BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA

Doctoral School Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising

Doctoral Thesis
- Summary -

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BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA

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Disinformation Countermeasures in the Digital Era. The Role of Media Literacy, Debunking, and Deepfake Awareness

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Introduction

A Global Economic Forum report (World Economic Forum, 2024) states that misinformation and disinformation are assessed as top concerns among experts over the next two years or as short-term risks. While this concern dissipates when it comes to risks foreseen for the next ten years, an assessment where misinformation and disinformation come fifth, the world of the future will very much depend on the actions taken now. The primary reason for these concerns is the potential for misinformation and disinformation to disrupt electoral processes and affect political stability in several areas over the next two years. There are currently pressing elements, namely the increasing levels of distrust in information, media, and governments, which can lead to a polarization of public opinion, and this skepticism on the part of the people can lead to social tensions. At the same time, the report also points to the need for a more effective media and governmental response. Over the next two years, a wide range of actors are expected to take advantage of the spread of synthetic content exacerbating social tensions, ideological violence, and political repression. These consequences will be felt in the long term, far beyond the immediate period of two years (World Economic Forum, 2024). Furthermore, 85% of the population expressed concern about the impact of disinformation (Ipsos & UNESCO, 2023). Today in the digital age, information is disseminated quicker and more widely than ever before.

For thoroughly mapping the phenomenon of disinformation, robust literature has been developed that shows three distinctive approaches, starting from a proactive approach, embodied in the study of the phenomenon of prebunking, which involves inoculating people with small doses of harmless disinformation (Basol et al., 2021; Bertolotti & Catellani, 2023; Boman, 2021; Hameleers, 2024; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Prike & Ecker, 2023; Roozenbeek et al., 2020; Shin, 2024; Shin & Akhtar, 2024; Tay et al., 2022; Traberg et al., 2023; van der Linden, 2023, 2024; van der Linden et al., 2021; Vivion et al., 2022); then debunking, which involves reactive intervention after people have been exposed to false narratives (Ahlborn et al., 2024; Bhargava et al., 2023; Chao et al., 2024; Frau-Meigs & Corbu, 2024; Herrero-Diz et al., 2024; Humprecht, 2020; Kvetanová et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2020; Saldaña & Vu, 2021; Zecchinon & Standaert, 2024); and an algorithmic approach that attempts to automate the process of countering disinformation (Atanasova, 2020; Ernst, 2024; Hsu et al., 2023; Quelle & Bovet,

2024; Stewart, 2021). Although the present thesis also addresses the debunking component, it is more concerned with understanding audiences and perceptions of disinformation in Romania.

Recent publications reveal a crucial distinction between disinformation and non-information, complex phenomena which are increasingly garnering attention from the academic community and the general public. Broda and Strömbäck (2024) identify multiple gaps in research on these phenomena, including the need to test computational methods to detect them and to better understand how they spread through various communication networks. Gelfert (2018) and Lazer et al. (2018) define misinformation and fake news and highlight their harmful consequences and the ways in which they spread. Wardle and Derekshan (2017) also propose a conceptual framework for studying information disorder, distinguished into the categories of mis-, dis-, and malinformation. In addition, Nielsen and Graves (2017) emphasize that the issue of false news is not confined to fake news, but also encompasses substandard journalistic practices and partisanship. Although clarity in addressing misinformation and disinformation is difficult to achieve, a group of scholars coordinated by Van der Linden (American Psychological Association, 2023) propose using the term "disinformation" in a broader sense to capture information manipulation, to highlight the complexity and difficulty of demonstrating the agent's intent to misinform. This highlights the concern for the accuracy and objectivity of the information presented in the report. It also outlines how the veracity of the information can be verified, including by checking facts, comparing with expert or scientific consensus, and identifying specific features of misleading or ambiguous content. This strong attitude is critical in today's world, where access to correct and reliable information is essential for making informed decisions and combatting disinformation.

We operate in an age of increasing deception and manipulation of public opinion, which diminishes the reliability of information and trust in democratic institutions. Social networks are important platforms for dissemination of such content, facilitating rapid access to information and manipulating users' opinions (Dale, 2017; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018). By using algorithms and artificial intelligence, some countries are attempting to limit the spread of manipulative information, but these efforts cannot fully counter the spread of post-truth phenomena (Varol et al., 2017). Another major problem is the perception that "news-finds-me" on social media, which diminishes understanding in case of political issues and increases political apathy (de Zúñiga et al., 2018). These phenomena contribute to the post-truth environment, affecting trust in traditional

news sources and the integrity of democratic processes (Goyanes et al., 2021). In the current context, it is essential to know the risks connected with the spread of disinformation on social media and to adopt successful methods to prevent this problem. An integrated approach is needed, which would include media education, legislative regulation, and the development of technologies to detect and limit manipulative information (Akram et al., 2022; Rubin, 2019).

Acknowledging the gravity of this issue, social media platforms are deemed accountable for counteracting disinformation, necessitating comprehensive policy reforms and self-regulatory measures to mitigate its proliferation (Shu et al., 2020). Disinformation campaigns that exploit identity-driven controversies exhibit resilience against fact-checking endeavors and circulate through adversarial narratives that amplify group grievances (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020). The ramifications of disinformation dissemination extend to the erosion of citizen confidence in democratic institutions, frequently entwined with the agendas of radical right movements and foreign endeavors aimed at destabilizing democracies (Tucker et al., 2018). Scholarly discourse on the subject is witnessing a burgeoning trend, with an increasing focus on unraveling the intricate dynamics of the impact of disinformation on social media, its intricate interplay with political opinions, and its role in shaping psychosocial narratives (Buchanan, 2020).

Within this context, Romania stands as a poignant case study. As a nation transitioning from a tumultuous history of authoritarian rule to a fledgling democracy, Romania grapples with the intricate dynamics of disinformation within its media landscape and societal discourse. Understanding the relevance of investigating disinformation in Romania requires an assessment of its historical context and contemporary challenges. Following the fall of communism in 1989, Romania embarked on a journey of democratization, marked by significant strides towards political and economic liberalization. Against this backdrop, the proliferation of disinformation poses multifaceted threats to Romania's democratic fabric.

Conspiracies are often vehicles for disinformation, undermining public trust and exacerbating social divisions. In the Romanian context, misinformation related to COVID-19 conspiracies negatively influenced vaccine acceptance (Buturoiu, Udrea, Dumitrache, & Corbu, 2021), reduced the impact of restrictions (Corbu et al., 2021), and induced a silencing effect in the population (Corbu, Buturoiu, Frunzaru, & Guiu, 2023). Research indicates a positive correlation between the heightened perception of fake news about COVID-19 and the belief in conspiracy theories. Additionally, uncertainty about the nation's future contributes to greater adherence to

conspiracy narratives and acceptance of false information regarding the pandemic (Bârgăoanu et al., 2021). In addition, another study conducted by Corbu, Bârgăoanu, Udrea, and Gavrilescu (2023) reveals that while conspiracy narratives do not inherently diminish trust in traditional media or social networks, debunking these theories can lead to reduced trust in these media, particularly in online articles and among those who support the theories. Resistance to information that challenges pre-existing beliefs is more significant online than on social media. A study identifies frequent exposure to fake news and education level as key predictors of belief in vaccination-related conspiracy theories, alongside the perceived usefulness of social networks and the degree of religiosity (Buturoiu, Udrea, Oprea, & Corbu, 2021).

There are multiple ways in which this problem of misinformation is being addressed in Romania. There are important researchers who have been professionally involved in counteracting this phenomenon that has escalated (Bârgăoanu, 2018; Bârgăoanu et al., 2021; Buturoiu, Udrea, Dumitrache, & Corbu, 2021; Buturoiu, Udrea, Oprea, & Corbu, 2021; Corbu, Bârgăoanu, Buturoiu, & Ștefăniță, 2020; Corbu, Oprea, Negrea-Busuioc, & Radu, 2020; Corbu et al., 2024; Oprea, 2022). In addition to this direction, there are multiple initiatives for fact-checking and debunking, and complementarily, an increasing number of NGOs that have assumed a significant role: media education. There is a certain fragmentation of these approaches, there are no initiatives that bring together all initiatives for a joint effort. The lack of an integrated national strategy to combat disinformation in Romania has led to a fragmentation of efforts and suboptimal coordination between the various entities involved. This lack of coherence and collaboration could be a starting point for research exploring how these entities could work together more effectively and how a national strategy to combat disinformation could be implemented.

The research gap identified in this thesis consists of analyzing disinformation dynamics in the Romanian context, deeming it not just a localized issue but also representative of broader global tendencies. By diving into the complexity of disinformation within this model, the present research aims to deepen policy discourse, empower civil society stakeholders, and add to the scholarly understanding of information manipulation in the digital era. The lack of research into the demographic composition, attitudes, and susceptibilities of Romanian audiences targeted by disinformation tactics is especially relevant. Understanding the intricacies of audience perceptions and responses is critical to developing effective interventions.

The current thesis emphasizes the importance of evaluating the efficacy of existing solutions used to reduce the impact of disinformation in Romania, including assessments of fact-checking activities, media literacy campaigns, regulatory measures, and technical advances. This study aims to provide practical recommendations for future disinformation interventions by evaluating the success of current techniques and identifying areas for improvement.

Research objectives:

O1. To discern prevalent disinformation strategies, including the effectiveness of fact-checking and media literacy enhancement efforts.

O2. To examine the attitudes and self-perceived competencies of audiences engaged in fact-checking and debunking, shedding light on the correlation between perceived media literacy and the propagation of disinformation.

O3. To delve into the perspectives of young adults regarding the phenomenon of political deepfakes and their implications.

Research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do current fact-checking models effectively combat disinformation, and which innovative strategies can address the emerging challenges in this field?

RQ2: Amidst pervasive skepticism among Internet users, which criteria can be used to distinguish credible sources of information?

RQ3: What role does digital media literacy education play in combating disinformation, and which entities are responsible for delivering this education effectively?

RQ4: How do individuals engaged in fact-checking and debunking perceive their capacity to effectively discern and combat disinformation?

RQ5: What are the primary determinants of individuals' susceptibility to propagate disinformation?

RQ6: How do audiences perceive and react to the emergence of political deepfakes, and what implications does this have for societal trust and political discourse?

In addition, a number of ***hypotheses*** were developed to better understand the audience interested in consuming newsletter journalism that publishes debunked news.

H1. There is a positive association between the concerns with fake news and the frequency of reading the debunking newsletter and perspective change on topics.

H2. There is a positive association between the frequency of reading the debunking newsletter and perspective change on topics.

H3. Sharing news that proved to be fake after consulting the newsletter is associated with a) critical openness and b) reflective skepticism.

H4. The self-perceived ability to detect fake news is influenced by a) concerns with fake news, b) frequency of reading the debunking newsletter, c) belief in science, d) critical openness, and e) reflective skepticism.

The current thesis is structured into eight chapters, five of which are based on fundamental theories in the field of disinformation, one chapter focuses on the methodological approach, one chapter presents the research results, and the final chapter focuses on conclusions, practical and theoretical implications, limitations, and future research recommendations. The opening chapter explores the issue of misinformation in the online environment, looking at the concept of fake news, conspiracy theories, and the contribution of artificial intelligence in propagating and countering misinformation. The definition given by Lazer et al. (2018) to describe the mechanism of fake news and the concept proposed by Wardle and Derakshan (2017) of mis-, dis- and malinformation are presented. The taxonomy of misinformation developed by Tandoc et al. (2017) provides a detailed deconstruction of this phenomenon, and recent research shows how artificial intelligence can be used for both the detection and propagation of misinformation (Buțincu & Alexandrescu, 2023; Diez-Gracia et al., 2023; Mega, 2023; Menz et al., 2023; Monteith et al., 2024; Montoro-Montarroso et al., 2023; Pastor-Galindo et al., 2023; Repede & Brad, 2023; Santos, 2023; Spitale et al., 2023). It also explores the link between disinformation and conspiracy theories, with references to Karl Popper's work (2013), and their impact on public trust in institutions and exacerbation of social divisions. Studies reveal that misinformation related to the

COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in vaccine-related doubts and in diminishing the impact of restrictions, highlighting the importance of counteracting this phenomenon for public health and societal stability (Bârgăoanu et al., 2021; Buturoiu, Udrea, Dumitrache, & Corbu, 2021; Buturoiu, Udrea, Oprea, & Corbu, 2021; Corbu et al., 2021; Corbu, Bârgăoanu, Udrea, & Gavrilescu, 2023; Corbu, Buturoiu, Frunzaru, & Guiu, 2023). In a similar manner, the first chapter highlights cultural and social resistance to HPV vaccination in Romania (Jiboc et al., 2023), as well as the psychological effects of exposure to misinformation (Kollár, 2022; Song et al., 2021; Springer & Özdemir, 2022).

The second chapter examines the prebunking method as a proactive strategy to combat disinformation. Boman's (2021) study compares the effectiveness of prebunking strategies with debunking and strategic silence, finding that prebunking, especially in combination with autonomy support and explicit details, is more effective in minimizing reputational damage and social amplification compared to the other strategies. Prebunking also decreases the credibility of the attacking organization and increases the credibility of the attacked organization. In addition, the emergence of technology has transformed the way we interact with the news, making us susceptible to exposure to misinformation. A study conducted by Musi et al. (2023) presents a comprehensive list of tools needed to learn critical thinking and apply prebunking strategies. The study also presents two AI chatbots designed to teach citizens how to avoid, create, or recognize misinformation. *Fakey*, one of these games, is designed to improve media literacy and combat misinformation. Micallef et al. (2021) show that the said game led to significant improvements in recognizing credible and non-credible news sources. *NewsWise*, another media literacy program, generated a positive impact in understanding news and increasing attention to fact-checking; *GoViral*! and *Get Bad News* are other game examples that use inoculation techniques to aid users in recognizing and resisting misinformation. This chapter reveals relevant literature which shows that media education and the use of gamification can be effective tools in the fight against misinformation, training individuals to identify and reject false information.

The third chapter investigates debunking and debunking platforms in Romania. According to Graves and Cherubini's (2016) classification, fact-checking approaches fall into two models: the newsroom model and the non-governmental model. In Romania, the non-governmental model is the most prominent, aiming to strengthen democratic institutions and enjoying more editorial

freedom. There are three fact-checking initiatives in Romania: *veridica.ro, factual.ro,* and *afp.verificat.ro,* designed to check the veracity of claims and correct misinformation. *Veridica* is a platform specialized in monitoring and combating disinformation campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe. The project is led by the International Alliance of Romanian Journalists and supported by non-governmental organizations, diplomatic representatives and corporate sponsors. Factual is the first fact-checking platform in Romania, monitoring public statements by politicians and aiming to present accurate information in a noisy media environment. The project is implemented by the *Funky Citizens Association*, and funding comes from donations by the volunteer team, donations from readers, and grant-funded projects. *AFP Verificat* originally started in France and has since expanded to over 80 countries, including Romania. The team is transparent and can be verified on the *AFP Verificat* fact-checking service website. The service is also linked to Facebook news verification, Romania becoming the eighth EU country to adopt the service. These initiatives are essential in the fight against disinformation, but there are limits to the fact-checking model. The process needs to be fast, and time pressure can affect the effectiveness of verification. The chapter also stresses the distinction between fact-checking and news verification in the newsroom, as misinformation can have damaging effects even after it has reached the public domain.

Chapter four explores the complex interplay between artificial intelligence (AI) and journalism, highlighting the potential for collaboration, challenges, and ethical implications. The section highlights the role of AI in transforming newsrooms through tools that simplify complex tasks and offer new insights and critically examines concerns about bias, loss of journalistic depth, and ethical considerations. The study examines the multifaceted contribution of AI to the dynamics of misinformation, from sentiment analysis to deepfake challenges. It highlights the need for continued research, multidisciplinary collaboration, and a responsible approach to integrating AI into journalism, noting the importance of maintaining ethical standards, transparency, and the values of accuracy, authenticity, and public enlightenment.

Collaboration between humans and machines in the creative industries is a crucial theme addressed in Marconi's (2020) optimistic view of AI as a partner for journalists, instead of an opponent. However, the current reality in journalism highlights concerns about slowdowns, staff shortages, and demanding work cultures. Marconi (2020) presents AI as a tool that can guide

journalists to new perspectives but stresses the need for ethical, editorial, and economical use of these tools. However, critics point to the limitations of AI technology in understanding emotional or contextual subtleties, suggesting that over-reliance on AI-generated insights can lead to errors and bias. In addition, questions are raised about whether AI-generated content can have the same depth and human touch as traditional journalism, and the focus on cost savings and abundance of content may raise questions about the veracity and accuracy of news stories.

The final theoretical chapter of this work investigates the impact of visuals in the age of artificial intelligence, focusing on the phenomenon of deepfake and the challenges it poses to visual literacy. The *deepfake* phenomenon, a term introduced in 2017 by a Reddit user of the same name, has captured the public's attention with the proliferation of pornographic content altered using face-changing technology (Somers, 2020). Although the term is relatively recent, the principles behind deepfake can be found in older technologies such as Adobe Photoshop, which revolutionized image editing in the 1980s. This evolved technological context has led to a democratization of visual manipulation, with apps such as Snapchat and Facetune allowing easy image editing directly from smartphones (Swerzenski, 2021).

The major issue raised by technological evolution in visual manipulation is related to visual literacy. In a world where visual manipulation is ubiquitous, traditional approaches to visual text literacy become obsolete. Rather than simply labeling images as 'real or fake,' visual literacy education requires an understanding of the processes behind images and the development of a critical and analytical approach (Messaris, 1994). In addition, deepfakes, using artificial intelligence, and machine learning, pose major societal dangers, including the dissemination of false information and the erosion of trust in the media (Kietzmann, Lee, McCarthy, & Kietzmann, 2020). They can have a significant impact on areas such as advertising, politics, and personal identity.

The methodological chapter and the findings chapter are centered around the three studies and breaks down how they will be employed in order to answer the six research questions. The first study delves into the perceptions of media **experts regarding the efficacy of current fact-checking models and strategies to counter disinformation.** Additionally, it examines the definition of credible sources amidst widespread skepticism among internet users, particularly within the Romanian context. The study also **investigates expert perspectives on the roles and**

responsibilities in digital and media literacy education. The research employed in the first study addresses the first three research questions. The second study scrutinizes the engagement patterns of subscribers to the *Misreport* Newsletter, answering research questions four and five. It assesses subscribers' perceived media literacy and its correlation with the dissemination of fake news, as well as the factors influencing media literacy. Furthermore, the study explores the relationship between belief in science, conspiracy beliefs, and media literacy. The third study ventures into the realm of deepfakes, tackling the final research question by probing participants' thoughts on the extent of the problem, the balance between fascination and concern, visions of the future in light of political deepfakes, and the identification of prevalent ideal types in the data.

Methodology Summary

To explore the phenomenon of disinformation and emerging technologies, a multifaceted research approach was adopted. This study comprises three interconnected studies utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the misinformation landscape in Romania.

The study aims to identify prevalent disinformation strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of fact-checking and media literacy efforts. It also assesses the attitudes and self-perceived competencies of audiences engaged in fact-checking, correlating media literacy with disinformation spread. Additionally, it investigates young adults' perceptions of political deepfakes and their societal implications. Key research questions include evaluating the effectiveness of current fact-checking models, identifying criteria for distinguishing credible sources, understanding the role of digital media literacy in combating disinformation, assessing perceptions of fact-checkers on their abilities, determining the primary factors influencing susceptibility to disinformation, and exploring audience reactions to political deepfakes.

A combination of expert interviews and surveys was employed to address these questions. Expert interviews were conducted to gain insights into disinformation strategies and the efficacy of fact-checking models. These semi-structured interviews allowed experts to provide detailed perspectives, enhancing the understanding of the disinformation phenomenon. To examine the self-perceived attitudes and skills of the public involved in debunking false information, and to investigate young adults' perspectives on political deepfakes, surveys were utilized. These surveys

included both closed and open-ended questions, collecting quantitative data and qualitative insights.

The data collection and analysis processes were rigorous and systematic. Expert interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed using both automated and manual methods to ensure accuracy. Pre-interview briefings were held to inform participants about the study's objectives and to obtain informed consent, ensuring confidentiality. The interviews, guided by a semi-structured format, facilitated in-depth discussions on various aspects of misinformation.

Survey data was collected from subscribers of a debunking newsletter, with responses gathered via Qualtrics. The survey aimed to understand participants' attitudes towards science, conspiracies, and critical thinking, as well as their engagement with fake news. Participants' engagement with the Misreport Newsletter and general news, as well as their susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs and trust in science, were assessed using established measurement scales. Qualitative data from expert interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This involved familiarization with the data through repeated review of transcripts, generating initial codes through both deductive and inductive approaches, identifying and refining themes through constant comparison, and synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative. The analysis revealed key themes related to the origins and spread of disinformation, the impact of disinformation on society, the current state of media literacy, governmental responses and policies, and media ethics and integrity.

This comprehensive methodological framework enabled an in-depth exploration of disinformation, providing valuable insights for policy interventions, technological innovations, and public awareness efforts. Through the combination of expert interviews and surveys, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the disinformation phenomenon in Romania

Findings

The study addressed three critical research questions, providing nuanced insights into the effectiveness of fact-checking models, criteria for distinguishing credible sources, and the role of digital media literacy education in combating disinformation.

Research Question 1: To what extent do current fact-checking models effectively combat disinformation, and which innovative strategies can address the emerging challenges in this field?

The findings reveal varied perspectives among experts regarding the efficacy of current fact-checking models in combating disinformation. Many experts expressed skepticism about the immediate impact of fact-checking efforts, citing low engagement levels and minimal click-through rates on fact-checks. This skepticism highlights the short-term challenges in motivating audiences to verify information thoroughly and in altering entrenched perspectives swiftly. However, some experts were optimistic about the medium to long-term potential of fact-checking, emphasizing public awareness and education's role in fostering critical information consumption. Sustained efforts in raising public awareness of misinformation dangers and promoting fact-checking resources, along with cultivating critical thinking skills from an early age, were deemed essential for long-term efficacy. Challenges in implementing effective fact-checking mechanisms were noted, including concerns about governmental overreach and the need for safeguards to preserve information integrity. The concept of "prebunking" emerged as a proactive strategy to counter misinformation before it spreads. Integration with journalistic practices was emphasized, suggesting accurate information dissemination and collaborative integration of fact-checking within journalistic workflows. These perspectives indicate that while immediate effects of fact-checking are uncertain, its long-term success relies on multifaceted interventions, including education and seamless integration within journalism.

Research Question 2: Amidst pervasive skepticism among Internet users, which criteria can be used to distinguish credible sources of information?

The study explored expert opinions on distinguishing credible sources amidst pervasive skepticism among internet users, particularly in Romania. Transparency and accountability within newsrooms were highlighted as critical indicators of credibility. Experts stressed the importance of discerning ownership structures, funding sources, and editorial practices to enhance trustworthiness. Visibility of editorial teams was also considered a hallmark of journalistic integrity, helping consumers gauge the reliability of news sources based on demonstrated professionalism and expertise. Media literacy emerged as a pivotal tool in empowering consumers to evaluate source credibility effectively. Techniques such as lateral reading and metadata analysis were identified as

essential in discerning the veracity of information. The proliferation of alternative news platforms and the omnipresence of political bias in the media landscape were acknowledged as challenges, necessitating vigilance in discerning credible sources. Experts emphasized the importance of integrating evidence-based approaches and academic literature into media consumption practices, particularly in fields like medical communication. Recognizing the subjective nature of trust, experts called for rigorous assessment grounded in journalistic principles and ethical standards. By prioritizing transparency, balanced representation of viewpoints, and adherence to professional standards, media outlets can foster trust and credibility among diverse audiences.

Research Question 3: What role does digital media literacy education play in combating disinformation, and which entities are responsible for delivering this education effectively?

Experts provided critical insights into the role of digital media literacy education and the identification of responsible stakeholders. The importance of media literacy across various age groups was underscored, with concerns about the limited scope and depth of media literacy education in schools. Challenges such as inadequate teacher training and resistance to integrating technology into education were identified, highlighting a significant gap in addressing the needs of diverse demographics.

Opinions varied on the stakeholders responsible for media literacy education, ranging from government ministries to NGOs and experienced individuals in media and disinformation. Some advocated for the Ministry of Education to integrate media literacy into formal curricula, while others emphasized the role of NGOs and international experts. A consensus emerged on the need for coordinated efforts among diverse stakeholders to address systemic gaps effectively. The gap between existing media literacy initiatives and comprehensive integration into formal education systems was noted, with a call for a centralized approach to media literacy education.

Educational strategies suggested include integrating media literacy across various subjects and fostering critical thinking skills through interdisciplinary approaches. However, concerns persist about the outdated nature of the education system and the need for comprehensive reforms to promote critical thinking from an early age. Rapid technological advancements further complicate efforts to align educational content with current technologies. Challenges identified include resistance to change, inadequate teacher training, and the complexity of addressing disinformation and misinformation. A sustained effort beyond short-term interventions is necessary to align

educational content with technological advancements and effectively educate students about media literacy.

RQ4: How do individuals engaged in fact-checking and debunking perceive their capacity to effectively discern and combat disinformation

The study uncovered several significant insights into the behavior and attitudes of subscribers to the Misreport newsletter and their interaction with disinformation and fake news. Social media emerged as a crucial platform for disseminating the Misreport newsletter, significantly contributing to its awareness among subscribers. Many subscribers expressed concerns about false information and a desire for reliable news, indicating a committed readership. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the critical role of newsletters in connecting with audiences and serving as an additional revenue stream.

RQ5: What are the primary determinants of individuals' susceptibility to propagate disinformation?

A notable finding was the negative correlation between subscribers' self-perceived ability to detect fake news and their concerns about fake news. This suggests a complex understanding of disinformation among the newsletter audience. While subscribers generally assessed their ability to distinguish fake news accurately, studies indicate that social media literacy can reduce the spread of false news. The findings showed that critical thinking, manifested as critical openness and reflective skepticism, is associated with the self-reflected practice of reassessing previously shared fake news. Data analysis revealed that belief in science, critical openness, and reflective skepticism positively influenced the self-perceived ability to detect fake news. Conversely, concerns about fake news and the frequency of reading the debunking newsletter did not significantly predict this ability. These findings highlight the importance of critical thinking skills in enhancing one's capacity to identify fake news.

RQ6: How do audiences perceive and react to the emergence of political deepfakes, and what implications does this have for societal trust and political discourse?

Public perceptions of satirical deepfakes of politicians were also analyzed. Participants frequently recognized the fake nature of satirical deepfake videos, often citing technical flaws and implausible content. Emotions ranged from concern about the societal implications of deepfakes to amusement, reflecting diverse responses. Participants generally expressed confidence in their ability to discern deepfakes but acknowledged the broader societal impact, emphasizing the need for vigilance and awareness. The study identified three ideal types in relation to perceptions of deepfakes: skeptical realists, tech-savvy optimists, and happy campers. Skeptical realists approached deepfakes with caution, emphasizing the need for media literacy interventions. Tech-savvy optimists viewed AI-generated content positively but remained vigilant about potential misuse. Happy campers were indifferent to deepfake technology, perceiving it as just another form of content.

Conclusion

This thesis provides a comprehensive examination of misinformation in Romania, focusing on the effectiveness of fact-checking and the complex landscape of misinformation dissemination. The analysis reveals that while fact-checking is seen as limited in the short term due to users' reluctance to engage deeply and verify sources, it holds promise for long-term effectiveness through public awareness and education. This aligns with literature suggesting that media education and critical thinking development are crucial for reducing misinformation susceptibility (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Vraga & Tully, 2019). Participants underscored the need for stricter policies from social media platforms and transparency to maintain information integrity (Tucker et al., 2018). Misinformation's profound implications for social cohesion, trust in democratic institutions, and public health are echoed in existing research (Van der Linden et al., 2017), with participants noting how anti-European and populist narratives exacerbate societal polarization (Benkler et al., 2018).

The thesis also explored the multifaceted interactions between fake news concerns, debunking efforts, and perceived ability to detect misinformation. Unlike other studies suggesting a direct link between accurate information exposure and fake news detection (Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Shahzad & Khan, 2022), this research indicates that psychological and cognitive factors play a more significant role. Notably, an overconfidence bias was observed among those with high confidence in science, potentially underestimating misinformation's complexity (Lyons et al., 2021; Serra-Garcia & Gneezy, 2021). The findings advocate for educational interventions that

foster reflective skepticism and critical openness to improve misinformation detection (Amaral et al., 2020; Da San Martino et al., 2020).

Regarding deepfakes, the thesis reveals diverse public responses, with significant concern about their potential to undermine social trust and political discourse (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Floridi, 2020). Participants exhibited varying attitudes towards deepfakes, emphasizing the need for tailored media education and regulatory measures (Diakopoulos & Johnson, 2020). The thesis recommends a holistic approach, combining technological advancements in detection tools with educational initiatives to cultivate healthy skepticism and critical thinking among media users.

Limitations

The thesis's limitations include a relatively small sample size, limiting the representativeness of the findings, and a cross-sectional design that does not capture changes over time. The reliance on self-reported data introduces subjectivity and potential biases. Additionally, the varying definitions and perceptions of deepfakes across different contexts may influence the results. The lack of in-depth exploration of demographic or cultural differences in risk perception further limits the applicability of the findings.

Recommendations

To address these limitations, future research should adopt longitudinal designs and use larger, more diverse samples. Combining self-reported data with qualitative methods can provide deeper insights and validate findings. Research should also explore deepfake definitions and perceptions across various cultural and social contexts to identify specific needs and vulnerabilities. Investigating demographic or cultural variations in risk perception can help tailor strategies to specific populations. Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential to fully understand the impact of misinformation and develop effective solutions.

Further Recommendations

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of deepfake exposure and the effectiveness of intervention strategies. Comparing perceptions and responses to deepfakes in different cultural and political contexts can reveal significant variations. Developing and evaluating educational interventions to foster critical thinking and media literacy is crucial. Policymakers should consider

legislative measures to penalize the creation and distribution of digitally manipulated content and mandate social media platforms to identify and report fake content. Public awareness campaigns are essential to inform citizens about the risks of misinformation and how to identify fake content. Technology specialists should continue to improve deepfake detection technologies, and interdisciplinary collaborations should be encouraged to address the complexities of digital disinformation.

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