated topics featuring the most-read content of the website, enabling users to deepen their understanding of their chosen topic via guided study.³⁷ The purpose of EA Akademi is to create a Turkish-language science curriculum accessible for all levels on a diverse range of issues including general biochemistry, astronomy, molecular biology and game theory. The initiative has also published three public interest and popular science books on evolutionary biology and published articles and columns in several popular science magazines and newspapers.

As the main purpose of the initiative is to fact-check and verify claims about evolution and debunk pseudoscience, it often clashed directly with the creationist and more religious/conservative users who interpreted the initiative's messaging as an 'atheist propaganda' and 'anti-religious content'.³⁸ Furthermore, the initiative has come under conservative media and government criticism due to its stance on secularism (a major political topic in Turkey), vegetarianism-veganism, genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) and LGBT rights.

Evrin Ağacı is still led by its founder Çağrı Mert Bakırcı, who serves as the initiative's chief editor. His wife, Ashlee Lane Bakırcı-Taylor serves as the chief advisor in scientific affairs and a group of 30 general and specialized editors (for example, in astronomy, philosophy, anthropology) preside over a pool of 19 resident, and more than 80 volunteer writers and translators. Although the platform receives funding support from the European Society for Evolutionary Biology, it is still a primarily self-funded initiative, but open to crowdfunding through its Patreon account. It has briefly accepted ads on its website (confined only to the magazine 'All About Space'), but rejected ads from the Russian atomic energy institute Rosatom, an unidentified Turkish hospital,

³⁰ The group's Facebook page can be accessed at: <https://www.facebook.com/evrimagaci/>

³¹ <https://evrimagaci.org/sozluk>

³² <https://evrimagaci.org/etiket/hastalik-katalogu-12449>

³³ <https://evrimagaci.org/sozler>

³⁴ <https://evrimagaci.org/gelincik/>

³⁵ <https://phd2.evrinagaci.org/>

³⁶ <https://pazar.evrinagaci.org/>

³⁷ <https://evrimagaci.org/evrim-agaci-akademi-nedir-7695>

³⁸ See for example: 'Maymuncular yine ODTU'de'. Yeni Akit. 29 November 2013: <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/maymuncular-yine-odtude-7666.html> and 'Başörtülülerin giremediği ODTÜ'yu maymunlar sardı!'. Yeni Akit. 19 October 2013: <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/basortululerin-giremedigi-odtuyu-maymunlar-sardi-6411.html>

and another unnamed online betting platform.³⁹ The group is still open to hosting advertisements and publishing sponsored videos but has stringent guidelines on which types of ads it accepts, listed in detail on the platform website.

Years after the emergence of Turkey's first-wave fact-checking platforms, the first dedicated political independent fact-checking initiative in Turkey, Doğruluk Payı (<https://www.dogrulukpayi.com/>), went online in June 2014. As the political scene began witnessing intense polarization in the run-up to the local elections in March, and the Presidential election in August of the same year, the country's media ecosystem began to polarize.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, Turkey's mainstream media and news environment faced additional pressures from bans, closures, confiscations and censorship measures, creating a significant demand for independent news and information. The first fact-checking platform that sought to fill this growing gap was Doğruluk Payı.

Launched as an initiative of the 'İzlemedeyiz Foundation' (<https://izlemedeyiz.org/>), Doğruluk Payı was created by a group of recent political science and international relations graduates. The initial purpose of Doğruluk Payı was to verify the election campaign claims of all competing politicians and parties at a time when political discourse was growing increasingly hostile and exaggerated with increasingly fewer independent journalism options to provide context. During its first few months of inception, the founders have considered building Doğruluk Payı as a paid service provider for major media companies as an external fact-checking consultancy. Following a consistent streak of unpaid offers, they have then chosen to build the platform as a non-profit organization, outside the scope of the mainstream media ecosystem, as a self-funded endeavor.⁴¹ After more than two years of public exposure, the group then managed to attract funds from major sources such as the National Endowment for Democracy, Consulate of Sweden in Istanbul and the Poynter Institute.⁴² Boosting their staff

size and fact-checking performance through these starter funds, the group then opened itself to user donations via Patreon, which contributed to roughly 7.8% of its gross income in 2018. Over time, it has evolved into an influential platform that could rapidly verify claims from all politicians, including the opposition parties, members of the parliament, government officials and state officials. Although its initial goal was to increase the transparency and accountability of the political campaign system and political promises in general, gradually Doğruluk Payı has turned into a watchdog of all claims and statements from the full spectrum of the political ecosystem in Turkey.

Doğruluk Payı operates a team of eleven staffers, led by Batuhan Ersun, the chairman of the board. Former founding chairman of the organization, Baybars Örsek now serves as the director of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) under the aegis of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.⁴³ General Coordinator Yüzyıl Aydın and the Coordinator for Digital Operations Denizcan Sarı manage six editors and two video editors. The team follows political statements live through a combination of national news sources, prioritizing daily political news agenda, breaking news and reports that receive particular attention online. Around 30%⁴⁴ of their fact-checks come from follower requests; users either send emails or use social media to flag certain statements to be verified by the platform. Then, the platform diversifies claims proportionately to the parliamentary seats and influence of each party. This prevents excessive focus on a single political party, yet retains a degree of balance in line with each party's electoral legitimacy in the parliament.

Editors follow a two-tier verification process: first, claims made by politicians are checked using open source tools, official reports and expert statements. If this yields inconclusive results, Doğruluk Payı editors then approach multiple issue experts (scientists, other officials, or researchers) to cross-validate these claims. Once evaluated, political statements and claims then receive a grade on a scale

³⁹ For a disclaimer about the platform's finances and income, please see: <https://evrimagaci.org/sponsorlu-icerikler-ve-reklamlar-hakkinda-7962>

⁴⁰ Murat, Akser. "News media consolidation and censorship in Turkey: From liberal ideals to corporatist realities." *Mediterranean Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2018): 78-97. Tanash, Rima, Zhouhan Chen, Dan Wallach, and Melissa Marschall. "The Decline of Social Media Censorship and the Rise of Self-Censorship after the 2016 Failed Turkish Coup." In 7th {USENIX} Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet ({FOCI} 17). 2017.

⁴¹ A Bloomberg HT interview with the platform's founding former director, Baybars Örsek can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2GHmOQc8Sg>

⁴² The platform's financial statement and biographies of its team members can be accessed at: <https://www.dogrulukpayi.com/~Hakimizda>

⁴³ <https://www.poynter.org/member/baybars-orsek/>

⁴⁴ Bloomberg HT interview Baybars Örsek: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2GHmOQc8Sg>

of validity: 'correct', 'close', 'mixed', 'distant' and 'wrong', and are published on the Doğruluk Payı website with an extended analysis featuring expert evaluation, figures and facts that have contributed to the editor's final assessment. Editor(s) that have handled the verification process are mentioned on the web page as the primary contact point for that particular evaluation and politicians or officials that have been fact-checked can directly contact the editor to challenge or critique those claims. The results are then published on the group's Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube accounts.⁴⁵

In 2019, Doğruluk Payı began producing interviews of and discussions on key national agenda items, featuring issue experts and opinion leaders most knowledgeable about the topic. These features are created in line with popular topics that attract the most public attention that week or month. In the past, it included topics such as common misperceptions and biases towards Syrian refugees, digital surveillance, suicide and religious schools in Turkey.⁴⁶ Since its establishment, the group also regularly maintains a report card called 'Hükümetre'⁴⁷ (Govern-meter), which keeps track of campaign pledges made by successive governments; whether pledges are fulfilled or are still pending. Hükümetre is open to public on their website, sorted according to the government period and type of promises made (urban affairs, social policy, economy, and so on).

Soon after Doğruluk Payı, another major player entered the Turkish fact-checking ecosystem: **Teyit.org**, which has been a turning point in Turkey's fact-checking quest. The trigger for its establishment was the 10 October 2015 Ankara Train Station Bombing, perpetrated by ISIS. This period witnessed a rapid increase in violence, repression and turmoil, not only contributing to the heavy polarization and restriction of the information ecosystem in Turkey, but also a distinct entrenchment among public and news consumers. 6 January 2015 suicide bombing of the Sultan Ahmet Police Station and a similar attack against the Vatan Police

headquarters on 1 April, February Turkish military operations against ISIS, several consecutive nation-wide bans and restrictions on social media and the 11 April collapse of the long-standing ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK all contributed to a dangerous and uncontrolled spiral of violence and repression across the country.⁴⁸ It was during this period that organized disinformation began to be used as a conscious strategy by all political parties and movements. Yet since it has access to full state media resources, the most disproportionately visible of such camps was that of the government, blurring the line between state and party propaganda.⁴⁹ To battle with government propaganda, opposition parties and movements also relied increasingly on exaggeration and organized disinformation, substantially eroding the information ecosystem in the country.

Teyit.org was established during this state of intermittent chaos and a dire need for accurate information; its founder - Mehmet Atakan Foça - was already engaged in a single-handed fact-checking crusade online. He decided to upgrade his personal endeavors into a more organized and professional practice by setting up Teyit.org, as the amount of disinformation flooding the media system had overwhelmed him personally.⁵⁰

The platform became immediately popular after its launch as it verified a broad range of disinformation topics. Although most fact-checking initiatives in Turkey have started with a specialization (leader statements, science, or columnist claims), Teyit.org entered the fact-checking ecosystem with a 'catch-all' agenda. The decision to start with such broader agenda was a result of popular demand, as the period that witnessed Teyit's emergence was both extremely traumatic, yet also significantly repressed in terms of access to accurate information and facts. The platform's popularity was also a result of its diligent engagement with an overwhelming influx of verification requests sent to the group by social media users.

⁴⁵ The platforms evaluation criteria and assessment protocol can be accessed at: <https://www.dogrulukpayi.com/~Degerlendirme-Kriterleri>

⁴⁶ These are published on the platform's Youtube channel, which can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/dogrulukpayi>

⁴⁷ <https://www.dogrulukpayi.com/hukümetre>

⁴⁸ Saka, Erkan. "Tracking digital emergencies in the Aftermath of Gezi Park Protests." *Research and Policy on Turkey* 2, no. 1 (2017): 62-75. Yesil, Bilge, and Efe Kerem Sozeri. "Online surveillance in Turkey: Legislation, technology and citizen involvement." *Surveillance & Society* 15, no. 3/4 (2017): 543-549.

⁴⁹ Erkan, Gülsüm, and Ahmet Ayhan. "Siyasal İletişimde Dezenformasyon ve Sosyal Medya: Bir Doğrulama Platformu Olarak Teyit. Org." *Akdeniz Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi* 29. Özel Sayısı (2018): 202-223.

⁵⁰ The 7 November 2017 Medyascope interview with the platform's founding director Mehmet Atakan Foça can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxE5XAHFPPg>

In its first few years, the group battled with objectivity at a time when being and the remaining objective became an increasingly harder endeavor. Foça has claimed in a later interview that the group was overwhelmed with the flood of fact-checking requests initially, and many in the group had to learn fact-checking methodology, claim prioritization and verification protocols on the job, gradually refining and streamlining their methods based on public demand.⁵¹ Although the platform has managed the initial flurry of fact-checking requests well, its members have realized that an essential part of their job would be to encourage and support open-source fact-checking, by decentralizing and autonomizing verification processes. To that end, Teyit.org translated Craig Silverman's 'Verification Handbook' (<https://verificationhandbook.com/>) into Turkish,⁵² to assist other journalists and citizen fact-checkers in their verification processes, as well as to distribute the fact-checking load by crowdsourcing.

Teyit.org started with a core group of four analysts but gradually increased their staff size to 23 members as more funding began pouring in.⁵³ They also employ five interns, a legal counsel, a financial auditor and more than 30 volunteers that contribute to the group's fact-checking efforts. Mehmet Atakan Foça serves as the founding director of the group, while Gülin Çavuş serves as the chief editor, and Emre Saklıca, Nilgün Yılmaz, Ali Osman Arabacı and Mert Can Yılmaz serve as issue editors. The group employs a digital content strategist, visual editor, two videographers, video producer, a creative director, a digital engagement editor, and a motion graphic designer, along with seven writers. In terms of core staff size, Teyit.org is the largest fact-checking initiative in Turkey. At the time of writing this report, the platform has verified 126 claims as accurate, 1201 as false, 95 as semi-true and 16 claims as unverifiable. There is a live counter on the platform's website that updates daily based on the group's fact-checking efforts.

Teyit.org website contains a detailed methodology including publication guidelines, operational definition of fact-checking and verification, editorial rules, and digital media principles.⁵⁴ The group has gradually built up its financial infrastructure, starting from a self-funded initiative in 2015. As of 2019, it has a large Patreon donation pool, along with grants from the German Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, US Embassy of Turkey, European Climate Foundation, and Media for Democracy, whose exact contributions are listed on the group's webpage in line with their IFCN membership requirements.⁵⁵ The group also has a separate agreement with Facebook, where it flags false content, earning around 92% of its income in 2019 through this partnership. The primary financial goal of the initiative is to create an income model for all fact-checking platforms in Turkey by becoming fully crowd-funded and reduce their dependence on external funding, to bolster their claim to objectivity.⁵⁶

In addition to its primary fact-checking role, Teyit.org also prioritizes methods and norm-building for Turkish fact-checkers and also produces the tools and methods for all Turkish digital media users to self-verify claims. From this perspective, Teyit.org aims to pioneer the autonomization of fact-checking as a practice and decentralize such attempts by not only raising awareness and creating demand but also regularly publishing how-to manuals and videos, as well as running public courses that focus on the specifics of digital verification. They also have a 'live editor's desk'⁵⁷ page, where users can monitor facts and allegations submitted or currently evaluated by the platform's editors, following their progress and outcome.

Teyit.org's success has led to its much-debated partnership with ModyoTV - the exclusive channel displayed on Istanbul public transportation screens and other displays owned and operated by the Istanbul Municipality.⁵⁸ This agreement

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The translated e-book can be accessed at: <https://teyit.org/verification-handbook-turkce/>

⁵³ The platform's investigative team line-up can be accessed at: <https://teyit.org/ekip/>

⁵⁴ The platform's methodology and rulebook can be accessed at: <https://teyit.org/yayin-ilkeleri-ve-metodoloji/>

⁵⁵ Annual breakdown of the platform's finances and funding sources can be accessed at: <https://teyit.org/hedir/>

⁵⁶ 7 November 2017 Medyascope interview with Mehmet Atakan Foça: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxE5XAHFPpG>

⁵⁷ <https://teyit.org/editormasasi/>

⁵⁸ 'teyit.org, İBB'nin yayıncısı Modyo TV ile iş birliği yaptı'. BirGün. 4 December 2018: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/teyit-org-ibb-nin-yayincisi-modyo-tv-ile-is-birligi-yapti-238947>

was intended to significantly broaden the audience of Teyit.org and distribute the group's fact-checking content to commuters that may not follow social media closely and to help limit the spread of disinformation more robustly. This was a tricky endeavor because the arrangement would entail Teyit.org - an initiative with an objectivity bid - to cooperate with a municipality, then led by a pro-government mayor. At a time of both direct censorship and self-censorship, Teyit.org had to walk a very fine line between broadcasting verification of content that wouldn't draw the ire of the government, but at the same time refrain from being perceived as a 'government stooge'.

The initial negotiations succeeded as both sides discussed what types of content could be broadcast from public transportation screens.⁵⁹ Teyit.org presented a large pool of sample non-political content that would be a good fit for public displays: themes revolving around public health, urban legends and popular culture. The process was finalized with an official agreement, enabling Teyit.org to broadcast short fact-checking videos on all Istanbul municipality screens by 1 December 2018. Yet, ModyoTV halted these broadcasts only four days later. The pretext, perhaps paradoxically, was another form of disinformation. Soon after the broadcasting began, a flurry of allegations flooded the social media sphere, alleging Teyit.org for having signed a direct deal with the Istanbul Municipality and was in essence, now 'purchased' by the government. This wasn't true, as the agreement was signed with ModyoTV, which wasn't tied to the municipality and was a media contractor. However, the line was too blurry for the critiques of this agreement, and a large number of disdainful Teyit.org fans accused both ModyoTV and Teyit.org for having won a 'secret public tender' from the government and that their agreement included terms that would amount to a white-washing of the government's policies. The overwhelming nature of this campaign has resulted in the unilateral termination of the contract by ModyoTV, leading to the abrupt ending of a 4-day experiment.⁶⁰

Yet, both sides have sat down again after the toxic political

climate of the 2018-19 election period was over. Teyit.org pitched a new proposal to ModyoTV in the hopes that a sustainable partnership can be established under the new mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu.⁶¹ A second agreement was reached by the end of October 2019, although this time with much less public advertisement to avoid a similar backlash that plagued the first agreement. With much less advertising, Teyit.org has silently begun supplying ModyoTV with a mutually agreeable and politically uncontroversial pool of fact-checking content. This agreement and the underlying process is an important case study on how independent fact-checking platforms can work with different political parties to maximize their public engagement and outreach, even during times of censorship and polarization.

Teyit.org's fortunes improved on another front, which enabled it to broaden not only its exposure, but also its enforcement capacity. The platform signed an agreement with Facebook in May 2018, becoming the first and currently only third-party Facebook news verification initiative in the country.⁶² This agreement has bestowed significant enforcement capacity to Teyit.org, as it now has the power to flag false Turkish news content on Facebook, publish a verification write-up on the topic and in turn, enable Facebook to reduce the exposure of the account disseminating such fake news. The workflow is defined in detail on both Facebook and Teyit.org websites: the content is first evaluated by Facebook according to three criteria:

- a) whether it influences participation in an election,
- b) a credible threat of violence, and
- c) in violation of the Facebook Community Standards.

If any of these conditions are met, Facebook deletes it automatically. If not, then Facebook sends the content over to Teyit.org, where it is evaluated according to its headline-content match, factual information presented and framing. If Teyit.org editors judge that the title or the content is fully, or partially flawed, then they flag it. Facebook then reduces the reach of the content by up to 80% on the News Feed, sending a warning to the account or news platform that

⁵⁹ For an extended explanation of the specifics of the Teyit.org-Modyo.TV partnership, please see Mehmet Atakan Foça's 6 December 2018 interview with MedyascopeTV: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24vRbZOF294>

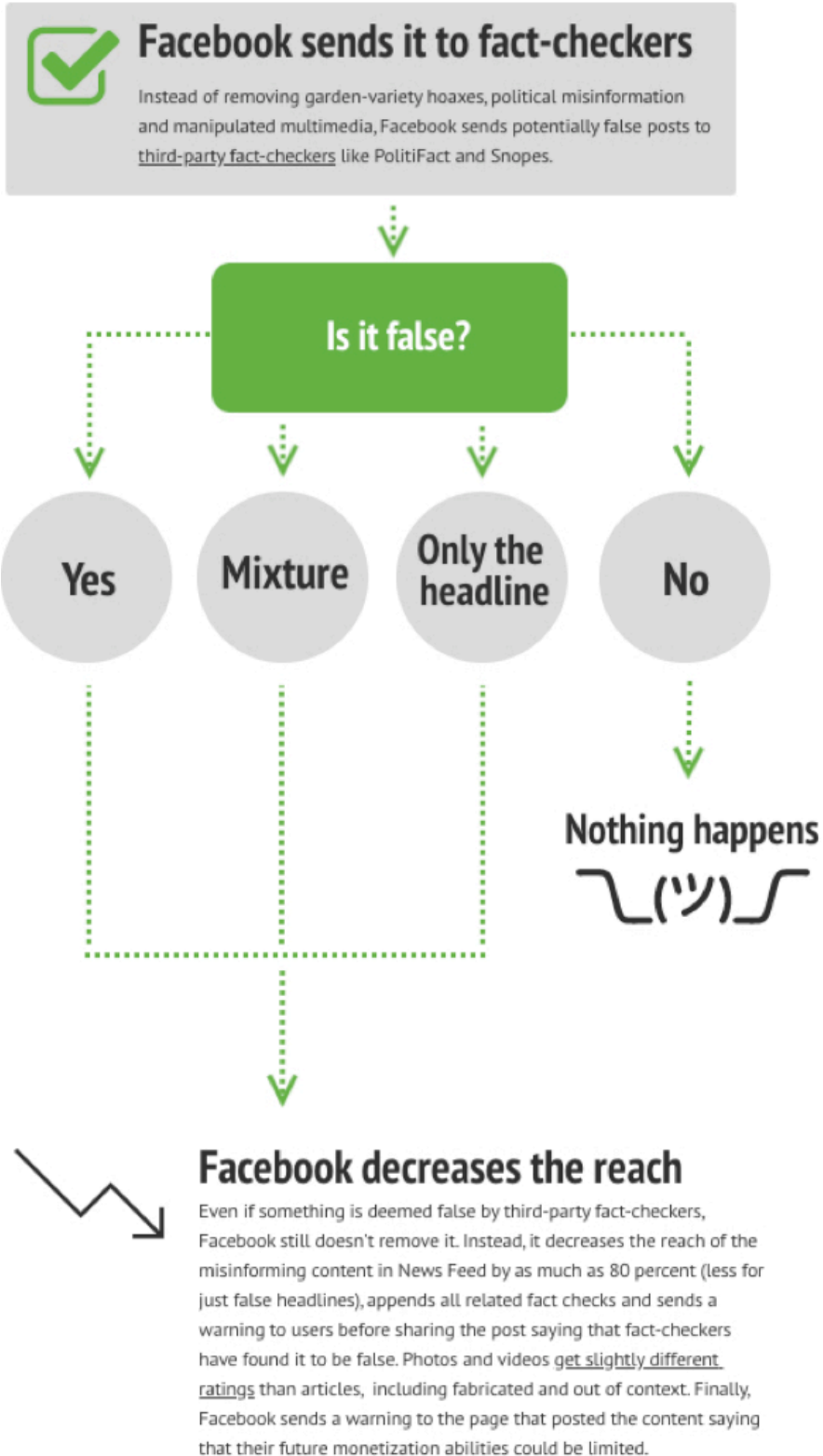
⁶⁰ The platform's explanation of what went wrong with its partnership with Modyo.TV can be accessed at: <https://teyit.org/kent-ekranlarinda-teyit-fikri-ne-umduk-ne-bulduk/>

⁶¹ 'Teyit yeniden İstanbul'un toplu taşıma araçlarında'. Teyit.org, 31 October 2019: <https://teyit.org/teyit-yeniden-istanbulun-toplu-tasima-araclarinda/>

⁶² 'Facebook'un doğrulama programı Türkiye'de teyit.org işbirliğiyle hayata geçiyor'. Teyit.org, 31 May 2018: <https://teyit.org/facebookun-dogrulama-programi-turkiyede-teyit-org-is-birligiyle-hayata-geciyor/>

further dissemination of false information would result in the reduction of their advertising and marketing income from Facebook. Such reductions in income can only be withdrawn once the account in question alters its content strategy and

receives Teyit.org's approval. Several Turkish news outlets, including the mainstream Hürriyet, have been subject to such Facebook income reductions in the last year.⁶³



Graph-1: What Facebook does and doesn't do to limit the spread of misinformation on the platform. Infographic by Daniel Funke, Source: Facebook. Full-size graph can be accessed at: <https://infogram.com/how-facebook-deals-with-misinformation-1hke60zwzg9345r>

⁶³ The author's private interview with Mehmet Atakan Foça, 4 March 2020.

Following the advent of Doğruluk Payı and Teyit.org as two leading dedicated political fact-checking initiatives, several competitors emerged from various political backgrounds. Among the first of those initiatives has been Doğrula.org - which became online in June 2017. A content analysis of the initiative's website yields a generally pro-government outlook, as it focuses mainly on debunking claims from opposition parties and groups, as well as international news sources that contradict the government's position. Some of those examples include debunking the opposition claim that President Erdoğan's election campaign logo was plagiarized from the Malibu drink logo,⁶⁴ fact-checking the allegation that government deputies are exempt from taxation,⁶⁵ pro-government companies, and also debunking a popular doctored video of then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım's TV interview.⁶⁶

The group's website doesn't contain any information about the editorial team, nor does it include any public information about its funding sources. In addition, editors and writers who debunk claims use aliases and codenames (the most regular contributor being 'Gascon Fish'), further obscuring the transparency of the group and its agenda. The group invites volunteer editors, who can join its fact-checking by applying on their website. In addition, users can submit fact-checking requests via the group's WhatsApp account via the phone number displayed on the group's webpage.

A similar initiative in English was created under the primary state news agency Anadolu Ajansı (AA), which began debunking claims from international news outlets by October 2019.⁶⁷ Rather than being pro-government, AA Fact-Check is 'pro-establishment', meaning it tries to 'defend' Turkey's official position in a way that is palatable for most political parties; not just the government. It focuses specifically on disinformation regarding Turkey's military operations against YPG and PKK militants, as well as Turkey's wider

cross-border military presence in Syria and its refugee policy. However, AA Fact-check can't be assessed as a part of the national fact-checking ecosystem because it is directly embedded into an existing major state-owned news agency. Furthermore, the website has a meagre output, engaging with a very narrow scope of disinformation types infrequently. To that end, AA Fact-check, in essence, performs the duty of the classical fact-finding task force in a traditional editorial office, and hence, cannot be considered as a dedicated fact-checking initiative like other groups discussed in this report.

Two other pro-government initiatives that are directly and explicitly funded by the government emerged roughly around the same time with Doğrula.org. These are Günün Yalanları (gununyalanlari.com/ - Daily Lies, in Turkish) and Fact-Checking Turkey (factcheckingturkey.com/ - in English), both of which are funded by the government public relations research initiative Bosphorus Center for Global Affairs or 'Bosphorus Global' (bosphorusglobal.org/en/activities). Günün Yalanları, similar to Doğrula.org, focuses on debunking disinformation from the opposition parties and groups that target government policy or stance on a given issue. The initiative became online in June 2015, soon after the collapse of Turkey's Kurdish peace process and the intensification of violence between Turkish security forces and the PKK forces during what is later called 'trench operations'.⁶⁸ The bulk of the group's debunking efforts initially went into contextualizing and verifying claims of heavy-handed response by the Turkish security forces in predominantly Kurdish civilian areas. More specifically, the platform combated what it perceived as internal and external disinformation regarding the operations of Turkish forces, engaging directly with national and international news outlets reporting on the clashes.⁶⁹ Over time, Günün Yalanları broadened its verification radar and began taking on a wider spectrum of debunking misleading claims against the government. These efforts inc-

⁶⁴ 'Erdoğan'ın Seçim Logosunun Malibu İçki Markasından Alındığı İddiası'. Doğrula.org. 2 September 2019. <https://www.dogrula.org/erdoganin-secim-logosunun-malibu-icki-markasindan-alindigi-iddiasi/>

⁶⁵ 'Kenan Sofuoğlu'nun Aracının Vergiden Muaf Olduğu İddiası'. Doğrula.org, 9 July 2018. <https://www.dogrula.org/kenan-sofuoglundun-aracinin-vergiden-muaf-oldugu-iddiasi/>

⁶⁶ 'Fikrasına Gülünmediği İddia Edilen Binali Yıldırım Videosu'. Doğrula.org 7 March 2019. <https://www.dogrula.org/fikrasina-gulunmedigi-iddia-edilen-binali-yildirim-videosu/>

⁶⁷ Anatolian Agency Fact-Check: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/fact-check>

⁶⁸ 'Behind the Barricades of Turkey's Hidden War'. New York Times. 29 May 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/magazine/behind-the-barricades-of-turkeys-hidden-war.html>

⁶⁹ See for example: 'Figen Yüksekdağ'ın "Sur'daki Kurşunlu Camii Havadan Helikopterlerle Bombalandı" Yalanı'. Günün Yalanları. 8 December 2015. <https://gununyalanlari.com/yalan/242-figen-yuksekdagin-surdaki-kursunlu-camii-havadan-helikopterlerle-bombalandi-yalani>

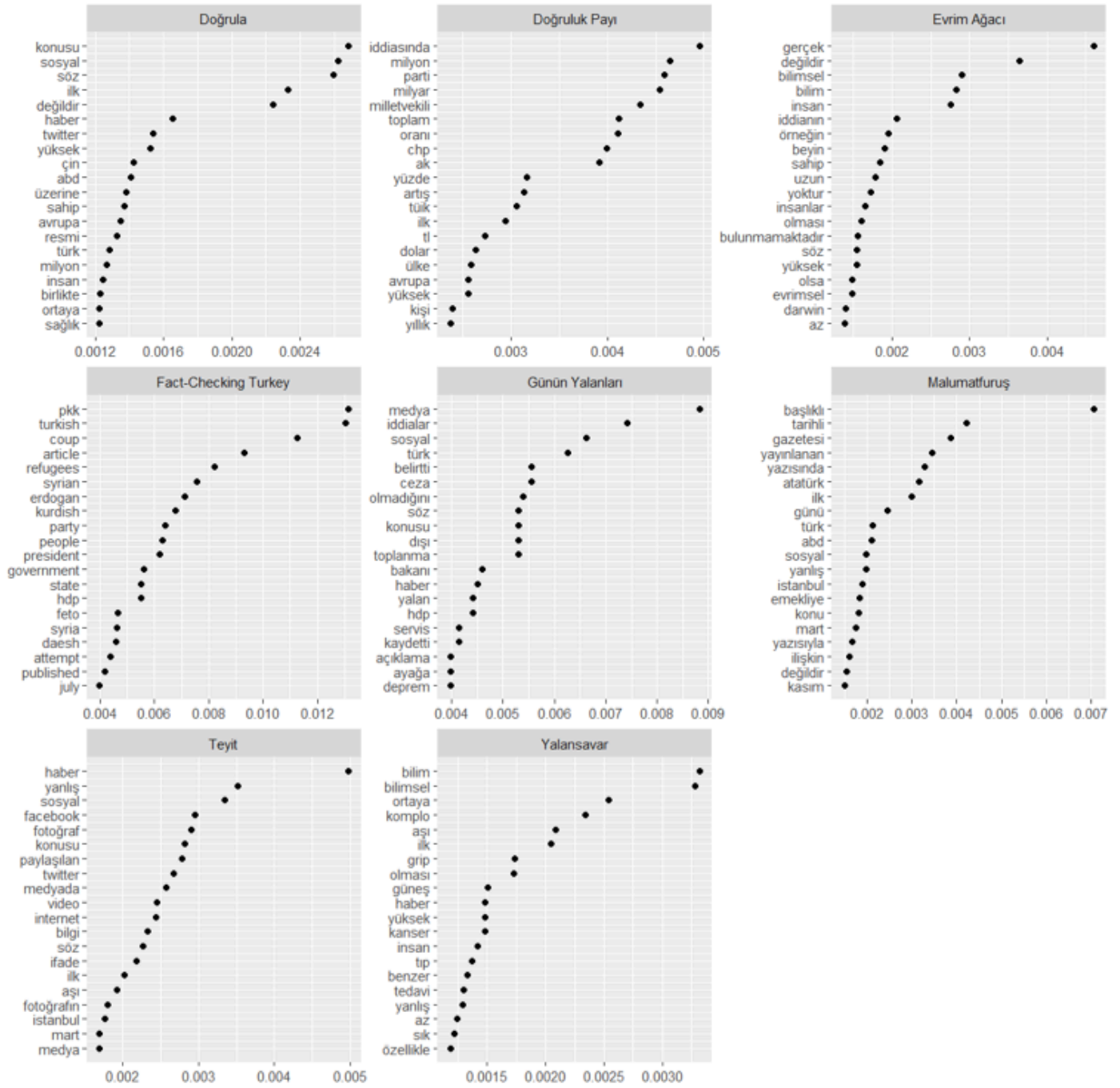
cluded opposition parties' claims about the construction of the Istanbul Airport, public misperceptions and disinformation against Syrian refugees and false claims made by the parliamentary members from the opposition parties against government policy.⁷⁰

Unlike most other fact-checking initiatives, Günün Yalanları (as well as its English-language cousin Fact-Check.TR) only select false statements to debunk. From that perspective, they don't have a random selection process for fact-checked claims and they don't follow the fact-checking protocols pursued by other platforms that are IFCN members. Neither Günün Yalanları, nor Fact-Check.TR has a publicly accessible site that lists their team members, nor do they host a statement on their principles of publishing, fact-checking

methodology or fact-checking criteria. Günün Yalanları also runs a side project called 'Utanç Günlüğü' (or Chronicles of Shame - utancgunlugu.com), which logs all major cases of Islamophobia in the world.

Fact-Checking Turkey serves as the English-language version of Günün Yalanları, although content-wise it engages more frequently with international news coverage of Turkey. The group's website has dedicated sections for the failed coup attempt in July 2016, domestic politics, foreign policy, economy and social issues. There is also a separate section called 'News' where the group publishes short opinion segments in English that mainly aims to reinforce Turkey's position vis-a-vis the PKK or in Syria.

⁷⁰ The platform has a section on most commonly debunked claims here: <https://gununyalanlari.com/populer>

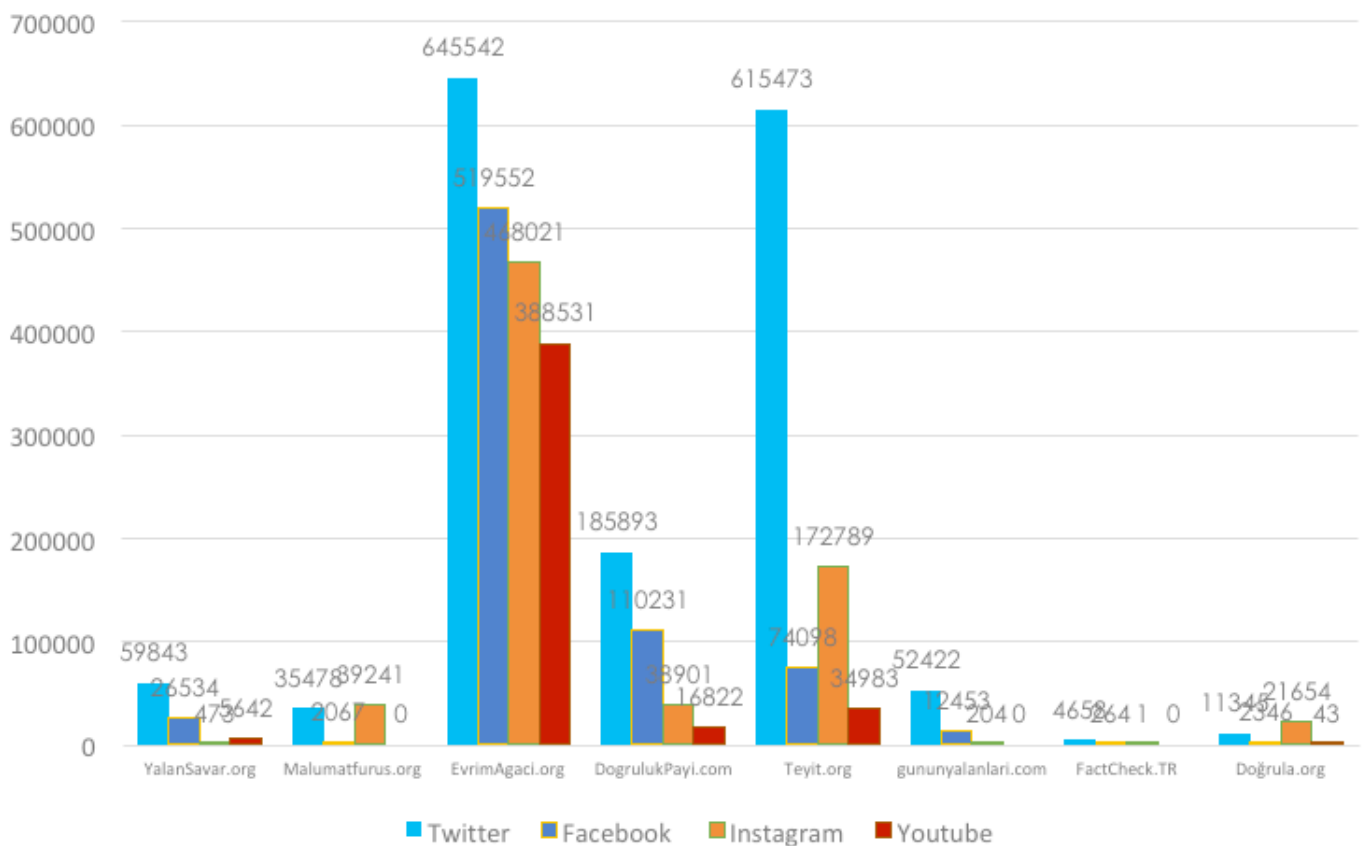


Graph-2: Top word frequencies of total written content of each Turkish fact-checking platform. The data is scraped from the websites of all platforms and cleaned for stop words. This graph is intended to demonstrate the macro-level focus and fact-checking agenda of each platform.

Other debunking projects from Bosphorus Global include 'FETO Facts' (fetofacts.com), which debunks domestic and foreign disinformation on the Fethullah Gulen organization and its network, 'Crackdown Chronicles' (crackdownchronicles.com) which logs human rights abuses in the US and the EU, 'In Fact', which is a 5-minute news debunking program commissioned by the Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) to accompany its prime time news report, 'Real Economy' (realeconomytr.com), which seeks to debunk disinformation regarding Turkey's economic crisis and its recovery process, and 'Facts of Turkey' (factsofturkey.org), which is less of a fact-checking platform and more of an outlet that brings overlooked positive news about Turkey to the mainstream. These platforms contain similar problems about transparency, verification protocols and financial information statements that Günün Yalanları and Fact-Checking.TR suffer from. In addition, these platforms fulfil an agenda-setting and propaganda function, rather than

act as fact-checking platforms in the true sense of the term. However, so much fragmentation of the government's efforts into several loosely connected debunking entities has so far yielded modest returns, as these initiatives remain low-engagement, low-follower outlets on social media.

To conclude this section, a final word on these platforms' social media reach is required. In terms of digital popularity (measured by followers on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube), the most sought-after platform is EvrimAgaci.org, which enjoys nearly 2 million aggregate followers on four platforms. They are followed by Teyit.org (863 thousand) and DoğrulukPayı (346 thousand), forming the most popular cohort of the Turkish fact-checking ecosystem. The combined follower base of YalanSavar, Malumatfuruş, GününYalanları, Fact-Checking Turkey and Doğrula.org (261 thousand all combined) is still lower than Doğruluk Payı alone.



Graph-3: Social media popularity of fact-checking platforms

DOES FACT-CHECKING WORK IN TURKEY?

Measurement of the impact of fact-checking is still a developing field, as newer methods and techniques are introduced to assess the reach and consumption of fact-checked content.⁷¹ Whether 'fact-checking works', is a similar question to whether 'journalism works', according to IFCN director Baybars Örsök.⁷² He claims that just as investigative journalism didn't end corruption and malpractice in politics and corporate affairs, fact-checking hasn't and probably won't end disinformation. However, he maintains that both investigative journalism and fact-checking work by building greater awareness of such malpractices and generating public pressure against people in leadership positions to remind them that nobody is immune to the repercussions of such malpractice. Teyit.org founder Mehmet Atakan Foça also maintains a similar view; specifically, that fact-checking must be viewed as a marathon, and its overall impact on an information ecosystem will be cumulative and long-term.⁷³ IFCN's Turkey assessors Erkan Saka and Sarphan Uzunoğlu are more optimistic, however, as they both view the growing demand for fact-checking in Turkey as a positive development in and of itself.⁷⁴ They maintain that the more demand these platforms create, the more long-term appeal there will be on verification as a regular component of the news and media ecosystem.

From a more quantitative point of view, there are several ways of measuring the 'success' of a fact-checking platform. Most commonly used measures in the scientific literature are a) the extent of their reach/popularity, b) fact-checking volume/output, and c) ability to reduce disinformation, both as an aggregate measure in an information ecosystem and

content-specific impact such as in times of crises.⁷⁵

As a more general snapshot of public awareness of the fact-checking environment in Turkey, 'Türkiye Raporu' (turkiyeraporu.com) – a public opinion research initiative of 'İstanbul Ekonomi' (istanbul-ekonomi.com/en) - conducted a survey on the information-seeking and verification practices of news consumers for the use of this report.⁷⁶ The largest chunk of the respondents (37.0%) stated that they don't use the Internet to get the news and the second-largest chunk (17.4%) claimed that they don't fact-check the claims they view on the Internet. Still, the majority of the respondents do fact-check online claims through various measures, indicating a general tendency to second-guess the assertions read on the Internet and social media. The largest verification source is 'other news websites' (25.6%), followed by 'family or friends' (9.7%). The total sum of all stated reliance on fact-checking groups in this survey is less than 10%. Among the fact-checking platforms, Doğruluk Payı is the most popular (3.7%), followed by Teyit.org (2.7%). Male respondents have generally expressed a greater tendency to fact-check and awareness of the leading fact-checking platforms, whereas almost half of the female respondents (45.6%) didn't verify the claims they have seen on the Internet.

In terms of age groups, older respondents tend to use the Internet less for news purposes compared to younger respondents. However, in terms of deciding to verify the claims read on the Internet, the picture is blurrier, as younger respondents (18-24 and 25-34 groups) expressed slightly less interest in fact-checking, although the percentile

⁷¹ Ciampaglia, Giovanni Luca, Prashant Shiralkar, Luis M. Rocha, Johan Bollen, Filippo Menczer, and Alessandro Flammini. "Computational fact checking from knowledge networks." *PloS one* 10, no. 6 (2015). Vlachos, Andreas, and Sebastian Riedel. "Fact checking: Task definition and dataset construction." In *Proceedings of the ACL 2014 Workshop on Language Technologies and Computational Social Science*, pp. 18-22. 2014. Graves, Lucas, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifer. "Understanding innovations in journalistic practice: A field experiment examining motivations for fact-checking." *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 1 (2016): 102-138. Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifer. "Estimating fact-checking's effects." Arlington, VA: American Press Institute (2015).

⁷² From the author's private interview with Baybars Örsök. 10 March 2020.

⁷³ From the author's private interview with Mehmet Atakan Foça. 4 March 2020.

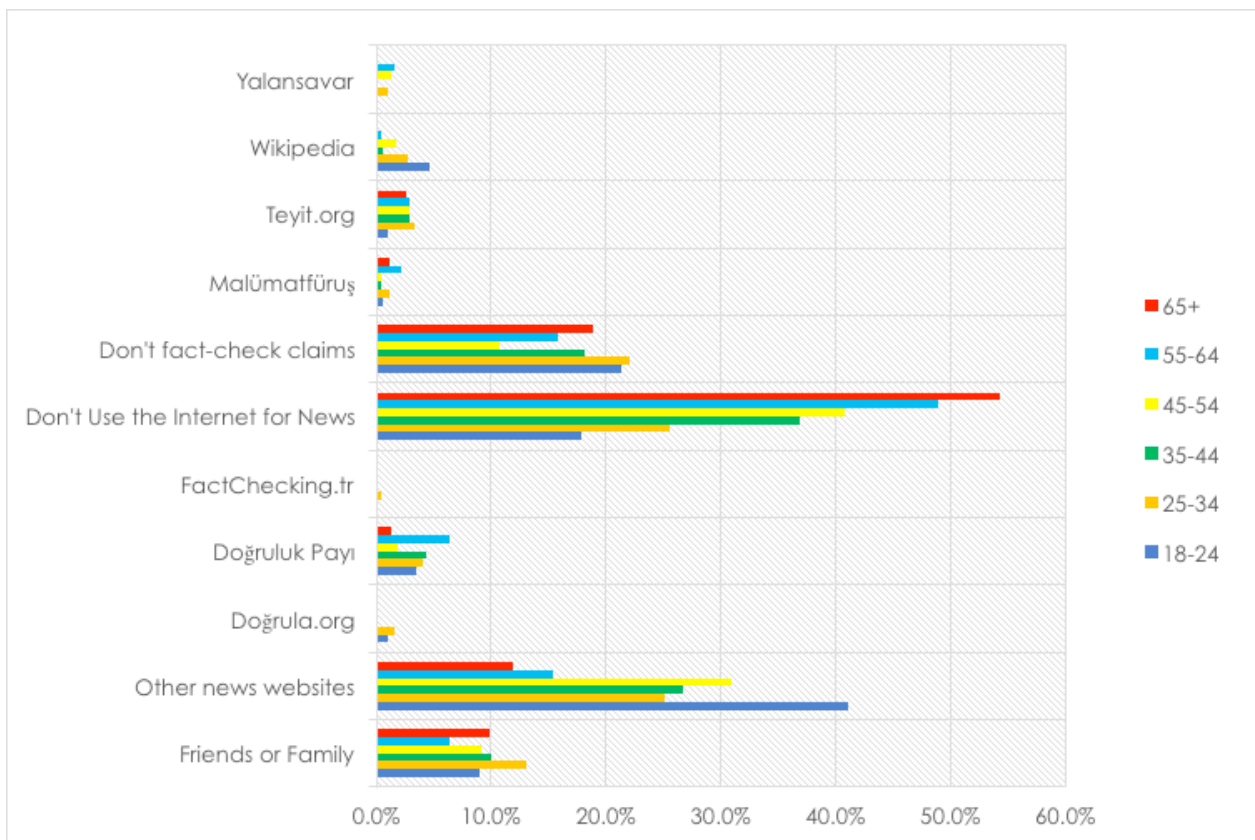
⁷⁴ From the author's private interview with Erkan Saka and Sarphan Uzunoğlu. 6 March 2020.

⁷⁵ Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifer. "The effect of fact-checking on elites: A field experiment on US state legislators." *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 628-640. Garrett, R. Kelly, Erik C. Nisbet, and Emily K. Lynch. "Undermining the corrective effects of media-based political fact checking? The role of contextual cues and naive theory." *Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (2013): 617-637. Tambuscio, Marcella, Giancarlo Ruffo, Alessandro Flammini, and Filippo Menczer. "Fact-checking effect on viral hoaxes: A model of misinformation spread in social networks." In *Proceedings of the 24th international conference on World Wide Web*, pp. 977-982. 2015. Margolin, Drew B., Aniko Hannak, and Ingmar Weber. "Political fact-checking on Twitter: When do corrections have an effect?." *Political Communication* 35, no. 2 (2018): 196-219. Thorson, Emily. "Belief echoes: The persistent effects of corrected misinformation." *Political Communication* 33, no. 3 (2016): 460-480.

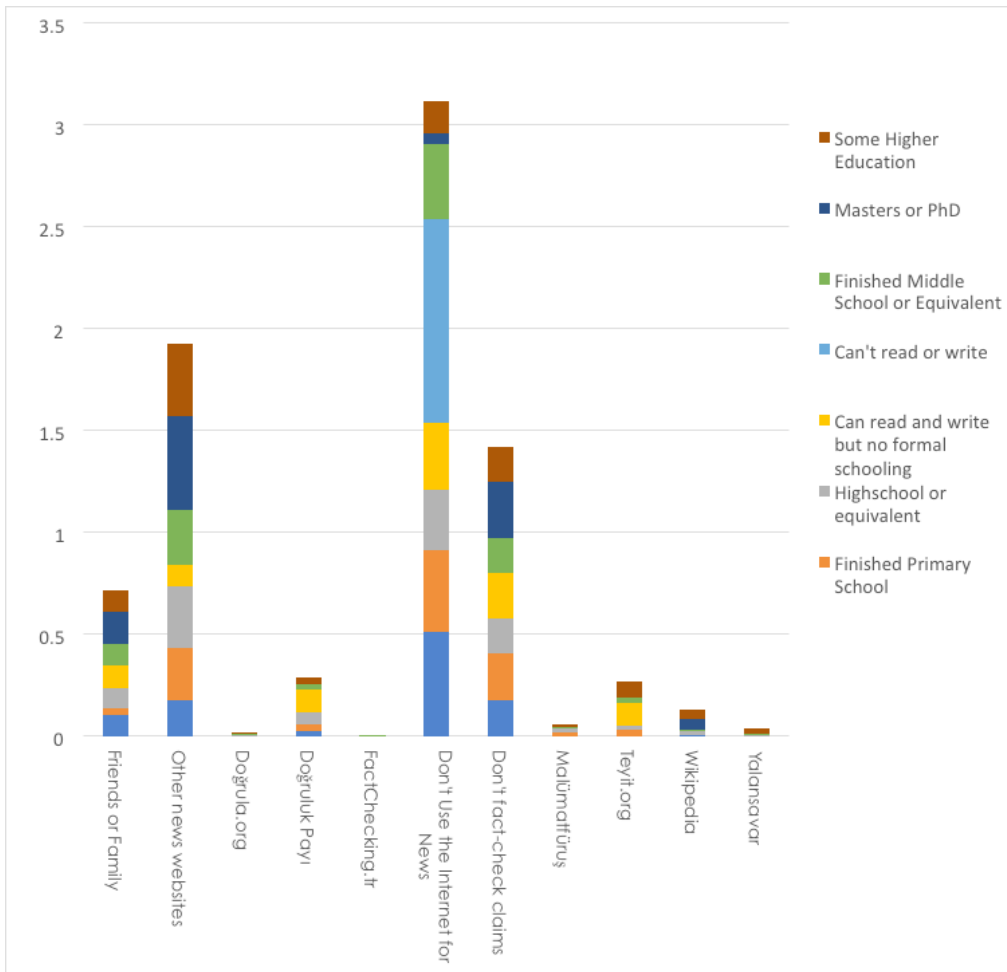
⁷⁶ Survey dates: 4-6 March 2020, Sample size: random-selected 1537 respondents from a nationally-representative pool at NUTS2-level. 95% confidence interval with +/- standard errors. Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing.

breakdown of these results across other age groups is quite similar. Similarly, the level of education of the respondents produce a blurry picture; with the exception of university and higher education graduates, most educational attainment clusters have similar practices on fact-checking. Both Teyit.org and Doğruluk Payı are the most popular (11.1%) among 'no formal education' respondents, whereas older respondents relied on Wikipedia more than younger

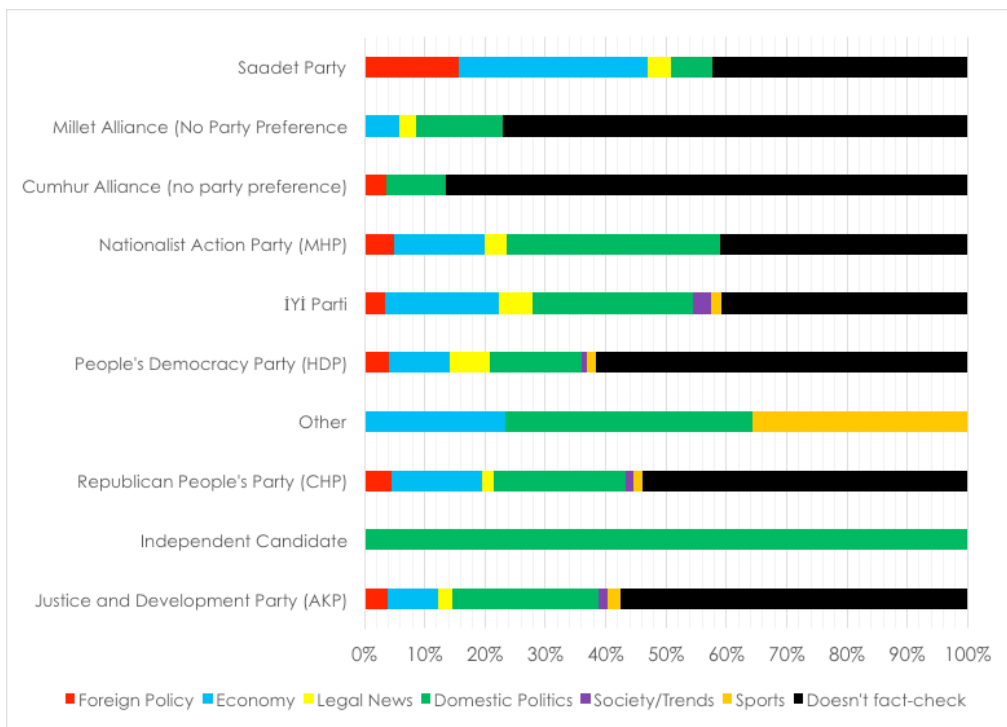
respondents, despite the fact that Wikipedia was banned in Turkey from 29 April 2017 to 15 January 2020. In terms of party affiliations, 'Cumhur alliance' (AKP + MHP) voters with no specific party support had the least engagement with the Internet as a source of news. On the other hand, among those that use the Internet as a source of news, fact-checking behavior seems to be similar (around 10-20% range not fact-checking news).



Graph-4: Which outlet or platform do you use to verify news claims you see on the Internet?
[Sorted according to age group]



Graph-5: Which outlet or platform do you use to verify news claims you see on the Internet?
[Sorted according to educational attainment]



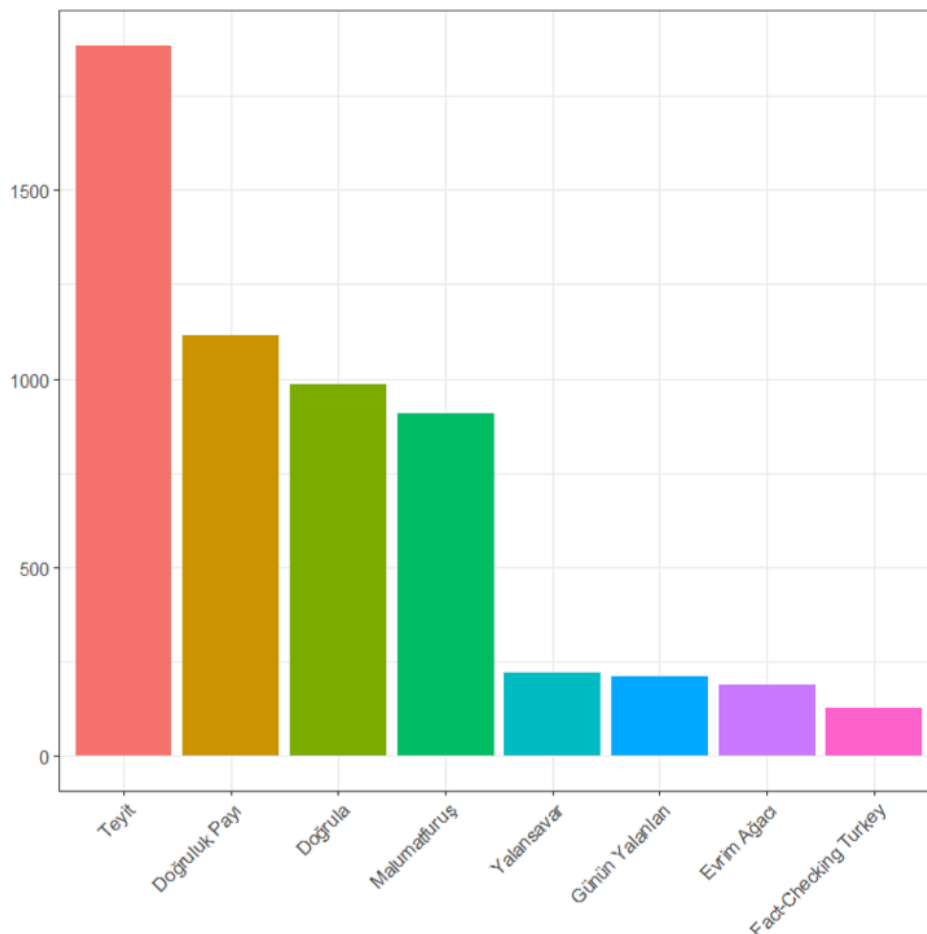
Graph-6: Which news topic do you most frequently fact-check?
[Sorted according to party/ally affiliation]

Respondents fact-check domestic political news the most (23.9%), compared to the economy (11.6%) and foreign policy (4.0%). Economy-related fact-checking is most common among 'no formal education' respondents, whereas politics and foreign policy-related fact-checking is most popular with university and higher education graduates. In terms of political affiliation, Saadet Partisi supporters were the most interested in foreign policy and economy news fact-checking, whereas respondents that supported independent candidates had the most interest in domestic politics news verification. These are followed by MHP (35.5%), İYİ Parti (26.6%) and AKP (24.4%) voters.

Overall, the survey results indicate that there is some awareness of, and interest in fact-checking, but the majority of the respondents still do such verification through older methods such as cross-checking with other news websites or discussing with friends and/or family. Overall reliance on fact-checking platforms is less than 10% in the survey, although this might increase in the coming years; most fact-checking platforms are new and operate mainly on social media. It remains to be seen in the years ahead whether fact-checking initiatives will muster greater support as more

Turks start using the Internet or social media as a source of news. Alternatively, like the Teyit.org-ModyoTV partnership, new forms of cooperation may materialize between fact-checkers and traditional media gatekeepers, increasing the reach of fact-checking.

The second measure of success for fact-checkers is the amount of output and volume of verified information. It is difficult to make a singular clear-cut quantitative assessment here because all platforms include different parameters and verification protocols with their fact-checking content. For example, ten verifications by one platform that produces extensive write-ups with their fact-checks takes much more time compared to other platforms that have short verification write-ups or contain no further explanations to justify their assessment. Simple volume-wise, Teyit.org is the platform with the highest number of quantitative output, followed by Doğruluk Payı and Doğrula.org. However, this alone isn't an accurate measure of 'success', since EvrimAğacı, the most popular fact-checking platform in Turkey has a low quantity of output, but has very extensive posts that require scientific evidence that accompany their debunking efforts.



Graph-7: Fact-checkers output based on aggregate number of fact-checking content pages on their website.

The third measure is to look at case-specific success stories of fact-checking platforms in politically contested periods. This measure is the most labor intensive and technically challenging task, due to work required to acquire, clean and verify the data, as well as establish a causal relationship between fact-checking performance and its observable effects on disinformation. To that end, the literature on the Turkish information ecosystem is still very open to studies that explore the empirical causal effects of fact-checking on the diffusion and duration of disinformation efforts. The fact that such studies include labor-intensive tasks that require a good degree of technical-computational know-how, and may often yield null effects are significant deterrents against the build-up of such literature.

The best case-specific exploration of the relationship between fact-checking and the spread of disinformation in Turkey has been Teyit.org's 2019 local election fact-checking impact report.⁷⁷ This study measures fact-checking success in terms of the engagement metrics of the most-shared disinformation content compared to the engagement metrics of Teyit.org's debunking content. The platform compares engagement metrics across 33 cases of disinformation in the run-up to the March 2019 local elections. The study finds that Teyit.org verification attempts received less engagement compared to disinformation-containing content in 25 cases out of 33. 10 of those 25 cases witness an overwhelmingly greater engagement with disinformation-related content, dwarfing Teyit.org's debunking efforts. However, 8 of the cases where debunking efforts have received more engagement compared to disinformation content provide a degree of perspective into fact-checking mechanics under politically contested periods. In terms

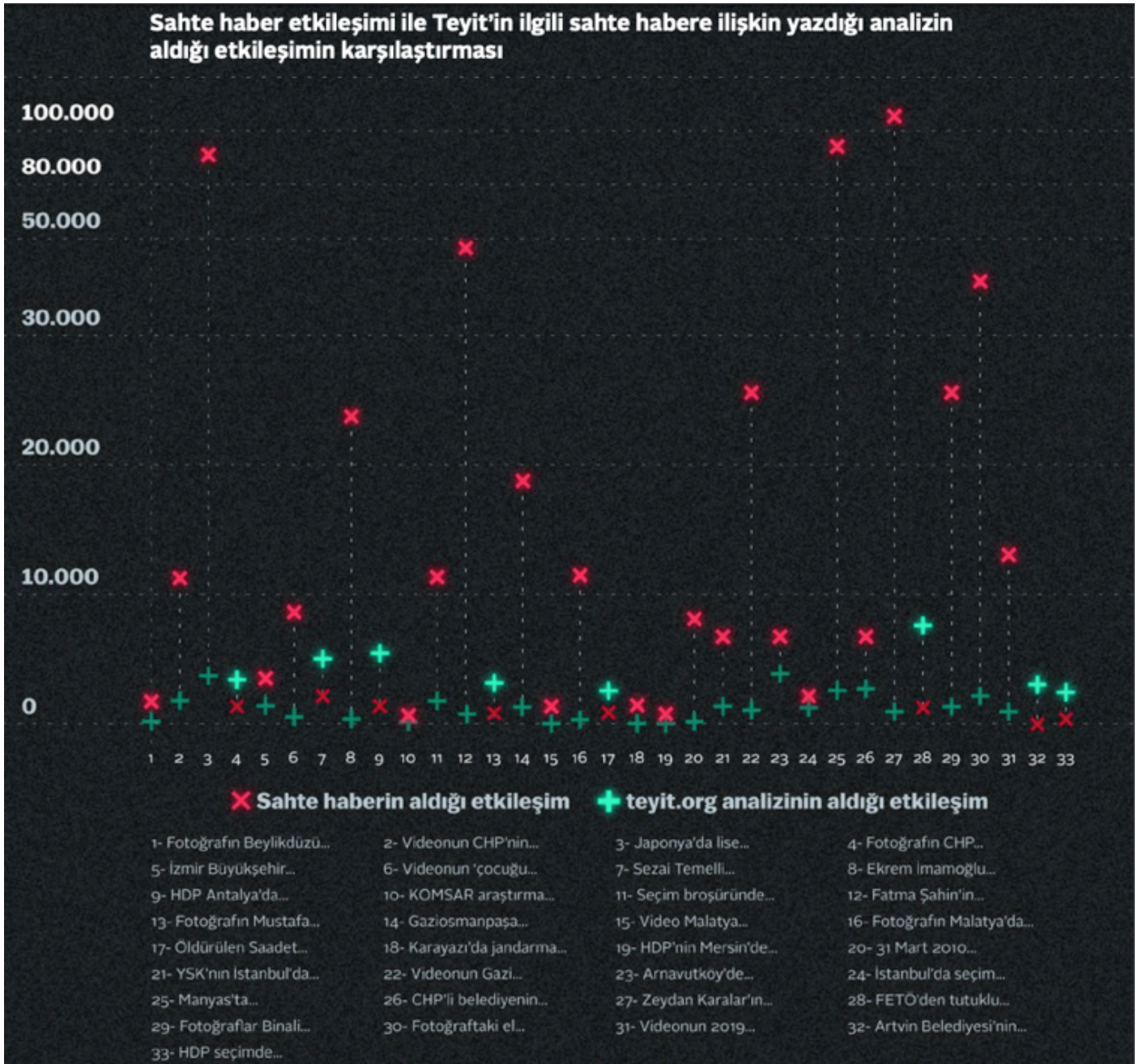
of engagement volume, the five most popular of these successful debunking efforts have been the allegations that:

- a) CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu once shared a house with an arrested member of the Fethullah Gulen organization,
- b) Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP) distributed pamphlets supporting the opposition 'Peoples' Alliance',
- c) HDP chairman Sezai Temelli claimed that 'Istanbul and Ankara will be run by the HDP',
- d) 1700 votes were transferred to the incumbent AKP candidate following government pressure,
- e) Japanese citizens that aren't high school graduates cannot vote in elections.

In terms of greater disinformation engagement compared to debunking efforts, the top 5 most popular cases have been the allegations that:

- a) Recently elected CHP major of Adana, Zeydan Karalar had rejected to serve due to an overwhelming amount of corruption and debt in the city municipality,
- b) MHP candidate had won the Manyas (Balıkesir) district, but following AKP pressures, it was transferred to a CHP candidate,
- c) The beautifully calligraphed entry into the guestbook of the Atatürk Mausoleum was written by the recently elected CHP mayor Mansur Yavaş,
- d) CHP election observers were emptying the ballot boxes in an Istanbul electoral district,
- e) Votes were being stolen by AKP election observers in Gaziosmanpaşa district of Istanbul,

⁷⁷ 'Sahte Haber Karnesi: Yerel Seçimler 2019'. Teyit.org, 2019. <https://teyit.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rapor-YS-2019-1.pdf>



Graph-8: Impact score-card from Teyit.org's internal study. Numbers on the X-axis indicate 33 of the most-shared disinformation content types and the Y-axis displays their social media diffusion/engagement rate. Red crosses indicate the engagement received by content that contains false information, whereas green plus signs indicate engagement received by Teyit.org's fact-checked content.

The graph can be accessed at (p. 26)

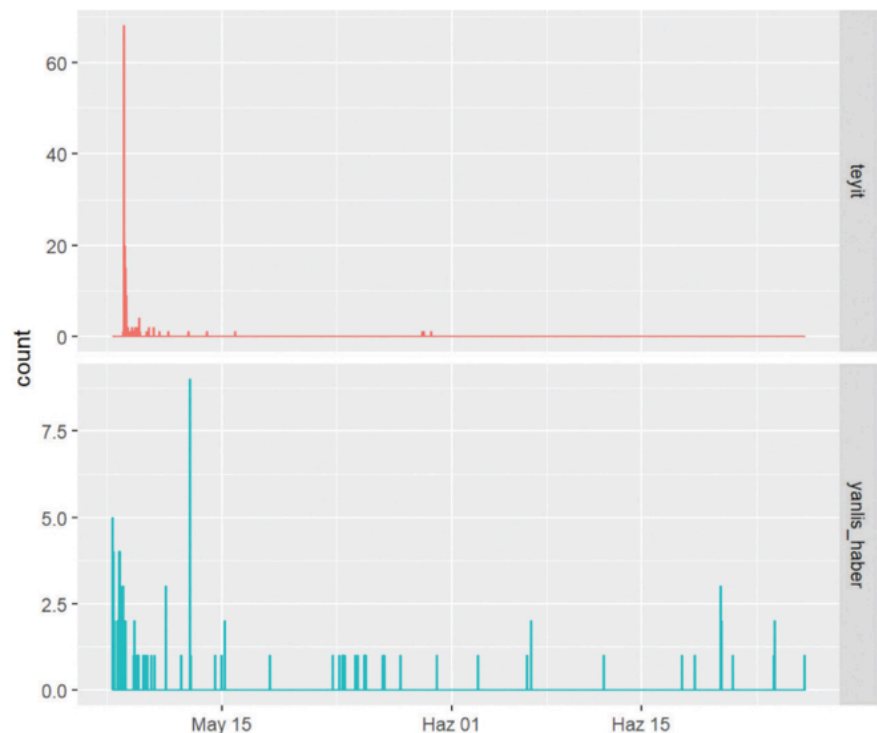
[\[https://teyit.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rapor-YS-2019-1.pdf\]](https://teyit.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rapor-YS-2019-1.pdf)

A general overview of the types of ‘successful’ versus ‘unsuccessful’ debunking engagement volume doesn’t yield a clear, generalizable finding about the impact of fact-checking on disinformation. Both the most popular cases of debunking and disinformation have similar themes, local/temporal context and foci. However, popular disinformation cases tend to be more related to vote-stealing and election meddling, which are allegations that can’t be immediately fact-checked using open sources under the time constraints of an election. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of disinformation cases in both March and June 2019 elections related to such vote-stealing and rollback of election results due to government pressures.

In a previous EDAM study on the role of Russian disinformation in Turkey, we had a chance to explore time-series dimensions of the interaction between fact-

checking and disinformation.⁷⁸ That study measured the impact of Russian disinformation on Turkey’s March and June 2019 election process, but while doing so, it has also acquired valuable data to test the effects of debunking on disinformation across five allegations that suggested:

- President Erdoğan called opposition candidate Meral Akşener ‘zilli’ (shrewish): This disinformation type emerged in early May 2019 in the run-up to the 23 June 2019 Istanbul local election re-run. Although it was debunked by the combined efforts of Teyit.org and DoğrulukPayı very early, and their debunking content received high levels of engagement, the disinformation lingered, and continued to be widely shared until 23 June. It is further problematic that the highest peak in disinformation-related engagement is observed days after the debunking.

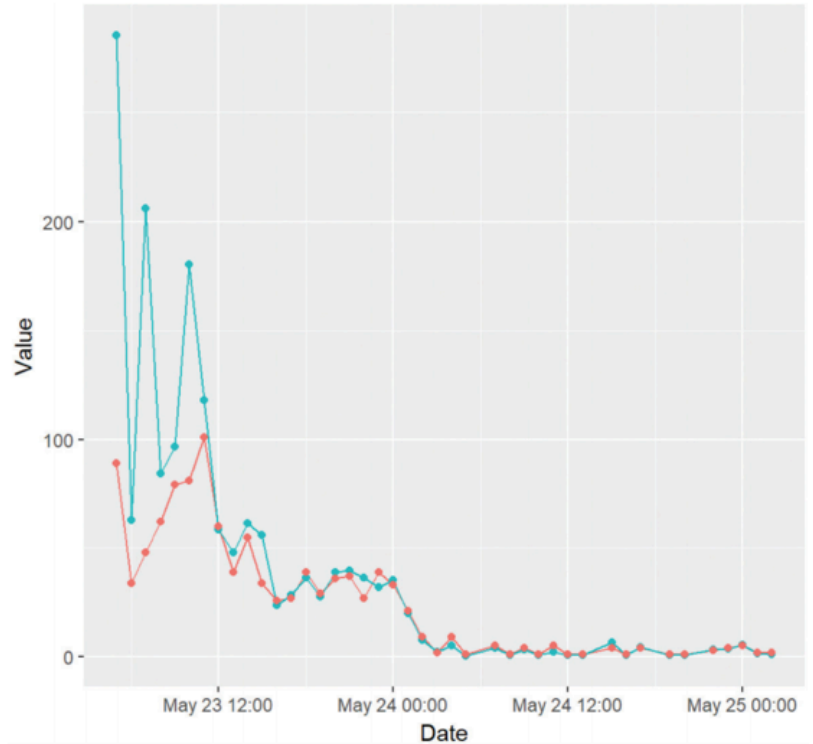


Graph-9: Sample ‘Erdoğan-Akşener-zilli’ disinformation content (above) and time-series distribution of the engagement with the disinformation content (below, second row) and Teyit.org’s fact-checking content (below, first row)

⁷⁸ Unver, Hamid Akin. “Russian Disinformation Ecosystem in Turkey.” Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Research (EDAM) Reports. 2019. <http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ak%C4%B1n-%C3%9Cnver-Russian-Digital-Media.pdf>

b) Opposition candidate Muharrem İnce danced inside a mosque: This badly photoshopped image circulated online for an extended period. Teyit.org and DoğrulukPayı jointly debunked it in the early hours of its diffusion, and

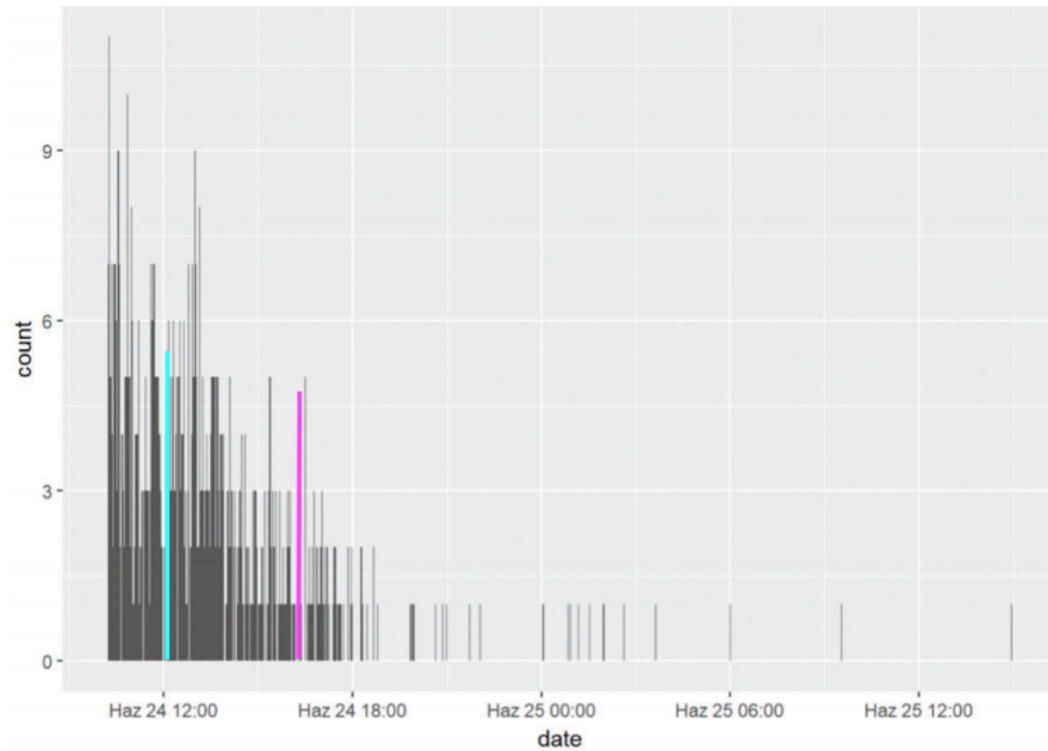
this had a measurable effect on limiting the spread of the content. This, however, may owe to the fact that the image was poorly doctored, making it easier to debunk or to believe in debunked content.



Graph-10: One of the photoshopped images of Muharrem İnce dancing in a mosque that spread online in the run-up to local elections. Below is a time-series distribution of engagement with disinformation-related content (cyan) and fact-checked content by Teyit.org and Doğruluk Payı (magenta)

c) Vote stealing allegations in a high school voting station in Diyarbakır: An early joint intervention by Teyit.org and DoğrulukPayı has led to a brief reduction in disinformation content, but was followed by a second

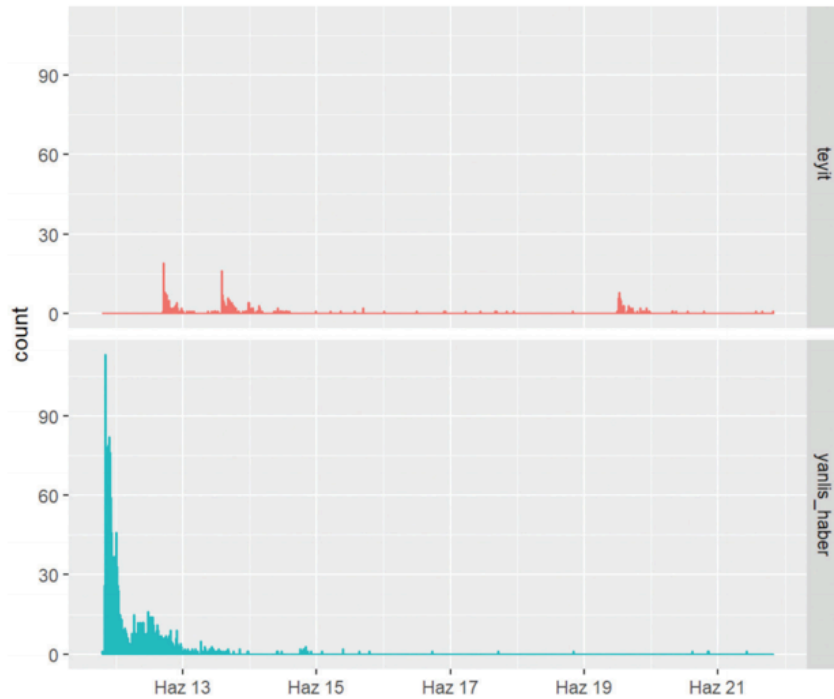
peak. Engagement with this disinformation ended by the end of the election day, due to the fact that it was formally debunked by the officials of the People's Democracy Party (HDP) in Diyarbakır.



Graph-11: Sample 'Diyarbakır vote stealing' disinformation content (above) and time-series distribution of the engagement with the disinformation content, in comparison to Teyit.org (cyan) and Doğruluk Payı (magenta) fact-checking times and engagement.

d) President Erdoğan, allegedly tired from campaigning, mistakenly calls his audience 'Sakarya residents' instead of 'Bursa': This disinformation type became overwhelmingly popular initially, but died down gradually over the next few days. Debunking efforts came late this

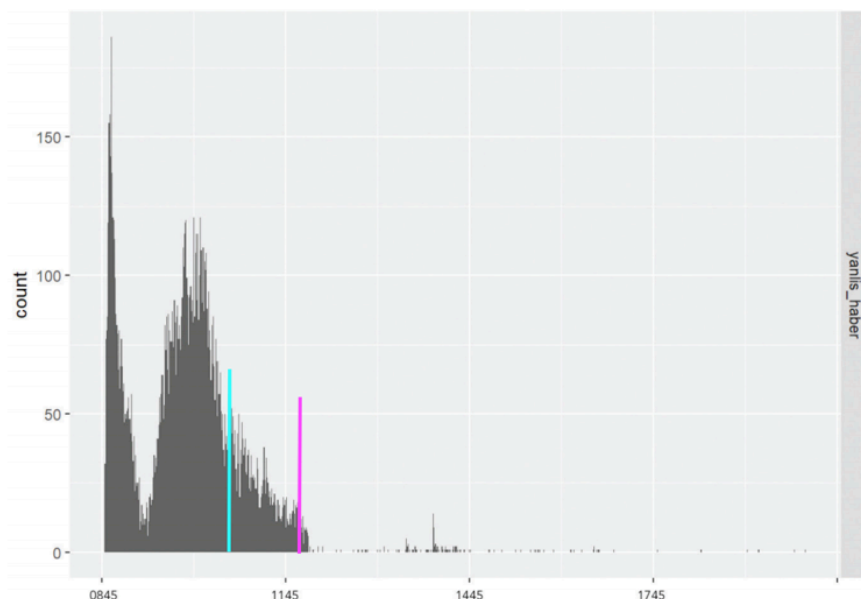
time after the engagement with the disinformation had already begun to phase out of the digital information ecosystem. This is one of the cases where fact-checking platforms had no observable effect on the reduction of disinformation spread.



Graph-12: Sample 'Erdoğan-Sakarya' disinformation content (above) and time-series distribution of the engagement with the disinformation content (cyan) and fact-checking content by Doğruluk Payı and Teyit.org combined (magenta).

e) The government uses 'disappearing ink' in voting stations in opposition-controlled municipalities: This election-day disinformation attempt was quickly debunked by Teyit.org and Doğruluk Payı, causing a rapid fall in engagement.

However, a second peak began a couple of hours after the debunking efforts, owing to a second wind across digital communication platforms like WhatsApp.



Graph-13: Sample 'disappearing ink' disinformation content (above) and time-series distribution of the engagement with the disinformation content, in comparison to Teyit.org (cyan) and Doğruluk Payı (magenta) fact-checking times and initial engagement

Overall, these measures indicate that a rapid and robust response in fact-checking is critical as such quick interventions have a demonstrable effect on the reduction in the diffusion of the disinformation content. However, engagement with the fact-checking content doesn't correlate with a reduced engagement with disinformation over time, as the most significant reductions in such engagement happen through other debunking mechanisms, either through

formal statements or personal networks on messaging platforms. Regardless, these cases demonstrate that no other fact-checking platform in Turkey, except Teyit.org and DoğrulukPayı has the capacity to successfully intervene in times of mass political disinformation campaigns. This renders both platforms unique in terms of their role in fighting fake news in real-time.

LONG-TERM VIABILITY OF TURKEY'S FACT-CHECKERS: A SWOT ANALYSIS

A SWOT analysis is one of several ways to assess the long-term viability of organizations by focusing on their Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats – SWOT. It has its origins in the 1960s and remained a key component of organizational reform and self-assessment protocols since the 1970s. Strengths and Weaknesses of a platform are intrinsic dynamics, such as organizational cohesion, well-ordered priorities and the efficiency of its internal communications. Opportunities and Threats, on the other hand, are extrinsic variables that concern where those platforms are situated within the wider information and fact-checking ecosystem in Turkey and the world.

In recent decades, SWOT analysis began to be viewed as a semi-obsolete method that is no longer used by the most prominent organizations. Rather, 'resource-based planning'⁷⁹ and competency-based planning⁸⁰ have superseded SWOT approaches. Resource-based planning (RBP) focuses on an organization's internal resources, capabilities and human resources as the founding blocks of organizational reform and suggests that organizations must pursue further development based on these existing resources. Barney (1991) expanded on RBP to clarify what those 'strengths' precisely implied: '*valuability (the capacity to increase the organisations effectiveness and efficiency), rarity (rare and in high demand), inimitability (difficult to imitate) and substitutability (not readily substituted)*'.⁸¹ Competence-based planning (CBP) on the other hand,

focuses on an organization's skill sets (i.e. what it reliably accomplishes) as the main driver of organizational reform.⁸² More modern interpretations of SWOT, however, do not view this approach as obsolete but underline the necessity of SWOT analysis to be reinforced by RBP and CBP-focused angles to retain its rigor.

YalanSavar: Among the main strengths of this platform is its group cohesiveness and their level of expertise in claims they are fact-checking. All editorial members of the platform specialize in a different field of science, rendering the group well-suited to undertake rigorous and quick debunking of claims, along with the capacity to conduct further research on issues they can't immediately verify. After ten years in the field, the group has also become more experienced in responding to new forms of health disinformation attempts, the most recent being the COVID-19 virus threat. The platform has been among the first few platforms to start debunking COVID-related news and gossip, and will likely remain a significant fact-checking player throughout the duration of the epidemic.

Both a strength and weakness of the group is that it is self-funded: this is a positive marker because this enables them to claim objectivity and independence from ad revenues, but also a potential negative marker since such resource limitations impair the group's exposure and ability to battle with health-related disinformation attempts in real-time.

⁷⁹ Valentin, Erhard K. "SWOT analysis from a resource-based view." *Journal of marketing theory and practice* 9, no. 2 (2001): 54-69. Helms, Marilyn M., and Judy Nixon. "Exploring SWOT analysis—where are we now?." *Journal of strategy and management* (2010).

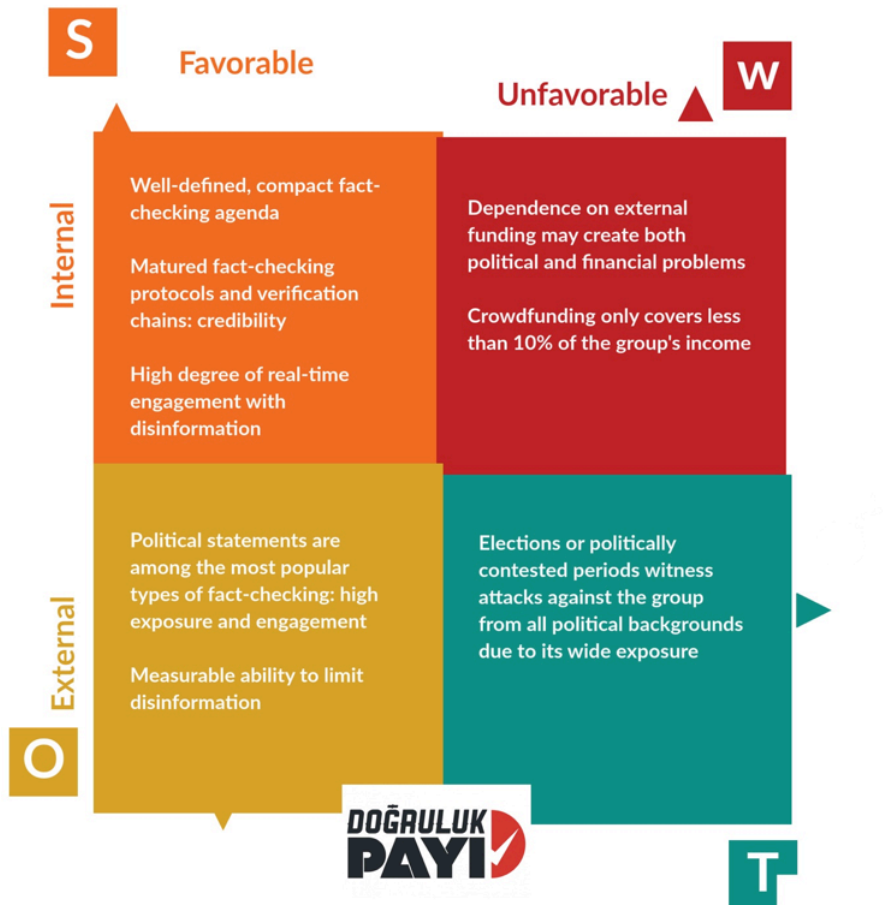
⁸⁰ Marrelli, Anne F. "An introduction to competency analysis and modeling." *Performance Improvement* 37, no. 5 (1998): 8-17.

⁸¹ Barney, J. B. "The resource based view of strategy: Origins, implications, and prospects." *Journal of management* 17, no. 1 (1991): 97-211.

⁸² Rothwell, William J., and Hercules C. Kazanas. *Mastering the instructional design process: A systematic approach*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

Given its self-funded nature, hiring volunteers and extra human capital becomes a difficult task; this in turn renders the platform ill-equipped to deal with cases of disinformation overload during crisis periods. One of their primary opportunities is the growing awareness of disinformation and interest in fact-checking in Turkey, which benefits all fact-checking platforms, including Yalan Savar. Especially in times of major health crises, this platform fulfils an important gap by offering verified information for public health

purposes when the government or official statements may remain insufficient or biased. This paradoxically becomes one of the group's main threats as challenging government narratives on health-related issues during emergencies may land the group bans or potential closures. Although this prospect hasn't materialized yet, the possibility will be tested to its maximum extent throughout the government's response period against COVID-19.









Graph-14: SWOT Charts of Turkish fact-checking platforms

Malumatfuruş: This platform benefits from the fact that it has clearly defined its scope and picks its battles carefully. By only fact-checking newspaper columnists, the group both manages to engage with the mainstream news and opinion ecosystem and stay relevant, but also manages to run its operations with a small group of volunteers on a self-funded scheme. However, the group suffers from credibility and exposure problems due to its editors' decision to remain anonymous and to remain a self-funded endeavor. This increases the public perception that the group may be aligned with the government, as other pro-government fact-checking platforms are also opaque about their members and funding schemes. While Malumatfuruş content cannot be interpreted as 'pro-government' and they have a degree of claim to objectivity, their secretive public outlook prevents them from being thoroughly assessed by IFCN and impairs their public outreach.

EvrimAğacı: Like Yalan Savar, Evrim Ağacı is also made up of a capable editorial committee to steer its team's activities. However, Evrim Ağacı runs a larger and more decentralized operation via volunteers as opposed to Yalan Savar, which runs a smaller, more specialized team. So far, this strategy seems to have worked in Evrim Ağacı's favor in terms of follower base and social media reach. Through its large pool of volunteers, the group can also raise greater awareness on science-related fact-checking and can also run a larger science-public engagement through personal networks. The group has also turned into a significant source of verified information on virology and public health as the COVID-19 virus hit Turkey, bringing with it a flurry of misinformation types.

Although the group's self-funded nature and strict policy towards hosting ads may seem like a weakness, there is currently no empirical evidence to support the claim that any of these conditions have hurt the group's outreach and output. Through its large writer pool, the platform also taps into a large human network of science enthusiasts and young university students, which renders its self-funding bid through Patreon a modest, yet sustainable source of income. Since the group shoulders the bulk of interest in science-based fact-checking along with Yalan Savar, many of the opportunities on its horizon are self-created. Especially through EA-Akademi and its diverse set of programs, the initiative has much space to expand as it brings more enthusiasts into the domain of science-based fact-checking.

However, similar to Yalan Savar, scientific fact-checks of the group may run into occasional political problems with the government or conservative opinion-makers in the Turkish information ecosystem, both of which form the major sources of threats against the group. These threats are more acute given the group's past run-in with these factions in topics such as secularism and LGBT rights.

Doğruluk Payı: As the pioneer political fact-checking platform in Turkey, DP enjoys good exposure and reach on social media. It is led by a compact and cohesive team that has been contributing to the platform's operations since its inception in 2014, and the group has honed its fact-checking protocols and methodology over the last six years. One of the main strengths of the group is its IFCN membership and the fact that it is one of only two platforms (along with Teyit.org) that belong to an elite international consortium. Although its founding director, Baybars Örsek is now in an independent position as the new head of IFCN, the fact that he comes from DP bestows the platform a degree of international recognition and credibility. The group's clear purpose and political statement focus enable it to remain relevant, engage with the public debate while retaining a small team that is financially sustainable over the long-term. However, currently, only 7.8% of the group's finances are covered by crowdfunding, which renders the group in constant search for external funding. Given their independent position, it is unlikely that they will receive government funding anytime soon, nor would any domestic funding source would risk their relationship with the government by financing DP. This means that they will remain dependent on international funding, which, in periods of extreme polarization and government restrictions, may lead to the perception of the group as representing 'foreign interests'. Although the group's funding sources also support other civil society initiatives worldwide, and don't dictate fact-checking agenda, Turkey's political culture and context may securitize these sources and this may lead to governmental pressures against the platform. In the past, the group's fact-checking efforts have created rows with politicians whose claims were debunked, rendering DP a constant political actor in an extremely polarized political domain. These rows may add to the existing tensions with the government and opposition parties, which remains a consistent threat for the group. DP already witnesses online harassment from the followers/voters of the politicians that are being debunked, regardless of the party affiliation of the politician in question.

Teyit.org: The platform is the best-funded and staffed fact-checking group in Turkey. It also has the widest engagement and reach among all Turkish fact-checking groups as it has a comprehensive verification agenda from politics to economics to health and social trends. This output volume is both a strength and a potential weakness for the group, as such seemingly limitless scope of verification renders them consistently relevant, but also significantly dependent on more staff, and hence, more funding during times of crises and heavy disinformation load.

The group views governmental pressures equally as problematic as public pressures, including from the opposition. Although the group has run into problems with the government and pro-government media outlets in the past like Doğruluk Payı, the platform director Mehmet Atakan Foça asserts that all political parties and online Teyit.org followers from all political backgrounds pressure the platform as much as the government does. This is also a by-product of the group's extensive verification agenda and its impartiality, which attracts criticism and pressure from all sides, rendering the group very much exposed to potential restrictions and censorship, including self-censorship.

The group may be exposed to the same types of accusations and pigeonholing that Doğruluk Payı suffers from, due to both platforms' dependence on external funding. Teyit's partnership with Facebook may generate potential pigeonholing dynamics, and may lead to future criticism by people who may believe Teyit has become a direct affiliate of Facebook's problematic content assessment and removal policy. However, Teyit has so far survived these prospects and retained its relevance in a chaotic and restrictive political information space. Even if Turkey's political risk factors remain the same, or better, improve, Teyit.org is well-suited to remain a leading platform among the country's fact-checking ecosystem.

The SWOT outlooks are similar for all three major pro-government players in the Turkish fact-checking ecosystem: Doğrula.org, whose funding sources are hidden, and GününYalanları and Fact-Checking.TR, both funded by the pro-government Bosphorus Global. All three have a notable follower base, and all three have a clearly-defined agenda: to protect the mainstream government position on social, economic and political issues from domestic and international mis-/disinformation. To that end, their non-random selection (only false claims of domestic and foreign

politicians or media outlets that are at odds with government policy) of fact-checked claims pigeonhole them directly as government public relations outlets, and their output can be assessed as more of an opinion-making and agenda-setting interface, rather than a dedicated fact-checking platform. Neither of these outlets argue against this claim, nor do they fight with this public perception or try to situate themselves into a more objective and unbiased position. In that sense, their fact-checking interest and range are both well-defined.

The most explicit weakness of these groups, however, is that they are known to be pro-government outlets, which impairs their ability to reach beyond their political echo chambers. Predictably, their fact-checking agenda also renders it unlikely for them to be considered for IFCN membership, which remains a key weakness in terms of objectivity. While most of the censorship or government-related potential threats faced by other platforms aren't valid for these outlets, they may nonetheless suffer from intra-party power calibrations and potential governmental infighting, leading to their takeover by different editorial teams, or closure. This was the case with earlier short-lived pro-government debunking platforms like 'Kebab and Camel', which was run by a team affiliated with former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. After PM Davutoğlu's stepping down in May 2016, most platforms like Kebab and Camel got marginalized and were dropped from the government support system.

From a general perspective, a common opportunity for all fact-checking platforms is the growing interest and demand for independent fact-checking in Turkey. As political polarization spills-over into media polarization, news consumers are clustered into camps that mostly get information from sources that are aligned with their political views. However, especially in times of crises, demand for objective news increases, generating widespread interest in fact-checking platforms. Through the awareness built by these fact-checking platforms, more news consumers begin to demand greater objectivity and fact-based reporting. The primary limitation of this opportunity is the fact that such awareness and demand exist mostly in digital space and among the relatively younger and urban portion of the population. Media tribalism is still very much strong among rural and/or older news consumers. Another chronic limitation is the extent of polarization itself. While the government repression is most visible because its tools are more diverse and well-resourced, fact-checkers usually complain about the fact that the opposition groups and parties are equally

as unforgiving and repressive as the government censors. This makes objectivity a continually moving goalpost which these platforms have to chase after every day.

Additional hurdles come with fact-checking during emergencies. The Turkish government has a long-standing policy of restricting access to the Internet, banning specific platforms and asking platforms to remove content or block users entirely during crises and emergencies. Such sudden information restrictions make life very difficult for fact-checking platforms even when they want to comply with the government's prerogatives and pursue a more restrained stance. One of the most common difficulties for fact-checkers is to gauge whether a particular government censorship is due to honest unavailability of information (i.e. the government itself doesn't have full information about the issue), a cover-up that must remain politically inaccessible, or an information restriction attempt to preserve public

order and prevent panic. Although the pro-government fact-checkers are expected to have a degree of direct line to the government on such matters, it becomes near-impossible for independent fact-checking platforms to tailor their fact-checking strategy during such information constraints. Should they verify disinformation attempts as fast as they come to ease the information request burden on the government? Should they keep clear of that particular issue because the government may want to cover it up? Or would debunking a claim, impair the government's ability to restore public order during potential upheavals? Even if and when a fact-checking platform seeks to comply with the government fully, there are very few communication protocols and cues on how to exercise such compliance, resulting in these platforms getting into unintentional trouble with the authorities. This also impairs the government's crisis communication attempts and impairs much-needed public reflex of information-seeking.

CONCLUSION

The advent of Turkish fact-checking groups yields a number of observations regarding the role of fact-checking beyond liberal democracies. As the Turkish experience suggests, fact-checking can work in information-constrained, polarized and censorship-prone political environments. They 'work' both in terms of their measurable contribution to limiting the spread of fake news and misinformation in some occasions, as well as a non-governmental political institution model that can withstand heavy pressures both from the government, as well as the polarized public information space. Finally, they work as a business model that can sustain itself for an extended period, whether as a self-funded initiative, or externally-funded enterprise.

In every country, specific triggers or events lead to widespread public demand for fact-checking. In Turkey, this was the H1N1 virus and a flurry of medical hoaxes that emerged online in the late-2000s, in tandem with the increase in Internet penetration in the country. The second wave comes after 2014, in response to a long succession of elections held at a time of great turmoil. The second wave fact-checkers initially emerge in the mid-2010s as political verification platforms, in response to the sharp polarization of the country's media environment and the erosion of news quality. The third wave fact-checkers are either funded by the government or are pro-government initiatives that sought to balance the fact-checking ecosystem, which in their view, was becoming too anti-government. It is worth underlining that these third-wave pro-government fact-checkers haven't challenged other fact-checking organizations to a noticeable degree. Instead, they established a different avenue of fact-checking (verifying claims against the government or the establishment) that was devised in lieu of other platforms.

There are currently only two Turkish fact-checking platforms that are the members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN): these are Doğruluk Payı and Teyit.org. This means that they have to abide by the IFCN's transparency and editorial rulebook conditions and open themselves to external audit regularly to retain their membership. There are other transparent groups like Evrim Ağacı and Yalan Savar that fulfils most of the IFCN's criteria, yet haven't been a member so far.

The survey conducted for this report indicates that a substantial portion of the respondents doesn't get their news from the Internet, or that they don't fact-check the

claims they see online. Those that fact-check still rely on older verification mechanisms such as asking friends or family, or checking up with other news sources (TV, radio, newspaper, websites). Overall awareness of and reliance on fact-checking platforms (combined) lie below 10%. However, this isn't necessarily a negative indicator, as fact-checking is new to Turkey's information ecosystem, and this figure will likely go up in the coming years. In terms of the most fact-checked topics, domestic politics, economy and foreign policy come on top.

This report's computational, large-N analyses of the relationship between fact-checking and disinformation yields inconclusive results. While there is some empirical evidence that fact-checking does work in a number of high-profile disinformation cases, the overall popularity and spread of disinformation-related content remain popular and mass-consumed during politically contested periods and crises. Three platforms, Doğruluk Payı, Evrim Ağacı and Teyit.org shoulder the most considerable burden of real-time fact-checking and engage with disinformation in higher volumes compared to other platforms. Most of the 'successful' cases of battling with disinformation has so far consisted of content that is easily debunkable; more time-sensitive, hard-to-verify and nuanced forms of disinformation spread far and wide, regardless of the level of performance of the fact-checking platforms.

However, Turkish fact-checking ecosystem yields two main positive and promising developments. First of all, the success of Turkish fact-checkers demonstrates that such platforms can not only survive, but also assume a critical public benefit role even under censorship, restrictions and polarization. Paradoxically, while such restrictions make life more difficult for fact-checkers because they also lead to the erosion of trusted facts from the public information ecosystem, such restrictions also generate widespread demand for fact-checking and objective information.

Second, walking such a tight-rope has rendered Turkish fact-checkers among the most successful and politically sustainable fact-checking groups in the world. Not only have many Turkish fact-checkers invented new forms of fact-checking and verification protocols, they have also created elaborate models of public engagement, government relations and oversight mechanisms that can serve as an inspiration for other fact-checkers in

democratically backsliding countries. Having endured the challenges of finding and disseminating 'facts' under an extreme level of polarization, these groups have learned how to survive political and legal pressures from all political sides, in addition to creating new financial models to render themselves sustainable. However, international funding (embassies, social media platforms, NGO funding) remains a critical source of income for more professionalized platforms, and it remains to be seen whether high-profile fact-checking platforms can manage their operations financially in the absence of such funds. There is a direct correlation between the size of funding and a platform's ability to attack

disinformation head-on, in real-time.

The future course of the Turkish fact-checking ecosystem and lessons learned from their actions will remain important for the international fact-checking and journalism observers. Even if Turkey further backslides democratically, or improve its political environment, fact-checkers will remain an important component of the information ecosystem. Watching their progress, successes and failures will also remain relevant for the disciplines of comparative political communication, communication sociology and the technology-information beyond regional confines.



Cyber Governance and Digital Democracy 2020/02/EN

April 2020

FACT-CHECKERS AND FACT-CHECKING IN TURKEY

H. Akin Ünver | EDAM, Oxford CTGA & Kadir Has University