

TITLE OF PHD THESIS: Fake news and the third-person effect: a contextualization on the ability to detect fake news and the vulnerability of opinion stability when faced with them

Coordinator: Univ. Prof. Dr. Nicoleta CORBU

Author: Alexandru-Cristian DUMITRACHE

Summary:

Since ancient times, various techniques mass persuasion have been used to achieve multiple objectives, especially for political, military or economic reasons (Thomson, 1977). Along with the technological development of society, these techniques have taken various forms, becoming more and more advanced and effective. In 2016, the popularity of the term fake news has grown rapidly, a phenomenon congruent with two significant events of recent history: United Kingdom's exit from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America, considered to be an outcome of disinformation's influence on the population as well.

There have been numerous attempts at defining (Gelfert, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017; Rini, 2017; Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020) and typologizing the concept of fake news. The European Commission's High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (2018, pp. 10–11) advocates the use of the term disinformation, fake news being a concept that can encompass many aspects related to the online environment and also tendentially used by various political leaders. Although the present paper supports, at a technical level, the very clear differentiation between the mentioned concepts, for cursivity and as a result of the popularity of the term, the term fake news is mainly used within this paper.

Starting from the idea that people tend to consider themselves less vulnerable to negative effects of the media compared to others, Davison introduces, in 1983, the concept of the third person effect. Studied, over time, in relation to multiple types of phenomena, it was concluded that this effect can generate behavioural changes as well, not just perceptual.

Similar to a relatively developed but still limited body of academic literature (Baek et al., 2019; Buturoiu et al., 2020; J. Cheng et al., 2021; Y. Cheng & Chen, 2020; Y. Cheng & Luo, 2020; Chung & Kim, 2021; Corbu et al., 2021; Hong, 2020; Landrum & Olshansky, 2020; T. Lee, 2021; T. Lee et al., 2022; Liu & Huang, 2020; Mena, 2020 ; Talwar et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021; F. Yang & Horning, 2020; J. Yang & Tian, 2021), the present paper is an analysis of the third person effect in relation to fake news.

This type of analysis has a particularly important relevance as it contributes to an in-depth understanding on the effects of fake news, and especially on how they are perceived. Given that 2024 represents a year with a record number of elections at global level, and also considering that fake news is a threat to democracy, a detailed understanding of how individuals relate to fake news can contribute to better preparedness against the spread of disinformation.

Therefore, the main objective of the paper is to identify whether, among a convenience sample of young students from the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations within the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration and the Faculty of Geography within the University of Bucharest (N=1079), the existence of the third person effect is confirmed in relation to fake news' ability to influence young people's opinions and to young people's ability to identify fake news. In order to be able to understand how the third person effect varies, it was also important to analyse the elements that could have the role of predictors of the intensity of the effect, as well as whether there are elements that could be influenced by the third person effect. Thus, a series of eight sub-objectives was drafted, which analyses the existence of the third person effect in the previously mentioned contexts, namely the potential of interest in politics, political knowledge, news consumption, perceived exposure to fake news, intention to use fact-checking methods and critical thinking to influence the third-person effect, as well as the effect's potential to influence young people's intention to go to vote. Each sub-objective is subscribed to a set of two hypotheses, one for each context the third person effect is analysed within this paper.

Thus, the structure of the thesis begins with a first section dedicated to the theoretical analysis of the two major concepts envisaged: fake news and the third person effect. The first theoretical sub-chapter aims to analyse the fake news concept, starting from the origins of the phenomenon and the methods used for mass persuasion throughout history, followed by a presentation of the theoretical delimitations of the concept (diversity of definitions, particularities of the concept and typologies), an analysis of the effects and moderators of fake news, as well as a presentation of existing ways to combat fake news. The second theoretical sub-chapter aims to analyse the the third person effect in the context of disinformation, starting with the chronological milestones of the third person effect, the components of the third person effect, a presentation of its predictors and moderators, concluding with an analysis of the studies focused on the third-person effect in relation to fake news.

From a practical point of view, the present thesis aims to analyse whether the 16 hypotheses are confirmed within the sample, using the statistical data obtained from a questionnaire applied to 1076 students, which have been used in bivariate or multivariate

analyses. After the detailed presentation of the methodology considered in the thesis, as well as of the research objectives and hypotheses, the second section of the thesis aims to present the analysis of the obtained data, as well as its interpretation.

Similar to previously published academic articles, this sample also confirms the existence of the third person effect, both in relation to fake news' ability to influence young people's opinions and to young people's ability to identify fake news

Therefore, one of the main conclusions of the present research is that, within the analysed sample as well, young people will consider their opinions being influenced by fake news to a lesser extent than their close friends, and especially than people in general. Similarly, the same young individuals will consider themselves as significantly better at distinguishing between real and fake news than close others and especially distant others.

An element of novelty also consists in the identification of elements that could influence or be influenced by the third person effect in the previously mentioned contexts. According to the statistical data resulting from the analyses that identify direct correlations between two variables but also from the regression models that bring together all the elements that could have the role of a predictor of the third person effect, with one exception (young people's level of news consumption), all the variables considered in the paper influence, totally or partially, at least one of the two contexts in which the third person effect is analysed.

Interest in politics is confirmed as a predictor of the third-person effect only in the context of young people's ability to identify fake news. Although this result could also be influenced by a general lack of interest of young people in politics, it can be argued that the more interested a young person is in politics, the more that person will consider that close others and especially distant others will be less able to distinguish between real and fake news. However, this result comes strictly from the Pearson-type correlations between the two variables, no influence of this predictor being identified in the regression models.

A young person's political knowledge level influences the third-person effect on both fake news' ability to influence young people's opinions (by referring to close others and distant others), as well as in the case of young people's ability to identify fake news (only in the case of distant others). Although Pearson correlations did not identify direct correlations between the variables, the regression models confirm that a young person's level of political knowledge is a predictor of the third person effect. Therefore, an identified reasoning shows that the more political knowledge a young person possesses, the more that individual will consider close others and especially distant others to be more vulnerable to fake news. Also, the same young individuals will find that they are better able to identify fake news compared to distant others.

Young individuals' news consumption level is the only element envisaged by the present paper as a potential predictor of the third person effect in the case of which no correlation could be identified, both as a result of the Spearman correlation analysis, as well as within the regression models.

Perceived exposure of young people to fakes news is a predictor of the third person effect only regarding young people's ability to identify fake news. This results from both Spearman's correlation analysis and from the regression models. Therefore, it can be concluded that when a young person believes that he/she is more exposed to fake news, he/she will perceive more acutely that close others are less able to identify fake news, also considering that distant others have an even lower ability to distinguish between real and fake news.

Regarding young people's intention to use fact-checking methods, both Pearson correlations and regression models demonstrate that this variable is a predictor of the third-person effect on young people's ability to identify fake news only when referring to distant others, not close others.

The level of critical thinking is also a predictor of the third-person effect on fake news' ability to influence young people's opinions (related to distant others) and regarding young people's ability to detect fake news (close others and distant others).

According to the regression models, in the case of the third-person effect regarding fake news' ability to influence young people's opinions, when referring to close others, the most influential predictor is young individuals' political knowledge level, followed by religiosity, (where a negative correlation is identified). Things are similar when referring to distant others,, except that the model reveals the existence of the level of critical thinking as the most influential predictor.

In the case of the third-person effect regarding young people's ability to identify fake news, when referring to close others, the most influential predictor is religiosity (negative correlation), followed by the level of critical thinking and the perceived exposure to fake news, both of which are positively correlated. Things are different when referring to distant others, with level of critical thinking being the most influential predictor, followed by the level of perceived exposure to fake news, the level of the intention to use fact-checking methods, religiosity, and level of political knowledge.

The only element considered as potentially influenced by the third person effect young people's intention to go to vote. Only Pearson correlations confirm that there is a correlation between the third-person effect on young people's ability to identify fake news (both close others and distant others) and their intention to vote. Therefore, another novel element of this

paper is the reasoning that the more a young person believes that he/she is more capable than close others and especially distant others to identify fake news, the more he/she will feel more motivated to vote. Hence, the perceived vulnerability of other people not being able to identify fakes news is a motivating factor for young individuals to exercise their right to vote.

Therefore, regarding the third person effect in relation to fake news' ability to influence young people's opinions, positive correlations have been identified suggesting that the effect is influenced by young individuals' level of political knowledge (both close and distant others) and their level of critical thinking (only in relation to distant others).

At the same time, regarding the third person effect in relation to young people's ability to identify fake news, positive correlations have been identified suggesting that the effect is influenced by young individuals' level of interest in politics (both close and distant others), the level of political knowledge (only in relation to distant others), the level of perceived exposure to fake news (both close and distant others), the level of intention to use fact-checking methods of facts (only in relation to distant others) and the level of critical thinking (both close and distant others).

The relevance of this study lies precisely in the topicality of the theme and the importance of its understanding in the context of disinformation as a threat to democracy. Fake news spreads through people and can have irreversible effects. Understanding how people in general and young people in particular are affected by fake news is a particularly important element, especially in the context of 2024 when, in addition to the European elections, elections are held in more than 64 countries around the world (Koh, 2023). In this sense, it becomes important to understand what are the elements that lead young people to consider other young people more vulnerable to fake news, but also if this perception leads them to be more willing to go to vote.