Policy brief: Europeans and False Online Information

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Strengthening Digital Fact-Checking Skills in the Age of AI

The rise of false, misleading, and deliberately deceptive digital content, often amplified by artificial intelligence, poses a growing threat to liberal democracy, human rights, and core European values.

This brief aims to answer the following questions:

1. What influences Europeans' **confidence in digital fact-checking**, i.e., verifying the truthfulness of online information and content?
2. What **policy recommendations can be formulated to strengthen the digital fact-checking skills** of European citizens?

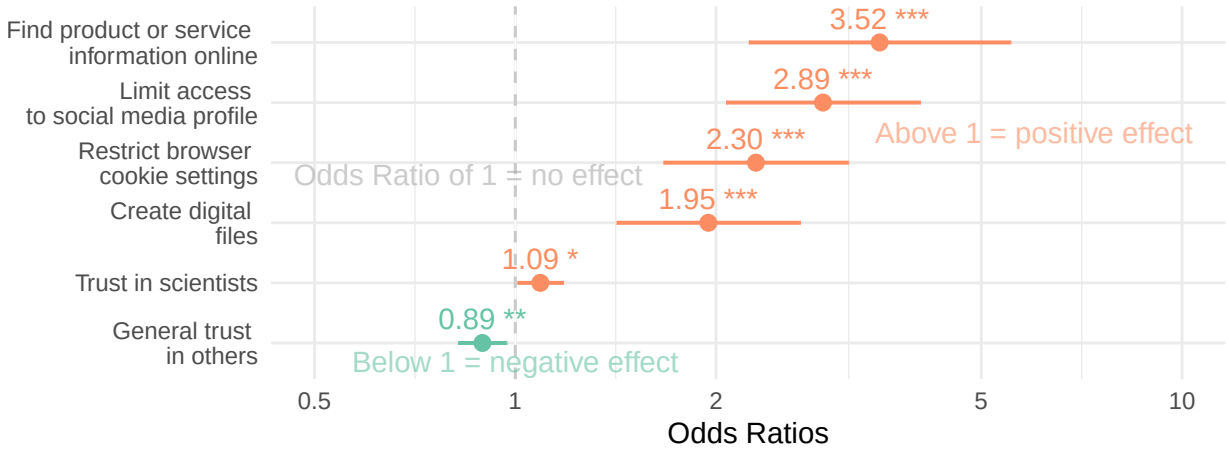
The Confidence Gap

The CRONOS 3 survey asked people across Europe to what extent the statement: "**I know how to check the truthfulness of the information or content I find on the internet**" is true for them. **Only 30% said it was very true, thus they were confident in digital fact-checking skills**. At the same time, as many as 86% say they use the Internet almost all the time or several times a day. That means **67% of most frequent internet users are not confident in their digital fact-checking skills**.

Factors of Confidence in Digital Fact-Checking

We analyzed several factors that influence respondents' confidence in digital fact-checking. We found meaningful associations between other digital skills and two types of trust:

People confident in finding information about goods or services online, limiting access to their social media profiles, and restricting cookies are more likely to be confident in digital fact−checking.
Trust in scientists also increases this confidence; general trust reduces it.



Source: Own elaboration based on CRONOS3 and ESS10−11 survey data.
Dots represent odds ratio values; lines indicate the uncertainty of the results.

Digital Skills Matter

The most important factor is confidence in finding information about goods or services online. People who declare this belief have **over 3.5 times the odds** of being confident in fact-checking **than those who do not**. This suggests that people look at information truthfulness as consumers.

> Recommendation 1:
> **Design fact-checking campaigns and training that mirror familiar online shopping behaviors. This makes the skill feel more intuitive and easier to learn**.

The next essential factors are limiting access to one's profile or content on social media and restricting cookies via internet browsers. These digital privacy skills increase confidence by **2.9 and 2.3 times the odds**.

> Recommendation 2:
> **Combine fact-checking campaigns and training with digital privacy issues. These skills reinforce each other and may have similar motivations**.

We found that participation in any digital skills training does not affect confidence in digital fact-checking. Thus, the training needs to be focused on that skill set. However, basic digital know-how does matter. People confident in creating digital files have **almost 2 times the odds** of being confident in fact-checking.

The Surprising Role of Trust

Each step up of general trust in others decreases the likelihood of confidence in digital fact-checking **by 11%** (0.89 odds ratio). The more trusting the respondents are, the less likely they are to consider themselves capable of fact-checking online.

> Recommendation 3:
> **Highlight the difference between trusting people in real life and trusting sources online. The internet is neither just an extension of the offline world nor has the same social rules**.

Each step up of trust in scientists increases the likelihood of confidence in digital fact-checking **by 9%** (1.09 odds ratio). Therefore, fact-checking skills and trust in people who provide evidence-based and validated information are positively related.

> Recommendation 4:
> **Invest in academia to support scholars in sharing their work in accessible ways. Train academic researchers to communicate their findings to the public**.

Analytical note

We studied 14 factors of confidence in digital fact-checking, and 8 had no meaningful impact: computer programming skills, using social media, frequency of internet use, participation in digital skills training, gender, age, education, income, and country of residence.

Open data from CRONOS3 Wave 1 (https://doi.org/10.21338/cronos3-w1), ESS10 (https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2), ESS10sc (https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10sce03_1), and ESS11 (https://doi.org/10.21338/ess11e03_0) represent countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. Respondents who did not use the internet or had no access to it were excluded; a total unweighted sample in the analysis was $n = 9{,}538$.

Supplementary tables and code to reproduce our analysis are openly available at: https://github.com/zremek/I4NG-Hackathon-2025

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