



National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration  
Multidisciplinary Doctoral School  
Communication Studies

## **Summary**

A generational approach to countering disinformation

Scientific supervisors: prof. univ. dr. Grigore Georgiu  
prof. univ. dr. Loredana Ivan

Author: Elena-Alexandra Dumitru

**Bucharest, 2024**

## Summary

The era we live in is marked by technology and the profound changes it brings to various aspects of individual and social life. We often refer to this period as the “digital age” or the “technology era”, and discussions about the present frequently emphasize digitalization, as it has ushered in a paradigm shift in communication and information processes in recent history. New digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the way we live and have introduced unprecedented opportunities across most sectors. However, digital technologies have also generated significant challenges, which continue to evolve alongside technological advancements. One such challenge is the phenomenon of fake news.

The term “fake news” gained global popularity in 2016, closely associated with the political events of that year, during which various public figures used it as a political tool to undermine their opponents’ opinions. However, experts argue that the term is inadequate, primarily because a simple true/false classification does not sufficiently capture the full spectrum of today’s informational disorders. Bârgăoanu (2018, p. 137) points out that “fake news are not always false and not always news”. Consequently, recent research distinguishes between different types of fake news, with disinformation and misinformation being the most relevant to this study. The High-Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation defines disinformation as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit”, while misinformation refers to “misleading or inaccurate information shared by individuals who do not recognize it as such” (HLEG, 2018, p. 10).

Disinformation is not a new or digital-specific issue, but it can be rather argued that it is a phenomenon intrinsic to humanity. Throughout history, people have used false or manipulated information to influence opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. What has changed with the integration of new information and communication technologies into everyday life is the speed and ease with which information, regardless of its quality, is disseminated. The digital environment, especially social media, has provided a platform through which any individual, regardless of expertise or intent, can share information on a global scale. “From here on, things get more complicated as we enter what [the author calls] disinformation 2.0, the new-generation disinformation” (Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 139).

Today's informational ecosystem is more fragile than ever, and disinformation has played a key role in its erosion. This has prompted researchers to pay close attention to studying the phenomenon's effects on individuals' lives (Buturoiu et al., 2023; Corbu et al., 2020) and on societies (Bârgăoanu, 2018; Bârgăoanu & Radu, 2018; Kapantai et al., 2021). At individual level, the effects of disinformation include confusion, doubt about trustworthy sources and information, actions taken based on previously encountered disinformation (Buturoiu et al., 2023, p. 126), as well as cynicism and alienation leading to the formation of distorted political perceptions (Guess et al., 2020). Research shows that most people are unable to identify disinformation but exhibit the third-person effect – they tend to exaggerate its impact on others while underestimating its effects on themselves (Ștefăniță et al., 2018). Researchers have expressed deep concern about the social effects of disinformation, particularly because it poses various threats to democracy. At a societal level, disinformation erodes trust in media institutions, polarizes society, influences political election outcomes, fosters pseudoscience and medical disasters, and impacts the economy (Buturoiu et al., 2023; Kapantai et al., 2021).

The severe effects on both individuals and societies have led experts to focus closely on counteracting disinformation. Researchers and public institutions have proposed numerous solutions. In this paper, I propose the following classification of measures to combat disinformation: (1) educational measures, (2) legislative measures, (3) technological measures, and (4) quality journalism. Through this doctoral research, I aim to analyze the effectiveness of these measures from a generational perspective. Studies testing individuals' ability to recognize fake news have shown alarming results across children and adolescents (Domonoske, 2016; Loos et al., 2018), adults (Veeriah, 2021), and the elderly (Loos & Nijenhuis, 2020). However, research on combating disinformation primarily focuses on younger audiences.

This doctoral thesis aims to fill a gap in the literature, which tends to address disinformation issues mainly concerning students and young adults. The research objectives guiding this work are (1) to observe potential differences among individuals from various age groups in their ability to recognize disinformation, (2) to identify and analyze existing solutions against disinformation, and (3) to assess the extent to which these solutions are generationally inclusive. This paper explores the effectiveness of disinformation countermeasures, focusing on those that do not adopt a generational approach when discussing the issue and implementing solutions.

The paper is structured into two main sections. In the first part of the thesis, the four types of measures mentioned earlier are presented, while the second part of the paper discusses the doctoral studies that test individuals' ability to recognize disinformation attempts and the doctoral research that addresses the effectiveness of the countermeasures against disinformation. The final section presents the conclusions and limitations of the study, along with suggestions for future research.

In the first chapter, the advantages and limitations of the counter-disinformation measures most frequently discussed in the literature are identified and analyzed: technological tools, quality journalism, legislative measures, and educational initiatives. The advantages of technological tools for detecting disinformation primarily relate to the volume of data they can process at an impressive speed. However, disinformation can become increasingly sophisticated and may quickly adapt to these advanced technological tools, managing to bypass them. Human involvement in the architecture of these technological tools may also lead to errors or serve the unethical interests of the companies that own social media platforms and search engines (*truthwashing*). Quality journalism can play a crucial role in creating a healthier media landscape, supported by greater press freedom. Although desirable, this situation is difficult to achieve due to the current state of media institutions, which are under immense competition with alternative sources of information, pressured by time, and financially controlled by political factors. Legislative measures to counter disinformation, adopted at national and transnational levels, are an important step in protecting democracy, but they can also pose a threat to it. When formulating and implementing legislative initiatives, it is important to consider citizens' rights, especially the right to free expression and the right to information. A promising legislative approach involves the adoption of policies that support individuals through educational measures, allowing them to learn how to evaluate information themselves. Most educational measures adopted worldwide focus on improving media literacy. It is essential that the education process involves individuals from all socio-demographic categories, especially older adults, who are often neglected in most countries that have adopted educational measures to counter disinformation.

The second chapter of the thesis presents research focused on individuals' ability to identify fake news and the measures to counter disinformation. In the first subsection of this section, I began a research process aimed at evaluating the ability of individuals in Romania to recognize disinformation attempts. Guided by this objective, I aimed to answer two questions: (1) Do

children, adolescents, and university students in Romania perceive the website “Saving the Jackalope” as trustworthy? and (2) What mechanisms do they use to identify disinformation? To answer these research questions, I conducted two studies to test the ability to identify disinformation among children and adolescents (Dumitru, 2020), as well as university students. The results of both studies were concerning, but they showed that university students, who had been informed about the dangers of the phenomenon in their academic courses, had a better ability to recognize disinformation than children and adolescents, who had received no prior training in this regard. One result with significant societal implications was gathered from the first study, which demonstrated that even in the rare cases when adolescents identified disinformation, they were still willing to carry out actions requested by sources they did not trust. This result is particularly important because the adolescent participants had the right to vote at the time of the research, meaning that the effects of disinformation on them could have impacted society. The mechanisms participants used to evaluate the information were, in most cases, lateral reading (searching for additional sources to verify the information) and, in a few cases, vertical reading (analyzing the form in which the information was conveyed, such as the type of website, logical errors, and sarcastic tone).

The second research study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the role of the media in the propagation of disinformation and misinformation and to identify the extent to which quality journalism could be an effective measure against the phenomenon. The study sought to identify how Romanian journalists perceive the fake news phenomenon, its causes and effects, and potential differences between traditional media and new media in terms of transmitting fake news. The research results showed that Romanian journalists, like participants in Western studies, perceive disinformation as a significant problem with serious societal consequences (lack of trust in the media, social polarization, confusion, incitement to action or inaction). Most journalists had at least once been the source of misinformation and had encountered false information published by their colleagues. An important observation some participants made was the lack of reaction from publications when such situations were reported, or even the blaming of journalists who called attention to disinformation. This result suggests the inability of practitioners to combat the phenomenon in a field where they are not only unsupported by their institutions or colleagues but are also discouraged in these attempts. Most participants felt there were no significant differences between traditional and new media in terms of disinformation. However, they highlighted the lack

of consequences for new media and indicated that the target audiences for both types of media differ in terms of age. When discussing the causes of disinformation, Romanian journalists pointed to time pressure in a crowded information environment, superficiality, and political interference as the most important factors. The responsibility to minimize the fake news phenomenon cannot, therefore, be solely attributed to the media. It cannot be a valid solution in a society where journalism follows a commercial model and is financially and ideologically influenced. Since journalists can often only observe the evolution of this problem, effective solutions might not be found in the direction of improving journalism quality but rather by focusing on what people do with the information they receive. Training individuals' ability to understand the nuances of the phenomenon and distinguish between trustworthy information and disinformation can only be achieved through educational measures.

In the third research study of the doctoral thesis, I collaborated with two experienced authors in the field of generational studies. Together, we aimed to identify educational initiatives that counter disinformation in a generationally inclusive manner and to assess the extent to which their effectiveness is supported by scientific evidence (evidence-based tools). The results demonstrated that most research studies and initiatives (both small-scale and large-scale) in the field of media literacy have included younger participants, primarily students at various levels of formal education and, occasionally, specialists (teachers and journalists). Additionally, most of the studies that proposed media literacy educational initiatives took place in a formal setting, usually a classroom. This environment excludes individuals who are not part of the traditional education system and may influence participants' responses and the outcomes of research. The social implications of these results are important, especially regarding access to reliable information for all individuals. It is crucial that these types of training and interventions consider a wider audience from different socio-cultural groups – people from various generations, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Most of the interventions discussed in the paper measured only the short-term effectiveness of the proposed tool, and the majority of the training programs were not evidence-based. An evidence-based approach, with significant potential in efforts to counter disinformation, is one proposed by studies that presented interventions with a gaming component. This could be a more inclusive method, with a simple structure to help individuals combat disinformation.

The fourth study in the doctoral research explores, from a generational perspective, studies that test the effectiveness of technological measures implemented by or potentially implementable by social platforms to counter disinformation. Although the research results analyzed are generally positive in terms of the effectiveness of the tested measures, they do not aim to observe the effects across all age groups. Study participants are usually adults and young adults. The elderly are included only in large-scale research focused on presenting broad results, not on addressing the topic from a generational perspective, while none of the studies include children and adolescents in their samples. Considering that social media users span all age groups, no conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of technological measures in combating disinformation on social media without involving children, adolescents, and seniors in studies investigating this issue. One important implication of this research concerns how disinformation is flagged by social platforms and the extent to which this can be understood and correctly decoded by individuals without training on the fake news phenomenon. Technological measures could use pictograms (such as Pinocchio) to signal disinformation, which could be more easily decoded by individuals of all ages due to the rapid association that can be made between symbols and their commonly accepted meanings. The results of the fourth study highlight the need for individuals to be educated about disinformation; however, in this context, it is important to mention the limited access certain social categories, especially the elderly, have to formal education systems.

The results of the studies included in this doctoral research converge towards addressing solutions to disinformation from a multidisciplinary perspective. However, the paper emphasizes the special importance of educational measures, which can help individuals acquire the necessary skills to effectively evaluate information and identify disinformation. These types of solutions should not be seen as a miraculous cure, but rather as a fundamental element in the fight against disinformation. Educational measures must be supported by all other fields proposing solutions in this regard, but an essential role in supporting the educational effort should be attributed to legislative measures. The main intention of this research is to raise awareness of the need for a more generationally inclusive approach to combating disinformation, so that individuals of all ages can become informed citizens capable of actively and constructively participating in society.

During the development of this work, at various stages of the research process, a question arose: “Are we (researchers, institutions, civil society, the state) doing enough to ensure that all individuals, regardless of age, have access to reliable information that helps them become fully-

fledged citizens in a democratic society”? This doctoral thesis suggests that the answer is negative, prompting further questions: “In what other ways is individuals’ access to a democratic society, where they can fully exercise their constitutional rights and freedoms, restricted?” “Which categories of individuals are neglected in research, project proposals, and the implementation of laws and societal changes?” and “How can we reduce these disparities among individuals to improve the state of democracy today?”

Research on disinformation generally includes a young audience in its samples. One of the important contributions of this paper is that it proposes a generational approach through three of the studies conducted, focusing particularly on children, adolescents, and seniors, to complement the specialized literature. Additionally, the first study in the doctoral research improves a research design previously used in other studies and presents a website (“Saving the Jackalope”) that can be used as a source of information in similar studies that test individuals’ ability to identify disinformation.

After the initial study was published (Dumitru, 2020), HotNews wrote an article describing the research results and presenting the perspectives of education specialists on disinformation (Popa, 2021). Following this, Greenpeace Romania shared a Facebook post explaining that the jackalope does not exist, that the organization fights against disinformation, and that it encourages individuals to verify suspicious information, regardless of the source (Greenpeace Romania, 2021). The study thus opened a public dialogue through which individuals can become more aware of the phenomenon and the dangers it poses to society.

The second study presented in the doctoral research contributes to the academic exploration of the disinformation phenomenon from the perspective of the understudied Eastern European press. Most research addresses the situation of the media from a Western or West-European perspective. The alarming state of press freedom in Romania today, as indicated by the Reporters Without Borders report, demonstrates the considerable need for more research efforts to study the role of the press in informing the public and developing disinformation today.

The doctoral thesis proposes the concept of *truthwashing* to refer to the deceptive communication of social platforms regarding their engagement in the fight against disinformation, used to strengthen the platforms’ image. Over time, social networks have implemented various technological tools that companies have claimed were designed to reduce disinformation and misinformation. However, serious algorithmic errors, the subjectivity of decisions to delete or



retain content on platforms, and the lack of transparency suggest that these initiatives may be more *truthwashing* actions than genuine efforts to combat fake news. The term has been used sporadically before, but only in political contexts. A Google Scholar search using only the term *truthwashing* yielded 50 results, but none of the papers introduced or treated the concept.

The results of this doctoral thesis have implications both for the research field and for society in general. The thesis presents theoretical perspectives and a series of articles that contribute to the development of disinformation research and could serve as a starting point for proposing more generationally inclusive public policies.