JOURNALISTS ON DISINFORMATION: EFFECTS AND COUNTERACTING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Disinformation represents a significant threat to democracy, yet the role of key actors responsible for safeguarding a healthy information space remains unclear. This article explores how Romanian journalists perceive the effects of disinformation, the strategies they adopt to counter it, and the challenges encountered in this process. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 journalists working across online, offline, and hybrid media platforms, followed by an inductive thematic analysis of the collected data. Findings indicate that journalists seem to be aware of the social and professional implications of disinformation. Their main concern is that people have lost trust in the media. However, they don't seem engaged in combating the malign phenomenon through tactics such as debunking or prebanking. Their efforts are primarily concentrated on preventing the dissemination of false information by verifying content before publication. The verification practices employed tend to rely on traditional journalistic methods such as direct source verification, cross-checking multiple sources, and contextualizing information. This creates a structural asymmetry because journalists operate within time-intensive frameworks, whereas disinformation exploits instantaneous virality. One of the most significant challenges identified by participants is negative audience feedback, which often results in internal concerns about potential loss of audience. There is a tendency for journalists to abandon covering certain topics due to public pressure. Negative audience feedback is particularly discouraging for younger journalists working primarily in online newsrooms, where performance is closely tied to platform-driven metrics. From this perspective, Romanian journalism appears increasingly shaped by platform metrics, raising questions about the press's autonomy and its future capacity to uphold democratic values and provide reliable information.

Keywords: Disinformation, effects, journalists, social networks, audience feedback.

Introduction

In the digital age, disinformation poses a greater threat to democracy than ever before, especially online, where information spreads extremely quickly and often without control. While three decades ago a photo or video could constitute solid evidence in

journalism, today such content must be rigorously verified, as technologies based on artificial intelligence, which have become widely available, can create or manipulate images with convincing realism. Furthermore, the democratization of access to information dissemination channels has expanded the number of actors involved in informing the public, while allowing facts and falsehoods to circulate and coexist within the same channels. This dysfunction, which leads to information disorder, is amplified by the algorithms of digital platforms, which favor echo chambers and information bubbles, reduce the diversity of perspectives and deepen social polarization (Wardle, 2017). Although social media platforms were not created with the purpose of spreading disinformation, they have become fertile ground for it because they lack human gatekeepers, are vulnerable to fake accounts and bots, exploit users' cognitive biases, and overwhelm audiences with an excessive volume of content. These realities make online social networks extremely susceptible to instrumentalization and exploitation against democracy. Recent history has shown us that these things happen, and the 2016 US elections and Brexit are just two examples in this regard. Therefore, information disorder or disinformation should not be understood as random phenomena, but as the result of complex interactions between structural vulnerabilities and deliberate manipulative actions. Both state and non-state actors exploit these weaknesses through increasingly sophisticated tactics, introducing and legitimizing false narratives in the media space to promote their own agendas.

In this context, journalists, the only actors in the information landscape who claim to have "exclusive techniques" that help them distinguish reality from fiction, facts from opinions, operate under increasing economic pressures, strict deadlines and constantly changing public expectations. These constraints sometimes transform them, even unintentionally, into amplifiers of disinformation and there are numerous examples in the specialized literature that attest that disinformation has migrated from online social networks to the mainstream press. The role of journalists thus becomes ambiguous. When they fulfill their missions that give them social legitimacy, namely correct and balanced information of the public, they are part of the solution. Other times they become part of the problem due to the chase for clicks or for financial or ideological reasons. When journalists become trumpets of disinformation, the consequences are profound and multidimensional, as disinformation has scientifically documented negative effects on both the public and democracy. One of the most serious effects is the erosion of trust: citizens increasingly express scepticism towards journalists, authorities, and experts alike. Given these dynamics, it becomes essential to analyse how journalists themselves perceive disinformation, what strategies they consider most effective to mitigate its impact, and what obstacles they encounter in doing so. The study contributes to the growing body of research on the vulnerabilities of journalism in the digital age, particularly in countries with fragile media ecosystems.

Understanding disinformation

For the purposes of this research, we will use both terms: misinformation and disinformation. The term disinformation is understood as non-factual, manipulative, or decontextualized content intentionally created to pursue objectives such as expanding audience reach, generating financial profit, or advancing ideological or political agendas. Misinformation refers to unintentional spread of false, manipulated, out-of-context information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Disinformation is a complex phenomenon. Although the term itself is relatively recent, the practices it encompasses have existed for thousands of years. "People did not wait

for the modern era to use dishonest methods to deceive their adversaries or rivals" noted Henri-Pierre Cathala (1991) in his work "The Age of Disinformation" (Cathala, 1991:21). So, disinformation is an old phenomenon, but its coupling with new communication and information technologies makes it more dangerous. Based on the academic literature, we consider that computerized disinformation has the following characteristics:

- *It is fast* - if during the Cold War, disinformation needed years to circulate from one continent to another and its amplification depended largely on the reaction of traditional channels (Ellick & Westbrook, 2018). In the era of the internet and online social networks, correct or distorted information can be published by anyone, from anywhere, and can cross the planet in a few seconds (Wardle & AbdAllah, 2023).
- *It is adaptable* - disinformation has a remarkable capacity to adapt to social, cultural and visual contexts. It is parasitic as it attaches itself to important topics and exploits real social concerns (safety, health, civil liberties, etc.). At the same time, it has a chameleon character, which manifests itself by adopting any narrative or functional style of language, as well as any form of visual content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). Today, disinformation takes various forms, including satire, parody, fabricated news, doctored photographs and videos, advertising materials, and propaganda (Tandoc et al., 2018). Clare Wardle (2017) offers another taxonomy, identifying seven distinct categories: (1) satire or parody, which has the potential to mislead audiences; (2) misleading content, involving the deceptive use of information; (3) impersonation content, where authentic sources' identities are hijacked; (4) fabricated content, which is entirely false and created with deceptive intent; (5) false connection, where images, captions, or headlines do not match the content; (6) false context, where authentic content is shared in a misleading framework; and (7) manipulated content, where real information or images are altered to deceive (Wardle, 2017). Alina Bârgăoanu (2023) emphasizes that disinformation is not limited to written articles but includes opinions, comments, the recirculation of outdated information without proper updates, images, videos, cartoons, and collages (Bârgăoanu, 2023). Moreover, this type of content does not fit neatly into a strict "true-false" dichotomy; it can contain partial truths or be entirely fictitious, making it difficult to detect (Bârgăoanu & Radu, 2018).
- *It is dependent on algorithms* - disinformation content has the potential to go viral. It falls into the category of communication products perfectly adaptable to the digital environment, in the sense that it is data-based, micro-targeted and hyper-personalized (Bârgăoanu, 2023).
- *It is captivating* - disinformation is not boring, it acts on an emotional, not rational, basis; it can be hidden in narratives of humour, which are used to ridicule important topics with the help of humour (euvsdisinfo.eu, 2019).
- *It is non-factual* – disinformation can be based on beliefs, sometimes impossible to verify and difficult to combat.
- *It has the ability to instrumentalize* – disinformation can transform technologies and relationships between people into tools of manipulation. Even attempts

to combat disinformation through legislation, warnings, and education can be presented as "evidence" of the existence of a repressive, censorship system.

The effects of disinformation are multidimensional. Studies indicate that even brief exposure to false information can have a measurable impact on cognitive and behavioural processes (Bastick, 2021). Disinformation can induce false memories (Frenda et al., 2013; Grady et al., 2023; Mangiulli et al., 2022), diminishing individuals' ability to differentiate between reality and fiction. Moreover, it undermines public trust in democratic institutions and, by extension, in the media (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), influences electoral campaigns and political preferences (Tsfati et al., 2009; Cantarella et al., 2023; Gunther et al., 2019; Wang, 2020), and exacerbates social divisions by fuelling excessive polarization. In such a climate, where distrust becomes the norm and societies grow increasingly fragmented, understanding the relationship between social cohesion and trust is essential. Research suggests that trust levels directly influence both individual and collective behaviours (Loomba et al., 2021; Westney et al., 2023), and a lack of trust in government, media experts, and institutions can further fragment society (Colley et al., 2020).

Although social media platforms were not designed for disinformation, they are considered fertile ground for its spread. Why? Because these digital environments lack human gatekeepers, are susceptible to infiltration by fake accounts, bots, and trolls, exploit users' cognitive biases, and contribute to information overload among the public (Ferrara et al., 2016; Gupta et al., 2013; Hayawi et al., 2023; L. Sanchez, 2021, Bârgăoanu, 2023, Hartog, 2017).

Understanding journalism in social media era

Journalists are "individuals compensated for professional activities that involve searching, researching, writing, and disseminating news across various platforms for newsrooms or other media-focused organizations" (Bossio, 2017). They have integrated social media platforms into their professional practices, which has led to significant changes in work routines. Muhammad Fahad Humayun and Patrick Ferrucci (2022) identified three main purposes for which journalists use these tools in professional contexts (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022): news construction; news distribution; personal branding.

Nowadays, the communication space is fragmented, and journalists no longer have a monopoly on informing the public. But they are the only actors who claim to possess "exclusive techniques" that help them separate reality from fiction, facts from opinions, commercial content from editorial content, and remove subjectivism from the news presentation process, with the aim of correctly informing the public and defending Democracy (Coman, 2016; McNair, 2009). These goals have never been easy to achieve, but in the current informational context, the mission undertaken by journalists has become even more difficult. The advertising activity carried out by digital platforms has a negative impact on media revenues, even if the giants transfer a small part of the amounts to news organizations as a result of displaying advertisements on their sites (Google, 2022; Nugroho, 2021). As Jacques Attali (2021) points out, digital platforms manage to attract more than half of global advertising because they possess the technology that allows them to know and analyse audiences in depth by category (Attali, 2022). To cope with the pressure, newsrooms are forced to align with the operational logic of online social networks, which prioritize popularity and virality over the accuracy of information (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In taking this step, the boundary between editorial and commercial

blurs increasingly because journalists compete with influencers, automated accounts, and commercial actors within the same attention economy. In an effort to win the battle for audience attention, newsrooms sometimes sacrifice accuracy in favour of speed and volume. When does this happen "editorial review is bypassed" and "the fact-checking process is minimized" (Anderson et al., 2016) leading to the dissemination of news in provisional, inaccurate or incomplete forms (Karlsson, 2011).

Such shortcuts in editorial oversight and fact-checking point to a broader structural issue: the insufficient training and preparedness of journalists to handle the demands of the digital environment. Vera Katzenberger (2024) examined the alignment between technological advancements in the media industry and journalism education. The research highlights that many journalists report insufficient exposure to critical digital skills, including search engine optimization, user metrics, data journalism, and coding (Katzenberger, 2024). Other studies have indicated that journalists often lack familiarity with modern digital verification tools, such as fact-checking services (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Edwardsson et al., 2023). Among those who are aware of these tools, there is a prevalent lack of confidence in relying solely on them for verification purposes (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Edwardsson et al., 2023). Journalists believe they do not have enough time and knowledge to introduce new verification routines (Edwardsson et al., 2023).

On the other hand, online social networks have enabled direct interaction between journalists and audiences, but this has also fuelled harassment, particularly targeting women and those covering sensitive issues. Research shows that much of this abuse occurs online, often involving threats of physical violence (Lewis et al., 2020). Political campaigns further amplify hostility through advertising strategies that mobilize citizens into active agents of pressure (Howard, 2020). Such dynamics create a climate of intimidation that discourages coverage of sensitive topics. Waisbord (2020) conceptualizes this as a new form of censorship, where hate speech and citizen "vigilance" discipline journalists into conformity (Waisbord, 2020).

In addition, journalists are constantly targeted by disinformers who aim to get their messages into the mainstream media either to whitewash them, gain credibility, or multiply sources (Krasodomski-Jones et al., 2019; Carrasco Rodríguez Belén, 2020; Meleshevich & Schafer, 2018; Carrasco Rodríguez Belén, 2020; Meleshevich & Schafer, 2018).

On the other hand, the fight against disinformation is difficult and involves many factors. În general, efforts to counter disinformation can take a proactive approach before it spreads (prebunking), aiming to build public resilience against false narratives (Garcia Laura & Shane Tommy, 2021). Another method for restoring truth is debunking (fact-checking and refuting misinformation).

A transnational study conducted across 18 countries before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights that newsrooms have recognized the magnitude of disinformation propagated through digital platforms and have implemented proactive measures to counteract it. These strategies include establishing specialized fact-checking departments, forming partnerships with organizations dedicated to information verification, and engaging journalists in professional training programs focused on identifying and combating disinformation (Mayerhöffer et al., 2022). Additionally, a representative survey in the U.S. examined how newsrooms have adapted their practices amid escalating disinformation. To avoid misinformation, journalists are placing greater emphasis on verifying sources, reducing the use of anonymous sources, and being more transparent about the provenance of information (Vu & Saldaña, 2021).

As the phenomenon of disinformation has not been extensively investigated through the lens of Romanian journalists' perceptions, this study aims to contribute to filling this gap by providing empirical insights into how media professionals in Romania understand, experience, and respond to this challenge.

Research question

1. How do journalists perceive the effects of disinformation?
2. How do journalists perceive the most effective methods for countering disinformation, and the obstacles preventing the media from functioning as a bastion of truth?

Methodology

This research employed the semi-structured interview method, followed by an inductive thematic analysis of the collected data. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, in which the researcher initially constructs the sample by accessing their network of subjects, referred to as "seeds", who then recommend additional participants that meet the criteria for selection and interview eligibility (Babbie, 2008; Waters, 2015). This method falls under non-probabilistic sampling techniques, as participants are not randomly selected. Consequently, there is a risk of bias, such as homophily, which reflects the tendency of individuals to recommend others with similar perspectives (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, 2020). To mitigate this issue and ensure a heterogeneous sample, strategic adjustments were implemented based on academic literature recommendations: sample diversification (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Waters, 2015), increasing the number of waves and cross-recommendation (Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

The final sample consisted of 24 Romanian journalists, including 13 women and 11 men, aged 22 to 55 years:

- experience: 12 journalists had over five years of experience; 12 journalists were beginners, with a maximum of five years of experience;
- work environment: 8 journalists worked exclusively online; 8 journalists worked exclusively offline; 8 journalists worked in a hybrid environment (both online and offline);
- news organization coverage; 4 participants worked for international media organizations: 14 participants worked for national organizations; 4 participants worked for local institutions; 2 participants worked for regional organizations;
- professional roles: 2 participants were editor-in-chiefs; 2 were editors; 4 were correspondent reporters; 6 were news writers; 10 were general reporters.

The interviews were conducted by phone between July 12 and August 7, 2024, with conversations lasting between 10 and 30 minutes. The collected data was anonymized and then imported into the NVivo software to facilitate organization and analysis. The analysis was conducted following the stages outlined by Andrea J. Bingham (2023), which include: organizing the data, sorting it, understanding and interpreting it, followed by the final explanation of the results (Bingham, 2023). Once the thematic analysis was completed, the results were exported into an Excel file to establish the final themes.

Research Findings

The themes emerging from the analysis were divided into three sections:

(a) The effects of disinformation on journalism and the public:
- declining credibility of journalism and shrinking audiences; election influence, social destabilization; public health impact

(b) Counteracting disinformation:
- fact-checking before publication; editorial filters.

(c) Obstacles in combating disinformation:
- public feedback; the complexity of the disinformation phenomenon; personal and organization-specific limitations

Declining credibility of journalism and shrinking audiences

All participants consider disinformation to be a significant threat not only in Romania but also in other European Union states. In their view, the danger is amplified both by the democratization of access to technologies that facilitate communication and by the emergence of tools capable of creating or manipulating visual and narrative content. Social media has emerged as the main channel for the dissemination of disinformation, a finding consistent with existing literature on the role of digital platforms in accelerating the spread of false narratives (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Journalists claim that they are more cautious when information enters the newsroom through digital platforms than when it is collected directly from other online sites or from human sources. They believe that the abundance of information on social platforms favors the spread of disinformation, by complicating content verification processes and lends credibility to certain narratives, since messages are propagated simultaneously by multiple sources.

> "The more information there is, the easier it becomes to slip false data among credible ones, which, by being placed alongside authentic information, in turn come to appear credible. At one point, there was a phrase attributed to a Nazi propagandist, according to which a lie told once remains a lie, but a lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth." (P1)

However, participants also noted that television continues to play an important role in amplifying disinformation, particularly through sensationalist coverage.

With regard to the actors contributing to the dissemination or amplification of disinformation, journalists argue that, with the democratization of internet access, new technologies allow a wide range of actors, from the general public to media outlets, influencers, and politicians, to spread false or misleading information quickly and without verification. Many of them stated that nowadays everyone has the possibility to spread disinformation. Some respondents emphasized that newsrooms themselves often contribute, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The pressure to attract and retain audiences can encourage journalists to prioritize speed and sensationalism over accuracy, leading to the amplification of incomplete or poorly verified content.

> "Journalists have lost their credibility precisely because some of them actively spread disinformation. Some have taken responsibility for their mistakes and publicly acknowledged them, but public trust has remained damaged." (P20)

According to one participant, his newsroom may at times contribute to the dissemination of distorted information, mainly as a result of pressures to attract larger audiences.

"Even the newsroom I work for contributes to this problem. We end up propagating incomplete information. Unfortunately, despite our efforts, we are drifting away from one of the fundamental purposes of journalism: to inform." (P24)

Moreover, in a media landscape saturated with content, journalists expressed concern about their diminishing ability to convince the public of the accuracy of their reporting. The sheer volume of disinformation circulating online can overshadow verified news, making credible journalism increasingly difficult to hear and to recognize in the public sphere.

"In an environment where the information space is flooded with disinformation, it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince the public that the information published by our newsroom is properly verified." (P21)

The consequences of disinformation are directly felt within the journalistic profession. Journalists consider the main effect of disinformation to be the erosion of public trust in journalism. They stressed that they are facing a credibility crisis that has undermined journalism's historic role as a cornerstone of democracy, a point illustrated by a journalist with more than 20 years of experience:

"Between 1990 and 2000, journalism was regarded as a pillar of democracy, the most trusted profession. There was even a saying among ordinary people: *'If it's in the newspaper, it must be true.'* Today, in the midst of a wave of disinformation, journalism, journalists, and media institutions have lost much of their credibility. If people place more trust in the chaotic flow of information on social media than in the press, it is clear that we are facing a serious problem." (P1)

The credibility crisis has profound implications for the relationship between journalists and the public, reflected in the declining audiences of media organizations. Several participants warned that the public's growing distrust of the media could further reduce audiences, as people find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between factual journalistic content and the false information circulating online:

"Why would you read something from people you don't trust?" (P17)

"Unfortunately, this leads to a generalized distrust of the press. People do not distinguish between a misleading source and a credible one." (P2)

"Everyone thinks the press lies and spreads fake news." (P14)

"Nobody trusts the press anymore. Not even the press itself trusts the press. Many times, we don't even trust our own editorial process. In this context, disinformation and fake news are far too easy to promote." (P3)

The decline in public trust in journalism, as observed by journalists themselves, is in fact a professional crisis, which generates demotivation, insecurity and can create pressures to adapt content to public expectations, reducing the autonomy of editorial departments. Therefore, this crisis makes the media vulnerable.

Election influence, social destabilization and public health impact

The findings reveal that journalists perceive disinformation as a pervasive force capable of influencing electoral outcomes, undermining social stability, and distorting public health narratives. Several participants emphasized the impact of disinformation on election processes, identifying politicians as key disseminators of false or misleading content, particularly through social media platforms (P1, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P13, P18). By circumventing traditional media and addressing the masses directly, politicians can spread narratives that remain largely unchecked and unverified:

> "If we consider the current election campaign, where AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) is offering apartments worth €35,000 with no interest, something completely unrealistic, yet tens of thousands of people are lining up to sign a contract for nothing. I believe this is a clear example of disinformation." (P18)

Beyond electoral contexts, journalists also identified social destabilization as a critical consequence of disinformation (P9, P10, P11, P15, P22). This destabilization manifests through a gradual erosion of public trust in state institutions, as well as the incitement of civil disobedience. One journalist recounted instances where disinformation circulating on social media platforms encouraged youth to resist police authority during routine traffic stops (P9).

Participants also expressed concerns regarding the impact of disinformation on public health, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several journalists highlighted how medical disinformation regarding "miracle treatments" and vaccination spread rapidly on digital platforms, creating confusion and fuelling public scepticism (P1, P5, P7, P18).

One journalist noted that the spread of conflicting health narratives not only led to widespread misinformation but also intensified family conflicts, as individuals adhered to divergent information sources.

Verification and editorial filters

Most journalists interviewed in the study affirmed that countering disinformation is an integral part of their professional responsibility. However, there is a notable divergence in opinions regarding the extent of this responsibility and the most effective strategies for addressing disinformation. While some respondents emphasized that the primary responsibility lies with journalists, others suggested that combating disinformation should also involve broader societal actors, including authorities and the general public (P7, P17, P12, P20, P22, P24). A minority of participants (P6, P10, P11) expressed skepticism about the feasibility of journalists effectively countering disinformation, given the increasingly democratized access to mass information channels, which enables virtually anyone to disseminate false content. When asked about the most effective methods for mitigating disinformation, most journalists pointed to traditional fact-checking and editorial verification as the core strategies. This approach prioritizes verifying content before publication rather than debunking false narratives after they have been circulated. The emphasis is on preventing the amplification of problematic narratives rather than engaging in post-publication corrective measures.

Journalists described a series of verification practices that serve as standard operating procedures in newsrooms: direct source verification, cross-checking multiple sources, and contextualizing information.

> "The first thing you do as a journalist is verifying information from multiple sources. This is a fundamental mechanism. I have promised myself that I will never give up this filter, no matter how much time pressure there is on a subject." (P1)

> "We only take news from people who have been through our newsroom, from people we know personally." (P5)

> "We verify the person, the post, the organization they belong to, and how reliable their claims are." (P7)

> "I try to get input from both the person who published the information and the person involved in the story." (P8)

> "I call them directly and ask: have you really posted that? Or I try to find a third party who can confirm that the person behind the post is real." (P11)

> "In the end, the most effective method remains traditional verification, fact-checking by phone." (P15)

> "The most effective way, in my opinion, is to call the person in question, the one who is actually in a position to speak on the topic. That seems like the best approach to me." (P16)

> "A good approach is to verify information as thoroughly as possible before sharing it and to provide context." (P17)

> "We always go straight to the source, that's what we do. We get as close to the source as possible." (P19)

> "For example, I once had to verify a piece of information that appeared online. I called a government minister for clarification, but he seemed completely disconnected from reality. At that moment, my editor stopped me and said: 'What? Are we calling someone who spreads disinformation? No way. We'll verify the information with experts in the field.' So instead of relying on an official source, I turned to academic sources, professors, specialists, and field practitioners who deal with the issue directly." (P22)

> "When we see news on a website, we don't just take it at face value. We verify the information across multiple sources." (P23)

In newsrooms with a larger number of employees, the editorial process involves multiple layers of verification before news stories are published. This increases the likelihood of identifying editing errors, informational inconsistencies, or even elements of disinformation. Some journalists participating in the study believe that these verification mechanisms can serve as effective tools in combating disinformation and preventing the spread of inaccurate information (P2, P8, P9, P14, P18, P20, P24).

"We interact with editors, and they ask so many questions that simply taking the information as it is and publishing it is never enough. The materials never reach broadcast or publication exactly as we initially wrote them. Obviously, they go through verification by two or three additional people, so to speak. Each of these individuals has their own questions and observations. You can never rely solely on what you read or see without conducting further checks. On the contrary, sometimes you end up making multiple calls because each editor might have a new concern or question." (P2)

"Texts are reviewed before publication by two editors-in-chief, who ensure that they contain at least three reliable sources. Additionally, they must include statements from identified individuals, with full names." (P14)

"All our articles go through multiple hands. I might miss something, but there is always an editor, an editor-in-chief, and even the social media team that checks the materials before they go out." (P18)

"It's effective to have these multiple layers of filtering - from the writer to the editor, producer, daily producer, and even online colleagues who are more familiar with false or misleading posts circulating on social media." (P20)

Only one journalist stated that disinformation could best be countered by having journalists specialized in specific fields (P9).

Public feedback

Just three of the 24 journalists interviewed indicated that they experience no difficulties in addressing disinformation (P7, P8, P12). All the others described the difficulties they encounter, many of which are closely tied to how audiences react to news content. The findings reveal that audience reactions to published news significantly influence journalists' behaviour, shaping both the content they produce and the strategies they employ to mitigate backlash. Participants noted that public feedback can function as a double-edged sword, serving as both a constructive resource and a source of undue pressure. One journalist noted that, in certain situations, the public constructively engages in the comments section of newsroom posts, helping to correct errors in published texts or add missing details to the news (P1). However, this form of constructive engagement was described as the exception rather than the norm. More commonly, journalists reported encountering hostile audience reactions, particularly when covering politically sensitive or controversial topics.

One journalist with extensive experience in the field said that, although he worked hard to gather evidence and present well-reasoned arguments, he frequently faced hostile audience reactions. He stopped covering certain topics when he noticed that public hostility led to decreased website traffic.

"We rely on the public. They are our target, our purpose is to inform them. But when the public reacts with hostility while you're trying to fight disinformation, it shakes the very foundation of your existence as a journalist. You start questioning whether you should continue battling disinformation or just focus on your own work, ensuring you follow ethical standards and avoid spreading false information. It's a psychological reaction, you instinctively try to avoid the fight. You acknowledge misinformation, but you stop actively debunking it because a certain segment of the audience will be hostile toward you. And guess what hostility leads to? Losing readers. In the end, you let them believe what they want. I know this sounds somewhat defeatist, but you eventually realize that you

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have to let them think that vaccines are dangerous and just focus on providing accurate information where you can." (P1)

Our results suggests that when dealing with problematic information and public hostility, journalists adopt two behavioural patterns: some avoid covering certain topics to prevent losing audience engagement, others deliberately cover controversial topics to attract more readers and increase visibility (P1, P4, P5, P9, P21, P22, P23, P24). One journalist admitted that he had to abandon certain topics due to audience pressure, but not by choice, it was a decision made by the newsroom management (P23). Another journalist recounted how, despite maintaining an objective approach to covering the Israel-Hamas conflict, he still faced audience hostility, with readers accusing him of bias. In response to the aggressive backlash, his newsroom decided to reduce coverage of the war.

> "We eventually gave up because people were becoming so aggressive in their comments. Now we write less about the conflict, we try to cover only the most important developments. But we don't publish as many articles as before because moderating the extremely violent comments was becoming too much work." (P21)

This form of self-censorship can have serious implications for content diversity and editorial integrity, as journalists may feel compelled to abandon critical topics in order to keep audiences engaged. This is not just an allegation, but a very real risk. On the other hand, those trying to resist the temptation to create content just for clicks feel frustrated when they see the high traffic and popularity of an online publication that actively spreads misinformation or disinformation (P9). Such frustrations are compounded by the highly fragmented nature of the information space, where the public has access to multiple sources, both official and alternative.

One study participant pointed out that when a false narrative gains traction on social media or a website, misinformed groups often target legitimate news outlets by pressuring journalists to alter their coverage or address controversial topics (P22).

> "Yes, when a page, a website, or a publication posts accurate information, many people, that already misinformed group, come to the publication's page and say: «You are bought, you are sold, you don't know the truth. I have the truth, not you journalists, who have checked and written from multiple sources. I have it because politician Y said so»." (P22)

The pressure from audience feedback presents a significant challenge in the fight against disinformation, especially for journalists who work for online or hybrid media outlets. Among the eight journalists who highlighted this issue, only two work in traditional media (radio and television), and both are at the beginning of their careers (P4, P5).

The complexity of disinformation

Journalists face significant challenges in combating disinformation, primarily due to its complexity (P3, P4, P9, P15, P16, P21). When asked about the goals of disinformation actors, most believe that disinformation efforts are linked to indirect financial gains through click-driven engagement, direct financial profit, political propaganda aimed at influencing elections or promoting hidden agendas, and the deliberate erosion of public trust. One study participant explained that disinformation infiltrates

society in various forms, constantly adapting and evolving, making it increasingly difficult to detect and combat (P15). Most journalists said they frequently encounter recycled videos and images in their work, but they are also aware that disinformation can take other forms, such as misleading or out-of-context information, texts that mimic the format of news articles while distorting reality, satirical content, memes, and clickbait headlines.

> "There are media institutions that are not really media institutions, but the public perceives them as such. There's a website called popescu.ro, or typically they use the names of cities or counties, like braila.info, for example. But behind them, you'll find politicians and economic interest groups." (P1).

Another journalist stated that due to the complexity of the issue, they often do not even know how to respond when they identify disinformation in a way that does not amplify it or extend its presence in the public space.

> "We have this example: we know a person is lying, but on the other hand, the claim has gained so much traction that it has become a topic in itself. And now we're in the difficult position of having to debunk it, trying to tell people it's not true. But then we realize that, in doing so, we might actually be pushing the snowball further downhill, keeping the issue alive even longer. And we find ourselves in a very, very complicated situation, one that I believe even more advanced societies struggle to solve." (P3).

Other respondents expressed concern about how deeply disinformation influences public perception and stated that their efforts to restore the truth often feel futile once false narratives take hold (P9, P21, P3).

> "The idea is that once you put out a piece of news that people believe, it becomes very difficult to counter it. It's really hard to issue a correction. We know this from experience. People accuse us of pushing certain interests, of being paid off by one group or another" (P9).

> "I think it's extremely difficult to challenge a pseudo-truth once it has taken root in the collective mindset. At least in the case of our audience, it's incredibly hard to present a correction or explain why what they believe is incorrect. When someone holds a strong opinion, it's nearly impossible to tell them, 'What you believe is actually false, here's the truth.' And usually, you can see in the comments that people get really upset" (P21).

Another journalist pointed out that there is a real risk young journalists may not recognize when they are confronted with disinformation (P4).

Personal and organization-specific limitations

Another significant obstacle in detecting and combating disinformation arises from the specific limitations within each organization: time pressure, heavy workloads, accelerated work rhythms, limited financial resources, insufficient professional training among journalists, the inability to verify the information (P2. P14, P5, P11, P13, P15, P 17, P18, P19, P20, P24). For instance, a radio newsroom may be tasked with preparing twelve news stories for a single broadcast, with only two editors assigned to cover them (P15).

One participant emphasized that due to high workloads, some editors lack the time to update information published on websites or broadcast on television, even when

they have access to real-time news feeds (P11). The pressure to publish quickly is further exacerbated by the intense competition between newsrooms, where speed is prioritized over accuracy, compromising the quality of information reaching the public (P14, P19).

> "The pressure to generate numerous articles and the race for visibility significantly reduces the extent to which sources and final texts are fully verified before publication" (P14).

Financial constraints also pose significant challenges. One journalist noted that limited budgets prevent newsrooms from investing in professional training programs for journalists or hiring specialists dedicated to detecting and countering disinformation (P18). Additionally, the lack of technical expertise in using digital verification tools was identified as a critical barrier to identifying and mitigating fabricated content (P17). Two other journalists noted that efforts to counter disinformation are often hindered by the authorities' failure to provide timely responses to press inquiries (P13, P 20). Two other participants explained that the abundance of information constitutes an obstacle to combat disinformation (P2, P5).

> "At some point, you end up experiencing burnout, where you simply can no longer cope with the overwhelming level of information." (P5).

Discussions

The results of this study show that Romanian journalists seem to be aware of the impact and harmful effects of disinformation on their professional responsibilities and on the wider media landscape. However, despite acknowledging the social and professional implications of disinformation, their responses remain largely reactive rather than proactive. This situation has multiple causes, but to fully understand them, it is essential to consider the major challenge facing contemporary journalism: the need to balance responsible reporting with the imperative to foster public engagement.

First, the study highlights the fact that journalists are primarily focused on preventing the spread of disinformation, rather than actively debunking it or educating the public. Journalists are working to avoid amplifying disinformation or misinformation by resorting to fact-checking techniques before publishing. The problem is that, unlike contemporary disinformation, which is algorithmically adapted and constantly evolving, the fact-checking methods used by journalists remain largely traditional. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by J. Samuelsen, Bente Kalsnes, and Steen Steensen (2025), which highlights a significant gap between the availability of new technologies and their actual use by journalists in daily information verification practices, with journalists continuing to prefer traditional fact-checking techniques (Samuelsen et al., 2025).

Secondly, our study suggests that newsrooms and journalists, especially young ones, feel a reluctance to proactively address disinformation due to the fear of facing public hostility, which can lead to loss of audience. This aligns with previous studies indicating that journalists often avoid engaging with controversial or controversial topics to mitigate negative public reactions (Waisbord, 2020).

Another critical aspect is the complexity and adaptability of disinformation content, characterized as chameleonic and algorithmically adapted. This complexity creates significant challenges in identifying and debunking false narratives. The findings align with the

theoretical frameworks proposed by (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), emphasizing that disinformation can manifest itself in diverse forms, from satire and parody to fabricated content, further complicating detection and countering. Furthermore, the findings suggest that journalists are constrained by organizational limitations, such as heavy workloads, accelerated work rhythms, limited financial resources, insufficient professional training among journalists, and the inability to verify the information. This echoes the findings of Picha Edwardsson et al. (2023), who noted that resource constraints can hinder journalists' ability to effectively fact-check information (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Edwardsson et al., 2023).

Conclusion and recommendations

In this article, we analysed the perception of journalists who use online social networks for professional purposes, focusing on how they assess the effects of disinformation, the strategies they consider most effective in combating this phenomenon, and the obstacles they face in this process. The relevance of the study stems from the fact that disinformation has become an increasingly sophisticated threat, especially using algorithms that allow for the digital manipulation of content.

Our conclusion is that in the current communication ecosystem, it is unlikely that journalists will play a central role in the systematic debunking of false narratives beyond preventive efforts aimed at avoiding their amplification. Although they are aware of the profoundly negative impact that disinformation can have on both their profession and democratic functioning, as well as the emerging complexity of this phenomenon, journalists often face significant constraints. These include the pressure to meet audience expectations or the limitations imposed by the organizational structures of the newsrooms in which they operate. From this perspective, Romanian journalism appears increasingly shaped by platform metrics, raising questions about the press's autonomy and its future capacity to uphold democratic values and provide reliable information.

These challenges highlight the importance of institutional and professional support initiatives aimed at strengthening efforts to combat disinformation.

In this context we consider that newsrooms could implement training programs for managing public hostility, equipping journalists with strategies for de-escalating online conflicts while maintaining professional boundaries. We also recommend the development of a verification-focused editorial culture, in which each newsroom has a clear protocol for handling suspicious information. Journalists must update their fact-checking tactics in line with the communication and information technologies they have integrated into their work routines.

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