

SUD investigates AFP fact-checking

Introduction

Fact-checking has become a major activity for AFP and management regularly points to it as a success story. Revenue has grown quickly over the past decade and it is a profitable activity for the Agency. CEO Fabrice Fries made it the first of three strategic priorities in his plan for 2023-2028, and fact-checking was already explicitly made part of our public interest mission in our 2019-2023 Aims and Means Contract with the French state.¹ But fact-checking has a dark side, one that is most flagrant with our TikTok contract. Many of the journalists who do fact-checking for TikTok have precarious short-term contracts that can see them paid as little as \$2.50 for a fact-check. They are under managerial and financial pressure to spend no more than 10 minutes on a fact-check and some submit their work directly to TikTok without review in violation of AFP's editorial guidelines. This is a recipe for poor quality and the lack of editorial oversight creates reputational damage risks.

When most of us think of fact-checks we think of the stories we see in newspapers around the world that look into assertions made on platforms or in public appearances. AFP does these sort of fact-checks and they are published on client websites as well as on our public website (<https://factcheck.afp.com/>).

But these are not the only types of fact-checks that we do, however. Under the contract with TikTok, the social media platform sends to AFP videos that may contain misinformation or disinformation. An AFP fact-checker watches the video, identifies the potential misinformation, and then fact-checks the claims. The fact-checker then writes a brief, two-or-three sentence summary of the claims made in the video and whether they are true or false. This is accompanied by several links to information (sometimes AFP stories) proving or disproving the claim. Finally, a rating is applied, such as: Misinformation, Unconfirmed/Disputed, Not Misinformation, or Opinion/Humor under the old system and False, Misleading, Unsubstantiated, Inconclusive, True or Out of Scope under the new system. In the Asia-Pacific region these are entered directly by the fact-checker into TikTok's system without being checked by another fact-checker or editor. Even stringers/short-term CDDs are directly entering their work into TikTok's content moderation system without review.

Pressure and Precarity

It is no secret that the Agency's fact-checkers are frustrated about the precarity of their short-term contracts. They were quite outspoken about this and their lack

¹ "Strategic priority 1 - Consolidate AFP's leadership in the fight against disinformation". "AFP is also further expanding its traditional role as a provider of reliable information with this new public service mission." COM 2019-2023. Section 2.2 "Become a global leader in the fight against disinformation"

of opportunities for evolution within AFP during the global Teams Q&A sessions in 2023 and 2024.

SUD-AFP recently spoke with a number of fact-checkers in various parts of the world, in particular those on part-time, short-term contracts to do fact-checks for TikTok. Their wages and working conditions varied considerably depending on the country. While some are on one-year renewable contracts, some had shorter contracts, and one said they had been pushed onto what could be described as a stringer arrangement with no guarantee of work month-to-month and was paid by the fact-check. Several of those on longer contracts had what one described as a monthly “retainer” which meant they would get that amount if TikTok did not provide enough work. Like stringers, they were paid by the piece. The lowest rate we found was the equivalent of \$2.50 per fact-check. While some said their pay was reasonable for their country and described it as a decent side job, others emphasized the need to complete fact-checks within the 10-minute target set by management in order to make it financially worthwhile.

Management will no doubt note that even \$2.50 per fact-check works out to \$15 per hour, or 13.85 euro per hour, which is above France’s minimum wage of 11.65 euros before taxes and social contributions, and no doubt above the minimum wage of most countries. But if it takes you 20 minutes per fact-check then it is only \$7.50 per hour. The fact-checkers are very attuned to the amount of time it takes them. One said they don’t pitch fact-checks because it takes too much time to find videos with interesting potential misinformation and then they have to, in effect, do the fact-check to pitch it, all with no guarantee it will be accepted.

Those among us who have worked as stringers know the immense weight of worrying whether you will get enough work to make ends meet, of feeling like you can’t live normally and guilty when you splurge on something as banal as going out to dinner. So, it’s good that AFP offers a guaranteed minimum monthly amount to at least some fact-checkers.

On the other hand, some said they had very little flexibility. That they had to do a set number of fact-checks per day, Monday to Friday, with no possibility to do more fact-checks to make up for taking a day off. And the guaranteed minimum was also a maximum. In order to get that amount they had to work every day. One described having had to work Monday to Friday for eight months straight and even had to work public holidays, without additional pay.

Fact-checkers also complained that the content of videos can be disturbing and violent, although they said management has worked with TikTok to reduce their exposure to such content. Nevertheless, like photo and video journalists, fact-checkers are at a heightened risk of suffering anguish from being exposed to disturbing images.

Fact-checkers also complained that they usually had little or no visibility about their contracts. One told of a colleague having said their goodbyes on the last day of their contract only to get an email in the late afternoon tersely announcing their contract had been renewed, nothing else.

Fact-checking insufficient for permanent status despite being a strategic priority

During the Teams Q&A sessions fact-checkers made it clear they are tired of being on precarious short-term contracts. During this year's session the Director of Information Phil Chetwynd acknowledged that fact-checkers need better perspectives and pledged that they would be offered more training opportunities. This is a welcome pledge, but one that will take time to implement, and is insufficient. Currently, only one third of fact-checking staff have permanent contracts according to information management recently provided to trade unions. It added that these are in coordinating roles and "*generalist journalists, capable of occupying all of the posts in the Agency*".² This doesn't state it explicitly, but the meaning is clear: for management fact-checking alone is not sufficient to hire someone permanently. This is important: despite fact-checking becoming a strategic priority for the Agency, alone it is insufficient to merit permanent employment. Management's document said using people on short-term contracts "*guarantees the necessary flexibility given possible client volatility*".

This is unacceptable for a profitable activity. AFP needs to assume the additional costs of possible severance payouts in case it loses contracts and volume declines. Our TikTok operation appears to be essentially built upon a socially precarious foundation. Is this what the future of AFP looks like? One of management's strategic priorities is to boost the share of non-media clients, after all. Socially, this sort of operation is unsustainable. It also runs risks for AFP: Australia was left without a fact-checker recently when they let go one to avoid giving a permanent contract under local labor laws and the other one then quit when they got an offer elsewhere. Why stick around?

Recipe for poor quality

The TikTok model is not only a recipe for social precarity but for poor quality. Piecework is antithetical to quality. When your managers tell you to spend 10 minutes fact-checking videos that can be 10 minutes long can anyone blame them for verifying only one aspect of a video? Professional conscience will only go so far when you know no one is checking your work before it is being submitted to TikTok (and often the regional editors are reliant upon Google Translate to read local-language fact-checks). Fact-checkers told us they had seen fact-checks that only partially covered claims made in videos or had misunderstood claims or social context. And they had been submitted to TikTok.

We found it shocking that part-time staff (who get several hours of training and one month of supervision) are allowed to submit fact-checks directly to TikTok without being reviewed. SUD-AFP recently asked management whether or not what we do for TikTok is an editorial product that must meet our editorial guidelines. Management replied that "*the services provided to TikTok meet the same quality standards as what is transmitted on the wire or published on our fact-checking sites in 26 languages. The editorial standards are the same as in our editorial and ethical guidelines and the AFP Fact-Checking Stylebook.*"³

We looked in AFP's Editorial Charter and we didn't find any mention that our work must be edited/reviewed before being sent to clients! So we asked management about this. Their response:

² Cloture 2023 - Groupe AFP. Page 41

³ Question 13, RIC May 2024.

*As mentioned, one of the cornerstones of the Agency's work is that each piece of content should be proofread by an authorized person before it is validated. This point is so obvious to the Agency's journalists that the absence of a clear reference to it in the Charter has gone unnoticed until now. This oversight will now be corrected.*⁴

And so Paris management updated the editorial Charter in March 2024 which included this unequivocal statement:

*"All production must be checked by an editor before being sent to clients or published online."*⁵

This clearly puts the TikTok workflow outside of compliance with our editorial standards. Troublingly, some managers now seem to believe we have flexible editorial standards. A senior editor told a fact-checker that we have different quality standards for TikTok: *"I understand your concern about quality, but this is not your concern....we are responsible for the quality....So we set [the quality level] with TikTok, we say, okay, the bar is here, it's not here..."* It is obvious to the Agency's journalists, if not to certain managers, that it is unacceptable for AFP to have more than one editorial standard. It is directly contradictory to our mandate to provide *"trustworthy information"*⁶.

Management needs to admit that TikTok fact-checks (at least in the Asia-Pacific region) do not meet the Agency's editorial standards. For that reason, along with others we'll outline below, TikTok fact-checks don't belong within AFP itself.

Reputational risk

If we're being honest, what we're doing for TikTok is content moderation and not journalism, even if fact-checkers use some of their journalistic skillset. SUD believes AFP should not engage in content moderation. Our core mission is to inform, not to help platforms moderate content. That doesn't mean that AFP can't do it, but it does mean we're supposed to do it in a subsidiary. Management recently confirmed that activities outside of our core mission should be done in subsidiaries.⁷ At the same time, it indicated that production on demand, which is what we are doing for TikTok, should be in a subsidiary. Mr Fries himself reaffirmed that principle in the July CSE meeting.⁸

Our work for TikTok also poses serious reputational risks for AFP. Management recently stated: *"It's precisely because our rules are strict and our methods perfectly transparent that TikTok calls on our expertise."*⁹ We've shown above that management has sacrificed our editorial standards to better milk the cow, but this statement implicitly recognizes our reputation for integrity and impartiality. That is what TikTok is interested in. Outsourcing fact-checking to organizations like AFP shields TikTok from accusations that it is biased in its content moderation, such as what happened in the United States with Twitter and Facebook and their supposed

⁴ Question 11, RIC November 2023

⁵ Our editorial guidelines as updated in March 2024 (AFP editorial standards and best practices / Charte AFP des bonnes pratiques éditoriales et déontologiques) added at the insistence of SUD: "All production must be checked by an editor before being sent to clients or published online." (p. 5)

⁶ AFP Statute. Article 2-2

⁷ Question 4, RIC May 2024.

⁸ « Dès lors qu'il y a une production à la demande, c'est filialisé »

⁹ Question 13, RIC May 2024.

suppression of right wing voices. Instead TikTok can (and does) point to the fact that determination of whether content is misinformation is in the hands of independent and impartial media organizations.¹⁰ We make the judgment call and label videos as misinformation, not TikTok.

What is the interest of AFP in lending its reputation for impartiality, integrity and independence to a social platform? Yes, we are helping make a space for public discourse a little less polluted with disinformation. But is the money we get worth the risk to our reputation? This reputational risk is real. TikTok asked us to fact-check a video in which the claim was that people should delete TikTok because China uses the app to spy on people. Fact-checking a video that makes claims about TikTok while getting paid by the platform is an obvious financial conflict of interest, one that would probably not be allowed for our journalists under our Editorial Guidelines.¹¹

Worse, this claim is one that pits China against Western nations, a number of which, including France, have banned the use of TikTok on phones issued to government workers to prevent spying. The video was ranked. Fact-checkers say they never received explicit instructions not to evaluate claims concerning TikTok. The AFP Fact-Checking Stylebook does not have a section on conflicts of interest. The fact that the claim that TikTok feeds user information to Beijing was labeled as opinion is of only limited consolation. It demonstrates we lack sufficient editorial control over the TikTok fact-checking operation.

If AFP does content moderation, it must do so in a subsidiary to protect its reputation. SUD-AFP is skeptical of the value of the "ethical walls" that subsidiaries provide to parent companies, but it is infinitely better than conducting content moderation from within the newsroom. And it is abundantly clear that editorial control needs to be tightened.

Management can hardly be relied upon to take such hard decisions concerning an activity it developed in recent years and considers one of its biggest achievements and priorities. Even more so since it terminated the contracts of two journalists who raised concerns about eliminating the systematic review of editing TikTok fact-checks, and has refused to acknowledge that it is cutting corners in terms of editorial rigor. So SUD-AFP has decided to request AFP's Higher Council to weigh in on the issue. In our view the Higher Council has in the past been too reticent to challenge management on its policies, but it alone has the authority to compel management to restructure our fact-checking operations or to assume the reputational risks of doing content moderation for social media platforms from the newsroom.

Paris, September 30, 2024

SUD-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)



¹⁰ <https://www.tiktok.com/transparency/en-us/combating-misinformation/>

¹¹ AFP editorial standards and best practices (2024), Section 4/Conduct, page 13