

DISINFORMATION AND FACT-CHECKING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Daniel Catalan-Matamoros
(Coord.)

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DANIEL CATALAN-MATAMOROS
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Editorial DYKINSON, S.L. Meléndez Valdés, 61 - 28015 Madrid

Teléfono (+34) 91 544 28 46 - (+34) 91 544 28 69

e-mail: info@dykinson.com / www.dykinson.es / www.dykinson.com

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BUILDING RESILIENCE OF UKRAINIAN FACT-CHECKERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

DANIEL CATALÁN MATAMOROS
University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

VIKTORIIA ROMANIUK
StopFake, Mohyla School of Journalism, Ukraine

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1. INTRODUCTION

This book is being published under the project titled “Building resilience of Ukrainian fact-checkers in the fight against disinformation about the EU” which was funded by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF). The project was led by the UC3M MediaLab Research Group in Madrid University Carlos III in collaboration with StopFake.org, the leading fact-checking organization in Ukraine. The aim was to strengthen the capacity of EU and Ukrainian fact-checking organizations to combat disinformation, particularly around topics related to the European Union.

The war in Ukraine has intensified disinformation, including Russian propaganda that actively discredits the EU and tries to undermine support for Ukraine from EU states and democratic values inside Ukrainian media space (European Commission, 2022). The project mapped the main disinformation narratives and

actors to flag them to the wider fact-checking community in the European Union to help them identify malign narratives and mitigate their impact.

This initiative is a set of research and educational activities aimed at improving fact-checking skills and awareness among fact-checkers. The project fosters positive transformations in the EU and Ukrainian media landscapes through information dissemination and knowledge exchange. The project strengthens the work of fact-checking organizations and reviews expertise and methodologies on information verification. Through this approach, it is expected to contribute significantly to the fight against disinformation in Europe.

Therefore, this project is funded by EMIF and led by UC3M MediaLab and StopFake.org, key organizations in the field.

1.1. THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND INFORMATION FUND (EMIF)

EMIF is a funding agency based in Portugal that was established by the European University Institute and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In addition, Google has joined as an EMIF donor. The fund is managed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, which ensures its day-to-day management. EMIF supports collaborative efforts to debunk disinformation, amplify independent fact-checking, and enable targeted research and innovation tools designed to address online disinformation in Europe. The EMIF provides support to organizations based in Europe through competitive award processes and using independent and impartial selection committees. The fund is committed to scientific autonomy and freedom, transparency, pluralism, non-discrimination, and diversity (EMIF, 2023). The EMIF grants funding to projects in Europe that aim to fight disinformation. The fund provides grants for fact-checking and media literacy initiatives, as well as fundamental research projects, with a view to addressing the phenomenon of online disinformation in Europe and promoting a more resilient and fact-based digital information ecosystem.

1.2. UC3M MEDIALAB

The Research Group "Analytics, Media and Public Engagement: Communication, Journalism and Technology Laboratory" (UC3M MediaLab) responds to the growing need to study the media and public discourse under the influence of technological advances in the information society. Fields such as the influence of social networks on public perception, citizen participation, disinformation, crisis communication, big data, STEM vocations and data journalism are areas of analysis that are applied to various extents of society such as politics, economics, law, science, health, environment, ethics, international relations, etc.

The members of the UC3M MediaLab study and analyze the behavior of traditional and digital media, journalistic coverage of relevant and sensitive issues for society, as well as the influence of communication technologies on public perception and citizen participation in public debate.

The group is composed by academics, researchers and doctoral students with multidisciplinary profiles from the fields of communication, journalism, science and technology as well as legal and social sciences. The members are participating in several European, national and regional research projects such as the Jean Monnet Chair "EU, disinformation & fake news" (UC3M, 2019).

1.3. STOPFAKE.ORG

StopFake.org is the leading Ukrainian fact-checking project. The purpose of the project is to monitor, verify, fact-check and debunk fake stories, look for disinformation coming from state and non-state agents, translate best articles from major European languages into Ukrainian/Russian and to post these translations on the website, and then to spread the information through social networks accounts. In the last 9 years StopFake has accumulated a huge experience, collecting examples of Russian disinformation, mapping the distribution ecosystem of disinformation and its impact on Ukrainian audiences.

In 2014, StopFake received The Bobs award from Deutsche Welle as the best project in Russian language. In 2016, StopFake was included in the list of New Europe 100 (changemakers in Central and Eastern Europe), compiled by Res

Publica, Google, Visegrad Fund, and the Financial Times. In 2017, the StopFake project received the prestigious Democracy Prize from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) as a leading organization in the global fight against propaganda and disinformation. During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine StopFake received a lot of attention among audiences and policy-makers for its role in combating disinformation. Fortune described it as a "vital force" in protecting Ukraine's efforts against propaganda and disinformation. In 2022, StopFake was one of seven Ukrainian outlets that was awarded the Free Media Pioneer award by the International Press Institute and the Library of Congress announced that it would digitally archive the website as a record of Russian propaganda during the war.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The idea for the project emerged at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The world was shocked by Russia's brutal military actions and the scale of information threats that emerged against this background. The migration crisis, energy, and economic threats against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine have become new powerful disinformation topics. It was obvious that addressing these challenges would require new and innovative approaches and collaboration of experts from various fields of information and strategic communications.

The project analyzed the StopFake.org own database and identified the key disinformation narratives of Russian propaganda about the EU and separate European countries that have become the focus of Russian fake news. The project team also researched modern information verification methodologies, which led to the creation of a unique training program for journalists and fact-checkers.

An important task of the project was also to create a new discussion platform that would bring together academics, journalists, and fact-checkers. The 1st European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking became such a platform, where we brought together leading European experts in various fields involved in overcoming problems in the field of information and disinformation.

3. PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research project includes the analysis of the database of the Ukrainian fact-checking agency StopFake.org which is a leader among fact-checking projects in Ukraine, revealing disinformation and misinformation about events in Ukraine by debunking fake news. The website publishes debunked fake news stories about events in Ukraine in 10 languages, including Ukrainian, Russian, English, Spanish, Bulgarian, French, Italian, Dutch, Czech, German, Polish, and Turkish.

Over the past eight years of regular monitoring, the StopFake project team has compiled a database of Russian disinformation, which now includes more than 30,000 links to disinformation materials from the Russian media. The interpretative phase of the research project employed selected methods that are part of standard research practice in media and communication studies and social sciences in general, including narrative analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis. In addition, the methodology included a systematic review on the most prominent and effective fact-checking tools that are being used.

The results were used for the development of a set of key recommendations for fact-checkers, media, politicians, and other relevant actors, and for the development of a guide and fact-checking curriculum that is based on state-of-the-art international standards and best practices to mirror professional reality.

The results were also discussed and summarized in a conference format, the European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking, with the participation of media researchers and fact-checker practitioners from many European countries and beyond. The project also ensured that all activities were carried out in a gender-sensitive manner, and further that equal opportunities for all were guaranteed, and that both men and women were treated equally.

4. ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT UNDER THE PROJECT

4.1. ANALYSIS OF EU-RELATED DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE

One of the project's objectives was to analyze how Russian disinformation influenced Ukrainians' pro-European beliefs and shaped the negative information background around the topics of Ukraine-EU relations. StopFake.org researchers conducted a study “Anti-EU Narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of StopFake.org's debunks”. This study analyzed and compared the narrative map of Russian disinformation about the EU before (2014-2022) and after the full-scale invasion (February 2022-now), examined narrative changes in disinformation, and studied which European countries were mostly often mentioned in fake news, in which context and what channels for spreading false information were used.

Narrative analysis not only allows us to trace key disinformation topics, but also to identify their correlation with political processes and Russia's overall strategy in the context of the war against Ukraine. Therefore, this study opens up broad prospects for further research.

The research findings demonstrate the need for systematic approaches to Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine and the EU. Since 2014, topics related to Ukraine's EU integration have been central to Russian malign influence operations, aiming at undermining trust in Ukraine's international partners, trust in official institutions of the EU, and existing democratic governance system. They are also designed to provoke violence and intolerance towards established democratic political systems, to foster total distrust in the EU, to undermine support for Ukraine's pro-European track. Also, the aim is to undermine the efforts of governmental institutions to act effectively in times of crisis, war, conflict, and finally, to influence local political processes. Considering the deepening global crisis of various kinds globally - from epidemics to wars and natural disasters - it is imperative to establish a system for effective responses and proactive measures operating in real-time, including threat prevention measures.

The study also demonstrates the importance of fact-checking activities. Considering the number of debunking articles analyzed in the study, we can see the format of countering disinformation implemented by fact-checkers and the ways in which fact-checkers interact and communicate with external target audiences, as the project's goal is not only to identify and refute harmful messages, but also to build effective communication with readers about the current threats of Russian disinformation.

4.2. FACT-CHECKING METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS

Fact-checking is a crucial process in the information ecosystem for ensuring the accuracy of information in publication stages, and it can be conducted either in-house or by independent fact-checking organizations. Fact-checkers play a vital role in verifying the accuracy of names, dates, and facts. The proliferation of fake news has become a global phenomenon with significant consequences for elections, public health, and beyond. Effective fact-checking tools become crucial to combat this global concern. This project activity provides a comprehensive synthesis and analysis of contemporary fact-checking methodologies, offering the latest insights on verification techniques and fact-checking tools.

This activity draws upon prior scientific publications in the field and serves as a valuable resource for staying up-to-date with the most current information in the field of fact-checking and verification methodologies. The team systematically identified and described the characteristics and outcomes for each recent study where effective fact-checking methodologies had been assessed. The studies analyzed consistently delivered key outcomes when evaluating the precision and accuracy of the developed tool. The results categorized fact-checking methodologies into content-based and social context-based approaches. Various fact-checking tools were highlighted as essential in helping individuals discern the veracity of information online. However, it is recognized that challenges need to be addressed (RAND Corporation, 2023; Deutsche Welle Akademie, 2020; Chung, 2023). The ongoing battle against fake news requires continuous efforts to improve fact-checking methods and promote digital literacy (Chung, 2023).

Fact-checking is likely to continue evolving in the future. Some future trends and recommendations include the rise of automation, collaborative fact-checking, deepfakes and misinformation challenges, blockchain technology, educational initiatives, real-time fact-checking, and incorporation into social media. Last but not least, as fact-checking evolves, there may be discussions about the ethical and legal responsibilities of fact-checkers.

4.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

During 9 years of active fact-checking work in the context of war and crisis, the work of Ukrainian professional data verification organization has proven its effectiveness. StopFake.org analysts have repeatedly participated in the development of communication strategies for various international organizations and provided advice to governments and the military.

Based on the current research of the StopFake fact-checking project regarding the narrative strategy of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU and Ukraine, the research group has developed recommendations for fact-checking organizations and government agencies.

The main recommendations for fact-checkers are based not only on the importance of understanding the narrative structure of disinformation, but also on the analysis of gathered information and communication with partners and audiences.

Among the main measures we recommend to fact-checkers are:

- Use the narrative map of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU as a basis for identifying threats of this type.
- Pay special attention to those EU countries that are systematically targeted by Russian disinformation.
- To conduct a regular analysis of target audiences of Russian disinformation.

- To conduct systematic monitoring and narrative analysis aimed at identifying new thematic and substantive changes in order to anticipate new threats.
- To analyze technologies and tools used by disinformation to produce fake news.
- To set up a publicly available repository of disinformation examples.
- To promote the internationalization of fact-checking to track and analyze the cross-border spread of disinformation. To establish an extensive monitoring framework.

StopFake.org experience in combating Russian disinformation will be also useful to governments and governmental organizations in the EU. We are convinced that existing approaches and measures taken in the context of combating information threats are constantly evolving, as disinformation changes and adapts to the current trends in the digital world. That's why it's important to support independent scientific research and systematic analysis of disinformation. These are the main measures we recommend implementing:

- to encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation of researchers,
- to include fact-checking in the structure of strategic communications,
- to involve fact-checkers in the policymaking process on countering disinformation.

4.4. THE CURRICULUM OF FACT-CHECKING

This project activity aimed to discuss important elements that should be included in the curriculum for professional fact-checkers. Indeed, the professional activity of fact-checkers involves a set of essential skills that are crucial in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information in today's complex information landscape (Carpenter, 2009). These skills were identified as follows:

1. Critical Thinking: Critical thinking forms the foundation of effective fact-checking, enabling fact-checkers to approach their work with skepticism, objectivity, and a commitment to accuracy. This skill is vital for countering misinformation and promoting a well-informed society.

2. Evaluating Newsworthiness: Fact-checkers need to critically assess the factual basis of the information that constantly flows into newsrooms. This skill helps them decide whether the material is newsworthy and should be included in further processing.
3. Broad Knowledge Base: Fact-checkers benefit from a broad knowledge base beyond journalism, as diversified knowledge equips them to identify potentially false or inaccurate information effectively.
4. Proficiency in Information Gathering and Investigation: Fact-checkers must excel in research and be skilled at finding credible sources, documents, and data to support or refute claims. They play a crucial role in providing accurate and reliable information to the public and countering the spread of misinformation.
5. Familiarity with Social Media: In the digital age, fact-checkers need advanced skills in information verification to combat the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms.

In addition to these skills, an essential skill in today's information landscape is "Media Literacy", which complements fact-checking. Media literacy enables individuals to critically evaluate and navigate the vast amount of information they encounter, understand how information spreads in the digital age, and recognize various forms of misinformation and disinformation (Potter, 2013; Tornero, 2008).

Academic qualifications for fact-checkers vary across organizations, but some recommended academic backgrounds include journalism, communication studies, political science or public policy, statistics and data analysis, law, library science or information science, and courses in critical thinking, digital literacy, ethics, and media literacy. Multilingual skills can be advantageous in multilingual or international fact-checking contexts. On-the-job training is also common in fact-checking organizations, and practical experience is valuable.

Adhering to a set of established principles and ethical codes is imperative for fact-checkers. These principles uphold the highest standards of quality and integrity within the field. The International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles emphasizes nonpartisanship, transparency of sources, funding, methodology,

and corrections. NPR's Guideline Principles focus on accuracy, fairness, completeness, honesty, independence, impartiality, transparency, accountability, respect, and excellence.

4.5. THE 1ST EUROPEAN CONGRESS ON DISINFORMATION AND FACT-CHECKING, AND OTHER NETWORKING AND DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

The project organized the 1st European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking, held on 20-21 November 2023 in Madrid. This was a significant event that aimed at addressing the growing issue of disinformation in the media landscape. The congress was organized by Madrid University Carlos III and StopFake.org from Ukraine, with a focus on "Disinformation Across the EU-Ukraine Media Landscape". The congress brought together leading experts, scholars, journalists, policymakers, and practitioners in the field to foster cross-border dialogue, promote knowledge sharing, and develop innovative strategies to combat disinformation and strengthen fact-checking practices. The event featured interactive sessions, workshops, and panel discussions exploring the multifaceted dimensions of disinformation, its impact on the media landscape, and the challenges it poses to democratic societies.

The congress aimed to answer the question: How to analyze, professionally verify, and communicate disinformation to different audiences? It addressed the challenges faced by journalists and fact-checkers in a rapidly evolving media landscape and highlighted the importance of media literacy in empowering citizens to discern truth from falsehood. By the end of the congress, the organizers envisioned a strengthened network of professionals dedicated to combating disinformation, equipped with new knowledge, tools, and strategies to foster accurate and reliable information dissemination.

In addition, networking and dissemination activities were conducted. For example, a joint expert group of UC3M and StopFake.org presented the project and research findings at the CELSA Communication and Journalism School of Sorbonne University (Paris, France). Representatives of the StopFake.org team also participated at the Fighting Misinformation Online Conference in Brussels which was organized by Google and European Media and Information Fund, in

the EUDisinfoLab Annual Conference 2023 that took place in Krakow (Poland), and in the EMIF Autumn Event 2023 "Community Building Against Disinformation" organized in the European University Institute, Florence (Italy). In addition, the project research findings were widely discussed among the Ukrainian and European expert community.

5. IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

The "Building resilience of Ukrainian fact-checkers in the fight against disinformation about the EU" project has had a significant impact on both the professional field of journalism and on society in the fight against disinformation and the promotion of democracy. The project has become a unique opportunity to bring together various stakeholders in the context of countering disinformation - European researchers, fact-checking organizations from Eastern and Central Europe, Spain and Ukraine, and media representatives. The project activities allowed participating parties to look at the problems of disinformation from the perspectives of different organizations regarding the spread of fake news in Ukraine and about Ukraine. The project also brought an opportunity to increase the visibility of Ukrainian fact-checkers, provide access to materials and current analysis by Ukrainian and European experts.

In the professional field of journalism, the project has elevated the capabilities and expertise of fact-checking organizations in Ukraine and the European Union. By analyzing disinformation narratives about the EU and Ukraine, the project has provided fact-checkers with valuable insights into the strategies and tactics employed by disinformation actors. This knowledge equips them with the tools needed to more effectively combat false narratives and ensure the accuracy of information in the media. Furthermore, the fact-checking methodologies and tools developed as part of the project offer a comprehensive resource for fact-checkers and journalists in their pursuit of truth and accuracy. This not only strengthens the quality of journalism but also contributes to the restoration of trust in media, which is crucial in a disinformation-ridden information landscape.

The curriculum of fact-checking outlined in the project ensures that incoming fact-checkers receive appropriate training and education, helping to cultivate a new

generation of professionals who are equipped to navigate the challenges of the digital age and combat disinformation effectively.

The 1st European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking served as a critical forum for experts and practitioners to share knowledge, best practices, and strategies for addressing disinformation. This collaborative effort has facilitated cross-border dialogue and knowledge sharing, ultimately strengthening the network of professionals dedicated to combating disinformation.

In society, the impact of the project is far-reaching. The work of fact-checking organizations like StopFake.org has helped raise awareness among the public about the prevalence of disinformation and the importance of verifying information. Through the dissemination of fact-checks and educational initiatives, citizens are better equipped to distinguish fact from fake. This knowledge contributes to the promotion of a more informed and democratic society where individuals can make informed decisions based on accurate information.

Moreover, the project's recommendations for fact-checkers, government agencies, and policymakers emphasize the need for a coordinated approach to combat disinformation. By promoting cross-disciplinary cooperation, including fact-checking in strategic communications, and involving fact-checkers in policymaking, the project contributes to building resilience against disinformation at both national and international levels.

As Russian disinformation tries to adapt to new realities of sanctions and restrictions, introduced after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the fact-checking remains one of the most effective instruments to combat it. In the context of global crises and wars, disinformation operations and false news have become an even more threatening phenomenon in the global context. Our project helped not only to keep the attention on the problem of disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine, but also to reflect on the global impact of information threats as a tool of warfare in the digital age.

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IS DE-PLATFORMING AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION TO GATEKEEP ONLINE TOXICITY IN THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR?

UXÍA CARRAL VILAR

University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

LIST OF CONTENT:

1. Understanding the new role of gatekeepers. 2. How to spread toxicity in social media? 3. Implications of disinformation & hate speech. 4. Is deplatforming an effective solution? 4.1. Positive aspects of deplatforming. 4.2. Potential inconveniences of deplatforming. 5. References

1. UNDERSTANDING THE NEW ROLE OF GATEKEEPERS

The role of gatekeepers in the realm of social media has evolved significantly over the past few years. Traditionally, gatekeepers were associated with newsrooms and editorial boards, making decisions about what information reached the public. Their role was characterized by editorial discretion, ethical standards and accountability (Shoemaker & Vos, 2019). In the digital age, however, gatekeeping has undergone a profound transformation:

One of the pivotal changes in gatekeeping has been the rise of algorithmic systems. Social media platforms like Tik Tok and Twitter have become the new gatekeepers, as they employ complex algorithms to curate users' content feeds based on user behavior, engagement, and perceived relevance, altering the way information flows and is consumed (Zuiderveen Borgesius *et al.*, 2018). This algorithmic gatekeeping determines what content users see with the effective goal of shaping their online experiences. Nevertheless, authors such as Noble (2018) and Barocas *et al.* (2023) highlight the potential risks associated with algorithmic gatekeeping pointing out that these algorithms can unintentionally amplify racial and gender biases.

Another danger may involve the perpetuation of filter bubbles, as algorithms prioritize content based on user engagement and relevance, users may find themselves in echo chambers where they are exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs while missing out on diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). This raises concerns about how these environments may affect public discourse and facilitate the spread of disinformation, an issue that will be approached in more detail later.

Considering the evolving gatekeeping landscape, users and policymakers are increasingly demanding transparency in how social media platforms employ algorithms and moderate content with the aim of seeking to understand the decision-making processes and the potential biases that may exist to perpetuate bias and filter bubbles. Moreover, ensuring transparency in content moderation practices is essential to building and maintaining trust (Diakopoulos, 2016).

However, Tufekci (2015) argues that algorithmic systems should be subjected to public scrutiny and auditing to ensure fairness and accountability. Indeed, a harmful consequence that has so far not been considered is the psychological effect that content moderation has on those human workers who collaborate with or supervise the algorithms.

Ensuring a safe and respectful online environment requires platforms to set guidelines to be enforced in order to remove harmful content. However, workers are not provided with any form of protection against the secondary effects of their work. Before addressing any inadequacies in the treatment of current moderators, it is crucial to acknowledge that a major hurdle in evaluating existing systems is the limited information available. So far, the majority of information concerning this matter has been derived from the disclosures of previous employees of these platforms:

In 2018 was released 'The Cleaners'¹, a documentary exposing one of the first cases: secret teams of content moderators cleaning up the darker side of the web thousands of miles away from the Silicon Valley companies they work for. Then

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-47639076>

came the lawsuits from around the world: An USA moderator sued TikTok in 2021 for providing inadequate safeguards against "extreme and graphic acts of violence, including mass shootings, child rape, animal mutilation, cannibalism, gang killings and genocide"². Recently, Meta workers in Spain have also denounced their company for psychiatric consequences³.

Hence, studies such as Gonçalves (2021) underscore the ethical dilemmas faced by content moderators. These gatekeepers must make quick decisions about what content should be removed or restricted, often dealing with traumatic or disturbing material. Therefore, these workers need to be provided with some counseling and psychological support as well as ethical guidelines for content moderators to mitigate the toll of their work and to prevent them from being involved in ethical concerns.

For example, balancing the need to remove harmful or offensive content with the principles of free speech is a constant ethical challenge. Human moderators may inadvertently introduce bias into content moderation decisions and err on the side of caution, removing content that may not necessarily violate guidelines (Dietvorst, 2015). At other times, their long exposure to this type of toxic content can lead them to normalize certain types of violence or even to frame these behaviors as customs of certain digital social communities (Roberts, 2019).

2. HOW TO SPREAD TOXICITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA?

In fact, social media networks often develop their own norms and cultures that can influence the behavior of their users (Kim, 2021). In some cases, these norms may encourage or tolerate toxic behavior, making it more acceptable within specific online communities. Group dynamics can amplify toxicity when individuals conform to these norms to gain acceptance or validation from their peers.

² <https://www.theverge.com/2021/12/24/22852817/tiktok-content-moderation-lawsuit-candie-frazier>

³ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20231006/9279078/mi-cabeza-solo-hay-muerte.html>

This is one of the mechanisms that underlie why social media has become a fertile ground for toxicity, but this phenomenon is a multifaceted manifestation influenced by several other factors. For instance, the 'online disinhibition effect', as described by Suler (2004), further exacerbates the spread of toxicity because individuals may feel liberated from societal norms and consequences when communicating online.

As a result, they may exhibit uncensored and sometimes harmful behavior, contributing to a toxic online environment. This feeling is broadly related to the relative anonymity online communication affords users (Hollenbaugh, 2013). In the digital realm, individuals can interact without revealing their true identities, leading to a phenomenon known as 'deindividuation' (Lowry *et al.*, 2016; Jaidka *et al.* 2021). This loss of personal accountability can embolden users to engage in aggressive or hurtful behavior they might refrain from in face-to-face interactions.

However, users do not refrain because on social networks it is easier to find spaces where their ideas are welcomed with open arms by like-minded people. This behavior is partly due to the algorithms based on users' preferences and engagement history often used by social media platforms to curate content. While this personalization enhances user experience, it can also foster polarization and the formation of echo-chambers (Del Vicario *et al.*, 2016). Users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, leading to reinforcement of their viewpoints and a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives.

Apart from this partial perspective, the other feature that gets the most permeability irrespective of the characteristics of the filter bubble is virality (Peña-Fernández, 2022). The viral nature of this type of content can lead to the rapid dissemination of toxic information, as sensational or provocative posts tend to capture users' attention and engagement. Indeed, research studies by Vosoughi *et al.* (2018) highlight that false information spreads faster and wider than true information on social media platforms.

In that sense, if this toxicity is intended to be the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information with the intention to manipulate, then it can be defined as disinformation. This phenomenon is generally characterized by some common features: It encompasses a wide range of deceptive tactics, including false narratives, fabricated evidence, and selective presentation of facts (Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

Besides, the aim to deceive often involves using some ambiguous sources, sensationalism, and the exploitation of cognitive biases (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017), since it preys on human psychology, capitalizing on confirmation bias and cognitive heuristics to gain traction and influence public opinion. Nonetheless, when false or misleading narratives stoke negative emotions and prejudices, another phenomenon often arises as a response to disinformation.

Hate speech refers to expressions that promote hatred, discrimination or violence against individuals or groups based on attributes such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender (Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Paz *et al.* 2020). The transition from disinformation to hate speech is not always direct, but certain factors contribute to this shift. Firstly, disinformation can dehumanize specific groups by portraying them as threats or undesirables. When disinformation fosters dehumanization, it can pave the way for more overtly toxic content and laying the foundation for hate speech (Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

As abovementioned, disinformation can also thrive in online echo chambers, which may normalize certain behaviors and radicalize individuals, making them more receptive to hate speech (Del Vicario *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, when the third factor, algorithmic amplification, comes into play, the groundwork has been laid for facilitating the reception and dissemination of severe toxic. Social media algorithms may inadvertently amplify disinformation by prioritizing engaging or sensational content (Vosoughi *et al.*, 2018).

Consequently, hate speech directly contributes to the toxicity of online spaces by promoting discrimination, hostility, and violence. It does not only foster a hostile environment that inhibits constructive dialogue (Citron, 2017), but also - even a

more devastating effect-, it can escalate conflicts, incite real-world harm, and silence marginalized voices.

This final point is paradoxical when one considers that, in the early stages of the emergence of social media networks, one of the primary goals was to democratize speech and enable public representation of minority and marginalized communities. Previous studies such as Carpentier *et al.* (2013) and Andrade-Vargas *et al.* (2021) claimed the democratization brought by social media had reshaped the dynamics of power in information dissemination.

In fact, authors emphasized how citizens and grassroots movements have harnessed the power of these platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and share their stories and perspectives with a global audience such in the Arab Springs held a decade ago (Hermida *et al.*, 2014). However, the widespread availability of free and publicly accessible communication platforms also heightens the potential for the spread of disinformation because of inadequate filtration mechanisms, provided before by journalists and media outlets.

In the context of the Ukrainian-Russian war, both factions have exploited communication channels as a means of manipulating the narrative in their favor. False contextualization and the prominent roles of Facebook and Twitter in circulating deceitful information, as well as a rise in disinformation efforts during the two-week period that followed the invasion, were used by both parties. False narratives portraying military decisions and attacks, which attribute atrocities and war crimes to the opposing side, dominate the discourse. It has been confirmed that as the conflict advances, the amount of false information originating from Ukraine decreases, whereas the level of Russian disinformation rises (García-Marín, & Salvat-Martinrey, 2023).

3. IMPLICATIONS OF DISINFORMATION & HATE SPEECH

On the one hand, disinformation can be created and disseminated for various purposes, including political manipulation, economic profit, social prominence or simply to sow discord. Its way of toxifying users and conversations lies in its ability

to undermine trust in information sources, erode public discourse and create a climate of confusion and uncertainty (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017):

Disinformation related to medical treatments can discourage people from seeking essential healthcare services. For example, the dissemination of false claims and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 led to reduced vaccination rates (Catalan-Matamoros & Elías, 2020). This phenomenon has also undermined the worldwide economic stability. False financial rumors, as highlighted by Di Domenico *et al.*, (2021) can lead to stock market fluctuations and substantial financial losses, impacting individuals' savings and investments.

Nonetheless, politics has been the most affected area by its impact. This type of toxicity fuels political polarization, since false narratives reinforce existing beliefs, deepen divisions and hinder productive political discourse, making it difficult to find common ground on critical issues (Kubin & von Sikorski, C., 2021). In fact, disinformation poses a severe risk to the integrity of democracy, but it has become the main threat in a key political process such as elections (Bernhardt *et al.*, 2008; Carral *et al.*, 2023).

False claims of election fraud such as did Trump (USA, 2020) or Bolsonaro (Brazil, 2022) can erode trust in the electoral process and potentially lead not only to contested election outcomes (Stachofsky *et al.*, 2023), but also to social unrest and incitements to violence like the assaults on U.S. Capitol and the Brazilian Congress (Kydd, 2021). However, the ultimate the most effective place for the dissemination of disinformation is in the construction of the narratives of each side during a war.

In the Ukraine-Russia conflict, both countries adopt different strategies depending on their goals. Russians, for instance, have employed an extensive approach that utilizes a broader range of media to disseminate their narratives. Pro-Moscow visual disinformation relies heavily on fabricated content, particularly in the form of fake news regarding the international community's response to the Russian attack. Conversely, the Ukrainian approach is characterized by a concentration of messaging across a select number of platforms, with most of the

disinformation focused on false claims of attacks (García-Marín, & Salvat-Martinrey, 2023).

On the other hand, hate speech has repercussions in the digital realm, but attention should be paid especially to its ripple effect in the offline sphere. In other words, it is essential to consider the wider cascading impact of a single improper interaction, leading to real-world consequences affecting people and communities. Within the frame of social networks, online trolling and harassment are significant contributors to this type of toxicity (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Trolls deliberately provoke and harass others, creating hostile environments that withdraw from online discussions and discourage open discourse (Poland, 2016). When those victims of trolling fear retribution for expressing their opinions due to the prevalence of hate speech, it hampers constructive dialogue and undermines the principles of democratic societies. The danger, however, lies not only in the online limitation of the diversity of voices and perspectives.

From then on, these same victims also censor themselves in their offline conversations. In educational settings, hostile learning environments are created where the intellectual and personal development of students is inhibited due to fear of harassment (Di Angelo, 2018). Hate speech also takes a toll on mental health. Long exposure to this toxicity can cause psychological distress and anxiety among targeted individuals, as demonstrated in studies such as Rivas-Drake *et al.* (2014).

Nevertheless, hate speech does not only attack individuals, but also reaches collectives and communities (women, LGTBQ+, blacks, Asians, etc.). The normalization can weak social cohesion, leading to isolated communities, as explored by Ziems *et al.* (2020). But also, online hate speech can serve as a precursor to real-world hate crimes, fostering an environment where discrimination and violence against targeted groups become more likely (Müller & Schwarz, 2023).

4. IS DEPLATFORMING AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION?

Expelling toxic users has emerged as a controversial method for combating these issues. As defined in scientific literature, deplatforming refers to the practice of suspending or permanently banning users who engage in harmful activities (Jhaver *et al.*, 2021). Some other authors (Rogers, 2020) match this concept directly to the deliberate collective action of removing an individual, group or content due to violations of platform guidelines.

Taking into consideration the previous definition, the primary aim of deplatforming is to address disinformation and hate speech promoted by users. For example, prominent figures who have repeatedly shared false information, such as Alex Jones, deplatformed from Twitter and YouTube (Pennycook & Rand, 2020) or Loomer, the ‘white nationalist’ banned from Twitter for a ‘racist attack’ on a Muslim US congresswoman (Rogers, 2020). Moreover, according to the Freedom House Overview (2023)⁴, “social media platforms and search engines also removed content in response to the Russian military’s invasion of Ukraine”:

During the first semester of 2022, “Facebook restricted access in Ukraine to 7,725 items of content related to the war, for allegedly violating local laws on hate speech, incitement to violence, extremism law, spreading misinformation and propaganda” against Ukrainians. “In January 2023, pro-Ukrainian users had their accounts removed for war-related publications on social networks”. On the contrary, “in June 2023, Twitter allegedly shadow banned Ukrainian users” who published fake news about the Russian movements. In short, “as revealed by Meta, in 2022 Ukraine was the second-most targeted country in the world by coordinated inauthentic behavior networks with majority of them originating from Russia”.

However, the expectations of deplatforming in striking a balance between protecting the right to free speech and maintaining a safe and responsible digital environment, they seem difficult to achieve sometimes. Thus, the efficacy of this

⁴ https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-net/2023#footnote5_qh6etcd

initiative has therefore been examined, exploring both its positive aspects and its potential inconveniences:

4.1. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF DEPLATFORMING

Deplatforming can effectively limit the spread of disinformation. Research conducted by Pennycook & Rand (2020) demonstrated that the removal of false information from social media platforms significantly reduces its reach. In the case of shutting down particularly offensive online communities as the subreddits *r/fatpeoplehate* and *r/coontown*, banned by Reddit in 2015 for violating its harassment policies, the forums that received users from those cancelled spaces did not experience a substantial rise in offensive language (Chandrasekharan *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, this practice enforces accountability among users and content creators. The threat of losing one's platform encourages individuals to be more cautious about the content they produce. This fosters an environment in which responsible information sharing is encouraged, as evidenced by the case of deplatforming Milo Yiannopoulos⁵, editor at the right-wing website Breitbart advocating sex with 13-year-olds under any conditions.

This accountability is not solely in the interest of platform users but also in the interest of social media companies themselves. Taking a strong stance against disinformation and hate speech through deplatforming can preserve and enhance the reputation of social media platforms. A study by Suzor *et al.* (2019) revealed that users are more likely to trust platforms that demonstrate a commitment to responsible content moderation.

By effectively curbing harmful content, platforms can maintain user trust and attract a broader user base. When platforms remove users or content promoting hate speech, they help create a safer environment for marginalized groups. For example, studies such as Haimson *et al.* (2021) explain that certain removals of

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39045458>

conservative participants often involved harmful content and how this was done with the aim of creating safe spaces with truthful information.

4.2. POTENTIAL INCONVENIENCES OF DEPLATFORMING

Nonetheless, deplatforming also raises concerns about certain negatives aspects as deprivation of freedom of speech. The removal of former President Donald Trump from Twitter⁶, for instance, ignited a debate over freedom of speech and corporate power. Social media companies, as private entities, wield significant power in shaping public discourse, leading to concerns over unchecked censorship. However, if private non-governmental entities take measures to restrict speech, those actions are not bound by constitutional limitations.

Therefore, having the power to delete content or users, it implies the enforcement of deplatforming policies can be potentially inconsistent and arbitrary. In fact, Lowe (2022) found that social media algorithms and moderators often struggle to distinguish between legitimate criticism and hate speech. This inconsistency in enforcement can lead to concerns about bias and the suppression of valid political discourse, such as Haimson *et al.* (2021) mentioned in the cases of transgender and black communities' speech removal.

Banning users may not be the most effective way to eliminate toxic behavior, since deplatforming does not end toxicity but unintentionally drive disinformation and hate speech to alternative less-regulated platforms. For example, after being deplatformed, many far right and extremist groups migrated to platforms like Parler and Gab (Rogers, 2020). In fact, the latest platform "makes salient that any speech that is not considered illegal by the US constitution is welcomed on the platform" (Kor-Sins, 2023).

This migration also gives rise to a strengthening of echo chambers, isolated online spaces where individuals with extremist views congregate in intensifying radicalization. By pushing extremists to fringe platforms, society is inadvertently being more polarized, and individuals are less likely to encounter differing

⁶ https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension

perspectives (Pennycook *et al.*, 2018). Besides, deplatforming can make it more challenging for authorities to monitor and address the issue effectively when it takes place in non-public social media platforms like Telegram (Rothut *et al.*, 2023).

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ANTI-EU NARRATIVES THROUGH THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR IN THE LIGHT OF STOPFAKE.ORG'S DEBUNKS

OLENA CHURANOVA

StopFake, Ukraine

VIKTORIIA ROMANIUK

StopFake, Ukraine

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1. INTRODUCTION

Disinformation as a tool of warfare was actively used in the Soviet Union and then by the Russian Federation. The conduct of Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine since 2014 has been accompanied by various information operations whose aim is to introduce harmful malign ideas and views into collective and individual consciousness; to disorient and misinform the public; to undermine certain beliefs and stability; to instill fear about one's neighbor through the portrayal of an enemy (Horban, 2015). Russia constantly disseminated a series of disinformation narratives to distort Ukraine's image in the eyes of both Western allies and Ukrainians themselves. Russia actively employs reflexive control to influence the opinions of the majority and the decisions made by stakeholders (Fedchenko, 2016; Media Aijr & Vailliant, 2018). Reflexive control compels a stronger opponent to voluntarily choose a particular action to benefit Russia and shapes the necessary perception of the situation around the

opponent (Makukhin, 2018; Snegovaya, 2015). To this end, Russia creates the necessary images, visualizations, fake statements, and fake studies, including fake and manipulative news, all of which work in concert and in one direction – to make the adversary think and make decisions in a way that benefits Russia.

The Russian-Ukrainian War that started in 2014 set a new stage for complex hybrid warfare where not only new types of traditional weapons are being used, but all types of information weapons are tested and deployed as well. A cornerstone and the main topic targeted in this information war is the relationship between Ukraine and the EU, which Russia is trying to manipulate and ruin in different ways.

The study of disinformation narratives against European countries and the European Union in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war has significant importance. The desire of Ukraine to move towards Europe, to aspire to a better standard of living, was the catalyst for the Euromaidan Revolution, to which Russia responded with war. Today, during the full-scale war, the European Union stands as one of Ukraine's largest and most important allies. Russia's information aggression towards such allies is in line with Russia's information strategy.

The selection of fact-checking materials for this research, focuses on narratives and their evolution during the full-scale war, but not only. The analysis reveals the reason fake news is used (the intent of the disinformation) and that debunking the most widely spread, emblematic, or the most dangerously influential material shows potentially future hot spots with which policy makers will have to contend.

Thus, within this framework, the following research questions were posed:

- What disinformation narratives about the EU and European countries were propagated from 2014 to 2023, and did this landscape change with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?
- Which European countries are most frequently featured in disinformation narratives, and in what context?
- Can a database of the fact-checking project serve as a basis for research and analysis of information operations?

2. DEFINING DISINFORMATION AND “FAKE NEWS”

According to David Lazer, disinformation is false information that is purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer, 2018).

In this context, it is worth considering the definition of fake news that researchers have developed by Allcott and Gentzkow as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017).

In official EU documents and reports by research organizations, analysts often refuse to use the term “fake news” because they consider it to be politicized. However, fact-checkers use this term in the sense of a “unit of content” – a text, photo, or video that is presented in the form of a news story or as a post on social media.

In this context we should also address the concepts of fake source as a false source/attribution of information to a known source and fake context – incorrect interpretation or fictitious context.

3. NARRATIVE PARADIGM THEORY AND NARRATIVE

Narratives are a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. They are stories designed to influence a target audience. (Pamment, 2021). Narratives are broadcast for a long time and reflect generalized ideas and stereotypical approaches in a way that is favorable to certain groups.

In analyzing narratives in the context of the state and ideology, it is important to consider the concept of a strategic narrative. Strategic narratives are understood here as a set of media discourses built to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm, or replace a preexisting discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the “speaker,” often a representative of the political elite (Price, 2015).

The theoretical framework of this study is the Narrative Paradigm Theory. Narrative theory assumes that people perceive information about life and processes around them as a series of stories, and plots that are broadcast for a long time in their

information space (Fisher, 1984). According to Fisher, individual facts and representations of events do not reach the audience as single packages, but rather as stories and narratives that give abstract concepts their forms. The Russian government understands the importance of narrative and is not afraid to advance a propaganda storyline masked as news (Wilbur, 2022).

4. METHODS

The purpose of this study is to analyze disinformation narratives directed against the EU and European countries, disseminated by Russian media from 2014 to 2023. The selection and analysis of Russian propaganda narratives were based on the work of the fact-checking project StopFake.org.

StopFake.org is a Ukrainian fact-checking project that was established in March 2014 at the Mohyla School of Journalism. Initially, the project's primary goal was to fact-check and debunk unreliable information and propaganda related to events in Ukraine but evolved into an information hub that analyzes the phenomenon of Kremlin propaganda in all its aspects and manifestations.

The StopFake database includes 5391 fact-checked and debunked articles from 2014 to 2023.

Content analysis was chosen as the primary research method here, as it is an ideal approach for the systematic study of narratives, the categorization of specific themes, the measurement of volume and their dissemination, and understanding which elements or themes are most emphasized and whether they change over time.

Materials consisting of mentions about the EU, and European countries were chosen for analysis. During the selection process, 664 selected debunked claims were categorized by the specific set of narratives and divided over time into two categories: narratives circulated before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and those after February 2022. To categorize and analyze the transformation of disinformation narratives, we divided a series of narratives by topic and noticed the

emergence of new narratives after the full-scale invasion, a decrease in the use of certain themes, and an increase in the use of other themes as well.

5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1. ANTI-EU DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES BEFORE THE FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The study of narratives through fact-checking by StopFake.org has helped reconstruct a certain image of Europe in its relations with Ukraine that Russia presents to its audience – all those it seeks to target in its disinformation campaigns. According to the Russian propaganda machine, European countries disregard Ukraine, consider it an unreliable ally ready to steal all aid for personal gain, doubting the effectiveness of its reforms and the weak moral values of its people. European countries are allegedly willing to engage in active warfare against Russia and constantly fuel the fire, as war suits their interests. Furthermore, they purportedly believe Ukraine is inhabited by aggressive radicals, unruly refugees, and a multitude of Nazis. European partners are also portrayed as eagerly waiting for Ukraine to disintegrate as a country so they can occupy its territories and use them as a resource asset. Additionally, certain countries are periodically ready to profess their love for Russia, knowing that Russia did not bring down MH17 and that sanctions against Russia make no sense.

The analysis of the most frequently used narratives, the most commonly mentioned countries in the debunked claims, and a review of data over the years reveal how the use of anti-EU narratives has evolved during the years of Russian-Ukrainian war beginning with the illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

If we analyze the most widespread themes that were debunked by StopFake and were related to the EU and European countries, we can formulate the following categories of narratives.

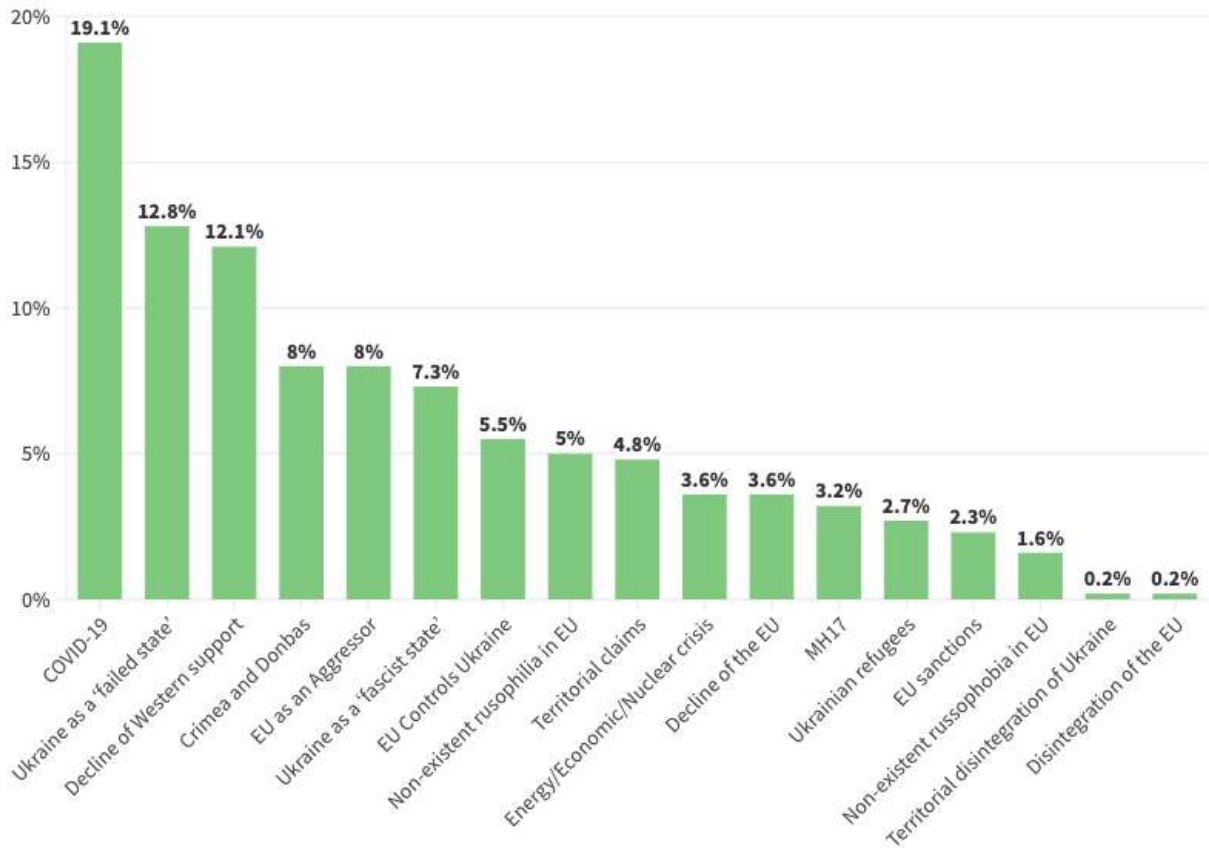


Figure 1. Anti-EU Narratives in StopFake's debunked claims before the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation.

The theme of the COVID-19 group of narratives was the most popular one – 19,1% from all selected materials which can be explained by the incredible growth of disinformation featuring European countries and used by the Kremlin to demonstrate the European Union's inability to handle a crisis and to propagate various conspiracy theories, including those against vaccination and evidence-based medicine. Furthermore, Russian propaganda leveraged the theme of the pandemic to cast doubt on the relationships between European countries and Ukraine and to spread the narrative that Ukraine would receive no support during challenging times.

The second most popular theme is one of the main and central messages of Kremlin propaganda regarding Ukraine – that Ukraine is a failed state, a country that should not exist (12,8%). A significant increase in the use of the "failed state" narrative occurred in 2016, precisely when the Association Agreement with the EU was

ratified, and a disinformation campaign targeting several European countries aimed to hinder its success. Ukraine is depicted in such fakes as a country with incompetent and unskilled leadership, whose residents are not interested in EU integration. It is portrayed as the poorest and most corrupt country with dangerous cities.

The third most widely spread group of narratives is dedicated to declining Western support for Ukraine (12,1%). These narratives were actively used during the ratification of the Association Agreement with the EU, the beginning of visa-free travel. Also noteworthy, this group of narrative fakes circulated messaging that Europe was ready to accept Russia's conflict resolution plan and take Russia's side of the story as well.

During the period from 2014 to 2022 themes related to the fake legalization of the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and the occupation of Ukraine's Donbas were prevalent (8%). Under this category, the Kremlin promoted fabricated evidence that the Crimean Peninsula was recognized as part of Russia, or evidence of the recognition of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

The category of narratives "EU as an Aggressor" (8%) depicts European countries as those who benefit from war, who are inclined to attack neighboring countries, and so on. Such countries are presented as active participants in the Russian-Ukrainian war or contributors to its escalation in Ukraine.

The category of narratives "Ukraine as a fascist state" (7,3%) contains fake stories aim to create and confirm the perception of Ukraine by Europe as a country of Nazis, people with anti-Semitic views who incite unrest in other countries, or engage in radical actions threatening Europeans, and do not share European values at all.

The other group of debunked claims fell under the narrative of "The EU controls Ukraine" (5,5% of all selected materials). In addition to narratives portraying Ukraine as a failed country, the Kremlin portrays Ukraine as an incomplete entity with a puppet government that is controlled from the outside. For example, this group includes fakes such as the claim the European Union is supposedly planning to bring Ukraine to its knees, that Britain itself plans to bring a pro-Russian president to power

in Ukraine, that the EU is granting Ukraine a loan solely in exchange for sovereignty, that poverty in Ukraine is increasing due to the EU.

A separate category includes materials that describe an alleged admiration of Russia by Europe – non-existent Rusophilia in the EU (5%). Among fakes in this category are debunked claims that Italians allegedly asked Putin to save the world, that the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs allegedly declared unity between the West and Russia, and that the UK supposedly adopted the Soviet education system because it was 'better'.

The narratives categorized as "territorial claims" (4,8%) are those aimed at creating the perception that European countries constantly seek to take parts of Ukraine for themselves, deploy their military forces, and do not consider Ukraine to be a separate and independent country.

A separate category of narratives is dedicated to energy, economic, and nuclear crises (3,6%), encompassing fake stories that falsely claim Ukraine is turning into a nuclear wasteland in Europe, consistently running out of gas in the winter and freezing, and more.

The "Decline and failure of the EU" category of narratives (3,6%) is dedicated to various examples of failed policies in EU countries that led to a deterioration of the economic situation, sparked protests, and increased misunderstandings among allies.

A separate category of debunking is dedicated to the topic of the MH17 tragedy (3,2%), including fake stories that falsely claim that Europeans believe Ukraine shot down the Malaysian airliner, or that there is supposedly evidence proving Ukraine's guilt, and more.

The category of debunking related to Ukrainian refugees wasn't as popular before the full-scale invasion (2,7%). Nevertheless, this narrative was still used to emphasize the level of domestic hatred towards Ukrainians who were leaving for the EU, working there, and trying to build a life.

A certain portion of fake news advanced a narrative related to EU sanctions (2,3%) against Russia in response to its actions in the Crimea and the Donbas. The Kremlin used this theme to emphasize that Europe allegedly actively opposes the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions and that it is primarily Europeans who suffer from these sanctions.

The narrative that alleges Russophobia in Europe (1,6%) was utilized by Russian media to create the false impression the EU is doing everything it can to eradicate the Russian language and oppress the rights of Russian-speaking people.

The least used narrative categories are dedicated to the alleged territorial disintegration of Ukraine (0,2%) and the disintegration of the EU (0,2%). Narratives of these categories aim to show that neither Ukraine nor the EU could stay within one's borders.

Indeed, from 2014 to 2022, Russian propaganda disseminated a range of disinformation narratives related to the EU, European countries, and Ukraine, with the aim of creating a negative image of both sides. The most widespread disinformation narratives, as illustrated in the graph (Figure 1.), essentially served as arguments for Russia to launch a full-scale aggression against Ukraine. These narratives continue to be utilized by the Kremlin in its rhetoric.

5.2. ANTI-EU DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AFTER THE FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the map of narratives has been changing somewhat. It is obvious that military and political events have influenced the semantic emphasis of previous topics and added new meanings to them.

ANTI-EU NARRATIVES THROUGH THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR IN THE LIGHT OF STOPFAKE.ORG'S DEBUNKS

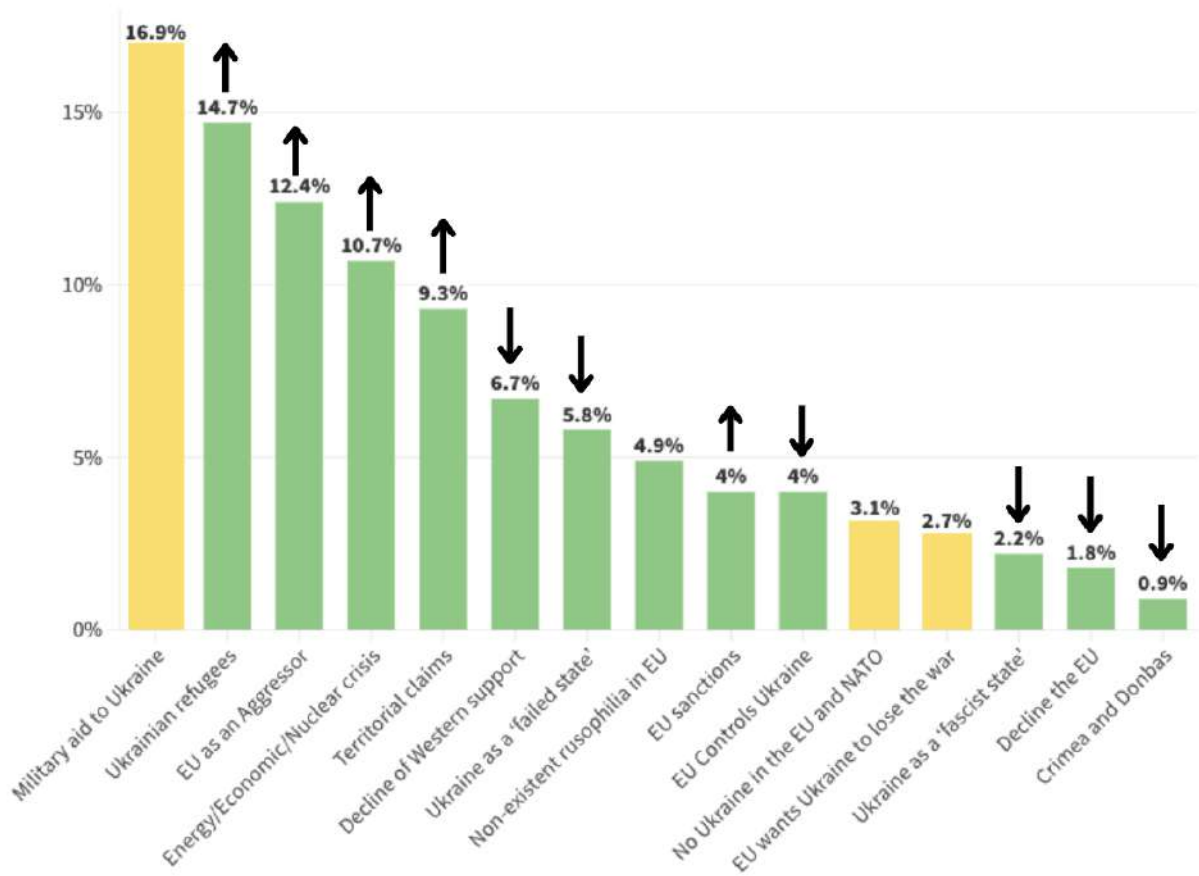


Figure 2. Anti-EU Narratives in StopFake's debunked claims after the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

For example, the topic of Ukrainian refugees in the EU is the most represented in the refutation database compiled by fact-checkers – (14,7%). Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the refugee narrative has become the main topic targeting European humanitarian support for Ukrainians and is aimed at both Western audiences as well as Ukrainians themselves.

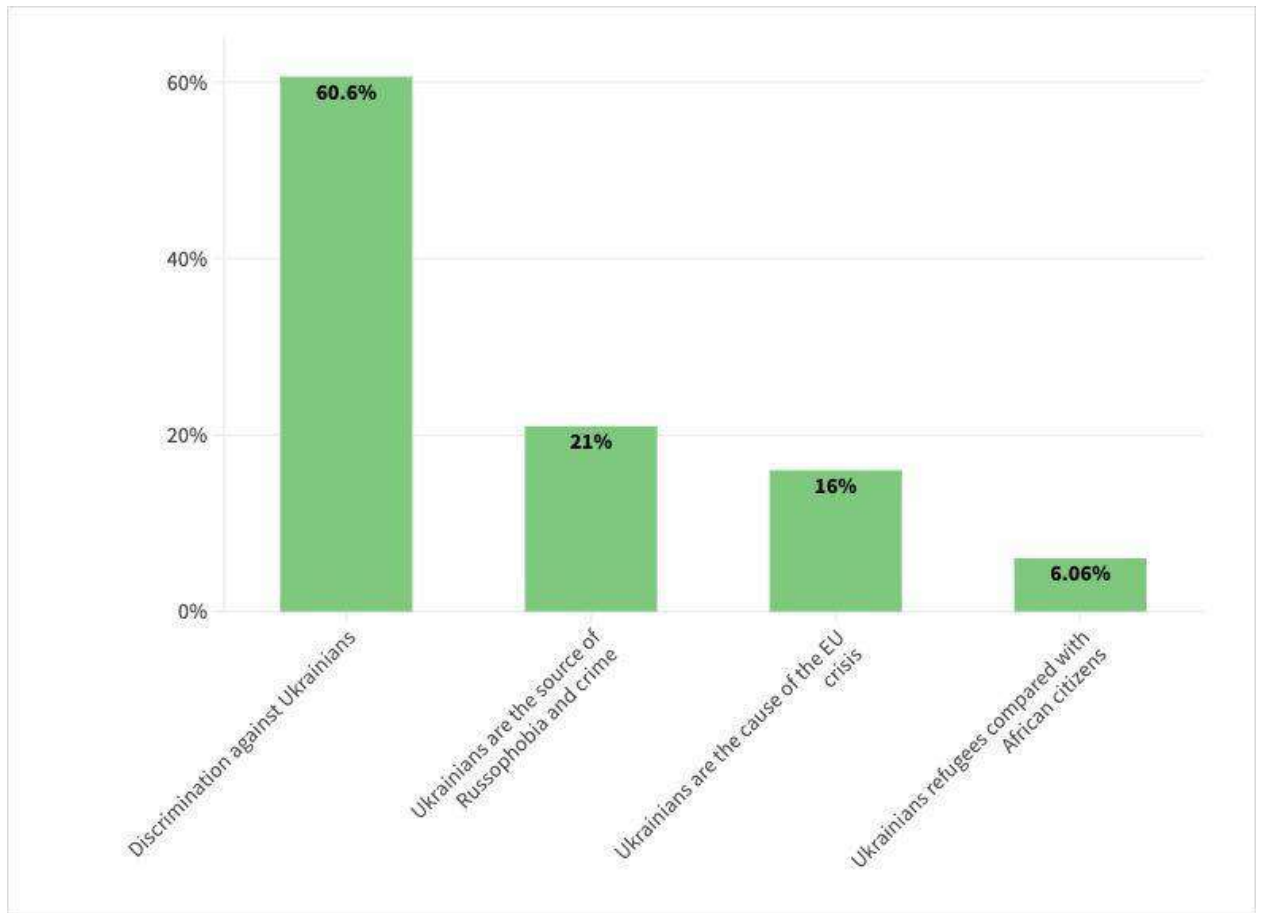


Figure 3. Subtopics of the narrative of “Ukrainian refugees in the EU”.

The refugee narrative can be divided into the following subtopics: “The EU despises and discriminates against Ukrainians” (60,6%), “Ukrainian refugees are the source of Russophobia and crime in the EU” (21%), “Ukrainians are the cause of the crisis in the EU” (12%) and comparing Ukrainian refugees with African citizens (6,06%).

The narrative “The EU despises and discredits” comprised 60,6% of narratives regarding this topic in the period from 2022 to 2023 and portrays European countries as hostile to Ukrainians, and/or presenting Ukrainians as a physical and moral danger. Such examples can be seen in the materials under the headings “Fake: KFC and Booking.com placed an advert offensive to Ukrainian women in Munich”, “Fake: Ukrainian refugees offered to live in the former Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany”.

The other largest subtopic “Russophobia and the crime of Ukrainian refugees”, is aimed at a Western audience and presents Ukrainians as a source of aggression and crime against the background of Russophobia, accounting for 21% of refutations in the fact-checker database on the topic “Ukrainian refugees.” Examples demonstrating this subtopic can be found in the materials “Fake: A crowd of Ukrainians beat a “Russian boy” to death in Germany”, “Manipulation: Ukrainian refugees in Italy beat the granddaughter of Russian poet Joseph Brodsky”, “Fake: Ukrainian refugees wanted to burn the Russian flag but destroyed 31 hectares of Spanish forest.” Indeed, there are reports with identical storylines, in which only the names of people and countries have been changed. For example, "Ukrainian refugees wanted to burn the Russian flag, but destroyed 31 hectares of Spanish forest" was spread in July 2022 during which real forest fires were burning in Spain.

Of all fact-checked materials in the refutation database, Military aid to Ukraine is the most represented narrative in the information space following the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (16,9%).

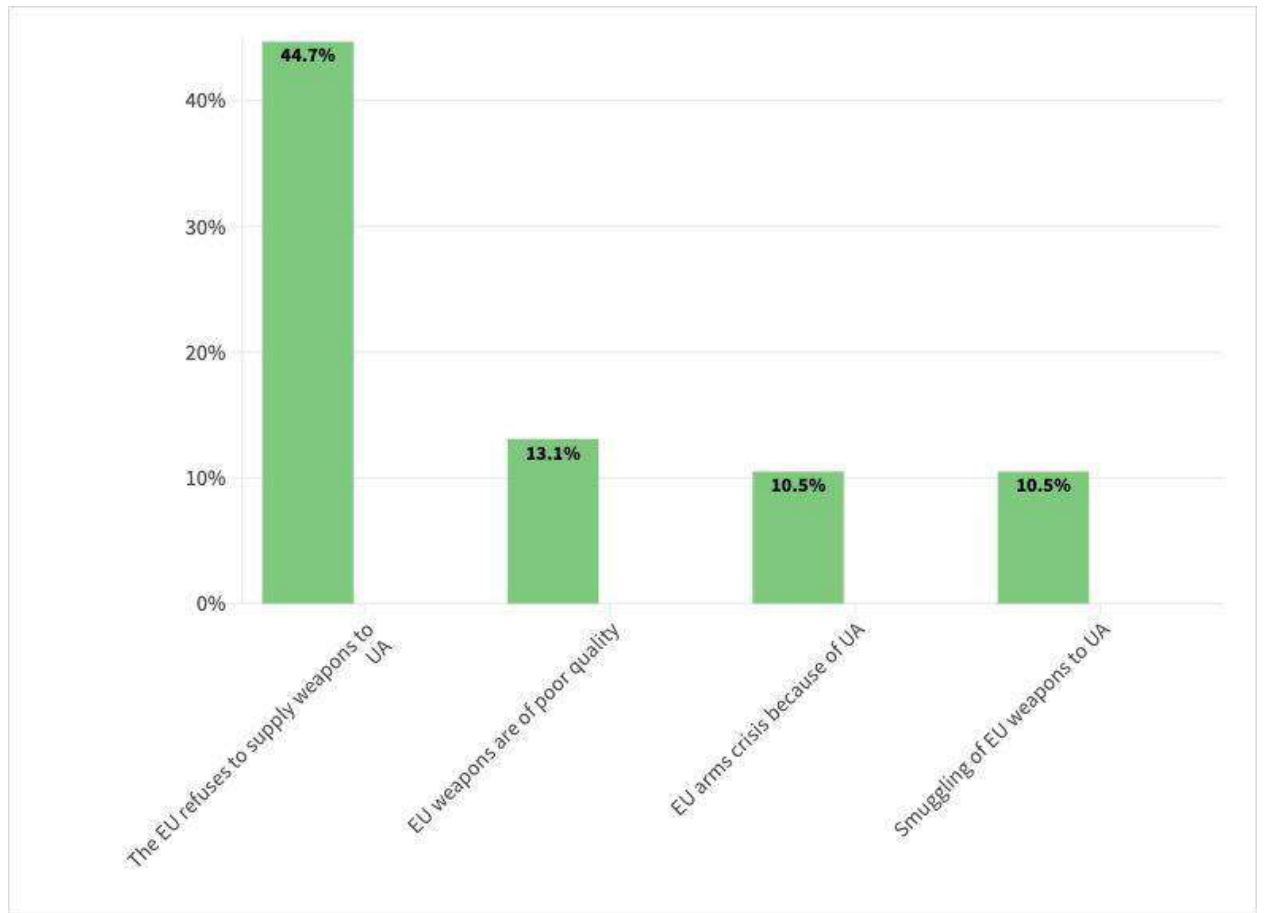


Figure 4. Subtopics of the narrative of "Military aid to Ukraine".

This study identified five sub-themes, including: "The EU refuses to supply weapons to Ukraine" (44,7%), "EU weapons are of poor quality" (13,1%), "Smuggling of EU weapons to Ukraine" (10,5%), and "EU arms crisis because of Ukraine" (10,5%).

News examples under the topic "EU refuses to supply weapons to Ukraine" include: "Fake: Germany will no longer supply weapons to Ukraine", Manipulation: European countries "refused military promises to Ukraine", "Fake: France plans to stop military aid to Ukraine because of industrial piracy", "Manipulation: More than 76% of French people are in favor of stopping military aid to Ukraine". False reports were designed to demonstrate an allegedly negative attitude and unwillingness of Western partners to provide military support, or to project general fatigue from military events, etc.

To confirm the information about the EU's alleged reluctance to provide military support, the messages used fake opinion polls, testimonies of fake experts, and fictitious quotes in Western international publications.

The topic "EU supplies low-quality weapons" (13,1%) is closely related to the previous one and aims to demonstrate the EU's reluctance and, at the same time, inability to provide high-quality military support. The key accents that appear in fake news on this topic promote the idea that European countries are weak, lack sufficient military resources, or are not interested in providing modern weapons. Examples of refutations include: "Fake: Berlin will supply Ukraine with outdated weapons....", "Fake: France "handed over broken Caesar air defense systems to Ukraine" – Le Figaro", "Manipulation: Ukrainian Air Force claims MiG-29s from Poland and Slovakia are "ineffective"."

On the one hand, Russian disinformation creates a sense of disillusion among the Ukrainian audience and European partners by promoting false claims of weak and poor-quality support, while on the other hand, it also creates distrust among the Western audience about the proper use of these weapons and questions the integrity of the Ukrainian side.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, disinformation has been shaping the narrative that military resources of the EU and NATO countries are being sold on the black market, misused, etc. The narrative "Smuggling of Western weapons in Ukraine" (10,5%) can be seen in the following refutations: "Manipulation: EU is afraid of "Ukrainian smuggling" of weapons and drugs", "Fake: In Finland, criminal groups receive weapons from Ukraine."

To reinforce the audience's negative perception of military support, disinformation also talks about the EU's arms crisis due to the war in Ukraine. This message was represented in 10.5% of the topics in the refutation database.

New narratives related to the EU include No to Ukraine in the EU (3,1%) and NATO, The EU wants Ukraine to lose the war (2,7%).

In these themes, Russian disinformation discredits European assistance, emphasizing that it is not sincere and intentionally ineffective. In these false stories, Russia says that the EU is not interested in strengthening Ukraine's European integration and does not foresee Ukraine being accepted into the EU. Disinformation also spreads fake information about the total lack of support among European citizens for Ukraine's European integration. The fake news cites examples of fictitious mass rallies and protests against Ukraine and portrays a picture in which Europeans completely reject Ukrainians.

Topics in which this message is represented in the database include: “Manipulation: Some EU leaders believe Ukraine is "waiting for defeat" – Poland's prime minister,” “Fake: Ukraine is being "drained" - Scholz said "uncomfortable decisions" are being made,” “Fake: EU releases video why Ukraine "should not become a NATO member”.

5.3. KEY COUNTRIES

An analysis of the data contained in the refutation database shows which countries are most often targeted in the disinformation, in what narratives do they most often figure and how frequently these narratives appear reveals the planned and strategic approach to Russia's disinformation strategy. Most often, the fakes were related to the European Union itself – 27.3% of all selected disinformation cases. However, the top five countries mentioned also clearly illustrate the focus of the Kremlin's attention in its disinformation campaigns:

- Poland (14.8%)
- Germany (14.6%)
- United Kingdom (7.7%)
- France (5.4%)
- Italy (3.8%)

It is also important to mention the 6th place - the Netherlands (appearing in 3.3% of selected materials). The highest number of disinformation cases regarding this country appeared in 2016 when a referendum on the approval of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine was held. At that time, 61% of votes were cast against the agreement's approval. The preparation for the referendum was accompanied by massive disinformation campaigns.

As for the top five countries, it is quite evident that the Kremlin's goal is to undermine Ukraine's relations with its most powerful allies, using historical backgrounds and shared history to exacerbate conflict situations, and to influence events and decisions in any way possible so as to stop any support for Ukraine.

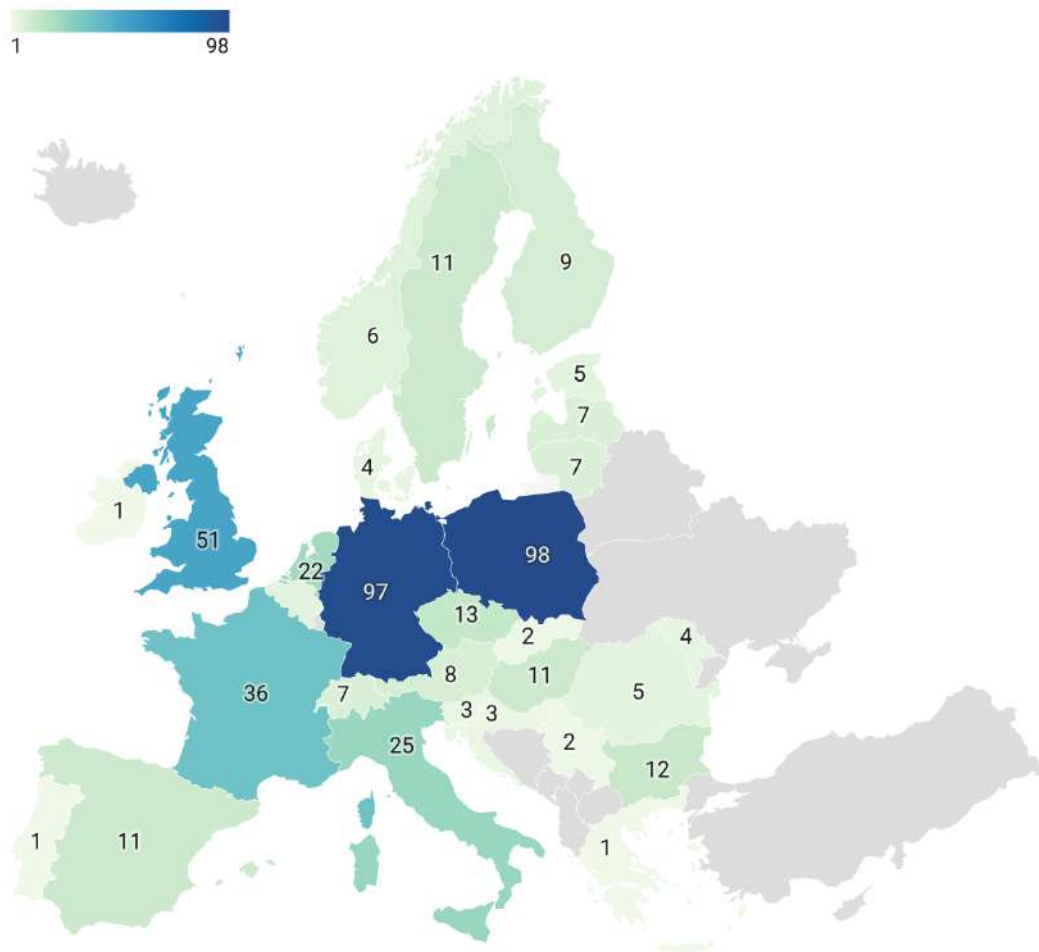


Figure 5. Subtopics of the narrative of “Military aid to Ukraine”.

When analyzing the most used narratives for each of the most often mentioned countries, a certain pattern emerges. Regarding Poland, there is a consistent effort to portray it as a country attempting to occupy Ukraine and seize its territory – the most popular theme of narratives dedicated to Poland refer to “territorial claims” – 28,6% of the selected disinformation topics related to this country. Throughout the years of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Poland is depicted as attempting to “take back” Western Ukraine, demanding that Ukrainians “give land and property to Poles,” and claiming that Poles constantly “support the occupation” of Western Ukrainian regions and demand “military intervention.” The other popular group of narratives dedicated to Poland aims to create an image of Poland as an aggressor (23.5%), with frequent dissemination of falsehoods about Polish military involvement in the conflict in the Donbas, allegations that Poland is provoking Russia, narratives holding Poland responsible for the start of World War II, or that Poland plans to attack Belarus, and more. Another prevalent narrative related to Poland involves Ukrainian refugees (19.4%). Initially, during the early stages of the Russian-Ukrainian war, there were falsehoods about various “statements” from Polish officials regarding Ukrainians being “cheap labor.” However, with the full-scale war and the escape of a large number of Ukrainians into Poland and neighboring countries in search of safety, the number of disinformation cases portraying Ukrainians as “aggressive” or incapable of following rules increased, suggesting that it is the Ukrainians who are responsible for rising crime rates, increased HIV infections, and the disappearance of state assistance to Polish citizens.

The most popular narratives related to Germany includes the category of “Ukraine as a failed state” (11,3%). This category consists of various falsehoods about how then-Chancellor Angela Merkel promised Ukraine a “lack of investments,” that government representatives were allegedly insulted, that Germans refused to honor the heroes of the Heavenly Hundred, and more. With the full-scale war, the number of fake news and manipulations regarding military aid from Germany to Ukraine increased. The group of narratives dedicated to military aid to Ukraine is in third place (10,3%). There was a separate disinformation campaign following the decision

to transfer Leopard tanks to Ukraine, accompanied by falsehoods suggesting that Germans were actively opposed to the transfer of heavy weaponry, and that Germans grew tired of supporting Ukraine, and so on. Also, the portrayal of Ukraine as a “fascist state” was a popular topic among the debunked claims mentioning Germany.

Disinformation narratives related to the United Kingdom, (the UK being third place in number of mentions) involve a range of topics. These narratives include claims about COVID-19 (13,7%), portraying the EU as an aggressor (13,7%), depicting Ukraine as a failed country (13,7%), and the notion of a non-existent Russophilia (11,8%). For example, among such fake stories were claims asserting the British apologizing to Russians for Boris Johnson's behavior, the British denying Russian involvement in the Salisbury poisoning, and the British expressing regret for not inviting Putin to Queen Elizabeth II's funeral. These narratives are likely aimed at sowing discord, undermining trust in the UK's policies, and creating confusion among the public.

Overall, differences in disinformation narratives are observed across different countries depending on their specific characteristics, the nature of their cooperation with Ukraine, the political stance on Ukraine's integration into the EU, and so on. For example, in France, the most frequently mentioned topics are Ukraine as a failed state, the pandemic, and military aid to Ukraine. Italy is most often referenced in fakes related to the pandemic, Ukrainian refugees, and narratives depicting Ukraine as a fascist country and a failed state. Even when examining narratives in fact-checking materials, it is possible to identify separate and coordinated campaigns tailored to each country.

5.4. KEY SOURCES

It is also important to mention which communication channels are used to spread disinformation narratives against the EU in the context of this research. First and foremost, it is worth highlighting the consistent coordination in promoting a particular disinformation narrative. When it appears in the information space, it is

simultaneously promoted through all the major Russian media outlets. Additionally, social media is engaged, and depending on the topic, trolls or bots in special groups, as well as individual users, are mobilized for its dissemination.

One can also note a transformation in the dissemination of disinformation as well as in the use of communication channels. In 2014, Russian mainstream media launched fakes through professionally produced segments on prime-time news channels like Channel One and other national media. However, during the full-scale invasion mostly Telegram channels or groups on other social networks began to be actively used. These channels or accounts may be created specifically for spreading fake information. Once appearing on a Telegram channel, such a fake migrates into the news of a marginal website and eventually reaches a large-audience news site, then transforming into a full-fledged news story. Estimations suggest the reach of such fakes is significantly broader, as they reach different audiences through various channels and groups.

The debunked narratives in the StopFake database, show that when it comes to traditional media, the most common sources to spread fake narratives and serve as primary disseminators include media outlets such as *Ukraina.ru*, *RIA Novosti*, *RT*, *Sputnik*, *Zvezda TV*, *TASS*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, *NTV*, *REN TV*, *Tsargrad*, *Politnavigator*, *Russkaya Vesna*, *NewsFront*, *Lenta.ru*, *Gazeta.ru*, *RIA FAN*, *News.ru*, *Vzglyad*, *Life.ru*, *Vesti.ru*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Izvestiya*, *Parliament's Gazette*, and others.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the dissemination of disinformation was a main characteristic of media outlets under Kremlin control, or those outlets closely associated with Putin. However, after February 2022 and following the implementation of a series of laws that essentially introduced military censorship in the country, disinformation narratives began to be propagated by other media outlets that had rarely been associated with spreading propaganda in the past, such as *Interfax* and *RBC*.

The usage of social media channels as primary sources for spreading disinformation during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a concerning trend. Telegram channels like Readovka, Mash, Kadyrov_95 (associated with the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov), Rossiya Seychas, Novosti Moskvyy, Ranshe Vsekh, Ostorozhno, novosti, Operatzya Z: Voenkory russkoi vesny, Solovyev, Rybar, and others, along with Russian politicians' personal channels (such as Dmitry Medvedev and Vyacheslav Volodin), showcases how these platforms have become significant outlets for disinformation.

These so-called military correspondents, who often operate outside traditional media, have seen a substantial increase in their roles as amplifiers of disinformation narratives. Given people's growing reliance on social media for news and information, the use of these channels for spreading information operations, fakes, and disinformation narratives will be a decisive trend in the coming years. This underscores the importance of critical thinking, fact-checking, and media literacy when navigating the information landscape during times of conflict.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of narratives in StopFake debunking database has shown that with the escalation of full-scale war, the use of a series of fakes related to European countries and Ukraine has significantly increased.

The StopFake database reveals how the transformation of anti-EU narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian war, shows that Russia mobilized its disinformation resources during the full-scale war and significantly, that it perceives European countries as a threat and as enemies. It clearly shows foreign countries as hostile to its target audience. The narratives known as "Ukraine as a failed state", and the "Decline of Western support" illustrates that Russia seeks by any means to undermine Ukraine's relationships with its allies and justify Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The use of fakes portraying European countries as aggressors who caused the war and incited an escalation indicates that Russia aims

for its audience to view the Kremlin's leadership solely as peacemakers who were compelled to fight against an aggressive Western world.

Furthermore, the analysis of debunked claims related to specific countries has revealed that Russia is conducting an information war tailored to each country individually. For instance, in the case of Poland, the focus is on the topic of refugees, while for Ukraine, the narrative revolves around the imminent breakup of the country. In the case of the Netherlands, a series of fake stories emerged during public discussions about the Association Agreement with the EU. This tailored approach illustrates Russia's intent to influence each country's perception and exploit specific vulnerabilities or concerns.

The research has demonstrated that the work of a fact-checking organization can reveal the processes of information operations conducted by adversaries and assist in strategic planning for responses to these information operations. Thus, the experience of StopFake.org has revealed the deliberate “zero-sum” nature of the Kremlin’s information warfare being waged against Ukraine since 2014. At the same time, it shows that while debunking is necessary, even crucial, it is not sufficient to completely counteract the influence of disinformation. The spread of disinformation narratives is an ongoing process during the war, and countering narratives with facts remains an ongoing challenge.

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INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS AS A TOOL OF THE INFORMATION WAR

OLGA YURKOVA

Igor Sirorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, Ukraine

LIST OF CONTENT:

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1. RUMORS AS A TYPE OF INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

1.1. INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS AS A SOCIO-COMMUNICATIVE PHENOMENON

Depending on the distribution channels, social communications can be divided into formal and informal ones. Formal communication is a type of communication in which information, which mostly takes the form of texts or stories, is spread through one or another technical distribution channel, including, for example, the media, statements of officials, documents, etc.

The subject of this study is informal communications, which include mainly verbal communications, such as rumors, gossip, anecdotes, and songs, sometimes written down but which spread in informal ways.

Theoretical aspects of informal communications, primarily organizational, were studied by such scientists as Burton, Mishra, DeMare, Crampton, Hodge, Rogers, Festinger, Smith, Kincaid, Davis, Allen, Cohen, W. H. Pope, and M. J. Pope et al. Pocheptsov, Ekman, and others analyzed different types of informal

communications, including rumors. Simmel, Shibutani, Smelzer, Anthony, et al. studied informal elements of public opinion.

Formal communications in the social context, in contrast to informal ones, are standardized, stable, stereotyped, and structured and reflect the mutual influence of various social institutions. Instead, informal communications are primarily interpersonal, based on trust, do not operate with rational arguments, are spontaneous, and are not systematized. Thus, they can complement formal communications. Nowadays, when the role of social media among the leading communication channels is growing, videos, memes, rumors spread on social networks, and messengers have been added to informal communications. They often influence public opinion and the attitude of particular groups of people towards other groups, persons, or phenomena. They can motivate them to do the actions the communicator requires (Svetoka, 2016; Wither, 2016; Chivvis, 2017; Huhtinen & Rantapelkonen, 2016). As Belkova (2015) points out, the influence of this communication channel is growing due to the decline in public trust in the media and official sources of information.

1.2. RUMORS IN THE INFORMAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Knapp, Allport, Postman, and Shibutani laid the foundation of the modern theoretical study of the rumor phenomenon. Attempts to reveal the various planes of this phenomenon in the system of mass consciousness and public opinion, which are vital for further scientific research, were carried out in the works of Bordia, Gluckman, DiFonzo, Kapferer, Kluckhohn, Colson, Mitchell, Rosnow, Frankenberg, Harrington.

Known attempts to define the concept of rumor were made by Oja (1973), which draws attention to the conceptual vagueness of this concept. Subsequently, it was improved by Fine (1985), Rosnow & Georgoudi (1985), and Rosnow & Kimmel (2000). DiFonzo Bordia (2007) made a fundamental attempt to differentiate the mentioned concepts. They analyze the commonalities and differences between rumors, gossip, and urban legends. In Ukrainian science, the concepts of rumor, gossip, and sometimes fake news were used interchangeably.

Here are some classic definitions of rumors. According to Knapp (1944), a rumor is an offer to believe actual information distributed without official verification. Allport & Postman (1947) define a rumor as a "specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present." Shibutani (1966) postulates that rumors are a form of communication that helps people in an uncertain situation to unite to understand it and give a reasonable interpretation, using their minds. So, a sign of rumors, in addition to word-of-mouth transmission and uncertain reliability, is the topicality and uncertainty of the circumstances of their occurrence.

1.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF RUMORS AS A TOOL OF INFORMATION WARFARE

1.3.1. UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE SOURCE (ANONYMITY)

As the classical definitions above show, a rumor's defining characteristic is not its veracity or positive or negative emotional coloring but uncertainty about its source and content. According to Shibutani, a rumor's foundation is an event with two features: importance and uncertainty (rumor = importance x uncertainty). A particular "reformulation" of this formula is the so-called Allport's law, according to which the rumor is derived from the importance of the event multiplied by its ambiguity. If we mark the rumor (R), the importance of the event (i), the ambiguity (a), and the function (f), then the law will look like $R = f(i*a)$.

1.3.2. SELF-TRANSMISSION

One of the critical characteristics of rumors, according to Pocheptsov (2000), is self-transmission. Self-transmission elements also include jokes, folk songs, or other genres of creativity that are not subject to official distribution: for example, obscene songs, corporate songs, prison folklore, and viral fragments of information on the Internet, such as memes or videos. They are called viral because they encourage recipients to share them with others due to humor, an exciting plot, and topical content. Pocheptsov gives three explanations for this property of rumors:

A) Lack of relevant information in the mass media

Rumors often contain information about which the mass communication media (MSM) is silent, so the zone of silence of the mass communication media is the zone of spread of the rumor and vice versa. This information is of interest to many and is, therefore, easily communicated. Lefebvre (2021) analyzed the emergence of the "great fear" of 1789 in France: with the low penetration of the press in the city, the data sources were the letters and stories of travelers. In the villages, news was obtained at the city markets, or someone was sent to the city to collect it.

B) Rumors are a response to the collective unconscious

He calls the second explanation the fact that rumors express the collective unconscious, archetypal phenomena (according to Jung¹). They fix and materialize the collective anxious expectations of society to the outside. The classification of rumors according to the emotions they provoke (rumor-desire, rumor-monster, aggressive rumor) confirms this thesis.

C) The spread of rumors is characterized by crowd psychology

Rumor responds to public desire, which is the communication of a crowd to which strict logic is inapplicable. As Bekhterev (2017) wrote, there is no point in persuading the crowd, united by a common mood, with reason. It must be "won over with hot words." In a crowd, individuals become less critical, moral, and more vulnerable to the influence of the environment. It is easier for them to suggest something.

1.3.3. SPREAD THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Pocheptsov notes that with the development of the Internet and social media as a means of communication, such a characteristic of rumors such as word-of-mouth or orality ceases to be mandatory. Rumors spread on the Internet have the following features:

¹ Jung, C. G. (2012). *Man and his symbols*. Bantam.

A) The lack of nuance

The lack of nuance is associated with the lack of tactile and visual contact. First, these are often short messages devoid of nuances when the non-verbal emotional component is lost: facial expressions, tactile communication, etc. However, the Internet language, even written down, retains the characteristics of orality in its content.

B) Self-spread

Self-spread of rumors is implemented by the repost function, sometimes with comments. It seems to remove responsibility for the content of the rumor from the repeater. On the other hand, it provides an instant, real-time spread of information unattainable by word of mouth.

C) The possibility of complete anonymity of communicators.

D) The Internet has opinion leaders, or super communicators, on whom other users are guided and who influence the further spread of rumors by picking up or refuting them.

E) The spread of rumors can be automated with the help of bots - special programs for filling real or fake accounts.

The media literacy index of Ukrainians (Detector Media, 2022) shows that 64% of users have digital competence, and 66% are sensitive to distorted content, with the lowest level among consumers aged 56-65. Given this, the Internet and social networks remain a field for manipulating public opinion. For manipulators, the technology of spreading rumors over the Internet has the same advantages as word of mouth: it is relatively inexpensive, does not require the hiring of employees, and the complete anonymity of the spreaders removes the ethical barriers that exist in the media or individual speakers who may fear prosecution. On the other hand, there are communities and territories not covered by the Internet or social media.

2. ANALYSIS OF RUMORS IN THE UKRAINIAN INFORMATION SPACE

2.1. PREREQUISITES FOR THE EMERGENCE OF RUMORS

Today, three main prerequisites for the emergence of rumors can be singled out: 1) deformation of the information space in a situation subjectively crucial for the audience; 2) simultaneous growth of social tension; 3) due to formal communications, the audience does not receive answers to their questions. Here, it is worth quoting Pocheptsov's (2015) remark that the information space should now be considered as built not from simple information but from information campaigns - messages behind which a "sponsor" stands.

An example of such a situation is the rumor of a possible nuclear provocation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) controlled by the Russian occupiers in June 2023, linked to relevant Ukrainian intelligence reports. Due to the great significance of the situation for the audience, this news significantly impacted the information field. The audience, which in this case is all Ukrainians, was in anticipation during the specified period and was actively looking for answers to whether there would be an explosion, of what power, how to avoid the consequences, etc. Since the official communication did not give answers to these questions or gave them partially (for example, it tried to dispel the myth about the need to buy iodine in pharmacies), rumors continued to arise, and public tension grew. This state continued until the appearance of other topics in the information space, which supplanted rumors about a potential explosion at the ZNPP.

2.2. TYPOLOGY OF RUMORS IN THE UKRAINIAN INFORMATION SPACE

Knapp developed the key and most well-known classification of rumors based on emotional impact. According to him, rumors are divided into:

- Pipe dreams of wish rumors: reflect collective dreams and desired consequences.
- Bogie rumors reflect consequences that cause fear.
- Wedge-driving or aggression rumors aim to undermine group loyalty or interpersonal relationships within individual groups.

We analyzed 400 rumors that circulated in the media space of Ukraine from the beginning of the full-scale Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, to October 30, 2023. Analysis of their potential emotional impact showed that Knapp's classification remains relevant.

2.2.1. PIPE DREAMS OF WISH RUMORS

Seventy-four wish rumors were identified in the studied sample. Modern examples of wishful thinking: Russian President Vladimir Putin is sick with cancer and will soon die; instead of him, Russians are shown a doppelganger.

The rumor about the treasures of the Ukrainian Hetman Pavlo Polubotok belongs to the wish rumors. According to it, in the 1720s, Polubotok sent gold to the Bank of the East India Company because he expected persecution. Later, he was imprisoned in St. Petersburg and charged with treason. Members of the Russian government, who came to Ukraine to investigate, allegedly looked for and did not find a tub of Hetman's gold coins. It was assumed that they were sent to Britain. Since then, Ukrainians have requested British banks several times, ending with the appeal of MPs V. Yavorivskyi and R. Ivanychuk to Margaret Thatcher with a request to find out the fate of the funds. Each time, they received the answer that the treasure did not exist. However, this story is still periodically updated in the information space (Plokyh, 2011). Thus, the Ukrainian Wikipedia mentions an unsubstantiated article on the little-known website, which says that Polubotok's gold (four tubs of gold coins) was found in the London dungeon at the former Bank of England vault. Examination showed that only the top layer was gold; the rest was rhodium, which is more than a hundred times more expensive than gold and was mined in an abandoned copper mine near the top of the Hoverla mount. "Now we will be able to lend to the IMF ourselves," the headline reads. It can be assumed that such duration of the "life" of a rumor and its transformation into a legend testifies to the strength of the collective human need to believe and hope for a better life, even at the expense of a miracle.

Such rumors, under certain circumstances, can support the morale of society (for example, there is a rumor about a virtuoso fighter pilot - the "ghost of Kyiv," which circulated at the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine), on

the other hand, they frustrate, forming inflated expectations that later they do not come true and result in disappointment. Also, such rumors can lead to harmful inactivity - because the problems are expected to "solve themselves." Since World War II, cases of deliberate spreading of such rumors to demoralize the enemy's population have been known. Agents of the Third Reich spread rumors in the United States that the war would end before Christmas, that Germany was catastrophically short of oil, or that Hitler would be overthrown in 2-3 months. When the term announced by the rumors came, and no expected changes occurred, public sentiments went down, and pessimism in assessments and views grew.

2.2.2. BOGIE RUMORS

In the studied sample, 156 bogie rumors were identified. Modern bogie rumors often refer to the expectation of future events: destructive shelling, the use of unconventional lethal weapons by the enemy, terrorist attacks that will lead to environmental disasters, etc. Experts call the psychological motive for spreading such rumors the fact that "divided" fear is more manageable to experience. Often, the spread of such rumors is an element of sabotage. It can be rumors about price increases or the disappearance of products that lead to market changes.

Such rumors often appear in social aggravation: epidemic, natural disaster, war, revolutionary state, coup d'état. Their leitmotifs run the scale from mild pessimism to outright panic. They are used to intimidate the population to induce specific behavior, activation, and encouragement to counter threats.

2.2.3. WEDGE-DRIVING OF AGGRESSION RUMORS

188 aggression rumors were identified in the studied sample. This suggests that the primary efforts of Russian propaganda during the war are focused on weakening and sowing discord in Ukrainian society. A typical example of aggressive rumors is the following story, which is probably intended to sow enmity between internally displaced persons and the residents who host them. According to a story that has been circulating since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, when there was a surge of internal displacement in Ukraine, a local family took in IDPs (usually people from the east

of Ukraine). When the owners were not home, the settlers left, leaving the gas burners open but not turning on the gas. Further details differ: according to one version, the settlers wrote curses on the mirror with lipstick to the hosts, who "live too well"; according to others, they wrote a note saying, "This is for the children" (probably, this refers to well-known fake news about the children killed by the Ukrainian army in Donbas) or left nothing. This story has been retold many times under different circumstances in different cities of Ukraine. In 2022, after a full-scale invasion, the plot received a "new breath" and went beyond the borders of Ukraine. It was spread abroad in relation to Ukrainian refugees, for example, in Lithuania.

Rumors are always related to the intended audience. For different audiences, the same rumor can have different connotations: for Ukrainians, the rumor about Putin's cancer is wishful, and for Russians, it is a bogie rumor. Rumors can contain elements of several types: for example, rumors about conflict in the country's military and political leadership is an aggression rumor with elements of bogie rumor, as it generally increases pessimistic moods. Therefore, some rumors in the study, which contained a double emotion for the target audience of Ukraine, were assigned two markers.

2.3. RUMOR CHANGES IN THE COURSE OF TRANSMISSION

Allport & Postman introduced three terms to describe the transmission of rumors: leveling, sharpening, and assimilating. Leveling means losing detail in the transmission process; sharpening - choosing specific details and giving them additional expressiveness; assimilation - distortion of information transmission due to subconscious motivations. Rumors adapt to the stereotypes and attitudes of the audience. Allport & Postman showed a group of white Americans a video of a fight between a white man and a black man. The white man had a razor in his hand. When retelling the episode, viewers often said it was with a black man.

Such modifications can also be traced in the researched rumors during the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, rumors about "ungrateful" IDPs acquired more vivid details when told: if, in one version, the IDPs left the burners on with the owners of the house, then in many other variations, they left them notes, often

anti-Ukrainian, or damaged their property. Thus, a characteristic was added to the portrait of ungrateful IDPs, which attributed to them the support of Russia. Since this rumor was retold with almost identical details in different regions of Ukraine, we can assume a certain number of real stories that differed among themselves. In the process of retelling, nuances disappeared, and stories gained additional expressiveness by emphasizing or borrowing specific details, possibly taken from social networks.

3. THE LIFE CYCLE OF RUMORS IN THE CONDITIONS OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

3.1. STAGES OF THE RUMOR LIFE CYCLE

Given the self-spread nature of rumors, the life cycle of a rumor is determined by the dynamics of its spread. Stopping the spread would mean the fading and death of the rumor. The "life cycles" of rumors vary. Some "die" naturally; new events supplant them as the audience gets "tired" of the topic. Rumors also disappear when the fears and tensions that cause them are eliminated, as well as when they are successfully refuted. Researchers note a wide range of rumor lifespans, from instant rumors (e.g., "There will be shelling now") to epochal rumors (e.g., that Stalin's death was no accident). Thus, it can be assumed that the lifespan of a rumor depends on the number of people and how long the rumor can interest them.

Rumor researchers in microblogs distinguish the following stages of a rumor's life: (a) birth stage, (b) growth stage, and (c) decay stage. They note rumors in a microblog, like in the real world, also have a life cycle with the stages of birth, growth, and decline, but without death, because the rumor remains "living" on the Internet. Researchers at the US-based FactCheck project have observed that rumors spread through e-mail first spread, then - ideally after being debunked - die down for a while and then flare up again. They compare them to a crowd of zombies that cannot be killed entirely. The life cycles of the various stories they debunked varied: while some rumors periodically "revived" with short periods of silence, others "looked dead for months or years." Similarly fake emails attributed to famous people. Our research has shown that "zombie" nature has rumors

about conflicts between the military and political leadership of Ukraine, rumors about the death of Russia's President Vladimir Putin, rumors about a possible re-offensive of Russian troops from Belarus, stories about "ungrateful" IDPs who allegedly support Russia. They can disappear after refutations but appear again in situations of high uncertainty or social tension in connection with specific information events, such as a problematic situation at the frontline, inconsistency of the government's political decisions, etc.

Also, previously debunked rumors circulating in Ukraine and abroad were updated in wartime. For example, such is the rumor of 2016 that packets of poison with inscriptions from the Koran are dropped into the mailboxes of Ukrainians. It began to be reposted at the beginning of the invasion and continued throughout the study period. It can be assumed that such rumors are designed to increase the sense of danger in the target audience.

3.2. DETERMINANTS OF THE RUMOR LIFE CYCLE

Bilynska (2017), speaking about the deformation of the communication space, means forming an alternative reality with its specific truth, the bending of communication to discuss one topic. The information attacks can be imagined as waves on a horizontal line, where topics needed by an interested group either artificially soar to the peak of popularity or lose it due to the lack of new details and data for discussion. Since these attacks do not always happen, the communication space can be depicted as a straight line on which waves and peaks appear from time to time in the direction of the growth or decline of the discussion.

In the context of the deformation of the communication space, as Bilynska notes, it is impossible to keep any topic at the peak of popularity, stimulating social dialogue. This will continue if money and resources are invested in the information attack. On the other hand, it is impossible to do this continuously: firstly, so that the target audience does not get tired of this information, and secondly, so that the circle of interested persons is not revealed. John divides rumors into spontaneous and artificial ones, which professionals deliberately create and spread with a specific purpose.

The thesis that reinforcement is necessary to keep rumors alive is supported by the findings of Huang & Su's (2013) study of rumors on Twitter, which showed that the number of retweets increases slowly in the first two hours. During the next 5 hours, the stage of accelerated growth occurs. At the decline stage, the amount decreases after reaching the peak in 5 hours. Denial of rumors also provokes inevitable fluctuations. Thus, if a rumor is not supported, it stops spreading in a few hours. Therefore, if a rumor "lives" longer, this may indicate special efforts invested in its distribution, involving new distribution channels, adding new details, etc.

When evaluating the life cycle of rumors in Ukraine, one should consider the shortening of the time horizon in the information space of Ukraine after February 24, 2022. Potapenko (2022) noted that the war shortened the time horizon: participants in the political process, experts, and media "are on the agenda for one to three weeks, and what happened the day before yesterday is no longer important."

3.3. THE ROLE OF REFUTATION IN THE RUMOR LIFE CYCLE

According to Shibutani, rumor-mongering is sometimes seen as a form of collective problem-solving involving providing, exchanging, and evaluating information. Therefore, corrective behavior is increasingly recognized as part of the rumor life cycle. Consequently, studies that previously focused on the spread of rumors began to cover their correction.

Several studies show that source credibility and rumor plausibility correlate with retweeting, and corrections are retweeted more often than rumors themselves (Zeng et al., 2016; Chua et al., 2017). Our research shows similar results, although the mutual intersection of the audience of rumors and the audience of refutations requires separate studies.

A team of researchers led by Zubiaga (2015) determined that true rumors were confirmed within two hours of being shared on Twitter, while debunking false ones took an average of 14 hours. They noted² that even respected media tend to

² <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/12/11211614/false-twitter-rumors>

issue early, unverified reports, using hedging language like "reportedly" or accrediting the report to other sources such as the police. This accelerates their spread, as audiences tend to share information from media that appears believable.

Our research confirmed this trend in the Ukrainian information space. Separate Ukrainian media spread about a third of the researched rumors with references to "media" or "internet." At least 20 of the 400 rumors gained a wider audience through the amplification effect of media coverage.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights how information attacks against the background of uncertainty and a lack of subjectively reliable information during wartime can deform the information space, leading to spreading rumors aiming to influence public opinion. Rumors are described as social mechanisms that help people cope with uncertainty during times of war. They play a role in shaping collective beliefs and responses to ongoing events.

The research confirms the actuality of the classical Knapp's typology of wartime rumors, classifying them into three main categories: wish, bogie, and aggression rumors. These categories reflect the emotional impact and supposed goals of different types of rumors spread as a part of an information war.

The study explores the life cycle of rumors, including birth, growth, and decay stages. Various factors influencing the rumor lifespan are described, including their ability to maintain interest and relevance among the target audience. It was concluded that an extended stay of a specific rumor at the peak of popularity is possible in case of artificial support of interest in it. The role of refutations in the rumor life cycle is also examined. The research indicates that source credibility and plausibility of rumors play a role in their spread, and corrections are often shared more frequently than the rumors themselves. However, these data do not allow for the assertion that their audiences overlap.

The influence of informal communications on socio-political processes requires expanding the research field and actualizing the scientific discussion regarding this phenomenon. The topic of rumors during the war, which are spread in social

media and their interaction with mass communication means, requires further research, intending to develop effective means of countering this means of information influence.

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FROM DISINFORMATION TO COGNITIVE WARFARE:
RUSSIAN AND IRANIAN TECHNIQUES, TACTICS AND PROCEDURES IN
THE DESIGN AND DEPLOYMENT OF HYBRID THREATS

DAVID ARROYO

CSIC, Spain

CARLOS GALÁN CORDERO

University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

JAVIER VALENCIA

Cras Vigilance Group S.L., Spain

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1. RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION

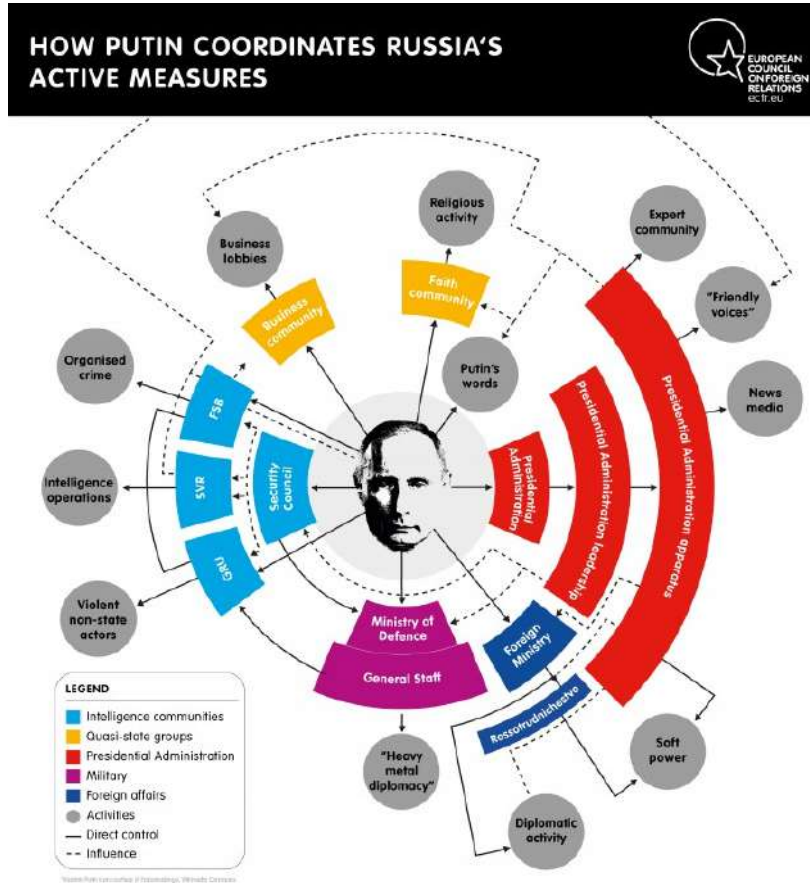
As is widely known, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched a military campaign in Ukraine. One of the first measures taken by the EU was to suspend the broadcasting activities of Sputnik News and Russia Today on the territory of the EU.

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission had already pointed out: *"The Kremlin's systematic manipulation of information and disinformation is used as an operational tool in its attack on Ukraine. It is also a major and direct threat to the public order and security of the Union."*

The Russian Federation has engaged in a systematic international campaign of disinformation, manipulation of information and distortion of facts to underpin its strategy of destabilization of its neighboring countries, the EU and its member states (European Council of the European Union, 2022).

Disinformation is often one of the main elements of Hybrid Threats, a course of action carried out by state or non-state actors with the intention of causing harm or loss to an objective while influencing decision-making at the local, regional, state, or institutional levels. These deliberate actions are coordinated and synchronized, and they intentionally target the weaknesses of democratic states and institutions (Hybrid CoE, n.d.). Disinformation is also a key element in cognitive warfare, altering how a target population thinks. And this cognitive warfare presents significant obstacles, particularly for liberal democracies that uphold moral and ethical norms and values (we use these terms interchangeably) such as freedom of expression, democratic processes, the rule of law, evidence-based truth, and so on (Miller S, 2023).

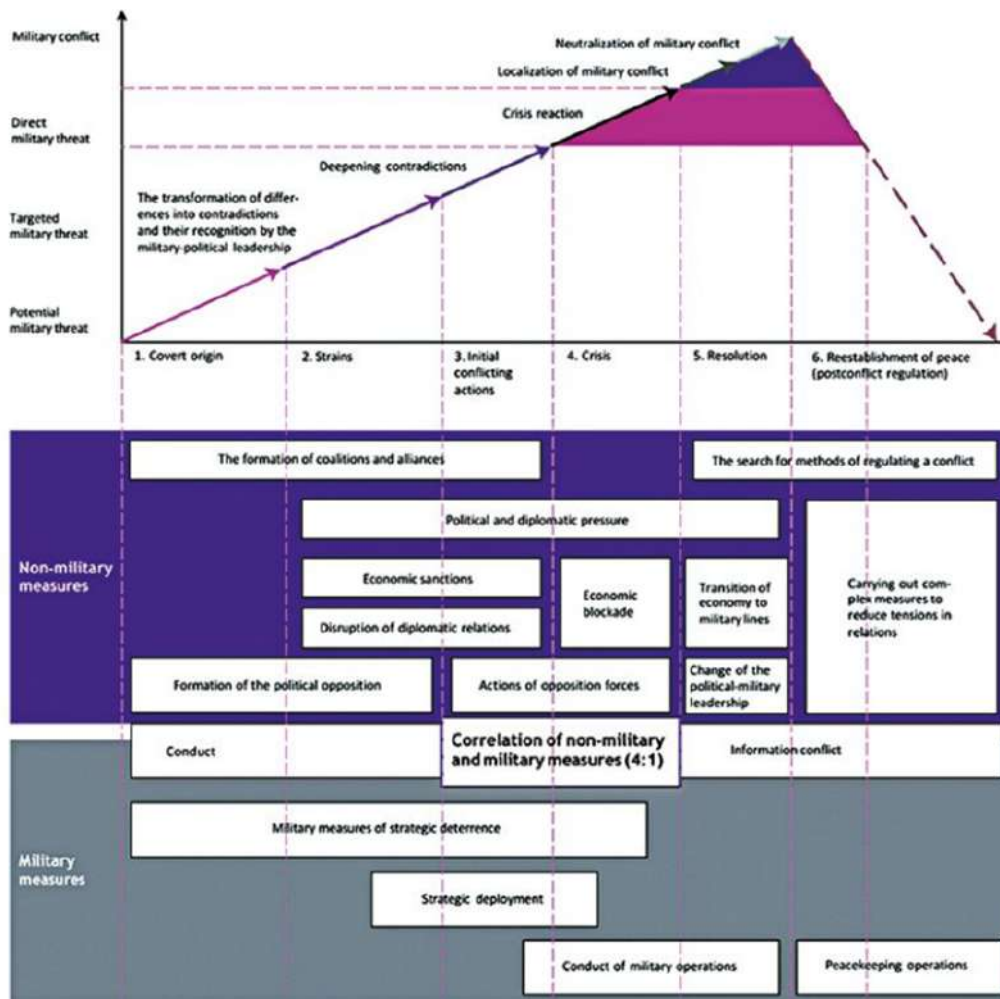
Russia's disinformation can be subsumed under the concept of so-called "active measures" (covert political operations ranging from disinformation campaigns to insurrections), which have a long and ignominious tradition in Russia and reflect a permanent wartime mentality, dating back to the Soviet era. So-called "active measures" corresponds to a term used by the Soviet Union (USSR) from the 1950s onwards to describe a range of covert and deniable political influence and subversion operations (CIA, n.d.), including (but not limited to) the establishment of front organizations, the backing of friendly political movements, the orchestration of internal unrest and the dissemination of disinformation (Galeotti, M, 2019). President Putin is both the ultimate source of authority and control in these campaigns and also an active player, as reflected in the figure below.



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations

An article from Russia's chief of staff, Valeri Gerasimov, appeared in the military journal *Voyenno-PromyshlennyyKurier* (VPK) in 2013. The piece was headed "The value of science is in foresight: new challenges require rethinking the forms and methods of conducting combat operations." In order to accomplish strategic goals, it outlined a new style of Russian combat that integrates conventional and unconventional warfare. The article emphasized the need of using non-military means to advance political and strategic goals and pushed for their utilization to gain an advantage in novel fields, like information or cyberspace, as well as the benefits of combining conventional military forces with psychological, economic, political, and informational tools. This brought to mind the aforementioned active measures' foundations (Galeotti, M, 2018):

*FROM DISINFORMATION TO COGNITIVE WARFARE:
RUSSIAN AND IRANIAN TECHNIQUES, TACTICS AND PROCEDURES IN THE DESIGN
AND DEPLOYMENT OF HYBRID THREATS*



Source: Colom Piella, Guillem. *Ejército Magazine*

Disinformation campaigns are very effective for Russia since, with a minimum investment, they can cause a very high level of damage. It is for this reason that Russia's state propaganda budget is increasing annually¹.

For years, Russia has been using the entire playbook of orchestrated manipulation, information, and interference, including disinformation, in an attempt to sow divisions in societies, denigrate democratic processes and institutions and garner support for its imperialist policies. The February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated, once again, a broad spectrum of

¹<https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2023/10/09/vrossiiskii-byudzhet-vtoroi-god-podryad-zalozhili-rekordnie-rashodi-nagospropagandu-a109399>

tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) in the realm of well-known disinformation narratives.

Ukraine has been the first target of Russia's FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation Interference) operations (FIMI: Towards a European Redefinition of Foreign Interference, 2023). The invasion is the culmination of years of manipulation and interference by Russia to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Indeed, almost all of the disinformation narratives used by the Kremlin to justify and mobilize domestic support for the invasion can be traced back to 2013-2014 and the Euromaidan protests, in the context of which the Kremlin sought to portray Ukraine as "a Nazi state," "a failed state," or "not a state at all." By the beginning of 2022, the pro-Kremlin media had been preparing the ground for the military invasion for years. But the work had already begun long before that. After World War II, the Soviet Political Police, and the KGB, singled out the United States as the "main enemy in the world" of the USSR. In this new geopolitical confrontation, the KGB's most important domestic target was Ukrainian nationalism, which was believed to be connected to and financed by the U.S. According to KGB archival documents, from 1953 to 1991, approximately 50% of all criminal cases focused on "dangerous" Ukrainian nationalists.

The second most important target of the KGB in Ukraine was another type of nationalism, Judaism and Zionism (comprising over 30% of all criminal cases). Religious sects were identified as the third threat to the USSR (10%) (Bertelsen, O. 2021). Based on these data, the KGB began to conduct various damage mitigation operations ("the threat of Westernization" of Soviet youth) and directed all its efforts to counteract the role of its main enemy.

From that time are the special operation "BLOK" (Poltava State Medical University, 2023) to restrict the political activism of Ukrainian intellectuals and the increase in the number of studies and surveys of society in the area, noting with concern the degree of "emulation" of the neo-fascist hippie and punk movements

of the West in Ukraine and Czechoslovakia. This situation also gave impetus to organizations such as Komsomol².

On the international scene, the Kremlin has also been using manipulation of information to undermine international support for Ukraine. The aim has been, above all, to sow doubts about who the aggressor is; hence the focus on disinformation campaigns accusing NATO and, in particular, the United States, of trying to encircle and contain Russia through Ukraine. Another objective of Russia has been to break the international opinion to condemn the war and impose sanctions on Russia for its violation of international law.

Some of the different tactics employed by Russia in the field of information warfare are listed below³, as well as some examples arising from the invasion of Ukraine.

- **Dismiss:** The first Russian approach to negative reports or comments is to dismiss them, either by denying the allegations on the ground or denigrating the person making them.

EXAMPLE: Despite numerous international (ALEX et al., n.d.) and national media⁴ warning of an imminent invasion, many official Russian media ridiculed this possibility by attacking newspapers that pointed it out⁵.

- **Distort:** Russian officials and media have also developed a strong tendency to distort information to support their overall narrative.

² Komsomol was the youth organization of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The term is a contraction of Kommunisticheski Soyuz Molodiozhi (Коммунистический союз молодёжи), Communist Youth Union. Created on October 29, 1918, since 1922 the official name became the Leninist Communist Union of the Youth of the Union (Всесоюзный Ленинский Коммунистический Союз Молодёжи, Vsesoyuzni Léiniski Kommunisticheski Soyuz Molodiozhi, abbreviated ВЛКСМ or VLKSM). It was dissolved in September 1991, following the failed coup in August of that year and three months before the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

³ [https://inventory.adt.ac/wiki/The_5D%E2%80%99s_\(dismiss,_distort,_distract,_dismay,_divide](https://inventory.adt.ac/wiki/The_5D%E2%80%99s_(dismiss,_distort,_distract,_dismay,_divide)

⁴ <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20220216/rusia-ucrania-conflicto-directo/2291141.shtml>

⁵ Ex: <https://t.me/elzoomrt/216>

EXAMPLE: On June 29 and 30, 2022, the NATO summit took place in Madrid⁶. A summit that was a complete success⁷ and where Spain was the focus of several disinformation campaigns by Russia. The pro-Putin Russian state news agencies Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik launched hoaxes that directly affected Spain.

In one of them, Spain was accused of giving in to alleged US blackmail to host the 2022 NATO summit in Madrid. According to Russian agencies, the US pressured Spain to send heavy weapons to Ukraine in exchange for holding the NATO meeting in the Spanish capital⁸.

- **Distract:** Another tool in Russia's information arsenal is distraction: diverting attention from the activities of Russia and its allies by hurling accusations elsewhere.

EXAMPLE: In the wake of the recent Hamas attack on Israel, the Kremlin is exploiting the conflict narratives to advance several information operations aimed at reducing U.S. and Western support and attention to Ukraine (Institute for the Study of War, n.d.).

- **Deterrence:** The last key tool in Russia's communications arsenal is to sow consternation, warning of Russia's military might and the disastrous consequences for those who stand in the way.

EXAMPLE: The nuclear threat is a narrative widely used by the Kremlin in various arenas⁹.

- **Divide:** Create conflict and widen divisions within a community or between communities and groups. Russian disinformation exploits social problems

⁶ <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/resultados-cumbre-otan-madrid>

⁷ https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/Comunicacion/Noticias/Paginas/Noticias/20220630_MINISTERIO06.aspx

⁸ <https://www.vozpopuli.com/espana/rusia-campanas-desinformacion-espana-cumbre-otan.html>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/visegrad24/status/1634135848466751488>

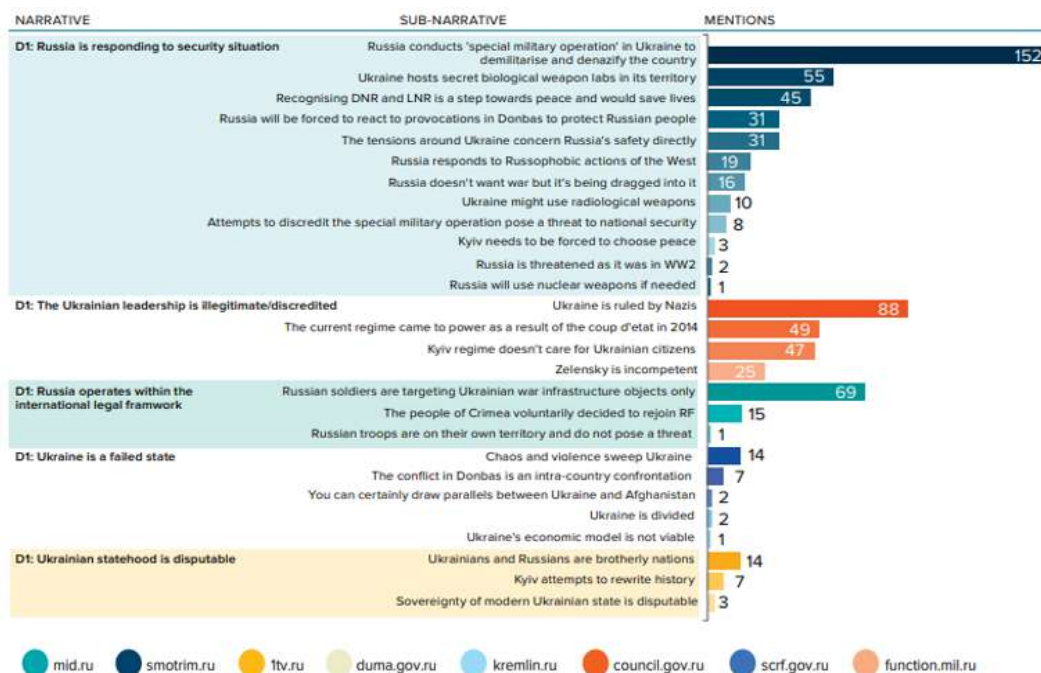
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in foreign states to undermine public confidence and generate conspiracy theories (Yablokov, 2022).

EXAMPLE: The Kremlin is conducting numerous disinformation campaigns to try to separate the Balkan countries from the European Union and the United States (Radio Free Europe, n.d.)

In the Kremlin's official communication and in the coverage of state television channels, disruptive narratives were used to undermine existing messages and prevent the emergence of coherent communication on certain issues.

The following are the five main disturbing narratives (and their sub-narratives) used in the official communication of the government of the Russian Federation, according to the number of pieces of content, once the invasion began.



Source: Nato Strategic Communications. Centre of Excellence

2. IRAN'S ROLE

Although the mutually reinforcing streams of anti-American (dis)information operations by Russia, Iran and China do not appear to represent an open and

established alliance between these three authoritarian regimes, but rather the ongoing convergence of the objectives of these three countries which, having divergent foreign policy objectives in many respects, possess a common adversary: the United States. By opportunistically reinforcing each other's information manipulation actions, the cumulative sum of their efforts is greater than their individual parts. Moreover, it also allows each country to focus on its comparative advantages. Russia's tremendous capacity for content production and programming in multiple languages offers China and Iran cost savings and greater reach. China's Twitter attacks on the United States provide the Kremlin with a proxy for information warfare. Iran's haughty and aggressive anti-U.S. claims allow Russia and China to promote narratives they would rather not present under their own names (Watts, n.d.).

On March 31, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a new Russian foreign policy concept that signaled the "formation of a more equitable multipolar world order." The concept highlighted Moscow's intention to strengthen its ties with non-Western countries, in particular by "developing large-scale and trust-based cooperation" (Russian Federation, 2023). Russia's commitment to multilateral institutions is guided by a far-reaching vision of Russian foreign policy that seeks to move the international system away from a unipolar order dominated by the United States. Russia wants to use these organizations to realize a new world order in which power and decision-making shift from the Euro-Atlantic space to non-Western emerging powers, to establish Russia as a key pole in the emerging multipolar system with the ability to dominate the Eurasian region, and to project Russian power and strengthen its international position (Stronski & Sokolsky, n.d.).

One of the main countries promoting such a conception of the "multipolar world" has been Iran, which in recent years has developed a shared ideological discourse in opposition to "Western values" (Therme, 2022). While Iran's initial official statement adopted a neutral position towards the war, subsequently, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei echoed President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric and blamed the West for Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Iran Supreme Leader Lauds Putin for Starting Ukraine War and Says If He Hadn't, "Dangerous" NATO Would

Have - CBS News, 2022) , so that Teheran, through its official media, aligned itself with Moscow on all the main narratives previously noted as the war progressed¹⁰ , and which we show below (Qaed, 2023).

- Russia is responding to an insecure situation:

Iran has supported all the arguments that Russia has put forward in this regard¹¹: Russia is conducting an operation against the Nazi regime¹²; Ukraine is developing biological weapons on its territory¹³; the West is adopting Russophobic behavior¹⁴; Ukraine is seeking to use radiological weaponry¹⁵, etc.

- Criticism of the leadership of the Ukrainian government:

Ukraine supports the Nazi regime¹⁶; various kinds of criticism of Zelensky (he is not seeking peace¹⁷, he does not have popular support¹⁸, etc.); the origin of the conflict dates back to the 2014 Coup d'Etat¹⁹, etc.

- Russia is acting in accordance with international law:

Russia is defending its nation, the Donbass region²⁰ and the Crimean Peninsula, which it considers Russian territories²¹; Ukraine is attacking its own citizens²², etc.

¹¹ Some of them, with the help of official statements by Russian diplomats or journalists.

¹² <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1507414543567564800>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1502781487409778688>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1503800406501122053>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1500394408629444608>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1521473485868249088>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1521449762658136064>

¹⁸ <https://t.me/detrasdelarazonconroberto/840>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1518233763993604103>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1523566591484391425>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1539159419883335680>

²² <https://t.me/HispanTVcanal/68327>

- Ukraine is a failed state:

Ukraine has been a country with enormous chaos and citizen insecurity²³; criticism of Ukraine's economic governance model²⁴; comparison of Ukraine's political situation with Afghanistan²⁵, etc.

- Ukraine's statehood is debatable:

Russia and Ukraine are nations with a common history²⁶ and the conflict is being provoked by the West pitting brotherly nations against each other²⁷.

Furthermore, it draws attention to the way that Teherán supported the official narratives of the Kremlin following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, blaming all of the blame on the "provocations of the OTAN" without pointing out or denouncing Russia's violation of international law (Ziabari, n.d.).

Iran, on the other hand, has created a disinformation machine that can rival Russia's (Murphy, 2020). Although Teheran is not as practiced as Moscow in propaganda attacks, it is forging ahead with new online tools to influence public opinion (Defense One, n.d).

Iran's digital influence operations represent a considerable part of public diplomacy, as it invests a lot of energy and economic resources in it. The Islamic Republic of Iran was born in part through the control and manipulation of information and the main resource it possesses to achieve this is the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) media company. The figure who holds the leadership of this media is appointed by the theocratic supreme leader and not by Iran's parliament (Zanconato, n.d). Moreover, as its former director general,

²³ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1496126654283984896>

²⁴ <https://t.me/presstv/63809>

²⁵ <https://t.me/HispanTVcanal/65089>

²⁶ <https://t.me/presstv/64038>

²⁷ <https://t.me/presstv/71380>

Abdulali Ali-Asgari, pointed out. "Islamic Iran is facing a broad media war and IRIB is at the forefront of this new war"²⁸ .

Internationally, IRIB operates thirty radio channels and nine television networks. Today, some of IRIB's most prominent outward-facing initiatives include: Al Alam, an Arabic-language station launched in 2003; PressTV, an English-language station launched in 2007; and Hispan TV, a Spanish-language station launched in 2011 and focused on Latin America (Duarte & González-Echeverry, 2020).

And despite the growing economic turbulence and problems facing the country, IRIB maintains an annual budget of approximately \$750 million (Breuninger, 2019). IRIB has been sanctioned numerous times by the United States, accusing it of engaging in various disinformation campaigns, employing censorship and distortion techniques (Treasury Announces Sanctions against Iran, 2023). And although Iran has collaborated in the spread of false information, this does not represent the majority or even a significant part of its known digital influence efforts. Although Iran frequently uses fake websites and social media users, the content disseminated is similar to its state propaganda, which is biased in favor of Iran and against U.S. interests, but rarely completely fabricated. In contrast to Russia's attempts at digital influence, which seek to distract and dismay, Iran seeks to persuade. While Russia employs hidden means to confront both sides of a political dispute, Iran employs hidden means to spread as strong a point of view as possible (Brooking & Kianpour, n.d.).

If we analyze the tools used by Iran in relation to those employed by Russia, we will observe that they have applied the same techniques on issues that are in their own interest:

²⁸ "Iran Launches 'Pars Today' News Outlet," PressTV, July 5, 2016
<https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/07/05/473779/Iran-IRIB-Pars-Today-Abdolali-AliAskariMohammad-Akhgari>

DISMISS	One example is the murder by the Islamic religious police of Mahsa Amini, a women's rights activist in Iran (Amnistía Internacional España, 2023). His death sparked numerous revolts in the country ²⁹ and official media in Teheran pointed out that these revolts were instigated by Western media (HispanTV, 2022).
DISTORT	In the aftermath of the recent Hamas attack, the official media report the statements of different politicians and leaders criticizing Israel, without contemplating any narrative of support ³⁰ .
DISTRACT	In the wake of Mahsa Amini's death, Iran's official media published numerous criticisms of various Western countries ³¹ .
DISMAY	Narratives reflecting Iran's military capabilities are commonplace in Teheran's official media ³² .
DIVIDE	All anti-Semitic demonstrations that take place in Western countries are usually covered by the official media ³³ .

In addition to this, it is striking to note how both Russia's and Iran's official media often rely on the same "experts" to appear on their programs. Resorting to this kind of profiles is often a characteristic element of Russia's propaganda ecosystem aimed at foreign audiences, people to help spread its message abroad. These profiles repeat the theses of the Kremlin leadership, justify Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, call for the lifting of Western sanctions against the Russian Federation and convince the world that the annexation of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine is legitimate³⁴.

These "experts" appearing in official Russian and Iranian media, disseminate anti-Western narratives and, depending on the particular country's media, support specific pro-Russian or pro-Iranian narratives (these profiles always

²⁹ https://www.lasexta.com/noticias/internacional/quien-mahsa-amini-mujer-irani-cuya-muerte-desato-protetas-regimen_2023030864060bfd88ee0500014cba61.html

³⁰ <https://t.me/presstv/75812>

³¹ <https://t.me/presstv/53879>

³² <https://t.me/presstv/74578>

³³ <https://t.me/presstv/75979>

³⁴ <https://molfar.com/en/foreign-propagandists>

disseminate all sorts of narratives favorable to both regimes). A few are noted below by way of example:

DIVULGATOR (supposed expert)	PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVE (MID RUSSIAN)	PRO-IRANIAN NARRATIVE (MIDDLE IRAN)
Scott Ritter	Criticizing the Ukrainian counter-offensive ³⁵ .	Disseminating narratives that point to Iran's military strength ³⁶ .
Alan MacLeod	Criticism of the Western media ³⁷	Antisemitic Narratives ³⁸ .
Pepe Escobar	Disseminating anti-NATO narratives ³⁹ .	Support for Iranian leaders ^{40, 41} .
Alfredo Jalife-Rahme	Support for the concept of "multipolarity" pointed out by Russia ⁴² .	Supporting regime policies ⁴³ .
Iñaki Gili de San Vicente	Anti-Ukrainian Narratives ⁴⁴	Anti-Israeli Narratives ⁴⁵
Ben Norton	Anti-Ukrainian narratives ⁴⁶	Anti-US Narratives ⁴⁷

It is also important to take into account how Iranian disinformation channels are especially recommended in Russian social networks, such as HispanTV in Spanish and VKontakte:

³⁵ https://t.me/tass_es/1531

³⁶ <https://t.me/presstv/67400>

³⁷ <https://sputniknews.lat/20180927/toda-la-verdad-sobre-google-1082307340.html>

³⁸ <https://t.me/presstv/68297>

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/mariar5956/status/1712881228431446073>

⁴⁰ <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/opinion/558667/soleimani-eeuu-mundo-multipolar>

⁴¹ <https://t.me/presstv/72862>

⁴² <https://sputniknews.lat/20230602/jalife-rahme-el-nuevo-orden-ya-es-multipolar-y-se-nota-en-el-ascenso-de-los-brics-1140038959.html>

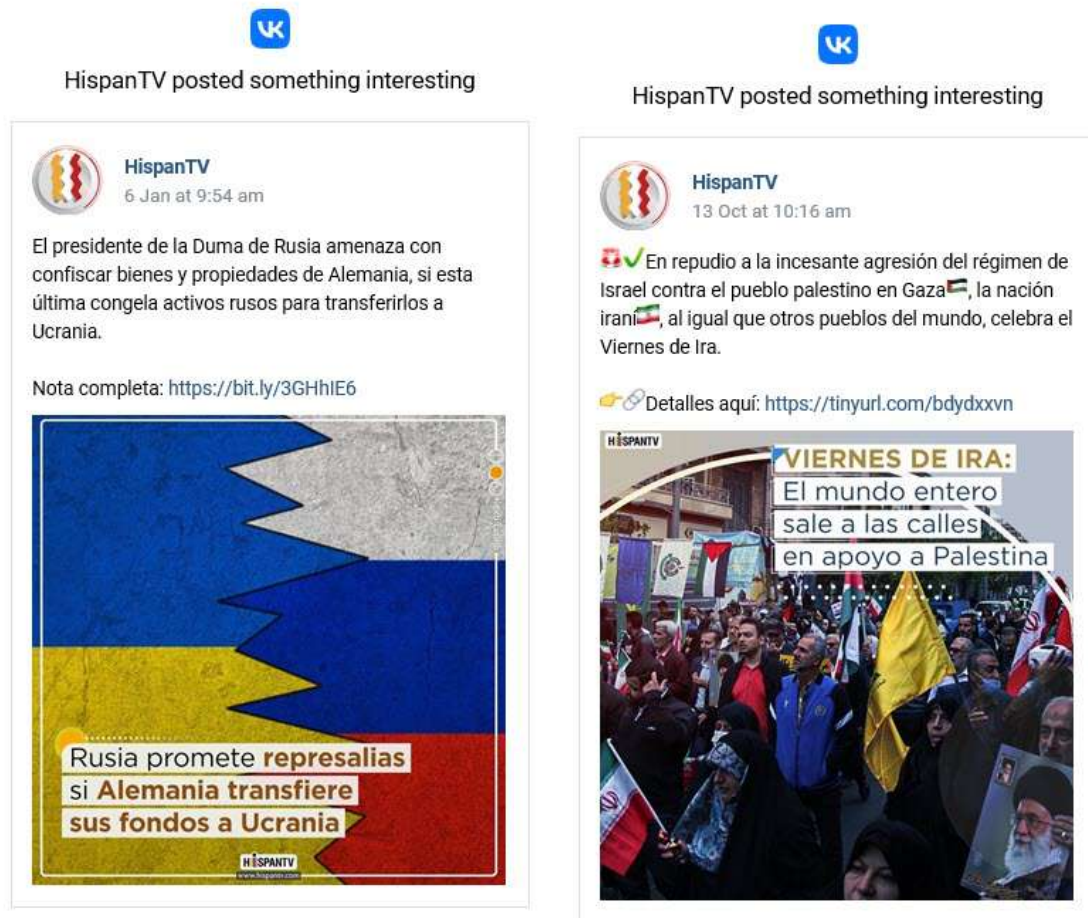
⁴³ <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/politica/446142/iran-rendir-oriente-medio-eeuu-soleimani>

⁴⁴ <https://sputniknews.lat/20231024/para-biden-primero-ucrania-e-israel-pide-o-anuncia-otro-sablazo-sus-propios-ciudadanos-1145081365.html>

⁴⁵ <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/politica/552462/iran-disturbios-provocacion-eeuu>

⁴⁶ <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230325/how-has-ukrainian-conflict-affected-the-eus-well-being-1108787281.html>

⁴⁷ <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/ee-uu-/563624/biden-influencers-jovenes-elecciones>



3. HAMAS ATTACK AGAINST ISRAEL.

On October 7, Hamas, the terrorist organization that controls the Gaza Strip (MARQUES, n.d.), carried out one of the most aggressive armed actions, provoking the worst attack suffered in Israel since its foundation as a state (RTVE.es, 2023). A surprise attack in which at least 1200 Israelis were killed. As a consequence, the region is preparing for a new conflict (Martínez & Bubola, 2023).

During the first three days of the Hamas attack on Israel, Iranian officials and media have disseminated numerous fake news stories that support their own interests, mainly by spreading anti-Semitic narratives (The Times, 2023). Some of these, such as images appearing in the official IRINN media purporting to show Hamas militants taking Israeli army generals hostage, were actually from the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh two weeks earlier, during which Azerbaijani

commandos were detaining local Armenian officials⁴⁸. The attack on Israel was aided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces (Kalin, 2023), which denied involvement, but praised the operation as "fiercely autonomous and unwaveringly aligned with the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people" (Ebrahim, 2023).

The attack, which was condemned by numerous countries and the EU itself (El PE Condena El Ataque de Hamás Y Pide Una Tregua Humanitaria | Noticias | Parlamento Europeo, 2023), the Kremlin amplified several information operations following the Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7, mainly blaming the West for neglecting conflicts in the Middle East in favor of supporting Ukraine and claiming that the international community will stop paying attention to Ukraine by showing attention to the Middle East. or, alternatively, Ukraine as a zero-sum comparison. Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev claimed that the United States and its allies should have been "busy" working on a "Palestinian-Israeli agreement" rather than "interfering" with Russia and providing military aid to Ukraine⁴⁹. Thus, presumably, the Kremlin will likely continue to exploit Hamas attacks in Israel to push various information operations aimed at reducing U.S. and Western support and attention to Ukraine (Institute for the Study of War, n.d.). Some of the Russian TV anchors publicly compared Israel to Ukraine, going so far as to note that "there should not be a drop of pity or sympathy" for the Israelis (Haaretz, 2023).

Support for Hamas also comes at the diplomatic level, as a delegation from the terrorist group visited Moscow on Thursday, October 26, and subsequently issued its own statement praising the efforts of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Foreign Ministry to put an end to what it called "Israel's crimes supported by the West (Reuters, 2023).

⁴⁸ https://twitter.com/2rni3a_ezm/status/1711290380845498860?s=20

⁴⁹ <https://twitter.com/MedvedevRussiaE/status/1710587836922053105>

4. CONCLUSIONS.

Although information warfare is nothing new and has always existed, and even for Russia it is a key element in its policy of foreign aggression, now, due to digital technologies, these procedures are having a much greater impact.

Through this propaganda and disinformation war, Russia is trying to achieve its strategic objectives through manipulation and deception in which both RT and Sputnik play a key role in the disinformation ecosystem established by the Kremlin. However, the support it has with other allied countries should not be limited to economic and military hardware support. Iran not only supports and shares all the narratives coming from the Kremlin, but uses the same techniques, collaborators, etc. to achieve its own objectives.

Understanding that the challenge is not only coming from Russia and that it is necessary to pay attention to third countries to understand the complexity of the phenomenon is an essential element.

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RUSSIAN MYTHS OF “ONE AND THE SAME PEOPLE NATION” AND “NATO’S ATTACK ON RUSSIA” IN THE LEGITIMIZATION OF THE RUSSO- UKRAINIAN WAR

GALYNA SOLOVEI

National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”; Ukraine

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1. INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2021, the Russian Federation issued an ultimatum to the United States of America, the OSCE and NATO sending draft security agreements between the United States and Russia and between NATO and Russia, respectively. Among other things, second document emphasizes: «The Russian Federation and all the Parties that were member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as of 27 May 1997, respectively, shall not deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other States in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of 27 May 1997» (Agreement, 2021). In this paragraph, Russian diplomats refer to the treaty concluded between Russia and NATO in 1997, which contains clauses on joint responsibility for security on the European continent (Founding Act, 1997), but does not contain clauses on non-expansion of NATO to the East and non-deployment of weapons at the territories of new NATO member states. According to this Russian requirement, such states as Czechia, Hungary, and Poland (joined NATO in 1999), Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (2004), as well as Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017), and North Macedonia (2020) would have to completely lose the protection they received by becoming members of the Alliance.

In the draft treaties, Russia emphasized on forbidding Ukraine to join NATO: «All member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States» and outlined a wider range of territories of sovereign states with which NATO countries were prohibited from having military relations: «The Parties that are member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization shall not conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine as well as other States in the Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia.» (Agreement, 2021). At the time of the announcement of the ultimatum, about 100,000 Russian troops were gathered on the border with Ukraine.

Official negotiations with the Russian side began in the second week of the new 2022 year at the level of the USA, OSCE and NATO. The dialogue was based on the illegitimacy of Russia's demands, according to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that any European country has the right to join the Alliance, and the United Nations Charter refers to the right of states to join organizations and alliances for ensuring their safety. Russia demonstrated its inability to dialogue, emphasizing the unconditional fulfillment of the ultimatum, and on February 24, 2022, invaded the territory of Ukraine, legitimizing its actions through the term "special military operation", which aims to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine.

Putin formally declared war to Ukraine on February 21, recognizing the independence of the puppet states of the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic, thereby deliberately and unilaterally withdrawing from the Minsk agreements¹. In his address to the Russian people dated February 21, Putin emphasized: "So, I will start with the fact, that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, or to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh for Russia – by

¹ The Minsk Agreements - signed on September 5, 2014, by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, and the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, provided for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of Russian troops from the conflict zone, and the federalization of Ukraine with the granting of self-government rights to the Donetsk and Luhansk republics.

separating, severing that is historically Russian land.” (Putin, 2022). Thus, Putin expressed his confidence in not recognizing the sovereignty of Ukraine, emphasized his conviction that Russia and Ukraine are inhabited by the same Russian people and that the invasion of a sovereign state is only a desire to "reunite" one and the same people. It was assumed that the majority of Ukrainians also consider themselves a one and the same people with the Russian invaders. That is why the Russian invasion was planned to be short and effective.

In this chapter, the legitimization of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will not be considered from the point of view of compliance of Russia's actions with the norms of international law. As Jens Stoltenberg stated at a press conference devoted to the threat of Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia violates all norms of international law that prohibit a sovereign state from invading the territory of another sovereign state. (Press conference by NATO Secretary General, 2022). If Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not provoked and legal, how does Russia legitimize military actions on the territory of a sovereign state?

I rely on the theoretical framework of Cuddy and Catton, which is based on the fact that the international law of war and peace was violated by states immediately after the conclusion of the UN Charter, and the invasion of one country into another was based on the primacy of geopolitics and military necessity. An illegitimate "de jure" local war becomes actually legitimate when it averts a total war, turning into an endless local war, which does not affect the entire population of the Globe. (Cuddy B., Kattan V., 2023).

Russia's December 2021 ultimatum and the unity of NATO members that no outside power can dictate which countries are eligible to join the Alliance have provoked the greatest tension since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

“As the Russians threatened the United States and NATO with the “asymmetrical response”, rumors began to swirl around Washington suggesting that nuclear-armed missiles might be installed close to American shores. After Russian officials suggested sending their troops to Cuba and Venezuela, concerns grew that such missiles might not only be carried on submarines but also based on

land. Putin's thread of the previous few months concerning a repetition of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 suddenly acquired new meaning and urgency. (Plokhy S., 2023, p.145)"

Threats of total nuclear war as a consequence of disobeying Russia's ultimatums are part of its information warfare strategy. The fear of total destruction is a strong emotion that excludes critical thinking and appeal to universal rules. The appeal to emotions transfers the legitimation of Russian aggression from the sphere of rational thinking to the sphere of irrational, fear-distorted perception, which prompts audiences who consume the products of Russian propaganda to make decisions beneficial to Russia's interests.

This study will analyze the purpose and methods of Russian propaganda, which legitimizes its aggression and local wars, thereby leveling the world order established after the Second World War. The study focuses on two interrelated myths of Russian propaganda: "NATO's attack on Russia" and "one and the same people", which are imposed on both domestic and foreign audiences. Despite the powerful and systematic subversive activity of the Russian state to destroy democratic values, democracies at the level of the state and society can resist the destructive influence of Russian propaganda. At the end of the chapter, specific ways to debunk the myths of Russian propaganda are given in order to preserve liberal democratic values.

2. THE AIM AND METHODS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

This chapter uses Jowett and O'Donnell's (2018) definition of propaganda, which focuses on the communicative process of propaganda as a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitive functions, and direct audience's behavior to achieve a response that promotes the propagandist's desired intent.

The actions of propagandists are not random or thoughtless, but on the contrary, they choose their steps and words considering all possible consequences. The dissemination of propaganda messages occurs according to the plan using special methods and tools. Propaganda aims to produce psychological, cognitive,

and behavioral changes of the target audience. "Shape perceptions" in this definition indicates that propaganda aims to change the way an audience perceives certain information, ideas, or attitudes. Propagandists try to shape perception with the help of language and images. "Manipulate cognitive functions" refers to changing the understanding of information and reformatting the beliefs of the target audience. Propagandists try to influence the actions of the audience by persuading them to change their behavior or take certain actions that are in line with propagandists' goals.

Specific feature of Russian propaganda is the fusion of such completely different concepts of Western discourse as "soft power" and "intangible weapons". According to Joseph Nye's classic definition, soft power is the ability to achieve the state's goals through attraction of its culture, ideas, and policies rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). Nowadays Russia formulates the goal of its humanitarian policy abroad as follows:

“On the world stage, the struggle for cultural influence continues to intensify, with new centers of power being widely involved in it. Globalization not only promotes the mutual enrichment of national cultures, but also threatens the cultural identity of countries and peoples. In this regard, when implementing this Concept, one should consider the increasing number of attempts to belittle the significance of Russian culture and Russian humanitarian projects, to disseminate and impose a distorted interpretation of Russia’s true goals of familiarizing the world community with its cultural heritage and achievements in various humanitarian fields, to discredit the Russian World, its traditions and ideals, replacing them with pseudo-values.” Kontseptsyia humanyarnoi polytyky Rosyiskoi Federatsyy za rubezhom, 2022

The text contains such terms as “the struggle for cultural influence” “threats to cultural identity”, “attempts to belittle the significance of Russian culture”, “to discredit Russian World, its traditions and ideals, replacing them with pseudo-values.” Such definitions have nothing to do with the attractiveness of a country's culture to be perceived by foreign audiences. Rather, these terms show belligerence in imposing the only correct perception of Russian culture.

Van Herpen claims that Russian propaganda totally changes the understanding of soft power concept created by Joseph Nye. Putin's Russia is beginning to rethink this concept after the "color revolutions" in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004. Instead of attracting, Russian soft power is turning into a hybrid weapon. The concept of "soft power" in the Russian sense undergoes a threefold reduction. First, soft power is reduced to only one of its components - public diplomacy.

"This means that soft power – which in Nye's definition is a power emanating from both civil society and the state – was reduced to an instrument used by the state to influence foreign governments and manipulate foreign public opinion". Perception that a soft power is a zero-sum game and to the second reduction: if for the "attractiveness contest" between the states in the original definition there are no winners and no losers, and it has no sense for one country to attack the 'attractiveness' of the other with the aim to increase its own soft power, for the Russian concept of 'attraction' winning and make all other countries lose is essential. In Russia soft power becomes the part of its hard military power, so it can include illegal activities, such as espionage, lies, disinformation and bribery."Van Herpen, 2016, p. 27.

The Russian interpretation of soft power turns the promotion of Russian ideas abroad into an element "nonmaterial" but "hard power", which nevertheless works, taking into account the three components of Russian "soft-power offensive", which were distinguished by Van Herpen. The first element of "nonmaterial hard power" is "Mimesis". Russian state copies Western strategies and institutions which are the most successful in their country's promotion. The second element is the "Rollback" which means elimination of the activities of Western soft-power institutes inside of Russia.

The state-formed propaganda concept of spreading messages needed by Russia to promote its own interests is completely carried out by state bodies imitating Western public organizations. At the same time, Russia outlawed the activities of Western cultural centers and NGOs, such as the British Council and USAID in

Russia, and forced NGOs that received funding from abroad to declare themselves "foreign agents".

The third component "Invention" demonstrates Russian "innovations" in the field. Van Herpen defines "Invention" as

"Strategy to invent new soft-power strategies, making ample use of the possibilities offered by the open Western societies. It includes legal as well as illegal activities in order to enhance the Kremlin's influence abroad and ranges from hiring Western public relations firms to improve its image to setting up spy rings, illegally financing political parties, and directly "buying" people." Van Herpen, 2016, p.34

This tool of communication warfare fully corresponds to the description of espionage, which was previously used by the KGB. Modern Russia uses these illegal elements of creating propaganda "channels" in order to destroy the very existence of objective truth and, accordingly, objective reality. After all, now Russia's reputation can be laundered for money by a respectable Western company that spreads messages in the West "as if it were its own", and pro-Russian messages can be delivered by members of parliament to their voters, convincing them that the interests of Russia are theirs, the voters of the democratic countries, interests.

A slightly different approach to describing the model of Russian propaganda is proposed by Nimmo. Nimmo describes this technology as 4 D model, which has four steps: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay. Regarding the first tool of manipulation of public opinion, Nimmo gives as an example the case of destroying audience's the cognitive abilities when Putin first denied the presence of Russian troops in March 2014 in Crimea, then partially admitting the presence of troops to strengthen the protection of the Black Sea Fleet, and finally fully admitting that the troops were there from the very beginning, openly mocking those who believed his assurances that Crimea was not captured by the Russian army. Thus, Putin devalues the cognitive abilities of audiences, "dismissing" them.

Distortion of information is perhaps the most massive tactic of Russian propaganda, which creates dozens of fake news every day, using paid actors as witnesses of real or completely fabricated events. Russia often distracts the attention of the audience from its crimes by offering many versions of reality, including conspiracy theories, insisting on a complete investigation and refutation of these very versions before "unfairly accusing" Russia of a crime, having in hand the facts and all the evidence pointing to Russian guilt. The last key tool of Nimmo's 4D model of Russian propaganda is to "dismay" the audience by constantly threatening to use nuclear weapons on all opponents of Russian propaganda. This technique is used starting from 2007 for the CIS countries and from 2022 for the Western audiences. (Nimmo, 2015).

Paul and Matthews complement Nimmo's analysis by characterizing the methods of Russian propaganda as 1) High-volume and multichannel 2) Rapid, continuous, and repetitive 3) Lacks commitment to objective reality 4) Lacks commitment to consistency, explaining the effectiveness of their approach from the point of view of psychology.

Using all available channels of information transmission, such as radio, television, internet platforms and paid bloggers and trolls, Russian propaganda "bombards" the audience with its messages. Because information is believed to be true and verified by checking multiple sources and channels, audiences readily believe those messages received from different sources. Often repeated lies or half-truths transmitted through various channels are believed by the audience as having been verified. The speed of Russian propagandists allows Russian messages to be the first to convey their distorted picture of the world. Those who try to refute Russian messages act reactively, and the repetition of accusations, for example, against any democratic leader, leaves him with the role of the accused, someone who justifies himself, proving his own innocence again and again.

To the question "Why is rapid, continuous, and repetitive propaganda successful?" the authors of the article give the following answer: "First impressions are very resilient. Repetition leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads

to acceptance.” Very often, Russian propaganda has nothing to do with reality. But most consumers of information are too lazy to verify the facts. Disproving fake news takes time and effort, but even disproved information over time modifies audience behavior. As an example of inconsistency in statements, the authors cite Putin's narratives, which often contradict each other. However, research shows that audiences tend to believe the diametrically opposite statements of this leader every time (Paul and Matthews, 2016).

What should Russian propagandists be like? What is the specificity of Russian communicators to convey clearly false information without trying to find the truth and debunk lies? Natalia Roudakova's research, which combines ethnography, moral and political theory, and media analysis, is devoted to this question. Using specific examples, Roudakova shows how already in the mid-2000s, the sphere of public life in Russia, where private individuals could publicly express their opinion and discuss common problems, respecting each other, was practically destroyed by the state. Only the state and atomized individuals remained in Russian communication sphere. Journalists and media, instead of covering real events and searching for the truth, criticizing the government and oligarchs, turn into "political prostitutes", or members of the "second oldest profession", as they are commonly termed in Russia, who monetize their truth-seeking skills for the manipulation of public consciousness in favor of the "customer" the state or an oligarch. Reality, truth, consistency in this case have no importance, what matters is the wishes of the "customer", from whom Russian journalists receive money. In contrast to the West, where the state and business must be accountable to taxpayers, and journalists as the "third power" must ensure that the abuse of the "first power" - the state, and the "second power" - business do not occur, harming citizens, in Russia journalists and media easily fabricate any reality for the money of the state or business, completely ignoring the interests of citizens to know the truth and control the government and business. (Roudakova, 2017)

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba (March 4, 2020 – now), who is the developer of Ukraine's communication foreign strategies, in his book *The War for Reality* claims that Russia is pushing its vision of the world, influencing the identities of the audiences it needs, destroying the harmful

(democratic) and cementing useful (uncertain) reality it needs: "Russia has unleashed a global hybrid war and is clearly aware of its goals - to destroy people's trust in democratic institutions (to disorient) and to impose on others the unconditional acceptance of Russian policies (to set new benchmarks)." (Kuleba 2022, p.108-109).

The effect of the change in the reality of Western societies, the leveling of liberal values and complete distrust of the facts, is significantly intensified, taking into account the rather long period of aggressive communication war, which Russia has been waging since the mid-2010s and significantly intensified its efforts after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

3. RUSSIAN MYTHS OF NATO'S ATTACK AND ONE AND THE SAME PEOPLE NATION

Mark Schorer (1959) sees myths as tools using which people try to make their experiences understandable (p.360). He describes myth as a construct that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of everyday life and organizes experience. Wars can be caused by the clash of different mythologies. Schorer argues that society can disintegrate into conflicting mythologies that cannot adapt to each other. This indicates that disputes and conflicts may arise due to differences in ideologies based on different mythological foundations. Another important idea in Schorer's concept is the emphasis that ideologies can activate behavior only when they rely on images and metaphors that people understand and accept. This makes myths a necessary component of any form of ideology. Myths give ideologies a visual and symbolic basis, making them more accessible and appealing to the masses.

Sherlock (2007) emphasizes the importance of political myths for managing a political regime. He argues that political leaders use myths to change the historical narrative in order to legitimize their power and gain support for their political actions. This is done by controlling the perception of the past and reinforcing the rights of one's group or regime. Sherlock points out the differences between history and myth. History is based on objective research and avoids

predetermined outcomes. It is aimed at a systematic and critical study of the past without preconceived views or approaches. Myth, on the other hand, does not analyze historical events, but presents them as already resolved and analyzed. A myth may contain elements of truth, but its form and use of facts are dramatic and subjective. Events are selected to serve the purposes of the myth, and facts that might threaten the integrity of the myth may be ignored or distorted.

The Russian myth, repeated thousands of times by Russian propagandists, was summarized by Nimmo into a linear sequential narrative of the confrontation between the "bad guy" represented by the West and the "good guy" represented by Putin:

"The US has always used NATO and European countries as a tool for its own foreign-policy aims. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the US acted like a victorious aggressor, trying to shape a world in which it would be the sole arbiter of power. As part of that goal, it supported separatists in the Caucasus in a bid to 'dismember' Russia, and absorbed the states of CEE into NATO in an attempt at 'encirclement', breaching a promise given to President Gorbachev.

When Putin came to power, he opposed the US attempt at world domination, and thus became the main stumbling-block to American ambitions [...]

NATO and the EU wanted to force Ukraine to turn West. They therefore gave it an 'either-or' choice of joining NATO and the EU's free-trade zone or staying in Russia's orbit. When President Yanukovych rejected their pressure, neo-Nazis in Kyiv staged a violent coup and began an assault on Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, NATO planned to move ships into Crimea. Russia therefore had no choice but to intervene to protect its compatriots, and the Russian-speakers of the East rose up against the Kiev junta in defense of their lives and their language." (Nimmo, 2015)

The Russian myth found support among powerful Western intellectuals, representatives of the school of realism in international relations. It is worth analyzing the views of John Mearsheimer, which he voiced at the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. When asked by a journalist about the

cause of the war, Mearsheimer said on March 1, 2022: "I think all the trouble in this case really started in April 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, where afterward NATO issued a statement that said Ukraine and Georgia would become part of NATO." (Chotiner, 2022).

Russia's reaction to the possibility of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO was not delayed - just a few months after NATO's statement, in August 2008, Russia invaded the territory of Georgia, calling the invasion a "peacekeeping mission" against the aggression of the central government of Georgia and in defense of Abkhazian separatists. As a result of the so-called "five-day war", Russia reached a peace agreement with the mediation of the European Union. According to the agreement, Georgia should grant special rights to South Ossetia and Abkhazia with self-government and broad autonomy, and Russia should withdraw its troops from sovereign Georgian territory. The Russian troops, whose withdrawal was guaranteed to Georgia by the personal mediation of Nicolas Sarkozy during the conclusion of the cease-fire agreement, were never withdrawn. Already in 2008, it became clear that the EU has no leverage to influence Russia regarding the implementation of peace agreements, the guarantor of which is the EU (Solovey, G., Kovtun, K., 2021). The Western response to Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was so similar to the strategic appeasement of Munich 1938 that it allowed Russia to believe that its full-scale invasion of Ukraine would have a similar response from the West, limited to public condemnation, sanctions and localization of the conflict, which will quickly end with a change of government in Kyiv to a pro-Kremlin one.

The limitations imposed by the theoretical framework of realism namely, consideration of the international system as a set of states as rational actors differing in the size of economies and military power allowed Mearsheimer to believe that if Russia demands that Ukraine sacrifice territories and establish a pro-Kremlin regime in Kyiv, that is exactly what a 40-million democratic state should do without going to war, because Russia greatly outnumbers Ukraine in terms of military power.

The determined, successful and long-term resistance of the Ukrainian people to the aggressive attempts of Russia debunks the myth of the inevitability of "the reunification of one and the same people" under the threat of the use of force declared by Putin.

"The Russian invasion destroyed the last vestiges of the belief that Ukrainian and Russians were fraternal peoples, to say nothing about their being one and the same people. That was true even of those features of common heritage to which Putin had sought to appeal in his articles and speeches, including historical roots, religious tradition, and joint resistance to the Nazi occupation." (Plokhy S., 2023, p.193)

Mearsheimer also provides advice on the Western response to Russia's demands. He does not think that Russia is a serious threat to the United States. US do face a China's serious threat in the international system. Maintaining friendly relations with Russia seemed to John Mearsheimer to be the best strategy at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which everyone believed would end in a military victory for the Kremlin in a few days or weeks, as it happened in Georgia in 2008. (Chotiner, 2022).

In reality, by making the choice to resist the Russian invasion and shattering the myth of a quick and mutually desired reunification of one and the same people under the Putin autocracy, and by demonstrating the atrocities committed by the Russians in Bucha, Ukrainians succeeded in uniting European leaders in condemning the crimes of Russian aggression at the end of summer 2022.

Since the Ukrainians were united in their desire to militarily resist the Russian invasion and held out for a long time even with limited help from the US and the EU, the discourse in the Western media changed to the beginning of autumn 2022. Francis Fukuyama opposes the argument that the expansion of NATO to the East is a threat that the US poses to Russia. "The argument was made, even before the Russian invasion, that Vladimir Putin was being driven by fear of NATO expansion and was seeking a neutral buffer to protect his country." (Fukuyama, 2022). NATO's expansion was not a plot hatched in Washington, London, or Paris

to drive the alliance as far east as possible. It was driven by the former satellites of the former USSR, which had been dominated by that country since 1945 and were convinced that Russia would try to do so again once the balance of power turned to Russia’s favor.

“A Russian defeat and humiliation will puncture this narrative of the advantages of authoritarian government and might lead to a rekindling of democratic self-confidence. It has been easy for publics in Western democracies to take for granted the peace and prosperity brought about by the liberal world order. It may be the case that every generation needs to relearn the lesson that the alternatives to liberal democracy lead to violence, repression, and ultimately economic failure.” (Fukuyama, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

Russia's threats to start a total nuclear war, its long-term total communication war and the practice of strategic appeasement, used by Western countries for decades, have called into question the relevance and universality of compliance with the norms of international law and undermined liberal democratic values. Granting Ukraine the status of a candidate for EU membership in the summer of 2022, recognition of Russia as a global threat at the NATO summits in Madrid and Vilnius, the desire of democratic countries to make Russia incapable of threatening Euro-Atlantic security in the long term, force the states of the European Union to move away from the long-term policy of strategic appeasement of Russia in order to counter its hybrid threat and vigilance in rooting out Russian propaganda.

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THE IMPACT OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION ON ITALIAN TV, A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

MATTEO PUGLIESE
University of Barcelona, Spain

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1. DEFINITIONS AND PRELIMINARY REMARKS

For the purpose of this analysis, various definitions of propaganda and disinformation were considered, despite there is no consensus in academia regarding these concepts. Some common elements emerge from the Cambridge Dictionary and Oxford English Dictionary definitions of propaganda. Namely, the dissemination of information defined as misleading, with the aim of influencing the public opinion and promoting a political agenda. These elements seem to be well summarized by the definition proposed by Thomas Huckin: *“Propaganda is false or misleading information or ideas addressed to a mass audience by parties who thereby gain advantage. Propaganda is created and disseminated systematically and does not invite critical analysis or response”* (Thomas Huckin, 2016). The Oxford English Dictionary defines disinformation as the *“dissemination of deliberately false information, especially when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it; false information so supplied”*, while the Cambridge Dictionary is more concise but does not depart from the concepts just expressed: *“false information spread in order to deceive people”*.

In the case of Russian disinformation, it can be interpreted as an integral part of the hybrid strategy of information warfare and not simply as a means of political propaganda¹. It is in fact a military tool with specific objectives for two reasons. First, Russian disinformation is often elaborated and disseminated by institutions such as the Russian Ministry of Defense, the military intelligence GRU or the FSB. Second, the disinformation produced by these entities is aimed at achieving military goals such as stopping the flow of weapons to Ukraine, as well as weakening morale and convincing the defenders to surrender (e.g., the fake news about President Zelensky's escape from the capital). This goal is pursued by manipulating the Western public opinion to pressure governments and parties to change the political agenda and international alliances (NATO and EU). It is no coincidence that, already in 2012, the then editor-in-chief of Russia Today Margarita Simonyan compared her TV network to the Russian Defense Ministry².

2. THE ITALIAN PUBLIC OPINION, A FERTILE GROUND FOR MANIPULATION

Italy showed little antibodies to defend itself against an aggressive disinformation campaign. Several reasons contributed to this fragility. In April 2022, according to an opinion poll, 46 percent of Italians believed that information about the invasion of Ukraine was manipulated and distorted (by pro-Ukraine media), while 25 percent thought that the photos of massacres were fake or altered to delegitimize Putin and Russia (Diamanti, 2022). Among the causes of the Italian public disorientation are also functional illiteracy, which is close to 28 percent according to OECD statistics, and digital illiteracy, with more than two-thirds of Italians unable to use the Internet in a complex and diversified way (OECD, 2016).

These data demonstrate that Italian audience constitutes a fertile ground for manipulation through propaganda (Russian disinformation, anti-vaccine conspiracy theories during the Covid pandemic, etc.). This has been occurring

¹ DFRLab, "Question That: RT's Military Mission", *Medium*, 8 January 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/question-that-rts-military-mission-4c4bd9f72c88>.

² "Нет никакой объективности" ["There is no objectivity"], *Kommersant*, Margarita Simonyan interviewed by Alexander Gabuev, 4 July 2012, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911336>.

on a massive scale since the first months of the invasion with a widespread presence of Kremlin proxies³. To the extent that in May 2022 some renowned Italian experts and academics refused to take part in TV shows in protest with the constant presence of Russian propagandists⁴. The goal of this study is therefore describing and analyzing such presence. As the findings show, the constant disinformation efforts influenced the Italian public opinion quite effectively, to the point that large sectors of the public cannot identify the responsibilities of the war and blame equally both sides.

3. METHODOLOGY

For the analysis of this phenomenon, a mixed methodology was applied (collection of quantitative and qualitative data) with regard to the presence of Russian guests, with a general descriptive and analytical purpose. The criteria for being included in the group are an affiliation with Russian State media, with government institutions, United Russia party, State controlled universities or public cultural institutions. Following the identification of the TV guests, the study verified their connection with the Russian regime. A quantitative data analysis was carried out and for each TV channel and program was provided the number of participants. A qualitative analysis was performed too with three macro-categories: “journalists” and media personalities affiliated with State media outlets; government officials, especially from the MFA and the Duma; the category of “ideologues” encompasses individuals from Russian cultural institutions and Aleksandr Dugin, an outspoken supporter of the invasion. Despite they do not fit the established criteria for the first pool of guests, a secondary group of 10 pro-Russian propagandists is separately counted, as they fueled the same disinformation contents.

³ Giuliano Foschini, “Quel filo che lega partiti e opinionisti al network della propaganda russa”, *La Repubblica*, 21 May 2022, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/05/21/news/filo_putin_italia_pace_guerra_ucraina_russia-350428819/.

⁴ Giovanna Vitale, “No ai talk-show, il rifiuto dei ricercatori: “Mai più in tv coi propagandisti russi”, *La Repubblica*, 4 May 2022, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/05/04/news/talk_show_esperti_geopolitica_russia_ucraina-347999549/.

The observation period spans from the 1st of March to the 30th of June 2022, the first 4 months of the war, when the attention of the public opinion was higher and more receptive. The primary sources were TV program records, publicly available at the online repositories collected by the author for the considered observation period⁵. Some TV programs do not display the complete list of guests for each episode; therefore the author manually revised each video, in this case some additional participation might have not been spotted. The limitations of this methodology are connected to the lack of an official unified database of guests for TV programs of the public broadcasting service as well as private channels. For this reason, the list of participants might not be complete, nevertheless the analysis tried to identify as many guests as possible.

4. THE CONTEXT OF ITALIAN TV NETWORKS

The TV networks taken into consideration for this study are the public broadcasting service Rai (Rai 1, Rai 2, and Rai 3), and the main private TV networks such as Mediaset (Rete 4, Canale 5, Italia 1) controlled by the Berlusconi family, and La7, owned by businessman Urbano Cairo. Historically, public television has always been affected in its programming by the political influence of the ruling parties (Piazzoni, 2014). Between the 1980s and 2000s, the three Rai channels were shared out among the main political parties. Rai 1 was first under the control of the Christian Democracy, the main governing party. During Silvio Berlusconi's governments this role was taken over by his Forza Italia

⁵ Dritto e Rovescio season 2021/2022, Rete 4, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/programmi-tv/drittoerovescio/drittoerovescio_SE000000000713,ST0000000002696; Controcorrente season 2021/2022, Rete 4, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/programmi-tv/controcorrente/primaserata_SE000000001525,ST0000000002653,sb100013344; Zona Bianca season 2021/2022, Rete 4, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/programmi-tv/zonabianca/puntateintere_SE000000001308,ST0000000002284,sb100009746; Quarto Grado season 2021/2022, Rete 4, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/programmi-tv/quartogrado/quartogrado_SE000000000019,ST0000000002705; Otto e mezzo season 2022, La7, available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTQLA-sdhEzSILtUoPpGXdZ8G-HuSeYy3>; DiMartedì season 2022, La7, available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/@dimartedi>; Non è l'Arena season 2022, La7, available at <https://www.la7.it/nonelarena/rivedila7?page=2>; Piazzapulita season 2022, La7, available at <https://www.la7.it/piazzapulita/rivedila7?page=2>; L'aria che tira season 2022, available at <https://www.la7.it/laria-che-tira/video/lambasciatore-ferdinando-nelli-feroci-alla-giornalista-russa-nadana-fridrikhson-le-letture-che-28-04-2022-435944>; Cartabianca season 2022, Rai 3, available at <https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/cartabianca/stagione-2021-2022/puntate>; Porta a Porta season 2022, Rai 1, available at <https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/portaaporta>.

party. Rai 2 was historically influenced by the Socialist Party and later by right-wing parties allied with Berlusconi. Rai 3 has long represented the left-wing channel, even to the point it was nicknamed “TeleKabul” for its unquestioning loyalty to the political agenda of the Italian Communist Party⁶ (Fantoni, 2023).

The real power, however, seems to reside in the hands of talk-show writers and hosts, who choose the TV guests. The political orientation of Mediaset channels has always been very favorable to Berlusconi and critical of left-wing parties (Durante et al., 2019). Until his death (12 June 2023), Berlusconi maintained a friendly attitude towards Putin and Russia, blaming Ukraine for the 2022 war and providing a distorted historical interpretation of the Minsk process⁷. This stance was reflected in the narrative of many Mediaset programs and in the choice of guests. In recent years, most programs especially on Rete 4 and Canale 5 have taken distinctly far right positions, fomenting anti-immigrant rhetoric and an alleged security crisis. Finally, La7 is considered independent of political influence and regarded as a liberal channel. Yet, it contributed significantly to the spread of Russian propaganda with a huge number of guests, second only to Rete 4.

5. ANALYZING THE PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ON ITALIAN TV

5.1 IDENTIFICATION OF THE GUESTS

Over the observed period (1st of March - 30th of June 2022) the study identified 21 Russian individuals who participated in TV programs and matched the criteria to be included in the analysis group. They can be divided into three macro-categories based on their role and affiliation: “State media”, “Government and Duma”, “Ideologues and academia”. The list includes notorious propaganda figures such as Vladimir Solovyov, the host of a vicious evening show on Rossiya-1, and Dmitry Kiselyov, appointed by Putin as CEO of the media group Rossiya

⁶ Bianca Berlinguer, the daughter of late Communist leader Enrico Berlinguer, became the head of Rai 3 news in 2009 and between 2016 and 2023 hosted the show “Cartabianca” for the same channel. After Berlusconi’s death, she decided to quit Rai and joined Rete 4 running the same show.

⁷ Nicolas Camut, “Berlusconi blames Zelenskyy for war in Ukraine”, *Politico*, 13 February 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/silvio-berlusconi-blame-volodymyr-zelenskyy-war-ukraine-russia/>.

Segodnya. Two Zvezda journalists are directly connected to the Russian Defence Ministry, while others have links with the FSB. All the 12 journalists are affiliated with media controlled by the Russian government: Rossiya-24, Rossiya-1, Pervy Kanal (Channel One), VGTRK, Rossiya Segodnya, Zvezda, Sputnik and RT (both banned by the EU for spreading blatant disinformation and conspiracy theories)⁸. Current and former employees of Russian State media revealed that editors coordinate the talking points at weekly meetings with Kremlin officials, and five days a week they receive a more detailed list of topics, which appear designed to supplement the Ministry of Defense’s war updates (Gessen, 2022). According to the Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, Russia ranked 164 out of 180 countries in 2023 and is considered not free⁹. Following the 2022 draconian censorship laws, remaining Russia’s independent media were shut down or went into exile (Vinokour, 2022). Among the regime officials invited on Italian TV are Foreign Minister Lavrov, who was aired twice by Rete 4 in May 2022, and the MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova, hosted by Rete 4 and La 7. Under the category of “Ideologues and academia” are listed figures like the theorist of Eurasianism and Russian imperialism Aleksandr Dugin. Alexey Komov, who represented Russia at the World Congress of Families (an international coalition of traditionalist Christian groups), is a former assistant to United Russia MP Viktor Zubarev and has connections to Matteo Salvini’s Lega. Daria Pushkova, former head of the RT London bureau, former head of the International Department at VGTRK and editor of Rossiya-1, is currently director of the Science and Culture Center of the Russian Embassy in Rome. Pushkova is also the daughter of former United Russia MP Alexey Pushkov, who chaired the Duma’s foreign affairs committee.

Surname transliteration)	Name (Russian)	Role – affiliation - connections
1. Belova Olga	(Ольга Белова)	TV host for Zvezda channel (Russian Defence Ministry) ¹⁰

⁸ Official Journal of the European Union, L065, 2 March 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2022:065:FULL>.

⁹ Press Freedom Index 2023, Reporters Without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>.

¹⁰ See <https://m.tvzvezda.ru/video/person/201904141130-u01w.htm>.

2. Bobrovsky Alexey (Алексей Бобровский)	Journalist, Rossiya-24 and previously Pervy Kanal ¹¹
3. Dugin Aleksandr (Александр Дугин)	Regime ideologue and invasion supporter ¹²
4. Fyodorov Pyotr (Пётр Фёдоров)	Journalist, Russian Television and Radio VGTRK ¹³
5. Fridrikhson Nadana (Надана Фридрихсон)	Journalist, Zvezda channel (Russian Defence Ministry) ¹⁴
6. Kiselyov Dmitry (Дмитрий Киселёв)	CEO, Rossiya Segodnya public media group ¹⁵
7. Комов Alexey (Алексей Комов)	Ideologue, former United Russia MP assistant, WCF ¹⁶
8. Kukhareva Tatiana (Татьяна Кухарева)	Journalist, Sputnik News and formerly RT France ¹⁷
9. Kulikov Dmitry (Дмитрий Куликов)	TV host for Rossiya-1, public council of Defence Ministry ¹⁸
10. Kurlaeva Olga (Ольга Курлаева)	Journalist, Rossiya-24 ¹⁹
11. Lavrov Sergey (Сергей Лавров)	Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia
12. Loseva Olesya (Олеся Лосева)	Journalist and TV host, Pervy Kanal ²⁰
13. Markov Sergey (Сергей Марков)	Professor at MGIMO (MFA), former United Russia MP ²¹

¹¹ Both channels are owned and controlled by the Russian government, see <https://www.vshouz.ru/speakers/bobrovskiy-aleksey-sergeevich/>; <https://fedpress.ru/person/2726980>.

¹² See Dugin's connections to United Russia, SVR and Tsargrad TV, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/23/ukraine-crimea-what-putin-thinking-russia>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/who-is-alexander-dugin-russian-nationalist-whose-daughter-died-car-bomb-attack-2022-08-21/>.

¹³ See <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/844519>; <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/13735897>.

¹⁴ See <https://m.tvzvezda.ru/video/person/201608111003-p7je.htm>.

¹⁵ See <https://xn--c1acbl2abdlkab1og.xn--p1ai/management/>; sanctioned by the EU since 2014 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R0398&from=EN>.

¹⁶ Until 2023 he was representative of the World Congress of Families in Russia and the CIS. He is connected to oligarch Konstantin Malofeev and former assistant to United Russia MP Viktor Zubarev, see <https://pravoslavie.ru/121346.html>; <https://www.familypolicy.ru/onas/rukovodstvo>; <http://ruspole.org/?p=13504>; <https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2019/07/20/news/caso-lega-russia-zubarev-parlare-di-soldi-in-hotel-e-assurdo-credo-sia-stata-una-trappola-301002518/>.

¹⁷ See <https://ru.linkedin.com/in/tatiana-kukhareva-a256083b>.

¹⁸ See <https://teleprogramma.pro/tele/tv-projects/3481082-bez-krika-i-isteriki-na-kanale-rossiya-1-snova-vyhodit-tok-shou-kto-u3418-u3511>; https://function.mil.ru/function/public_board/membership.htm.

¹⁹ See <https://crimea24tv.ru/content/speckor-rossii-24-olga-kurlaeva-zhurn/>; <https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/01/04/latvia-wants-to-reunite-two-russian-national-security-threats>.

²⁰ See <https://vm.ru/society/1051863-ya-zhdu-kogda-nastupit-nasha-pobeda-olesya-loseva-odrodine-seme-i-specoperacii-na-ukraine>; <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet>.

²¹ Markov served as a member of the Duma for United Russia between 2007 and 2011, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) is controlled by the Russian MFA;

14. Ostashko Ruslan (Руслан Осташко)	TV host for Pervy Kanal; FSB Moscow Institute graduate ²²
15. Popov Yevgeny (Евгений Попов)	United Russia MP, TV host for Rossiya-1 ²³
16. Pushkova Daria (Дария Пушкова)	Director, Russian Culture and Science Center in Rome ²⁴
17. Razov Sergey (Сергей Разов)	Russian ambassador to Italy (2013-2023)
18. Solovyov Vladimir (Владимир Соловьёв)	TV host for Rossiya-1 ²⁵
19. Suslov Dmitry (Дмитрий Суслов)	Moscow High School of Economics, Pervy Kanal TV host ²⁶
20. Vityazeva Yulia (Юлия Витязева)	Journalist, NewsFront ²⁷
21. Zakharova Maria (Мария Захарова)	Spokeswoman, Russian MFA

Table 1. Identification of the guests

member of the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests (2009-2012), see <https://web.archive.org/web/20090524235013/http://document.kremlin.ru/doc.asp?ID=52421&SC=1&PT=1&Page=1>.

²² Born in Donetsk, USSR, in 2003 graduated from the Moscow FSB Border Institute, in 2016 he unsuccessfully participated in the primaries of United Russia in the annexed Sevastopol for the Duma, see https://pobeda.onf.ru/news/news_ostashko0806; <https://www.spisok-putina.org/en/personas/ostashko-2/>; <https://utro.ru/news/showbiz/2021/01/11/1470064.shtml>; <https://sevastopol.su/news/obshchestvennik-iz-sevastopolya-stal-vedushchim-pervogo-kanala>.

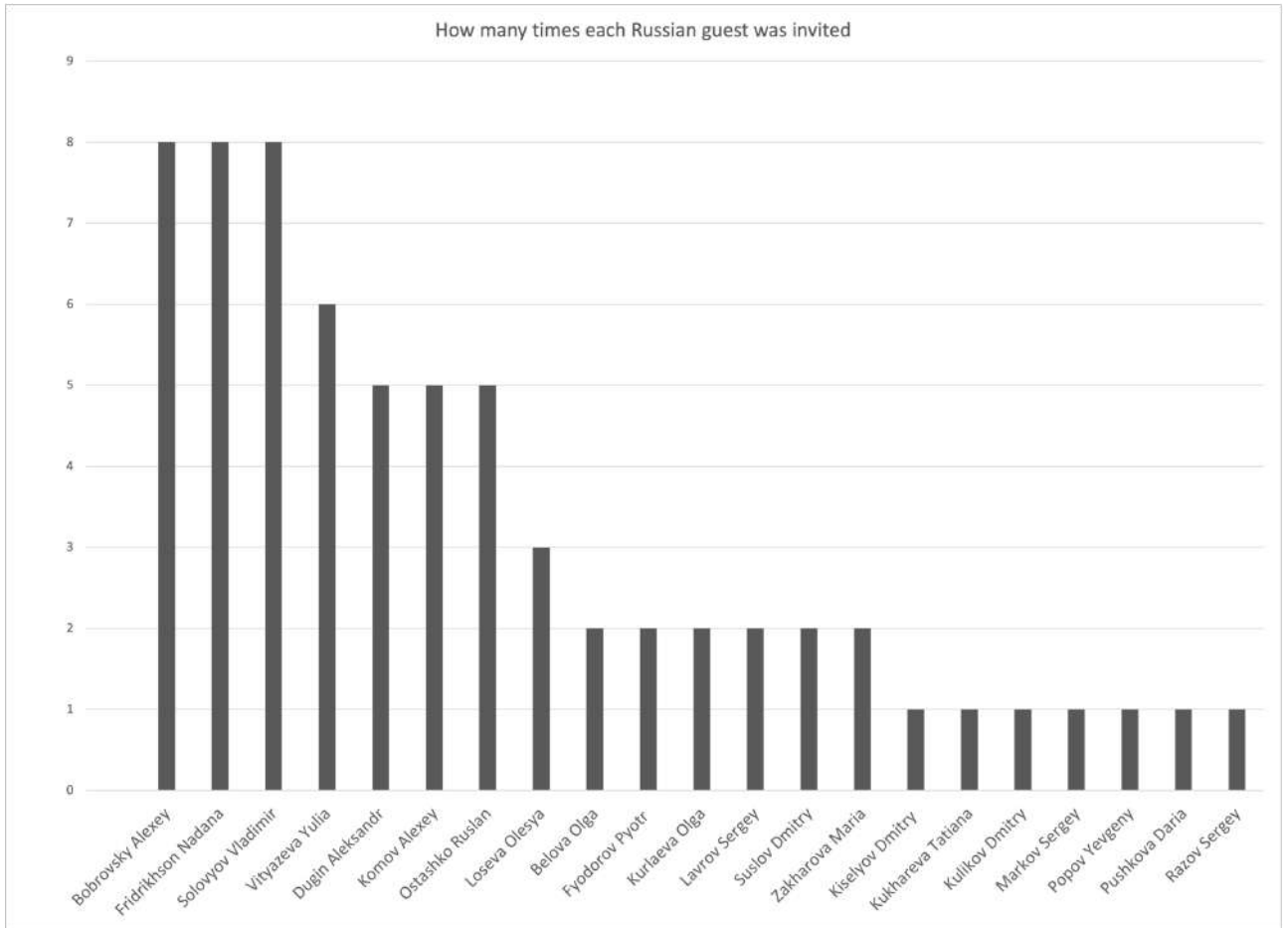
²³ Husband of Russian propagandist Olga Skabeyeva, they co-hosted the TV show “60 minutes” on Rossiya-1, see <https://tass.ru/encyclopedia/person/popov-evgeniy-georgievich>.

²⁴ Pushkova is the daughter of former United Russia MP Aleksey Pushkov, who chaired the Duma's foreign committee. She is the director of the Science and Culture Center in Rome, former head of RT London bureau, former head of the International Department at VGTRK, editor Rossiya-1, see <https://it.rbth.com/cultura/85112-daria-pushkova-nuovo-direttore-del-centro>; <https://zetaluiss.it/2021/12/15/centro-russo-di-cultura/>; <http://thecapritimes.com/dariapushkova>; <https://dzen.ru/media/peopleandfate/roman-s-postskriptumom-kak-i-s-kem-jivet-izvestnyi-televeduscii-aleksei-pushkov-5e499f8e40e9c554bad5097b>.

²⁵ See <https://smotrim.ru/brand/21385>; former member of the Presidential Council for the development of civil society and human rights, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/348784>.

²⁶ Suslov is affiliated with the Moscow Higher School of Economics, whose dean is directly appointed by the Russian Prime Minister and was suspended by the European University Association due to his support for the invasion of Ukraine, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107070025>, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/04/17/dazhe-v-sovetskoe-vremya-takogo-stesnyalis>, see also <https://www.hse.ru/org/persons/1165509>; <https://www.spisok-putina.org/personas/suslov/>.

²⁷ Real name Yulia Lozanova, a native of Odessa, see <https://ria.ru/20230606/vityazeva-1876555338.html>. NewsFront is a website founded in Russian occupied Crimea, according to the US State Department “guided by the FSB”, see https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-undermine-confidence-in-pfizer-other-covid-19-vaccines-u-s-officials-say-11615129200?st=it4dpc2j4oitn1o&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.



Graphic 1. How many times each Russian guest was invited

5.2. THREE MACRO-CATEGORIES

Many of the identified Russian guests might be included in multiple categories given their roles and affiliations. For instance, Yevgeny Popov was listed under the “Government and Duma” category since he is a United Russia MP and vocal supporter of repression of dissidents²⁸. But Popov was also co-host of the TV show “60 minutes” aired on Rossiya-1, together with his wife, notorious propagandist Olga Skabeyeva. Another example of overlapping categories comes from Sergey Markov, who served as a member of the Duma for United Russia in 2007-2011 and is a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), controlled by the Russian MFA. Markov was

²⁸ “Critical Russian Emigres Should Have Property Seized, Lawmakers Say”, *The Moscow Times*, 13 January 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/13/kremlin-readies-for-putins-2024-re-election-under-shadow-of-war-kommersant-a79938>.

also a member of the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests (2009-2012), in charge of paving the way for revisionism about the Soviet crimes and the rehabilitation of Stalin. Again, Dmitry Suslov was presented as an academic affiliated with the Moscow Higher School of Economics (whose dean is directly appointed by the Russian PM and was suspended by the European University Association due to his support for the invasion), but since 2022 is also the TV host of a program for Pervy Kanal.

State Media	Government & Duma	Ideologues & academia
1. Belova Olga	1. Lavrov Sergey	1. Dugin Aleksandr
2. Bobrovsky Alexey	2. Popov Yevgeny	2. Komov Alexey
3. Fyodorov Pyotr	3. Razov Sergey	3. Markov Sergey
4. Fridrikhson Nadana	4. Zakharova Maria	4. Pushkova Daria
5. Kiselyov Dmitry		5. Suslov Dmitry
6. Kukhareva Tatiana		
7. Kulikov Dmitry		
8. Kurlaeva Olga		
9. Loseva Olesya		
10. Ostashko Ruslan		
11. Solovyov Vladimir		
12. Vityazeva Yulia		

Table 2. Macro-categories

5.3 NARRATIVES FUELED BY THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDISTS

Recurring false narratives and disinformation repeated by the Russian guests included:

- Ukraine is ruled by a Nazi junta and Satanists²⁹;
- The “special military operation” started to thwart an imminent Ukrainian attack on Donbas and a potential NATO threat against Russia.

²⁹ Chonlawit Sirikupt, “Russia now says it must ‘de-Satanize’ Ukraine. What?”, *The Washington Post*, 17 November 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/11/17/russia-ukraine-war-satan-nazis/>; Peter Dickinson, “NATO, Nazis, Satanists: Putin is running out of excuses for his imperial war”, *Atlantic Council*, 8 November 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/nato-nazis-satanists-putin-is-running-out-of-excuses-for-his-imperial-war/>.

- Following the end of the Cold War, the West promised Russia that NATO would not expand eastward.
- The war started 8 years ago with the Nazi coup in Kyiv supported by the West and attacks on pro-Russians in Donbas and Odesa.
- For 8 years Ukraine carried out a genocide in Donbas killing millions of Russian speakers.
- Secret military biolabs and NATO personnel were present in Ukraine, in particular in the underground of Azovstal plant in Mariupol.
- The Russian massacres of civilians in Bucha and elsewhere are fake news fabricated by Ukraine and Western media to discredit Russia.

A concrete example of how Russian guests spread disinformation on Italian media comes from rumors regarding alleged secret biolabs in the underground of the Azovstal plant in Mariupol, with the presence of NATO soldiers and even generals³⁰. On 17 April 2022, former United Russia MP and MGIMO professor Sergey Markov posted on his Facebook page an image allegedly depicting the underground secret biolabs at Azovstal³¹. Just a few days later, on 20 and 21 April, three Italian TV programs, “Piazzapulita” (La 7)³², “Porta a Porta” (Rai 1)³³, and “Controcorrente” (Rete 4)³⁴, decided to show Markov’s picture and to give credit to this unsubstantiated fake news despite the lack of any credible source. “Piazzapulita” even mentioned “Russian political scientist Sergey Markov” as source. It later turned out that the picture came from the board game “Blackout” designed in 2015³⁵. On 22 April “Piazzapulita” apologized via Twitter for the mistake, yet on 28 April Nadana Fridrikhson (from Russian Defense Ministry’s

³⁰ “Fact Check-NATO chief Cloutier not captured in Ukraine”, *Reuters Fact Check*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-cloutier-captured-idUSL2N2W914L>; Marin Lefevre, “Senior US military officer was not captured by Russian forces in Ukraine”, *AFP Fact Check*, 14 April 2022, <https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32872JX>.

³¹ Sergey Markov, Facebook page, 17 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100003530221213/posts/4761392850655009/?d=n>.

³² Piazzapulita, La 7, 21 April 2022, minute 17:00, <https://www.la7.it/piazzapulita/rivedila7/piazzapulita-puntata-del-2142022-22-04-2022-435075>.

³³ Porta a Porta, Rai 1, 21 April 2022, minute 03:06, <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2022/04/Porta-a-Porta-11e06f4f-58a8-4ea2-bf8c-83f67ed7d68c.html>.

³⁴ Controcorrente, Rete 4, 20 April 2022, minute 01:45, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/controcorrente/mercoledi-20-aprile-2130_F311547501001601.

³⁵ See <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1336904045/blackout-2/>.

Zvezda) was invited to “L’aria che tira” and repeated that: “We found out there are biolabs in Ukraine, Victoria Nuland had already confirmed this, we don’t know any more for what purpose, what chemical agents and drugs, what was studied”. Fridrikhson referred to the statements of the US Under Secretary of State about veterinary and diagnostic laboratories funded since 2005 to prevent mass diseases³⁶. But the way she introduced the topic following rumors about secret military biolabs in Azovstal is a textbook case of disinformation. It is worth mentioning that neither the TV host nor other guests intervened to question her false claims. In addition, on 9 May former war correspondent Toni Capuozzo spoke at the show “Quarta Repubblica” (Rete 4) and mentioned “the recurring rumors that underground Azovstal there is not only a chemical lab, but tens of Western individual: Americans, British and, they say, even Italians”³⁷. Russian propaganda about NATO personnel in Mariupol kept circulating on mainstream media at least until the fall of the Azovstal plant³⁸.

5.4 DATA ANALYSIS

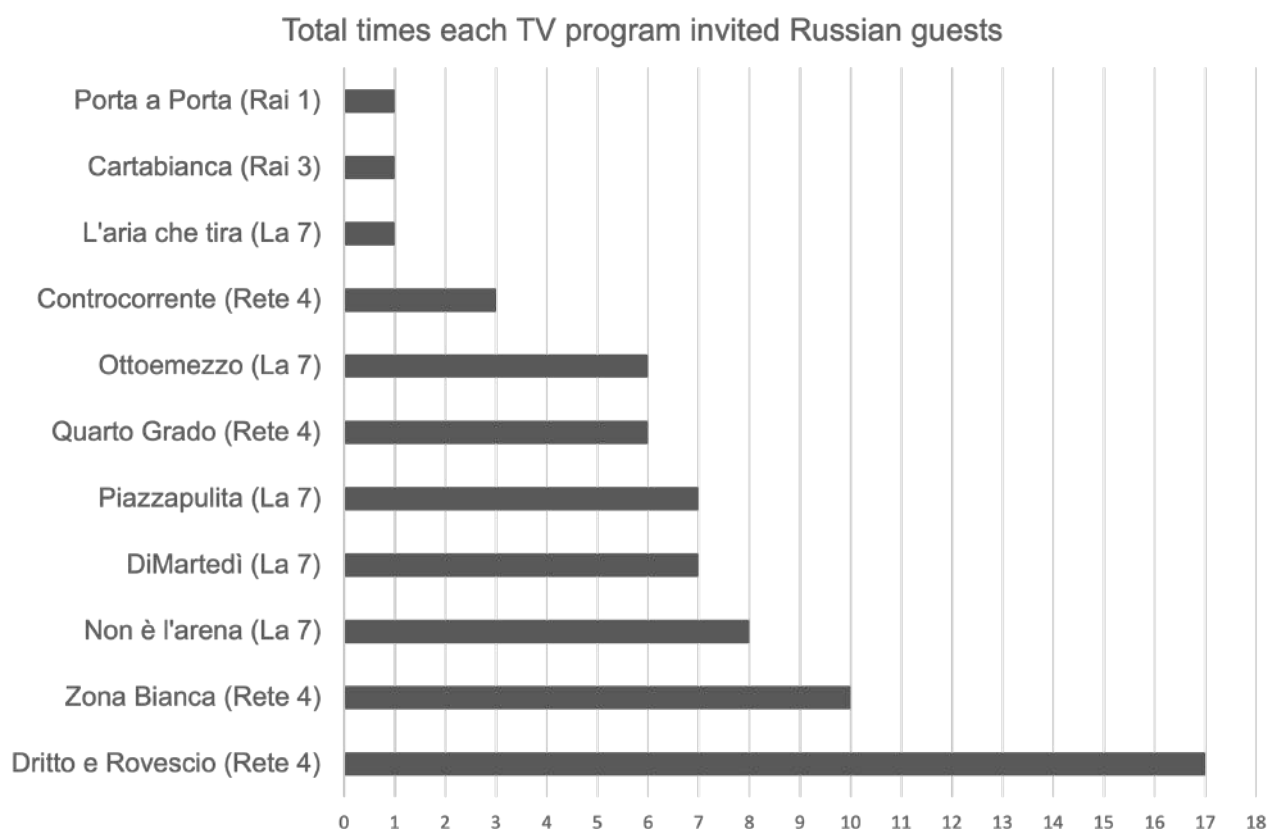
Over the 4-month period, the pool of 21 Russian propaganda guests was invited in total 67 times by 11 different TV shows from four channels (Rete 4, La 7, Rai 3 and Rai 1). In particular, Rete 4 (Mediaset) invited 15 Russian propagandists 36 times, La 7 hosted 11 of them 29 times, Rai 3 and Rai 1 one time respectively. The four Rete 4 programs were “Dritto e Rovescio” hosted by Paolo Del Debbio, “Controcorrente” hosted by Veronica Gentili, “Zona Bianca” hosted by Giuseppe Brindisi, and “Quarto Grado” hosted by Gianluigi Nuzzi and Alessandra Viero. The La 7 programs were “Non è l’arena” hosted by Massimo Giletti, “DiMartedì” hosted by Giovanni Floris, “Otto e mezzo” hosted by Lilli Gruber, “Piazzapulita” hosted by Corrado Formigli and “L’aria che tira” with Myrta Merlino. The two Rai programs were Cartabianca (by Bianca Berlinguer) on Rai 3 and Porta a Porta

³⁶ Linda Qiu, “Theory About U.S.-Funded Bioweapons Labs in Ukraine Is Unfounded”, *The New York Times*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/11/us/politics/us-bioweapons-ukraine-misinformation.html>.

³⁷ Quarta Repubblica, Rete 4, 9 May 2022, https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/quartarepubblica/puntata-del-9-maggio_F311546301001701.

³⁸ “IntelBrief: Russia Recycles Disinformation Playbook in Ukraine During Assault on Mariupol”, *The Soufan Center*, 25 April 2022, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-april-25/>.

hosted by Bruno Vespa on Rai 1. Data show that private TV channels gave significantly more space than the public broadcasting service Rai to Russian propagandists. They justified their presence 65 times to let Italians “hear the other side of the story”.



Graphic 2. Total times each TV program invited Russian guests

5.4.1. RETE 4

The evening show “Dritto e Rovescio” (Rete 4) in spring 2022 had an average audience of 1 million viewers (5.7-8%)³⁹. It hosted seven different Russian propagandists (Olga Belova, Aleksandr Dugin, Olesya Loseva, Ruslan Ostashko, Daria Pushkova, Vladimir Solovyov, and Yulia Vityazeva) for a total of 17 times, ranking first among the analyzed TV programs. On 12 June 2022 the host of

³⁹ See sources of audience share and TV program ratings from April, May and June 2022, <https://www.affaritaliani.it/mediatech/ascolti-tv-ieri-14-aprile-2022-791281.html>; <https://www.affaritaliani.it/mediatech/ascolti-tv-ieri-19-maggio-2022-797115.html>; <https://www.affaritaliani.it/mediatech/ascolti-tv-ieri-9-giugno-2022-800377.html>.

“Zona Bianca” Giuseppe Brindisi referring to the invasion of Ukraine stated that: “Right away we identified an aggressor and a victim, and we took side with the victim”. Yet, his show invited 8 Russian propaganda figures for a total of 10 times with little chance of fact-checking and debunking live the disinformation. The average audience share of this show in spring 2022 ranged between 500,000 and 900,000 viewers (3,7-8,3%). “Quarto Grado” hosted 5 individuals from the list for a total of 6 times, although the TV presenters had a balanced approach and were sympathetic with Ukraine. This show has always positioned itself way over 1 million viewers (8-10%). Finally, “Controcorrente” hosted 3 Russian guests one time each and achieved an audience between 500,000 and 800,000 viewers. In sum, 15 Russian propagandists were hosted 36 times by the Rete 4 and had a significant exposure to millions of Italians over the first four months of the invasion.

5.4.2. LA 7

La 7 ranked second for the number of guests (11) and number of times they were invited (29). The evening talk-show “DiMartedì” invited 6 Russian propagandists for 7 times, followed by “Ottoemesso” which hosted 5 guests for 6 times, but also “Non è l’arena” had 4 Russians for 8 times, “Piazzapulita” invited 3 of them for 7 times and “L’aria che tira” only once. During the analyzed four months for 2022 the audience share of “DiMartedì” was stable around 1 million viewers (6%). “DiMartedì” is a major political news show in Italy and hosted numerous guests, including International Relations scholars and experts who were able to question and contradict false narratives of the propagandists. The show “Ottoemesso” was beyond 1,500,000 viewers and reached 1,900,000 in April, while “Non è l’arena” was stable around 800,000-900,000 viewers, “Piazzapulita” between 700,000 and 1 million viewers, and “L’aria che tira” had an average audience of 300,000. Despite the disinformation about Azovstal biolabs, “L’aria che tira” host Myrta Merlino managed to fact-check live another claim by Defense Ministry’s journalist Nadana Fridrikhson, who denied Putin likened Russian dissidents to “gnats”. In March 2022, talking about thousands of Russians who left the country after the invasion of Ukraine, Putin - using a language that recalls the rhetoric from Stalin’s 1930 show trials - said: “The Russian people will always be able to distinguish

true patriots from scum and traitors and will simply spit them out like a gnat that accidentally flew into their mouths, spit them out on the pavement”⁴⁰.

5.4.3 RAI 3 AND RAI 1

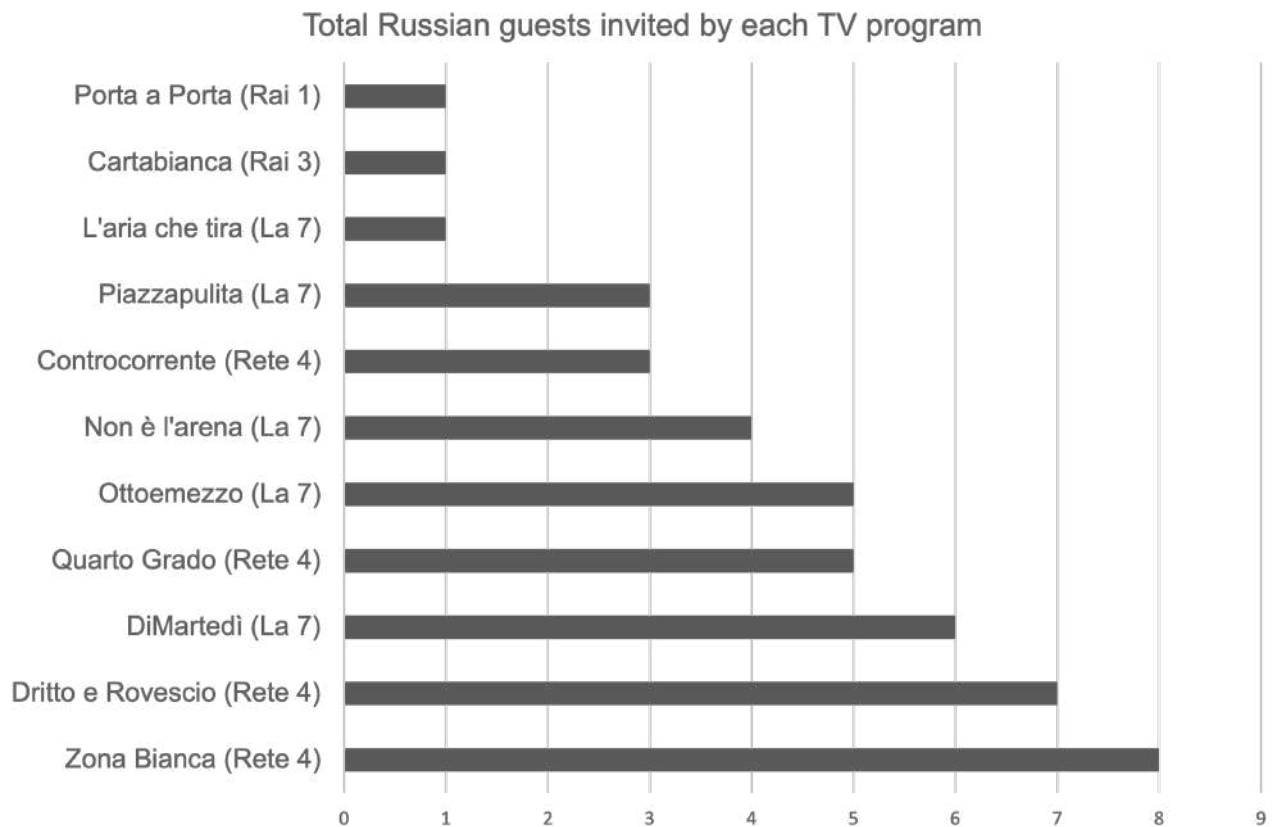
During the initial four months of the invasion, both Rai 3 and Rai 1 channels hosted only one Russian propaganda guest each. On 26 April Cartabianca (Rai 3) invited Russian Defense Ministry’s Nadana Fridrikhson, while on 22 June Bruno Vespa (Porta a Porta, Rai 1) interviewed Vladimir Solovyov, the notorious Russian warmonger. Vespa always showed solidarity towards Ukraine and often questioned what Solovyov claimed. Vespa’s evening show hosted twice Russian ambassador Sergey Razov, but before and after the observation period (15 February and 6 October 2022) and invited the new Russian ambassador for a similar interview on 5 October 2023.

5.5 FINDINGS AND ADDITIONAL POOL OF RUSSIAN GUESTS

The TV show which invited the most Russian propaganda figures was “Zona Bianca” (8), followed by another Rete 4 program, “Dritto e Rovescio” (7), that scored the highest number of times they were hosted (17). “DiMartedì” comes next with 6 different guests and the other TV shows with 5 or less. On 1 May Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was interviewed by “Zona Bianca” host and sparked outrage when said that “Hitler also had Jewish origins” and “the biggest anti-Semites are the Jews themselves”⁴¹. For these statements the government of Israel demanded formal apology from Russia and obtained it from Putin himself.

⁴⁰ “Putin likens opponents to ‘gnats,’ signaling new repression”, *Associated Press*, 18 March 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-business-europe-5a9f43e0e5e4da1200a440d667d6db91>.

⁴¹ Crispian Balmer, “Israel demands apology after Russia says Hitler had Jewish roots”, *Reuters*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-denounces-lavrovs-hitler-comments-summons-russian-ambassador-2022-05-02/>.



Graphic 3. Total Russian guests invited by each TV program

Additionally, the study identified at least 10 other pro-Russian guests (some hold also Ukrainian citizenship) invited more than 18 times by Italian TV shows. The individuals in this secondary group do not fit the established criteria to be included in the analysis sample. Nonetheless, are worth mentioning as they systematically fostered Russian propaganda narratives on Italian TV shows and have significant connections with Russian institutions⁴².

6. CONCLUSION

As the analysis shows, a pool of at least 21 identified Russian propagandists was invited in total 67 times by 11 different TV shows from four channels (Rete 4, La 7, Rai 3 and Rai 1) in the first four months of Ukraine's invasion. They were able

⁴² Author's database. Some are noteworthy for their affiliation: a representative of the Association Russkij Dom Verona, the commander of the separatist Vostok Battalion Alexander Khodakovsky, a representative of the pro-Russian platform Global rights of peaceful people, an Italian-Russian blogger with more than 15,000 followers on Telegram who spreads Russian propaganda through the channel "InfoDefense".

to reach millions of viewers and spread disinformation. In addition, at least another 10 Russian guests and several Italian pundits fostered their misleading narratives. Judging from the trends, TV producers and presenters invited those guests who “worked” in terms of audience share to heat up debates. Many TV hosts were not necessarily pro-Russian or biased, but they generally failed to provide fact-checking mechanisms vis-à-vis the disinformation. It takes time to examine and verify false claims, so they can rarely be debunked live. Experimental psychology studies show that the first impression is very resilient and someone is more likely to favor this information when faced with conflicting messages (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Italian private TV channels proved to be unprepared and unqualified to understand that “journalists” from Kremlin-controlled media, including the Defense Ministry, are not reliable sources of information. To assess the impact of the exposure to Russian propaganda, we can rely on opinion polls. According to an IPSOS survey conducted in Italy in June 2022, 32 percent of respondents, asked about the causes of the conflict, answered that NATO was threatening Russia⁴³. For a 26 percent this threat could not justify the aggression, while 6 percent thought it was a valid reason for Moscow to invade. Another 26 percent did not answer the question and only 42 percent said Russia had no justification for the attack. Similarly, in the May 2022 ECFR survey 27 percent of Italian respondents blamed “Ukraine, the EU, or the US” rather than Russia as the main “responsible for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine”, the highest percentage among the 10 European surveyed countries (Krastev & Leonard, 2022).

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⁴³ “Il conflitto in Ucraina”, IPSOS, 1 July 2022, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2022-07/IPSOS%20WAR%20TRACKER%20ITALIA_w17%2001-07-22.pdf.

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RECOMMENDATIONS ON STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF FACT-CHECKERS TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

VIKTORIIA ROMANIUK

StopFake, Ukraine

YEVHEN FEDCHENKO

National University of 'Kyiv-Mohyla Academy', Ukraine

RUSLAN DEYNYCHENKO

StopFake, Ukraine

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the European Commission launched the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, the first self-regulatory piece of legislation that intended to motivate companies to collaborate on solving the problem of disinformation. This updated Code makes 44 commitments and includes 128 detailed measures. Among the main measures mentioned in this document are the following “empowering researchers and fact-Checkers” (The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, 2022).

This shows the growing role of fact-checking organisations in the EU and the US. Over the last few years, the number of fact-checking services in Europe has increased significantly, both as part of media outlets and independent fact-checking organisations (Graves, Cherubini, 2016).

The world's leading network, The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), comprises about 100 fact-checking organisations from around the world,

including the EU, and plays a powerful role in promoting the importance of fact-checking as a tool for countering various types of information threats.

In 2022, in order to promote the highest standards of fact-checking and to promote media literacy for the public benefit the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) was established. This organisation positions itself as “the voice of European fact-checkers who uphold and promote the highest standards of fact-checking and media literacy. The EFCSN and its verified members are committed to upholding the principles of freedom of expression. They work to promote the public’s access to fact-checked trustworthy data and information and to educate the public in how to assess the veracity of information in the public sphere” (EFCSN). EFCSN has a strong potential to address disinformation and information threats in the EU.

However, Ukraine's experience in the context of combating disinformation in Europe is extremely important, as it is related to the implementation of measures to build resilience against the destructive effects of disinformation against the backdrop of a long struggle to preserve sovereignty and independence and military threats posed by Russia since 2014. During this period, a number of NGOs and governmental organisations have been established in Ukraine to counter disinformation, to do fact-checking, and increase the level of media literacy for various target audiences among Ukrainians.

Therefore, it was an important achievement that Ukraine started the process of neutralisation of the Russian disinformation system in 2014, the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine. That allowed Ukraine to gain strategic advantages in communication and to use these advantages in the future both to build an internal system of resilience and to create an international coalition of allies and partners. Since 2014 Ukraine has been studying the Russian doctrine of information warfare, its strategy, key actors, and dissemination platforms, as well as studying and neutralising the main narratives that would later be used by Russia to justify its invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine successfully managed to draw the world's attention to the problem of the spread and growing influence of Russian disinformation, explain its impact and discredit its main narratives. And all this was done preemptively, long before the full-scale invasion of February 2022 started.

Since 2014, the systematic work of various actors – state and non-state – to counter Russian information threats through monitoring information, raising awareness and understanding of disinformation threats has been one of the important steps to neutralise the Russian disinformation system. This has enabled Ukraine to gain strategic advantages in communication, and later was used to build an internal system of resilience and to create an international coalition of allies and partners.

There are several approaches to defining propaganda. In the modern context, the most relevant to our study is the approach of Curnalia (Curnalia, 2005) who noted that propaganda is a systematic effort to influence the perception of the people for which different mediums were used for a prolonged time period. Such activity influences public opinion by using emotions and irrational messages. Propagandists tried to use as many sources for message dissemination as possible in order to reach a maximum audience (Manzoor, 2019).

At the beginning of March 2014, the Mohyla School of Journalism at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy launched an innovative project called StopFake. It was an initiative of teachers, students and alumni who decided to create a new mechanism for cleaning the information space from harmful information messages of the Russian disinformation system and informing the Ukrainian audience about it.

Russian disinformation in all its manifestations became the main focus of the new project. Over the past nine years, StopFake has collected key examples of false reports by Russian media and has become a powerful archive of references to Russian lies. In 2022, StopFake was included in the archives of the Library of Congress as one of the "unique historical sources that demonstrates in detail the evolution and threats of Russian propaganda and disinformation". Numerous

materials on the StopFake website show not only the evolution of Russian propaganda at the narrative level, but also the technical side, as it demonstrates tools the Kremlin used to promote its narratives, how it used social media and built an international network of disinformation agents.

Among the StopFake's tasks were regular monitoring of Ukrainian and Russian media for false information about events in Ukraine; analysis of the phenomenon of Kremlin propaganda in all its forms and manifestations; informing various audiences and raising the level of media literacy; and conducting research. The systematic work of fact-checkers allowed them to observe the evolution of the Russian disinformation ecosystem, map its main narratives, and in a way - even predict the future full-scale invasion.

In his research the co-founder of StopFake Yevhen Fedchenko writes that "the example of Ukraine shows that modern warfare is also a war of narratives, and information technology is becoming a universal tool for imposing strategic content and social control on the audience" (Fedchenko, Y., 2023). He also emphasizes that since 2014, measures have been taken to increase public knowledge and awareness of disinformation threats. The result has been a significant neutralisation of the Russian disinformation system, which has enabled Ukraine to gain a strategic advantage in communication.

Strategic narratives are also a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon, A., O'Laughlin B., Roselle L.) In fact, a strategic narrative is a tool for constructing a global picture of the world for different audiences, a tool for shaping an ideological paradigm and new identities.

At the end of 2023, StopFake researchers conducted a study "Anti-EU Narratives through the Russian-Ukrainian War in the Light of StopFake.org's debunks". The research findings demonstrate the need for systematic approaches to Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine and the EU. Since 2014, topics related to Ukraine's EU integration have been central to Russian malign influence

programs, aiming at undermining trust in Ukraine's international partners, trust in official institutions of the EU, and existing democratic governance system. They are also designed to provoke violence and intolerance towards established democratic political systems, to foster total distrust in the EU, to undermine support for Ukraine's pro-European track and as well as to undermine the efforts of governmental institutions to act effectively in times of crisis, war, conflict, and finally, to influence local political process. Considering the deepening global crisis of various kinds globally, from epidemics to wars and natural disasters, it is imperative to establish a system for effective responses and proactive measures in real-time, including threat prevention measures.

Based on the current research of the StopFake fact-checking project regarding the narrative strategy of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU and Ukraine, the research group has developed recommendations for fact-checking organisations and government agencies.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACT-CHECKING ORGANISATIONS

Recommendation 1: Use the narrative map of Russian disinformation surrounding the EU as a basis for identifying threats of this type.

Since the narrative map of Russian disinformation on the EU, as the study shows, remains constant and is systematically employed by Russian disinformation, we recommend that fact-checking organisations and think tanks use it to construct markers and criteria for identifying fake messages across various types of media and social networks on this topic.

Recommendation 2: Pay special attention to those EU countries that are systematically targeted by Russian disinformation.

The current research on the narratives, promoted by Russia during the period from 2014 to 2023, has also identified the most targeted countries that have become focal points of disinformation (Poland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy). To effectively establish counter-disinformation campaigns, we recommend that fact-checkers pay attention to the geographic factor in fake

news and utilise available data for further analysis and information verification. It is crucial to communicate this with governmental institutions in those countries and consider this factor in the process of development of communication strategies.

Recommendation 3: To conduct a regular analysis of target audiences of Russian disinformation.

The results of the study demonstrate how Russian disinformation narratives are linked to specific countries. Based on the findings of the current study, we recommend that fact-checking organisations research audience reactions to certain fake news stories, to monitor trends and dynamics of their dissemination, to inform readers in countries with the highest disinformation threats. Such activities will help to anticipate and preempt possible consequences of the Kremlin's information attacks.

Recommendation 4: To conduct systematic monitoring and narrative analysis aimed at identifying new thematic and substantive changes in order to anticipate new threats.

As disinformation narratives evolve under the influence of various factors such as political processes and events, unforeseen crisis, and epidemics, it is essential to regularly re-assess narrative analyses to anticipate threats and identify key target groups and communities. We recommend utilising various monitoring and computation tools for monitoring disinformation, enhancing the capabilities of analysts and fact-checkers regarding threats and the ways they are disseminated.

Recommendation 5: To analyze technologies and tools used by disinformation for the production of fake news.

In the process of disinformation campaigns in Ukraine, Russia has used various technologies to reproduce false, manipulative information – deep fakes, fake audio, and photo/video messages. Regular monitoring and analysis allow us to

track not only the narrative but also the technological features of disinformation, as well as to prepare strategies and methods of verification and refutation.

Recommendation 6: To set up a publicly available repository of disinformation examples.

Based on fact-checkers data to develop a publicly accessible repository of disinformation examples annotated with narrative features across various types of content to be used by the fact-checking community and other stakeholders.

Also important is to organise an ongoing process for updating and analysing this data. Provide a transparent methodology for populating and utilising data from this database.

Recommendation 7: To promote the internationalisation of fact-checking to track and analyze the cross-border spread of disinformation.

Provide translation capabilities to track and analyse the cross-border spread of disinformation. According to the study, in the context of the war in Ukraine, disinformation clearly identifies the main countries involved and makes them the focus of its fake news. Given its international nature, fact-checking organisations should develop language services and translate refutations. This will increase the level of analysis of disinformation in a pan-European context, allow for the demonstration of trends common to different countries, and facilitate data exchange between fact-checking organisations.

Recommendation 8: To establish an extensive monitoring framework.

The monitoring structure should incorporate the most accessible fact-checking databases. To achieve this, it is necessary to initiate the establishment of networking connections and cooperation between fact-checking organisations, communication companies, social media platforms, and other stakeholders in the information process.

Recommendation 9: To inform and educate various stakeholders about disinformation trends on a regular basis.

Develop a system for regularly informing all stakeholders. Include the results of systematic analysis of disinformation narrative trends in public reports and discussions, articulate the trends and threats at all levels, and engage a wide audience in this process.

Recommendation 10. To build a network of fact-checkers and researchers.

Considering the importance of involving researchers in the search for new approaches to combating disinformation, we recommend that fact-checkers establish lasting cooperation with research institutions and universities. This will help to effectively identify and analyse disinformation challenges and develop effective ways to prevent the consequences of dangerous information attacks.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS AND POLICYMAKERS

Recommendation 1. To support independent scientific research and systematic analysis of disinformation.

We urge governments to fund and support independent research in the field of information and disinformation. To create conditions for systematic analytical work by scholars across Europe. In order to study the social impact of disinformation, promote interdisciplinary research that includes IT, social, psychological and humanitarian fields.

Recommendation 2. To encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation of researchers

In order to improve the processes of data collection and analysis, encourage interaction between fact-checkers, researchers, and representatives of communication companies and social networks. Also, it will be important to create a platform that would combine the capabilities of professionals across Europe and provide up-to-date information on security threats in the field of information.

Recommendation 3. To include fact-checking in the structure of strategic communications.

In the process of building communication companies and strategies at various levels, take into account the results of fact-checking activities. Take into account trends and disinformation narratives to formulate strategic messages and explanations for different target audiences.

Recommendation 4. To involve fact-checkers in the policymaking process on countering disinformation.

Since the systematic activity of fact-checking organisations allows to identify technological, narrative and behavioural features of the processes related to the transmission and consumption of information by different groups, their experience and observations can be useful in developing policies and formulating legislation in the field of information and countering disinformation.

Recommendation 5. To apply clear frameworks and legal mechanisms for data protection and data use policies.

As data protection and the right to privacy is a value of a democratic European society, it's essential to promote transparency of stakeholders' activities in the field of countering disinformation, create opportunities for the exchange of data, reports and research.

Recommendation 6. Strengthen sanctions against agents and sponsors of disinformation.

Since disinformation is changing and actively adapting to new realities and legal prohibitions, systematic updating of formal approaches to combat disinformation should be addressed. Based on systematic monitoring by analytical and fact-checking organisations, develop and strengthen sanctions against disinformation agents and governments sponsoring destructive information actions. Any new digital processes and deformational influences must have a relevant sanction or legislative response.

Recommendation 7. To collaborate with digital platforms

Establish close cooperation with civilian platforms to track and block disinformation, messages containing threats to national security, and violent and radical content. Support the best practices of fact-checking programs run by digital platforms and communications companies.

Recommendation 8. To develop criteria to identify agents and sources of disinformation.

Disinformation tends to change dynamically and adapts to bans and sanctions and acquires hybrid features. New allegedly independent, not state-related speakers and opinion leaders and influencers are acting as actors of disinformation, manipulating the concept of freedom of speech and undermining the foundations of a democratic society. Due to these trends, we recommend that governments, together with fact-checking organisations and academia, work to define wider criteria for disinformation agents and actors, and disruptors of information processes.

Recommendation 9. To promote and support self-regulatory initiatives of media/fact-checkers and other stakeholders in the information process.

In order to ensure multilateral and effective work of journalistic and fact-checking organisations, we recommend that governments create conditions and support self-regulatory initiatives. EFCSN is one such important example of a pan-European fact-checking organisation. Supporting and strengthening such initiatives should be an important priority for the EU councils and parliaments.

Recommendation 10. Public awareness and Media Literacy.

Include issues related to disinformation and propaganda and information verification in the curricula for different age groups at different stages of national education on a regular basis.

Given the potential of fact-checking organisations and their activities in informing different target groups about fake news and promoting critical thinking, the

importance of official sources and trusted resources, involve them in national media literacy events. Support media education initiatives.

Develop and promote information campaigns to promote the role of fact-checking and media literacy and involve various types of media (television, radio, online media), educational and media organisations in such campaigns.

4. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Disinformation is false information that is purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer, 2018).

Digital platform: An internet company and/or service on which registered users post information and communicate digitally, including popular social media sites/companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and more (Canadian Citizens' Assembly on Democratic Expression).

Malinformation is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017).

Misinformation: verifiably false information that is shared without the intent to mislead. The effects of misinformation can still be harmful. People also deliberately spread false or manipulated information (Pamment, 2021).

Narrative is a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. They are stories that are designed to influence a target audience. (Pamment, 2021).

Propaganda is “conceived of as strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source” (Parry-Giles, 2002). Russian propaganda is not just the promotion of ideas and messages, it is the systematic imposition of ideology. Indeed, this is the most relevant definition. In essence, propaganda aims to change the attitudes and behaviors of the masses and could potentially act as a tool to spread an ideology (Collison, 2003).

Strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O’Laughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Fact-checking is the systematic assessment of online resources, media messages and publication of claims made by organizations or public figures to assess their validity (Walter, Cohen, Holbert, Morag)

Fact-checking organisations are Journalistic organisations focused on professional verification of information.

Media literacy is the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages (Austin, E, Chen, Y, Pinkleton, B, Johnson, J.).

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FACTS, SKILLS, AND ETHICS: THE CURRICULUM OF FACT-CHECKING

MIGUEL CEMPELLÍN FERNÁNDEZ

University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

DANIEL CATALÁN MATAMOROS

University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Encyclopædia Britannica¹, journalism is the collection, preparation, and distribution of news and related commentary and feature materials through such print and electronic media as newspapers, magazines, books, blogs, webcasts, podcasts, social networking and social media sites, and e-mail as well as through radio, motion pictures, and television. In the realm of APA (American Press Association), journalism is a multifaceted endeavor involving the meticulous collection, critical evaluation, skillful generation, and effective presentation of news and information. Furthermore, it encompasses the outcomes derived from these intricate processes.

The fundamental goal of journalism is to equip citizens with the indispensable knowledge required to make well-informed choices concerning their personal lives, local communities, broader societies, and governing bodies (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). With these regards, the education of journalists is essential to

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/journalism>

ensure highly skilled professionals who can keep high standards in the journalistic profession. Building upon the insights of these two authors, a set of shared elements that are essential for quality journalism were identified:

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to keep the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.
- Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.

The training of 21st-century journalists has evolved to keep pace with the changing media landscape and the demands of a digital and interconnected world.

- **Digital and Multimedia Skills:** Journalists in the 21st century are expected to be proficient in digital tools and multimedia storytelling. This includes skills in video production, photojournalism, podcasting, and data visualization (Wang, 2010).
- **Data Journalism:** Data journalism has become an integral part of modern journalism. Journalists are trained to analyze and visualize data to uncover and present newsworthy stories (Heravi, 2019).
- **Social Media and Audience Engagement:** Journalists must be adept at using social media for news dissemination and audience engagement. This includes knowing how to build and engage with a digital audience (Zayani, 2021).
- **Ethics and Responsible Reporting:** Journalists are still expected to adhere to the core principles of journalism ethics, which include accuracy, fairness, and accountability (Cavaliere, 2020).

- **Fact-Checking and Verification:** The rise of misinformation and fake news has made fact-checking and verification skills more critical than ever (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018).
- **Cross-Cultural and Global Reporting:** Journalists are often required to cover stories with a global perspective, requiring cross-cultural understanding and international reporting skills (Willnat et al., 2013).
- **Media Law and Ethics in the Digital Age:** As journalism moves into the digital space, understanding the legal and ethical issues in online reporting is essential (Pathak, 2016).
- **Entrepreneurial Journalism:** Many journalists are now working as freelancers or starting their own media ventures. Training often includes entrepreneurial skills to navigate this landscape (Singer, 2018).
- **Continuous Learning and Adaptation:** Journalists are encouraged to embrace a mindset of continuous learning and adaptability to stay current in a rapidly changing field (Hamilton, 2009).
- **Diversity and Inclusion Training:** Training often includes an emphasis on diversity and inclusion in newsrooms to ensure a more representative and equitable media landscape (Polyak & Donnelly, 2019).

To achieve this, journalism ardently aspires to maintain a commitment to fairness and precision, achieved through the application of objective methodologies and the adept management of inherent biases. To uphold such a high degree of accuracy and precision, the pivotal role of the fact-checker becomes indispensable.

2. THE ROLE OF THE FACT-CHECKER

A fact checker is an indispensable professional who plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the information disseminated by their organization is both accurate and truthful. The fact-checker can be found diligently scrutinizing the authenticity of data not only in both the print and broadcast sectors, but also in digital contents as in social media and websites.

The significance of a fact checker's role cannot be underestimated; by upholding the veracity and precision of published or aired content, they act as the vanguards safeguarding their organizations against potential legal disputes. Simultaneously, they play a pivotal role in maintaining the sterling reputation of their organization within the competitive realm of the information industry.

The duties of a fact checker axis on strong research skills and an innate ability to distinguish confirmed facts from unverified claims. These responsibilities include (Dealh, 2019):

- **Confirming details:** Fact-checkers are adept at validating information from sources without altering the integrity of the story.
- **Correcting copy:** This may encompass rectifying spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors to maintain textual precision.
- **Confirming historical information:** They are meticulous about verifying dates, whether they relate to recent events or those from bygone decades.
- **Confirming data:** Fact-checkers ensure the accuracy of quoted study results and survey findings.
- **Confirming identities:** This involves verifying the names, addresses, and identities of quoted sources while ensuring that attributed information aligns with their actual statements, all without causing alarm that might lead to retractions.

3. THE SKILLS OF THE FACT-CHECKER

Fact-checkers play a vital role in the validation of information, acting as guardians of accuracy within the realm of reporting. To excel in this role, a fact-checker must exhibit an essential array of skills, encompassing a wide spectrum of abilities and competencies, constitutes a fundamental aspect of a fact-checker's repertoire. These skills are not static but rather dynamic in nature, open to cultivation and expansion as one gains experience and expertise over time. This meticulous approach is essential in bolstering the reliability and trustworthiness of the content they review and endorse.

The following skills have been determined in essential in the professional activity of fact-checkers (Carpenter, 2009).

- **Critical Thinking:** Critical thinking is the foundation of effective fact-checking. It enables fact-checkers to approach their work with skepticism, objectivity, and a commitment to accuracy, ultimately serving the public by countering misinformation and promoting a well-informed society.
- **Evaluating Newsworthiness:** A substantial volume of material constantly streams into newsrooms, each potentially appearing newsworthy. The process of fact-checking involves critically evaluating the factual foundation of this material to decide whether it merits inclusion or exclusion from further processing.
- **Broad Knowledge Base:** A broad knowledge base extending beyond the realm of journalism is invaluable. Journalists with diversified knowledge are better equipped to identify potentially false or inaccurate information.
- **Proficiency in Information Gathering and Investigation:** The ability to conduct thorough and effective research is crucial. Fact-checkers must be adept at finding credible sources, documents, and data to support or refute claims. Fact-checkers rely on their ability to access, assess, and analyze information to provide the public with accurate and reliable insights, promoting informed decision-making and countering the spread of misinformation.
- **Familiarity with Social Media:** In the digital age, understanding how social media functions as a platform is indispensable. Fact-checkers need advanced skills in information verification to combat the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on social media channels.

These competencies collectively empower fact-checkers to navigate the complexities of the information landscape, ensuring that the news they report is accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

In further refining this classification, it is imperative to introduce an additional essential skill, namely, Media Literacy.

Media literacy and fact-checking are closely related, as both are essential in today's information landscape to help individuals critically evaluate and navigate the vast amount of information they encounter and understand how information spreads in the digital age and recognizing the various forms of misinformation and disinformation.

In an age where misinformation is prevalent, media literacy and fact-checking are invaluable tools for empowering individuals to be discerning consumers and responsible sharers of information, because it encompasses the proficiency to deconstruct media messages, evaluate message impact, and create media thoughtfully (Potter, 2013; Tornero, 2008).

4. ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

We conducted a comprehensive investigation into the training requirements for fact-checkers, aiming to determine the specific academic qualifications necessary for this role. During our research, we observed variations in the prerequisites across different fact-checking organizations. Some organizations did not stipulate precise academic requirements; rather, they emphasized the need for a university-level education. In contrast, certain organizations provided a non-exhaustive list of recommended educational backgrounds, signaling flexibility in the qualifications they considered suitable for fact-checking roles:

- **Journalism:** A substantial portion of fact-checkers have previously followed journalism backgrounds. Acquiring a journalism degree or delving into related fields furnishes you with the fundamental competencies in research, composition, and ethical considerations indispensable for the craft of fact-checking.
- **Communication Studies:** The purview of communication or communication studies also bears relevance. These academic paths frequently encompass essential components like critical thinking, media literacy, and the art of persuasive communication, all of which are highly applicable to fact-checking.
- **Political Science or Public Policy:** Fact-checking predominantly revolves around scrutinizing statements propagated by politicians and

prominent public figures. A grounding in political science or public policy proves invaluable for comprehending political nuances, issues, and rhetorical tactics.

- **Statistics and Data Analysis:** In an era characterized by data-driven journalism and fact-checking, a robust grasp of statistics and data analysis becomes a prized asset. It empowers you to meticulously evaluate claims underpinned by data and research.
- **Law:** Individuals with a legal background can contribute significantly to fact-checking endeavors, particularly when it comes to assessing the veracity of legal claims or statements made in a legal context.
- **Library Science or Information Science:** Librarians and information scientists are proficient in conducting comprehensive research and validating sources, rendering them aptly suited for roles in the fact-checking sphere.
- **Critical Thinking and Research Skills:** Irrespective of your academic foundation, the development of critical thinking, research, and information literacy competencies constitutes a fundamental requirement for effective fact-checking. These capabilities can be honed through a variety of academic disciplines.
- **Digital Literacy:** In the digital age, a profound understanding of navigating online resources and verifying information is pivotal. Enrolling in courses dedicated to digital literacy or undertaking self-education in online research techniques can prove highly beneficial.
- **Ethics and Media Literacy:** Exploring courses or coursework centered on ethics and media literacy is advantageous for grasping the ethical dimensions inherent to fact-checking, encompassing concepts such as accuracy, fairness, and objectivity.
- **Multilingual Skills:** If your aspirations encompass fact-checking within a multilingual or international context, attaining proficiency in multiple languages represents a substantial advantage, augmenting your effectiveness in scrutinizing information accuracy.

It's crucial to underscore that fact-checking organizations often furnish on-the-job training to their fact-checkers, with specific skill requirements subject to variation based on the organization's particular focus. Furthermore, it's worth noting that fact-checking isn't confined exclusively to individuals with formal educational backgrounds. Many accomplished fact-checkers have cultivated their expertise through practical experiences, internships, and independent study.

In conclusion, an amalgamation of a robust academic foundation, adept critical thinking capabilities, formidable research proficiencies, and an unwavering dedication to accuracy and ethical standards constitutes the quintessential attributes of a successful fact-checker.

5. PRINCIPLES AND ETHICAL CODES

In addition to acquiring academic training and possessing a diverse set of essential skills, it is imperative for every fact-checker, in their daily responsibilities, to rigorously adhere to a set of established principles or ethical codes. These principles and codes are meticulously designed to uphold the highest standards of quality and integrity within the realm of fact-checking. They serve as guiding beacons, ensuring that the pursuit of factual accuracy and truth aligns with core values and ethical guidelines. By abiding by these principles, fact-checkers not only fortify the reliability of their work but also contribute to the greater mission of safeguarding the veracity of information in the public sphere.

In the contemporary landscape, a diverse array of ethical codes tailored explicitly for fact-checkers has proliferated, emerging from prestigious institutions and organizations. These ethical guidelines are typically rooted in the realms of communication and journalism, underpinning the profound importance of ethical rigor in the practice of fact-checking. These meticulously crafted codes underscore a resolute commitment to upholding the highest standards of ethics and integrity within the fact-checking profession. Their presence not only serves as a testament to the dedication of these institutions but also stands as a bulwark against misinformation and inaccuracy, ensuring that the public receives accurate and reliable information.

5.1. THE INTERNATIONAL FACT-CHECKING NETWORK FACT-CHECKERS' CODE OF PRINCIPLE

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)² at Poynter is dedicated to advancing the standards of excellence in fact-checking. They believe that nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking plays a vital role as a potent instrument of accountability journalism. In contrast, fact-checking that lacks proper sourcing or is biased can not only undermine trust in the media and experts but also muddle public comprehension.

Its code of principles is designed for organizations that consistently produce impartial assessments of the accuracy of statements made by public figures, prominent institutions, and other widely disseminated claims that hold significance for society. It has been developed through extensive consultations involving fact-checkers from across the globe, offering conscientious practitioners a set of guiding principles to uphold in their day-to-day fact-checking endeavors.

- **A Commitment to Nonpartisanship and Fairness:** Signatory organizations fact-check claims using the same standard for every fact check. They do not concentrate their fact-checking on any one side. They follow the same process for every fact check and let the evidence dictate the conclusions. Signatories do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues they fact-check.
- **A Commitment to Transparency of Sources:** Signatories want their readers to be able to verify findings themselves. Signatories provide all sources in enough detail that readers can replicate their work, except in cases where a source's personal security could be compromised. In such cases, signatories provide as much detail as possible.
- **A Commitment to Transparency of Funding and Organization:** Signatory organizations are transparent about their funding sources. If they accept funding from other organizations, they ensure that funders have no influence over the conclusions the fact-checkers reach in their reports. Signatory organizations detail the professional background of all

² <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-commitments-of-the-code-of-principles>

key figures in the organization and explain the organizational structure and legal status. Signatories clearly indicate a way for readers to communicate with them.

- **A Commitment to Transparency of Methodology:** Signatories explain the methodology they use to select, research, write, edit, publish, and correct their fact checks. They encourage readers to send claims to fact-check and are transparent on why and how they fact-check.
- **A Commitment to Open and Honest Corrections:** Signatories publish their corrections policy and follow it scrupulously. They correct clearly and transparently in line with the corrections policy, seeking so far as possible to ensure that readers see the corrected version.

5.2. NPR GUIDELINE PRINCIPLES

NPR (National Public Radio)³ is an independent, nonprofit media organization that was founded on a mission to create a more informed public. The mission of NPR, in partnership with its member stations, is to create a more informed public, one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas, and culture within the United States and across the globe.

- **Accuracy:** Our unwavering commitment is to relentlessly pursue the truth in all our journalistic endeavors. The meticulous verification of facts stands as the cornerstone of our integrity.
- **Fairness:** In our quest to convey the most accurate narrative, we recognize that treating those we interview and report on with meticulous fairness is paramount. We are guided by the principles of professionalism and a deep sense of impartiality.
- **Completeness:** We acknowledge that errors of omission and the dissemination of partial truths can have profound repercussions on our credibility. We are resolute in our dedication to providing a comprehensive and balanced account of the facts.

³ <https://www.npr.org/ethics>

- **Honesty:** We firmly believe that journalists who conduct themselves with unwavering honesty earn the trust of their audience. We are committed to upholding the highest ethical standards in our reporting.
- **Independence:** To instill and maintain the public's trust, it is imperative that we make it unequivocally clear that our primary allegiance is to the public interest. Any personal or professional interests that could potentially conflict with this allegiance are rigorously scrutinized to avoid compromising our credibility.
- **Impartiality:** We steadfastly endeavor to report and produce stories that transcend our individual biases, ensuring that we treat all perspectives with fairness and objectivity.
- **Transparency:** To foster unwavering confidence in our journalism, we recognize the critical importance of providing the public with the tools necessary to evaluate our work. Transparency is the key to accountability and trust.
- **Accountability:** We wholeheartedly accept full responsibility for our work, acknowledging that we must always be prepared and willing to answer for our actions and decisions.
- **Respect:** We firmly believe that everyone affected by our journalism deserves to be treated with the utmost decency, compassion, and respect. Our reporting reflects these principles.
- **Excellence:** We hold the conviction that our journalism reaches its pinnacle of value when we harmoniously meld vital truths with engaging narrative, making the information accessible and compelling to our audience.

6. LIMITS AND CHALLENGES IN FACT-CHECKING

6.1. LIMITATIONS

While there is no denying the pivotal role fact-checking plays in maintaining the integrity of the public sphere, it has become increasingly evident that it, by itself, is insufficient in effectively combatting the pervasive issue of disinformation. This

recognition has prompted authors such as Vinhas & Bastos (2022) to delineate eight fundamental challenges facing fact-checking, encompassing a spectrum of issues from epistemological concerns to the challenges of ambiguity and ephemerality:

- **Epistemological complexity:** Fact-checking often treats facts as unequivocal, overlooking the nuances, subjectivities, and diverse interpretive possibilities inherent in information.
- **Implementation hurdles:** The resource and time-intensive nature of verification struggles to keep pace with the rapid dissemination of problematic information.
- **Confirmation bias:** The effectiveness of fact-checking is often influenced by the pre-existing beliefs and partisan perspectives of information consumers.
- **Eroding trust:** Fact-checking's efficacy diminishes as public trust in democratic institutions wanes, making it challenging to moderate public discourse effectively.
- **Ambiguity in narrative:** The clear demarcation between facts and misinformation is often obscured within complex narratives. Fact-checking sometimes grapples inadequately with the inherent ambiguity, conflicts, and multiplicity of communication.
- **Overlooking ephemerality:** Prioritizing popular content can lead to the neglect of transient information that frequently emerges and vanishes on social media, inadvertently ignoring crucial content that spreads more efficiently.
- **Pursuit of objectivity:** The relentless quest for objectivity in fact-checking overlooks the inherent subjectivity in the selection of evidence and the communication of results to the public.
- **Critical engagement:** The ability to critically engage with content depends significantly on prevailing social norms and group mentality, both of which can perpetuate media literacy as a tool to bolster pre-existing biases.

6.2. CHALLENGES

The evolution of artificial intelligence presents a burgeoning challenge to the control of disinformation by fact-checkers. These advanced AI systems have streamlined the creation and dissemination of fake news, making it both effortless and economically feasible. As a consequence, fact-checking organizations are compelled to carefully assess and address these escalating risks, recognizing that the landscape of misinformation has become more intricate and demanding than ever before.

- **Expanded reach:** The growing capabilities of generative AI to rival human-generated content at a minimal cost reduce the entry barriers, enabling a broader spectrum of actors to engage in the creation of disinformation campaigns. This facilitates the rapid scaling of such operations, driven by political, ideological, financial, or social motives. Furthermore, the proliferation of false information and biases in online spaces, which feed into extensive language models, renders users with limited media literacy not only vulnerable to unintentionally consuming and disseminating problematic content but also easily susceptible to manipulation.
- **Enhanced effectiveness:** The inherent naturalness and eloquence of AI-generated texts enhance the persuasiveness and personalization of disinformation, making it substantially more challenging to detect, even for seasoned fact-checkers. This contributes to a gradual erosion of trust within information ecosystems. These qualities are particularly advantageous for actors aiming to propagate conspiracy theories, meddle in democratic processes, or advance adversarial narratives.
- **Heightened sophistication:** While AI lacks the capacity to distinguish and authenticate facts, its ability to imbue false information with an aura of authority and portray it as factual paves the way for innovative and more sophisticated disinformation tactics.

7. RESOURCES

Below, we present an array of resources that offer an opportunity to delve further into the realm of fact-checking. These resources have been thoughtfully categorized into three distinct groups: organizations and institutions actively engaged in fact-checking initiatives, a collection of tools and extensions designed to bolster your capability in identifying misinformation, and valuable resources tailored to enhance your media literacy skills.

7.1. ORGANIZATIONS & INSTITUTIONS

These websites cover a range of topics and regions, making them valuable resources for fact-checking information from various sources:

- **Snopes** (www.snopes.com): A comprehensive fact-checking website that debunks urban legends, myths, and rumors.
- **PolitiFact** (www.politifact.com): Focused on checking the accuracy of statements made by politicians and public figures and categorizes them on a Truth-O-Meter scale.
- **FactCheck.org** (www.factcheck.org): A project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center that monitors the factual accuracy of statements made by major U.S. political players.
- **The Washington Post Fact Checker** (www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker): Examines claims made by politicians and public figures, awarding Pinocchios for false or misleading statements.
- **Fact-Checking Network** (www.poynter.org/ifcn): The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) is a network of fact-checkers around the world. It provides resources and maintains a code of principles for fact-checking organizations.
- **AFP Fact Check** (www.factcheck.afp.com): Run by Agence France-Presse (AFP), this website focuses on fact-checking viral misinformation and hoaxes.

- **BBC Reality Check** (www.bbc.com/news/reality_check): The BBC's fact-checking unit examines claims made in the news and by politicians.
- **OpenSecrets.org** (www.opensecrets.org): This site by the Center for Responsive Politics tracks money in U.S. politics and checks claims related to campaign financing and lobbying.
- **Full Fact** (www.fullfact.org): The UK's independent fact-checking organization that scrutinizes claims made by politicians and in the media.
- **Hoax-Slayer** (<https://smhoaxslayer.com>): Debunks hoaxes, email scams, and other types of online misinformation.
- **TruthOrFiction.com** (www.truthorfiction.com): Investigates and verifies the accuracy of viral rumors and stories.
- **FactCheckNI** (<https://factcheckni.org/>): Focuses on fact-checking claims related to Northern Ireland and its politics.
- **Africa Check** (www.africacheck.org): Fact-checks claims made in African countries to promote accuracy in public debate and the media.

In addition, a selection of postgraduate university programs aiming to educate fact-checkers is shown in Table 1.

INSTITUTION / ORGANIZATION	TRAINING PROGRAM NAME
University Rey Juan Carlos I	Máster de Formación Permanente en Investigación Periodística, Nuevas Narrativas, Datos, Fact-checking y Transparencia
University San Pablo CEU & Newtral	Verificación Digital, Fact-Checking y Periodismo de Datos
UNESCO & IPDC (The International Programme for the Development of Communication)	Journalism, Fake News, and Disinformation
University of Tartu	Disinformation and Societal Resilience

INSTITUTION / ORGANIZATION	TRAINING PROGRAM NAME
UNICRI (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute)	Summer School on Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech
ICFJ (International Centre for Journalists)	Disarming disinformation
University of Cambridge	Cambridge Disinformation Summit
El País - Escuela de Periodismo	Metodología y herramientas online contra fake news y para el periodismo de investigación
IPR (Institute for Public Relations)	Combating disinformation

Table 1 – List of training programs in fact-checking

7.2. MEDIA LITERACY

These resources cover a range of topics and educational levels, from K-12 to adult education.

- **News Literacy Project** (www.newslit.org): The News Literacy Project provides free resources and programs to help people, especially students, become more discerning consumers of news and information. They offer interactive lessons and tools to teach news literacy skills.
- **The Stanford History Education Group (SHEG)** (www.shed.stanford.edu): SHEG offers free curriculum and assessments for teachers and students to improve digital literacy and critical thinking skills. Their materials are designed for K-12 education.
- **MediaSmarts** (www.mediasmarts.ca): Canada’s Centre for Digital and Media Literacy offers a variety of resources, lessons, and games for teaching media literacy to students of all ages.
- **Common Sense Education** (www.common sense.org/education): Provides tools, lesson plans, and reviews of media and technology for

educators and parents. Their resources focus on helping children and young adults navigate the digital world safely and responsibly.

- **Center for Media Literacy** (www.medialit.org): Offers resources, workshops, and curricula to promote media literacy education. They focus on helping individuals understand how media messages work and how to deconstruct them.
- **The NewseumED** (www.newseumed.org): The Newseum offers educational resources on media literacy and the First Amendment. Their website includes lesson plans, videos, and interactive activities.
- **Media Literacy Now** (medialiteracynow.org): Advocates for media literacy education in the United States and provides resources for parents and educators.
- **Digital Citizenship** (www.digitalcitizenship.net): Offers resources and lesson plans on digital citizenship, including media literacy and responsible online behavior.
- **Teaching Tolerance** (www.tolerance.org): Provides free resources and lesson plans to help educators promote diversity and inclusion and teach media literacy in the context of social justice.
- **iCivics** (www.icivics.org): Founded by former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, iCivics offers educational games and resources to teach civics and media literacy to students.
- **PBS LearningMedia** (www.pbslearningmedia.org): PBS offers a wide range of educational media resources for teachers, including content related to media literacy and journalism.

7.3. TOOLS & EXTENSIONS

These tools and extensions can assist us in fact-checking claims, images, and websites, and in evaluating the credibility of information sources. They can be valuable aids in our quest for accurate and reliable information.

- **Google Fact Check Explorer:** This tool allows you to search for fact-checks from a wide range of fact-checking organizations and news sources. Just enter a query, and Google will display fact-checks related to that topic.
- **InVID Verification Plugin:** This browser extension helps you verify the authenticity of photos and videos found online. It allows you to check where a video or image originated and when it was posted.
- Reverse Image Search Engines:
 - **Google Images:** You can perform a reverse image search by uploading an image or entering an image URL to find other instances of the image on the web.
 - **TinEye:** A reverse image search engine that can help you find the original source of an image.
- Fact-Checking Browser Extensions:
 - **NewsGuard:** This browser extension provides credibility ratings and detailed information about news sources and websites. It's available for popular browsers like Chrome and Edge.
 - **Media Bias/Fact Check Extension:** This browser extension gives you quick access to media bias and fact-checking information about websites.
- **ClaimReview Markup:** Some websites use ClaimReview markup, which provides structured data about fact-checks. You can use browser extensions like "ClaimReview Fact-Checker" to detect and highlight these fact-checks on web pages.
- **Hoaxy:** Hoaxy is a tool that visualizes the spread of claims and fact-checks on social media. It helps you understand how misinformation and fact-checks propagate online.
- **Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart:** While not a traditional fact-checking tool, the Media Bias Chart categorizes news sources based on their political bias and reliability. It's a helpful reference for evaluating news sources.
- **CrowdTangle:** This tool, owned by Facebook, helps track the spread of content on social media. It can be useful for tracking the popularity of news articles and identifying trends.

- **Fact-Checking Apps:**
 - **FactStream:** An app that provides a stream of fact-checks from various fact-checking organizations.
 - **Is It True?:** An app that allows you to check the credibility of information using fact-checks from verified sources.
- **OpenStax CNX:** An open-source platform that offers a collection of textbooks and educational resources, including critical thinking and information literacy modules.

8. FINAL REFLECTIONS

The fact-checking curriculum is an essential component of journalism in the twenty-first century since it provides professionals with the skills and ethics needed to battle disinformation in our interconnected society. The function of the fact-checker is critical because they assure the integrity and honesty of information, protecting their companies from legal problems and preserving their reputation. The fact-checker's abilities, which include critical thinking, knowledge collection, and familiarity with social media, allow them to traverse the complicated information landscape and deliver credible insights to the public.

Academic qualifications for fact-checkers vary, but a solid foundation in journalism, communication studies, political science, statistics, and data analysis is advantageous. A legal or library science background, as well as digital literacy, ethics, and media literacy, can all be advantageous. Multilingualism can be useful for fact-checking in an international setting.

In an age of disinformation, the fact-checker's devotion to truth and objectivity, together with their varied skill set, plays a critical role in preserving journalism's credibility. As journalism evolves in reaction to the digital era and globalized globe, the fact-checker remains a solid defender of the truth, functioning as a light of reliability amid a sea of information.

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FACT-CHECKING POLITICAL DEBATES:
FOSTERING JOURNALISTIC SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES FROM THE
NEWTRAL HACKATHON

MARTA PÉREZ ESCOLAR

University of Murcia

ROCÍO ZAMORA MEDIA

University of Murcia

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1. INTRODUCTION

The most recent report published by the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) highlights that citizens still struggle to identify trustworthy sources of information. There is a prevailing lack of trust in the media, and particularly in the content consumed on social networks. As outlined in the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023), disinformation and media distrust persist as significant social concerns, especially considering that these phenomena fuel the proliferation of polarization in society and the creation of echo chambers. The Journalism Trust Initiative also agrees that online algorithms tend to amplify the extremes –sensationalism, rumours and falsehood–, resulting in giving opinions and emotions more credibility than facts. Consequently, high levels of distrust lead users to isolate themselves within "information bubbles" (Pariser, 2012), which, in turn, hinders the encounter of dissonant voices (Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2021).

Similarly, the study released by the Global Disinformation Index (2023) also confirms that "the dissemination of disinformation has disruptive and impactful

consequences" (p.4) for the media market in Spain, certainly given the proliferation of news outlets that focus on generating various forms of disinformation. Moreover, specific politicians also contribute to the misinformation and disinformation environment. In fact, some political actors occasionally employ falsehoods without facing negative consequences (Armstrong-Taylor, 2012). In an era where a US President refers to major news outlets as "fake news" when confronted with criticism, and his press secretary speaks of "alternative facts" when presenting the administration's viewpoint, it becomes imperative to explore the role of journalists in fact-checking and combating disinformation.

The phenomenon of political lying is becoming more widespread (Lilleker & Pérez-Escolar, 2023) and contributes to societal confusion and places added pressure on fact-checking journalists. Therefore, the need for trustworthy sources of information is a significant social issue nowadays.

Drawing from these concerns about information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), and with the objective of contributing to the necessary improvement of journalistic practices, this research proposes the inclusion of a set of cross-curricular competencies related to political verification in Journalism study programmes. These competencies align with the 21st-century skills advocated by UNESCO (2005), could qualify students to effectively address contemporary real-world issues and combat political disinformation.

Concretely, this chapter's main contribution lies in suggesting cross-curricular competencies tailored to fact-checking journalists: the political debate fact-checker journalist –understood as a specialization within fact-checking journalism–. The study is based on an innovation experience conducted between some a team of academics and students from Journalism Degree at the University of Murcia in collaboration with *Newtral*, a prominent Spanish fact-checking media outlet in Spain to identify main competencies related to fact-checking of political debates for future journalists.

2. VERIFICATION SKILLS FOR FUTURE JOURNALISTS

The traditional journalist's profile has undergone a rapid transformation in the past two decades. Technological changes that influence news production, distribution, and consumption have given rise to new roles in newsrooms, demanding fresh routines, dynamics, approaches, and skills that were previously unthinkable. In today's media landscape, various specialized professionals coexist, such as data journalists (Mair & Keeble, 2014; Baack, 2015; Bradshaw, 2017;), visual journalists (Machin & Polzer, 2015; Gynnild, 2013), transmedia journalists (Gambarato, 2018; Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018; Moloney, 2019), experts news curation in social media (Burns, 2018; Lopezosa *et al.*, 2023), or mobile journalists (López-García *et al.*, 2019), among others. These new professionals are part of what Chadwick (2013) has described as a "hybrid news system", representing a hypercompetitive environment where journalists interact with each other and with politicians and citizens to cover breaking news.

All these new professionals are accustomed to working in highly demanding environments with routines and paces that prioritize speed and immediacy (Hargreaves, 2003; Rosemberg & Feldman, 2009). According to Kovach & Rosenstiel (1999), these demands, imposed by the new work system, hinder journalists' ability to fulfil their classic role of "providing a true and reliable account of the day's events" (p.5).

In such a complex ecosystem, information professionals also need to grapple with the relentless rise of disinformation (United Nations, 2017), which challenges journalists' ability to fact-check news. The methods employed for checking and validate information require time, an increasingly scarce resource in traditional media.

To combat false information and misleading content, verification units have emerged within mainstream media, such as *EFE Verifica* or *VerificaRTVE*, and specialized media outlets, such as *Newtral* or *Maldita.es*, that are exclusively dedicated to verifying messages and debunking disinformation. Journalists who specialize in verification possess a set of knowledge and skills that go beyond the traditional competencies of a mainstream journalists (Pérez-Escolar *et al.*,

2021; Herrero-Diz *et al.*, 2022; Reyes de Cózar *et al.*, 2022). Hence, professionals engaged in the verification and debunking of falsehoods exhibit profiles that distinctly differ from those of traditional journalists.

This phenomenon has spurred the interest of academics and researchers in understanding the skills, competencies, training, and abilities required by these new journalists. Ufarte-Ruiz *et al.* (2018) noted that these professionals must acquire the competencies typical of more traditional journalism roles and receive specialized training in big data and social media. As they add in a subsequent study, fact-checking journalists' ability to engage with audiences is also part of the process of disseminating verification results (Ufarte-Ruiz & Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

Other researchers, such as Vizoso & Vázquez-Herrero (2019), have emphasized that these new professionals should also possess knowledge of programming and data journalism, as well as familiarity with specialized verification tools. In this context, Graves (2016), Brandtzaeg *et al.* (2016), and Brandtzaeg *et al.* (2017) have focused on understanding the tools and methods used by fact-checking journalists in the process of authenticating online content, whether it be images, videos, or text. Among these tools, commonly used ones appear to include Google Images, Google Maps, Tungstene, and TinyEye (Brandtzaeg *et al.*, 2016). For example, the *VerificaRTVE* newsroom has provided a free toolbox to assist journalists and journalism students in the verification process. Similarly, the importance of automated verification for detecting deepfakes and AI-generated content, facilitated by artificial intelligence algorithms (Graves, 2018), is increasingly emphasized in recent studies (Salaverría & Cardoso, 2023), which underscore the growing use of artificial intelligence in contemporary political campaigns.

Focusing on verification methodology, librarian Sarah Blakeslee at the Meriam Library, California State University, Chico, designed an evaluation tool called the *CRAAP Test*, which stands for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose. This test was one of the pioneering projects created to help students learn to assess the reliability of documentary sources and references used in their academic work (Blakeslee, 2004; Sullivan, 2019).

There is a proliferation of methods and resources similar to the *CRAAP Test* aimed at assisting university students in evaluating information sources. For example, librarians at Indian River State College (IRSC) developed a program to educate and train journalists in combating false content (Auberry, 2018). UNESCO also offers a digital library with a manual titled *Journalism, 'Fake News,' & Disinformation* to enhance journalists' media literacy and counter disinformation (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

In the field of Information and Communication Sciences, initiatives aimed at media literacy to counter falsehoods and deceptive or inaccurate content are beginning to emerge. In Spain, for example, specialized fact-checking media outlets like *Maldita.es*, through its *Maldita Educa* program, offer courses, lectures, and practical workshops on verification to help university students and future journalists identify disinformation. Similarly, in 2019, Newtral launched *Newtral Educación* to promote critical thinking in schools, high schools, universities, and other educational institutions. They also offer various courses on fact-checking and a master's program in *Digital Verification, Fact-Checking, and Data Journalism*.

Overall, universities and communication faculties have a responsibility to combat the disinformation phenomenon by promoting critical thinking, fostering healthy scepticism –which includes doubt and tolerance for uncertainty – and encouraging the pursuit of new knowledge (Clampitt, 2018). Recognizing the essential role that universities should play, this research suggests a set of competencies related to verifying false information and deceptive or inaccurate content in political debates. While the idea of reformulating competencies in higher education is not new, the original contribution of this study is to propose the specialization of the verification journalist; more specifically, this chapter explores the cross-curricular journalistic competencies for fact-checking on political debate aligned with the 21st-century skills advocated by UNESCO (2005).

Inspired by the 21st century competencies proposed by UNESCO, Ordóñez-Olmedo *et al.* (2022) have compiled a list of key skills for future journalist based on the idea that abilities are interconnected with interpersonal, social, and

competitive competencies, often referred to as *soft skills*. These competencies are essential for achieving technological literacy and effectively addressing the challenges of our time. They are designed to improve pedagogical practices and realign the primary objectives in the context of learning (Valencia-Molina *et al.*, 2016).

21 ST CENTURY SKILLS	DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION
Information literacy	Information literacy necessitates a process that enables the recognition and contextualization of essential information in response to information, technology, and media-related demands. UNESCO (2016) deems it crucial to educate citizens in media and information literacy to ensure their development in society.
Media literacy	Media literacy is defined as "the ability to access and process information from any form of communication" (Potter, 2018). Buckingham (2005) identifies production, language, representation, and audience as fundamental concepts in media literacy.
Critical thinking	Critical thinking is the deliberate and self-regulated process of judgment. This process considers evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria (Butterworth & Thwaites, 2013).
Communications and collaboration	Communication and collaboration are meant to facilitate the expression of thoughts and ideas in a responsible, efficient, and effective manner to solve encountered problems (Triana <i>et al.</i> , 2020). They promote clarity and efficiency in articulating ideas and thoughts through speech and writing, as well as the responsibility of collaborative work. They also encourage flexibility and a willingness to assume commitments toward a common goal (Romero & Turpo, 2015).
ICT literacy	ICT literacy comprises a set of skills for effectively locating, evaluating, and using necessary information (Shivakumaraswamy & Narendra, 2021).
Problem-solving	Problem-solving is initially connected to prior knowledge, involving monitoring and a subjective assessment of the correct answers. Subsequently, it sets objectives for

21 ST CENTURY SKILLS	DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION
	<p>accurate execution and analyses the provided response, reflecting on the action taken, and deciding whether modifications are necessary in the proposed answer. Monitoring plays a dual role in the problem-solving algorithm. Its retrospective function involves the examination of previous responses, while its prospective function encompasses emotions and value judgments concerning one's own learning (Sáiz-Manzares & Pérez, 2016).</p>
Creativity and innovation	<p>Creative thinking involves the construction of knowledge and the development of products and processes using technology. Loveless (2002) suggests that to promote creativity in the classroom, teachers must establish a social environment in which students feel secure enough to explore and experiment with ideas (innovation) and take risks.</p>
Productivity and Accountability	<p>Productivity and accountability are centred around three interconnected elements: efficiency, effectiveness, and the delivery of high-quality goods and services, as described by Trilling & Fadel (2009), which involves "producing results" (p. 83). Teaching students how to optimize productivity, plan effectively, and allocate and manage their time in accordance with the demands of the tasks they need to complete.</p>
Initiative and self-direction	<p>Learners must be prepared to take the initiative to acquire new ideas, concepts, processes, and applications, as this enhances their efficiency and effectiveness. Self-direction is essential to adapt to change and discover how to enhance organizational effectiveness and productivity, making it a crucial skill for success and ongoing employability (Kivunja, 2015).</p>
Social interaction	<p>Students need to be instructed in social skills to effectively communicate with each other, using various means such as words and non-verbal cues, including gestures, facial expressions, body language, or personal appearance. Kagan (1994) emphasizes this by stating, "It is hard to imagine a job today that does not involve</p>

21 ST CENTURY SKILLS	DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION
	some cooperative interaction with others. The most common reason individuals are terminated from a job is not a lack of job-related skills, but rather a deficiency in interpersonal skills" (p. 1).
Flexibility and adaptability	Future graduates must be adaptable to changing circumstances and environments, as well as open to new ideas and innovative approaches to completing tasks. These characteristics contribute to success, while a lack of these skills can result in stagnation and failure (Kivunja, 2015).
Cross-cultural interaction	Workplaces require individuals to interact effectively with co-workers and people they encounter, as well as to collaborate in diverse teams. This collaboration extends beyond their physical workplace and includes virtual communities, such as serious games in which they may become immersed.

Table 1. Key Skills for Future Journalists in the 21st Century. **Source:** Ordóñez-Olmedo et al., 2022

For these reasons, the importance of 21st-century skills (UNESCO, 2005; Ananiadou & Magdolean, 2009; Silva *et al.*, 2016) has grown, as they have become essential for tackling real-world problems (INTEF, 2019; Pérez-Escolar *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, their incorporation into Journalism Degree programs is emphasized, with the intention of combatting political disinformation and misinformation in today's world.

3. INNOVATIVE LEARNING WITH NEWTRAL: A CASE STUDY

3.1. OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

This chapter aims to describe an innovation experience conducted within the Journalism Degree program at the University of Murcia (Murcia, Spain), in collaboration with Newtral, a prominent Spanish fact-checking media outlet. This research seeks to identify the main competencies related to fact-checking of political debates that future journalists should acquire.

To achieve this goal, the Project-Based Learning (PBL) methodology was employed. This method is designed to help students acquire the skills deemed essential for 21st-century journalists by UNESCO. According to Barrows (1986), the PBL methodology represents a process in which projects are used as a starting point for the acquisition and integration of new knowledge. In this way, students actively participate in higher-level cognitive processes, such as the identification of problems; the selection, collection, and discrimination of information; the understanding and interpretation of data; the creation of logical relationships, and the articulation of conclusions (Suárez, 2019).

Therefore, through a collaboration with *Newtral*, students had the opportunity to work with verification journalists in fact-checking the statements of the political candidates for the presidency of the Region of Murcia.

3.2. DESCRIPTION OF THE TEACHING INNOVATION EXPERIENCE: THE FACT-CHECKING HACKATHON

During the Spanish Regional Elections –celebrated on 28 May 2023–, *Newtral* launched a Fact-checking Hackathon to cover the electoral debates in the autonomous communities where the elections were held. These elections took place in twelve of the seventeen autonomous communities, following a period of instability dominated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and its political and economic consequences. The *Fact-checking Hackathon* was divided into 3 phases:

- **PHASE #1.- Organization of the Groups.** *Newtral* reached out one university from each autonomous community with elections. A total of 10 universities participated in this innovative project. The participating professors were responsible for selecting the 10 students who took part in this experience. The role of these 10 students was to cover and fact-check the electoral debates in their respective autonomous communities, jointly with their university professors.
- **PHASE #2.- Verification Training.** A few weeks before the start of the electoral campaign, *Newtral* organized a virtual training day for the students and professors involved in the project. During these sessions, the

verification journalists explained *Newtral's* methodology, routines, and dynamics. Towards the end of the session, a simulation exercise was conducted using a past debate from the last Andalusian elections for practice. This training lasted approximately five hours and was conducted in small groups, with two or three universities representing their autonomous communities.

- PHASE #3.- Verification of debates. For the debates, *Newtral* created a Slack channel for each university. Within these channels, students posted any suspicious statements and, at the same time, provided some sources of information to help fact-check those statements. The professor assumed the role of coordinating the students' workflow and overseeing the sources and verifications. Simultaneously, the *Newtral* team conducted their own verifications of each regional debates, and monitored the content verified by the students to incorporate their contributions.

In this case, the team from University of Murcia was in charge of conducting the fact-checking on two electoral debates in the Region of Murcia. However, while the initial plan was to cover two debates, just one took place on May 19th, 2023, at the Colegio de Periodistas de la Región de Murcia¹. This debate was broadcast by 7RM and Onda Regional. The debate ended abruptly when, after the advertising break –which closed the thematic blocks–, the candidate from *Unidas Podemos*, María Marín, refused to vacate her lectern for Helena Vidal –a candidate from the coalition party of *Más Región* and *Equo*–. Apparently, the day before this debate, the Junta Electoral Central determined that, due to *Equo* and *Podemos* had previously run together in the last elections, and both have representation in the Assembly, the time to speak for both parties in the debate should be shared. María Marín disobeyed this order and, therefore, the debate had to end at that point.

Beside the candidate from the extreme left party, *Unidas Podemos*, María Marín, there were other political candidates taking part on that debate that were included in our fact-checking analysis: José Ángel Antelo, representing the extreme right party *Vox* –he is now the new Vice-President of the Region de Murcia–; Fernando

¹ <https://acortar.link/TwMvbA>

López Miras, representing the conservative center-right party, *Partido Popular* (PP) –he remains as the President of the Region de Murcia–; José Vélez, representing the *Socialist party* (PSOE); María José Ros, representing the center party, *Ciudadanos* party; and Helena Vidal, for the coalition party *Más Región* and *Equo*.

4. RESULTS FROM THE FACT-CHECKING HACKATON: VERIFICATION SKILLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY POLITICAL DEBATES

Despite the cancellation of the electoral event in the Region of Murcia, the *Fact-checking Hackathon* with *Newtral* was conducted and helped students in acquiring a range of professional cross-curricular competencies related to verification journalism, particularly in the context of electoral debate fact-checking. These emerging abilities are essential components of the 21st-century skills advocated by UNESCO, which are aimed at combating political disinformation. Based on these 21st-century skills and after the innovative experience with *Newtral*, the participating students were offered a brief survey to assess the importance of cross-curricular competencies related to this initiative. The results obtained allowed us to identify a set of cross-curricular competencies that students should develop for the effective fact-checking of political debates, as outlined in Table 2:

CORE SOCIAL AND COMPETENCIES	CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCES FOR THE VERIFICATION OF POLITICAL DEBATES
INTELLECTUAL COMPETENCIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency in rapidly distinguishing between political rhetoric and verifiable statements. • Strong research knowledge and investigative journalism skills. • Cognitive reflection for critical thinking. • Rapid interpretation, argumentation, and problem-solving skills. • Quick decision-making capability. • Enhanced selective attention and mental alertness for quick discernment.

*FACT-CHECKING POLITICAL DEBATES:
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HACKATHON*

CORE SOCIAL AND COMPETENCIES	CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCES FOR THE VERIFICATION OF POLITICAL DEBATES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High vigilance against disinformation and misinformation. • Advanced critical thinking and reasoning, encompassing both deductive and inductive approaches. • Self-directed learning, demonstrating a proactive approach to acquiring new knowledge. • Proficiency in retaining and synthesizing information for effective use.
<p>METHODOLOGICAL COMPETENCIES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency in using and mastering technological tools. Demonstrated ability to effectively use and master various technological tools and platforms. • Evaluation of information sources. Competence in critically assessing the reliability and credibility of information sources. • Proficiency in recognizing and utilizing reliable and relevant sources of information to fact-check statements based on topics. The ability to identify, access, and employ trustworthy and pertinent sources for fact-checking specific topics. • Initiative in analysis, planning, organization, and management. Proactive approach to analysing information, planning fact-checking processes, organizing resources, and managing tasks efficiently. • Capacity for innovation. Demonstrated ability to introduce innovative approaches and methods in the fact-checking process. • Ensuring the accuracy of data rapidly using different sources of information. Rapidly and effectively cross-referencing information from diverse sources to ensure data accuracy.
<p>PERSONAL AND SOCIAL COMPETENCIES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration, cooperation, and connectivity abilities. Demonstrated competence in working collaboratively, cooperating with others, and effectively connecting with peers and colleagues.

CORE SOCIAL AND COMPETENCIES	CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCES FOR THE VERIFICATION OF POLITICAL DEBATES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence in multitasking and task management. Proficiency in managing multiple tasks and responsibilities simultaneously. • Assertiveness and empathy. Ability to assert one's views and needs while understanding and empathizing with others. • Ethical and responsible behaviour. Adherence to a strong ethical code and demonstrating responsible conduct in professional settings. • Social responsibility. Commitment to ethical and responsible actions that contribute to the betterment of society. • Respect for fundamental rights and gender equality. Recognition and adherence to the principles of fundamental rights and equality between men and women. • Active participation and social engagement. Engaging actively in societal issues and contributing positively to the community. • Effective integration and collaboration in multidisciplinary teams, assuming various roles and responsibilities. The ability to efficiently integrate into diverse teams, taking on different roles and responsibilities as required. • Flexibility and adaptability rapidly. Quick adaptation and flexibility in response to changing circumstances and demands. • Integrity and commitment to professional performance. Upholding high levels of integrity and demonstrating dedication to professional duties. • Stress tolerance. The ability to manage and tolerate stress and high-pressure situations effectively. • Self-reliance and entrepreneurship. Demonstrated self-reliance and a proactive attitude towards entrepreneurship and self-driven initiatives.

CORE SOCIAL AND COMPETENCIES	CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCES FOR THE VERIFICATION OF POLITICAL DEBATES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork skills. Competence in working effectively within a team, collaborating, and achieving common goals. • Motivation for achieving goals. Maintaining strong motivation to reach personal and professional objectives. • Initiative and leadership. Showing initiative and leadership qualities in various situations and contexts. • Identification, practice, and demonstration of proactive competitiveness. Identifying, practicing, and showcasing proactive competitiveness to excel in a competitive environment.
COMUNICACION-RELATED COMPETENCIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to quickly rectify and correct errors. Proficiency in promptly identifying and rectifying errors or inaccuracies in content. • Error-free media expression in terms of grammar and spelling. Demonstrated proficiency in written and verbal communication, free from grammatical and spelling errors. • Constructive and critical dialogue. Engaging in meaningful and critical dialogues, providing constructive feedback and analysis. • Creativity in communicating the debunking. Applying creativity and innovative approaches when communicating the process of debunking or fact-checking. • Cultivation of imaginative thinking. Encouraging and nurturing imaginative thinking and problem-solving skills.

Table 2. Cross-curricular competencies proposal for the verification of political debates. **Source:** authors' own.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The verification of electoral debates both, at regional and national level, is a specialization of fact-checking journalism because it requires a very particular set of skills, knowledge and abilities. To prevent falsehoods from spreading faster than the truth (Zamora Medina & Losada Díaz, 2021), journalists must be both,

swift and thorough, when fact-checking political meetings. Therefore, unlike fact-checking journalists or investigative journalists, who can spend time creating content, political debate fact-checkers cannot adhere to the dynamics of *slow journalism* (Le Masurier, 2016; Benaissa Pedriza, 2017). Journalists tasked with fact-checking political debates must act promptly and effectively to verify real-time claims made by politicians during election meetings.

Hence, competencies related to the verification of electoral debates are vital components of 21st-century skills and should be incorporated into the curriculum of Journalism Degree programs, with the purpose of combatting political disinformation. This approach marks the initiation of a paradigm shift in didactic plans within the European Higher Education area. Fortunately, in this new landscape, Journalism and Communication Degree programs are already recognizing the need to instil competences that empower students to tackle political disinformation and nurture their critical thinking abilities.

According to one of the latest APM (2021) reports, verification journalism is emerging as the linchpin for the survival of the journalism profession. In a context marked by hybridization (Chadwick, 2013) and declining trust in information sources (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023), media credibility hangs in the balance. Consequently, equipping future communicators with the ability to verify information positions these students at the vanguard of knowledge and innovation. It empowers them to champion a more credible and transparent journalism, characterized by transparent processes (Robles-López & Zamora-Medina, 2020).

Results from this innovation experience with *Newtral* on professional *fact-checking* during the Spanish political debates during 2023 Regional Elections confirmed the existence of new cross-curricular competencies proposal for political verification. This contribution also pointed out to a new specialized professional profile on fact-checking journalism: the political debate fact-checker. This role demands specific knowledge and skills to rapidly discern truthful content from deceptive content, critically evaluate information, judge the accuracy of information, correct deceptive content, and recommend guidelines for identifying misleading content. While this specialization in fact-checking journalism draws

from other forms of journalism, such as investigative and data journalism, and follows some classic journalistic routines, it is evident that it requires new talents.

In conclusion, while recognizing the limitations of this teaching innovation experience developed in collaboration with Newtral in terms of representativeness, this endeavor based on the realm of competencies requisite for the 21st century will serve to evaluate the evolution of skills related to the verification of electoral debates in successive electoral cycles. The implemented experience, thoroughly evaluated by all participants, underscored the importance of equipping journalism students with these cutting-edge verification skills. Such immersive teaching experiences, as described in this study, are invaluable as they provide students with realistic and hands-on learning opportunities, effectively preparing them to navigate the diverse challenges they will encounter in the professional world upon entering the workforce.

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THE JOURNALIST'S TOOLKIT: EXPLORING EFFECTIVE FACT-CHECKING METHODS

DANIEL CATALÁN MATAMOROS
University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain
MIGUEL CEMPELLÍN FERNÁNDEZ
University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

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1. The origin and proliferation of fake news. 2. The need for effective fact-checking. 3. The process and method of fact-checking. 4. The use of artificial intelligence in fact-checking. 5. Final reflections. 6. References

1. THE ORIGIN AND PROLIFERATION OF FAKE NEWS

We've all encountered news, whether through online articles, tweets, or messages on platforms like WhatsApp, that initially seemed true, only to later discover it was false. In this age of instant access to large amounts of everyday information, it is critical to have tools at our disposal to detect and prevent the spread of disinformation. Developing these skills is essential for a discerning and responsible engagement with the vast sea of digital information.

It becomes imperative to begin by identifying fake news. Cambridge Dictionary¹ defines it as "*false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke*". Collins Dictionary² as "*a false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting*".

Wardle (2017) classified the phenomenon of "fake news" into a total of seven distinct compartments: 1) Satire or parody, characterized by a lack of malicious intent but with the potential to mislead; 2) False connection, where headlines,

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news>

² <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fake-news>

visuals, or captions fail to align with the content; 3) Misleading content, marked by the deceptive use of information to frame issues or individuals; 4) False content, wherein genuine material is presented alongside misleading contextual information; 5) Imposter content, exemplified by the impersonation of legitimate sources; 6) Manipulated content, where genuine information or imagery undergoes alterations designed to deceive; 7) Fabricated content, constituting entirely fictitious material crafted with the intent to deceive and inflict harm.

There are four components to any fake news (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020): 1) the creator/disseminator, which includes both those who publish fake news unintentionally and those who do so intentionally; 2) the victims, both in traditional media, like printed newspapers, and in digital media, like tweets; 3) the content, both literal (the title or body text of the news), as well as non-literal (the reason it was created, the subject matter); and 4) the social context of how fake news is spread.

While many might think that the proliferation of fake news is a recent phenomenon, driven by the rapid advancement and widespread use of the internet in the last decade, it's worth noting that false news has a much longer history. The Daily Sun, a New York newspaper dating back to 1835, was responsible for one of the earliest instances of false news in modern times. They released a story about the presence of moon creatures, which had a tremendous influence in the United States.

To be most effective, fake news needs to be spread through social media to reach massive and receptive audiences. This reach may be done through four ways:

1. Using bots. These computer algorithms that work in online social network sites to execute tasks autonomously and repetitively, search and retrieve non-curated information and post them on social media sites using trending topics and hashtags (Morstatter et al., 2016).
2. By flesh-and-bone people because they have a hard time identifying false news, and that they don't recognize their own inability to do so (Lyons et al., 2021).

3. Other option is the microtargeting, which is the use of online data to tailor advertising messages to individuals, based on the identification of recipients' personal vulnerabilities (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2021).
4. Trolls, who are humans who hold accounts on social media platforms to generate comments that argue with people, insult and name-call other users and public figures, try to undermine the credibility of ideas they don't like, and to intimidate individuals who post those ideas (Allen et al., 2021).

Fake news has become increasingly prevalent over the last few years. Online media platforms are especially susceptible to disseminating fake news. As a result, it has become a worldwide problem, with ramifications for elections, state-sanctioned violence, and health effects, making fact-checking tools critical in reducing belief in fake news, reduction that persists for some time (Porter & Wood, 2021).

In recent years, the proliferation of fake news has posed a significant challenge to the integrity of information dissemination. The consequences of this phenomenon extend far beyond misinformation; it has far-reaching implications for democratic processes, public health, and even matters of national security (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; (Pennycook et al., 2020)); or it has impacted on elections, potentially swaying public opinion and distorting electoral outcomes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

2. THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE FACT-CHECKING

As the prevalence of 'fake news' continues to grow, it is vital that media professionals possess the tools required to confront its hazards. With these regards, investigative journalism and fact-checking are intrinsically linked, particularly when crucial facts, vital to the public's interest, are frequently buried and inaccessible. The urgent need for effective fact-checking tools has never been more apparent.

Fact-checking tools and initiatives have been developed to verify the accuracy of information and reduce the prevalence of fake news. These tools range from automated algorithms to human fact-checkers, all working tirelessly to counteract

the spread of false information (Vosoughi et al., 2018). They play a crucial role in helping individuals discern the veracity of news and information they encounter online. In this context, Graves & Glaisyer (2012) established three ways in which fact-checking tools could work:

- Changing people's mind, provide them with an effective counterweight to fake news.
- Changing journalism, encourage them to not just report, but assess the fact.
- Changing the conversation, especially statements in the media.

While fact-checking tools have shown promise in reducing the belief in fake news (Pennycook & Rand, 2019), it is essential to recognize that this battle is ongoing. Fake news continues to adapt and evolve, requiring continuous efforts to improve fact-checking methods and promote media literacy. As Porter & Wood (2021) argue, the reduction in the acceptance of fake news must persist over time to have a lasting impact on society.

Fact-checkers are essential in the age of information overload and social media, but for the objective of eliminating false information to be achieved, everyone must be able to detect this type of content. For this, digital literacy is vital for everyone to access the resources they need to educate themselves without falling victim to misinformation or fraud (Choudhary & Bansal, 2022). Indeed, fact-checking tools are crucial, but they must overcome some obstacles (Sarr & Sall, 2017):

- The subjectivity of the reliability, that make difficult to determine the reliability of a fact.
- Unstructured data, which give more value than those structured.
- The temporal aspect of the reliability and the lack of source.
- The semantics of sentences.
- The identification of factual facts.
- The real time and the speed of information spreading.
- The reliability of the check sources, that makes the reliability is often questioned.

- The factchecking needs other information, such as information on the author, the date of publication, or source sites.
- The filtration of the check sources.

As it ever was, fact-checking is no guarantee against a group of people deciding to ignore the evidence of factual truths, but without the effort of fact-checking, we surrender each of our reality to others. Fact checking emphasizes that we should remain skeptical for our own survival (Leonard et al., 2018).

While fact-checking tools can streamline certain aspects of the fact-checking process, it remains an incomplete solution. Fact-checking is a multifaceted task that demands human judgment, and they are not a substitute for human fact-checkers, but it can certainly enhance their efficiency and effectiveness (Henderson, 2021).

According to Rodriguez (2022), we can conclusively establish the significance of fact-checking, as it serves to: a) prevent the dissemination of hoaxes; b) promote the dissemination of information in a more ethical manner; and c) foster a culture of learning about multiple perspectives on the same story.

3. THE PROCESS AND METHOD OF FACT-CHECKING

Fact-checking is the process of verifying the factual accuracy of questioned reporting and statements. Fact-checking can be conducted before (*ante hoc*) or after (*post hoc*) the text or content is published or otherwise disseminated (Fellmeth & Horwitz, 2011). In both cases, they aim to identify errors so that the text can be corrected before dissemination, or perhaps rejected. While the first case is based on an in-house quality control, the second one is normally checked by independent or external fact-checking organizations.

Fact checkers verify that the names, dates, and facts in an article or book are correct (Harrison Smith, 2004.). For instance, they could get in touch with someone whose words are used in a planned news story to inquire about the accuracy of the quotation or the proper way to spell the person's name. Fact-checking is a crucial step in the proofreading process as well as a current, distinct type of journalism. Its objective is to offer objective, accurate analysis of public

remarks to reduce public misunderstanding and advance knowledge of important subjects (Parker, 2023).

Fact-checking spans across diverse domains of knowledge, with each area tailored to address specific objectives and information accuracy requirements:

- **Political Fact-Checking:** Focuses on verifying claims made by politicians, government officials, and political entities, especially during elections and policy debates (Wang, 2017).
- **Health Fact-Checking:** Concentrates on claims related to medical and health topics, ensuring the accuracy of health advice, medical research, and the effectiveness of treatments (Hämäläinen & Wiechetek, 2020).
- **Science Fact-Checking:** Involves verifying scientific claims, scrutinizing research studies, and debunking pseudoscientific claims (Miquel-Ribé & Laniado, 2019).
- **Environmental Fact-Checking:** Addresses claims related to environmental issues, climate change, and conservation efforts, with a focus on verifying environmental data (Gheorghiu, 2020).
- **Internet and Social Media Fact-Checking:** Specializes in checking claims, rumors, and viral content on the internet and social media platforms to combat misinformation (Vosoughi et al., 2018).
- **Economic and Business Fact-Checking:** Centers on claims related to the economy, businesses, financial data, and stock market trends (Rangapur et al., 2023).
- **Local Fact-Checking:** Fact-checks claims and statements relevant to specific local or regional issues and events (Jerónimo & Sánchez Esparza, 2023).
- **Historical Fact-Checking:** Involves fact-checking historical claims, events, and stories to provide accurate historical context and dispel historical myths (Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018).

The art of fact-checking, as outlined by Ireton and Posetti (2018), reveals in a meticulously orchestrated a three-phase process. This three-fold process constitutes the cornerstone of the fact-checking discipline:

- 1) Finding fact-checkable claims through legislative records, media outlets and social media. This process includes determining which major public claims can be fact-checked and ought to be fact-checked.
- 2) Finding the facts by looking for the best available evidence regarding the claim at hand.
- 3) Correcting the record by evaluating the claim in light of the evidence, usually on a scale of truthfulness (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

In the ever-evolving battle against misinformation, the categorization of fact-checking methodologies has become increasingly complex, as elucidated by Hangloo and Arora (2021). This multifaceted classification delves into two distinct dimensions: content-based and social context-based fact-checking. Understanding these intricacies is paramount in the relentless quest for truth in an information-saturated world:

a) Content-based Fact-Checking, by analyzing the content of the articles, either the text or image or both within the news article:

- Knowledge-based: This approach involves comparing the claims made in news articles with external sources to verify their authenticity. It relies on established knowledge and factual accuracy.
- Style-based: Style-based fact-checking aims to determine if the writer has the intention to mislead the public by examining the language, tone, and framing of the content. It assesses the rhetorical strategies used.
- Linguistic based: This methodology uses a set of enhanced textual features to distinguish between fake and real news. It focuses on linguistic and grammatical cues that might indicate misinformation.
- Visual-based: Visual content can be analyzed to detect how it provokes or misleads readers. This includes scrutinizing images, videos, and graphics used in news articles.

b) Social Context-based Fact-Checking, or how the news proliferates over time and provides useful information to determine the veracity and stance of news articles:

- **Social Context-based:** This category assesses how news spreads over time and provides valuable information to determine the veracity and stance of news articles. It looks at the social and cultural context in which news is shared.
- **Network-based:** Network-based fact-checking studies different social networks and their dynamics to detect fake news. It considers how information propagates within and across these networks.
- **Temporal-based:** Information on the internet is not static; it evolves over time with new information and modifications to claims. Temporal-based fact-checking takes this into account to track the changes in a story or claim.

In the dynamic landscape of fact-checking methodologies, the tools and approaches used for verifying content can be further categorized to accommodate the diverse challenges posed by today's information ecosystem. This categorization provides a more nuanced understanding of the methods employed to ascertain the accuracy of claims. Three distinctive approaches come to the forefront, and each approach carries its own set of advantages and limitations, and understanding this classification is crucial for making informed decisions in the battle against misinformation:

- 1) **Manual fact-checking**, where dedicated journalists conduct rigorous investigations. Manual fact-checking, as eloquently detailed by Graves (2016) necessitates painstaking investigative efforts by dedicated journalists who meticulously verify claims using rigorous scrutiny of primary sources, thereby ensuring the utmost accuracy of reported information. It offers several advantages, including the nuanced understanding of context and the ability to uncover subtle falsehoods that automated tools might overlook. However, it is a time-consuming and

resource-intensive process, limiting its scalability in addressing the vast volume of misinformation generated daily.

- 2) **Automated fact-checking algorithms**, harnessing advanced technology for swift identification of false information. Automated fact-checking algorithms, as outlined by Zubiaga et al., (2019) harness the power of natural language processing and advanced machine learning techniques to promptly and effectively identify and flag false information, thereby contributing significantly to the mitigation of the rapid dissemination of misinformation. It has the advantage of speed and scalability, capable of quickly processing vast amounts of information. However, their effectiveness hinges on the quality of the algorithms and training data, and they may struggle with context-dependent claims or subtle misinformation.
- 3) **Crowdsourced fact-checking initiatives**, which engage the wider public to collectively verify content. Crowdsourced fact-checking initiatives, as exemplified in the pioneering work of Vosoughi et al., (2018) actively involve the broader public in the verification process, thereby harnessing collective intelligence and fostering transparency in the realm of fact-checking endeavors. This category fosters transparency and inclusivity in the fact-checking process, drawing upon diverse perspectives and expertise. However, it may face challenges related to the quality of contributions and potential biases among participants.

Fact-checking organizations often have their own set of guidelines and procedures for implementing these methodologies. These guidelines are the systematic approaches and techniques used to verify the accuracy of claims, statements, or information, and they vary depending on the nature of the claim and the available resources. Here are common fact-checking guidelines (Kaminsky, 2023):

1. Source Verification, which ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information which it's gathered.
 - Cross-reference the information you find across multiple sources to validate its consistency and authenticity.
 - Evaluate the credibility of the sources you utilize.

- When possible, verify the information through official or authoritative sources.
2. Documentation and Record-keeping, crucial for organization, reference, and legal purposes:
- Take detailed notes of your findings, including the source, date, and relevant context.
 - Capture screenshots or save copies of content that may change or become unavailable over time.
 - Store your collected data and documentation securely to protect the privacy and integrity of the information.
3. Ethical Considerations
- Respect individuals' privacy rights and obtain appropriate consent when collecting or sharing personal information.
 - Ensure that your investigations comply with applicable laws and regulations.
 - Utilize the information you gather responsibly and ethically.

These guidelines are often used in combination, depending on the type of information being fact-checked and the available resources. Fact-checking is a critical practice in journalism and information dissemination, helping to ensure the accuracy of claims and combat misinformation.

4. THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN FACT-CHECKING

Artificial intelligence has played an increasingly important role in fact-checking tools, helping to automate and enhance the process of verifying the accuracy of information and combating misinformation. This is often referred to as Automated Fact-Checking (AFC), denoting the utilization of artificial intelligence-driven mechanisms for the verification and authentication of information, a practice that holds growing significance in the contemporary information landscape.

Here are some key techniques based on artificial intelligence used in fact-checking:

- **Automated Claim Detection:** Artificial intelligence algorithms are used to automatically detect and identify claims or statements that may need fact-checking. These claims can be extracted from various sources, such as news articles, social media posts, or political speeches (Sheikhi et al., 2023).
- **Natural Language Processing (NLP):** These techniques are applied to understand and analyze the language used in claims and the related articles. This allows fact-checking tools to comprehend the context and nuances of the statements (Allen et al., 2021).
- **Database and Knowledge Graphs:** Fact-checking tools often use databases and knowledge graphs that store a vast amount of information. Artificial intelligence helps in searching and retrieving relevant information from these databases to support fact-checking (Weikum, 2021).
- **Automated Source Credibility Assessment:** Artificial intelligence can be used to assess the credibility of sources and websites. It can analyze factors such as domain authority, past reliability, and bias to determine the trustworthiness of a source (Krzysztof et al., 2015).
- **Semantic Analysis:** Artificial intelligence can perform semantic analysis to understand the meaning and implications of a statement. This helps in detecting more subtle forms of misinformation and disinformation (Vo & Lee, 2019).
- **Claim Matching:** Artificial intelligence tools can compare claims against a database of previously fact-checked statements to see if there are similar claims that have already been assessed (Kazemi et al., 2021).
- **Sentiment and Emotion Analysis:** Some fact-checking tools incorporate sentiment and emotion analysis to understand the emotional impact and framing of a claim, which can help detect biased or misleading information (Sethi & Rangaraju, 2018).
- **Real-Time Fact-Checking:** Artificial intelligence-powered fact-checking tools can provide real-time fact-checks during live events, such as political debates or press conferences, to promptly correct inaccuracies (Godel et al., 2021).

- **Multilingual Support:** Artificial intelligence can be used to fact-check claims in multiple languages, making it more effective in a global context (Gupta & Srikumar, 2021).
- **Automated Report Generation:** Fact-checking tools can automatically generate reports summarizing the results of fact-checking, which can be helpful for journalists and the public (Mahmood et al., 2024).
- **User-Generated Content Analysis:** Artificial intelligence can analyze user-generated content on social media platforms, identifying potentially false information and providing context or corrections (Prabhakar et al., 2021).
- **Machine Learning Models:** Machine learning models, such as deep learning and ensemble methods, are often used to improve the accuracy of fact-checking by learning from past fact-checking efforts (Anusree et al., 2022).

Artificial intelligence-driven fact-checking tools are continuously evolving, and they are playing a crucial role in combating the spread of misinformation and improving the overall quality of information available to the public. However, while these techniques have the capability to identify fake news, it's important to note that they are not infallible, as they are susceptible to certain limitations. To enhance the accuracy of fake news detection, ongoing research endeavors can be pursued to mitigate these limitations and formulate innovative strategies aimed at achieving higher precision (Tajrian et al., 2023).

This does not imply that the utilization of artificial intelligence for fact-checking is a straightforward or uncomplicated endeavor; on the contrary, it underscores the existence of ongoing, complex challenges that necessitate meticulous attention and consideration to enhance the efficacy of this form of artificial intelligence (Graves, 2018). Some of these challenges might be as follows:

- A significant portion of the tasks undertaken by human fact-checkers demands a level of judgment and sensitivity to context that remains beyond the capabilities of fully automated verification systems.

- Remarkable progress is being achieved in automating the verification of a specific set of straightforward factual claims, particularly those backed by authoritative data. Nevertheless, AFC systems will continue to rely on human oversight in the foreseeable future.
- Both researchers and practitioners concur that, at present, the most promising applications of AFC technologies involve tools that aid fact-checkers in the identification and investigation of claims, as well as in the effective delivery of their findings.
- Up to this point, independent nonprofit fact-checking organizations have been at the forefront of AFC development and implementation, with limited involvement from traditional media outlets.
- While some individual AFC tools have been cost-effectively developed by fact-checking groups, the advancement of capabilities and the creation of large-scale systems necessitate sustained support from foundations, universities, and platform companies.

5. FINAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Fact-checking plays a crucial role in the information ecosystem and is likely to continue evolving in the future. Some future trends and recommendations might be as follows:

- **The Rise of Automation:** Fact-checking processes are increasingly being automated using artificial intelligence and machine learning. Automated fact-checking tools are becoming more sophisticated and capable of quickly identifying false information. For instance, discusses about automated fact-checking projects and their impact.
- **Collaborative Fact-Checking:** Fact-checking organizations are likely to collaborate more in the future. They will work together to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation across borders. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) is a reference to explore for global collaboration efforts.
- **Deepfakes and Misinformation Challenges:** Fact-checking will need to adapt to the challenges posed by deepfake videos and highly convincing

misinformation. Organizations like First Draft are at the forefront of addressing this issue.

- **Blockchain Technology:** Some fact-checking initiatives are exploring the use of blockchain technology to ensure the transparency and authenticity of their work. Like the initiative of DUIC (De Utrechtse Internet Courant) in collaboration with Design Innovation Group & Milvum.
- **Educational Initiatives:** There's a growing need for media literacy and critical thinking skills. Fact-checking organizations, like the Poynter Institute, may increasingly focus on educational initiatives to equip people with the tools to assess the credibility of information.
- **Real-time Fact-Checking:** Fact-checking in real-time during live events, debates, and speeches is expected to become more prevalent. The Washington Post's "Fact Checker" is known for real-time fact-checking during political events.
- **Incorporation into Social Media:** Social media platforms may integrate fact-checking tools directly into their interfaces. Facebook, for instance, has introduced fact-checking features on its platform, and this trend could continue.
- **Ethical and Legal Considerations:** As fact-checking evolves, there may be discussions about the ethical and legal responsibilities of fact-checkers. Hence, the need for a code of Professional Integrity for independent European fact-checkers, developed by fact-checking organizations and with the support of the European Commission.

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THE NEED FOR AN UNCONTAMINATED JOURNALISM: THE SLOW JOURNALISM IN THE FAST ERA

UDANE GOIKOETXEA-BILBAO,
University of the Basque Country, Spain
CARMEN PEÑAFIEL-SAIZ
University of the Basque Country, Spain

LIST OF CONTENT:

1. Introduction 2. Informative distortions 3. Fake news and disinformation, a threat to democracy 4. Post-truth during pandemic 5. Methodology 6. Results: the need for an in-depth journalism against disinformation 7. Discussion and conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media, initially conceived as platforms for bringing people together, is being used – together with fake news and big data – as a veritable weapon with a clear objective: to imperceptibly change our behavior in order to provoke political and social changes that have nothing to do with democracy. Fake news, hoaxes or conspiracy theories expand uncontrolled throughout social media and have global consequences. In this context, quality slow journalism is advancing day by day on the Internet, what today is quantitatively secondary and geographically peripheral could become, in the near future, qualitatively significant and, in certain cases, aspire to dispute the hegemony of some media that until now have been a reference.

The research is based on the development of a mixed research using triangulation (Denzin, 1989), to develop exploratory, descriptive, and quantitative techniques. Different keys have been analyzed through ten case studies¹

¹ Ctxt (Spain), 5W (Spain), Gatopardo (Mexico), Letras libres (Mexico), Yorokobu (Spain), Jot Down (Spain), Anfibia (Argentina), La Silla vacía (Colombia), Arcadia (Colombia), Panenka (Spain), etc.

(Wimmer and Dominick, 1996), in-depth interviews (Gaitán and Piñuel, 1998), a Delphi study (Linstone and Turoff, 2002; Verčič et al, 2001) and 2,000 questionnaires carried out in Argentina, Colombia, Spain and Mexico².

The triangulation gathers in a holistic way the phenomenon regarding representative media of the new current of this resting journalism in order to study from the concept of what slow journalism is to where this movement is currently positioned. We could say that narrative or slow journalism (Rosique-Cedillo and Barranquero-Carretero, 2015) is a journalistic practice that, fleeing immediacy, produces texts that encourage reflection and analysis, using literary formulas, but without stepping into the limits of fiction, and rigorous and quality information. The data obtained through different techniques allow us to obtain a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon studied in the context of fake news (Berkowitz and Schwartz, 2016; Zilles, 2019, Greene and Murphy, 2020). In this context, a long-form, uncontaminated digital journalism is consolidating as an alternative to other styles: slow journalism.

2. INFORMATIVE DISTORTIONS

The appearance of social media and online platforms has led to the traditional media becoming more distanced whilst the opposite has happened with online media, where we can find all kinds of information: honest, quality, good, superficial, without sources, without context, without a signature, without a date, without establishing the ownership of the media entity, a loud speaker for fake news and lies, rumor, information that is not contrasted, not verified, etc.. We are faced with a disinformation bubble that threatens democracy and that is sacrificing professional quality, informative quality, ethics and deontology for different reasons that we will cover in this article. Furthermore, disinformation is designed to be difficult to detect.

² The survey was conducted by CIES S.L. and TRA (The Research Alliance). 500 people were interviewed in December 2019 (100 for each country in the sample). The technique used was online with quotas stratified by sex (266 men and 234 women) and age (169 between 18-34 years, 172 between 35-49 and 159 between 50-75). The confidence level was 95% and the maximum margin of error for the five countries as a whole was $\pm 4.5\%$.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now used in the service of deep fake news, making it more sophisticated and difficult to detect. We live in an age of information overabundance in which the traditional media is losing credibility, where there are signs of a lack of professional control in some digital news media and where there is precariousness within the professional media labour force; all of which is framed by a global crisis, made worse by the recent health crisis, that has posed a serious challenge to journalism, governments, political parties, the general public... In this setting an overabundance of information is produced where people do not have time to read everything they would like to, let alone process, analyze or criticize it (Campos, 2010). This overload of information is also known as 'infoxication' (Barranquero-Carretero and Rosique-Cedillo, 2014).

There are currently millions of information items, and this excess of information leads to a market of news without control, and although journalism is going through 'turbulent' times, people are interested in the news. Journalism should continue to fulfil a social function, which is to provide citizens with the necessary tools to be able to interpret the world around them, adhering to the almost sacred principles of any serious and rigorous information: sources, verification, and contrasting.

The verification process should be done, independently of the source; it should be obligatory to check credibility and contrast the information, whether it be an internet source or from an accredited media entity; rumor and information should be distinguished. Verification implies firstly contrasting the trustworthiness of the source (Torres et al., 2018), followed by consulting with experts and contrasting the data with authorized voices so as to avoid succumbing to sensationalist content or to misinformation. Social media is a very useful tool and source for journalists that had helped to bring the world closer to society, enabling a continuous tracking of the news and the possibility of interacting with the public.

A new report from the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) at Oxford University (CEPYME news, 2018), has found that, despite efforts to fight computational propaganda, the problem is growing on a large scale. Samantha Bradshaw, co-author of the report, says that "there has been a considerable increase in the number of countries in which there is an officially organized manipulation of social

media, from 28 to 48 countries throughout the world" (...) The main part of this rise comes from political parties that spread disinformation and fake news in and around election times. There are more political parties that have learnt from the strategies used during the Brexit campaign and the US presidential elections in 2016, but there are many more electoral campaigns all over the world that use bots, fake news and disinformation to polarize and manipulate voters. Samantha Bradshaw adds that, in general, the organized use of manipulation of social media is a big business. They estimate that tens of millions of dollars are spent on these activities: "Part of the money may be spent on legitimate publicity on social media, but there is certainly a growing industry of fake accounts, online commentators and political bots" (CEPYME news, 2018).

In the words of Divina Frau-Meigs, in the VII International Congress of the Spanish Association of Research and Communication [VII Congreso Internacional de la Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación (AE-IC)] that took place in Valencia on the 28th and 30th November 2020, "disinformation has proved to be an influential weapon in peace times". According to Frau-Meigs, the majority of actors from all sectors (politics, defense, education...) have underestimated the impact of social media platforms on the creation and transmission of influence.

Depending on the intention, false information can be classified into misinformation, which is created without the intention to mislead, and disinformation, which is created with the intention to mislead and deceive the reader (Fallis, 2014; Salaverría et al., 2020). Both have negative influences. Fake news is disinformation that imitates the content and form of the news but without guaranteeing the standards of precision and credibility demanded of any professional journalistic product. The most notable characteristics reveal that there are often hidden intentions behind it, whether it be to interfere in the decision-making process (elections, referendums, etc.) or to artificially create states of opinion that later favour the adoption of certain decisions by public powers (Zhou and Zafarani, 2018; Salaverría et al., 2020). Right from the outset they possess a viral structure that amplifies their social echo thanks to the internet and social media, and they form part of a set of informative distortions in which

there is a cohabitation and feedback of false rumor, erroneous information, or partially false news. Fake news has become a constant in journalism and a real problem when it comes to discerning the verisimilitude of a piece of information; along with fake news there are also rumors and hoaxes. Hoaxes are not a new phenomenon in journalism; in fact, they were already a tool of power in the 18th century and a rumor can be defined as an unverified claim, which is made by users on social media platforms and can potentially spread beyond their private network (Bondielli, Marcelloni, 2019).

In this context, the general public is asking itself: What's going on? What's happening in the field of information and communication throughout the world? And on a socio-political level? People are asking recurring questions, such as: Is all this commotion normal, this continuous scandal, this noise in the media, this "everyone against everyone"...? What are the winning techniques and new battlegrounds opening up right now within public opinion? What research has been done in relation to these issues? Below we will attempt to analyze what is happening in this field of communication. What is evident is that the mechanisms that generate public opinion are changing. But beyond an understanding of the empirical impact of fake news on societal institutions that scholarship has shed light on, "emergent research also points to the potential of fake news being instrumentalized as a discursive tool to achieve political ends" (Neo, 2020: 2). Social media, fake news, algorithms, and big data have changed everything (Casero Ripollés, 2018). There are some key concepts that we cannot lose sight of: Disinformation (false information that is deliberately spread), hidden intention, whether it be political, social, economic or cultural, viral structure, it forms part of a set of informative distortions.

Yamir Moreno, a scientist at the Institute of Biocomputation and Complex Systems Physics [Instituto de Biocomputación y Física de Sistemas Complejos (BIFI)] at the University of Zaragoza, points out that disinformation spreads more quickly than biological viruses and even reaches more people, which is why it has been called an infodemic. The study, that this scientist has taken part in, shows and quantifies how mobility and people's relationships (both physical and online) influence the propagation of a rumor so that it becomes viral. This viral

propagation will depend greatly on the relevance of the spokespeople, their arguments and radius of social action (from commenting among their neighbours to getting a thousand retweets or appearing on television)³.

There is talk of a massive seduction in terms of fake news and the creation of the post-truth era. These fake news stories, rumours, manipulation, post-truth (Hamborg, Donnay & Gipp, 2018), inundate our private, public and vital spaces, taking advantage of a series of circumstances that enable them to succeed; a lack of credibility in the traditional media, the simplification of the message, Internet, social media, algorithms and big data, the actions of bots and trolls, the disrepute of the political class, political polarization and, furthermore, because they are free of charge.

Ignacio Ramonet, in a conference in La Casa Encendida (Madrid, November 2018) pointed out that fake news, post-truth and alternative facts are exploding the field of information and contributing to the redrawing of public opinion: "The battle for power takes place on communication networks that attempt to shape public opinion and minds according to the interests of what is known as digital capitalism". He referred to the words of Manuel Castells: "Whoever wins the battle of minds wins the battle of power". In the age of over-information, it is not easy to be informed. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between a true news story and a fake one. Fake news, post-truth and alternative facts have bulldozed their way onto the scene, making it extremely difficult for citizens to distinguish reality from fiction. Ramonet (2018) asks what the point of democracy is if Facebook knows us better than we know ourselves and knows even before we do who we are going to vote for: "If they can manage to hack our own brains, how can we resist the unforeseen dangers of new technologies?"⁴

For the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2010), power is no longer the monopoly of the State but now resides in our minds. The essential form of power lies in the capacity to mould the mind. As he explains, the media has become the area in which power strategies are laid out; but, in the current technological context, in the age of the internet and the mobile phone, mass communication

³<https://heraldo.es/noticias/aragon/2020/03/30>.

⁴<https://www.documentaleson.com/ignacio-ramonet-la-informacion-en-la-era-de-las-fake-news/>

has crossed over the frontier of the traditional media and originated a new communicative environment which has profoundly modified the relationships of power. In the same forum, Manuel Castells (2010) states that power lies in controlling communication, whether it be the macropower of the State and communication groups, or the micropower of all kinds of organizations. Power is something more than communication, and communication is something more than power. But power relies on controlling communication, just as counter power relies on breaking that control". For Castells, "the only thing the traditional media has left in the face of the new forms of communication is credibility (...), and communication is increasingly concentrated in multimedia business groups, but, at the same time, it is more segmented, more focused on specific audiences".

In this context, Ignacio Ramonet (2021) assures us that social media is an expression of the "authentic democratization" of communication, although he also warns that it "has infinitely multiplied the capacity for mind manipulation". He observes how, at present, a "media Darwinism" is being produced, and the power that is incapable of adapting to the new reality will lose, since today social media is the main space for dialectic confrontation. "It is the present day Agora", he claims. The ex-director of *Le Monde Diplomatique* points out that social media and the new types of messaging (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Zoom, TikTok, etc.) have unarguably expanded the space of freedom of expression; at the same time it has infinitely multiplied the capacity for mind manipulation and for the surveillance of citizens: "Paraphrasing Marx, that history is the history of technological innovation; and that each technological innovation provides a solution to a problem, but each solution creates a new problem" (Ramonet, 2018).

3. FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION, A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

Among other reasons because their promoters' traffic in our personal data, invade our privacy, use lies, artificially generate states of opinion etc. In 2016 it became clear that disinformation campaigns in social media were able to swing a convocation or an election result, just as occurred in the successes of Brexit in the UK and of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections. The emergence of

social media and online platforms have brought with them a rise in campaigns of toxicity as an undesired side effect (Vosoughi, 2018; Wagner and Boczkowski, 2019). In many cases, they are orchestrated from abroad in order to directly influence public opinion without the traditional filters of the local news media.

Fake news not only had a decisive influence in the 2016 and 2020 US elections, and in the Brexit campaign, but also played a key role in Bolsonaro's victory in Brazil (2018), and in other countries like: Australia, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya, Latvia, Ukraine, Iran, Moldavia and Russia. Fake news even contributed to the creation of a climate conducive to genocide in some cases, like the one in Burma (Myanmar) in 2017 against the Muslim minority (Rohingya), which left 25,000 people dead and 750,000 displaced, when the people of the Rakhine State were brutally subjugated. This situation had a lot to do with messages inciting hatred which were allowed to spread via Facebook. These social media platforms which were originally seen as an example of a certain utopia are now forcing many to wonder whether they are more an element of a dystopia. In this context of infoxication, videos and artificial intelligence are used to expand fake or manipulated information in a credulous way: an inappropriate use of social media, fake news, a partisan use of big data (algorithms), bots, trolls, deep fake news.

Technology played a decisive role in Donald Trump's campaign for the 2016 General Election in the US where the news that was spread was an example of this: for example, when it was claimed that Pope Francis was supporting Donald Trump as presidential candidate, which was completely untrue; and another story in which Hillary Clinton was said to have sold weapons to ISIS, which was also a lie. Cambridge Analytics used the data of 50 million profiles of potential Republican voters in Facebook. If there is anything to be gleaned from the research it is that it is not always the case that truth will out, but rather that falsehood spreads significantly further and faster than truth.

The fake news stories favourable to Trump that were emitted in the three months prior to the elections were shared a total of 30 million times in Facebook, while those favourable to Clinton were shared 8 million times. It is much more likely that people will create stories that favour their preferred candidate, especially if they have an ideologically segregated social media.

A legitimate question to be asked in this context is the following: who is more effective at propagating fake news – bots or humans? Studies carried out so far show that humans are. Despite the fact that users who spread fake news have notably fewer followers than bots do and were less active on Twitter, they were much higher in number than those who spread true news stories. We must take into account that fake news spreads feelings and sensations that have a wider echo on social media, such as anger, fear, disgust or uncertainty. Furthermore, they are often accompanied by the novelty component or the "surprise" factor, which expands their diffusion.

As perverse as it seems, it has been proven that the majority of the population prefers to cling onto doubtful information that reaffirms our convictions rather than put our ideas at risk with true news⁵.

4. POST-TRUTH DURING PANDEMIC

The proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories that have appeared all over the world during the COVID-19 pandemic are a good example of the post-truth setting we are currently living in. Governments in most parts of the world – not all, of course – have managed information in a biased, partisan way lacking in transparency. World rulers –with very few exceptions– have treated their citizens as simple, underage subjects. They have not acted with transparency, have hidden information, have manipulated data and have tried to use the media as mere transmission belts to defend their interests. Has anyone stopped to ask why the media has resorted so often to the opinion of experts to get a more accurate analysis about the real dimensions of the pandemic? Why does the general public give more credibility to scientists than politicians? Citizens do not trust their leaders. The proliferation of confusing information, which is barely verified, or contradictory generates unease and anxiety among the population. In these circumstances, fake news circulates faster than the spread of the virus itself, with disastrous consequences: greater confusion, more disaffection with

⁵Harvard University - Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. Research Publication No. 2020-6. October 2, 2020. Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign. Yochai Benkler et. al.

everything, a better breeding ground for conspiracy theories. Many governments –not all– have lied to us. They have told us what we wanted to hear. All this, together with pandemic fatigue, has caused people to function based on so-called "normalcy bias" – that psychological mechanism which causes our brain to try to return to normality even before normality can be recovered. The economy has been placed above health, with disastrous results. Those governments that have done the opposite have had fewer deaths, have saved their economies and have come through the pandemic earlier.

In times of pandemic the communication policies of most governments throughout the world have been guilty of opacity, always on the defensive. They have been incapable of dealing with fake news, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories. Governments that have opted for different tactics, such as New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, or some Nordic countries have gained their citizens' trust and have been much more effective at dealing with the virus.

The problems derived from large scale disinformation, made clearly visible with the "infodemic" that the WHO warned of in February 2020, require a transdisciplinary approach. In a recent article, seventeen researchers from different specialization fields – ranging from climate science to philosophy – argued that academics should try to treat the study of the large scale impact of technology on society as a "crisis discipline". The term crisis discipline is used to refer to a field in which scientists from different areas work quickly to address an urgent social problem, such as the way conservation biology tries to protect species in danger of extinction or how climate change research aims to slow down global warming. The changes derived from the massive use of new technologies and the lack of control over disinformation may have unpredictable consequences that affect not only democracy but even the future of the planet.

As the cost of inaccuracy diminishes, individuals and institutions are better placed to obtain ideological and political benefits from blatant lies. Sectors of society or of social media repeatedly exposed to falsehoods can become normalized or lack access to an environment of information capable of separating fact from fiction.

Over and above disinformation, we urgently need to understand the consequences of dark patterns (the interface design that guides people against their best interests) and opaque algorithms, those deviations that are now important research topics in the field of Communication.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study forms part of a wider project about slow journalism in Spanish. The methodology used for this work is based on triangulation (Creswell, 2014: 239): "The purposes of mixed methods studies is based on seeking convergence (triangulation), examining different facets of a phenomenon (complementariness), using the methods sequentially (development) ". We can identify five general reasons for combining methods (Greene, Caracelli and Graham 1989: 257): triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and diffusion. Qualitative and quantitative methods (Wimmer and Dominick, 1996) were used for this research, such as case studies of slow magazines, in-depth interviews, surveys in Spain, Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia⁶, and an international Delphi study. The Delphi method is prospective and used to get a consensus of opinion from a group of experts about a particular topic (Eiroa and Barranquero, 2017: 79). This method involves structured questions about a specific subject put to a panel of experts. Its aim is to analyze the perceptions of experts about the study topic and detect future tendencies. Thorough questionnaires are carried out individually with these experts, alternating them with the feedback from the group and, from an open exploration an opinion is created that represents the group, following the successive rounds that are carried out.

6. RESULTS. THE NEED FOR AN IN-DEPTH JOURNALISM AGAINST DISINFORMATION

The loss of credibility in the media and the rise of disinformation raise great challenges from the point of view of informative quality, particularly within a context of labour precariousness and a redefining of the media business model,

⁶ Countries in which the ten analyzed websites are located

but also one of complexity and uncertainty. We need to reflect on the issues that affect information quality, to go deeper into a complete diagnosis of the causes of this deficit and to come up with proposals for the implementation of improvements. In this setting of truth, lies and post-truth in times of self-interested toxicity, there is a consolidation of unhurried or slow journalism, a journalism that is more explanatory and analytical, within an ecosystem of hybrid news media that champions the rescue of uncontaminated information (Rauch, 2011, Greenberg, 2012, Le-Masurier, 2015).

Over time it has been shown that it is possible to carry out quality, public service journalism online. Since 2010, different news media have found a niche in the current information market with one clear aim: to return to a public service journalism, to practice it freely, and to recuperate classical information genres whilst taking into account current technology and the new possibilities it opens up. The following media entities have arisen in this vein: Ctxt (Spain), 5W (Spain), Gatopardo (Mexico), Letras libres (Mexico), Yorokobu (Spain), Jot Down (Spain), Anfibia (Argentina), La Silla vacía (Colombia), Arcadia (Colombia), Panenka (Spain), etc., to name but a few.

These media are currently very important reference models within digital narrative journalism in Spanish. Erik Neveu (2016) defines it as a narrative and participative journalism, directed at a community that prioritizes untold stories. Slow journalism should be considered an ideal online type that questions the reality of journalism.

According to what has been observed through case studies and in-depth interviews with professionals working in these media entities: analysis, in-depth report, contextual interview, essay and – in general – long format texts have their place within the market. This grants them a touch of distinction in a supply marked by uniformity of content and sensationalist bias. Despite being eminently digital news media (largely as a result of the paper crisis), they maintain a complementary relationship with their printed versions, together with applying a large dose of audacity and innovation in their approach. Starting from a small business structure, they know how to swim against the tide and take important risks. They have created their own brand image, acquiring an added value that

distinguishes them from the existing majority on offer in the market (Goikoetxea and Ramírez de la Piscina, 2019).

In the words of Vanesa Jiménez, director of the magazine *Ctxt*, the idea was to go back to the concept of journalism as a citizens' right, as a public service, as a democratic principle, as a fundamental element of critical thought: "It was a somewhat utopian journalism, but a large handful of news media have shown that it can be carried out freely thanks to the internet and reader support", explained this journalist within the framework of the International Congress on Slow Journalism that took place in Bilbao in November of 2020.

Slow journalism is a meticulous long format journalism that cultivates all information genres. It is aimed at a specialized audience that demands a more paused journalistic reception. It is related to literary journalism and immersion journalism because its rhetoric comes out of investigation. It has a commitment to informing in a precise way, to telling stories creatively and deeply, with diverse techniques and different resources. The formal characteristics it shares with literature coexist with a certain freshness that is free and close to the reader.

Quality slow journalism is led by veteran journalists (some of them victims of the press crisis), lovers of literature with a talent for narrative, professionals who practice a journalism of facts and investigation, cultural innovators who – having been evicted from paper format – have proved to be passionate about the new editorial models emerging online. They are analytical reporters without borders who attempt to explain the complexity of social phenomena through context.

The Portuguese journalist Felipe Caetano (2013) compared the need for slow journalism to that of 'slow food'. He identifies it as going back to the origins, to the fundamentals, and presenting content that has been worked, with time, with deliberation, reflection, and analysis: "Texts that stay in our memory, that captivate us and that we want to keep". The use of new technology amplifies the echo of these journalistic practices and, furthermore, citizens are increasingly opting for an online consumption of information.

We are at a point where the audience accepts with relative normality the idea of paying for quality content, in fact most of the media that practices slow journalism

are financed via subscriptions. In this sense, quality slow journalism is able to forge its own niche in the market. According to a study carried out by the HGH Research Group in the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), income from subscriptions and voluntary donations are a big part of financial turnover, and these news media entities are very attentive to reader loyalty. They also resort to diversification to balance their economy with the sale of their own publications in print or producing content for other outlets. The studied digital projects in Spanish are sustained by a reduced workforce complemented by the work of extensive networks of collaborators, most of them freelance journalists (Agirre, Murua, Zabalondo, 2020). Narrative journalism is not very profitable in commercial terms, as Spanish authors Martínez and Colomer, or Bianchini from Argentina point out; "it demands an elevated production time and costs that not all media outlets are prepared to assume, even less so in the middle of the search for an economically viable business model" (Palau-Sampio; Cuartero-Naranjo, 2018).

According to data collected in Argentina, Colombia, Spain and Mexico, from people between the ages of 18 and 65 who had consumed the digital press at some time, 36% of those surveyed claimed to have read the narrative press, after being provided with the definition and some brand name examples on the questionnaire itself.

This proportion is significantly higher in Colombia. Some 78% of this population in the analyzed countries habitually use the digital press to be informed about current affairs. The digital press is the priority news media for 41% of men, while it is social media for 40% of women. The population between the ages of 18 and 34 get their information mainly from social media (53%). Trust in the media outlet is the main reason for consumption (61%), with this reason being more common among those in Colombia (65%). Secondly, consumers look for specific subjects (43%), something that also occurs to a greater extent in Colombia (52%) and Mexico (50%), as well as among those under the age of 35 (48%).

The experts who took part in the Delphi study carried out by the Basque University (UPV/EHU) Research Group express their concern over the drop in quality conditioned by the tendency towards info-entertainment given that they

envisage a polarization between good and bad quality media, although they were reluctant to generalize. In fact, they see reasons to be optimistic about the possibilities of developing tools that increase the quality offered by digital journalism, such as fact checkers, along with the appearance of new media entities that stand up to the conditioning of the news agenda by the major outlets.

The consulted experts consider that it promotes quality, contributes reflection, has the capacity to educate readers by getting them more involved in the news, and allows the reader to remember and understand the information better. However, they point out that in terms of sales and audience, the market is still quite limited, less so than traditional journalism. Nonetheless, the majority agree that this type of journalism is more necessary than ever to combat disinformation and information overload.

In terms of its characteristics, the experts highlight time and distance that enable analysis, depth, context and informative independence, the human value of its stories, its creativity and audience participation. As keys for its success, they underline specialization, marking its own editorial line, and covering stories that are sometimes overlooked by the media, but which could be of interest to certain sectors of the audience. In this sense they mention investigative journalism as the most in-depth. The experts are optimistic about the future of narrative journalism, in such that they see a growing space for it to distinguish itself from a media that focuses on immediacy.

In terms of financial sustainability, they recommend that the media maintains a coherence when it comes to looking for sources of funding, and that these guarantee the independence, transparency and legitimacy of the journalistic profession. They consider that the ideal business model for the slow media would be one that doesn't rely on external funding from outside the media outlet itself. In this respect, they consider that governments could better regulate the communicative system, leading to the creation of better conditions that would allow the practice of slow journalism.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Social media and online platforms are not only services, they are architectures and infrastructures that support and provide an immense flow of data which is used by multinational businesses and creators of public opinion.

Authoritarian movements are only possible when the general public become used to a new normality that anesthetizes them and which has been implemented with the COVID-19 pandemic. Combating disinformation requires much more than knowing how to use fact checking portals. It means heeding the threat that fake news poses for democracy. For this, governments must encourage, disseminate and practice the critical spirit and introduce communication education into the national school curriculum. For their part, citizens must demand democratic control of the media because the quality of the democratic system depends significantly on it.

The moment of truth has arrived. We are living through an exceptional situation all over the planet. Citizens should empower themselves informatively, be much more demanding, insist on transparency from their leaders, and educate themselves more in communication. Never before have so many people had so much news media at their fingertips, and yet, never before has disinformation reached such global dimensions, due to a lack of a critical use of the media. Ryszard Kapuściński was very clear when he said: "when it was discovered that information was a business, the truth became no longer important". The writer and journalist Rodolfo Jorge Walsh, assassinated by the Argentine dictatorship, expressed it even more starkly: "journalism is free or it is a farce".

The majority of the experts consulted within the framework of the aforementioned research project agree that slow journalism is more necessary than ever to combat disinformation and information overload. They are optimistic about the future of this journalistic current in that they see a growing space where it can distinguish itself from that which focuses on immediacy.

Narrative journalism is highly valued among its consumers, with a score of 4 out of 5, obtaining 3.9 for both its quality and its future possibilities. The ten digital media entities analyzed stand out for their rigorous treatment of their content, a

meticulous style in which interview and report are of great importance; they show a commitment to precision, creativity and the use of different techniques and resources; they apply new narratives thanks to new technologies; and they stand out for their innovation and design, etc.

Some of our results are in line with those offered by Nico Drok and Liesbeth Hermans (2015) when they point out that professional journalism has lost its monopoly on the production of the news; there is an overabundance of information and the value of the news has decreased together with the attention paid to it by the public, especially among the younger members of the population. It is difficult to know whether the future of journalism lies in strategies of speed such as "digital first", in slow journalism, or in both. Research carried out among Dutch users in the 15 – 39 age group (N = 2642), showed that an overwhelming majority think that the news should be available at all times, in all places and free of charge. However, the younger users in this age group want journalism to be more investigative, inclusive, cooperative and constructive. These characteristics define the emergent concept of slow journalism.

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DIGITAL ERA EMPOWERMENT: LEVERAGING NEWS LITERACY AGAINST DISINFORMATION THROUGH CONNECTED GAMING

MENGFAN ZOU

University of Alcalá, Spain

SARA CORTÉS GÓMEZ

University of Alcalá, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

Disinformation has evolved over time, with its manifestations intensifying in the digital era. The academy's gravitation towards technocentric practices in the contemporary society emphasizes not only the decentralized dissemination but also the rising challenge presented in the form of deepfakes (Posetti et al., 2018). These issues are further accelerated by the public's pursuit of entertainment without sufficient advanced knowledge, as a trend observed by Temir (2020).

In responding to challenges posed by disinformation, corrective strategies increasingly refer to audience-centered interventions. Empirical evidence demonstrate that receiver's critical news literacy effectively facilitates citizen's empowerment in assessing and discerning fake news (Jones-Jang et al., 2019).

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Confronted with this context, due to deficiency of initiative in addressing the urgency, video games have been acknowledged as widely recognized support mechanism. Within the gaming experience, citizens' news literacy is cultivated, and simultaneously, their capabilities are extended for broader practical applications (Gumulak & Webber, 2011).

Nevertheless, compared with the recent burgeon in news literacy games and their unparalleled advantages in motivating public to engage with participation in cultivating their news consumption and literacy, relevant exploration into the mechanism of news literacy video games from the audience-centered lens remains a dearth.

Addressing observed research gaps, our study delves into a preliminary documentation and conceptualization of the overlooked inherent mechanism of news literacy games. Precisely, we focus on how players harness embedded gameplay resources- narratives and interactions- to amplify their social agency within the given context.

Consistent with objectives, we developed the *News Literacy Cultivation through Connected Gaming* (NLCCG) framework in shaping the consequent direction of the study, based on two conceptual frameworks: Games for Civic Learning (Raphael et al., 2009) and Connected Gaming (Dishon & Kafai, 2019). Notably, these are pioneers in integrating civic game literacy, which can be seen as research advancement inspiring news literacy study, with a focus on game engagement and literacy.

We apply Walkthrough methodology (Light et al., 2016) to selected games (N=4) following meticulous criterion for establishing corpus of data, aiming to build a comprehensive analysis of game elements and structures contribute to news literacy cultivation in a critical way.

We employ a framework derived from a literature review to evaluate the chosen games, and concurrently, our findings validate the utility of our model. Our framework appears to explicitly explain the schema of news literacy games. And we suggest that immersive experience of literacy games is considerably emphasized. Simultaneously, game challenges and appropriate tutorials appear frequently as principal elements. Further discussion relating players' agency and their potential is being discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. NEWS LITERACY AGAINST DISINFORMATION

News literacy, an emerging subject in academia, has captured relatively increasing attention since 2006 (Fleming, 2015). Fleming further explains that marked by the introduction of news literacy course at Stony Brook University in 2006, the initiative to critically evaluate news coverage, as well as analyze news' reliability and credibility, has been continuously addressed. On basis of this, Higdon (2020) acknowledges that for students, news literacy education is evaluated effective only when grounded in a critical framework. He suggests that such a critical approach serves a dual purpose: to identify media content disparities associated with power structures and to explore potential salvation realized through democracy.

In advancing the study in news literacy practices, the academic circles strive to define news literacy, despite prevailing differences in interpretation. In the year 2021, Tully and his colleagues extend the definition in the digital landscape. They extract its core function, contending that the foundation of news literacy is built upon five pivotal domains: context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption. Consistent with this perspective, news literacy is deemed to be intrinsically attached with the ability of discerning fake news. Furthermore, it cultivates individuals' behavior in information consumption, assimilation, and contemplation (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

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Despite the initial framing of news literacy as an epistemic educational practice, there's a growing societal emphasis on its importance for all citizens. Jones-Jang et al. (2019) ascribe this urgency on the essence of digital communication, which embraces widespread knowledge dissemination and inclusive citizen participation. Undoubtedly, the explosion of information that defines the "information age" has also given rise to its antithesis: disinformation (Temir, 2020). Tandoc et al. (2017) offer additional insight, explaining that the realm of media creators has broadened due to prevalent digitalization. This denotes that journalists drastically expand from professional personals to individuals with access to social media.

Consequently, this democratization blurs the lines between factual reporting and potential misinformation. This underscores the vital importance of news literacy for modern consumers. In essence, news literacy is no longer just an academic subject but a crucial tool for navigating the intricate web of digital information (De Miguel Molina et al., 2019).

2.2. INTERACTIVE LEARNING: VIDEO GAMES IN EDUCATION

Video games, characterized with its interactive nature, constitute the dominant entertainment industry in the world (Productions, 2022). Considering their pervasive power, Bavelier et al. (2012) address the cognitive contribution of video games, viewing video games as specific training environments in which learning capability is elevated while learning regimens are adhered to.

Collins and Ferguson (1993) introduce the ideas of epistemic games' forms, shedding light on how innovative knowledge is shaped and assimilated through game structures. They posit that scientific inquiries are established by foundational structures termed epistemic forms. Simultaneously, the rules and tactics governing these investigations are defined as epistemic games. Expanding on this, Shaffer (2006) broadens the concept of epistemic frames to encompass methods of practice such as initiating inquiries, amassing information, and evaluation. He concludes that

these practices, combined with cognitive methods, are perfectly realized through virtual game simulations.

Aligned with the goal of enhancing immersive learning, Gee (2004) highlights the overlap between effective learning principles and the attributes of beneficial video games. These games, he argued, can amplify cognitive skills during classroom learning. Gee (2004) detailed how such games serve pedagogical goals, emphasizing that the content delivered should align with educational objectives. Furthermore, he underlines the importance of pacing to optimize information retention post-gameplay. Significantly, Gee champions "good games" for their layered challenges, enabling players to tackle increasing complexities and hone their expertise, thereby promoting profound learning in classrooms. Echoing this sentiment, Shaffer (2006) emphasizes the advantages of deep engagement, suggesting that heightened interest in a subject can lead to knowledge mastery. He introduces the concept of "islands of expertise", emphasizing the potential of epistemic games that merge knowledge with educational content. This approach, Shaffer believes, could enhance academic performance by integrating expertise recognition.

Highlighting a paradigm shift in learning, games offer students the chance to amplify their educational journey, breaking classroom boundaries. Through these games, students can create their own digital communities rooted in shared principles (Shaffer et al., 2005). These diverse virtual settings enable students to navigate varied identities, fostering intrinsic motivation and empowering them with robust identities, as supported by both Shaffer et al. (2005) and Gee (2004).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we aim to establish a conceptual framework for news literacy games, enabling a systematic evaluation of the relationship between game mechanisms and player engagement from an epistemic perspective. This led to the proposal of the *News Literacy Cultivation through Connected Gaming* (NLCCG) framework, adapted

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from two pertinent conceptual frameworks: *Games for Civic Learning* (GCL; Raphael et al., 2009) and *Connected Gaming* (CG; Dishon & Kafai, 2019). While both of them are tailored to the assessment of civic education facilitated by video games, their applications are not limited to this game genre, given that the core mechanisms of epistemic games are analogous across various contexts.

Game Civic Learning (GCL) is established on a foundational viewpoint: it emphasizes the intricate relationships between game design elements and the level of player engagement. Building on this foundational perspective by Raphael et al. (2009), several hypotheses emerge that delve deeper into the intricate dynamics of game design. These hypotheses suggest that games effectively combining civic content with gameplay, or setting rules that prompt reflection on public matters, are likely to be more potent tools for civic learning (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2019). Furthermore, the balance struck between expediency, agency, structure, and ethics in a game can determine its effectiveness in training players for specific civic roles. Specifically, games leaning towards expediency and agency are posited to be ideal for nurturing leadership qualities, while those emphasizing structure and ethics cater more to non-leadership civic roles.

Rather than dichotomies, these tensions operate on a spectrum. The way a game navigates these spectrums not only affects player immersion but also determines the opportunities for civic learning within the game environment.

The *Connected Gaming* (CG) framework, introduced by Dishon and Kafai (2019), emphasizes two key linkages in the realm of gaming. First, it highlights the link between a game's context and its societal impact. Second, it underscores the transition from gaming experience to players becoming active game creators and contributors, a concept dubbed "connected gaming." This framework emerged to address gaps identified in earlier research. Dishon and Kafai observed that previous studies tended to neglect the societal repercussions rooted in the game context and overlooked the civic influence games can exert. They also challenged the traditional

perception of players as passive recipients, underscoring the overlooked potential for players to evolve into active civic contributors and game designers.

Our study adopts the concept “connected gaming” and develops it as being our profound player-centered perspective. Grounded in the insights of Kafai & Burke (2016), “connected gaming” underscores the symbiotic relationship between playing and creating within game environments, evident in phenomena like Minecraft’s sandbox mechanics and the culture of player “modding.” Aligning with the aspirations of civic education, this approach positions players not merely as passive consumers but active contributors and shapers of gaming ecologies. By championing this viewpoint, we seek to further illuminate the transformative potential of games in fostering civic engagement, resonating with Gee’s (2004) observations about the civic roles of gaming communities.

Adopting a game-centric methodology to probe into news literacy is grounded in several pivotal considerations. Within our research scope, we traverse the realm of digital misinformation, aspiring for a structured evaluation of news literacy games based on a continuum spanning game narrative and integrated gameplay. Informed by the principles of civic education (Raphael et al., 2009; Dishon & Kafai, 2019), the News Literacy Cultivation through Connected Gaming (NLCCG) framework (see Figure 1.) is delineated through both collective and individual dimensions. Fundamental tenets shaping game content, such as rules, roles, and objectives, are extrapolated to societal community interactions. This paradigm underpins the significance of fostering a transferable learning environment, encapsulating roles of both game designers and players.

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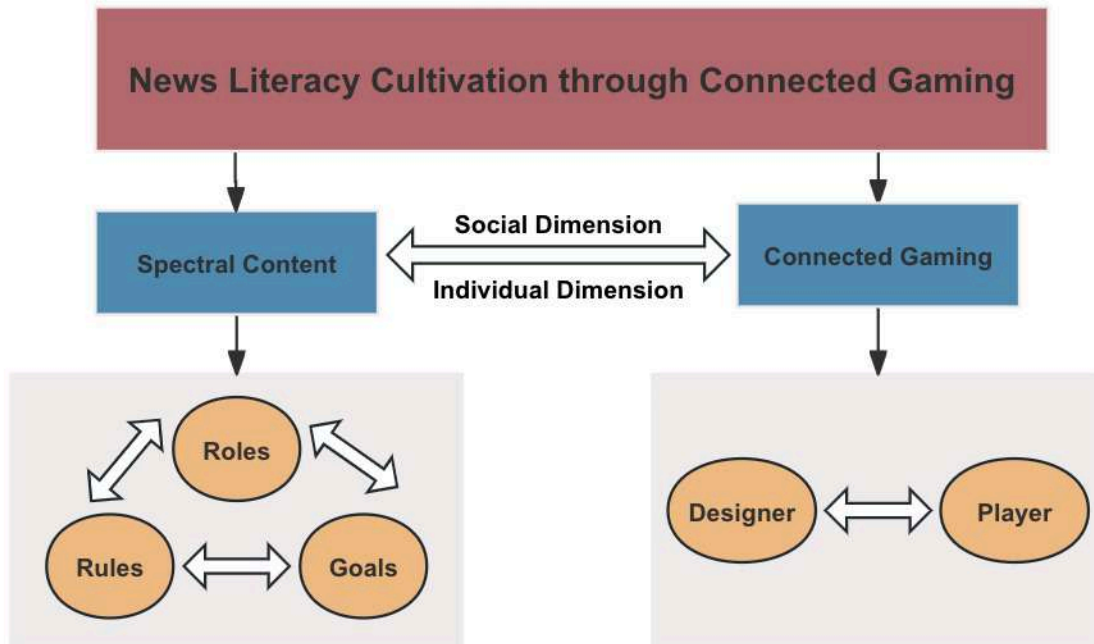


Figure 1. The diagram of representation of NLCCG model. NLCCG: News Literacy Cultivation through Connected Gaming

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. THE SAMPLES

To thoroughly understand the intricate process and influence of narrative components and their ties to the gaming experience, we delve into the interplay of these representations within the societal and individual contexts. In our study, we utilized the justificatory explanation from Norris et al. (2005) to clarify video game genre selections. This explanation type, focused on actions' justification, aligns best with our research objectives.

Drawing from Norris et al., the justificatory explanation emphasizes rationales, norms, and values of each existence, subsequently, causes for acting are revealed. Using

this approach, we grounded our choices in academic rigor and clarity. This method allowed a transparent articulation of the rationale behind each game selection.

Our process begins by leveraging the Game Directory database and CommonSense Education, platforms recognized for promoting cultural diversity and educational integrity. We undertook a meticulous search, employing combinations and singular iterations of terms such as "news literacy," "fake news," "disinformation," and "misinformation." The search results were extensive and, intriguingly, indicated a prevalence of simulation genre within news literacy games.

Secondly, to ensure a broad reach and accessibility, we prioritize games that are compatible with standard web browsers. This decision is supported by an intention to mitigate technological hindrances and facilitate widespread engagement.

Subsequently, considering the non-commercial emphasis of video games designed to address disinformation, our evaluation criteria discards traditional popularity measures that heavily depend on market sales. We presume that games emphasizing news literacy integrate within the video game genre taxonomy encompassing categories like action, adventure, role-playing, strategy, simulation, puzzle, sports, and racing (MasterClass, 2020). Given our specific interest in the pedagogical dimension of video games as tools for news literacy education, the incorporation of diverse genres is essential. Therefore, we adjusted our steps to record all search results and attempted a comprehensive genre coverage to provide varied pedagogical contexts.

Finally, the games resulting from the search were classified based on their genre affiliation. Upon a comprehensive scrutiny, a set of four games emerged, congruent with our stipulated benchmarks. These are detailed in Table 1, showcasing a mix that not only aligns with the pedagogical needs but also ensures diversity and accessibility.

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Game	Genre	Objective
Cat Park	Simulation; Strategy	Using disinformation tactics to turn the public against constructing a cat park.
BBC iReporter	Simulation; Role-playing	Spot real stories, ensuring accuracy, impact and speed in media literacy sim.
Harmony Square	Role-playing; Simulation; Strategy	Spreading fake news for provoking internal divisions in the neighborhood.
Bad News	Strategy	Increasing followers in social media while maintaining credibility.

Figure 2. Four video games in the analysis

4.2. WALKTHROUGH METHOD

We employed the walkthrough method championed by Light et al. (2016) as a pragmatic strategy for examining software applications in the digital age.

As explained by Light and his colleagues, “The walkthrough method establishes a foundational corpus of data upon which can be built a more detailed analysis of an app’s intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings and implied ideal users and uses”. Rooted in the intersection of technology and culture, this method enhances our exploration of video game mechanisms aimed at fostering news literacy. Furthermore, it offers insights into the roles and rules from a cultural vantage point. This approach also underscores the intertwined experience of being both a designer and a player within the framework of connected gaming.

Light et al. (2016) summarize the schematic procedures of this approach, which including meticulous examination and recording of an application's interfaces, functionalities, and sequences of actions. All the interrogated routine activities are decelerated in order to involve with their predominant characters of inherent mechanism, consequently enabling a critical cultural analysis. Further, our decision to employ the walkthrough method aligns with our emphasis on integrated experiences within the gaming perspective. This strategy offers us an avenue to fluidly investigate covered components that might reflect the orientations and aims of game developers.

Gee (2014) contends that a comprehensive content analysis of video games necessitates an exploration into "...the role of challenge and difficulty in games" (p. 13). Our research broadened the perspective from merely examining the structure and ethics governing game tasks, to understanding player efficacy and agency. This expanded view captures the positions players assume when faced with alterations, as highlighted by Raphael et al. (2009).

5. ANALYSIS

Grounded in technology-enhanced learning, our investigation critically examines the fitness of video games designed for fostering news literacy. Drawing on De Freitas (2018), we systematically categorize our game samples within distinct learning paradigms, exploring their applicability across varied educational contexts.

One of the major differences that distinguish traditional education from contemporary new learning is the mediums and material employed for instructional development. Given the pedagogical base, we recognize two distinct categories of games: those video games that convey news literacy through game content encompassing the narrative and intertwining it with roles, rules, and goals to shape game mechanics (Elson et al., 2014) ; the second category consists of games focusing on tangible competences transferable onto real communities, where despite varying play contexts, the resulting impact is manifested.

As delving deeper, we observed that players, when engaged with these games, gamers either resonate with personal development focused on journalistic awareness or immerse themselves in social simulated positions, such as media manipulation aiming to deceive the populace.

While each game has its unique nuances, these broad categories provide a lens through which we can analyze and document these illustrative paradigms revealed by selected models.

5.1. CONTENT-LED NEWS LITERACY GAMES

In line with the statement by Jenkins (2004) which suggests that compared with other forms of audio-visual products, not all video games tell stories, we support that existing various focal points of games. Elson et al. (2014) delineate game content as a synthetical terminology of game narrative which resembles storyline of movie and literature, and game mechanics composed of governing regulations within games. Their claim aligns with our conceptualization of content as a spectrum, in which agency, structure, expediency, and ethics intrinsically intersect.

As content occupies crucial position, educational strategies are implemented by incorporating disciplinary knowledge into games' narrative. In this way, gamers transform to being active readers, engaging with meanwhile responding to the content in a "perform(ing)" way, incited both by both their inferences and emotions elicited (Spires, 2015).

5.1.1. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the present study, personal development is defined as the journey of comprehending the constructed game environment, eliciting critical thinking to navigate challenges, and fostering associated creativity as articulated by Spires (2015). News literacy comprises of critical evaluation and analysis of media information, games centering on enhancing gamers' skills in narrative environment accord with contemporary call for harnessing digital potential (Higdon, 2020).

"Bad News", a selected strategy game designed for players above fourteen years old, enables gamers immerse themselves in the pursuit of unscrupulously garnering maximum attention from the public, at the expense of showing no respect journalist ethics. This game is text-based, provides successive description of stages in which players manage their social media. Players face with decisions where they are required to choose one option more applicable over another. Each choice demonstrates its visible influence by adjusting the number of followers and

fluctuating the credibility meter.



Figure 2. The interactive narrative of *BadFigure*

In this game, commonly employed disinformation tactics are presented from an opposing viewpoint to the audience, positioning players as creators of deceptive content. As a result, the game fosters cognitive resilience against disinformation for players by embedding malevolent motives within the game's content design. As the game designer explain, investigators of this game discovered that the citizens have developed their capability to identify manipulation in social media, and they are persuaded by the game to decline transmitting manipulative information.

5.1.2. JOURNALISM ENGAGEMENT

In professional context, news literacy deeply correlates with the newsroom environment, where news literacy agenda is both realized and reinforced (Brites & Pinto, 2017). Drawing from their semi-constructed interviews with industry insiders, Brites and Pinto supplement that the operations in newsrooms intrinsically relate to forging informed citizens, which insinuates that the population could benefit from professional practices. It is fascinating that news literacy games could facilitate these conditions by provoking highly interactive game mechanics.

In “BBC iReporter”, the creators immerse players in a professional journalistic setting where they are a BBC journalist. The backdrop, social dynamics, and task

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assignments are portrayed through video conferences and online posts. The rhythm of the game mirrors real-world journalism, requiring players to delve into breaking news and ensure timely updates. As a result, the player's performance is assessed based on three critical dimensions: accuracy, impact, and speed.

Aiming to effectively analyze and authenticate the information they come across, players instinctively employ critical thinking and bridge this method to their everyday experiences, fostering collective civic news literacy. Ku et al. (2019) underscore the importance of sustaining a skeptical stance to ensure news media literacy in the digital millennium. In this game, both the act of consuming news and the proactive search for it are deemed significant predictors in the media landscape.



Figure 3. Introduction of professional requirements to players.

5.2. TRANSFERENCE-LED NEWS LITERACY GAMES

Video games distinguish themselves from other potential educational means by their transferability of learning, a capability proposed from cognitive psychological perspective. Blumberg (2014, pp. 15–18) elucidates that achieving educational objectives through experiential engagement accords with the essence of knowledge transfer. Furthermore, this experiential involvement is crucial in ascertaining the successful realization of such transfer.

As transfer is comprehended as the procedure during which “the carrying over of .. performance” (Newman, 1954) is realized from one side to another. The outcomes of transfer can be evaluated via three dimensions: learned skill, performance change, and memory demands (Barnett & Ceci, 2002). In line with this system, through those news literacy games specifically address the cultivation of competences in practice, a certain number of social behaviors are shaped by the transition experienced within the games.

5.2.1. ACQUIRING EXPERTISE

In the realm of news literacy games, the competence to master the skills in navigating through abundant news coverage, discern disinformation, and implement critical thinking interweaves with journalistic expertise. For individuals across diverse professions, such proficiency serves as an essential tool for anyone who aims to engage actively and responsibly in civic discourse. This proficiency transcends the gaming environment, providing pertinent in real-world situations.

In the game “Cat Park”, the player faces with a proposal for constructing a cat park that opposes the player’s willingness. Consequently, the player navigates through the surroundings of his/her living city, persuading the public to support the players’ opinion.

Breaking News: **Concerning!**
City prioritizes ...

public park

green space

elitist pets

Figure 4. Selecting disinformation tactics for leveraging influence

During the whole simulation, the accumulated expertise determines the level of task completion. Intrinsically, these tactics are proved to originate from prevalent disinformation practice, and the designers adds that such simulation seeks to delve into social tensions exploited for individual benefits.

Critically speaking, this game broadens the exploration from inherent elements like the strain between individual agency and social ethics to the societal dynamics vibrated due to individual choices during civic engagement.

5.2.2. INTEGRATION IN SOCIAL DECISION MAKING

News literacy is characterized as an instrument that explains individuals actions. As posited by Vraga et al. (2020), it profoundly impacts on anticipatory behaviors encompass news consumption, discernment of misinformation, refutation of conspiratorial notions, and active participation in civic affairs. Under the circumstance that news is simplified to “any asserted claim” (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1146), news literacy emerges as a social mechanism that guarantees the control over news production, dissemination, and consumption. The actualized character reveals the inherent objective of news literacy games, which revolves around integrating news literacy in social system, especially respecting societal norms and understanding associated behaviors (Vraga et al., 2020).

“Harmony Square” provides gamers with a simulation of tight neighborhood. In a compelling condition, gamers assume the role of immoral disinformation chief, prepared to manipulate the sway of fake news. The ultimate purpose of players is to govern the political agenda which is to divide the once united citizens. The game thus allows players to explore the outcomes of disinformation in a social dimension.

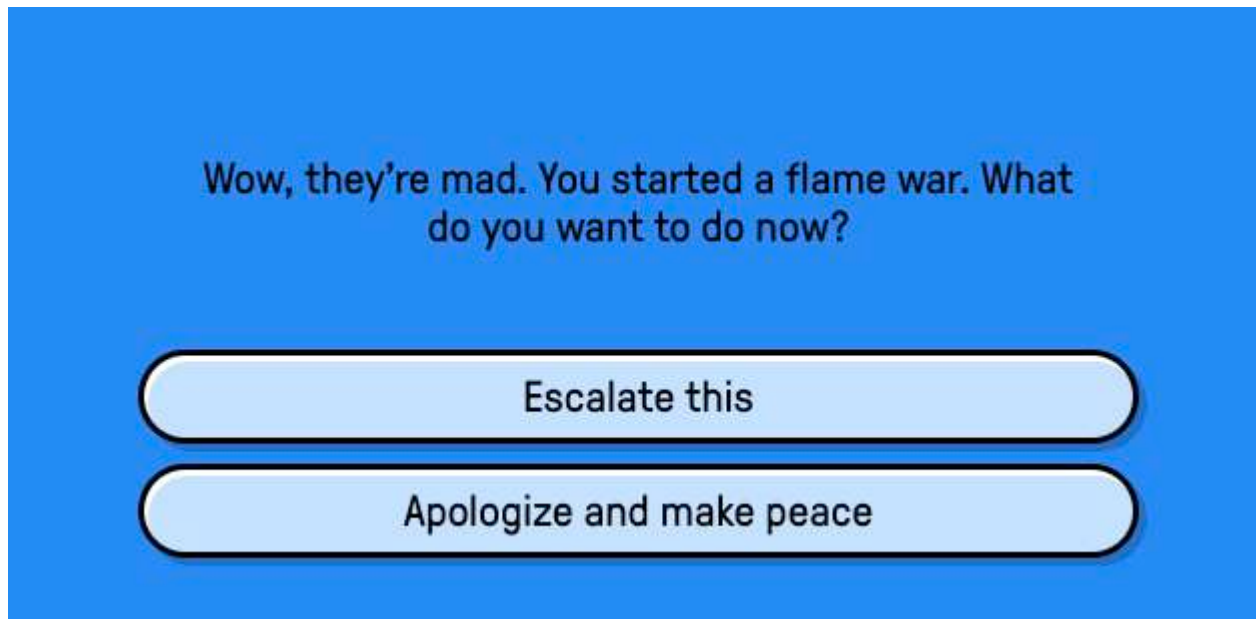


Figure 5. Choosing strategy to other residents

Within "Harmony Square," the game's community serves as a microcosm of society, encapsulating and amplifying the intricacies of social dynamics. The rapid unfolding of events and interactions in this virtual setting provides players with a condensed lens through which players can observe and engage with the complexities of societal response to external influences, particularly the pervasive effects of disinformation.

6. DISCUSSION

Over the ultimate decades, news literacy is considered to align tightly with the domain of cognitive learning research. This attachment encompasses intellectual approaches regarding data analysis, evaluation, categorization, inference, and unification (Fleming, 2015). Fleming further comments that news literacy mirrors the identical objective of academic curriculum and classroom environments, which is leveraging cognitive capabilities.

Considering this context, in which information is fractured and convoluted, cultivating

news literacy necessitates strategies that are both effective and engaging. As emphasized by Guess et al. (2020), this has been unprecedentedly urgent, given the involved dissemination of news coverage that individuals have to navigate. In the meanwhile, investigators have consistently magnified the correlation between news literacy and deeply expanding disinformation (Posetti et al., 2018; Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

Video games emerges as a pivotal junction. Their interactive nature facilitates players' immersion where they can interpret knowledge, force skills, anticipate outcomes, and engage in social practices—all within the game's framework. The inherent design of video games, coupled with the potential for connected gaming experiences, equips players with tools and skills to address real-world challenges. As observed by Miller (2009) and Dishon & Kafai (2019), the educational potential of video games is undeniable. Their use as innovative tools against the growing crisis of information credibility underscores their significance in modern pedagogy. The interactive landscapes they provide are reshaping the way educators approach news literacy, offering promising avenues for the future of education.

In our research, news literacy games are selected ensuring the representation of current subgroups of epistemic games. Despite we intend to render all genres of games for a comprehensive analysis, it is observed that simulation occupies the predominant position of news literacy games, and there no exist varied genres of news literacy games except simulation, strategy, and role-playing. The predominance of simulation could be attributed to several factors. In essence, simulation games is effective in reconstructing real-world systems, allowing players to immerse themselves in realistic settings and navigate challenges reflective of real-world problems. This phenomenon has also been noted by other researchers such as De Freitas and Oliver (2006), they conclude that simulation games contribute significantly to ideological engagement. When players are placed in a simulated environment, they're more likely to understand and engage with the underlying principles and ideologies being presented. This is particularly vital for news literacy

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games, whose goal is not just to educate but also to influence players' perspectives and critical thinking skills regarding news consumption.

Strategy and role-playing subgenres further enhance this experience. While simulation provides the environment and the system, strategy elements challenge the player's decision-making skills, and role-playing allows them to step into specific roles within the news industry, fostering empathy and understanding.

The News Literacy Cultivation through Connected Gaming (NLCCG) framework that we proposed in this study, serves as an innovative approach in visualizing the role of connected gaming in the enhancement of news literacy. This preliminary framework has proved its effective in categorizing and understanding inherent rules that constitute mechanics. After walking through various games, by examining the structure of games indicated by our conceptual framework, correlations between game objectives and the essential domains exhibited in the framework. The spectral content is developed and constrained by the dynamics between roles, goals, and rules in games. Simultaneously, the experiential gaming is incited while players evolve to active designers, who engage themselves with community practices in the reality.

As a result, for the evolutionary connected experience of players, more attention regarding news literacy transference is required. Due to the majority of contemporary news literacy games anticipate civic participation as expected outcomes. Games like Harmony Square and Bad News actively prompt players to involve in their data collection, this academic track is valuable for researchers to discern the implication of players' social actions in a panoramic sphere.

In conclusion, the intersection of video games and news literacy presents an innovative and interactive pathway to navigate the complexities of today's media landscape. While the potential of these games is evident, continuous evaluation and

refinement, keeping in mind the aforementioned considerations, are essential to ensure their sustained relevance and effectiveness in fostering a well-informed citizenry.

7. LIMITATION

Our research is developed through qualitative perspective, despite the walkthrough methodology applied collects an essential corpus of data for sequent analysis, individual biases from researchers may result in fluctuating emphasis of components of observed games. Additionally, as we selected representative news literacy games considering limited resources for analysis, the entire genre of news literacy games deserves to be furthered in a comprehensive view.

The changing dynamics of the news media and the gaming industry means that the rationale accommodates with current situation may expire in the near future. Thus, while our findings provide regular reviews of the current state, and updates will be crucial to maintain their relevance.

The varying backgrounds, experiences, and cognitive processes of individual players can also influence their engagement and interpretations of these games. Our research did not delve into the nuances of individual player experiences or their key takeaways, marking another avenue for deeper exploration in subsequent studies.

Lastly, our focus remained primarily on the educational outcomes and the game mechanics. The NLCCG framework remains to be evaluated and examined by a wider range of news literacy games or even compared with other subgenres of epistemic games. We sincerely expect suggestions and critics from the academy.

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DEBUNKING STRATEGIES FOR NEGATIONISM AND CONSPIRACY

GUILLERMO GARCÍA GÓMEZ

INFOVERITAS, Spain

CARLA PINA GARCÍA

INFOVERITAS, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

Few people escape the spell of conspiracy theories, there is something about them that grips us. Despite the fact that the information is literally in the palm of our hands, most citizens believe in some or even several of these theories. In fact, at INFOVERITAS we have noticed in recent months that conspiracy theories are on the rise. Not only because of the widespread use of the Internet, but also because of the increased polarization of society since certain political groups came to power.

But conspiracy theories are not new; they go back a long way in history. Homer recounted the adventures of men fleeing from conspiracies orchestrated by the gods. In 1692, mass hysteria condemned thousands of people accused of witchcraft to the stake in Salem, USA.

As these examples show, conspiracy theories have always reflected the fears and anxieties of the times, beyond human control. Now, in the 21st century, some groups deny that human actions have an impact on the environment, promote false hypotheses about cures for certain diseases, or question the vote count in elections, as has happened for the first time in Spain.

But why do we believe in conspiracy theories at a time when we have so much information at our disposal?

2. WHY DO WE BELIEVE IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

Conspiracy theories offer answers that society does not have. Especially in times of uncertainty such as the present, even if they are implausible, fantastic or contrary to the most obvious evidence. We choose to believe that certain elites or powerful forces are manipulating certain situations with negative interests, even if these are all suppositions that have never been proven.

The conspiracy theorist is no longer a marginal figure. The image of the person living in the basement or refusing to leave the family home has been discarded. Conspiracy theories transcend class, age, and gender. What motivates people to believe in conspiracies, as with misinformation, is the need for explanation and peer pressure. Societies may be able to function with a small percentage of deniers, but there is a problem when that number increases.

3. THE RISE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

In addition to its undeniably positive qualities, the Internet is synonymous with excess. The information overload of recent years, on everything from politics to health, has also led to the rise of conspiracy theories. Users are faced with so much information, often based on lies, half-truths, biased data and emotion, that they do not know what to believe.

The theories are essentially the same. They already know that there is nothing new under the sun. However, the protagonists or targets of the hoaxes and the way we approach conspiracies have changed: the advent of the internet, social networks and encrypted communication channels means that any news story can go viral from anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds.

Conspiracy theories can grow in two directions: from the top down, by dubious leaders and media who use manipulation and these theories as a political tool; or from the bottom up, by organizations or ordinary people who instigate these theories.

Since communication has become open, individuals from different parts of the world have been able to connect with like-minded people at a distance through forums or communities, thus strengthening their sense of belonging to a group. Sometimes it happens that a lonely person finds his or her reference group, or that these groups are so closed that they can be thought of as a sect, that it is impossible to leave them. If you believe in one conspiracy theory, you are more likely to believe in others.

We at INFOVERITAS have seen this in our daily work. We have identified certain accounts on X, the social network formerly known as Twitter, that are dedicated to spreading hoaxes on different but recurring topics. Immigration or climate change, for example, are two topics that are often addressed by these profiles, which have a large number of followers.

On the other hand, social networks are based on algorithms that show users the most popular content. The most viral content tends to be the most controversial, often including conspiracy theories.

More recently, the creation of verification platforms, moderation controls and public exposure has led to a shift to private channels, such as Telegram or WhatsApp, or to proprietary channels, spaces where no one checks the content and there is little moderation. There, people who are not experts in any field become spokespersons for any theory and are used as a source of information.

4. HOW CONSPIRACY THEORIES CONQUER US

In general, conspiracy theories appeal more to the emotions than to reason, more to the heart than to the head. There is also a common tendency to believe that it is always others who are being deceived; however, as noted above, anyone can fall for one of these hoaxes, there is no pattern that encompasses the people who are most likely to believe them.

It is also common for them to contain some element of truth, even if it is distorted, inaccurate or incomplete.

They are also presented in a fictional narrative structure. There is a villain, usually the elites; a victim, society; and a hero, the denier.

And this structure is repeated over and over again to make it easier to remember. As mentioned above, there are topics that are 'usual suspects' for disinformation stories, such as immigration or climate change, about which many hoaxes are circulated.

5. EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

The following is an overview of some of the disinformation narratives encountered in the daily work of INFOVERITAS. As you will see, these are hoaxes of various kinds, ranging from doubts about the sinking of the Titanic to some fake cancer treatments.

5.1. 2030 AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is constantly the subject of hoaxes and misinformation. Here are two examples of the many that have been found.

5.1.1. RAINFOREST ALLIANCE

One of the most curious stories to emerge in recent months is that of the Rainforest Alliance label. There is a trend to say that this seal, which is placed on food products, indicates that the products contain insects. In fact, it is a sustainability label. It is also associated with Bill and Melinda Gates, although the couple have nothing to do with the Rainforest Alliance, apart from a grant in 2007 and a financial contribution in 2019.

5.1.2. NATURE RESTORATION LAW

In July, the European Commission voted on the Nature Habitats Directive. It has been controversial because of its alleged aim of destroying the primary sector. In reality, the aim of this legislation is to move towards a sustainable agricultural model that will guarantee food production in the future, the preservation of biodiversity and the restoration of damaged natural areas.

5.1.3. LIMIT ON CLOTHING PURCHASES

Over the summer, a hoax from an usually disinformative X account claimed that the EU was going to limit clothing purchases to three in order to meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda. This was, of course, false. The European Commission confirmed to INFOVERITAS that the message was false.

5.2. ELECTORAL FRAUD

A new phenomenon has emerged in Spain this year: the questioning of the integrity of the electoral system. Both in the municipal and regional elections in May and in the general elections in July.

5.2.1. REGIONAL ELECTIONS

There was controversy over allegedly stolen votes in the regional elections in May. At the beginning of the hoax, Correos (the public company in charge of processing absentee ballots) was cited as the source of the figures, claiming that the figures did not add up and that votes had therefore been stolen. However, when the source they themselves cited was consulted, the figures given by the disinformers were wrong.

5.2.2. GENERAL ELECTIONS

As the general election in Spain was held in July, many people were on holiday and there was a record number of postal votes. As a result, there was a lot of disinformation about electoral fraud, focusing on postal voting. In the weeks leading up to the vote, there was a lot of talk about how many people were going to vote by post.

The truth is that Correos was very transparent and explained the process at all times. The voting documents that could not be delivered to voters' homes after two attempts were not lost, as disinformative reports claimed, but were available at their post office.

5.3. ANTI-SCIENTIFIC THINKING

Anti-scientific hoaxes are another of the 'usual suspects' mentioned above. Along with health hoaxes, which will be discussed below, this is one of the most damaging disinformation narratives for society, as it directly affects people.

5.3.1. CHEMTRAILS

A classic disinformation and conspiracy theory. We are not being sprayed from the air. The white trails seen after passing aircraft are the result of condensation. The water vapour in the air reacts with the dust produced by combustion in the engines to produce the white trails seen in the sky.

5.3.2. CLIMATE CHANGE

As has been said, this is one of the most dangerous streams of disinformation for society. Not only because it has a direct and currently tangible impact on individuals, but also because it affects people's credibility and trust in institutions.

A) World Economic Forum and climate change commitments

Another classic of the disinformation mill. The World Economic Forum is often the subject of hoaxes. On this occasion, it was about alleged climate restrictions to combat global warming. In the summer of 2023, comments, and headlines about alleged statements by Nicole Schwab of the World Economic Forum about such climate caps went viral.

Of course, this was never discussed. The video shared by these comments and headlines never showed Schwab talking about climate lock-ins, nor did the Forum mention them. Schwab was talking about the COVID-19 crisis.

B) NASA and Milankovitch cycles

Disinformative stories have also been found claiming that NASA has confirmed that climate change is due to the Earth's orbit. This is also a lie. NASA has confirmed the human influence on climate change. The hoaxes are based on the famous Milankovitch cycles, about the amount of sunlight absorbed by the Earth,

but these are long term and do not explain the current acceleration of global warming.

As you can see, this hoax is a good example of the distorted truth used by conspiracy theorists.

5.3.3. THE TITANIC

A conspiracy theory resurfaced with the Titanic disaster in June 2023. The Titanic did not actually sink, but its "twin brother", the Olympic. However, there is no proof that the Titanic did not sink. The famous liner sank on 15 April 1912.

5.4. HEALTH

Just as global warming hoaxes pose a direct threat to society, so too do health hoaxes. However, they are also a common target for disinformation narratives.

5.4.1. SKIN CANCER AND SUNSCREEN

Following the news that sunscreen was to be introduced in schools in the Netherlands in response to an increase in the incidence of skin cancer, hoaxes circulated claiming that the use of sunscreen increased the incidence of skin cancer. This is false, there is no conclusive link between the use of sunscreen and an increase in the incidence of skin cancer. On the contrary, it is one of the most effective ways of preventing it.

5.4.2. COVID VACCINES

The COVID-19 vaccines continue to be the subject of hoaxes long after the vaccination campaign has ended. In particular, a hoax was found claiming that the Pfizer vaccines administered in the European Union were a placebo. Also, false. Placebos are used as a control in clinical trials, not in vaccination campaigns.

5.4.3. CANCER AND FASTING

Another health misinformation that has emerged in recent months is that fasting and ketosis can cure cancer or diabetes. Ketosis is the lack of carbohydrates that make the body function. This is absolutely not true. While very controlled fasting may have health benefits, it does not cure cancer. And in people with diabetes, it can be fatal.

5.5. MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Unsubstantiated racist comments, especially against the Muslim community, are also common on X's accounts, which usually publish hoaxes. They usually refer to the fact that Muslim immigrants in Spain do not want to work, but rather to live on the aid that the government can give them.

5.5.1. SUBSIDIES

Last October, we came across a hoax about an alleged statement attributed to "the Muslim community", without further specification. The alleged statement by this "Muslim community" was that they would leave Spain if they were deprived of benefits and had to work. This is false. Various Islamic organizations in Spain denied to INFOVERITAS that these alleged words had been said. In addition, the "news" was not accompanied by any links or sources, as is usual with the type of X accounts that publish these hoaxes.

5.5.2. TRAVELLING AND RECEIVING BENEFITS

Another of the falsehoods we have come across about the Muslim population in Spain and the alleged collection of benefits was that the Muslim community in the region of Castilla y León had denounced the regional government because it wanted to travel and collect the benefit known as Renta Garantizada de Ciudadanía (Guaranteed Income of Citizenship). One of the exclusion criteria for this benefit is that any member of the family unit receiving it must leave the territory of Castilla y León. The exceptions are force majeure, serious illness of a member of the family or reasons related to work. In addition, the decree states

that the exceptions of force majeure or illness of a family member are abolished if the departures occur more than three times in a year or last for more than 45 calendar days per year.

This is also not true. Both the department in charge of aid and an Islamic organization have denied this "news", which is, moreover, not recent.

5.5.3. SNIPER IN LEÓN CATHEDRAL

At the end of October, the inter-ministerial briefing meeting of EU telecommunications ministers took place in León as part of the Spanish Presidency of the EU. There was a heavy police presence in the city, including a sniper in the cathedral.

Another of the X accounts, which regularly spreads disinformation, attributed the presence of the sniper to the fact that the churches were "Islamist targets" and that his aim was to protect "special visitors to the cathedrals". This is false. The police confirmed to us that the police presence was due to the informal summit. Nevertheless, the hoax had gained a lot of traction on the aforementioned social network.

5.6. TERRORIST ALERTS

In the context of the war between Israel and Palestine in the Gaza Strip and the terrorist attacks that took place in different parts of Europe, there were many hoaxes in Spain about supposed terrorist alerts in different places, such as Atocha station (the scene of the 11M attacks), or about an increase in the level of anti-terrorist alerts, or about increased controls at the entrances to cities such as Seville. In October we came across a number of these disinformation stories, and of course they all turned out to be lies.

5.6.1. STABBING ON THE MADRID METRO

Another of X's usually disinformative reports claimed that an Arab had stabbed a commuter in the Madrid metro while shouting 'Allah is great'. This was a lie. Both the National Police and the Metro denied that the stabbing had taken place. The

National Police also reminded people of the importance of relying only on official sources when faced with this kind of hoax, which is designed to spread fear.

5.6.2. CIVIL GUARD CHECKS DUE TO INCREASED ANTI-TERRORIST ALERT

Also in October, a video recorded by the passenger of a car passing through a Civil Guard checkpoint, specifically that of the Rapid Action Group (RAG), the body specialized in the fight against terrorism, at the entrance to Seville, circulated. One of the X accounts that shared the video blamed the checkpoint for the increase in the anti-terrorist alert level. Also, false. Civil Guard confirmed to us that it was a routine check by the RAG.

Moreover, the anti-terrorist alert was maintained at level 4 out of 5, with increased measures. The same level has been maintained at 4 since 2015, at the time of writing, following attacks in France, Somalia, Kuwait, and Tunisia.

5.6.3. DECONTEXTUALISED VIDEO FROM THE HOME OFFICE

In 2017, the Ministry of the Interior published a short video with recommendations on how to act in the event of witnessing a terrorist attack. At the time, the Ministry conducted an information campaign on social networks and in the media about the video. However, in the context of the war between Israel and Palestine in the Gaza Strip and the alerts and terrorist attacks in Europe, the video circulated on social networks as if it were still current. This is another way of misinforming because the current context is not the same as it was then.

5.6.4. BOMB THREAT IN ATOCHA

Madrid's Atocha station was the sad scene of the 11 March terrorist attacks. At the end of October, a hoax spread on X that there had been a bomb threat at the station. But that was not the case. Adif, the company responsible for managing Spain's railway system, confirmed that it was a false alarm. A 'suspicious package' had been detected and, as per protocol, the National Police had been informed. It turned out to be a false alarm, and things went back to normal.

5.6.5. CLOSURE OF EDUCATIONAL CENTERS IN MADRID

On this occasion, WhatsApp was the platform chosen to spread a hoax that schools in the Community of Madrid had been closed due to a terrorist alert. Also false. In addition to the fact that the supposed news was spread with a link to a website that contained a joke, the Department of Education of the Community of Madrid confirmed to INFOVERITAS that the message was false and that classes were taking place normally. Despite the joke that the hoax contained, the message was not only shared on WhatsApp, but also had a great impact on social networks such as X.

5.6.6. RAISING OF THE ANTI-TERRORISM ALERT LEVEL

The anti-terrorist alert levels are a measurement mechanism that is the responsibility of the Home Office, which evaluates the situation in this regard and takes a series of measures to address the circumstances in this regard. Currently, at the time of writing, Spain is at level 4 out of 5, with increased measures. However, in October this year, in the context of the war between Israel and Palestine, false rumours circulated that the alert level had been raised to 5.

The Home Office itself confirmed to INFOVERITAS that no decision had been taken to raise the terrorist alert level to the maximum, but that the level 4, in force since 2015, had been reinforced with additional measures. The National Police also denied this hoax, which, according to the police, has been circulating since 2017. They also stressed the need to trust only official sources.

5.7. FAMOUS PEOPLE

The spread of hoaxes claiming the death of famous or important people is also common. Many of them have their origins in an Italian journalist known as the “Twitter serial killer” for reporting the supposed deaths of famous people such as Pope Benedict XVI or Mario Vargas Llosa, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. However, this journalist is not the only one responsible for spreading these hoaxes.

We have also come across other celebrity hoaxes that have nothing to do with an alleged death, but which demonstrate the speed with which viral information can spread without contrast and involve important figures, in this case from the world of football.

5.7.1. ROSA MONTERO, WRITER

The Spanish writer Rosa Montero did not die in August. A hoax circulated on X, formerly Twitter, claiming that the writer had died. But that was not the case. She herself denied the alleged news on her account on the social network.

5.7.2. JOSÉ LUIS PERALES, COMPOSER

Also in the summer, the hoax of composer José Luis Perales' death circulated. Various reports on X spread the supposed news of the musician's death. But it was false. Perales himself published a video on his social networks in London, where he had spent a few days with his family, in which he denied these hoaxes.

5.7.3. ELENA SALGADO, FORMER MINISTER AND FORMER VICE-PRESIDENT OF SPAIN

In the same year, 2023, false rumours circulated about the death of the former minister and former vice-president of Spain, Elena Salgado. Also, false. The announcement of Elena Salgo's death was the result of a hoax by the Italian journalist known as the "Twitter serial killer".

5.7.4. CRISTIANO RONALDO, FOOTBALL PLAYER

Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, a former Real Madrid player who currently plays for Al-Nassr in Saudi Arabia, was the subject of a viral hoax published not only on disinformation accounts but also in the national media. The hoax claimed that Cristiano Ronaldo had been sentenced to 99 lashes in Iran for adultery. The controversy began when the footballer met an Iranian painter, who gave him one of her paintings featuring him.

But the story turned out to be false. The Iranian embassy in Spain denied the "information". In addition, some of the media that reported the "news" quoted an Iranian media outlet of which no trace was found during our investigation of the hoax.

5.8. ISRAEL-PALESTINE WAR

Early October saw the start of a new war in the conflict that has raged between Israel and Palestine since 1948. The month of October saw an escalation of violence on both sides that reached international proportions. In this context, a multitude of falsehoods circulated. Indeed, as this chapter is being written, new ones continue to emerge. Decontextualized videos manipulated photographs and images that did not correspond to the Israeli-Palestinian war were part of our daily work during the month of October.

5.8.1. THE RESURRECTED CHILD

With the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian war, a hoax was circulated claiming that the accompanying images on social media were part of a Palestinian hoax. The video showed a funeral of sorts, which was interrupted by sirens. The men carrying the supposed corpse left the body on the ground and ran away. The 'dead' person, a child, then got up and ran away. But this had nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian war. It was a fake funeral, organized in March 2020 in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, in order to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the Jordanian government.

5.8.2. WHITE PHOSPHORUS

Another video went viral on social media, purporting to show an Israeli white phosphorus attack on Gaza. However, it was not in Gaza, but showing part of the war between Russia and Ukraine.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry website explains that "white phosphorus is used by the military in various types of ammunition and to produce smoke to conceal troop movements and target identification".

5.8.3. ALLEGED BOMBING OF GAZA

In the same context of the war between Israel and Palestine, a video of an alleged Israeli bombardment of Gaza circulated on social networks. But it turned out to be false. The bombing had nothing to do with the war mentioned but was an attack on the Syrian town of Yabroud in 2013. The town is about 80 kilometers north of the capital, Damascus.

5.8.4. GAZA BUILDINGS IN FLAMES

Another hoax, in the form of two videos that we saw make a big impact on X, formerly Twitter, was one that showed images of what appeared to be several buildings in flames. The message on the social network said it was about Gaza, in the context of the war between Israel and Palestine. However, this also turned out to be false. The images were actually of the CR team celebrating winning the Algerian football league title. Belouizdad. Moreover, there were no burning buildings. They were flares and pyrotechnics set off in a coordinated way.

5.8.5. TWO HELICOPTERS ALLEGEDLY SHOT DOWN

Another of the strangest hoaxes we have come across in the context of the war between Israel and Palestine was the one about the alleged downing of two helicopters in Gaza by Hamas. There was no such downing. The images that went viral corresponded to the war simulation video game Arma 3.

5.8.6. THE SAME GIRL WHO SURVIVED THREE SEPARATE BOMBINGS

Three photos of three different alleged bombings, in which the same Palestinian girl appears, have also gone viral. From right to left, in the first snapshot, the girl is in the arms of a man wearing a grey/light blue T-shirt and a white helmet. The rescuer also has another minor in his arms. In the second, the girl appears in the arms of another man dressed in yellow, while in the last, the little girl is in the arms of a man wearing a green shirt with a checkered pattern. Some users on social networks claimed that it had "miraculously" survived "three different bombings". This also turned out to be false. The photomontage, which dates back

to August 2016, corresponds to a single bombing in Aleppo (Syria) and has nothing to do with the war between Israel and Palestine. Each of the three images in the collage shows one of the three men who participated in a human chain to bring the minor to safety.

6. THE DANGERS OF HOAXES

In general, disinformative narratives are dangerous, both for society as a whole and for individuals. Some of the hoaxes we have seen may seem relatively harmless, such as the Titanic hoax. But there are others that are truly damaging. Encouraging the specter of electoral fraud is a danger to democracy, as seen in the attack on the US Congress or later in Brazil.

The BBC reported in an article on three disinformation incidents that led to wars or international conflicts. One of the most notorious was the alleged testimony of a Kuwaiti girl in the US Congress. It was one of the triggers for the US entry into the Gulf War in the early 1990s. According to the BBC, the girl was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the US and her testimony was a lie.

People's lack of trust in scientific institutions is dangerous and can lead to actions that are harmful to society. Denying climate change is dangerous, not getting vaccinated is dangerous, not protecting yourself from the sun is dangerous, spreading fear of a terrorist alert is dangerous, posting unsubstantiated offensive messages implicating a minority group is dangerous, falsely reporting the death of famous people is dangerous, especially to their families, fasting does not cure cancer... In this case, the situation of cancer patients is serious enough to spread messages of false hope. Some of the experts consulted to refute this type of hoax have stated that these hoaxes are motivated by economic or sectarian recruitment purposes.

7. THE ROLE OF FACT-CHECKERS: HOW WE WORK IN INFOVERITAS

In this context, one of the doubts that arises is how fact-checkers contribute to the fight against denialist theories. Because of their danger, as we have seen,

they must be treated as a priority. But it is difficult to escape them. That is why prevention is better than cure.

In this sense, we believe that the verifiers have a difficult and not an easy task. However, professional rigour and working with data, facts and reliable sources, avoiding opinions, as we do at INFOVERITAS, can help prevent the spread of these denialist theories, as long as the verification circulates faster and reaches more people than the hoax. Expert testimony must always be used to deny some issues, such as those related to health or climate change, and official data and primary sources must be used to combat others, such as hoaxes about electoral fraud.

On the other hand, fact-checkers play a fundamental role in society's media literacy. The importance of media literacy must be taken into account in order to have a well-informed society with evidence-based opinions, which is crucial for democracy. INFOVERITAS therefore develops initiatives that reach all citizens.

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THE ROLE OF THE WESTERN UNIVERSITIES (AND CULTURAL STUDIES) IN THE GROWTH OF FAKE NEWS AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS¹

CARLOS ELÍAS

University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

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1. THE ALTERNATIVE FACT

Journalism was an ‘invention’ to fight hoaxes. Its aim – the same as that of modern science – has been to seek the truth and make it public, but both systems have been perverted. The search for truth leads us to a better knowledge of reality, which, in a system of freedoms, that is to say of decision-making – political, business, labour, medical, and so on – offers us a great competitive advantage. Along with the scientific method, journalism defines contemporary Western culture.

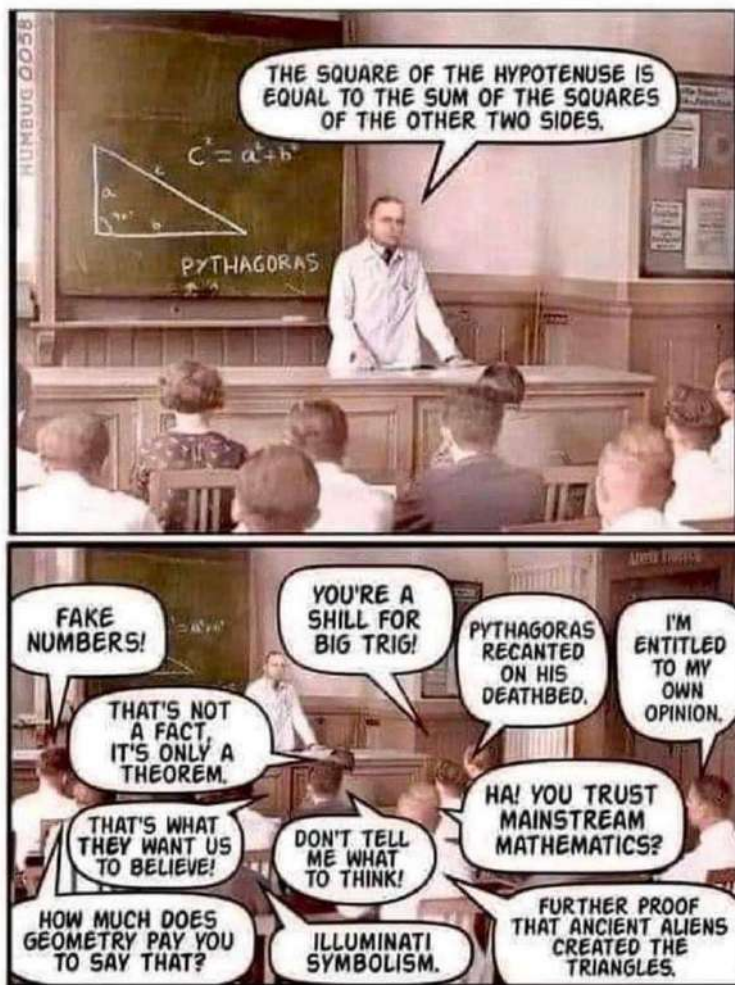
Very interesting research published in *Science* has shown that fake news spreads faster on the internet and social networks than real news. After analysing a data set of rumour cascades on Twitter from 2006 to 2017 (about 126,000 rumours were spread by ~3 million people), it was determined that: ‘falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information (Vosoughi et al., 2018)’.

The concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘rational thought’, the foundations of the Enlightenment, have suffered an enormous intellectual setback since the second

¹ The ideas in this chapter come from the book *Science on the Ropes. The decline of Scientific Culture in the Era of Fake News* (Elías, 2019), where they are much more developed.

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half of the twentieth century in certain Western universities that have sponsored postmodern philosophy. This is since Feyerabend and his idea that there is no difference between science and a fairy tale, summed up by his motto 'anything goes' (Feyerabend, 1970), since Lyotard has maintained that science is nothing more than a grand narrative (Lyotard, 1979) – and since Derrida himself, whose work focuses on criticizing what he considers the totalizing ideology of 'logocentrism'; that is, thinking that is based on logic and reason (Derrida, 1967).



In Western universities, a source of distaste for truth and fact has been established and has led to the emergence of star students such as Sean Spicer, White House Press Secretary (with Donald Trump). In his first press briefing, he accused the media of 'deliberately underestimating the size of the crowd for President Trump's inaugural ceremony'. Many media were alarmed by the small audience and compared aerial photographs of the ceremony with those of the

election crowds for his predecessor, Barack Obama, in 2009. The difference in numbers was significant: with Obama, the Capitol building was full; with Trump, there were many gaps. Spicer stated without embarrassment that the ceremony had drawn the 'largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe (Cillizz, 2017)'. Spicer claimed that 420,000 people rode the DC Metro on inauguration day 2017, compared to 317,000 in 2009. He did not offer a source for his claim or clarify the time periods being compared. The data were completely false. The reporters reproached him, but Spicer did not admit any questions (actual ridership figures between midnight and 11 am were 317,000 in 2009 and just 193,000 in 2017. Full-day ridership was 782,000 in 2009 and just 570,557 in 2017)²

Spicer's briefing completely contradicted the facts, and the very next day would be a memorable episode in the history of the West. Trump's campaign strategist and counsellor, Kellyanne Conway, defended Spicer's statements in a 'meet the press' interview. 'Why put him out there for the very first time, in front of that podium, to utter a provable falsehood?' Chuck Todd asked Kellyanne Conway. 'It's a small thing, but the first time he confronts the public, it's a falsehood?'

After some tense back-and-forth exchanges, Conway offered this: 'Don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. You're saying it's a falsehood, and they're giving—our press secretary, Sean Spicer, gave alternative facts to that. But the point really is...' At this point, a visibly exasperated Todd cut in: 'Wait a minute. Alternative facts? Alternative facts? Four of the five facts he uttered... were just not true. Alternative facts are not facts; they're falsehoods.'

'Fake news' is so yesterday. 'Alternative facts' is where it's at now.³ In her answer, Conway argued that crowd numbers in general could not be assessed with certainty, and objected to what she described as Todd's trying to make her look

² 'Alt-fact: Trump's White House threatens war on media over "unfair attacks".' Haaretz: Reuters, 22 January 2017. Retrieved 17 February 2018.

³ Aaron Blake. (22 January 2017). 'Kellyanne Conway says Donald Trump's team has "alternative facts". Which pretty much says it all.' *Washington Post*.

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ridiculous. She rebuked the journalist who sought the truth and facts, based on Feyerabend's postmodern 'everything goes' philosophy.



Conway considered 'alternative facts' to be different versions of reality: 'there were fewer people than ever before at the inauguration of Trump' vs 'there were more people than ever before at the inauguration of Trump'. The followers of each side believed the version of the 'alternative facts' that gave their brains the most pleasure, and that they reproduced it in their respective echo chambers.

This theoretical elaboration of 'alternative facts' (Cooke, 2017) in the post-truth era (Peters, 2017) has become legendary, and describes the current era in defining the relations between power, public opinion and the media. It also shows the contempt for science and the rational method of approaching truth.

The philosopher Mario Bunge explains perfectly in his book, *Pseudoscience and Ideology* (Bunge, 2013), how scientific progress and the advancement of knowledge are not linear: throughout the history of humanity there have been times when science has flourished and others when it has almost disappeared.

I agree with Bunge. Only, in my view, the current crisis of science, 'the public image of science' and, in short, the evils attributed to it by a part of society are not due to religion or political power, as in the past, but to something more liquid, permeable and pernicious: the media culture of the mainstream (of Hollywood or

Madison Avenue) and how it deals with science. Young people acknowledge this. This media culture does not come out of nowhere: it has been created in the universities, where those who will later take charge are taught not only about the mass media but of other social aspects, such as the curriculum or the narrative of what science has meant in the history of humanity.

My position on this point is clear. In terms of the lack of interest on the part of young people and, above all, the lack of vocations, as well as the increase in magical thinking as evidenced in all surveys and the framing of media content, the decline of science is not so much due to erroneous educational approaches or political decisions. Given that the phenomenon appears in all Westernized countries – which have very different educational policies and educational cultures – it is due to what unites them: the mainstream media culture and the cult of celebrity.

I repeat, we cannot lose sight of the second part of the equation: in Western universities, especially since World War II – won by the Allies, entirely thanks to science – there has been an enormous proliferation of professors and researchers in the humanities and social studies fields with the clear, although seldom admitted, objective of intellectually discrediting the natural sciences. For decades, these professors, departments and faculties have been graduating students who, without knowing about science, are highly critical of scientific disciplines. Especially dangerous in this respect are the students and teachers of philosophy, sociology, communication, political science, history and education studies. They take on the role that the Spanish Inquisition had played in the Counter-Reformation, crushing any research that advanced the knowledge of modern science begun by Galileo.

In the twenty-first century, the attacks on science are not so much from theology or papacy as from the secular philosophy, sociology and mass communication taught in universities (especially those suffering from the harmful influence of French academia): together, they have built cultural paradigms that promote values that are contrary to rational thought, scientific knowledge of nature and

rigorous work. On the contrary, the cult of fame, rapid success, irrationality and magical thinking (which are highly literary) is increasingly extolled in the media.

The case of France is curious: its rise as a country, as a culture and as a language coincided with its firm support for the ideals of the Enlightenment; its decline in every sense – not only cultural but economic – has coincided with uncritical acceptance of irrational thought in its universities.

As the Venezuelan philosopher Gabriel Andrade (2013) so well maintains, it is ironic that, in just two centuries, France has gone from being the country that promoted the ideals of the Enlightenment to become the country that attacks them the most. France is the country of origin of the illustrious: Voltaire, Diderot, D'Holbach, D'Alembert and Montesquieu. But it is also the country of origin of the great postmodernist gurus: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze

2. THE FRENCH PHILOSOPHERS OF THE FRENCH THEORY

There is one thing that I will always thank France for: the Encyclopaedia and the Enlightenment. And there is one thing that I will never forgive it for: that two centuries later its universities let in the irrational thinking of French postmodern gurus such as Lyotard (1924–1998), Baudrillard (1929–2007), Foucault (1926–1984), Derrida (1930–2004) and Deleuze (1925–1995), among others, and accorded them the same status as physicists, chemists and biologists. The origin of their anti-scientific mentality is unclear: maybe it is because they were born in the 1920s and were at a formative stage' during World War II. Yet others were unaffected. The problem lies not with them (mental disorders have always been present, even in academia) but with the university as an institution, considering them seriously. Above all, the problem is that biologists, chemists, physicists, mathematicians, geologists, engineers, and serious philosophers would find it impossible to thrive in this academic climate.

That was the end of a part of the French university (it is now almost irrelevant, in a world context), yet it heavily contaminated the American university, the best in the world and, from there, arts faculties across the entire Western world. Due to this influence, 'anything goes'. Since 2016, when Donald Trump won the

presidential elections and there was talk of anticipation, or alternative facts, there has been a shift: Trump's advisors have been trained in social studies or humanities departments, which take these authors seriously. Fortunately, Oxford and Cambridge are immune (not totally, as we shall see) to postmodern philosophy, but not the American universities of Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and so on.

The French Encyclopaedia – the Encyclopaedia – by Diderot and D'Alembert was a triumph of free thought, of the secular principle and of private enterprise. It foreshadowed the triumph of the French Revolution and of the enlightened values in favour of science, technology and, especially, of reason over irrationality.

Encyclopaedias are an old aspiration of human knowledge, from the cuneiform tablets in the archives of the kings of Mesopotamia (668 BC) to the Natural History of Pliny the Elder and many other lost Greeks and Romans. In the sixth century, Chinese emperors commissioned their colossal plethora of officials with an immense encyclopaedia, culminating in 1726 with the *Gujin tushu jicheng's* 745 hefty volumes. Yet this had no influence, as the Chinese officials did not circulate it. Likewise, the French Encyclopaedia was produced by a private company, and its sale and business profit involved publishing the volumes, as we know, not all at once but alphabetically: one letter per volume, one at a time. There were ground-breaking decisions: sorting the entries alphabetically, which put 'king' (roi) below 'rat'; ranking the amount of text in each entry; and selecting what was defined and what was not, who was cited and who was not.

As the entry for 'soul', the classical and authoritative definitions by Plato, Aristotle and St Augustine were inserted. Skilfully, as though to refute these, the encyclopaedia also added those of other, more 'disputed' intellectuals, such as Epicurus, Hobbes and Spinoza. These quotes ended the supremacy of religion. Obviously, there was much criticism – the Encyclopaedia was outlawed by the Inquisition. The monarchy and the clergy put pressure on the publishers to change their attitude, but the bourgeoisie, who bought the encyclopaedia, wanted more science and technology and less theology. This led to the fall of the old regime.

Apart from these beautiful ideals, which changed Western mentality, the Encyclopaedia had another characteristic: its editors were proud of the intellectual qualifications of the authors of the entries. These ranged from Rousseau and Voltaire to others who were less well known yet eminent in their time, such as the chemist Gabriel Venel, the physicist Louis Guillaume Le Monnier, the mathematician Guillaume Le Blond and the architect Blondel, among others. They knew the huge difference between being a specialist and just a self-taught amateur. And this is not trivial in our times, when the dominant encyclopaedia is Wikipedia, with its attendant problems.

Many articles were read and edited at meetings at the home of Baron D'Holbach, patron of the Encyclopaedia who, under a pseudonym, is the author of a controversial book in defence of atheism, *Christianity Unveiled: Being an Examination of the Principles and Effects of the Christian Religion*.

The encyclopaedists were not neutral, but took sides in favour of science, reason, progress and economic development as the source of prosperity, and against slavery and the Inquisition. Now, it seems obvious, but in the eighteenth century this was an act of heroism.

3. AGAINST THE ENLIGHTENMENT

In the middle of the twentieth century, an intellectual movement began in Europe and then spread throughout the United States. This movement despises rationality – the rationalist hegemony of the West, its followers said – and promulgated a return to mediaeval thoughts of myths, romanticism, and alternative facts. By turning its back on rationality, it obviated the need for data and arguments: it wanted followers who were emotional and with little affection for data. Until then, irrationality had always belonged to the ultra-religious Right (nothing else has done more harm to religion and magic than scientific and rational thought). What is interesting now is that, while rationality had been responsible for progress, the new mystics were from the political Left and claimed that scientific thought was totalizing. They blamed rationality for the Nazi holocaust and science and technology for labour exploitation.

There the decline of the Left began as progressive yet rational thinking, using the same arguments as the far Right. But the decline of the West and the rise of the East also began. China accepted the values illustrated: free trade, rational thinking and training in physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics as the basis for solving any social, economic, political or philosophical problem. It is true that China is not a democratic country, yet democracy – which I, as a journalist, will always defend – is part of the European cultural tradition (from ancient Greece), and is not exclusive to either scientific tradition or the Enlightenment.

The counter-movement in the West began in the Enlightenment itself and came not only from the Church or the Inquisition, as might be expected, but from philosophers such as Rousseau. Faced with Diderot's and D'Alembert's (both scientists) optimism for science and technology, Rousseau pointed out that science cures some diseases yet generates more ills than it solves. Another idea was also his: that the general will must be defended against dissidents (and that they must be crushed by society), which would make science – from Galileo to Darwin to Einstein – a social mistake. Science has always been intellectual dissidence, but Rousseau's idea left a strong legacy among literary intellectuals and triggered the so-called romanticism movement, promoting a return to myth and popular religiosity. Through literature, Rousseau idealized the life of the Middle Ages precisely because it was unscientific.

In his controversial essay, 'Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder', Oxford professor Isaiah Berlin argues that the counter-movement comprised those who were, above all, anti-rationalists and relativists. That would have favoured irrational romanticism and nationalist totalitarianism. Irrationalism came not only from the ultra-religious (the clearest example would be De Maistre) but atheists such as Nietzsche, opposed to all kinds of rule including that of scientific method.

Scientific thought, together with secularism, egalitarianism, materialism and Renaissance humanism, is part of the most radical of the French Enlightenment (Diderot, Condorcet, Mirabeau, etc.). There were the more moderates (D'Alembert, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire) who, in reality, were

reformers of the Old Regime, but they did not believe in the pro-scientific manifesto that Condorcet gave in his speech of admission to the French Academy in 1782. In this, he affirmed that the 'moral' (social) sciences should follow the same methods and acquire the same exact and precise language and the same degree of certainty as the physical (natural) sciences.

This led to a declaration of war by philosophers such as the German, Wilhelm Dilthey (1883), who, influenced by the idealists Kant and Hegel, held the thesis that everything social should be 'spiritual' rather than 'material'. In a way, it was a reproduction of Spanish mysticism as a way of understanding the world: St Teresa of Jesus before Bacon, Newton, or Dalton.

In fact, according to the science historian Phillip Ball, German physicists during the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) wanted to encourage a quasi-mystical perspective of quantum theory in the face of the growing rejection of the supposed evils of materialism: commercialism, greed, and the invasion of technology (Ball, 2013, 49). Science was associated with matter (it is actually the study of matter), and many literary intellectuals linked it to these supposedly degenerate values. The literary intellectuals of the Weimar era considered that the aspirations of science were inferior and could not be compared with the 'noble aspirations' of art and 'high culture'.

There is debate on whether the emphasis on metaphysical aspects of quantum mechanics was cultivated to free physics from materialism. The blame was not laid on quantum theory but on that of the microscopic probability of matter developed by the Scottish physicist James Maxwell (1831–1879) and the Austrian, Ludwig Boltzmann (1844–1906). The statistical distribution of the molecules proposed by Maxwell and Boltzmann to explain the kinetic theory of gases laid the foundation for fields such as special relativity and quantum mechanics. Also, by renouncing a precise and deterministic description of atomic movements, there was an abundance of renunciation of causality and a rise in indeterminacy.

The German philosopher and historian Oswald Spengler, in his influential book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* ('The Downfall of the Occident', 1918), pointed out that the doubts of the physicists of his time (referring to Maxwell and Boltzmann) about causality were a symptom of what he considered to be the moribund nature of science.

This was the background, even though it was somewhat forgotten during World War II. It gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century. There was a movement that linked the atomic bomb to science. To be unscientific was to be concerned with the humanities, and the postmodern philosophers (French and German) began a far more continuous attack on science than the Romantics had carried out. Alternatively, and this is my hypothesis, it was no more continuous, yet was able to have great influence when its ideas were received among the growing community of communication students, who would later dedicate themselves to journalism or cinema.

The famous analytic philosopher of the University of California, Berkeley, John Searle (one of the most eminent philosophers of the mind), maintains that French postmodern philosophy – Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and so on – deliberately practices 'obscurantisme terroriste (terrorism of obscurantism)⁴, with the intention of making the ideas of charlatans look like genius. Let us briefly analyse some of these philosophers' ideas about science.

One of the most acclaimed is Roland Barthes (1915–1980). Studied extensively in non-English-speaking Western schools of communication, and also in media studies in the latter, he went so far as to say that clarity in writing is a 'bourgeois ideology' (for him, the bourgeoisie is something negative). The dark language allows us to affirm both one thing and its opposite, because everything is left to the discretion of interpretation. And it is this has been exploited by the movement of 'alternative facts' and post-truth.

⁴ Steven R. Postrel & Edward Feser (2000) 'Reality Principles: An Interview with John R. Searle'. *Reason*. <https://reason.com/archives/2000/02/01/reality-principles-an-intervie>

It holds extravagant (but pleasing to the ears of obscure literary scholars) ideas whereby literary critics have the same level of creativity as the writers themselves. Barthes, in his book *Critique et vérité*, states that anyone who writes a dark essay on Shakespeare or Cervantes must also be worthy of artistic glory.

However, in my view, it is perhaps the Frenchman Jacques Derrida who has contributed the most to the concept of post-truth so beloved of today's populists. He has elevated irrational approaches to academic and seriousness. Derrida bases his work on an attack against what he calls logocentrism; that is, knowledge based on logic and reason. In his opinion, in the West, intellectual violence has been exercised by giving priority to the rational over the irrational. Derrida maintains that the emphasis on rationality favours the domination of men over women and points out that logocentrism leads to phallogentrism.

Like all French postmodernists, Derrida is an extremely dark author, because logical reasoning (something that Derrida opposes) invites us to think that, if rational thinking or logocentrism leads to phallogentrism and male dominance, the way to obtain gender equality is to return to irrational thinking or magic. But for the postmodern French Theory, magic and science are at the same level. It would not be a problem if we were considering a hairdressing salon or a mechanic's workshop. The serious thing is that it is sustained in the university; the worst thing of all is that those who promote these anti-rational ideas are rewarded.

In fact, in 1992 there was a huge scandal when the University of Cambridge wanted to award Derrida an honorary doctorate and a group of 20 philosophers opposed it in a letter to the Times. The signatories saw a pernicious influence on the university in those departments for which magic is as valid – because it is a literary object – as science: the departments of film studies, French and English literature.

That letter did not prevent Derrida from being awarded an honorary degree by the University of Cambridge (1992), following a vote of 336 to 204 in favour. Perhaps that was the turning point in the decline of the Western university: that

the university where Newton taught or where the structure of DNA was discovered had awarded Derrida a doctorate. It is proof that in the university of the late twentieth century, the arts (literary studies) had power over science and rigorous philosophy. This is not because they were right, but because they had more students, and therefore more teachers who voted. If a majority of teachers voted that Derrida's thought was valid, then it was valid.

Under that premise, Galileo could never have succeeded, not to mention Einstein. When Hitler wanted to discredit Einstein, he also displayed the populist spirit that most people are right. He recruited intellectuals to discredit the German physicist, compiling the opinions of 100 scientists who contradicted those of Einstein in *One Hundred Against Einstein* (in German, *Hundert Autoren Gegen Einstein*), published in Leipzig, Germany, in 1931. When Einstein was asked about the book, his answer stated that he knew what science was: 'If I were wrong, only one would have been enough.'

The posttruth and alternative facts that have brought Trump to power are nourished by another variant of French anti-scientific and irrational philosophy: relativism. For its followers, truth does not exist, science does not lead to truth and truth is always relative to the one who enunciates it. If a person believes that the Earth is flat, it is his truth and it is as true as that of a professor of physics who claims that it is spherical.

One of the main French representatives of this current is Jean-François Lyotard. In his opinion, postmodernism is defined as the loss of credibility of the great narrative. Science, for Lyotard, is just one more narrative, although it is a great one: it is a great narrative. But since, in his opinion, the great narratives lost their legitimacy in the mid-twentieth century, science has likewise done so (Lyotard, 1979). In any case, for Lyotard, it being only a narrative, science is really an ideology with which one can agree or disagree. This cultural relativism is not new. Already the Greek sophists, with Protagoras at the head and his famous phrase 'man is the measure of all things', have established that every human being has his truth. The sophists, who recognized that they used rhetoric with the intention of persuading, not finding the truth, were pre-scientific.

However, the French postmodern philosophers were able to say both that science was just another ideology and to say it on television, or to fly in an aeroplane, without taking into account that, if science were not true, there would be no television and the aeroplane would not fly. Inconsistency becomes a value. They were not afraid to use that aeroplane to fly to the United States to spread the stain of their irrationality – French Theory – by polluting American universities, the best in the world, and, from there, the whole West.

It is a fascinating story described by the communication expert François Cusset in his book, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life in the United States* (Cusset, 2003). It explains how these French theorists first entered the French language departments in order to reach the influential English literature and literary critics at universities such as Irvine or Cornell. It was the Modern Language Association, the most important forum for teachers and researchers in literature (founded in 1883), which from the 1970s and 1980s onwards went from analysing Shakespeare's theatre or the Baroque poetry of Calderón de la Barca to lectures with titles (influenced by French Theory) such as 'Clitoral Imaging and Masturbation by Emily Dickinson', 'Victorian Underwear and Representation of the Female Body' and 'The Sodomite Tourist'. And this was an academy, and they paid them the same salaries as in physics. It is the responsibility of scientists not to strike – as at Cornell, for example – but to find another university where they do not have to work alongside departments that accept French Theory. It is not enough to vote as, at the moment, rational scientists and philosophers are in a minority in the West because they have no students. And if they lack students, they have no power: not just economic power, but influence in the world.

These departments of literature have incorporated French philosophy into English literary theory and, from there, it has gone into cultural studies and film studies. Literature teachers (Paul de Man, Gayatri Spivak, etc.) promoted reading groups of French authors. It would not have spread beyond a group of eccentric university professors and appointments among their brotherhood of pedants if it were not for a widespread error in many universities of the West: the creation of faculties of communication. Cinema, journalism, advertising, and television

programmes are not staffed by professors of thermodynamics, genetics or chemistry, but by professors in film studies, cultural studies, media studies, semiotics or literary theory. When their students came to control mass media, both irrationality and post-truth spread like wildfire.

In any case, what is interesting in the twenty-first century is that this relativism and deconstructivism, which went from Heidegger to the Left of the French Theory that incorporated him into cultural studies, is now one of the main tools of the far Right: it is used by politicians from Marine Le Pen to Donald Trump and the defenders of Brexit in order to build realities that run parallel to the facts. It is used to elevate fiction to the same status as reality and facts, as long as it serves to construct persuasive stories.

During the NBC show *Meet the Press*, when Kellyanne Conway, Donald Trump's government advisor, told Chuck Todd that, despite the photographs and facts showing more people in Obama's inauguration than Trump's, she did not hesitate to use the deconstructivist concept of Derrida and the French Theory to talk about 'alternative facts' (Conway studied politics and took her doctor's degree in law at American universities): 'He (referring to Sean Spicer, who was responsible for Trump's communications at the time) presented alternative facts. There is no way to count people in a crowd accurately', Conway said. Yes, there is, actually, but physics and mathematics should be involved, not the creation of narratives, storytelling or literary theory that Conway and Spicer used. The same goes for Le Pen's economic, anti-immigration and anti-European statements.

I insist that literary theory or cultural studies would have no relevance (they would not appear on the walls of a darkened university department) unless they are taught to students who then have responsibilities for mass communication. And not only do these students go on work in the media, but a significant majority do so as campaign advisors or as public discourse creators. The influence of those French Theory-loving professors who later devoted themselves to the mass media is the real triumph of the irrational and relativistic intellectuals who saw science as the cultural and intellectual paradigm that defined the West in the mid-1950s. From French Theory (and, above all, its American version) there is also

contamination of 'science studies', which, influenced by another Frenchman, Bruno Latour (and also by the British Steve Woolgar) have tried to deconstruct the scientific disciplines (from his influential book -first published in 1979- *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*).

Latour (in recent times, in 2018) worries that he has gone too far. Citing an op-ed in the *New York Times*, in which a Republican senator argued that the way to gain public support for climate change denial is to artificially maintain a controversy by continuing to 'make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue', Latour notes 'I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show 'the lack of scientific certainty' inherent in the construction of facts'⁵.

Relativists defend themselves by saying that the hegemony of some ideas – the scientific ones, for example – over others, those of magic, is an example of intolerance and, ultimately, of totalitarianism. But relativism is not the same as tolerance. Tolerance implies that although there is in existence a true idea, I tolerate your having one that is false. When Voltaire, in his *Treatise on Tolerance*, said, 'I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend your right to say it to the death', he was not defending relativism but the right freedom of expression for the wrong speaker. He did not mean that both were right.

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THE DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION ABOUT GLOBAL WARMING IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

CECILIA KINDELÁN

ESIC Business & Marketing School, Spain

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"Some have turned defaming the sciences into a science; although they do not believe they are doing what I say, but rather demonstrating their personal knowledge publicly. But for me, discovering something unknown, anything that turns out to be more beneficial when invented than ignored, seems to be a genuine endeavor and task of intelligence, just as completing what was only half-done. In contrast, striving to discredit what others have found through scientific method with malicious words, without correcting anything, but rather defaming the discoveries of the knowledgeable before the ignorant, seems to me not an endeavor and task of intelligence, but rather natural slander or clumsiness" (Hippocrates of Kos - 460 B.C.-Thessaly-370 B.C.)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. NATURE CANNOT BE FOOLED

Dr. Richard Feynman, Nobel Prize in Physics and one of the great science communicators of the 20th century, said that Nature cannot be fooled, but it's evident that we humans can deceive each other... and many people have made deceit, disinformation, and self-serving lies their way of life.

The issue of anthropogenic climate change has become one of the problems gaining the most relevance due to its scientific, political, environmental, economic, and public health implications. Today, it requires a new approach beyond political speeches and intentions, demanding a qualitative leap from past

actions that can make society understand and take responsibility for the consequences of continuing with an unconscious behavior towards Nature, of which Pope Francis (2012) said in one of his most celebrated speeches, "God always forgives, man sometimes, but Nature never forgives."

Over the past 30 years, the world has witnessed significant advances in understanding between science and climate change. Recently, the concept of climate change has been gaining more presence in society which, no matter how current it may be, remains a confusing and controversial phenomenon for a large majority of citizens.

1.2. UNCERTAINTY

The responsibility for delivering an effective and impactful communicative message to the conscience of the citizens primarily lies with scientists and journalists. These professionals increasingly respect each other's work, but a closer approach could improve such important aspects as communication strategies to explain the impacts of this global phenomenon and achieve greater involvement more clearly.

It's true that concern for climate change, environmental defense, and sustainable development are increasingly present, but in society, they still constitute a rhetorical desideratum that accentuates the contradictions between the interests of the dominant productive system and the adoption of measures that seek the planet's sustainability.

From the outset, there were three significant manifestations in relation to the effects of pollutants on climate evolution.

- A. The broad scientific consensus.
- B. The resistance of various countries to sign commitments that, in some way, could question the bases of the opulent society model and thus associate that approach with certain ideological options.

C. The argumentative confrontation of the media, with a message generally uncommitted, discontinuous, often described through the violent spectacle of nature: tsunamis, droughts, and floods.

Humanity is witnessing, according to the broad consensus of scientists, the prelude to a critical scenario, caused by human intervention in the environment, but the public watches the spectacle with passivity, indifference, resignation, impotence, and some disbelief.

Over a century ago, the scientific community began to investigate the phenomenon of global warming. Today there is a consensus among the scientific community that the origin of climate change lies in human activity and calls for a rapid response to the situation, but unfortunately, society remains asleep. The era of information has brought with it a constant flow of data, creating a fertile ground for the dispersion of both crucial knowledge and falsehoods.

The danger of climate change is discovered by scientists, analyzed by experts, and negotiated by governments elected by citizens, so to save the planet, it is necessary to motivate a change in people's behavior. To do this, understanding how they perceive the risk is needed because today, climate change is still not on the political agenda of many major countries in the world, in the manner and intensity it should be.

Global warming, a critically important issue for the future of the planet, is no exception. Among university students, who are at a key stage in forming their opinions and knowledge, any misinformation process, and the existence of bad or simply biased or incomplete information can have profound consequences.

This article examines how these informational distortions impact understanding and what can be done about them. It presents data from a study conducted a few years ago, which already shows that not even university students, presumably better informed than the average population and belonging to an age group assumed to have greater knowledge and sensitivity on the matter, are immune to these processes.

Over recent decades, the relationship between science and society has evolved in such a way that individual scientific research, as was common in past

centuries, is no longer feasible. Moreover, science is heavily influenced by other disciplines like history, geography, or sociology, making its role in our society significantly more complex.

Science philosophers Silvio Funtowicz and Jerry Ravetz (1996) coined the term "Post-Normal Science" to refer to this new conceptual reformulation. Science, while retaining its own rules and methodology, is now characterized by being in a situation of high risk due to the rapidity of decision-making.

Science always speaks in a conditional voice. The science affecting climate change is marked by a strong component of uncertainty due to the complexity of the climate change operation system and its relationship with different elements like the oceans or the atmosphere.

Collectively, these uncertainties present a serious problem for politicians and the media, often resulting in a response of indifference.

1.3. CONSENSUS

Moreover, this uncertainty has also been conditioned by the existence or absence of consensus among the scientific community. In 1988, initially under the auspices of the World Meteorological Organization, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established, quickly joining the United Nations Environment Programme. It became characterized by the validity of its consensus, the legitimacy of its experts, and the neutrality of its recommendations. However, as its members were appointed by governments, criticisms soon emerged questioning its independence.

In 2007, the Swedish Academy awarded them the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of their research on the human origins of climate change, restoring credibility to this institution and acknowledging the value of the contributions of climate scientists.

Commonly, it is thought that the climate movement began with the first environmentalist groups, when, it was driven by the scientific community (Neale 2012)

Researchers alerted the global population about global warming. First, they organized themselves in international scientific conferences and later took it as their mission to inform society and attract scientists from various fields.

1.4. MANIPULATION

Through the United Nations-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel of Experts on Climate Change, scientists began publishing reports on the state of global warming. During the process, they added individuals from governmental machinery to encourage governments to act. However, the U.S. government delegates brought representatives from leading oil and coal companies to their sessions. Starting from 1990, these companies organized themselves and began to obstruct any action on climate change mitigation (BBVA 2020).

The Carbon Club, comprising coal, gas, and oil companies, adopted a strategy aimed at convincing the public and public authorities that such warming was not occurring and that there was no unanimity among scientists.

Through various opinion think tanks, they hired scientists to produce manipulated reports that would never be published in impactful scientific journals. They also aimed to convince the U.S. administration at the time that reducing emissions would harm American industrial interests, thereby slowing down the adoption of a global agreement on emission limitations.

The media were also controlled to ensure adequate coverage of the issue. Certain communication professionals adhered to the Fairness Doctrine (Calderon 2009); a policy introduced by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission in 1949. This policy required holders of radio and television station licenses to present issues of public importance in a fair, honest, and balanced manner. Based on the principle that the broadcasting spectrum was a public good, therefore, stations had to use it in a way that served societal interests, presenting a variety of viewpoints on controversial issues. However, the "Fairness Doctrine" was eliminated in 1987 by the FCC, partly due to the belief that there were enough voices and opinions in the media market to ensure a diversity of viewpoints without the need for governmental regulation. Since its removal, there has been

a notable increase in media polarization, particularly in the United States, where news channels often present clearly biased political viewpoints. (For example, there were Americans who denied that man had been on the moon, but serious media never published it as the other point of view worthy of credibility).

In the early decades of its existence, scientists had a strong position when writing each report issued under the acronym IPCC. However, governments eventually won the battle regarding the third part of the document, dealing with commitments, which was what journalists ultimately read and conveyed to society.

A clear example of manipulation and creation of controversy was the publication of the IPCC's fourth report. This document was crucial as it indicated that the most significant increase in global temperature was caused (with 90% probability) by human action.

Coinciding in dates, in February 2007, Fred Singer and Dennis Avery (2007), two scientists critical of most of their colleagues' opinion, published a book "Unstoppable Global Warming: every 1500 years" purportedly demonstrating that climate change is a natural part of a cycle occurring every 1,500 years. This document became a bible for those denying any human responsibility for spurious reasons and for those who, out of ignorance or simply by neglect, doubted what the rest of the scientific community accepted as valid and proven. Media outlets linked to more conservative factions in the USA, England, or Australia, clearly maneuvered to increase this perception (Climate Progress 2012).

Despite these controversial situations, what climate scientists achieved was very innovative. Never had there been an organized movement with such a significant political agenda. Ultimately, most of the scientific community succeeded in raising awareness of what was happening, though they have not yet been able to achieve all the solutions they deemed necessary. The immense power of the coal and oil industry (with its manipulation of the media and funding of political campaigns) continued to hinder them.

At that time, there was a current of opinion that scientists had not been successful in communicating their messages to the public and had been more focused on

proving their theories and conducting research, thinking this was the priority. But, while all this was happening, a select group of well-organized professionals with specific ideological and economic interests took advantage of this situation and began introducing their ideas through persistent communication campaigns aimed at sowing doubt and misinformation.

As Naomi Oreskes (2011) contends, the profound chasm between science and society leads to a state of ignorance and unfamiliarity with the issue among politicians, journalists, and lawmakers. This gap fosters a climate of fear and rejection, despite their crucial role in devising solutions.

Furthermore, this divide between the scientific community and society is blamed for political inertia and the exploitation of the situation by economic and political interest groups, often camouflaged under the guise of "charitable foundations promoting knowledge," to spread their ideologies.

2. THE PHENOMENON OF CLIMATE

The phenomenon of climate change impacts numerous vital factors such as prejudices, habits, priorities, institutional structure, and entire systems, also influencing emotions and even interpersonal relationships. It is not surprising, therefore, that many people find it difficult to comprehend the issue. An involuntary psychological reflex of short-term protection subconsciously plays a decisive role, diverting attention and hindering proactive engagement.

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) identified four lifestyles in relation to risk, with coordinates being "social regulation" (High / Low) and "social contact" (High / Low). They defined the following profiles:

- Fatalists: High social regulation and low social contact. Nature is a lottery, capricious. Even if we eliminate cars and reduce fossil fuel consumption, the planet's climate will continue to change.
- Hieratic: High social regulation and high social contact. Nature is forgiving if treated with utmost care and respect.

- Individualists: Low social regulation and low social contact. Nature is benign.
- Egalitarians: Low social regulation and high social contact.

This confirms that climate change messaging must be tailored to the needs and predispositions of a specific audience.

Individual reasoning also affects perceptions of climate change and attitudes towards this issue. Analytical reasoning, involving processes of assimilation, deliberation, and judgment, responds differently from affective reasoning, which is more primitive, intuitive, automatic, and quick.

2.1. PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Scientist Barrie Pittock (2009) categorizes three psychological responses to climate change: nihilistic, fundamentalist, and activist.

- Nihilistic psychological response given the current situation, doing nothing is futile. There is no longer a solution. It's best to enjoy what we have, as its duration is uncertain.
- Fundamentalist psychological response: God or a supreme force will come and save us at the worst moment. They may deny the existence of the problem or, recognizing it, deny its severity.
- Activist psychological response: the situation can still be resolved. Urgent action is needed.

If a person chooses activism, a sequence of difficult decisions just begins. If one opts for the other responses, everything becomes much simpler and more comfortable. Climate change could offer Western civilizations, composed of more independent individuals, an opportunity to regain a deeper spiritual life, creativity, and ethics. Otherwise, if everyone adopts a lifestyle marked by consumerism, we will need more planets to sustain our needs.

As suggested by Assadourian (2010), change can occur with the involvement of six institutions: education, business, government, media, social movements, and

sustainable traditions. Climate change is closely linked to sustainability from a social standpoint (balancing current and future societies), economic (incorporating ecological concepts into accounting), and ecological (or environmental concerns related to reducing greenhouse gas emissions).

However, in response to scientific community warnings about global warming, the first to react, motivated by economic reasons and the preservation of their status quo, and massively disseminating falsehoods, were mining companies. Coal extraction and electricity generation companies organized around the Western Fuels Association and the Edison Electric Institute, creating in 1991 a lobbying group named the "Information Council for the Environment (ICE)." Their stated aim was: "Reposition global warming as a theory rather than a fact." (Hueriga, 2020), (UCS 2015).

2.2. DENIALISTS

Denialists, funded by the powerful and multi-billion-dollar tobacco industry, had discovered in the 1950s-60s an efficient strategy to achieve the same end: generate doubt about what science unequivocally demonstrates. And it is precisely this strategy that the coal, oil, electric industries, and many others continuously adopt, with a notable coincidence that several ideologues and key players from those times were also involved in these new initiatives, including one of the most renowned U.S. public relations gurus, E. Bruce Harrison. (Jimenez, 2023), (Puig, 2009)

This is how one of the most defining characteristics of organized denialism is the creation of a vast number of networked organizations, succeeding each other to give the impression of a large 'popular' movement.

The initial advertising and public relations campaign of the denialist movement was a success. The massive bombardment, just for 'market testing,' cost half a million dollars. The document revealing these strategies is known as the 'Vampire Memo.' (2006)

The advertisements and word-of-mouth aimed at the press, born, and stimulated in the U.S., linked global warming to a communist invention. After the fall of the

Berlin Wall, communists had supposedly become environmentalists, with the aim of: "fulfilling their dream of an egalitarian society based on the rejection of economic growth in favor of a smaller global population, less consumption, and a much more equitable sharing of far fewer resources." (Gelbspan 2006)

The next step was to label environmental scientists concerned about the environment as genocidal. The hired PR agencies proved adept at constructing 'framing,' thereby easily generating the association between ecologists and genocides.

Ross Gelbspan, (2006) a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who investigated the denialist movement, states, "the most effective campaigns were far more coercive. Western Fuels stated in its annual report that it was recruiting various climate change skeptical scientists as spokespersons. The coal industry paid these and a handful of other skeptics around one million dollars.

So, why do educated groups with access to and knowledge to assess the magnitude of this problem continue to deny it?

Several psychological factors contribute to climate change denial, including:

- Cognitive dissonance: People may deny climate change because accepting it would require changing their behavior, leading to discomfort or dissonance.
- Confirmation bias: People tend to seek information that confirms their existing beliefs and ignore contradicting information.
- Social norms: People may deny climate change because it doesn't align with the beliefs of their social group or community.
- Hierarchical power structures: Individuals accepting hierarchical power structures tend to deny climate change more.
- Political ideology: Climate change denial is more common among politically conservative individuals.
- Authoritarian attitudes: Climate change denial also correlates with authoritarian attitudes and approval of the status quo.
- Hard-minded personality: Climate change denial correlates with a hard-minded personality, characterized by low empathy and high dominance.

- Predisposition to avoid negative emotions: People may deny climate change because accepting it would require experiencing negative emotions like guilt or fear.

Understanding these psychological factors allows for the development of strategies to counter climate change denial and promote accurate information about climate change. These strategies can include addressing cognitive dissonance, providing information that confirms existing beliefs, and appealing to social norms that support action on climate change.

However, considering all the above, what impact might this have on a population of university students, who, despite having more access to information than ever, often opt for the comfort of third-party crafted information, with its biases and misinformation, rather than conducting their own research and reaching independent conclusions? (Kindelán, 2013)

3. CLIMATE CHANGE PERCEPTION IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

In a study we conducted some time ago on a broad group of university students from various disciplines to examine, among other things, their perception of the misinformation documented in this article, we observed some interesting data. More than half of the participating students perceive climate change as one of the main problems of the 21st century that needs a solution. (Kindelán, 2013)

Nearly 75% of them opined that climate change is "a reality for which man is responsible due to the misuse of natural resources," showing a correct perception of the problem. However, more than 25% leaned toward denialist responses, an interesting finding from the study being that the majority of Marine Sciences students believed climate change to be a natural consequence of the planet's cyclical changes. This percentage was too high for students who deal with this topic and have specific subjects on it in their curriculum, forcing those responsible for this degree to reconsider the kind of training being offered on this topic, as there was also a non-negligible number of them who claimed that "Climate change is concocted by environmentalists to profit through the use of alternative energies."

The groups that responded most to denialist or misinformation options were three degrees students where specific training on climate change and environmental issues is imparted: Social Education (23.8%), Architecture (20%), and Marine Sciences (18.8%). These students argued that there are many uncertainties about the planet's temperature for there to be unanimity in the scientific community.

The paradox here might be that in these careers in which subjects related to climate change are taught, the content of denialism and the factors of misinformation supporting it were not being thoroughly explored.

In conclusion from this study, it was striking that university students, despite mostly understanding the phenomenon of climate change and recognizing human activity as its main cause, did not perceive its threat as immediate. Their perception of danger was medium-term, evidently still being a product of poor quality in information and in the sources, they used for documentation, among which specific books on the topic were used by a minority and the majority relied on internet searches despite being, according to well-known and studied evidence, the place where more toxic, manipulated information and biases guided toward a series of biases is concentrated. Undoubtedly, this plays an increasingly important role along with the use of Social Networks, which are more used than search engines and have certainly relegated other traditional media to a residual role. The most evident proof is that one of them, Tik Tok, has become the primary source of information search and access for the so-called Generation Z, even above conventional TV channels. We believe that it will be necessary to use these new tools more consistently, ingeniously, and creatively to reach these generations of young people who continue to be the target of misinformation on issues such as vaping, energy drinks, or climate change through the same channels. The sooner we realize and start using them to send messages based on scientific evidence, the sooner we can prevent the new generation from also believing, as reflected in that study from a few years ago, that this is not an urgent problem and that what the influencers who are receiving resources from those who want nothing to change are saying, is the reality that lulls young people who

do not have a special and personal interest in this topic and therefore are easy prey for the masters of misinformation.

3.1. EDUCATION AND ROBUST KNOWLEDGE

Battling misinformation and poor information regarding global warming is crucial for ensuring effective understanding and response to this monumental challenge. Equipping college students with critical skills, robust knowledge, and a sense of urgency can transform them into pivotal actors for positive change and climate action.

Only by promoting rigorous, evidence-based education and critical thinking can we hope to develop future leaders capable of addressing the challenges of global warming with the seriousness and urgency it demands.

In conclusion we would like to consider some points to properly contextualize this issue.

1. Perception and Action: Misconceptions about global warming can lead to a distorted perception of its risks, resulting in apathy or the adoption of ineffective or counterproductive measures.
2. Scientific Skepticism: A barrage of contradictory information might cause students to question the validity of climate science itself, leading to a skepticism that hinders effective understanding and action.
3. Strategies to Combat Misinformation and Poor Information: provide role models and mentorship, integrate climate literacy in curricula, offer workshops and training.
4. Education and Awareness: University programs should emphasize evidence-based climate science teaching and media literacy, preparing students to critically analyze information sources.
5. Promoting Critical Thinking: Encouraging critical thinking skills can help students distinguish between truthful and misleading information, assessing the sources, evidence, and methods used in the claims they read or hear. It's vital that the disseminated message is always reliable and based solely on verified and verifiable facts.

6. **Fact-Checking Platforms:** Encouraging students to use fact-checking tools and platforms to verify climate-related claims. This includes teaching them to identify and be wary of sources known for bias or inaccuracy.
7. **Student Initiatives and Activism:** Projects involving students in climate action and sustainability can provide practical experiences and knowledge that counter misinformation.
8. **Providing Verified, Reliable Information Backed by Undisputed Scientific Data:** It's crucial to show students the vast amount of data supporting climate change and how it is known that global warming is real and a threat. They should understand that climate change negatively affects human health and wellbeing, such as increasing existing diseases and conditions, and helps pests and pathogens spread to new regions.
9. **Highlighting the Importance of Collective Action:** It's also crucial to note how important it is for society to take steps to mitigate potential negative effects in the future, as addressing global climate change is a Herculean task, dependent on international consensus and the efforts of communities, businesses, and individuals alike. In this respect, their role as youth who will live and lead in the future is exceedingly important to keep in mind.
10. **Addressing Common Misinformation Arguments:**
 - "Climate change is not real": This is one of the most common misconceptions about climate change. However, the science behind climate change is well-established, and there is overwhelming evidence that global warming is real and a threat.
 - "Climate change is just a natural cycle": While Earth's climate has always changed, the changes in the last 150 years have been exceptional, and it's documented that these are not due to volcanoes, solar radiation, or other natural causes, but to anthropogenic action.
 - "The effects of climate change are insignificant": Climate change has significant effects on the environment, including rising sea levels, more frequent and severe weather events, and the extinction of plant and animal species.

- "The climate change issue is not urgent": Climate change is a global crisis requiring urgent measures. Delaying action will only worsen the problem and make it more difficult, if not impossible, to resolve, as confirmed by overwhelming scientific consensus based on observational data and prediction models.
- "Climate change is a political issue": Climate change is a global crisis affecting everyone, regardless of their political thought or beliefs. It is crucial to address climate change as a non-partisan issue and work together to find solutions.

As we can see, combating misinformation and poor information regarding climate change among university students involves a multi-faceted approach that combines education, critical thinking, and awareness. By implementing precise strategies, universities can help equip students with the skills and knowledge to critically assess information, differentiate between fact and misinformation, and become informed advocates in the fight against climate change misinformation.

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THE NEW GAME OF POLITICS.
HOW INFORMATION DISORDERS HAVE RESHAPED (AND THREATENED)
MODERN DEMOCRACIES

ROBERTO GELADO MARCOS

University San Pablo CEU, Spain

MARICHÉ NAVÍO NAVARRO

University San Pablo CEU, Spain

LIST OF CONTENT:

1. Disinformation as a not so recent phenomenon. 2. The new threats put forward by modern disinformation. 2.1. What do contemporary information disorders look like? 2.2. The specific impact of disinformation on politics. 3. Fact-checking as a reaction to fight disinformation. 3.1. Is fact-checking effective? 4. Conclusions. 5. References.

1. DISINFORMATION AS A NOT SO RECENT PHENOMENON

It is widely accepted that disinformation is a not a new phenomenon, though its problematic nature has exponentially increased its potential reach in the last few years. Hameleers & van der Meer (2020, p. 228) warn about how the era that we are currently living in seems to be “*characterized by post-factual relativism (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017). This implies that the epistemic premises of information and factual knowledge have increasingly become a source of doubt and distrust*”. The not insignificant list of consequences that one can intuitively infer from the skeptical landscape painted by these authors –and agreed by many others– are so pervasive that it is difficult to imagine one single field of our current existence, ranging from health to politics, that cannot be affected by such mistrust.

In an investigation conducted by Gelado & Puebla (2019) on the impact of disinformation in Spain, it was noted that half the Spanish population already

presented a notable degree of vulnerability towards information disorders. The conclusion took us back to pre-pandemic times, which confirmed that certain episodes (such as COVID-19 itself) could have boosted the effect due to certain conditions that were met back then (such as the increased consumption of contents coming from Internet-based platforms derived from situations that discourage people's mobility, as confirmed by Comscore (see Poch-Butler et al., 2023, p. 380 and Moreno et al., 2020). However, the phenomenon had already planted its roots before then.

In fact, the diffusion of rumours dates back to as early as the invention of the printing press. Gutenberg's device was, as Elizabeth Eisenstein (1983) put it, the most radical transformation in Western Intellectual life –or, as Francis Bacon (in Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 15) would agree, one of the three inventions, along with gunpowder and the compass, that have “*changed the whole state and face of things throughout the world*”–, but it was also a way to amplify the list of potential senders and, as a result of that, spurious content as well. This could, in fact, easily be included in the list of similarities that Balnaves et al. (2009, p. 20) hint at between the printing revolution and the later transformations introduced by broadcasting and computing technologies.

Newspapers were one of the most significant branches of the reshaped cultural landscape catalyzed by the invention of the printing press, and its massified commercial version. This was arguably conceived and/or seen in different milestones of the 19th century and has a recorded history of episodes that could easily qualify in some of the basic modalities of information disorders (misinformation, malinformation and disinformation) put forward initially by First Draft and immediately adopted by key institutions such as UNESCO (Cf. Ireton & Posetti, 2018), which was soon widened by Wardle (2019) –also a key member of the excruciatingly valuable contribution made by First Draft to better understand informative disorders.

As Copeland (2010, p. 34) explains:

“The press played a key role in defining America even before settlers began arriving from Europe. Colonization literature painted a portrait of America as a place that offered immigrants all they needed to (...) become social and economic successes”.

Newspapers were indeed the epitome of the United States quite unrestricted view of freedom of expression, legally contemplated in the 45 words of the First Amendment to the American Constitution, which *“guarantees the American People a free press, as well as freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and the right to petition the government”* (Kirtley, 2009, p. 586).

This was the background that saw a massive proliferation of diverse, highly successful daily publications which explored the different possibilities of targeting massive audiences with stories that both interested them and could play a social function. The latter was first a radical innovation of newspapers such as *The Sun* (1833), founded by Benjamin H. Day in 1833, *The New York Herald*, founded by James Gordon Bennett in 1835 or *The New York Tribune*, founded in 1841 by Horace Greeley. All of these publications were part of what press historians refer to as *“penny press”*, whose main goal was conveying *“news rather than views with an emphasis on information that would interest the average person”* (Copeland, 2009, p. 85).

The initial lack of partisanship that inspired the penny press in their first years led some to affirm that they deserve credit for *“laying seeds for journalism’s convention of objectivity that later came to serve as a goal to be strived for”* (Charkas, 2009, p. 1016). *“The penny press period”*, as Sloan & Parcell put it (2014, p. 261) *“is marked by a growing realization by editors that serving the public with news was not only good journalism, but also good for sales”*. However, these same authors acknowledge that *“the penny press was not always true to its promised purpose of ‘giving a correct picture of the world’”* (Sloan & Parcell, 2014, p.261). This was due

to several factors, but mainly to the aforesaid race to print more, faster, and increasingly reach larger audiences.

Stephens (2007) agrees that *“the penny newspapers attracted large working-class audiences. However, the size of those audiences inevitably lifted the ownership of those newspapers into the upper classes”*. This led to the fact that, *“despite the egalitarian rhetoric of the early penny papers, significantly conservative, even reactionary, political forces were unleashed by mass circulation”* (Stephens, 2007, p. 189). It was then when, since high circulations were required to maintain the advertising income, *“the journalism world again would be refreshed by a new wave of “popular” journalism, bringing new readers and even larger circulations”* (Stephens, 2007, p. 194).

Joseph Pulitzer is, probably, the most prominent personality of this trend who capitalized on its sensationalist approach to the publication of news in the last third of the 19th century, and which many refer to as New Journalism. Stephens (2007) described the style Pulitzer adopted for the New York World, a decaying publication that he bought in 1883 and turned into a mass success in a very short span of time, using four main lines of action: (1) sensationalism, (2) crusading, progressive politics, (3) attention-getting campaigns and (4) aggressive, intelligent news coverage. An immigrant himself, he knew better than anyone that not only did immigrants form the vast majority of New York’s population (80% of New York’s citizens were first- or second-generation immigrants [Pizarroso, 1994, p. 441]) but also what type of stories and styles they enjoyed.

Even though Pulitzer was still influenced by the conventions of what good reporting was, which had been established by the successful newsmen that led the *“penny press”* revolution, some of the stories published in the World were so spectacular that some suspicions loomed over them to the point of fearing that the World likely sometimes made them too colourful. Soon enough, William Randolph Hearst, whose life and works were gloriously portrayed in Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane (RKO, 1941), appeared as the man who was ready to cross all the red lines that Pulitzer had not

dared to. This sometimes pushed him to break his own commitment to the truth, as happened in the (in)famous case of the explosion on the battleship Maine that Hearst falsely attributed to the Spanish troops deployed in Cuba.

“In his version of the new journalism, (...) Hearst neglected to include Pulitzer’s respect for accuracy and truth: The Examiner’s exaggerations of minor accidents on the hated Southern Pacific Railroad foreshadowed exaggerations in later Hearst newspapers of the offenses committed by the Spanish in Cuba or of the talents of Hearst’s paramour, the actress Marion Davies.” (Stephens, 2007, pp. 194-5)

Hearst’s headlines might not have been accurate, but they were certainly popular, with circulation occasionally surpassing 1 million in those days. Hearst and Pulitzer would fight over the news business in New York starting in 1895, when Hearst bought the New York Morning Journal (which, funnily enough, had been founded by Pulitzer –who later sold it for a million). Hearst’s first decision was to cut the price down to a penny to increase the pressure on Pulitzer and his business: his dumping strategy ultimately aimed at ousting Pulitzer from the already overcrowded business of news at the time. Hearst did not achieve his goals immediately, but Pulitzer was eventually forced to lower the price of the New York World.

After that, Hearst literally *“hired away many of the World’s top journalists”* (an episode, along with Marion Davies’ and others, that were parodied in Citizen Kane), *“including the artist behind a popular cartoon, “The Yellow Kid””* (Stephens, 2007, p. 195), *which justified the term “yellow journalism”* later coined by historians. Pulitzer recruited another artist to draw similar cartoons, and both engaged in a battle to see who could *“most overdramatize Spanish injustices in Cuba”* (Stephens, 2007, p. 195).

Distorted versions of events that actually happened or even made-up stories could not be explained then by the potential brought along by 21st century technologies. However, these pose new challenges that threaten different spheres in modern societies.

2. THE NEW THREATS PUT FORWARD BY MODERN DISINFORMATION

The relatively recent outburst of technological possibilities which make it increasingly difficult to discern true contents from fabricated ones has catalyzed a public landscape where informative disorders occupy a prominent position. Its ramifications branch out to practically every social layer, but its impact on politics is particularly noteworthy, as has been pointed out by academics and institutions in recent years, with electoral processes being at the core of some of these disrupting attempts (Sorgatz, 2018). The European Commission (2018), for instance, warned five years ago about the binomial relationship between technology and politics to characterise information disorders as one of the most concerning threats for modern societies, noting that *“new technologies can be used, notably through social media, to disseminate disinformation on a scale and with speed and precision of targeting that is unprecedented”*.

The never-before-seen amount of content that modern users are bombarded with daily are far from helpful in this respect indeed, nor is the speed at which information (and disinformation) spreads almost instantly. Vosoughi et al. (2018) warned five years ago that false news is 70% more likely to be reposted than those that were truthful. Also, the exponential increase of these new technologies threaten to boost its effect with future developments of AI, which has already opened the potential abyss of not having any feasible certainty to differentiate real content from an entirely fabricated one. The first step, as pointed out by Gelado (2022) may be not entirely technological; but, rather, a firm battle to restore the importance of truth at the core of modern societies; since, as Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007, p. 43) stated, debates *“between opponents arguing with false figures or purely on prejudice fails to inform. It only inflames. It takes the society nowhere”*.

2.1. WHAT DO CONTEMPORARY INFORMATION DISORDERS LOOK LIKE?

The malicious intention (Gentzkow et al., 2016) behind disinforming messages is central in most academic discussions that have attempted to conceptually clarify

what disinformation is and what different kinds of information disorders we may face. This is a much-needed endeavour given the “*complex and somewhat controversial*” nature of the phenomenon (Tandoc et al., 2021, p. 111).

Many points at the United States Presidential Elections of 2016 as an inescapable milestone to explain the rapid proliferation of information disorders thereafter. Barker et. al (2022, p. 173) affirm that such a “*cycle heightened the salience of the misinformation epidemic*” but highlight that “*the contagion itself has been spreading for some time*”, which cross-refers to our previous note on information disorders multiplying their effect thanks to a number of factors rather than being a purely new phenomenon in and of itself.

López-Martín et al. (2023, p. 2) agree that “*fake news has always existed, though it was not until 2016 when the phenomenon gained an unprecedented prominence worldwide*”, and mention specifically two noteworthy events as indispensable explanations to understand such an effect: “*the US Presidential Elections of 2016 (...) and the Brexit referendum (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gómez-Calderón, 2020; Baptista et al., 2021; Kapantai et al., 2021; García-Marín & Salvat-Martinrey, 2022)*”. The unprecedented amount of contents that modern users are bombarded with daily are far from helpful in this respect indeed, nor is the speed at which information (and disinformation) spreads almost instantly (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). This, in the specific case of information disorders, has a significant impact on the capacity to reflect and produce critical thinking (Zubiaga et al., 2016); something that Hylland (2001) already warned about when he discussed the “*tyranny of immediacy*” brought along by the new platforms that were proliferating in the digital environment in the wake of the 21st century.

On a similar note, Pérez-Seoane et al. (2023, p. 5) defend that “*although disinformation has always existed, it is the digital media, and, especially, the social networks*” that have rocketed the impact of information disorders, since “*It is here where fake news has found an outlet and it is a space for non-journalists to create seemingly journalistic contents and share them*”.

2.2. THE SPECIFIC IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION ON POLITICS

Although the impactful ramifications of information disorders are, as stated before, numerous; some of the most refined orchestrated attempts to destabilize entire nations have incontestable political intentions. In 2018, Bradshaw and Howard noted that democracies were being politically targeted by disinformation campaigns: more than 70 countries back then had already suffered verifiable campaigns of this nature. This has raised concerns regarding the potential harming effects that misconceptions derived from such articulated attacks can have, especially in context of political elections (Thorson, 2016). Coincidentally, Bennet & Livingston (2018) suggested that disinformation was one of the biggest threats to modern democracies nowadays.

Hameleers & van der Meer (2020, p. 228) point out that *“as misperceptions primarily persist when tightly intertwined with strongly held beliefs or ideologies, misinformation is inherently related to political polarization”*, which is a notable impact of information disorders that branches out to the political field. In this respect, and paraphrasing the work of Reedy, Wells, & Gastil (2014), Hameleers & van der Meer (2020, p. 229) also remind us that *“such false information can eventually lead to false beliefs or factual misperceptions, posing vexing problems on democratic decision-making”*.

In the previous epigraph, two remarkable electoral moments in recent history (the US Presidential Election of 2016 and the Brexit referendum) were mentioned as a key milestone in the use of these political scenarios to aim at destabilizing entire countries; but, as López-Martín et al. state (2023, p. 2), the trend was not limited, thereafter, to Britain and the United States:

“Since then, fake news has been frequently used in numerous democratic processes, such as the Catalan independence referendum of October 1st, 2017 (Alandete, 2019), the 2018 Presidential Elections in Brazil (Oliveira & Rossi, 2018), the peace referendum in Colombia (Gómez-Calderón et al., 2020) or the two General

Elections that took place in Spain during 2019 (Magallón, 2019; Paniagua Rojano et al., 2020)". (López-Martín et al., 2023, p. 2)

3. FACT-CHECKING AS A REACTION TO FIGHT DISINFORMATION

The aforesaid proliferation of information disorders, which frequently evolve at such speed that mechanisms to counter their harming effects like legislation struggle to catch up with, has led to the emergence of initiatives such as fact-checking, which Hameleers & van der Meer (2020, p. 229) have hinted as "*a potential solution in correcting the rising spread of misinformation that has become part of the contemporary mass communication landscape*"; in the hope that "corrective information can counter the effects of misinformation on false beliefs".

Abuín-Penas et al. (2023, p. 18) have pointed to the rising mistrust that threatens to settle in modern societies as the catalyst to explain the increasing importance of fact-checkers and verification. Ufarte-Ruíz et al. (2018, p. 734, cited in Pérez-Seoane et al., 2023, p. 5) define the endeavour as an attempt to apply "*journalistic data techniques to unmask the errors, ambiguities, lies, lack of rigour and inaccuracies in some contents posted on communication media*".

Regardless of whether they are seen as crucial champions that "*battle with entrenched fanatical beliefs*" (Seaton et al., 2020, p. 8), "*critical interventions in the fight against the expansion of false and/or misleading news*" (Moreno-Gil et al., p. 252), or a mere reformulation of that role traditionally assigned to journalists of double-checking unconfirmed stories (Graves, 2016), fact-checkers play a key role, along with legislation and actions aimed at fostering media literacy, in the fight against information disorders.

3.1. IS FACT-CHECKING EFFECTIVE?

As pointed out by Abuín-Penas et al. (2023, p.18), the main aspects studied on fact-checking have hinged upon "*the verifiers' motivations, principles and purpose, as well as its effectiveness when correcting erroneous information* (Walter et al., 2020)".

Effectiveness is, then, a key point in the notable academic interest raised by the booming fact-checking phenomenon.

Even though, as Barker et al. point out, “*evidence of journalistic fact-checking’s capacity to correct misperceptions is mixed*”, there are records, both from academics and journalists, endorsing “*the fact-checking enterprise (...)—and not without some evidentiary rationale*” (Barker et al., 2022, p. 173). Such affirmation builds on the findings by Gottfried et al. (2013) on fact-checking’s capacity to “*improve readers’ understanding of candidate issue positions and other election-relevant facts*”, as well as their role in protecting users from negative advertising or even discouraging “*politicians from making unsubstantiated claims*” (Barker et al., 2022, p. 174).

The underwhelming evidence on fact-checker’s efficiency stated by Barker et al. (2022) cross-refers as well to the countering effect of cognitive dissonance, which Rosnow and Robinson (1967, p. 299) defined as “*a tendency (on the part of individuals) to maintain, or to return to, a state of cognitive balance*”. Applying the principle to media consumption, we would say that people “*tend to expose themselves to those mass communications that are in accord with their existing attitudes and interests*”, consciously or unconsciously avoiding “*communications of opposite hue*” (Klapper, 1960, p. 19).

Coincidentally, the investigation run by Barker et al. themselves conclude that Politifact’s infographic comparing candidate’s factual accuracy was “*not likely to alter inter-partisan candidate appraisals, but they may affect intra-partisan ones – at least among Democratic primary voters*” (Barker et al, 2022, p. 173). Hameleers & van der Meer (2020, p. 227) claim, in a similar manner, and as a result of their experiments exposing users to “*attitudinal congruent or incongruent political news and a follow-up fact-check article debunking the information*”, that “*neither the exposure to misinformation or a fact-checker altered their view as this was already correct (i.e., in line with the fact-checker) in the first place*” (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020, p. 245).

This corroborates that *“fact checkers are most likely to be selected when they confirm prior attitudes and avoided when they are incongruent, indicating a confirmation bias for selecting corrective information”* (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020, p. 227). *“It is, however”, the authors conclude, “crucial to take into account whether the fact-checker actually refutes news that is congruent with citizens’ prior attitudes”* (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020, p. 245-246).

In their research on the fact-checking activity immediately after the start of the COVID-19 world emergency crisis, Dafonte-Gómez et al. conclude that the pandemic captured most of the verified stories but alerted that this could have led to a *“decrease in the attention paid to fake news and hoaxes in other fronts”* (Dafonte-Gómez et al., 2022, p. 176). Following the interaction rates, these same authors praise the engaging rates of Brazilian users consuming fact-checking services, a geographical environment that has also attracted researchers such as Batista Pereira (2022).

Regarding the topics covered by fact-checking stories, Pérez-Seoane et al. (2023, p. 10) highlight the prevalence of politics, which is present in 40% of *“among the 114 most important posts in 2021 (...) followed by health (23.68%, with the backdrop of the vaccination against COVID-19), society (13.16%) and the economy (8.77%)”*; a set of results that concur, as the authors themselves point out, with those by Ceron et al. (2021)” (Cf. also Paniagua Rojano et al., 2020).

According to the aforementioned prominence of politics and electoral periods in the agenda of disinforming attempts to destabilize entire regions, electoral campaigns have also naturally hogged the efforts of fact-checkers to debunk distorted content, as researched by authors like Baptista et al. (2022).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Information disorders have been systemically linked to the emergence of modern mass media, though, as it has been warned by institutions and backed up by

research, the possibilities brought along by contemporary technology has multiplied its potential effect. This, along with recent temptations to succumb to relativist postulates that question the centrality of truth that governed centuries of human progress, has paved the way for a time where the quest to differentiate real content from a fabricated one has become increasingly difficult.

It is easy, in this scenario, to surrender to what today seems impossible: knowing what is true and what is not. Though not as easy, engaging in a mission to recuperate the value of truth, first, and fight the malicious and often poignant attempts to pursue political agendas regardless of their truthfulness, is where true social value lies.

In this backdrop, fact-checking has surfaced as one key strategy to fight against information disorders. The number of platforms striving to debunk false stories as a business model has increasingly grown since 2016, the milestone where concerns on the impact of disinformation grew to also systemic levels; and so, has the research on their impact. Findings on this end may not encourage an undivided optimism of the fact-checkers' impact, yet their role still looks indispensable in a war that seems to need to be battled on different fronts.

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STRATEGIC IGNORANCE IN POLITICAL CONFLICTS: RT AS A DISINFORMATION TOOL

FELIPE NÚÑEZ SÁNCHEZ
University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

A few days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, EU countries and the social media platforms Twitter and Instagram blocked the account of the RT channel (formerly Russia Today), accusing it of being an instrument of disinformation in the service of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Cross-accusations between the West and Russia regarding propaganda are not new, but the creation of deliberate ignorance through new forms of disinformation is.

In this chapter, we will explore the evolution of political propaganda and how states have adapted it to new digital and multi-platform scenarios. In particular, we will present the case of Russia in the context of the *information war* and analyse the role played by the media outlet RT in this tactic. We argue that, following the Russian government's national strategy, RT is a tool of disinformation that, beyond fulfilling the traditional purposes of political propaganda, seeks primarily to destabilise through the sowing of doubts and uncertainty. For this reason, agnotology may be an appropriate approach for studying this phenomenon.

2. FROM POLITICAL PROPAGANDA TO MANUFACTURED IGNORANCE

If we wanted to trace the origins of persuasion and propaganda, we would have to go back to Aristotelian rhetoric, the art of communicating a message effectively, seeking to change attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours. From this common origin, we could identify these two initial concepts, which some authors have tried to differentiate based on the intentionality of the person issuing the message (Soules, 2015).

According to Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (2015), propaganda, usually associated with authoritarian regimes, is a deliberate and systematic act of changing perceptions and manipulating behaviour in pursuit of a benefit for the propagandist. Persuasion is a broader concept and has a different historical connotation. It refers to convincing someone to adopt a point of view or behaviour voluntarily (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015).

The study of propaganda and persuasion was widespread during and after World War II. A significant part of research in the field of communication focused on the effects these communication techniques had on the public. Regarding the evolution of the media effects research tradition, four phases are commonly identified (Voderer et al., 2020), each with a relative level of influence of media messages on the public (which, in chronological order, are strong, weak, moderate, and negotiated). In the current phase, effects are considered to be negotiated, implying that the media compete with other sources of opinion formation (McQuail, 2010). In short, the media's ability to influence the public has been subject to revision over time, as has the role of the recipients.

Nor should propaganda be understood as a homogeneous concept encompassing various approaches and techniques. The sociologist Jacques Ellul (1973) distinguishes several fundamental types of propaganda, establishing dualities. Thus, propaganda can be political or sociological, depending on whether the propaganda comes from a political group or is derived from the sociological context. It can also be vertical or horizontal, depending on whether the process is from a hierarchically superior group to the grassroots or whether it

arises from within the group. If articulated based on emotions, it is irrational, but if it presents facts and information, it could be rational. Finally, we find agitation propaganda if its purpose is to subvert an established order or integration propaganda if it seeks to reinforce cultural norms.

With the emergence of the internet and digital platforms, especially over the last decade, global society has had to cope with the rise of the phenomenon of misinformation and the rise of organized propaganda campaigns on social media (Jack, 2019; Kapantai et al., 2020). It is a unique phenomenon occurring under the confluence of a receptive social context and an enabling technological paradigm (Ferraris, 2019).

Both propaganda and disinformation are often considered interchangeable by some authors (Johansson-Nogués & Şimanschi, 2023). This is because, in their political context, both tactics aim to elicit a specific response from a targeted group. A propagandist achieves this goal by selectively choosing and framing specific facts while manipulating or withholding information that goes against their message. It is worth noting that some authors argue that the current situation is different from classical propaganda. Instead of trying to convince people of a certain truth, the current system aims to create a sense of uncertainty and confusion regarding what information to believe. This leads to a state of *epistemic anarchy* (Dawon & Innes, 2019).

In our minds, the development of this event has created a semantic field of words that have become associated with political events and, ultimately, have served to delimit a central concern of public life today: the contemporary difficulty of distinguishing between what is true and what is not. For example, Donald Trump's rise to the US presidency or the Brexit Campaign is inseparable from terms such as alternative facts, fake news, misinformation, or post-truth (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Amazeen & Bucy, 2019).

The rise and popularisation of these concepts, often used interchangeably despite their nuances, serve as an indicator of a latent problem: the emergence of a contemporary culture of ignorance, characterised by resistance to verifiable

facts, fostered within an atomized media system and sponsored by social agents who deliberately propagate doubt (Rose & Bartoli, 2019). This situation brings us directly to the idea of agnotology.

The processes of social construction of ignorance can be approached through agnotology, a term developed by the historian of science Robert Proctor (2008) to denounce the disinformation campaigns originated by the tobacco industry. In the face of scientific studies that associated smoking with the development of lung disease, tobacco companies created and supported alternative studies to further their interests. With this strategy, they managed to divert the debate and relativise the credibility of scientific sources. From this perspective, ignorance and knowledge equal their usefulness as tools of governance and control (McGoey, 2012).

The tobacco companies' strategy is not unique, as similar patterns exist in other industries and products, such as the documented cases of herbicide companies, the asbestos case, or climate change denial (Michaels, 2008; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). The main objective of these propaganda machines is to contradict the scientific consensus and create a false sense of uncertainty and chaos.

Today's participatory and atomised media environment has created deliberate ignorance through digital platforms that actively spread disinformation and political propaganda (Benkler et al., 2018; Farkas, 2018; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019; Guess & Lyons, 2020). In some situations, there are malicious and premeditated motives, as some disinformation operations have been carried out using bots, which are social media accounts controlled by software designed to look like real human users (Friedberg & Donovan, 2019). However, although the existence of bots interferes with disinformation, fake news spreads further and faster than the truth because humans, not bots, are more likely to spread it (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the traditional media also play a fundamental function because of their role as disseminators of information. In a more pronounced sense, we have already described the possible forms of propaganda, and power

groups can use these strategies to spread their ideas through the media, which is exacerbated when democratic conditions are weaker (Stier, 2015). However, a less easy aspect to see is when journalistic values of objectivity, fairness, and balance make journalists vulnerable to being enlisted as accomplices, regardless of whether they are willing or unwilling, in the deliberate cultural production of ignorance (Christensen, 2008; Weatherall et al., 2020).

As we have seen, the line of research studying disinformation can be traced back to studies of persuasion and propaganda. Studies of the latter two concepts have evolved and have gone through different phases that conceived of the influence that the media had on the public in different ways.

With the advent of social media, disinformation has become the main problem. Although some see it as an evolution of propaganda, others emphasise a substantial change: the main objective of disinformation is to plunge public opinion into doubt. On a more profound societal level, this process has given rise to a culture of ignorance.

Digital platforms, traditional media, and society all have a role and a responsibility in this phenomenon and contribute to it, consciously or unconsciously. Against this background, agnotology, the study of the deliberate creation of ignorance, appears as a suitable approach to understanding this problematic situation.

With this background, in the following pages, We will address the problem of disinformation promoted by the Russian government, precisely, the role played by the media outlet RT. In this case, what we are analysing is the role of a state that uses disinformation tactics and, ultimately, the creation of ignorance and doubt in public opinion as a valuable tool to further its geopolitical strategies.

3. THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT AS A DISINFORMATION-CREATING ACTOR

Disinformation plays a significant role in Russia's national security strategy. It is part of a historical response to what they perceive as the previous use of this strategy by the West, particularly the United States, to isolate Russia

internationally (Murphy, 2023). However, as Brian Murphy (2023) has pointed out, this strategy is not unique to the Russian government, as nations like the United States and China have also employed disinformation tactics to promote their national interests.

As Dariya Tsyrenzhapova and Samuel Woolley (2021) have pointed out, Russian propaganda efforts have been interpreted through the theory of reflexive control, which seeks to find an opponent's weaknesses and exploit them to aggravate ideological polarisation and weaken institutions in that territory. It is known as 'sharp power' and seeks to 'penetrate the media system of target countries' (Tsyrenzhapova & Woolley, 2021).

The Russian government has been successful in leveraging social media as platforms to foment social and political unrest (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Barbaro & Skumanich, 2023), using bots and other cyber threats as tools to manage the information environment and spread propaganda on social media (Costik, 2022). In addition to using these digital tools, it has adapted to the codes and jargon specific to each platform, such as the use of memes to convey ideology (Chen et al., 2023).

This situation has led to allegations in recent years that Russia has been actively involved in interfering in electoral processes in the West, using tactics to divide society and undermine democracy (Hamilton, 2019). Such allegations of political interference have been investigated, for example, in the 2016 US elections (Jamieson, 2020; Keating & Schmitt, 2021). In that context, the Russian Internet Research Agency's (IRA) strategy focused on supporting Donald Trump, who promised to improve relations with Russia, while seeking to damage Hillary Clinton, who advocated sanctioning Russia for its military involvement in Ukraine (Golovchenko et al., 2020).

While there are different views on how political persuasion affects citizens and how much we know about it in these cases (Jamieson, 2020), one possible studied consequence of this Russian campaign is that exposure to disinformation reports during the electoral process may have influenced how people perceive

the influence of disinformation on others. It may ultimately have weakened trust in the electoral system and the quality of democracy (Ross et al., 2022).

In general, these accusations have been extended to other countries. For example, in the case of Sweden, this is due to rivalry with Russia in the strategic Baltic Sea region (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017). In the UK, these concerns arose after the referendum on leaving the European Union (Richards, 2021) and have also been observed in other European electoral processes, such as France and Germany (Neudert, 2017; Baumann, 2020).

Recently, the case of Ukraine as a disinformation target has become relevant again due to the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022. Although this case has long been the subject of attention (Larrabee, 2007; Tsekhanovska & Tsybulska, 2021; Jacuch, 2021), new developments have highlighted the different levels of scope of disinformation strategies implemented by Russia.

At the foreign policy level, Russia's disinformation campaign has been deployed in different countries with the aim of polarising citizens and increasing support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a situation that other states are aware of but still a difficult challenge to manage (Chen et al., 2023; Erlich & Garner, 2023; Johansson-Nogués & Şimanschi, 2023). In Spain, for example, since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, there has been an increase in news coverage of defence and cybersecurity news, as well as references to disinformation and fake news (Abad-Quintanal et al., 2023).

Within the country's borders, the Russian authorities have also used disinformation strategies to gain and maintain public support for the war. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Kremlin propaganda promoted the idea of a confrontation between the two countries and how the Western bloc supported Ukraine. However, after Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential elections, the media shifted their focus to a new confrontation between Ukraine and Donbas (Karpchuk & Bohdan, 2021).

Elisabeth Johansson-Nogues and Elena Şimanschi (2023) have examined Russian disinformation production frames on Ukraine at the beginning of this

military operation, detecting three thematic axes that served to justify the conflict to the Russian people: 1) portraying the Donbas region as a victim, 2) singling out the Ukrainian political elite and nationalism as the enemy, and 3) characterising Ukraine as a symbol of Western aggression against Russia.

In short, disinformation plays a fundamental role in the Russian government's strategy, which is directed internally toward its population to legitimise its actions, and externally towards other countries, seeking to polarise their populations and destabilise their institutions. In this strategy, Russia has taken advantage of social media and other cyber threats. However, the traditional media, which we have yet to mention so far, play a role in this plot. In the following section, we will delve into the case of RT, an international television channel financed by the Russian government.

4. THE CASE OF RT AS A POLITICAL DISINFORMATION TOOL

First, we need to provide some historical context. From 2000 to 2005, the prevailing notion in the media was that Russia had lost its former influence and power (Evans, 2005; Zheltukhina et al., 2018). These were the early years of Vladimir Putin as Russia's president, a figure who, from the outset, was portrayed by the international press as an autocrat (Zheltukhina et al., 2018). It is essential to consider that in these early years, the Coloured Revolution took place (Georgia, 2003; Ukraine, 2004; Kyrgyzstan, 2005), whereby the post-Soviet space began to undergo social and political changes, something that threatened Moscow due to the anti-Russian drift of the new governments. In contrast, within the country, Putin was seen as the person who had brought back Russian pride, lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the end of his first term in office, it was evident, after a period of misrule, that the country was growing economically and politically stable (Anderson, 2015).

To solve the problem of its image abroad, the Russian government developed a soft power strategy: creating a new international television channel that would explain the Russian perspective on global news to other countries. Thus, on 7 June 2005, the creation of Russia Today was announced (Ioffe, 2010). This

development aligned with the Doctrine of Information Security adopted in 2000, which emphasised promoting Russia's image abroad.

Despite initial difficulties competing for international attention with a smaller budget, Russia Today has achieved a massive audience, broadcasting what it considers 'other' news or 'unpublished' information (Pomerantsev, 2015). It has brought fame among foreign audiences in cases where it has broadcast criticism of Western governments' policies. However, as Peter Pomerantsev says, behind this alternative version of Western reality, the Russian channel accumulates numerous accusations of deliberately spreading disinformation and false stories in order to sow doubt and confusion in the context of information warfare.

RT's evolution reflects a significant transformation in its goals and approach throughout history (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). Initially, RT focused on promoting Russian culture and positive Russian news but subsequently experienced a notable shift towards promoting the political interests of the Russian government. As Mona Elswah and Philip Howard (2020) point out, the turning point came during the Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008.

The Georgian war marked a turning point in Russia's media projection abroad. During the conflict, Georgia conducted an effective media campaign. At the same time, the Russian government imposed a doctrine of journalistic opacity on the international public. It focused on communicating to its domestic audience to support the measures. It is also the beginning of a new patriotic discourse that presents Russia as a victim vis-à-vis the West and NATO.

After 2008, Russia Today changed its name to RT, a brand with an appearance less linked to the Russian government. It began to produce disinformation to spread propaganda under two principles: to sow the idea that Western countries faced similar problems to Russia and to promote controversies and conspiracy theories that would damage Western media (Yablokov, 2015; Elswah & Howard, 2020).

For example, when RT America began broadcasting in 2010, it aired a programme on the possibility that the 9/11 terrorist attack was prepared internally

by the US government. As Ilya Yablokov (2015) has pointed out, RT's adoption of a culture of conspiracy allows it to impinge on the social and economic problems of the American country with conspiratorial accusations.

This way, it spreads an anti-elitist message that the US public can share. RT uses conspiracies developed within the Western countries themselves. It exploits the dissatisfaction of disgruntled citizens and exploits internal tensions within that society. Consequently, this allows it to introduce other conspiracy theories about relations between Russia and the West.

Thus, from 2014 onwards, we began to speak of information warfare as Russia's defence strategy against the United States and NATO. For its part, the IRA is beginning to take advantage of applying propaganda techniques in digital environments, as discussed above in the case of the 2016 US presidential elections.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The qualitative study by Mona Elswah and Philip Howard (2020) interviewed journalists who had worked in RT's newsroom. One of the interviewees told a story that exemplifies the Russian media's strategy in the context of Brexit in 2016. This worker, confused by RT's line on this event, approached his editor and asked him about the media outlet's position on Brexit. The editor's response was: Anything that causes chaos is RT's line.

This sentence sums up the above. The importance of disinformation in RT's strategy plays a crucial role in Russia's domestic and international strategy, using various techniques and platforms. For other countries in the West, this strategy poses significant challenges to democracy and the stability of their institutions.

This form of new multi-platform and computational political propaganda is based on the creation of manufactured ignorance. "Anything that causes chaos" implies an intention to destabilise through disinformation, doubt, and uncertainty. For this reason, agnotology is an excellent theoretical framework to address the Russian government's deliberate creation of ignorance. To understand the purposes of

geopolitical strategies, it is not only important to consider what propagandists want us to think, but it is also essential to consider what propagandists want us to ignore.

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VERITAS VINCIT:
AN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK FOR COMBATING
DISINFORMATION

PAVLO BURDIAK
University of Lodz, Poland¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Disinformation and information manipulation are not new concepts – they have been around for thousands of years. Throughout history, individuals and institutions have harnessed the power of information for both noble and nefarious purposes. Over two millennia ago, Octavian employed a cunning disinformation campaign to undermine his adversary Mark Antony, ultimately paving the way for his rise as the inaugural Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar (Khan, 2021). This historical episode illustrates how the distortion and manipulation of information have persisted as strategic tools used to achieve diverse objectives: from

¹ The author is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Law and Political Sciences of the University of Szeged (Szeged, Hungary). At the moment, he is the Visegrad Scholarship holder at the Lodz Cyber Hub of the University of Lodz (Lodz, Poland). The present book chapter was written by the author in the capacity of a visiting researcher at the Lodz Cyber Hub with the support of the International Visegrad Fund.

securing victories in conflicts and advancing political aspirations to settling scores, exploiting vulnerable populations, and even generating financial gains.

Although disinformation is not a novel concept, the way it circulates in society has evolved significantly. The surge in digitalisation worldwide, despite its manifold benefits, has simultaneously created new possibilities for the proliferation of harmful disinformation. The ease with which false narratives can be disseminated, amplified, and manipulated in the digital age has exacerbated the challenge. Social media platforms, online echo chambers, and the speed of information dissemination have all played a role in intensifying the impact of disinformation.

This growing predicament highlights the critical need to establish a global framework to address the disinformation problem comprehensively. It is imperative to develop strategies to counteract the spread of disinformation and protect the integrity of information ecosystems. In this rapidly changing information age, the fight against disinformation has taken on a new urgency, demanding common approaches to safeguard the truth, human rights affected by disinformation, and the values that underpin democratic societies.

As a global organisation committed to maintaining peace and security, fostering cooperation, and upholding human rights, the United Nations has recognised disinformation's critical role in undermining these fundamental principles. The UN initiated efforts to foster international collaboration and dialogue on the issue of disinformation and suggested legal instruments that could be used to deal with the proliferation of harmful disinformation. This chapter will look at the international human rights framework for tackling disinformation developed within the UN. The author will analyse the peculiarities of this framework and establish its applicability to states and companies, including online platforms.

2. DEFINING DISINFORMATION: A JOURNEY INTO ITS ONTOLOGICAL DEPTHS

2.1. DISINFORMATION'S HYDRA: GRAPPLING WITH ITS MULTIFACETED COMPLEXITY

In contemporary legal discourse, disinformation is a relatively modern phenomenon that still lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. Notably, the absence of a universally accepted definition for disinformation is not just a matter of semantics. The complexity of defining disinformation lies in its multifaceted nature.

Disinformation can take various forms, from deliberately fabricated to manipulated content (Wardle, 2019). This diversity of disinformation tactics reflects the constantly evolving landscape of information warfare and influence operations in the digital age (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, n.d.). For instance, disinformation may be disseminated through targeted advertisements aimed at a specific group of people, potentially sowing social division. It can also take the form of fake news distributed by automated bots or the impersonation of celebrities through fake social media accounts. Additionally, manipulating content ratings through orchestrated responses to give a false impression of public sentiment is another tactic used to manipulate public perception (Дворовий & Людва, 2021).

Another challenge is the inherently political and contested nature of the concept of disinformation. The dynamics of disinformation can be highly complex, as false information can be manipulated and utilised by actors with vastly differing objectives. Truthful information, on the other hand, can be unjustly branded as “fake news”, leading to its delegitimation. Adding to the complexity is the fact that people’s opinions and beliefs (deeply rooted in individual perspectives and cultural contexts, making them subjective and diverse), uncertain knowledge (where information may not be definitively proven or disproven), parody and satire (which intends not to deceive but to provide social or political commentary through exaggeration and humour), and other similar forms of expression do not

neatly fit into a binary assessment of truth and falsity, making the concept of disinformation even more contested (Khan, 2021).

Furthermore, the spread of false content online with the intention to cause harm, which we often term as disinformation, can inadvertently be shared by innocent third parties without malicious intent. This situation, referred to as misinformation, can unintentionally amplify the dissemination of false information and lend credibility to the nefarious intentions of the original disseminator (Khan, 2021). Another scenario arises when someone deliberately shares genuine information intending to cause harm, known as malinformation. This often involves taking information that was originally intended to remain private or confidential and bringing it into the public sphere (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Unlike disinformation, which entails spreading false or misleading information, malinformation involves manipulating or exposing truthful information for malicious purposes. The intricate interaction among disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation significantly contributes to the challenge of providing a precise and clear definition of the phenomenon of disinformation. These three forms of misleading or harmful information are closely interconnected, and distinguishing between them can be complex in some situations due to their overlapping characteristics.

2.2 POLICY ARSENAL: STATE APPROACHES IN TACKLING DISINFORMATION

All the complexities and nuances surrounding the dissemination of disinformation underline the imperative to develop a comprehensive and well-thought-out response to this pervasive issue. However, the lack of consensus on the definition of disinformation has far-reaching implications for efforts to combat its spread. Without a clear and universally accepted framework, it becomes challenging to establish a cohesive and effective global response. Different countries and organisations may have their own interpretations of disinformation, which can lead to inconsistencies in policies and strategies to counter the impact of harmful, misleading information.

Many states are grappling with the challenge of addressing disinformation through various legal and regulatory means. While some states have proposed or enacted specific legislation targeting disinformation, others have sought to integrate disinformation-related provisions into existing legal frameworks, such as penal codes, civil laws, electoral laws, or cybersecurity laws. The scope and focus of these established legal frameworks vary significantly. The measures proposed in these laws are frequently drafted with broad, ambiguous language, which carries the potential risk of inadvertently restricting legitimate expression. This highlights the delicate balance that must be struck between countering disinformation and upholding freedom of expression (Bontcheva et al., 2020).

2.3 REPUTATION AT STAKE: CORPORATE STRATEGIES IN THE BATTLE AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Aside from governments and states, companies (particularly those in the technology and social media sectors) represent another key group of actors attempting to address disinformation. Disinformation is frequently disseminated through various online platforms, with popular social media like Facebook, prominent video-sharing websites like YouTube, and widely-used messaging applications like WhatsApp serving as some of the primary channels for its distribution (Marwick, 2018). Due to their vast user bases and interconnected networks, online platforms can amplify the reach and impact of disinformation campaigns, making them essential focal points in efforts to counter the spread of false information.

Consequently, many companies implemented a diverse range of responses to address the issue of disinformation. These responses include collaboration with third-party fact-checkers; enforcing stricter advertising policies to prevent the dissemination of misleading or false information, particularly in the context of political campaigns and public discourse; implementing enhanced monitoring of user accounts that exhibit suspicious behaviour or engage in coordinated disinformation campaigns; modifying content curation and search ranking algorithms to promote reliable sources and reduce the visibility of disinformation; conducting user education and training programs to enhance the ability of

individuals to identify false or misleading information, etc. (Kaye, 2018). However, the efforts by various companies to combat disinformation differ, as does the definition and scope of what is (or is not) included in the companies' policies on tackling disinformation.

3. DISINFORMATION DECIPHERED: UNITED NATIONS' EVOLVING DEFINITIONS

3.1. CHARTING THE COURSE: JOINT DECLARATION ON DISINFORMATION

Taking note of the multifaceted nature of disinformation and recognising the challenges posed by this phenomenon, the United Nations initiated a number of activities aiming to provide a common definition of the concept of disinformation.

One of the first attempts to define disinformation was manifested in the adoption of the "Joint declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda" (2017) signed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information.

The joint declaration defined disinformation as statements which are known or reasonably should be known to be false. This definition was created for states, requiring them not to make, sponsor, encourage, or disseminate such disinformation statements (Joint declaration, 2017). While a step in the right direction in terms of understanding disinformation, the provided definition lacked some crucial elements. It focused primarily on the criterion that disinformation involved verifiably false statements but did not incorporate references to the harmful effects or the intent to cause harm that are often associated with the dissemination of disinformation.

3.2. SHAPING THE DISCOURSE: ITU/UNESCO BROADBAND COMMISSION'S STUDY ON DISINFORMATION

The imperative for taking action against disinformation has been acknowledged within the ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. In the study “Balancing Act: Responding to Disinformation While Defending Freedom of Expression” (2020), co-founded by the ITU and UNESCO, the notion of disinformation was used to describe “false or misleading content with potentially harmful consequences, irrespective of the underlying intentions or behaviours in producing and circulating such messages” (Bontcheva et al., 2020). It is also worth highlighting that this refined definition expands and specifies the previous definition provided in the 2017 joint declaration. This updated definition underscored that disinformation encompasses not only false or misleading content but also content with the potential for harmful consequences. However, this definition did not take into account whether the individual or entity spreading the disinformation had the intention to cause harm or not. The aspect of intentionality may be a noteworthy factor in assessing disinformation. While some disinformation is spread with the clear intent to deceive and harm, not all instances may involve malicious intentions. In some cases, individuals or entities may unwittingly share false information, lacking the awareness or intent to cause harm.

3.3. SETTING THE STANDARD: SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR'S & SECRETARY-GENERAL'S NOTION OF DISINFORMATION

Another definition of disinformation was provided by the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression Irene Khan. In her report on disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression (2021), Irene Khan defined disinformation as “false information that is disseminated intentionally to cause serious social harm” and misinformation as “the dissemination of false information unknowingly”. She also stressed that some forms of disinformation can amount to incitement to hatred, discrimination and violence, which are prohibited under international law (Khan, 2021). The definition put forward by Irene Khan demonstrates the evolution of the term

“disinformation” within the UN legal framework. The 2017 joint declaration focused on the falsehood of information as the cornerstone for identifying disinformation. The 2020 ITU and UNESCO study considered not only the falsehood of information, but also the potential to cause harm. Finally, Irene Khan’s definition of disinformation encompassed the falsehood of information, the potential to cause harm, and the intention to cause harm.

The UN Secretary-General’s report on “Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (2022) reiterated that many studies highlighted the following defining elements of disinformation: inaccurate information intended to deceive and shared to do serious harm (Guterres, 2022). These are the same three characteristics that were identified by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression Irene Khan:

- Inaccuracy: disinformation typically involves information that is factually incorrect or misleading. It deviates from accurate and truthful representation.
- Intent to deceive: a characteristic of disinformation is the intention to deceive and mislead individuals or the public.
- Serious harm: disinformation is associated with the potential to cause significant harm. Whether damaging reputations, influencing political processes, inciting violence, or undermining public health, disinformation often carries serious consequences.

Hence, within the UN legal framework, disinformation can be defined as false information that is disseminated intentionally to cause serious social harm. This definition encapsulates the essential elements of disinformation, including its falsehood, intentionality, and potential for harm. Recognising these aspects is critical for effectively addressing disinformation within the framework of international law and human rights, as it highlights the need to safeguard accurate information and society’s broader well-being.

4. GLOBAL RESPONSE: UN HUMAN RIGHTS LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMBATING DISINFORMATION

4.1. THE RULE OF TRUTH: A ROADMAP FOR STATES IN MEETING GLOBAL STANDARDS ON DISINFORMATION

The dissemination of disinformation can inflict significant and far-reaching harm on our societies, eroding a wide spectrum of human rights. For instance, disinformation about health interventions, such as vaccines, can lead to severe physical harm and even loss of life. Disinformation pertaining to elections has the potential to undermine the rights to free and fair elections and to participate in public affairs, thereby affecting the very foundations of democracy. Furthermore, disinformation can include hate speech that incites discrimination, hostility, or violence. In cases where disinformation threatens human rights, appropriate measures must be taken to address these detrimental consequences (Guterres, 2022).

While it is essential to address the issue of disinformation, responses to disinformation must be crafted in a way that does not inadvertently infringe upon fundamental rights, particularly the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) stressed that condemning and countering disinformation should not serve as a pretext for curtailing the exercise and enjoyment of human rights, nor should it be used to justify censorship. HRC urged to avoid implementing vague and excessively broad laws that criminalise disinformation. All policies or legislation aimed at addressing disinformation must be grounded in international human rights law (Human Rights Council, 2022). The HRC also underscored the significance of upholding the principles of free expression, independent and diverse media, and providing access to independent, fact-based, and science-based information as effective measures to counter disinformation (Human Rights Council, 2020).

While international human rights law encompasses a wide array of human rights, it is crucial to scrutinise the international standards specifically related to the freedom of expression within the context of countering disinformation. The HRC

acknowledged the essential role that the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression plays in reinforcing democracy, fostering pluralism and multiculturalism, advancing transparency and media freedom, and countering disinformation (Human Rights Council, 2022). International standards on freedom of expression provide guidance on how to balance the imperative of combatting the intentional spread of harmful false information with the fundamental right to express one's opinions and ideas. This balancing exercise is essential for crafting effective strategies that uphold human rights while combating disinformation.

4.1.1. STANDARDS ON FREEDOM OF OPINION AND DISINFORMATION

The main legal instruments guaranteeing the right to freedom of opinion and expression within the UN are Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. As the name suggests, the right to freedom of opinion and expression consists of two interrelated aspects: an internal aspect associated with the freedom of opinion, and an external aspect linked to freedom of expression.

Article 19 of the UDHR and Article 19 (1) of the ICCPR protect individuals' right to hold opinions without interference (General Assembly, 1966). This right is considered absolute and is not subject to exceptions or restrictions. Any attempt to coerce individuals into either adopting or refraining from holding a particular opinion is strictly prohibited. This prohibition underscores the fundamental principle of safeguarding the freedom of opinion, ensuring that individuals have the autonomy to form, maintain, or change their opinions without external pressure, influence, or coercion.

However, in practice, various external factors constantly influence individuals' thinking and opinions. The freedom to be exposed to a wide range of influences is regarded as a dimension of personal autonomy (Jones, 2019). In assessing the potential infringement of freedom of opinion by disinformation, a pivotal factor to consider is the knowledge and consent of the rights holder. The extent to which individuals are aware of the influence or manipulation they are subjected to and whether they have given informed consent is critical in determining whether

disinformation impacts the right to hold opinions freely. An example of a potential impact of disinformation on the freedom of opinion in the digital domain is affecting people's opinions without their explicit knowledge or consent by employing tools like content curation, content recommendations, or micro-targeting (Khan, 2021). Recognising and addressing these dynamics is vital in upholding the integrity of the freedom of opinion in the digital age.

4.1.2. STANDARDS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND DISINFORMATION

Article 19 of the UDHR and Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR preserve the right to freedom of expression, which entails freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any media, including Internet-based platforms (Human Rights Council, 2012).

It is important to note several points that are relevant to the freedom of expression and information in the context of disinformation:

- Freedom of expression encompasses all forms of information and ideas, including those that may be regarded as deeply offensive (Human Rights Committee, 2011).
- It is not compatible with international human rights standards to impose a general prohibition of expressions of an erroneous opinion or an incorrect interpretation of past events (Human Rights Committee, 2011).
- According to international human rights law, individuals have the right to express opinions and statements, even if they are ill-founded, or engage in forms of expression like parody or satire if they choose to do so (Khan, 2021).
- Furthermore, unlike the right to freedom of opinion, the right to freedom of expression is not absolute and can be subject to restrictions as outlined in Article 19(3) of the ICCPR. More specifically, any restriction of freedom of expression (including limitations imposed on disinformation) must be consistent with the requirements of the so-called three-part, cumulative test. The three-part test stipulates that a restriction has to (Khan, 2021):

- be provided by law, as per the principle of legality. This means that policies on combating disinformation should be clearly and narrowly defined. Laws that are vague and grant excessive discretion can result in arbitrary decisions that are incompatible with Article 19 (3) of the ICCPR;
- pursue a legitimate goal (e.g. respect of the rights or reputations of others, protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals), as per the principle of legitimacy. It presupposes that any limitation imposed on disinformation must have a direct connection to at least one of the legitimate goals outlined in Article 19(3). It is essential to emphasise that the mere prohibition of disinformation, in and of itself, is not considered a legitimate goal under international human rights law;
- be necessary and proportional in a democratic society, as per the principle of necessity and proportionality. To decide on the need of introducing disinformation restrictions, it is imperative to consider the directness of the causal relationship between the speech and the harm it may cause, as well as the severity and immediacy of that harm. Besides, the principle of necessity requires that any restriction be suitable and proportionate in achieving a legitimate goal, while using the least intrusive means to protect that goal. For example, criminal sanctions, which represent serious interference with the freedom of expression, should generally be reserved for only the most extreme cases. In all but the most egregious instances, criminal penalties are considered disproportionate responses to restricting expressions, including disinformation.

The UN Human Rights Council unequivocally stressed that any response to the disinformation must be compatible with international human rights law, particularly the aforementioned principles of legality, legitimacy, necessity and proportionality (Human Rights Council, 2020).

4.2. BEYOND PROFIT: CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY IN ADDRESSING DISINFORMATION

While states play a central role in addressing the issue of disinformation, it is crucial for business enterprises, especially online platforms, to take more proactive measures in response to the evolving challenges posed by disinformation. The General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have encouraged businesses and online platforms to address disinformation while respecting human rights under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights - UNGPs (General Assembly, 2022 ; Human Rights Council, 2022).

The UNGPs, often referred to as the “Ruggie Principles,” are a set of internationally recognised guidelines aimed at ensuring that business enterprises respect human rights throughout their operations. They were endorsed by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2011 and are based on the foundational framework proposed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General John Ruggie (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011).

In accordance with the UNGPs, business enterprises are required to establish a human rights due diligence process. This process is designed to identify, prevent, mitigate, and resolve both actual and potential impacts on human rights resulting from their operations. Therefore, when addressing disinformation, companies should implement transparent and easily accessible policies that align with human rights principles. These policies should include robust protections for public discourse on issues of public interest. Companies should also conduct periodic reviews to assess the impact of their policies on the freedom of expression, including the right to access information, and the human rights of the individuals whose rights are at stake (Guterres, 2022).

To effectively address disinformation while upholding human rights, online platforms also need to engage in actions such as reviewing their business models. This includes a critical examination of the role of algorithms and ranking

systems in amplifying disinformation. Furthermore, enhancing transparency, enforcing all relevant legal safeguards for users, and promoting due diligence are essential steps aligned with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (General Assembly, 2022 ; Human Rights Council, 2022).

In addition, the UNGPs state that businesses should respect human rights according to the provisions enshrined in, *inter alia*, the International Bill of Human Rights. The International Bill of Human Rights consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Hence, the freedom of expression standards enshrined in Article 19 of the UDHR and Article 19 of the ICCPR should be applied not only by states, but also by businesses, including online platforms (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, the world is struggling with a pervasive surge of inaccurate information disseminated on an unprecedented scale. The widespread dissemination of harmful disinformation poses a substantial threat to an array of human rights, compelling governments, businesses, and society at large to grapple with this intricate challenge. Effectively addressing this intricate challenge calls for a legal framework that not only protects human rights but also adeptly balances the need to mitigate the dissemination of harmful disinformation with the imperative of safeguarding the freedom of expression, even when dealing with contentious ideas. This quest for an international human rights framework to combat disinformation finds its roots within the legal landscape of the United Nations.

The UN's human rights framework for tackling disinformation allocates the central role in addressing disinformation and protecting human rights to the governments. It lays down that any state measures taken to counter disinformation must adhere to the principles of legality, legitimacy, necessity and proportionality, as outlined in Article 19(3) of the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights. The use of vague or overly broad laws that grant excessive discretion must be avoided to prevent arbitrary decision-making and ensure compliance with international human rights standards.

Business enterprises, including media companies, online platforms, and technology firms, share the responsibility for mitigating disinformation's impact. They are expected to align their policies with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Transparent policies that protect public discourse and human rights due diligence are essential components of this corporate responsibility. The UNGPs also reference the ICCPR, positioning Article 19 (3) as a wellspring of standards (i.e. principles of legality, legitimacy, necessity and proportionality) for businesses when imposing restrictions on disinformation.

Hence, balancing the genuine need to counter disinformation with the human rights safeguards for freedom of expression is essential to maintaining a just and rights-respecting response to the issue of disinformation.

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INTERNATIONAL SCOPE OF EUROPEAN FACT-CHECKERS: CASE STUDY OF SPAIN, FRANCE, AND THE UK

PABLO HIDALGO COBO

University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

CASANDRA LÓPEZ MARCOS

University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

BELÉN PUEBLA MARTÍNEZ

University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain

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1. DISINFORMATION AND FACT-CHECKING

Disinformation poses a critical threat to democracies, directly impacting individuals and specific communities. The intertwining factors of social media, political polarization, and recent international conflicts—such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the Israel-Hamas conflict—have fuelled the evolution of more sophisticated disinformation techniques. This has heightened social and academic concerns.

Fact-checking stands out as a key strategy in the battle against disinformation (Graves et al., 2015). European Union institutions have actively championed this cause since 2015, with initiatives like the East StratCom Team (2015), The Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats (European Commission, 2016), the Action Plan against Disinformation (2022), or the establishment of Special Committees on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes of the European Union, including Disinformation (Terán-González, 2019).

In the current climate of war and geopolitical tensions, the need for fact-checking has never been more urgent, especially in Europe. While fact-checkers have proliferated globally since 2014 (Rodríguez Martínez et al., 2021), Europe has been at the forefront of these practices, significantly influencing their global impact. The use of key languages, such as English, Spanish, or French, has played a pivotal role in the widespread adoption of these fact-checking platforms.

Fact-checking, defined by Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2019), is a specialized process validating data through contemporary tools, with information technology playing a crucial role in the operational framework.

Journalism has embraced fact-checking as a crucial weapon against the proliferation of fake news (Amorós, 2018). In the current landscape of dwindling trust in the media, verification emerges as a powerful tool for media accountability, offering journalism an opportunity to reclaim its societal significance (Mayoral et al., 2019). This sentiment resonates in the research of Rodríguez Martínez et al. (2021), exploring disinformation and fact-checking platforms, emphasizing collaboration between journalism and communication professionals and technicians armed with tools and algorithms to navigate extensive information (Vizoso et al., 2018).

The roots of fact-checking can be traced back to the 1980s (Dobbs, 2012) and gained momentum in the 1990s with television programs and blogs dedicated to verifying electoral campaigns (Fletcher et al., 2016); Young et., 2018).

The inaugural online fact-checking site, Snopes.com, dates back to 1995 (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). However, it wasn't until 2023 that the first digital media platform with professional journalists dedicated to political fact-checking, FactCheck.org, emerged in the United States (Rodríguez Martínez et al., 2021). Pioneering organizations like PolitiFact and Fact Checker surfaced in 2007 (Rodríguez Martínez et al., 2021). Towards the end of the first decade of the century, various fact-checkers began to proliferate (Spivak, 2010). The establishment of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in 2015 within

the Poynter Institute marked a significant milestone in amplifying news verification efforts (Graves, 2016).

2. FACT-CHECKERS IN SPAIN, FRANCE, AND THE UK

In Spain, there are several fact-checking agencies that have a crucial role in the fight against misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. These are: Maldita.es, Newtral, EFE Verifica and Verificat. All of them are recognized by the International Fact-checking Network and participate in Meta's external verification program (López-Marcos and Vicente-Fernández, 2021).

Among the Spanish agencies, it's worth highlighting that EFE Verifica is a part of the publicly owned EFE news agency. Verificat and Maldita are both non-profit entities, with the former focusing regionally on Catalonia. Newtral operates as a sole proprietorship, involved in various activities, including audiovisual production and Artificial Intelligence (Newtral, 2023).

France leads the analysis among IFCN countries, boasting a total of nine agencies—surpassing the combined count of Spain and the UK. French fact-checkers distinguish themselves by their integration into various media outlets. For instance, Franceinfo.fr is part of Radiofrance, while AFP Factual operates under the Agence France-Presse news agency, both of which are public entities. CheckNews is affiliated with Liberation, Les decodeurs with Le Monde, Fake off with 20 minutes, Les Vérificateurs with TF1, and Les observateurs with France 24.

Interestingly, the two fact-checkers not associated with a media outlet, Les Surligneurs and Science Feedback, have distinctive thematic focuses. Les Surligneurs focuses on verification, explanation, pedagogy, and the dissemination of political-legal issues (Les Surligneurs, 2023). On the other hand, Science Feedback concentrates on climate change and health (ScienceFeedback, 2023).

Notably, two of these fact-checkers, AFP Factual and Les observateurs, exhibit a strong international orientation, offering content in multiple languages and focusing on various regions.

The landscape of British agencies is notably diverse: The Ferret Fact Service and Fact Check NI have regional focuses on Scotland and Northern Ireland, respectively. Logically, functioning as a technology company, operates globally with offices in the UK, USA, and India. It serves as both a free fact-checking agency and a for-profit organization, providing services to governments and private sector entities (López-Marcos and Vicente-Fernández, 2021). Similar to Fact Check NI, Full Fact operates as a charitable organization, but its impact is nationwide.

3. OBJECTIVES

The research aims to determine the geographical focus of fact-checkers in Spain, France, and the UK.

This overarching objective encompasses three specific goals: firstly, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the extent of fact-checking activities in these pivotal European countries; secondly, to identify variations among the three nations, particularly in terms of the regions and areas most frequently subject to fact-checking; and finally, to establish a profile for each agency, delineating their scope and geographic concentration.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a descriptive methodology, leveraging the analysis of multimedia content as the most effective approach for delving into media content (Chaves Montero, 2018). Employing a quantitative approach, each verification undergoes coding based on predefined categories and variables.

According to Sampieri et al. (2018), content analysis is a method that objectively and systematically examines communication in various forms. This entails

categorizing and subcategorizing messages or content, followed by subjecting them to statistical analysis.

Numerous theorists, including Berelson, Kerlinger, Holsti, Bardin, and Krippendorff, have contributed to this methodology. Puebla Martínez (2013) offers an overview of their insights in the realm of audiovisual content analysis. He distills the common elements identified by these theorists into four key characteristics: objectivity, systematicity, manifest content, and generalizability (2013).

Nominal precoding aligns with what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) term as direct content analysis, wherein responses are pre-coded based on prior research or a theoretical framework. The variables and categories are chosen based on a review of theoretical literature on disinformation, referencing scholars such as Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), Tandoc et al. (2018), and Wardle (2019).

4.1. VARIABLES

Two dependent variables are considered: fact-checker (encompassing fourteen fact checkers) and country (encompassing Spain, France, and the U.K.). The independent variables include scope, International Institutions, Other identities, Country, and Region.

The selection of fact-checkers adheres to specific criteria: (1) Compliance with IFCN criteria, as transparency standards are mandatory; and (2) operating in the U.K., Spain, and France—countries chosen to represent diverse international perspectives and cultural ties, as well as the three predominant European languages globally.

Seventeen fact-checkers across the three countries were identified: four in Spain (EFE Verifica, Maldita, Newtral, and Verificat), four in the U.K. (FactCheckNI, Ferret Fact Service, Full Fact, and Logically), and nine in France (20 Minutes Fake off; France 24 - Les Observateurs; Le Monde - Les Décodeurs; Les Vérificateurs LCI / TF1; Libération – CheckNews; franceinfo.fr, Les Surligneurs, AFP Fact Checking, and Science Feedback).

- Regarding the variable "scope," the categories include:
 - International: Involving another country in the headline or any political or physical element related to that country (personality, institution, landmark, company, place, etc.).
 - National: Applying the same criteria for those not falling under the international category.
 - Regional: Relevant to fact-checkers focused on a specific region within a state, such as Scotland, Northern Ireland, or Catalonia.
 - General: Used when no specific information in the headline aligns with the other categories.

One distinct variable assesses whether the post is related to any institution, such as the EU, focusing on aspects like politicians, policies, or institutions. The "Other Identities" variable encompasses non-state groups, including religious or ethnic groups, as well as non-state identities.

The "Country" variable identifies the country named in the headline, and countries are grouped into regions for an overview of regional focus.

4.2. SAMPLE

The sample comprises publications from July 2023, posted on the official websites of the selected fact-checkers during this period. Three French fact-checkers are excluded from quantitative analysis due to their specialized focus (Les Surligneurs and Science Feedback) and technical limitations (AFP Factuel). The total sample consists of 772 publications covering all verifications by the fourteen fact-checkers during this period.

To assess the model's reliability and reproducibility, we implemented an intercoder reliability procedure. Adhering to Krippendorff's (2004) recommendations, a second coder conducted a post-test analysis on 10% of the sample (77 randomly selected posts) focusing on variables with subjective elements. The outcomes demonstrate high performance (variable Scope; $\alpha=0.912$).

	n	Fr
Spain	294	38,1%
EFE Verifica	27	3,5%
Maldita	176	22,8%
Newtral	61	7,9%
Verificat	31	4,0%
France	200	25,9%
20 Minutes Fake off	6	0,8%
France 24	34	4,4%
franceinfo.fr	31	4,0%
Le Monde - Les Décodeurs	3	0,4%
Les Vérificateurs	54	7,0%
Libération	72	9,3%
UK	277	35,9%
FackcheckNI	4	0,5%
Ferret Fact Service	18	2,3%
Full Fact	67	8,7%
Logically	188	24,4%
Total	771	

Table 1. Distribution of the sample

Regarding the number of posts, there is a relatively similar number between countries: 294 in Spain, 277 in the UK and 200 in France. This distribution varies significantly if we look at the differences by agency.

Thus, some fact-checkers, such as 20 Minutes Fake Off (6), Le Monde - Les Décodeurs (3) or FackcheckNI (4) do not reach ten desserts in a whole month. Likewise, there are 5 agencies that do not reach 40 posts in July: EFE Verifica (26), Verificat (31), France 24 - Les Observateurs (34), franceinfo.fr (31) and FerretFact Service (18).

The fact checkers that have published the most posts have been Logically (188) and Maldita (176) with a big difference compared to the rest. Next up are Liberation (72), Full Fact (67), Newtral (61) and Les Verificateurs (54).

4.3. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The timeframe of just one month provides a glimpse into patterns and distinctions among countries, yet it is heavily influenced by significant events within that period, such as elections in Spain, protests in France, and revolts in Africa.

To comprehend the full landscape of fact-checking in Europe, three pivotal countries have been chosen, but future research would benefit from incorporating a more extensive array of countries to capture a comprehensive snapshot of Europe.

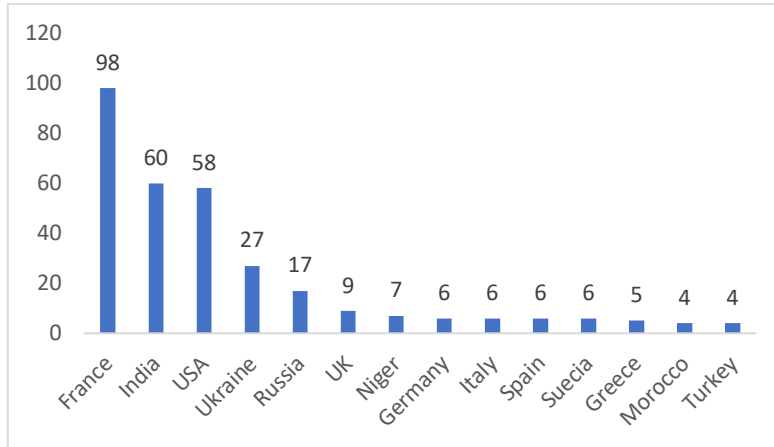
It's crucial to note that the outcomes in each country are shaped by the specific agencies operating within them. Consequently, the conclusions drawn are explicitly tied to the individual agencies under consideration.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. TOTAL SAMPLE

A comprehensive analysis involved examining a total of 771 publications. Among these, 366 (47%) possess an international component, while 317 (41%) are posts with a national focus. Posts with regional scope constitute a minimal portion, accounting for only 30 (4%), and the remaining 58 (8%) are not assigned to any specific spatial area. Therefore, the joint analysis of all the data (n=772) reveals a greater prominence of posts with national (336) or international (333) reach.

In addition, the institutions and ethnic or religious groups that are named have been identified. Regarding institutions: the European Union (it is named 15 times), the World Economic Forum (8), the World Health Organization (2), the UN (2) and NATO (1). As for the groups, Muslims are expressly named up to 11 times, Africans twice, Maghrebs twice, and Latin América and Arabs once.



Graphic 1. Most mentioned countries

France takes the lead in frequency, appearing a notable 98 times, followed by India at 60, the U.S.A. at 58, Ukraine at 27, Russia at 17, the United Kingdom at 9, Niger at 7, and Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden each at 6. Morocco and Turkey are four times mentioned each. The following countries have been mentioned three times: Belarus, China, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Ireland, Tunesia and Venezuela. And the following countries have been mentioned twice: Algeria, The United Arab Emirates, Mali and Nigeria.

It's crucial to note that this period coincided with riots in France following the death of Nahel Merzouk occurs in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, a topic on which there were numerous publications in different fact checkers with verifications. In addition, revolts occur in the Sahel area, with the Coup d'état in Niger as a paradigmatic milestone, which occurred between July 26 and 28, 2023.

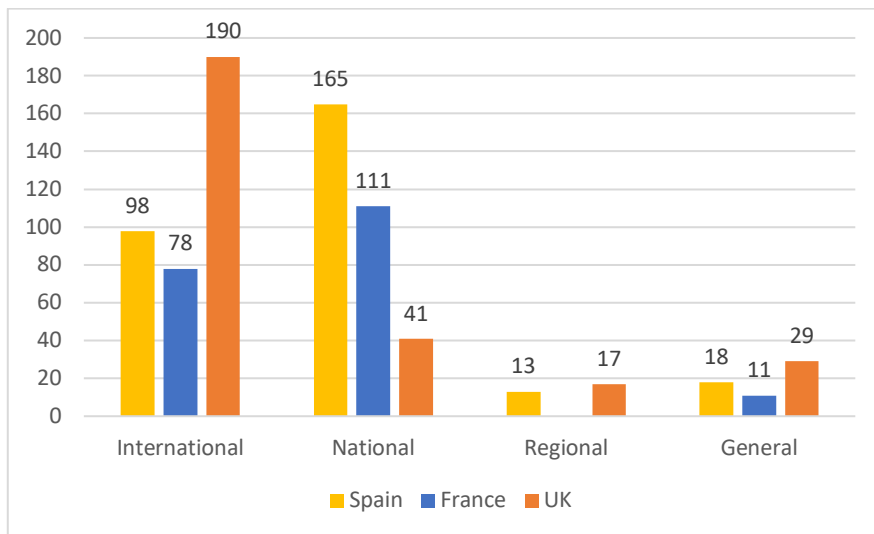
India secures emerges as the second most mentioned country 58 mentions, primarily concentrated within a single fact-checker (Logically, from the U.K.). The United States emerges as the second most mentioned country with the third spot with 58 references. However, it's important to acknowledge that this count encompasses posts naming American brands, politicians, or celebrities. Ukraine (27) and Russia (17) follow closely, reflecting the heightened attention due to the armed conflict between the two nations.

While not a country, European Union institutions appear 15 times in the headlines, as well as the category 'Muslims', which is included due to its frequent occurrence, noted 11 times.

If we group these countries into regions, we obtain that Europe is the most mentioned continent (137 mentions), followed by Asia (64), North America (55), the Russian-Ukrainian war (34), Africa (29), Latin America (12), Middle East (11) and Antarctica and Oceania both with one mention.

5.2. COUNTRY COMPARISON

When we delve into a country-based analysis, intriguing patterns emerge. Notably, agencies in the UK significantly lead with a higher percentage of international posts.



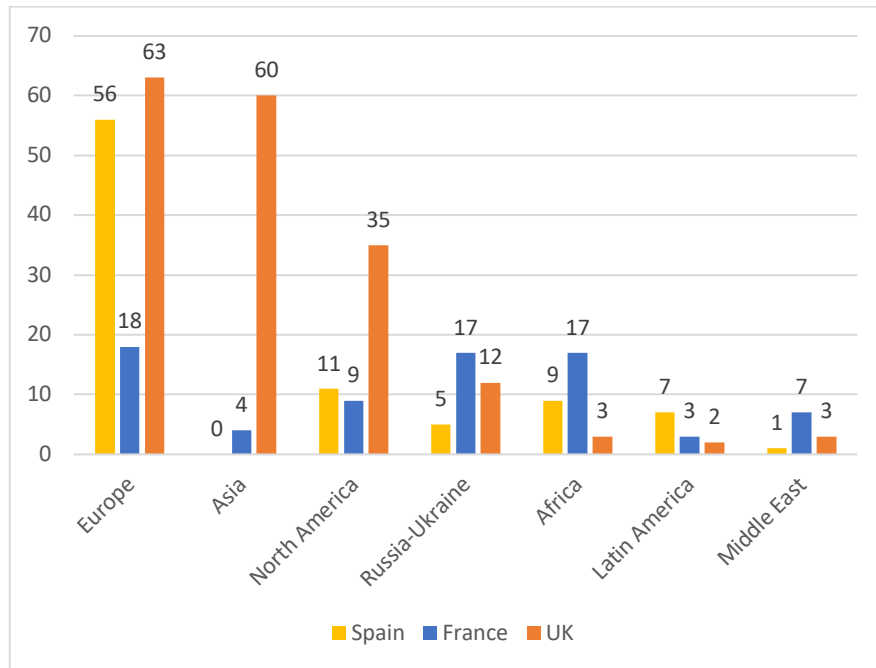
Graphic 2. Scope by country

Moreover, a distinctive trend is observed where fact-checkers from Spain and France exhibit a greater proportion of national posts, with 57% for France and 60% for Spain.

Conversely, the prevalence of regional posts is notably minimal in comparison to the overall count, registering at zero for France, which lacks agencies with regional outreach. The UK stands out as the country where fact-checkers are

most focused on international issues, comprising 65.7%—a stark contrast to the French fact-checkers' average of 36% and the Spanish, which stands at just 26.9%.

Remarkably, mentions of the European Union are sparse across the posts, with Spanish fact-checkers being the most inclined to reference it.



Graphic 3. Most mentioned regions by country

The examination of regions mentioned in international posts reveals compelling insights. Foremost, Spain emerges as the country where fact-checkers focus most prominently on European countries. Notably, there is a conspicuous absence of posts naming Asian countries, with only a single mention of the Middle East. Conversely, Spain takes the lead in posts about Latin America.

In the UK, there's a notable concentration in posts about Europe (34.4%), Asia (32.3%), and North America (18.3%). France, in contrast, exhibits less dispersion, with a focus on posts about the war in Ukraine, Africa, and the Middle East.

Spanish fact-checkers in international posts frequently name France (44 times), the U.S.A. (13), Germany (4), Morocco (4), Ukraine (4), and Venezuela (3).

Meanwhile, UK fact-checkers mention India (59 times), France (53), the U.S.A. (36), Ukraine (12), Russia (5), Sweden (4), Ireland (3), and Turkey (3). French fact-checkers, on the other hand, often mention the U.S.A. (13), Ukraine (11), Russia (9), Niger (7), Italy (5), Spain (5), Tunisia (3), and Iran (3).

It's worth noting that the substantial presence of Asia in the UK is largely attributed to India. Additionally, both the UK and Spain predominantly focus on European countries, with France being the central subject in a significant portion of these posts (44 out of 51 in Spain and 53 out of 64 in the UK).

A closer look at the analysis by country reveals nuanced details. In Spain, mentions are concentrated primarily in France (44) and the USA (13). Similarly, the UK exhibits a concentration, with 53 posts about France and 36 about the U.S.A., but India stands out as the most mentioned country in the UK during July, noted up to 59 times.

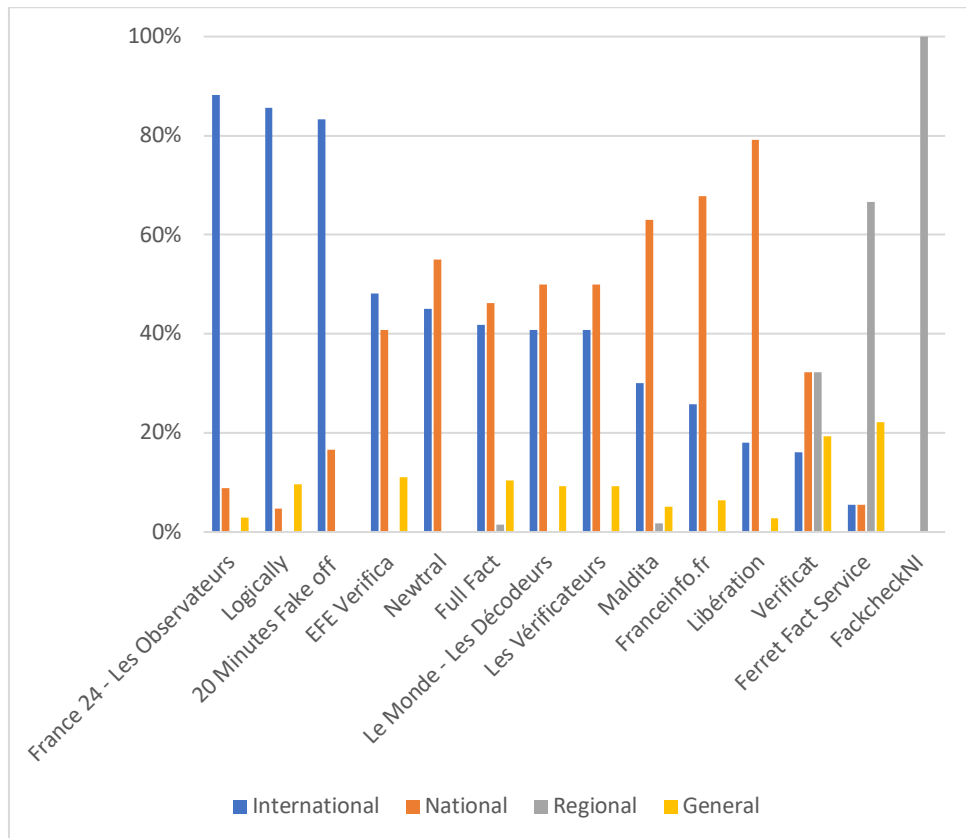
When considering religious institutions and groups, Spain notably leads in referencing European Union institutions, accounting for 12 out of the total 15 mentions. Conversely, the World Economic Forum is exclusively mentioned by UK fact-checkers, with Logically referencing it up to seven times and Full Fact mentioning it once.

5.3. COMPARISON BY FACT-CHECKERS

If we look at the proportion (in relative terms) of posts by geographic scope, significant differences are observed by agency. There are verification agencies in which more than 80% of the posts they have published have international reach: France 24, 20 minutes Fake Off and Logically. This is very significant because the rest of the agencies do not exceed 39% of international posts.

Likewise, the graph clearly shows that there are three agencies with a regional infra-state focus: Verificat (Spanish with a focus on Catalonia); FackcheckNI (British with a focus on Northern Ireland) and Ferret Fact Service (British with a focus on Scotland).

The remaining 8 agencies have national reach, since between 46% and 81% of their posts are national. However, we can differentiate those that combine national and international information (Newtral, Les Verificateurs Efe Verifica and Full fact) compared to Maldita, franceinfo.fr, LeMonde and Liberation, with a marked national focus.



Graphic 4. Scope distribution by fact-checker

6. CONCLUSIONS

Significant variations emerge when considering both country and agency, particularly concerning the scope and volume of publications.

Firstly, a noteworthy distinction arises between two agencies, Maldita and Logically, prolifically publishing almost 200 posts, and others such as FactCheckNI, Le Monde - Les Décodeurs, and 20 Minutes Fake off, which generate fewer than 10 posts per month.

When categorizing fact-checkers based on geographical scope, four distinct groups emerge: agencies with an international approach, those with a regional focus, those with a national approach, and agencies that strike a balanced approach.

Agencies like Logically, France 24 - Les Observateurs, and 20 Minutes Fake off demonstrate a pronounced international focus. It's essential to include AFP Factuel in this category, given its incorporation of multiple languages, each offering personalized content.

Conversely, Verificat, FactCheckNI, and Ferret Fact Service orient themselves regionally toward Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, respectively. The exploration of regional fact-checkers presents itself as a potential avenue for future research.

Several agencies prominently feature a high percentage of posts with national reach, including Libération, franceinfo.fr, and Maldita. Finally, Full Fact, Efe Verifica, Les Vérificateurs, and Newtral maintain a balanced portfolio, striking a harmonious blend between national and international posts.

These quantitative findings substantiate certain assertions highlighted in the introduction, such as the localized focus of Verificat, FactCheckNI, and Ferret Fact Service, as well as the global orientation of AFP Factuel and Logically.

Despite the mentioned variations, the comprehensive analysis of the entire sample suggests a balance between national and international posts. Among the publications with global reach, France, the USA, India, Ukraine, and Russia emerge as the most frequently mentioned countries. It's noteworthy that European countries, excluding Russia and Ukraine, contribute to over 40% of these mentions.

Crucially, Logically's headquarters in the USA and India underscore the global reach of its posts. Regarding those receiving less-than-anticipated mention, it's noteworthy how the African continent garners minimal attention, even in the

aftermath of a violent coup d'état in July. A similar pattern is observed in the case of Spanish elections.

Conversely, there is a notable surge in disinformation surrounding the war in Ukraine. Examining the mentioned institutions, the limited prominence of the EU and the striking presence of the World Economic Forum raise concerns.

A detailed examination by country reveals notable insights. Spain, in contrast to France and the UK, stands out for its lower proportion of international posts, indicating a more pronounced national focus. It's worth considering that the Spanish national elections on July 23 may explain this heightened national focus during that month. Interestingly, the Spanish elections did not resonate in France and the United Kingdom, where Spain was scarcely mentioned, with most of the mentions related to the Spanish minister Teresa Ribera.

In the case of Spain, the countries mentioned predominantly hail from Europe, with a conspicuous absence of posts related to Asia, including the Middle East and Asia Pacific.

France boasts the highest number of IFCN verifiers, totalling nine. Additionally, two of these agencies, Les Surligneurs focusing on legal verifications, and Science Feedback on scientific topics, feature thematic specializations absent in Spain and the UK. France also differs in the absence of regional agencies, potentially attributed to divergent territorial policies.

In France, two agencies, France 24 - Les Observateurs and AFP Fact Checking (not quantitatively analysed), exhibit a robust international focus. France's mentions predominantly revolve around Europe, Africa, and the Russia-Ukraine war, with a notable emphasis on Africa and Ukraine, reflecting historical and current relations.

In the UK, there is a distinctive international focus coupled with a significant number of regional posts. This can be attributed to the unique composition of the four IFCN agencies in the UK, with two having a regional character and one

demonstrating a marked international focus. These four agencies present varying volumes of posts during the month.

Regionally, the United Kingdom stands out for a high number of verifications related to India, due to the fact-checker Logically. Additionally, it deviates from France and Spain with a more pronounced emphasis on the U.S. and, uniquely, a more frequent reference to 'Muslims.'

For future research directions, this analysis provides the flexibility to incorporate additional countries, such as Italy and Germany, or broaden the sample with a more extended time frame.

It also opens avenues for a more in-depth exploration, comparing two analogous fact-checking entities from different countries, whether through the acquisition of regional agencies or comparing agencies with an international focus across diverse nations.

Moreover, delving into the analysis of the topics discussed and the nature of disinformation circulating in each case holds promise for an intriguing exploration that interconnects countries, identity groups, specific themes, or types of disinformation.

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INEQUITY DRIVEN MISTRUST

ALEJANDRO POSADA BERMÚDEZ

INTERNEWS, Colombia

ROCÍO LÓPEZ ÍÑIGO

INTERNEWS, España

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and other recent health crises have highlighted the negative impact of misinformation and mistrust in health information on health systems. Various studies have shown the link between mistrust and aspects of health response, such as health outcomes, preventive services, care-seeking behavior, vaccination rates, mortality during emergencies, risk perception, and acceptance of health measures (Lee & Lin 2011, Ahorsu 2021, Reirsen et al. 2022).

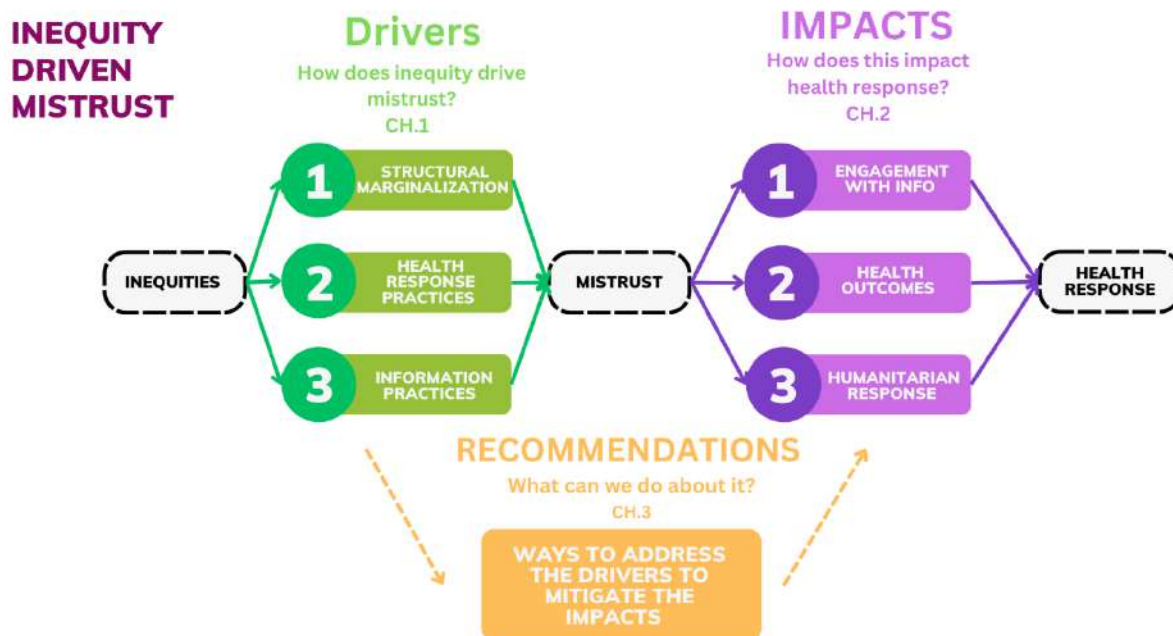
As such, understanding the drivers of mistrust in health information and how to address them is crucial (Mulukom 2022). This research is part of the Rooted in Trust (RiT) project at Internews, which has partnered with local organizations to respond to health-related rumors and misinformation. As part of our project, we identified that inequity is a significant driver of mistrust, especially in at-risk communities.

The existing literature has gaps in understanding how inequity-driven mistrust affects low-income and humanitarian settings. Some studies focus on information inequality, while others emphasize structural inequalities and their impact as social determinants of health, particularly in high-income settings (Jaiswal et al., 2020; Bazargan et al 2021).

This paper aims to investigate how inequity contributes to mistrust among at-risk communities in humanitarian contexts and its impact on health emergency response and "infodemic" management. Case studies in northern Iraq and the Amazon regions of Colombia and Brazil provide empirical insights.

The research has three objectives: (1) understanding the drivers of inequity-driven mistrust, (2) categorizing its impact, and (3) identifying strategies for mitigation. The three main drivers of inequity-driven mistrust identified include: structural inequities and grievances, inequities during health response, and inequities associated with information response. The impacts of this mistrust include communities' engagement with official information, health outcomes, and engagement with humanitarian responses. Recommendations are provided to address these drivers and mitigate the impacts.

In summary, the research argues that inequity is a significant driver of mistrust in health information for at-risk communities. Failing to address deep-rooted inequities can hinder the effectiveness of "infodemic" management efforts and health emergency response.



2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, the concept of inequity is pivotal. For this study, we adopted a bottom-up approach, allowing participants to define the main inequities faced by their community during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Inequity was broadly defined as any perception of injustice, unfairness, or inequality associated with an imbalanced power dynamic involving single or multiple actors with economic, social, epistemological, or cultural implications. Perpetrators of perceived inequities could be abstract (societal structures, systems, or forces) or institutional (public, private, or non-governmental) at various levels.

3. METHODS

This research, conducted by Rooted in Trust (RiT) teams in Colombia, Iraq, and Brazil, focused on specific at-risk populations and regions. In Colombia and Brazil, the study centered on indigenous populations in the Amazon, particularly in the isolated Amazonian department of Vaupés. In Iraq, the focus was on IDP camps in the northern Kurdistan region, primarily comprising individuals with links to the recent (2013-2017) conflict with

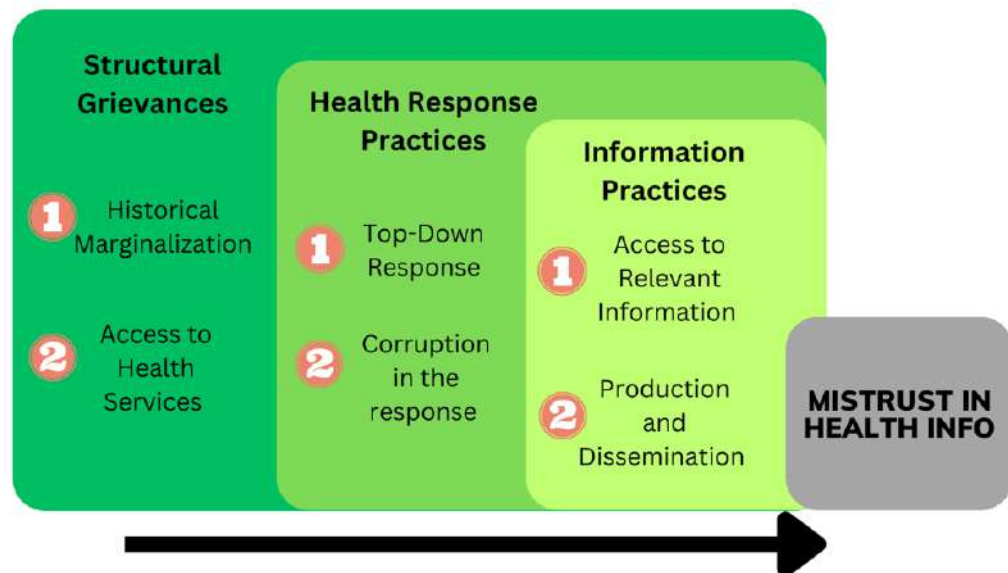
the Islamic State (IS). This included four focus group discussions (FGDs) in each country, involving diverse community members benefiting from RiT programs, and 16 stakeholder key informant interviews (KIIs) in each context, which included discussions with media, humanitarians, civil society, community healthcare workers, and community leaders.

4. SECTION 1: DRIVERS THROUGH WHICH INEQUITY INFLUENCES TRUST

This section delves into how inequity shapes mistrust in health-related information, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DRIVERS

HOW CAN INEQUITY DRIVE MISTRUST?



We've identified three key drivers through which perceived inequities affect trust in health-related information:

1. **Structural Inequities:** These are unrelated to information provision but impact trust in actors or institutions delivering health information. It encompasses historical abuse, marginalization due to conflict, geopolitics, post-colonial structures, and inequalities related to limited access to quality health services and resources.

2. **Inequities During Health Emergency Response:** Perceived inequities during the response phase affect trust. This driver includes limited community participation, reluctance to listen to feedback, inadequate presence of response actors in communities, and corruption in the response, characterized by empty promises and unfair enforcement of health measures.
3. **Inequities in Health-Related Information Provision:** This driver involves limited access to relevant, factual, transparent, localized, and actionable information in the preferred language. It also includes inequities in information production and dissemination, such as a lack of representation in information production and a disconnect between information and service provision.

These three drivers highlight the complexity of trust, shaped by practices and structures before, during, and after health emergencies. Inequities present in the information response and society can influence trust. At-risk communities in developing or humanitarian settings often experience inequalities at multiple levels, rooted in postcolonial structures, unequal health systems, and disproportionate resource distribution.

4.1. DRIVER 1: STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

This first driver emphasizes historical and ongoing marginalization that exists independently of the health emergency response. These structural processes illustrate the time-dependent aspect of trust, where trust is built and lost over time. Trust, as previously noted by Internews (2020), is challenging to rebuild once lost. Additionally, this study identifies that in low-income settings, vulnerable populations experience structural inequities amplified by regional and global geopolitics and post-colonial relations.

In these contexts, mistrust from national actors (e.g., governments, private sector, civil society) is compounded by a sense of inequity on a global scale. This section underscores that trust in information is not solely determined by communication strategies within a response but is also shaped by enduring historical and ongoing inequities that affect diverse societies.

4.1.1. HISTORICAL MARGINALIZATION

Our data reveals historic rifts between communities and actors at various levels, fostering mistrust in health crisis information. These fractured relationships often stem from actions or inaction by these actors, leading to perceived poverty, instability, loss of freedom, inequality, mobility restrictions, discrimination, and marginalization, all contributing to inequity-driven mistrust.

Globally, our rumor data uncovers tensions with global governance institutions, pharmaceutical industries, and philanthropic figures. These tensions often arise from perceived interference in the sovereignty and choices of developing nations, rooted in post-colonial feelings of dependence and submission to a global Northern system.

Nationally and locally, we found tensions with government, military, and civil society institutions, driven by feelings of abandonment, abuse, and corruption. This eroded trust in the health-related information associated with these actors during the pandemic.

We also uncovered historical tensions between local knowledge systems and perceived Western science. Some expressed concerns about the lack of historical collaboration between their indigenous knowledge and Western science, particularly in Brazil and Colombia. These complaints stem from historical and post-colonial attempts to exploit and commercialize indigenous knowledge, especially in health (Simpson 2004).

In Colombia's Vaupés department, indigenous communities expressed frustration with health institutions demanding indigenous knowledge solutions for the pandemic without fostering true intercultural collaboration. For instance, indigenous communities were compelled to consume a Western diet in hospitals, hindering genuine knowledge exchange.

Another aspect of this historical tension we identified involves situations in which science, solely due to its Western association, is perceived as superior or more reliable by communities in the global South. Multiple factors contribute to this perception, including the historical inequalities in global scientific knowledge production, which have hindered

participation of scholars from the global South in global discussions (Posada & Chen, 2018). In our data, we found numerous rumors and disinformation that leverage the mention of Western countries or universities to boost the credibility of the information they convey.

4.1.2. ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

This category addresses disparities in healthcare access and quality, impacting trust in health-related information, particularly among vulnerable populations in low-income settings. Distrust in hospitals and healthcare services was a global issue during COVID-19 misinformation, driven by unequal service distribution and quality. Regions like Southern Colombia and Northern Iraq saw complaints about care quality among vulnerable communities.

Interviews revealed that a history of subpar health services and inadequately trained healthcare workers contributed to mistrust in medical information. Low-quality services, often due to limited training, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient equipment, eroded trust, regardless of good intentions. For example, in Vaupés, Colombia, despite having three ICU units, no one knew how to use them effectively. The connection between low-quality services and diminished trust is often overlooked when addressing health service-related misinformation, raising doubts about actors' ability to care for communities and impacting trust levels.

Another issue is access to healthcare services, which affects trust when information doesn't address access barriers. Iraq and Colombia face access challenges with different underlying reasons, highlighting the importance of understanding contextual factors behind similar trust issues.

4.2. DRIVER 2: INEQUITY DURING HEALTH RESPONSE

This section focuses on inequities within the health emergency response, which influence trust in information. These inequities encompass disparities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the response, involving a range of actors beyond the

national health system. While the first section highlighted structural factors impacting trust in information, this section emphasizes that factors within the health response, unrelated to information or communication, still affect trust.

4.2.1. TOP-DOWN RESPONSE

This characteristic pertains to the top-down approach in designing and implementing a health response, which can erode trust in response actors and their intentions. Frustration with top-down responses was consistently observed in our data. Communities expressed discontent over nonparticipation or tokenistic involvement in the response, limiting trust in the intentions of response actors and the alignment with communities' needs. They also raised concerns about the profiteering of others involved in the response, further eroding trust.

For example, communities voiced frustration regarding their participation in the response's design and implementation. Local leadership's engagement is crucial for contextualized and community-rooted responses, ensuring the response addresses real needs and maintains transparency. However, lack of involvement of traditional healers and local councils in some regions led to frustration and mistrust, as decisions appeared distant from the community's context.

Moreover, not all forms of participation are trust-inducing. Tokenistic participation, where community members are involved but have no real influence, can negatively affect trust. This is true when community leaders are used as information vessels without decision-making power, creating distrust. Humanitarian actors were accused of taking advantage of communities for donor-related purposes and then leaving them behind.

Furthermore, limited roles for non-traditional health actors, such as civil society and local media, at the beginning of the health response created frustration. In Colombia, health secretaries' centralized approach excluded those with closer community relationships. Their eventual inclusion improved health actors' proximity to and relationships with indigenous communities.

Another significant issue was the reluctance to genuinely listen to communities, especially when they criticized the response. This failure to engage in two-way dialogue nurtured mistrust and hindered the response's ability to address community-specific needs. Community and local media in Colombia faced backlash for maintaining an open mic policy that allowed criticism and concerns to be expressed. Authorities sometimes accused them of spreading misinformation.

Lastly, maintaining a constant and long-standing presence in the community was found to build trust. Church and religious leaders, as well as camp managers in Iraq, gained trust through their physical presence, tours, and interactions with communities. Conversely, a lack of presence drove mistrust, as community members doubted the intentions of entities that failed to appear during the crisis.

4.2.2. QUESTIONABLE INTENTIONS

This second characteristic relates to corruption and unethical practices within the response that breed mistrust. Communities question the ability, intentions, and transparency of those involved, leading to doubts about the provided information. Cases of empty promises, unequal enforcement of measures, and delayed responses contribute to this dynamic.

Empty promises were identified as a significant issue, significantly affecting trust in the response and its actors, and indirectly impacting trust in the provided information. Transparency around the ability to deliver is crucial for building trust. Empty promises can result from different factors, including overpromising without ill intentions or making mal-intentioned promises to gain short-term acceptance without delivering. This can erode trust in the entire sector, as some entities fail to deliver on their promises. A humanitarian actor in Iraq illustrated this problem:

"Many NGOs are making false promises to communities. (...) This builds this lack of trust between the community and different agencies and NGOs. (...) When I go to them there is this destroyed relationship between me and them even before I see them."
Humanitarian Agency, Northern Iraq

There were also complaints about corrupt and unequal enforcement of health response measures, especially stay-at-home orders. Indigenous and afro-Colombian populations faced disproportionate consequences due to the informality of their employment. Stay-at-home orders were found to disproportionately affect lower-income populations, as observed in multiple studies (Basu et al 2021; Cho 2021).

4.3. DRIVER 3: INEQUITY AS PART OF THE INFORMATION RESPONSE

This final driver pertains to unequal practices directly contributing to the information response during a health emergency, leading to mistrust in provided information. It focuses on inequities related to accessing relevant health information and the processes involved in producing and disseminating such information. This driver underscores the significance of accuracy, timeliness, relevance, proximity, accessibility, representativeness, and understandability. Accuracy is associated with access to factual information, while timeliness and relevance are equally vital. Proximity is influenced by how accessible, representative, and understandable the information is for the targeted community.

4.3.1. ACCESS TO RELEVANT INFORMATION

The most critical injustice linked to inequity-driven mistrust is the lack of access to adequate information. Access is a key factor in shaping trust, but it's not solely about the availability of scientific or factual information; relevance also plays a crucial role. Below, we highlight elements of information that, when missing, diminish the relevance of available information and subsequently impact the trust communities place in it.

1. **Factual Information:** Trust relies on access to verified facts. We've seen in Iraq that a weakened information ecosystem limits access to such facts, fostering mistrust and enabling discriminatory narratives.
2. **Localized Information:** Communities seek tailored information. General information not addressing their specific needs can breed mistrust and misinformation.

3. **Dialogic Information:** Imposing information rather than engaging in dialogue fuels inequity-driven mistrust. Communities want informed decision-making.
4. **Language Barriers:** Lack of local language information creates distance and mistrust. Local partners producing content in the local language enhances trust and understanding.
5. **Actionable Information:** Mistrust grows when information lacks practical solutions for specific challenges. Irrelevant recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic caused frustration among vulnerable communities.
6. **Source Transparency:** Knowing information sources and motivations is vital. Transparency builds trust, especially when there are strained relationships with certain actors.

4.3.2. PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

This section discusses information production and dissemination inequities. Our data reveal that trust is significantly influenced not only by access to relevant information but also by the methods of information production. In this context, we identified key inequities:

- **Lack of Community Involvement:** Communities expressed frustration with their limited role in producing shared information, leading to feelings of inequity, mistrust, and a perception of information irrelevance. For example, in Iraq, disadvantaged groups were underrepresented in the media, fostering hate speech and one-sided narratives.
- **Extractive Data Collection Practices:** Lack of transparency in data collection practices erodes trust. Ethical and transparent research practices are crucial for building trust. Frustration emerged in our main case studies due to data collection without providing useful information or services in return, reinforcing post-colonial implications of knowledge extraction.
- **Poor Coordination between Service and Information Provision:** Frustration arose from inadequate coordination between service and information provision, leading to perceptions of untimely and irrelevant information responses, impacting

trust in information. In Colombia, health professionals' awareness without vaccines and vaccine distribution without prior information generated mistrust.

5. SECTION 2. THE IMPACTS OF INEQUITY-DRIVEN MISTRUST

This section addresses the adverse effects of inequity-driven mistrust on information management and health emergency responses, identifying three main impacts:

1. **Community Engagement with Information:** Inequity-driven mistrust can lead to two opposing practices, with some communities spreading rumors and disinformation, while others disengage from formal information channels. This poses threats to the information ecosystem as people may turn to less reliable sources during crises.
2. **Effects on Health Systems and Outcomes:** Inequity-driven mistrust directly leads to reluctance in following health recommendations, especially from actors perceived as responsible for pandemic-related inequities. This mistrust also contributes to vaccine hesitancy and perpetuates inequities by increasing the divide between communities and health systems.
3. **Impact on Relationships with Organizations:** Inequity-driven mistrust frustrates at-risk communities, affecting their relationship with humanitarian and civil society organizations meant to serve them.



These impacts highlight the detrimental influence of perceived inequity, compromising the information ecosystem and undermining relationships between communities and powerful actors, thus affecting the effectiveness of information and health emergency responses.

5.1. IMPACT 1: ENGAGEMENT WITH INFORMATION

Through our data, we identified that inequity-driven mistrust had an impact on the ways that communities engage with information. While for some it results in active and frustrated engagement with rumors and disinformation, for others it results in a decision to disengage and withdraw from official institutional information providers and search for alternative – in some cases lower quality – sources. Both seemingly opposing practices can emanate from a similar frustration and have detrimental effects on the health of the information ecosystem.

5.1.1. ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH RUMORS AND DISINFORMATION

We found that inequity-driven mistrust can lead to active engagement with misinformation and disinformation. Frustrations arising from perceived inequities can fuel doubts and questions within communities, often escalating into rumors. For instance, a community healthcare worker in Iraq explained how inequity affected trust:

“It [inequity] affects us because communities do not trust us from the very beginning. When we go to help, they have this trust issue. They ask themselves: Are they real? Are they here to serve us? Is it for real, or do they just want to give us the vaccination? which is sometimes turned into ‘they will make us infertile’. Because they reach a point where they do not trust anyone because everyone has tried to abuse them in different ways”.

Moreover, disinformation campaigns capitalize on inequity-driven mistrust. By acknowledging the historical and ongoing marginalization faced by communities due to inequities, these campaigns gain traction. While the information may be false, it resonates with the real and significant emotions experienced by the targeted communities. These campaigns exploit inequity-driven mistrust to undermine the importance of vaccines,

portraying them as dangerous and labeling them a profit-driven endeavor. This negatively impacts the information ecosystem.

As part of the Rooted in Trust project, we have been collecting health-related rumors from at-risk communities in humanitarian contexts over the past two years. We systematically analyzed this data to identify how perceived inequity manifests in the rumors. The result includes rumor maps for each country ([Link to rumor maps](#)).

5.1.2. DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: INFORMATION FATIGUE

Inequity-driven mistrust can also lead communities to disengage from official institutional information sources and actively seek alternative sources. This disengagement poses a significant challenge to the official health response, as it hampers the delivery of crucial information during a health emergency. It can be more challenging to address than active engagement because when official information loses relevance, navigating its impacts becomes more complex.

For instance, a religious leader in Iraq outlined factors driving disengagement: “If they’re not receiving the assistance on time, for example, the food supplies, they completely don’t trust the health. (...)So they don’t care about health information because they’re not receiving essential assistance on time.”

The disconnect between official information providers and communities can lead to the search for alternative sources, some of which may offer lower-quality or potentially harmful information, as discussed in the following section.

5.2. IMPACT 2: HEALTH OUTCOMES

Inequity-driven mistrust can directly or indirectly impact health systems and health outcomes during a health emergency. Directly, it may lead to communities being unwilling to follow health recommendations and seeking alternative treatments or preventive measures, some of which can be life-threatening. Indirectly, the frustrations stemming

from inequity-driven mistrust can exacerbate the distance between communities and health actors, creating a vicious cycle that further magnifies the health inequities faced by these communities.

5.2.1. UNWILLINGNESS TO FOLLOW HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

The frustrations associated with inequity-driven mistrust can contribute to an unwillingness to follow health recommendations during a crisis. If people mistrust the information, there is less incentive to pay attention or follow what is being proposed by that information. In instances where the mistrust is very severe, the effects of the recommendations can even backfire, resulting in community members taking the completely opposite action or seeking alternatives. This impact is inherently related to the rise of misinformation and disinformation presented in the previous section. Rumors also contribute to an unwillingness to follow health recommendations during a health emergency.

The inequity associated with a lack of information and services can also push communities to seek alternative solutions in terms of cures and preventative measures for the virus. Some of the alternatives can be quite dangerous and pose a greater health risk, such as the numerous cases of rumors that suggested the unsupervised use of chloroquine to treat COVID-19.

5.2.2. EXACERBATES INEQUITIES AND ISOLATES COMMUNITIES

Inequity-driven mistrust not only affects health recommendations but also damages the relationship between communities and healthcare providers. Unfulfilled promises and unequal access to services contribute to this frustration. In a focus group in Iraq, participants lost trust in health clinics due to repeated unfulfilled promises by the government and organizations. A humanitarian agency interviewee emphasized how the strained relationship between communities and healthcare systems affected their work.

“During the pandemic, we witnessed a significant amount of hesitancy among people and a lack of trust in both people and governments. (...) There was a notable sense of

hesitancy between communities and the healthcare systems, leaving us stuck in the middle.” Humanitarian Agency, Northern Iraq

The ruptured relationship between communities and health systems contributes to a vicious cycle which further exacerbates the inequities faced by communities. By distancing themselves from health systems communities are less likely to be able to position their health needs and concerns in the policy of service provision agenda. As a result, there is an increased likelihood that those needs will not be considered or addressed, which further increases the inequities that damaged the relationship in the first place.

5.3. IMPACT 3: HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

The third impact of inequity-driven mistrust in our data was increased frustration with humanitarian actors. Similar to health systems, we saw strained relationships between communities and humanitarian or civil society organizations due to this mistrust, affecting their ability to create and implement programs tied to wider humanitarian responses.

Communities' negative experiences can cast a shadow on the entire sector, impacting the work of new organizations. It often becomes necessary for organizations to rebuild trust by differentiating themselves from the broader sector.

Frustration with humanitarian response also stems from the timeliness and sustainability of implementation. In Iraq, abrupt withdrawal of funding from IDP camps in the north led to dissatisfaction, particularly due to poor communication and transparency. This lack of continuity can make communities feel abandoned, fostering rumors and perceptions of inequity. These issues result from the weak connection between humanitarian and development programming, making transitions abrupt. In Iraq, communities expressed concerns about the lack of communication about post-funding cut plans. These frustrations contribute to feelings of inequity and injustice, further impacting the relationship between communities and future humanitarian programming.

6. SECTION 3: RECOMMENDATIONS TO MITIGATE, ADDRESS AND ACKNOWLEDGE INEQUITY-DRIVEN MISTRUST

Mistrust, stemming from inequity and injustice, is a significant challenge in health and humanitarian responses, affecting relationships among vulnerable groups. To combat inequity-driven mistrust, we offer recommendations derived from successful practices in various locations, informed by conversations with key informants in Colombia and Iraq and insights from the Rooted in Trust project during the COVID-19 pandemic. While addressing these issues is complex and challenging due to deeply ingrained power dynamics, recognizing their influence on emergency response outcomes is essential.

6.1. RECOMMENDATION 1: RESPONDING TO STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

1. Historical Marginalization:

- Reflect on past experiences and their impact on communities' trust in public health and emergency interventions today.
- Address historical oppression and discrimination to rebuild trust and empower communities.
- Evaluate power dynamics in the operational settings.
- Promote dialogue between Western and indigenous knowledge systems.
- Acknowledge the value of local and indigenous knowledge.
- Respect cultural diversity in care practices to build trust.

2. Gaps in Access to Quality Services:

- Recognize how limited access to quality health services breeds mistrust.
- Rebuild trust with local and national health authorities and facilities.
- Work on delivering promised services and protecting community values.

6.2. RECOMMENDATION 2: RESPONDING TO INEQUITY DURING HEALTH RESPONSE

1. Tokenistic and Non-Participation:

- Recognize and utilize local community capabilities.
- Prioritize local expertise over foreign aid when possible.

- Ensure ongoing community involvement in preparedness and response planning.
2. Top-Down Approaches:
 - Offer options rather than imposing solutions.
 - Empower individuals and communities to make decisions.
 - Foster dialogue to identify common goals and acknowledge different capabilities.
 3. Social Listening and Feedback:
 - Collect community feedback and take meaningful action.
 - Establish protocols for community data and feedback.
 - Avoid extractive practices and build trust.
 4. Long-Lasting Collaboration:
 - Maintain continuous presence in the community.
 - Invest in collaborative approaches throughout the crisis phases.
 - Avoid abrupt departures without exit strategies.
 5. Questionable Intentions:
 - Maintain transparency about processes and intentions.
 - Guide communities through each step of humanitarian actions.
 - Address historical marginalization and build trust.

6.3. RECOMMENDATION 3: RESPONDING TO INEQUITY AS PART OF THE INFORMATION RESPONSE

1. Access to Relevant Information:
 - Strengthen the information ecosystem for health emergencies alongside health system preparedness.
 - Map relevant actors, assess community information dynamics, and address collaboration challenges in advance.
2. Provide Contextualized Information:
 - Support communities in creating tailored information.

- Assist local media and community organizations while ensuring their independence.

3. Production and Dissemination of Information:

- Align information dissemination with service availability.
- Avoid creating false expectations or suspicions.
- Ensure communication matches the stage of the emergency response.

7. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the grave consequences of misinformation and mistrust in health information, impacting health systems. This study aimed to understand how inequity contributes to mistrust in health information among at-risk communities in humanitarian contexts, affecting "infodemic" management and health emergency responses. Case studies in Iraq, Colombia, and the Brazilian Amazon identified three key drivers of inequity-driven mistrust: structural inequities, health response inequities, and information response inequities. These inequities erode trust in health information, impacting community interactions, behaviors, outcomes, and relationships with health systems and humanitarian efforts. Recommendations to mitigate inequity-driven mistrust include acknowledging past experiences, fostering dialogue between knowledge systems, addressing service access gaps, respecting local capacities, and promoting community participation. In conclusion, addressing deep-rooted inequities is crucial to mitigate mistrust in health information among at-risk communities, ultimately enhancing "infodemic" management and health emergency responses for improved health outcomes.

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IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION
PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM
MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

OLIVIER R. PHILIPPE

Barcelona Supercomputing Center, Spain

NATALY BUSLÓN

Barcelona Supercomputing Center, Spain

MARÍA JOSÉ REMENTERÍA

Barcelona Supercomputing Center, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had multiple impacts on our population. The serious problems it represented in people's health at social, economic, political, and environmental levels caused a change in all spheres of our lives. Scientific efforts to publish and research the coronavirus have been the strongest in history, leading to the largest number of scientific publications. According to Riccaboni, M; Verginer, L., the COVID-19-related medical subject headings (MeSH) terms have experienced a 6.5-fold increase in the output of average papers published during the first few months (Riccaboni & Verginer, 2022). This overload of information in scientific papers has also been accompanied by a massive wave of false content and misleading information globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes an overabundance of false or misleading information in digital and physical environments, which impedes the implementation of best public health policies during a public health crisis such as COVID-19 (Pool et al., 2021). That has become a national and

international battleground of a struggle against misinformation (Melki et al., 2021). Over the last few years, dis- misinformation phenomena and the so-called “fake news” (Tandoc et al., 2018) have been widely studied in different news contexts, such as the U.S. presidential elections, the Brexit referendum, and the world summit on climate change, and so on. However, none of these cases is comparable to the dis- misinformation detected during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brennen et al., 2021), with the added issue that dis- misinformation about COVID-19 spreads faster on social media than verified news (Huang & Carley, 2020). In our study, we understand disinformation as verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public. At the same time, misinformation is verifiably false information that is spread without the intention to mislead, often shared because the user believes it to be true ¹.

This dangerous situation has worsened since its circulation has reached unforeseen scales, severely affecting domains that range from politics and economy to public health. In healthcare, the proliferation of manipulated medical information has been perceived as especially harmful due to the impact that this content might have on people’s lives. It has been proved that differences in citizens’ experiences and ideology can have an impact on how much misinformation spreads. Misleading healthcare information, dangerous hoaxes with false claims, fraud content and conspiracy theories endanger public health. International organizations, the WHO, and the European Union (EU) are working in close cooperation with online platforms to encourage them to promote authoritative sources, demote content that is fact-checked as false or misleading, and take down illegal content or content that could cause physical harm ² and damage to society. An excess of unverified information endangers people’s decisions to take action and requires study and care as it can affect their health and affect the tendency to share this data with other people.

The study of this phenomenon requires a multidisciplinary point of view due to the magnitude in political communication, public opinion, the corporate world or

¹ Sources: EFE Verifica, Maldita and Newtral

² The survey, being done in Spain, they are equivalent to Spanish education levels.

environmental issues, but in the current context, scientific research on disinformation in the health field seems more necessary than ever. Social media increases and represents an important role in spreading information, so it is important to work in different channels (Gabarron et al., 2021; Shahi et al., 2021). The diffusion of misinformation and disinformation through modern communication and social networking sites is one of today's most urgent problems. It is crucial to analyze the consequences in terms of citizen participation. Not everyone is equal in the face of misinformation, especially when it is about health. Of course, level of expertise is an important factor to consider. Gender, age, education and ideology seem to be the principal socioeconomic factors that impair the judgement or at least the trust in online resources about health (Sbaffi & Rowley, 2017), and this is true for COVID-19 misinformation too (Melki et al., 2021). Spain is not an exception in this problem, in fact, the volume of false content in digital media in Spain has increased considerably since the lockdown was decreed (Fernández-Torres et al., 2021; Lázaro-Rodríguez & Herrera-Viedma, 2020; Martínez, 2020). Blanco-Herrero and al. studied the reported exposition of misinformation by age, gender, socioeconomic and ideology in Spain. They reported an impact of gender and ideology. Young people and women reported more often being exposed to fake news than men, and the extent of their use of media also aggravated this perceived experience. However, in their study, they were interested in the feeling of being exposed to disinformation rather than the capacity to detect such misinformation (Blanco-Herrero et al., 2021). Besides the different socioeconomic aspects studied in the literature, the message features also have an importance in the news disinformation. The misinformation, especially in health, adopted a specific writing style and the perceived credibility of the source (Di Sotto & Viviani, 2022). Not only does some misinformation imitate the professional style of legitimate news, it can also resonate in the individual based on what they have read in the past (Melki et al., 2021; Swire et al., 2017). Repeated exposure is also a factor that can accentuate the acceptance of dis- misinformation (Saby et al., 2021). In this line, the present experiment is interested in these two aspects of misinformation diffusion, the individual level and the message level. These two aspects are crucial to understanding how misinformation is diffused but also

detected by people. The following are the research questions; (i) What are the relevant socio-demographic variables and media consumption related to the likelihood to detect legitimate news and misinformation? (ii) Which aspects of a news subject are used to make a decision, and do it change if they are right or wrong. The novelty of the approach in this experiment is the misjudgment can also affect legitimate news.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. DATASET

Our study has been carried out with a dataset composed of misinformation and legitimate news. The subset was built during the RRSSalud project selecting misinformation news on health, technology and politics published between March and April 2020 (Salaverría et al., 2020). The dataset was completed with 10 verified news, established by MyNews repository, a platform that records all the information published in the main Spanish media on the exact dates and similar topics (see Table 1).

News title	Type of news	Publication date	Publication media	Fact checker
Alimentos que más inmunizan contra el coronavirus	Misinformation	20/03/2020	Coronavirus noticias	Maldita
Hantavirus. La OMS advierte al mundo del nuevo virus que viene de China	Misinformation	27/03/2020	Mediterraneo Digital	EFE verifica
Madrid denuncia que el Gobierno paralizó en Zaragoza	Misinformation	1/4/2020	Ok Diario	Maldita

News title	Type of news	Publication date	Publication media	Fact checker
5.000 kilos de mascarillas para Madrid porque "Aduanas cierra a las 15h"				
Bill Gates anuncia que implantará microchips para combatir Covid-19 y rastrear las vacunas	Misinformation	2/4/2020	El Independiente	Newtral
Demuestran científicamente la relación causal entre la tecnología 5G y el COVID-19	Misinformation	16/04/2020	Maldita	
Todo apunta a que el COVID-19 "se escapó" del Instituto de Virología de Wuhan	Misinformation	19/04/2020	Norte Extremadura	Newtral
El uso prolongado del tapaboca produce hipoxia	Misinformation	2/5/2020	Dia del sur noticias	Maldita
Stefano Montario: las mascarillas	Misinformation	18/05/2020	Verita spirit	Maldita

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

News title	Type of news	Publication date	Publication media	Fact checker
incuban el cáncer				
El Ministerio del Interior alemán define al coronavirus como "falsa alarma global" en un informe filtrado a la prensa	Misinformation	1/6/2020	Diario Octubre	Newtral
La OMS alerta sobre el Virus Nipah, que puede ser peor que el Covid-19	Misinformation	16/06/2020	Las Repúblicas	Maldita
La Junta iniciará el lunes el reparto de menús para menores en riesgo de exclusión en Córdoba	Legitimate	20/03/2020	Europa Press	
El CSIC busca una vacuna para el Covid-19 a partir del virus que erradicó la viruela	Legitimate	26/03/2020	Atresmedia	
Coronavirus: llega a Madrid el material	Legitimate	4/1/2020	Libertad Digital	

News title	Type of news	Publication date	Publication media	Fact checker
sanitario al que Huawei se comprometió con el rey Felipe VI				
Coronavirus No hay evidencia de que los perros transmitan el virus	Legitimate	4/2/2020	El Comercio	
Moscú vigilará la cuarentena mediante un código QR	Legitimate	4/15/2020	El Periódico	
El coronavirus solo se desactiva por completo a más de 90 grados	Legitimate	4/19/2020	La Voz de Galicia	
El uso de la mascarilla agrava el aislamiento de las personas sordas	Legitimate	5/2/2020	El Norte de Castilla	
Utilizar guantes no tiene ningún sentido	Legitimate	5/18/2020	La Voz de Galicia	
Una vacuna contra la poliomielitis podría ser la	Legitimate	6/16/2020	AS	

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

News title	Type of news	Publication date	Publication media	Fact checker
solución contra el coronavirus				
Sanidad estudia adelantar este año la vacuna de la gripe	Legitimate	6/16/2020	El Comercio	

Table 1. News and the date of publication as well as the fact checker who was responsible for the qualification as dis- misinformation.

2.2. PROCEDURE

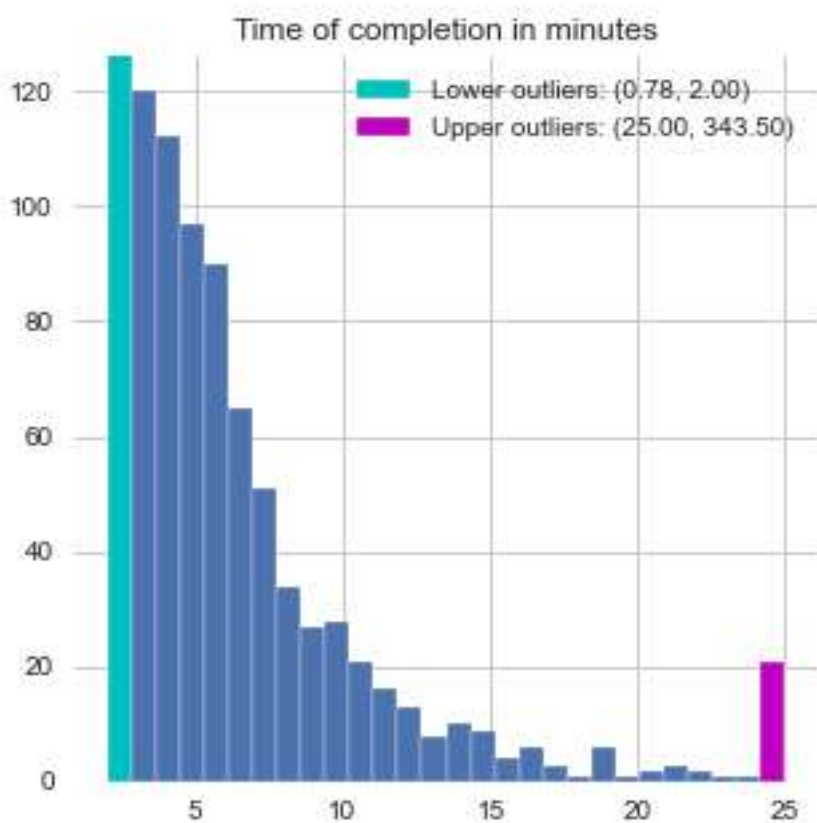


Figure 1. Time of completion in minutes for all the participants

The experimental part of the research has been carried out through an online survey platform designed specifically to give random information to each user. The website presented two pieces (one legitimate news and one misinformation). For each, the subject was asked to judge if the news was a legitimate piece of news or misinformation. After, a list of multiple-choice questions asked them what were the aspects of the news that led to their decision. The questions were different if the subject considered the news legitimate or misinformation. After the two rounds of questions about news and justifications, the subjects were asked about their age, gender, ideology, education, religion, technological level and a series of questions about their media consumption. From the total of participants (n=1063), 60 participants have been removed as outliers because they took under 2 minutes (n=51) or more than 25 minutes (n=9) to complete the survey. 840 subjects composed the final dataset (see Figure 1).

2.3. MEASURES

2.3.1. MISINFORMATION AND LEGITIMATE NEWS

Over the 20 news, each was presented at least 65 times. A chi-square test of independence showed no significant association between the type of news and the rate of correct identification, $\chi^2(1, n = 1680) = 2.54, p = .11$ (see Table 2, Graphic 2 and 3).

Type of news	Right	Wrong
Misinformation	538	302
Legitimate information	570	270

Table 2. Count of right and wrong answers per type of news

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

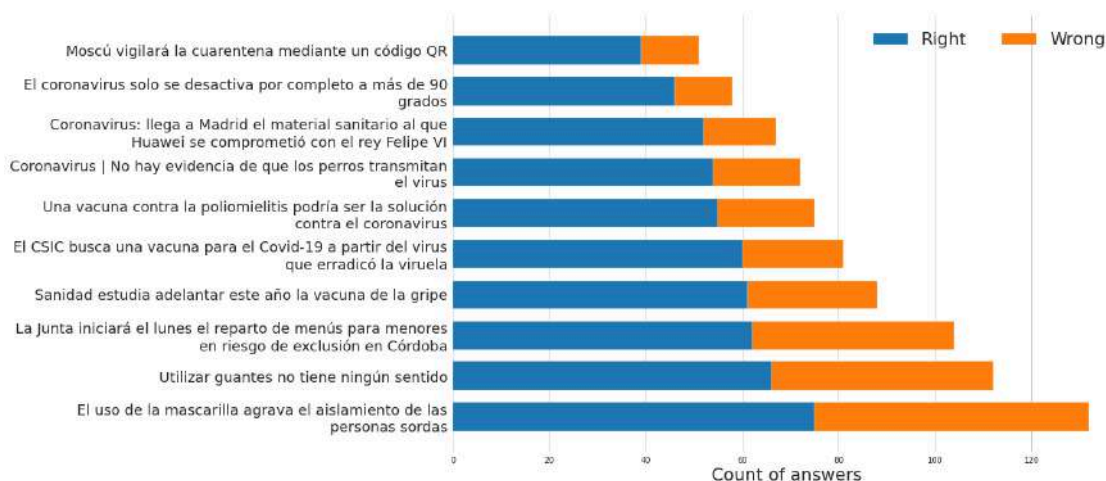


Figure 2. Count of the different answers per news title for legitimate news

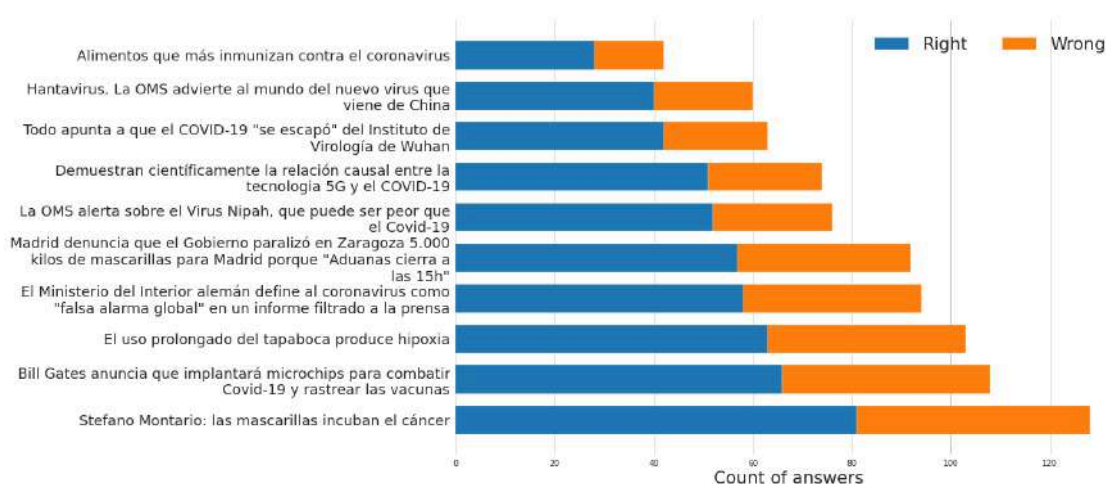


Figure 3. Count of the different answers per news title for dis- misinformation news.

2.3.2. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Gender: Question about gender asked, including Male/Female/No binary. There were 53% of Females (n=445) and 47% of Male (n=395) and no No binary.

Religion: Subjects were asked which religion they have, if any. The options were Catholic, Atheist, Islamic, Agnostic, Evangelist, Buddhist, Protestant, and Other. After exploring the data, the variable was transformed with answers recoded into Religious, No religious and No Answer. There were way more of Catholic (n=390), Atheists (n=191) and Agnostics (n=42) than other religions (n<10). After

recoding, participants were coded into Religious (n=420) for 50% of them, No religious (n=334) for 40% of them and 10% (n=86) without an answer.

Political Affiliation: The survey asked the participant to give their political orientation among 5 choices (Left, Centre-left, Centre, Centre-Right, Right). 25% (n=206) self-identified as being left, 17% (n=145) being Centre left, 16% (n=135) Centre, 12% (n=98) Centre right, 8% (n=66) Right. 23% (n=190) of the subject did not answer that question.

Age: 6 age bands were asked (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65) 8% (n=69) were aged under 18-24 years old, 16% (n=132) between 25-34 years old, 22% (n=187) between 35-44 years old, 28% (n=235) between 45-54 years old, 20% (n=164) between 55-65 years old and 6% (n=53) more than 65 years old.

Education: Subjects were asked about their education level, No formal education, Primary school, Secondary school, Professional level, Undergraduate, Postgraduate, Doctorate and Other. The different answers have been recoded into a three levels variable. 19% of the subjects had at least a Secondary level (n=156), 28% a College level (n=232) and 54% a University level (n=451).

Technological level: Subjects were asked to report their technological level. 9% considered their level as Basic (n=74), 43% Intermediate (n=363), 48% Advanced (n=400) and 3 subjects did not answer that question.

The count for the socio-demographic variable can be seen in Table [3](#).

Variable	Value	Counts	Proportion
Gender	Female	445	53
	Male	395	47
Education	Secondary	156	19
	College	232	28
	University	451	54
	NaN	1	0
Age	18-24	69	8

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

Variable	Value	Counts	Proportion
	25-34	132	16
	35-44	187	22
	45-54	235	28
	55-65	164	20
	>65	53	6
Technological knowledge	Basic	74	9
	Intermediate	363	43
	Advanced	400	48
	NaN	3	0
Religion	Religious	420	50
	No religious	334	40
	NaN	86	10
Ideology	Left	206	25
	Centre left	145	17
	Centre	135	16
	Centre right	98	12
	Right	66	8
	NaN	190	23

Table 3. Counts and proportions of the different socio-demographics variables

2.3.3. MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Participants were asked about their media consumption on a scale of 5 points (Never, Every year, Every month, Every week, Every day). The answers can be found in the divergent bar plot (see Figure 4). Except for the question about reading, all of them were in majority used or consumed every day.

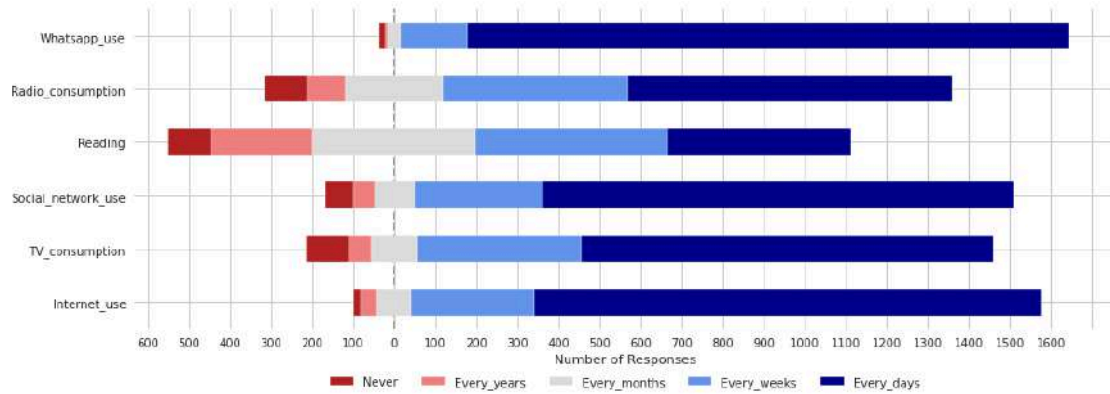


Figure 4. Divergent plot on Media consumption and Social network use

2.3.4. JUSTIFICATIONS

For news considered misinformation: When the subject judged the news as misinformation (regardless of the answer being correct or no), they had to answer a multiple choice question on which aspect of the news they deemed essential to decide (Table [6](#)).

For news considered legitimate: When a subject considered the news as legitimate, they also had to answer a multiple-choice question but with different answers. Additionally, they respond to follow-up multiple choices questions about what they plan to do after reading the news (see Table [7](#)).

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. ANALYSIS 1: IMPACT OF SOCIAL FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION ON THE CAPACITY TO DISTINGUISH NEWS

Two questions were asked per participant, among a finite set of 20 questions, raising potential concerns of pseudoreplication. To account for the variability of the news and the repeated measures among participants, we used a Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMM) to treat the news titles and the subjects as random effects (Baayen et al., 2008; Bates et al., 2015; Jernigan & Jernigan, 2019).

A mixed-effect binomial logistic regression model with random intercepts for subjects and for news titles was fitted to the data to predict the dependent variable, the answer given by the participant to judge the piece of news as legitimate or misinformation. When the participant correctly identifies the news, it is coded as 1 and 0 when incorrectly.

A model selection was performed for the structure of the random effect news titles. The model with the random intercept for news title performed significantly better $\chi^2(1, n = 1680) = 77.0, p = 0.001$ than the model without random effect and the model with random intercept and random slope (see Table 4 for a summary). The random effect for subject returned a singular fit. However, as it is required by the experiment design and should not add any issue in the final results, it was kept as it is.

	Params	AIC	BIC	logLik	deviance	Chisq	Df	P-values
Without R. Effect	23	1574.95	1692.51	-764.47	1528.95	NA	NA	NA
R. Intercept	24	1499.95	1622.62	-725.97	1451.95	77	1	<0.001*
R. Intercept and R. Slope	26	1503.76	1636.66	-725.88	1451.76	0.19	2	0.91

Table 4. Report of ANOVA for model selection with different Random Effect structures. Comparison of models with the mode without Random effect structure with the variable news titles

Finally, two logistic mixed models (estimated using ML and BOBYQA optimizer) were fitted to predict the answer.

First a model (model 1) with all the predictors, following the formula: *answer* *Education* + *Age* + *Ideology* + *Gender* + *Religion* + *Technological* + *Whatsapp_use* + *Radio_consumption* + *Reading* + *Social_network_use* + *TV_consumption* + *Internet_use*.

From this model (model 2), an interaction with type of news and all significant predictors was fitted. The second model used the following *formula*: *answer* *Education* + *Age* + *Ideology* + *Gender* + *Religion* + *Technological* + *Whatsapp_use* + *Radio_consumption* + *Reading* + *Social_network_use* + *TV_consumption* + *Internet_use* + *Education:type_news* + *Age:type_news* + *Ideology:type_news* + *Religion:type_news* + *Technological:type_news* + *Reading:type_news* + (1| *subjects*) + (1| *news_title*).

The interaction with *type_news* was for discerning different patterns when news is considered as misinformation or legitimate information even if no significant interactions were found. The models are reported in Table 5.

Education has a significant effect on model 1 ($p = 0.047$) and on model 2 ($p < 0.047$). An analysis of contrasts for the model 2 shows that subjects who have a University degree identify correctly the type of news significantly more often compared to the subjects with College degree (OR=0.563, SE= 0.127, $df=Inf$, $z = -2.534$, $p = 0.030$) in the case of misinformation (see Figure 5(A)).

Religion is a significant predictor for both model 1 ($p < 0.001$) and model 2 ($p < 0.001$). The subjects reporting any religious belief have more difficulties to correctly identifying the type of news and are making significantly more errors than the subjects who are not reporting any religion in case of legitimate information (OR=0.525, SE= 0.111, $df=Inf$, $z = -3.030$, $p = 0.002$) and misinformation (OR=0.632, SE= 0.129, $df=Inf$, $z = -2.239$, $p = 0.025$) (see Figure 5(B)).

Technology also has a significant impact on model 1 ($p = 0.028$) and model 2 ($p = 0.026$). The analysis of contrasts pairwise shows a significative difference in the likeliness to correctly identify the type of news between different types of technological level. Subjects with basic level of technological knowledge compared to the subject with Advanced technological knowledge are more likely to be wrong, but only for the legitimate news (OR=0.385, SE= 0.157, $df=Inf$, $z = -2.339$, $p = 0.050$) (see Figure 5(C)).

Age also has a significant impact in model 1 ($p = 0.035$) and in model 2 ($p = 0.037$). When analysis the pairwise contrasts in model 2, the significance is true for older people (> 65 years old) and 35-44 years old (OR=0.304 SE=0.139 df=Inf, $z = -2.593$ $p = 0.098$) in the misinformation setting, and between the (18-24) and 55-65 (OR=0.307, SE= 0.120, df=Inf, $z = -3.018$ $p = 0.030$) and between the 18-24 years old and (>65 years old) (OR=0.1813, SE= 0.094, df=Inf, $z = -3.282$, $p = 0.013$) (see Figure 5(D)).

Reading has a significant deleter impact on the prediction for correctly identifying a piece of news in model 1 ($p = 0.026$) and in model 2 ($p = 0.023$) It seems that the more the subject reports reading often the less they are able to correctly identify the news and the effect is regardless of the type of news (see Figure 5(E)).

Characteristic	Model 1 with main effect		Model 2 with interaction with type of news	
	OR (95% CI)	p-val	OR (95% CI)	p-val
2-5 factor(Education)		0.047		0.047
Secondary	1.07 (0.84, 1.37)		1.08 (0.84, 1.39)	
College	0.79 (0.65, 0.98)		0.79 (0.64, 0.98)	
University	—		—	
factor(Age)		0.035		0.037
18-24	0.6 (0.40, 0.89)		0.6 (0.40, 0.90)	
25-34	1.05 (0.75, 1.45)		1.05 (0.75, 1.47)	
35-44	0.85 (0.65, 1.11)		0.84 (0.64, 1.10)	
45-54	0.9 (0.70, 1.16)		0.89 (0.69, 1.16)	
55-65	1.28 (0.95, 1.71)		1.27 (0.95, 1.72)	
>65	—		—	

Characteristic	Model 1 with main effect		Model 2 with interaction with type of news	
Ideology		0.34		0.33
Right	0.81 (0.57, 1.13)		0.81 (0.57, 1.14)	
Centre right	0.96 (0.72, 1.28)		0.96 (0.72, 1.29)	
Centre	0.96 (0.74, 1.24)		0.96 (0.74, 1.25)	
Centre left	1.33 (1.01, 1.74)		1.32 (1.01, 1.74)	
Left	—		—	
Gender		0.078		0.07
Male	0.88 (0.77, 1.01)		0.87 (0.76, 1.01)	
Female	—		—	
Religion		<0.001		<0.001
Religious	0.76 (0.66, 0.88)		0.76 (0.65, 0.87)	
No religious	—		—	
Technological		0.028		0.026
Basic	0.69 (0.49, 0.98)		0.68 (0.48, 0.98)	
Intermediate	1.04 (0.84, 1.29)		1.04 (0.84, 1.29)	
Advanced	—		—	
type_news		0.4		0.41
misinformation	0.87 (0.62, 1.21)		1.14 (0.25, 5.24)	
legitimate information	—		—	
Whatsapp_use	1.16 (0.86, 1.55)	0.33	1.17 (0.87, 1.57)	0.31
Radio				

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

Characteristic	Model 1 with main effect		Model 2 with interaction with type of news	
consumption	1.07 (0.95, 1.21)	0.25	1.08 (0.96, 1.22)	0.22
Reading	0.88 (0.78, 0.98)	0.026	0.87 (0.77, 0.98)	0.023
Social				
network use	0.98 (0.85, 1.13)	0.77	0.97 (0.84, 1.13)	0.75
TV_consumption	1.03 (0.90, 1.16)	0.69	1.03 (0.90, 1.17)	0.7
Internet_use	1.14 (0.94, 1.37)	0.17	1.14 (0.94, 1.37)	0.18
Education * type_news				0.15
Secondary * misinformation			0.82 (0.64, 1.06)	
College * misinformation			1.01 (0.82, 1.24)	
Age * type_news				0.45
18-24 * misinformation			0.76 (0.51, 1.14)	
25-34 * misinformation			0.87 (0.62, 1.21)	
35-44 * misinformation			0.94 (0.72, 1.24)	
45-54 * misinformation			0.92 (0.71, 1.20)	
55-65 * misinformation			1.16 (0.86, 1.56)	
Ideology * type_news				0.66
Right * misinformation			0.8 (0.57, 1.13)	

Characteristic	Model 1 with main effect		Model 2 with interaction with type of news	
Centre right * misinformation			0.95 (0.71, 1.27)	
Centre * misinformation			1.03 (0.79, 1.34)	
Centre left * misinformation			1.15 (0.88, 1.52)	
Gender * type_news				0.38
Male * misinformation			1.07 (0.92, 1.23)	
Religion * type_news				0.35
Religious * misinformation			1.07 (0.93, 1.24)	
Technological * type_news				0.79
Basic * misinformation			1.13 (0.79, 1.62)	
Intermediate * misinformation			0.96 (0.77, 1.19)	
Whatsapp_use * type_news				0.6
Whatsapp_use * misinformation			1.08 (0.80, 1.46)	
Radio_consumption * type_news				0.069
Radio_consumption * misinformation			0.89 (0.79, 1.01)	
Reading * type_news				0.44
Reading * misinformation			1.05 (0.93, 1.18)	

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

Characteristic	Model 1 with main effect		Model 2 with interaction with type of news	
Social_network_use * type_news				0.1
Social_network_use * misinformation			0.88 (0.76, 1.03)	
TV_consumption * type_news				0.91
TV_consumption * misinformation			0.99 (0.87, 1.13)	
Internet_use * type_news				0.71
Internet_use * misinformation			1.04 (0.86, 1.25)	

^aOR = Odds Ratio, CI = Confidence Interval, p-value= Type II Wald chisquare tests

Table 5. Models report

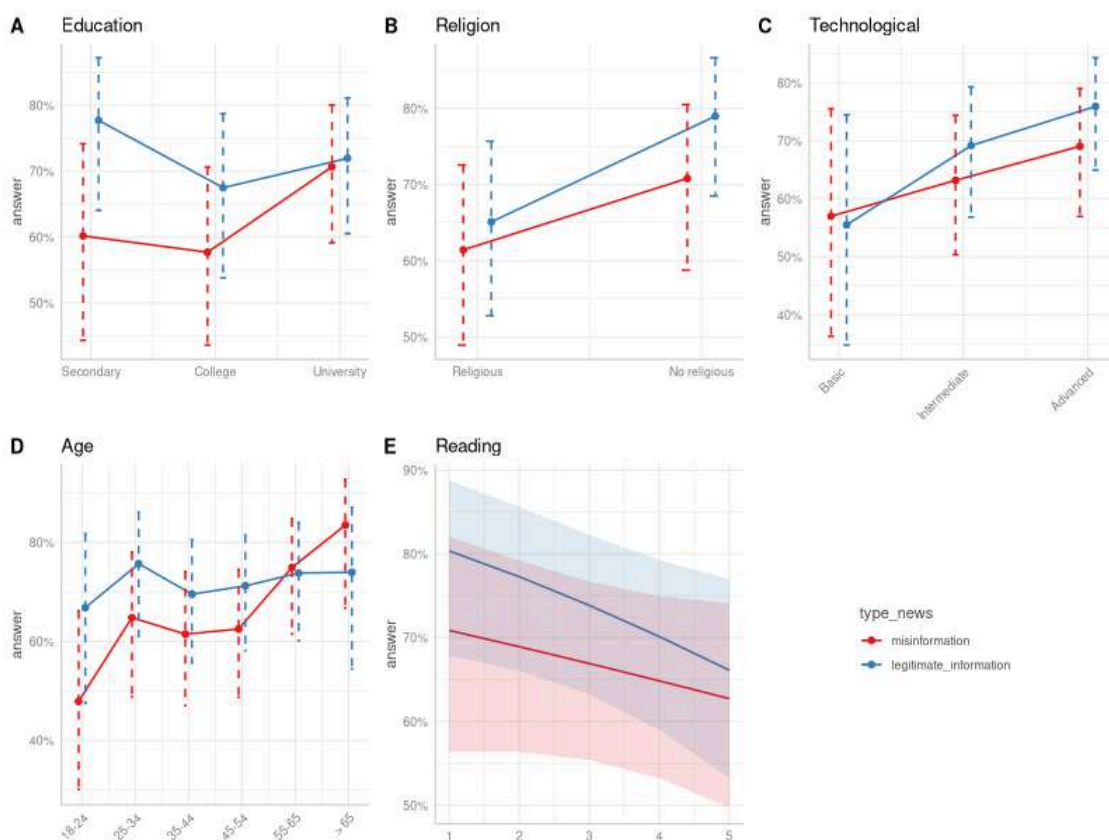


Figure 5. Marginal effects for predictors with significant contribution to the model. The predictions are for the predictor per type of news while holding all other variables at their average value: while.

3.2. ANALYSIS 2: DECISIONAL FACTORS TO PROCESS THE INFORMATION

When a participant judged a piece of news they answered follow-up questions about which aspect of the piece of news they took into account for their decision. In case they considered the news as legitimate or as a dis- misinformation (regardless of them being right), they had different questions asked.

In order to see if there is a difference between the subjects who answered right and the ones who answered wrong at the question on the reported important factors, the dataset is divided in two. One subset includes all the cases of subjects who considered the news as legitimate and the other one includes the subjects who considered the news as misinformation. On each subset, we counted the answers given for each response and counted the total participants who selected at least one of the propositions. Then the proportion of subject who had selected that specific reason was calculated regarding the subset size.

In the case of the subject considering the news as legitimate, when looking within each condition, in both cases, the previous read information is the most often selected justification (43% for the ones who are right and 39% for the subjects who are wrong). It highlights the precondition for each group in their reasoning for their decision process. In second comes the professional style for subject that considers the news as legitimate (29%) and the coherence for the ones who are wrong (25%). Importantly, the professional style seems to induce in error at least 19% of the subject who get the type of news wrong. Results are reported in Table 6 and in Figure 6.

	Right (n=570)	Wrong (n=302)
Previously read the information	43 % (n= 247)	39 % (n= 119)
Professional style	29 % (n= 168)	19 % (n= 57)
Coherent	28 % (n= 160)	25 % (n= 75)
Known media	25 % (n= 141)	18 % (n= 55)
Reliable media	21 % (n= 120)	16 % (n= 48)

IMPACT OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS ON THE ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH LEGITIMATE NEWS FROM MISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

	Right (n=570)	Wrong (n=302)
Source Reliable	14 % (n= 81)	14 % (n= 43)
Same belief	13 % (n= 75)	17 % (n= 51)
Source known	13 % (n= 74)	15 % (n= 45)
Same ideology	5 % (n= 28)	7 % (n= 20)
Other	2 % (n= 10)	3 % (n= 10)

Table 6. Justification when a subject thinks the news is legitimate. The n per column is the number of subjects who selected at least one answer. The percentage for each answer are individually calculated using that n

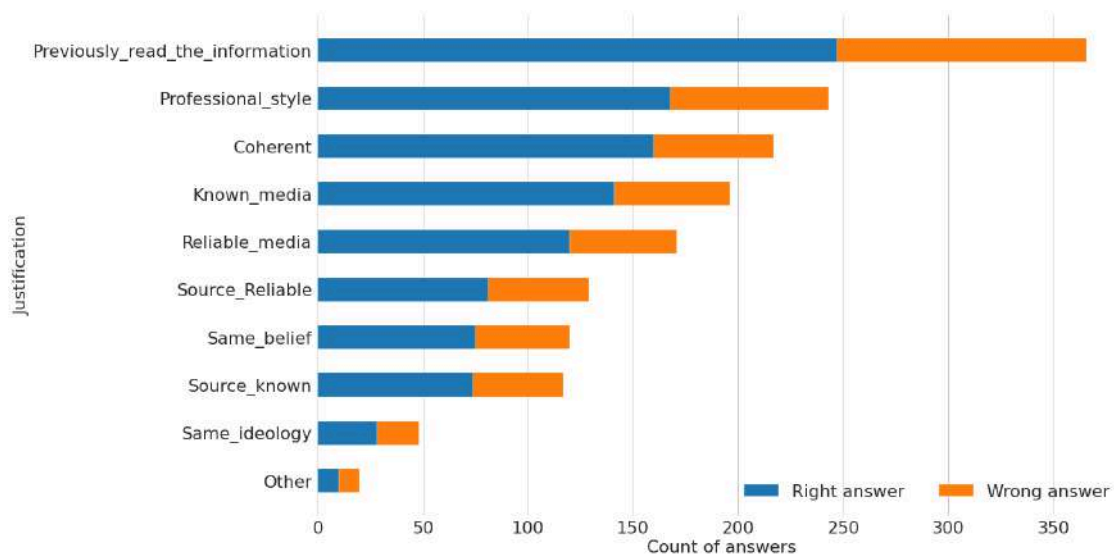


Figure 6. Count for the reason why the subject considered the news as legitimate. The question being multiple choice subject could have chosen more than one answer.

In the case of the subject considering the news as misinformation, the most often cited reason to deem a news as dis- misinformation is the sensationalist headline. 35% of those who are right, but more importantly, 40% of the subjects that are wrongly considering a legitimate news as dis- misinformation as reported in Table 7. It indicates the importance of headlines for information, not only for the importance of dissemination but for the news’s apparent trustworthiness. Other than the headlines, the reliability of the media is important in both case (28% for the correct answers, and 26% for the wrong answer). The rest of the reasons are about the sources of information within the piece of news. Interestingly, the different belief and different ideology does not seem to be an important reason to consider a news as dis- misinformation.

	Right (n=172)	Wrong (n=175)
Headline sensationalist	35 % (n= 60)	40 % (n= 70)
Media unreliable	28 % (n= 49)	26 % (n= 46)
Without sources	21 % (n= 36)	21 % (n= 37)
Source unknown	17 % (n= 30)	20 % (n= 35)
Cited sources unknown	14 % (n= 24)	11 % (n= 20)
Unprofessional style	13 % (n= 23)	19 % (n= 34)
Cited sources unreliable	13 % (n= 22)	17 % (n= 29)
Previously read debunked	13 % (n= 22)	10 % (n= 17)
Different belief	10 % (n= 18)	11 % (n= 20)
Different ideology	9 % (n= 15)	6 % (n= 11)
Image sensationalist	8 % (n= 14)	9 % (n= 16)
No coherent	8 % (n= 13)	11 % (n= 19)

Table 7. Justification when a subject thinks the news is a dis-misinformation. The n per column is the number of subjects who selected at least one answer. The percentage for each answer are individually calculated using that n

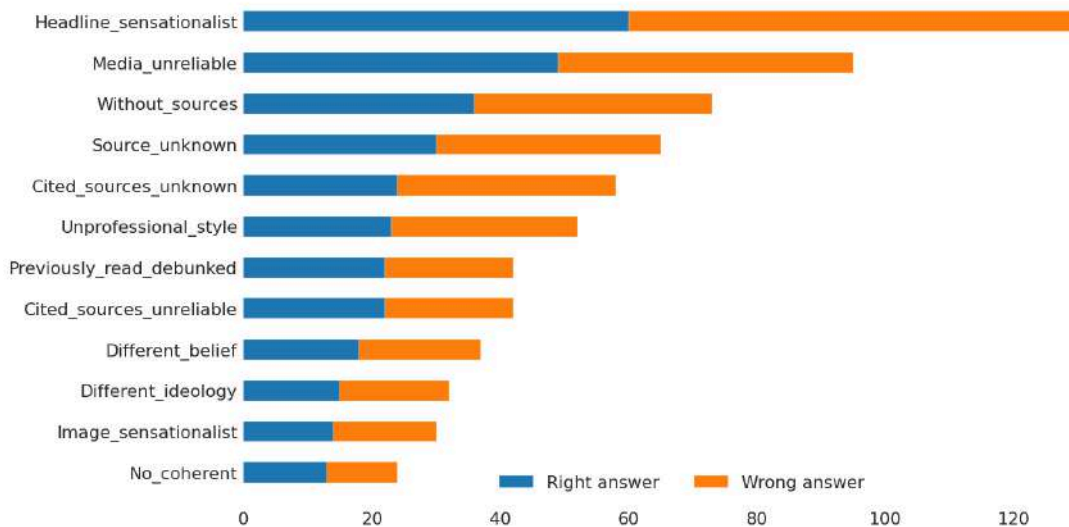


Figure 7. Count for the reason why the subject considered the news as dis-misinformation. The question being multiple choice subject could have chosen more than one answer.

4. DISCUSSION

This experiment studied different socio-demographic factors and media consumption that can differentiate subjects and their ability to discern

misinformation from legitimate information. It was expected to have a higher rate of success in the case of legitimate information and replicate the previous findings in the literature that assert the highest capability of people to discern the truth from dis- misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Despite being better at detecting legitimate information than misinformation, there were no significant differences between the two types of news. Moreover, the interaction with the type of news and the different predictors was not significant. The main problem here is not only that the subjects have difficulties detecting misinformation, but they will also consider legitimate information as false, amplifying the issue of trust overall.

Regarding the socio-demographic factors, the most significant effect found in the models is religion. This is in line with previous research on the impact of religiosity and dis- misinformation (Barua et al., 2020). According to the results, religious belief has a deleterious effect on detecting the type of information in all cases studied.

Religious people and tendency to believe fake news has been proven in past studies (Frenken et al., 2022). It is often linked to the shared political orientation. Religious people are more often associated with right wing and conservatism in the USA (Olson & Green, 2006; Patrikios, 2008), but also in European context (Baptista et al., 2021) which in turn is associated with a stronger tendency to believe in dis- misinformation (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Calvillo et al., 2021). However, the present study did not find any significant impact of ideology to the lack of distinguishing the type of news.

Another explanation that could align better with the current results, is the idea that the analytic cognitive style is shared between religious people and conspirationists. Both lack analytic thinking and may trust dis- misinformation more easily (Bronstein et al., 2019). That framework has the advantage of explaining why religious people are more often wrong regardless of the type of news, however it cannot be tested within the methodology of this experiment. It could be future research to understand the relationship of these variables more deeply.

Education has an impact on correctly identifying the type of news, but less predominant than expected. Education is only a proxy to different types of literacy at play in the fight against dis- misinformation (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). In this context, health literacy is an important factor to take into account. However, as shown in our result, digital literacy alone is a great predictor for detecting the type of news and in line with previous work (McDougall et al., 2019; Phippen et al., 2021; Pilgrim et al., 2019; Reddy et al., 2020).

Age seems to be a more contradictory predictor. Some studies point out the higher risk for older people in face of dis- misinformation with much higher rate of accept it (Loos & Nijenhuis, 2020) and share of it (Brashier & Schacter, 2020), while some others has found it to be the strongest socio-demographic factor to reduce acceptance of dis- misinformation (Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020). This study shows the importance of age but in the direction of old people (over 55 years old) being better at detecting the nature of the news. It is important to note that, while the dis- misinformation often spread through social media, the experiment used full traditional news articles. Similar studies with other formats of information, such as tweets, short videos, forums discussion could revert this relation as the format of how information is disseminated would advantage the population who more often use these new forms of communication, and it is more often the youngest people (Pew Research Center, 2021). For media consumption the results show the more the people read, the less efficient they are to detect the type of news, while any other type of media consumption was not significant. It is a counter-intuitive result but the absence of effect for social media consumption can be explained by the sample, all subjects do use a lot of Internet resources in general and do not allow in our results to distinguish them.

The second phase of the experience was to study which part of the message the subjects were using to make a decision. Previous works have shown that the source of information is important for judging if a news article is legitimate or not (Kim & Dennis, 2018). However, in our studies, even if people often report the source's trustworthiness as important, it does not seem to predict their aptitude to detect the veracity of the information. Sources are important for people to decide if the news is true or not, but it is only in their perception of it rather than

an objective judgement. The source's veracity seems to be more about echo chambers and previous exposition rather than being based on their capacity to detect the type of news, the source information is only informative concerning the subject and what information they believe in the first place (Kim et al., 2019).

The most important aspect is the headlines. It significantly more often chose to be the reason to deem a piece of news is dis- misinformation even if it is not the case. It is in the line of previous studies and the importance of headlines but uncovers important conclusions for professional writers. Often punchy headlines or sensationalist titles, called clickbait (catchy and often misleading title) can be preferred to enhance the virality of the content. While the efficiency of this method is questionable (Mukherjee et al., 2022), it also has a deleterious effect on the perceived veracity of the news. Headlines should be crafted with cautious for not wrongly convincing potential readers that the piece of news is false. It should be used with caution (Denisova, 2022).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In summary, after modelling two multiple levels logistic regressions no difference in the ability to identify between misinformation and legitimate information was found. On the individual factors, education, religion, age, and technological literacy are important predictors for correcting identifying the type of news, while the gender and ideology were inconclusive in both models. Surprisingly, only one significant effect of media consumption has been found: the more people read, the less they are able to discern the type of news. On the message level, people often use the headline and the sources as salient points of information to make a decision (correct or not) and highlight the importance of carefully written headlines. On limitations of this study, future work should abandon the dichotomous nature of misinformation and legitimate information. Besides the issue of deciding the intention of the author of the dis- misinformation (Tandoc et al., 2018), some facts can be uncertain themselves (Krause et al., 2020; Osman et al., 2022). While making the selection of news more difficult, it can be easy to implement a scale rather than a True-False question to participants. An option could be using the same terminology created by different fact-checkers in the

world. The direct advantage would be the ease of using external and verified news, but also studying the complexity of the information landscape. Another point to consider is the interaction between the content of the news and its presentation. While the headlines seem to be an important factor to take into consideration, the present studies did not control that aspect. Presenting the same news but with a different type of headlines could satisfy these requirements and show to which extent it is impacting the trustworthiness of the participants. But previous works have shown that the interaction between headlines and the intention of the reader is more complex in real life. People can share news without reading the content and knowing the information is false but doing so for other motives (Gabriel et al., 2022; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Future work should also be done in studying, not only dis- misinformation but how people are identifying verified news as legitimate or not. The importance is in accentuating the issue about dis- misinformation. It is not only believing in conspiracy but also the distrust in verified news. Broad socio-demographic indicators as used in this study are useful to dress a quick and understandable picture of the potential victim of dis- misinformation, but it is often proxy to a more complex underlying reality. Using more precise framework such as the analytic thinking rather than religion or political orientation and various literacy rather than general literacy and/or education, will provide a better understanding on the different mechanisms that are at play, but also would avoid a partisan bias in the study, but also in its potential interpretation by avoiding any political or religion orientation.

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