

Defending fact-checking partnerships with platform companies: 'We can't fight alone against disinformation'

Johan Farkas and Mette Bengtsson

Abstract

This article investigates how professional fact-checkers defend collaborations with major platform companies such as Meta, Alphabet, and ByteDance. Drawing on 12 qualitative interviews with European fact-checkers, the study applies rhetorical apologia theory to analyse recurring justificatory arguments. We identify four modes of differentiation and three modes of transcendence employed by fact-checkers. Arguments of differentiation involve distancing fact-checking from platform company partners to emphasise editorial independence; distinguishing between different platform companies to legitimise partnerships with certain actors while rejecting others (notably TikTok owned by ByteDance); separating platform companies as a whole and specific employees within them; and contrasting platform funding with state funding to defend the former as less compromising for editorial autonomy. Arguments of transcendence invoke counter-factual scenarios of unmitigated misinformation; appealing to broader alliances against disinformation; and highlighting the potential for improving platform companies from within. These findings contribute to existing scholarship by unpacking how fact-checkers negotiate the complex institutional dependencies of platform company partnerships by simultaneously acknowledging risks and asserting pragmatic necessity. As such, the study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges facing fact-checking organisations and their efforts to establish legitimacy as epistemic authorities in the boundary terrain shared with other key actors in today's media landscape.

Keywords: fact-checking, platforms, apologia, rhetoric, TikTok, Meta

Introduction

The circulation of unsupported knowledge claims on digital platforms has been subject to extensive political, journalistic and academic debate (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Hameleers, 2024). A key proposed solution has been dedicated fact-checking outlets that correct false and misleading claims online (Graves et al., 2023; Graves and Lauer, 2020). The effectiveness and merits of fact-checking, however, has been subject to debate (Andersen and S oe, 2020; Bengtsson and Schousboe, 2024; Graves, 2025).

A key source of funding for fact-checking institutions derives from major platform companies, defined as corporations that operate 'digital architecture[s] designed to organise interactions between users' (Dijck et al., 2018: 4). In response to criticism for not only failing to address, but also actively profiting from, scams, manipulation and hatred (Grohmann et al., 2022), platform companies such as Meta, Alphabet, Twitter (now X) and ByteDance have launched different funding initiatives for fact-checkers (Clark, 2022; Culliford, 2020; Narayan Bettadapur, 2020). Meta (then Facebook) launched its Third-Party Fact-Checking Program in 2016 through which the company funds selected fact-checking organisations for examining the veracity of claims on Facebook,

Instagram and Threads (Graves et al., 2023). However, in 2025, CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced the termination of this program in the US, accusing fact-checkers of bias, censorship and for being 'something out of like, you know, 1984' (cited in Watt et al., 2025). Subsequently, a spokesperson from the company clarified that it had 'no immediate plans to end its fact-checking program in places like the European Union which take a more active approach to regulation of platform companies' (cited in Paul et al., 2025). Accordingly, Meta continues to fund fact-checkers in Europe, in large part due to the legal requirements of the Digital Services Act (Graves, 2025).

While platform partnerships with fact-checkers have long been criticised by right-wing actors for being biased against conservatives (Watt et al., 2025) – something now echoed by Zuckerberg – these programs have also faced criticism from journalists, academics and platform employees (Andersen and Søre, 2020; de-Lima-Santos, 2024; Levin, 2018; Suliman, 2023; Wynn-Williams, 2025). Fact-checkers who use the Third-Party Fact-Checking Program have also articulated doubt and criticism about the system that they sometimes consider flawed and believe should be approached with caution (Bengtsson et al., 2024; Schjøtt and Bengtsson, 2024). Shortly after joining Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, both Snopes and The Associated Press (AP) left. A former editor at Snopes, Brooke Binkowski, stated that Facebook was 'more interested in making themselves look good and passing the buck. They've essentially used us for crisis PR' (cited in Levin, 2018). Echoing this sentiment, Facebook's former Director of Public Policy, Sarah Wynn-Williams notes in her 2025 memoir that Facebook 'could've decided to genuinely clean things up, Instead, they created some window-dressing "fact-checking partnership"' (2025: 343). Evidence of Meta's lackluster commitment to addressing mis- and disinformation came in 2025, when internal documents revealed that the company had estimated earnings of around \$16 billion from scam ads in 2024 alone, allegedly exposing its users to approximately 15 billion scam ads per day (Horwitz, 2025). Before this, researchers had already called for fact-checkers to 'reduce reliance on third-party platforms' (de-Lima-Santos, 2024), which risks compromising public trust in their independence (Suliman, 2023).

With an interest in how fact-checkers navigate this public criticism, including from within their own industry, this study examines how European fact-checking organisations defend their continued collaborations with major platform companies. Drawing on 12 qualitative interviews with professional fact-checkers from 12 organisations across 12 European countries, we investigate reflections on partnerships with companies such as Meta, Alphabet, and ByteDance, alongside their views on platforms' broader roles in addressing mis- and disinformation. To analyse these, we draw on rhetorical apologia theory (Ware and Linkugel, 1973) for identifying recurring arguments fact-checkers make in defence of these collaborations. When asked about platform partnerships, the majority of the interviewed fact-checkers adopted a defensive stance, likely due to the above-

mentioned experiences of recurring criticism from journalists, political actors, and social media users, the latter of which predominantly – though not exclusively – derive from far-right actors. This makes apologia theory particularly well-suited for examining how these European fact-checkers – whose economy still largely depends on platform companies – seek to maintain legitimacy and epistemic authority in the context of contested partnerships.

While several studies have explored the relationship between fact-checking organisations and platform companies (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2023; Cazzamatta, 2025b), none have applied rhetorical apologia theory to examine how fact-checkers defend such collaborations and reckon with their limitations. Overall, Europe remains understudied as compared to North America in the context of fact-checking, despite being the continent with most fact-checking institutions (Cazzamatta, 2025b; Stencel et al., 2023). The study addresses these gaps through the following research questions:

RQ1: How do European fact-checkers defend their ongoing relationship with and dependence on platform companies?

RQ2: How do European fact-checkers through their defense seek to maintain institutional boundaries between themselves and platform partners and uphold epistemic authority?

Fact-checking as an emergent institution

Fact-checking initiatives began to emerge around the same time as the first social media platforms in the early-to-mid 2000s (Graves and Lauer, 2020). Starting out as a US phenomenon, the practice later spread globally, with some institutions identifying as journalistic outlets and others as grassroots or NGO initiatives (Graves, 2018). In the early years, fact-checkers were primarily concerned with factual claims from political actors. However, with the changing media landscape, fact-checkers increasingly sought to prevent the spread of misinformation online. This has been dubbed the 'debunking turn' in fact-checking (Graves et al., 2023), which is now increasingly supported by technological tools, such as digital forensics software (Cazzamatta, 2025a) and early-stage experiments with automated fact-checking (AFC) (Kavtaradze, 2024).

In Europe, policy efforts have in recent years sought to hold platforms accountable for the spread of false information. With the adoption of the Digital Services Act in 2022, the European Union established a regulatory framework with potential penalties for platforms failing to address issues such as disinformation, hate speech and spam (Council of the European Union, 2024). Complementing legislative efforts, the European Commission funded the creation of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) in 2022, intended as a regional counterpart to the U.S.-based International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) (EFCN, n.d.). Gaining status as a 'verified signatory' in the EFCSN – as with the IFCN – comes with the possibility of entering Meta's partnership program for fact-checkers (Meta, 2025).

Boundary work in fact-checking journalism

Fact-checking journalism – as with the broader field of journalism – is unique in that its legitimacy as an epistemic institution, at one at the same time, rests on ‘a grandiose knowledge claim (that it possesses the ability to isolate, transmit and interpret the most publicly relevant aspects of social reality) and an incredibly modest one (that really, most journalists are not experts at all but are simply question-asking generalists’ (Schudson and Anderson, 2008: 96). Unlike other knowledge-producing professionals – for example lawyers or academic researchers – the field of journalism does generally not have formalised barriers to entry such as pre-required degrees, protected titles, or esoteric knowledge. This also applies to fact-checking.

Due to a lack of formalised institutional barriers, the field of journalism primarily ‘maintains its boundaries and legitimacy through engaging in rhetorical competitions for “epistemic authority”’ (Canella, 2023: 211). By continuously engaging in debates about what journalism is and ought to be, journalistic institutions seek to maintain and reinforce its claims of being trustworthy knowledge producers and a ‘fourth estate’, often by reference to ideals of autonomy (Örnebring and Karlsson, 2022). As Örnebring and Karlsson (2022) note, journalistic institutions tend to idealise their autonomy through the use of ‘wall’ metaphors: ‘something impenetrable, absolute, even sacred’ (46). This includes walls between owners and newsrooms, advertisements and editorial content, and sources and journalists. In practice, these relations are continuously negotiated and challenged, both rhetorically and materially (Handley and Rutigliano, 2012). Karlsson and Örnebring (2022) thus propose an alternative metaphor of a membrane, encapsulating how journalistic institutions continuously close off and open their boundaries in relation to other fields.

Several researchers have analysed the boundary work of fact-checkers and their emergent set of institution-making claims of epistemic authority and autonomy (Graves, 2018; Graves and Lauer, 2020; Graves et al., 2023; Singer, 2021). Based on fieldwork at two of the first international fact-checking summits, Lucas Graves (2018) has mapped the emerging international milieu, drawing the contours of the initial development of common global standards as well as efforts to secure reliable funding. Comparing the nascent global fact-checking movement to its US origin, Graves (2018) highlights that between journalists, academics and political-civic actors boundaries were not drawn in the same way in an international setting: ‘[W]hereas professional fact-checkers aggressively police the borders of their practice in the United States, they have welcomed non-journalists into the fold internationally’ (Graves, 2018: 614). In a more recent study, Lauer and Graves (2025) offer a network analysis of the global fact-checking movement, describing the prominent role of platform companies, being ‘not only a funding source but also a primary rationale for credentialing and governance mechanisms’ (p. 3517), asking in conjunction ‘how fragile those structures will prove as the priorities of platform companies shift’ (p. 3517).

Earlier, Graves et al. (2023) also analysed the boundaries between fact-checkers and platform companies, pointing to how fact-checkers try to differentiate themselves within organisations (doing both political fact-checking and debunking but with clear professional boundaries); between organisations (differentiation between themselves and other fact-checkers seen as inferior and more commercial); and between subfields (not doing debunking, as this is seen as not 'worth their attention').

Like Graves et al. (2023), our study examines how fact-checkers engage in boundary work to uphold their professional autonomy within asymmetrical power relations with major platform companies. By thinking along the lines of rhetorical apologia theory, we are able to provide a detailed analysis of how the fact-checkers defend their platform partnerships. Fact-checkers have to navigate complex dilemmas related to their institutional boundaries and autonomy: On the one hand, they are often heavily reliant on the financial support from platform companies and want to contribute to the qualification of claims circulating on social media. On the other hand, they may feel compelled to distance themselves from the often-criticised platform companies and to explain their reasons for and approaches to engaging in the partnerships with such actors, which are often accused of being the culprits behind the very problems fact-checkers are trying to resolve. To unpack fact-checkers' reflections in interviews, rhetorical apologia theory offers a rich framework to provide a more systematic and nuanced understanding of their boundary work.

Apologia theory as an analytical framework

Apologia theory originates from rhetorical theory, a widely cited work being Ware and Linkugel's (1973) seminal typology of public self-defence strategies used in resolution processes counteracting a pejorative accusation. Inspired by Robert P. Abelson's theory on belief dilemmas (1959), Ware and Linkugel suggested a distinction between reformative and transformative strategies of rhetorical defense, outlining two of each kind. Reformative strategies are building on existing understandings and thereby not trying to change the audience's feelings, attitudes, or perception of reality – either through denial, which is simple disapproval or disclaimer of intent (257–277), or through bolstering, which involves reinforcement of a fact or value viewed favourably by the audience (277–278). Conversely, transformative strategies aim to change people's feelings, attitudes or perception of reality – either through differentiation which involves separating some facts or values from a larger context within which the audience presently views them (278–279), or through transcendence which involves relating one's case to a larger context in which it is justified (280–281). The four strategies can be combined in various ways, the most common being the subgenres of absolution, vindication, explanation and justification (283). As we unfold in the analysis, fact-checkers use a combination of the two transformative acts, differentiation and transcendence, for example by defending

partnerships by differentiating between different platform companies or transcending the relationship by arguing that they improve platform companies from within.

Originally, apologia theory was developed to analyse strategic rhetorical defences, for example speeches by politicians in the wake of public scandals (Gold, 1978; Ware and Linkugel, 1973). In rhetorical scholarship, apologia theory is related to character building and concepts like ethos, reputation, and narration (Achter, 2000), as well as the short- and long-term 'effects' within different potentially developing situations (Simons, 2000). However, scholars have used the theoretical framework to analyse defense strategies in various settings, for example, public institutions (Harvey, 1995), celebrities and cancel culture (Hobbs and O'Keefe, 2024), and corporate communication, crisis management and image repair (Benoit, 2024; Vigsø and Wigren, 2010). In journalism research, researchers have used apologia theory to study how journalists and news organisations respond to public criticism (Borden, 2012; Krogh and Svensson, 2017; Sridharan and Taylor, 2023). Involving the theory of paradigm repair and boundary maintenance, Mark Coddington (2012) for example compared how the New York Times and The Guardian portrayed their collaboration with Wikileaks, and how this was defended in opposing ways by the two newspapers when replying to the public criticism.

Although apology theory has only sparsely been used in combination with theory on boundary work, this framework provides a relevant complement for fine-grained analyses of the rhetorical aspects of the boundary work, unpacking the intricacies of how the involved actors, in this case fact-checkers, defend their institutional practices and, thus, maintain and negotiate professional and institutional boundaries. As in the work of Coddington (2012), we differ from the original framework of Ware and Linkugel (1973) in that we explore the authority building efforts in relation to a current relationship, rather than to a prior action. Furthermore, we choose not to use the term 'strategy' as in the original theory, as we do not refer to a prepared strategic defense in a public context (e.g., a public speech by a politician) but operationalise apologia theory in the more open setting of qualitative interviews. Although our interviewees should not be viewed as a unified group, our analysis finds clear patterns in their rhetoric on partnerships with platform companies.

Methods: qualitative interviews with fact-checkers

The 12 qualitative interviews with professional fact-checkers were conducted by the first author between November 2023 and March 2024. Interviewees worked at 12 different fact-checking organisations based in 12 different European countries: The Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany,

Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden. Written informed consent was secured from all interviewees. The interviews lasted 71 min on average.

All 12 fact-checking organisations are certified members of both the EFCSN and IFCN, having also received funding from platform companies in prior years (2021 to early 2024). The interviews all followed a semi-structured interview guide, revolving around six overarching themes: (1) organisational structure (2) audience, (3) the societal role of fact-checking, (4) editorial independence, (5) potentials and challenges of fact-checking and (6) the role of platform companies. While only one theme explicitly revolved around platform companies, these were frequently brought up in relation to other themes.

The interview guide aimed to get interviewees to reflect on different aspects of how they maintain institutional boundaries and the challenges they face in doing so, not least in relation to platform companies. The first theme aimed to get an overall sense of the fact-checking institution in question, including how it is funded (e.g., by platform companies). The second theme focused on who the fact-checkers view as their core audience and how they engage with users on social media platforms. The third theme focused on the geo-political context and media landscape in which they operate. The fourth theme focused on how fact-checkers try to maintain institutional independence, including from platform partners. The fifth theme focused on overarching potentials and challenges of fact-checking, openly asking what it would require for fact-checking to have a bigger societal impact (here, more stable funding was a recurrent theme). Finally, the sixth theme revolved around the role of platform companies, including the sincerity of their commitment to tackle mis- and disinformation.

Following the interview guide, the interviewer sought to ask open-ended questions throughout the interviews, including on the relationship between fact-checkers and platform companies. As became clear across the interviews, such questions about platform companies were often met defensively by the interviewees, which eventually led us to analyse these responses using rhetorical theory on apologia.

All interviews were transcribed using automated transcription software (on a local university server) followed by manual transcription. The transcribed interviews – comprising a total of 107,529 words – were subsequently analysed through a four-step process using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo: In the first phase, overarching codes were established inductively by reading through the material and identifying recurring themes across the interviews. In the second phase, the material was coded based on the established themes. In the third phase, the

theoretical framework of Ware and Linkugel (1973) was used to analyse all codes related to platform companies, identifying recurring rhetorical defences across the material. Finally, in the fourth phase, quotes from across the material were grouped in accordance with the overarching types of rhetorical defences identified in the prior phase.

In the analysis section, all interviewees have been anonymised, including details of their organisational affiliations and geographic locations. Each is identified only by a randomly assigned number (e.g., respondent #1). This mitigates two identified forms of potential harm: (1) the possibility that interview comments about platform companies could jeopardise current partnerships between the interviewees' organisations and said companies, and (2) the possibility that interviewees could face targeted harassment based on their comments, something several interviewees describe as a persistent threat to their professional work.

In terms of limitations, the decision to include only one interviewee from each fact-checking institution limits the geographic generalisability of our results. For this reason, this study does not seek to describe country- or region-specific variations, focusing instead on analysing overarching similarities and tensions across the data. In this regard, it should be noted that the average number of paid fact-checking employees – part-time or full time – across the studied organisations was only 8.2 at the time of the interviews with a median of 7.5 (as per the organisations' yearly IFCN reports and interview responses).

Analysis: in defense of fact-checking partnerships

From 2021 to early 2024, all 12 fact-checking organisations in our study received funding from at least one major platform company. The most prevalent funding partner was Meta (Facebook/Instagram, n = 9), which, at the time of writing operates the world's largest fact-checking partnership program, followed by Alphabet (Google, n = 8), ByteDance (TikTok, n = 2), Twitter (n = 2), and Spotify (Kinzen, n = 2). In the case of Meta and ByteDance, funding of fact-checkers is tied directly to active participation in fact-checking activities on these companies' platforms.

When asked about the funding partnerships with platform companies, interviewees generally use defensive rhetoric, particularly transformative acts of differentiation and transcendence (Ware and Linkugel, 1973). As explained by several interviewees, they are accustomed to receiving criticism and even harassment from people who accuse them of colluding with platform companies to suppress or distort public debate and information:

A common criticism that we face in our work is that people say: 'Okay, you decide what the truth is, but how can you know? There are so many truths and what you do is

ensorship, and I cannot say my opinion in social media because you delete my posts', which of course is not true. We don't delete stuff anywhere. Yeah, but that is a common challenge. (Respondent #12)

Fact-checkers stress that they are never directly involved in decisions of content removal, which is the responsibility of platform companies. Nonetheless, multiple interviewees state that they often face accusations of being censorious, untrustworthy, biased, and part of nefarious conspiracies, particularly from far-right actors. In this regard, critics frequently bring up funding received from platform companies as 'evidence' of wrongdoing or conspiratorial collusion (#1, #6, #9, #12).

Criticism can derive from social media users, politically aligned media outlets, or established political actors and take the form of both harsh comments and harassment. Several fact-checkers explain that the funding they receive from the European Union (#4, #10) or from non-governmental organisations associated with George Soros (#3, #6, #7, #9, #10, #12) have also been brought up as 'proof' of their untrustworthiness or nefarious intent. As respondent #10 notes, their institution often receives comments on social media and emails from critics accusing them of 'serving globalist, neoliberal, Soros, whatever organisations. That we are basically the public enemy number one, we are serving foreign interests'. Such criticism also takes the form of threats or organised harassment. As described by respondent #7, they have received 'hate speech, hate mails, people cursing you, blaming you for things that you're not responsible for, like telling you that you are collaborating with Zionists or whatever with Soros, and Bill Gates, and Big Pharma'. Across our interviews, fact-checkers state that they rarely respond to critics or harassers, believing it to be unproductive and potentially even dangerous.

Given these experiences of accusations of censorship and collusion – often tied directly to financial links with platform companies – fact-checkers in our study describe their collaborations with platforms in defensive terms. Drawing on Ware and Linkugel's typology of apologia, we find that interviewees predominantly use four types of rhetoric of differentiation and three types of rhetoric of transcendence when explaining and legitimising their relationship to platform companies (see Table 1 for an overview).

Table 1. Overview of fact-checkers' arguments for partnering with platform companies.

Differentiation	<i>Explanation</i>	Transcendence	<i>Explanation</i>
D1. Differentiation from tech companies	Defense of fact-checkers as independent from tech companies	R1. Transcendence towards an overarching goal	Defense of collaboration with from tech companies by reference to a higher goal
D2. Differentiation between tech companies	Defense of particular tech companies as better than others	R2. Transcendence towards broad alliances	Defense of funding from tech companies by reference to a need for alliances
D3. Differentiation within tech companies	Defense of tech companies as having some parts that are better than others	R3. Transcendence towards better tech companies	Defense of funding from tech companies by a need for improving them from within
D4. Differentiation from government	Defense of tech companies as being better than governments		

Differentiation in defense of partnerships with platform companies

As described by Ware and Linkugel (1973), rhetorical defences of differentiation function by 'separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute' (278). This implies distancing an actor or actions from a frame of reference or an association that might cast them in a negative light.

Across our interviews, we find four recurring types of rhetorical differentiation used by interviewees to describe and defend their organisational collaboration with and funding from platform companies. We designate these as: (D1) Differentiation from platform companies, (D2) differentiation between platform companies, (D3) differentiation within platform companies, and, finally, and (D4) differentiation from the state. We present these four types below, each accompanied by quotes from the interviewees.

D1. Differentiation from platform companies

A recurring theme across our interviews revolves around a need to distance fact-checking institutions from the tech industry, stressing the organisational and editorial independence that fact-checkers have from companies such as Meta, ByteDance, or Alphabet. Several interviewees question whether platform companies fund fact-checkers out of a sincere commitment to combating mis- and disinformation or whether it is mainly a branding effort to appease critics and avoid further regulation (#6, #9, #10, #12). As respondent #6 states in connection to their collaboration with Meta:

'It puts us a bit into a position where we could become too close allies of the big tech companies. But it also really allows us to work in an efficient and independent manner. With the cooperation with Meta, we are third-party suppliers and we have all the editorial freedom to choose what we are fact-checking; to choose what we are publishing and when, as long as it adheres to the IFCN standards. So that is a good collaboration. And I believe that we and other fact-checkers are being careful about not becoming some PR tool of Meta and to also stay critical of them and the steps they take, which are not exactly helpful in the fight against disinformation'.

Through acts of differentiation, fact-checkers underline that, while their overarching goals and values might not be fully shared with the platform companies that fund them, the independence they have from these funders legitimises their relationship. In this regard, maintaining a critical stance towards the tech industry is highlighted as important, as exemplified by respondent #9:

'The fact that we are collaborating with them [platform companies] doesn't mean that we should stop being critical of such parties. I would say that I, myself, as just one of the workers of this organisation, I do not work with Meta and TikTok [...] I myself try to internalise this independence as much as possible'.

Here, we see not only a differentiation between the fact-checking organisation and the platform companies that fund them, but also a differentiation between the fact-checking organisation as an institution and the individual fact-checker working within it, thus creating further distance. While the organisation might collaborate with Meta and ByteDance (TikTok), this line of argument goes, this need not apply to the fact-checkers themselves who ought to stay both independent and critical.

D2. Differentiation between platform companies

A second type of differentiation found across interview responses centres on distinguishing some platform companies from others, defending existing collaborations with reference to inferior alternatives. This defense is particularly expressed by fact-checkers working in organisations that do not collaborate with ByteDance (TikTok), which they describe as a worse alternative to partners such as Meta and Alphabet. Interviewees cite concerns about the transparency, ownership, and values of ByteDance as reasons for not working with the company and, instead, choosing alternatives (#3, #5, #6, #12). Current partnerships, most notable with Meta, are thus defended by reference to the inferior option of working with ByteDance, as exemplified by Respondent #3:

On Meta when something gets fact-checked, for example, a video, before you see the video, you get a little announcement: 'This has been fact-checked by independent fact-checkers'. You can read the fact-check, you can ignore the fact-check, but it's there. On TikTok, it's not really, like on TikTok from what I've heard, like, from other people who are in, who have a deal with them, it's that you can't really even get to the fact-check from

the misleading video and so we kind of want something more serious from TikTok before we join them.

In order for fact-checkers to work with TikTok, this line of argument goes, its parent company ByteDance would have to be at least as transparent as current platform collaborators. Other fact-checkers, however, dismiss working with ByteDance altogether:

'We don't collaborate with TikTok because that basically it's a Chinese product, so made by an authoritarian regime and, as a medium, as a platform, who is claiming for themselves to work for democracy and the common good, there's a friction in this. So there's no collaboration'. (Respondent #12)

Here, the Chinese origins of TikTok and its parent company ByteDance is seen as disqualifying for its potential to be a collaborator and source of funding, unlike companies like Meta and Alphabet, which the fact-checking organisation in question does collaborate with. Through rhetoric of differentiation, existing collaborations with platform companies are thus defended through the creation of a boundary, which separates acceptable from unacceptable norms and values. Importantly, such rhetorical boundaries are not consistently drawn across the European fact-checking field, as we will return to in the discussion. While some organisations reject ByteDance outright, others do accept funding from the company, suggesting that these reactions are not reflective of overarching values across the fact-checking industry, but rather negotiated responses to evolving organisational contexts and constraints.

D3. Differentiation within platform companies

A third type of rhetorical differentiation revolves around distinguishing platform companies as a whole from the specific divisions, people, or tools within these companies that fact-checkers with:

'There's always criticism of this being just a PR effort for Meta. I would say that within the partnerships, within Meta, the people who are actually working on it seem to be pretty much devoted to making the platforms better, just that they don't have unlimited power within the company. So there's a limit to what they can do, even based on our own feedback. But I do think that it is having an impact'.

(Respondent #4)

While platform companies might not always share the same organisational values or goals as fact-checking institutions – in some cases only supporting fact-checking as a means of public relations management – employees within platform companies who work with fact-checkers often do share the same values, thus justifying collaboration.

D4. Differentiation from the state

A fourth and final type of rhetorical differentiation found across interviews revolves around a distinction between funding from platform companies and state funding (#6, #7, #8). Receiving funds from platform companies, this line of argument goes, is defensible since it ensures stronger organisational and editorial independence than the alternative of state funding would. As explained by respondent #7 who works at an organisation that does not accept state funds but has done so from Alphabet and Twitter:

'We will not allow ourselves to receive state money or any kind of, you know, favour. We go as far as to forbid our editorial team from being members in a party, in whatever capacity. We even forbid our core members from holding a prominent position in the civil sector, especially if it's a decision-making position'.

By setting firm boundaries towards the state and established politics, the fact-checker defends collaborations with platform companies on the basis that this does not compromise independence as much as the inferior alternative. In this regard, it should be noted that the boundary towards state funding is not shared across European fact-checkers, as several interviewees work at organisations that do receive both platform company and state funding, something we will return to in the discussion.

Transcendence in defense of partnerships with platform companies

Similar to rhetorical defences of differentiation, Ware and Linkugel (1973) argue that arguments of transcendence are transformative in that they seek to reshape the audience's perception of a specific fact, object or action. Whereas differentiation involves doing so by separating a fact from a context in which an audience potentially views it unfavourably, transcendence involves defending something by rhetorically placing it in relation to a new, more abstract and, importantly, more favourable aim or context.

Across our interviews, we find three recurring types of rhetorical transcendence in the defense of collaborating with and receiving funding from platform companies: (T1) Transcendence by reference to a worse alternative reality, (T2) transcendence towards broad alliances and (T3) transcendence towards better platform companies.

T1. Transcendence by reference to a worse alternative reality

A shared line of argument across multiple interviews revolves around defending collaboration between fact-checking organisations and platform companies by reference to a counterfactual

scenario, in which mis- and disinformation spreads uncontrollably due to a lack of fact-checkers keeping it in check. As respondent #11 argues:

Without us, the danger is going to be bigger [...] I don't think a social media network without fact checking journalism is better than with that. I don't think it's better for us to leave, because then we will have a gap. And when we have these kinds of gaps, we know what happens. People with bad intentions go and share whatever they want.

Without fact-checkers being visible on platforms, mis- and disinformation would fill the gap and flourish, this line of argument goes. This potential alternative reality justifies working with platform companies.

Echoing this position, respondent #6 notes that combatting mis- and disinformation on digital platforms would be impossible without fact-checking: 'There are a lot of theories about how active communication, pre-bunking, and strategic communication should play a role [in countering mis- and disinformation]. But I can't imagine all these strategies without fact-checking'. A world where fact-checkers are not active on platforms, this position holds, would be worse than the present.

Several interviewees stress that, while they remain critical of platform companies they collaborate with, they see every initiative launched against mis- and disinformation as a stepping stone towards the overarching goal of improving public debate and democracy:

'What we think about big platforms is that obviously they could do more against disinformation, but we try to be positive and I think that every step they take against disinformation is good for democracy and for the environment on social media'

(Respondent #2)

T2. Transcendence towards broad alliances

A closely related rhetorical defense of collaborations between fact-checkers and platform companies revolves around the need for broad alliances to fight against mis- and disinformation (#1, #2, #6, #11). As summarised by respondent #2:

'We can't fight alone against disinformation. This is one of our mottos when we contact our community [...] We can use it with the platforms, with the academic institutions, with the European institutions, and with lots of actors in the environment of disinformation'

From this position, funding from and collaboration with platform companies is only one of the many types of partnerships that fact-checkers need to establish and maintain in order to achieve the higher goal of combatting mis- and disinformation. Accordingly, working

closely with platforms is a necessary part of a broader strategy towards strengthening public debate and democracy in the digital era.

T3. Transcendence towards better platform companies

The third and final type of transcendence we find across multiple interviews legitimises collaboration with platform companies with the argument that this enables fact-checkers to improve the tech industry from within (#2, #11). While not as prevalent as the former two types of transcendent rhetoric, this type of defense is found among fact-checkers working in organisations with multiple partnerships with platform companies:

'I think it's better to have journalists working with these tech companies. Of course, it's not perfect. But we can also work with them to improve these relationships and that happens'. (Respondent #11)

If fact-checkers abstained from receiving funding from platform companies, this line of argument goes, they would be unable to work towards improving the tech industry from within. For this reason, working with platforms is an important means of achieving the higher goal of improving public debate through more active involvement from the companies who own the platforms on which debate is taking place.

Discussion

Our findings show that European fact-checkers use defensive rhetoric when describing their financial and collaborative ties to platform companies such as Meta, Alphabet and TikTok. Across the interviews, fact-checkers use differentiation and transcendence to defend existing partnerships, often by reference to worse alternatives, such as inferior funding options (e.g., the state), platforms (e.g., TikTok) or realities (e.g., a world without fact-checking). In combination with acts of bolstering, which are less prominent and therefore not a focus in our analysis, these transformative strategies of rhetorical defence function as ways of explaining and justifying the partnership with platform companies.

Drawing on the conceptual framework of Karlsson and Örnebring (2022), we argue that fact-checkers' defensive rhetoric represents a form of institutional boundary work similar to that found in traditional journalism, in which journalistic professionals often claim independence through the metaphor of a 'wall' (e.g., separating journalists from other actors). In the case of fact-checkers, partnerships with platform companies are defended based on claims of having clear boundaries that ensure independence. This mirrors cases where

traditional journalistic institutions have defended themselves by marking a distance to collaborators, such as *The New York Times* in connection to Wikileaks (Coddington, 2012).

While we find that fact-checkers perform rhetorical boundary work across the interviews, we simultaneously find that they disagree on how and where to draw such boundaries. While some fact-checkers, for example, defend their partnership with Meta by reference to a refusal to collaborate with TikTok – seen as a worse alternative – other fact-checkers collaborate with both platform companies. Similarly, while some defend funding from platform companies by reference to a refusal to receive funding from the government, other fact-checkers depend on both. These differences can, at least in part, be explained by socio-political differences across Europe in terms of overall levels of trust in government and media (Edelman, 2023). At the same time, however, they indicate tensions across fact-checking partnerships, in that some fact-checkers – inadvertently – defend their institutional practices through rhetoric that could be read as a critique of their colleagues in other European countries.

In our view, differences across rhetorical boundaries reflect more than just regional variation. They also highlight the still-emergent state of fact-checking as a professional field, as described in previous research (Graves and Lauer, 2020). Whereas Graves et al. (2023) describe differentiation strategies in relation to internal boundaries articulated by fact-checkers, the acts of differentiating and transcendence found in this study relates to external boundaries drawn by fact-checkers between themselves and platform companies as well as between various kinds of platforms. This study supplements Graves et al. (2023) by providing a rhetorical perspective on the boundary work of fact-checkers in its various facets. While the interviewed fact-checkers in this study invoke rhetorical boundaries to assert autonomy from platform companies, the boundaries they describe are neither uniform nor consistently drawn. This suggests that what is at stake is not only legitimacy in the eyes of the public but also struggles over the normative foundations of the field itself, as fact-checkers negotiate the meaning of independence in the context of platform partnerships. As such, fact-checkers' rhetoric can be seen as part of ongoing attempts to construct a shared professional identity that reconciles normative ideals with pragmatic realities.

This study is not without limitations. Due to its limited empirical granularity – with only one interviewee from each country – as well as ethical considerations pertaining to anonymisation, this article has focused on overarching trends, rather than country-specific differences. This could fruitfully be addressed in future research. Such research could also

Farkas, J., & Bengtsson, M. (2026). Defending fact-checking partnerships with platform companies: 'We can't fight alone against disinformation'. *European Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231261422085>

productively draw on additional sources of data from fact-checkers (e.g., websites, social media posts, emails, press releases) as well as data from platform companies, which could shed further light on the rhetoric surrounding fact-checking partnership programs.

References

Abelson RP (1959) Modes of Resolution of Belief Dilemmas. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3(4): 343–352.

Achter PJ (2000) Narrative, intertextuality, and apologia in contemporary political scandals. *Southern Communication Journal* 65(4): 318–333.

Andersen J and S e SO (2020) Communicative actions we live by: The problem with fact-checking, tagging or flagging fake news – the case of Facebook. *European Journal of Communication* 35(2): 126–139.

Belair-Gagnon V, Larsen R, Graves L, et al. (2023) Knowledge Work in Platform Fact-Checking Partnerships. *International Journal of Communication* 17: 1169–1189.

Bengtsson M, Schousboe S (2024) And that's a fact: A rhetorical perspective on the role of fact-checkers. *Journalism Practice* 18(9): 2414–2432.

Bengtsson M, Schousboe S, Farkas J, et al. (2024) Fact-checkers, tech-giants, and algorithmic systems: Between autonomy and automation in the relational and dispersed construction of ethos. In: Kjeldsen J, Hess A (eds) *Ethos, Technology, and AI in Contemporary Society: The Character in the Machine*. New York: Routledge.

Bennett WL and Livingston S (2018) The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication* 33(2): 122–139.

Benoit WL (2024) *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended*. State University of New York Press.

Borden SL (2012) Press Apologies: A New Paradigm for the New Transparency? *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 27(1): 15–30.

Canella G (2023) Journalistic Power: Constructing the "Truth" and the Economics of Objectivity. *Journalism Practice* 17(2): 209–225.

Cazzamatta R (2025a) Redefining objectivity: Exploring types of evidence by fact-checkers in four European countries. *European Journal of Communication* 40(2): 144–164.

Cazzamatta R (2025b) The Content Homogenization of Fact-Checking Through Platform Partnerships: A Comparison Between Eight Countries. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 102(1): 120–157.

Clark M (2022) Spotify is ramping up its efforts to find misinformation in podcasts. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2022/10/5/23389301/spotify-kinzen-audio-analysis-content-moderation-acquisition> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Coddington M (2012) Defending a Paradigm by Patrolling a Boundary: Two Global Newspapers' Approach to WikiLeaks. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 89(3): 377–396.

Farkas, J., & Bengtsson, M. (2026). Defending fact-checking partnerships with platform companies: 'We can't fight alone against disinformation'. *European Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231261422085>

Council of the European Union (2024) How the EU combats harmful content online. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/how-the-eu-combats-harmful-content-online/> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Culliford E (2020) YouTube expands fact-check feature to U.S. video searches during COVID-19 pandemic. Reuters, 29 August. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/technology/youtube-expands-fact-check-feature-to-us-video-searches-during-covid-19-pandem-idUSKCN22A2W9/> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Dijck J van, Poell T and Waal M de (2018) *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Edelman (2023) Edelman Trust Barometer: Europe Report. Edelman. Available at: <https://www.edelman.be/insights/2023-trust-barometer-europe-report> (accessed 4 August 2025).

EFCN (n.d.) European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN). Available at: <https://efcsn.com/> (accessed 4 August 2025).

EFCSN (2024) European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN). Available at: <https://efcsn.com/> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Gold ER (1978) Political apologia: The ritual of self-defense. *Communication Monographs* 45(4): 306–316.

Graves L (2018) Boundaries Not Drawn: Mapping the institutional roots of the global fact-checking movement. *Journalism Studies* 19(5): 613–631.

Graves L (2025) Will the EU fight for the truth on Facebook and Instagram? *The Guardian*, 13 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/13/meta-facebook-factchecking-eu> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Graves L and Lauer L (2020) From Movement to Institution: The 'Global Fact' Summit as a Field-Configuring Event. *Sociologica* 14(2): 157–174.

Graves L, Bélair-Gagnon V and Larsen R (2023) From Public Reason to Public Health: Professional Implications of the "Debunking Turn" in the Global Fact-Checking Field. *Digital Journalism* 12(10):1417–143

Grohmann R, Pereira G, Guerra A, et al. (2022) Platform scams: Brazilian workers' experiences of dishonest and uncertain algorithmic management. *New Media & Society* 24(7): 1611–1631.

Hameleers M (2024) Is the alarm on deception ringing too loudly? The effects of different forms of misinformation warnings on risk perceptions of misinformation exposure. *European Journal of Communication* 39(4): 360–374.

Handley RL and Rutigliano L (2012) Journalistic field wars: defending and attacking the national narrative in a diversifying journalistic field. *Media, Culture & Society* 34(6): 744–760.

Harvey J (1995) The Emerging Practice of Institutional Apologies. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 9(2): 57–65.

Hobbs MJ and O'Keefe S (2024) Agonism in the arena: Analyzing cancel culture using a rhetorical model of deviance and reputational repair. *Public Relations Review* 50(1): 102420.

Farkas, J., & Bengtsson, M. (2026). Defending fact-checking partnerships with platform companies: 'We can't fight alone against disinformation'. *European Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231261422085>

Kavtaradze L (2024) Challenges of Automating Fact-Checking: A Technographic Case Study. *Emerging Media* 2(2): 236–258. Krogh TV and Svensson G (2017). Media Responses to Media Criticism. *Nordicom Review* 38 (1): 47–64.

Mahdawi A (2025) From TikTok to TrumpTok? The app's banning and unbanning encapsulates everything wrong with US politics. *The Guardian*, 21 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/21/tiktok-ban-trump-trumptok-us-politics> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Mahl D, Kessler SH, Schäfer MS, et al. (2025) Conspiracy theories and misinformation in digital media: An international expert assessment of challenges, trends, and interventions. *Communications*. Epub ahead of print.

Meta (2025) How fact-checking works. Available at: <https://transparency.meta.com/features/how-fact-checking-works> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Narayan Bettadapur A (2020) TikTok partners with fact-checking experts to combat misinformation. Available at: <https://newsroom.tiktok.com> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Örnebring H and Karlsson M (2022) *Journalistic Autonomy: A Genealogy of a Concept*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Paul K, Mukherjee S and Sophia DM (2025) Meta shelves fact-checking in policy reversal ahead of Trump administration. *Reuters*, 8 January. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/technology/meta-ends-third-party-fact-checking-program-adopts-x-like-community-notes-model-2025-01-07/> (accessed 4 August 2025).

Schudson M and Anderson CW (2008) News production and organizations: Professionalism, objectivity, and truth seeking. In: Karin. Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas. Hanitzsch (eds) *Handbook of Journalism Studies*. Mahwah, NJ:, pp. 88–100.

Schjøtt A, Bengtsson M (2024) De- and recoding algorithmic systems: The case of fact checkers and fact checked users. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 30(6): 1919–1938.

Simons HW (2000) A dilemma-centered analysis of Clinton's August 17th apology: Implications for rhetorical theory and method. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86(4): 438–453.

Singer JB (2021) Border patrol: The rise and role of fact-checkers and their challenge to journalists' normative boundaries. *Journalism* 22(8): 1929–1946.

Sridharan N and Taylor A (2023) Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word: Reinforcing Institutional Identities through Newspaper Apologies for Racist Past. *Journalism Studies* 24(16):. 2053–2071.

Stencel M, Ryan E, Luther J, et al. (2023) Misinformation spreads, but fact-checking has leveled off. 21 June. Available at: <http://reporterslab.org/2023/06/21/misinformation-spreads-but-fact-checking-has-leveled-off/> (accessed 23 May 2025).

Vigso O and Wigren MVS (2010) Character as defence: A study of Vattenfall's communication following an incident at the nuclear plant at Forsmark, Sweden. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 15(4): 365–379.

Ware B I. and Linkugel WA (1973) They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59(3):273.