Fake news and Higher Education Students: A case study

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CONTEXT

- The current logic of creating **false news** derives from the need to manipulate public opinion for different purposes and social media, as well as some applications like WhatsApp, are the means employed to achieve such goals.

- There is a growing concern of society and of higher education institutions over this phenomenon and they are all striving to understand and study it.

- There are debates to promote discussion on the topic and some initiatives are being developed to minimize the impact of misinformation.

- **What about the younger users? How do they adjust to this new reality? What perception do they have of fake news?**
CASE STUDY AND OBJECTIVES

- The study *Fake News and Higher Education Students* is included in this investigative dimension.

- His main **objective** is to understand how higher education students currently attending a Degree in Media and Communication perceive some aspects related to fake news and online disinformation.

- **Specific objectives:**
  - identifying the participants’ level of trust towards the different news sources,
  - their degree of awareness of fake news,
  - their perception of the impact fake news can have,
  - students’ level of responsibility when they have to deal with fake news.

- Using the information collected from the exchanges that have taken place in a focus group, the study presents some of the results of a case study involving social communication students at a Portuguese Higher Education Institution.
A case study was implemented for this work. That case study follows a qualitative methodological approach and used the exchanges that took place in the context of a focus group composed of eight students attending the 2nd year of a Social communication course at a higher education institution in Portugal.

The implementation of the process developed in the focus group followed 5 phases: planning, preparation, moderation, data analysis and dissemination of results.

During the planning stage, we drew up the objectives, defined the structure of the interview script, selected the participants and the size of the group and decided to work with one focus group only. During the preparation stage, we selected the participants and took time to inform them of the objectives and of the length of the process and determined the logistical requirements. We decided that the moderation role would be played by one of the researchers of the study, a member of the institution teaching staff who works directly with the students.
METHODOLOGY

Prior to the discussion carried out in the focus group, a 20-question script was developed to: i) realize what young people know about fake news and the importance they attach to the issue, ii) know their opinion on which media is more prone to disseminate fake news and iii) understand the kind of solutions they suggest to deal with the problem.

The group discussion took place on May 17th 2019 in a school meeting room and lasted 45 minutes. The sample consisted of a group of eight students. Most of them were female students (5). Participants’ age ranged between 19 and 20, with a median age of 19.62.

The group meeting was recorded using two different audio recording devices and the debate was guided by the presence of a moderator. The conversation was informal, and we used open questions during the dialogue.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The topics concerning the fake news issue were ordered as follows: i) definition of fake news, ii) identification of fake news, iii) fake news dissemination channels, iv) level of concern with fake news, v) reliable media, vi) impact of fake news, vii) areas more affected by fake news and viii) measures to fight fake news.

i) Definition of fake news:

The students were asked to define the concept of fake news and their answers showed that most of them associate fake news with misinformation and consider that fake news and false news are not the same. In their opinion, fake news stories mix real facts and false information to look more credible to the public. Students consider that the concept is associated with manipulation and serves the interests of certain media. For the group, in a general manner, fake news means misinformation, decontextualization and persuasion.
ii) Identification of fake news:

In general, students agree that the most reliable way to identify fake news is to look for additional information on the topic in different media.

On the other hand, participants understand that it is important to read the content of the news, not just the headlines to go beyond the superficial information they provide.

They also argue that fake news can be identified by the way they are written, since they use a certain language and a certain type of adjectives to support a particular point of view to favor or to harm something or someone.
iii) Fake news dissemination channels:

Most participants agreed that social media are the best way to spread fake facts. Some of them also referred the role played by some digital applications meant for close groups of friends or relatives, like WhatsApp for example, in the transmission of those manipulated stories.

iv) Level of concern with fake news:

All the participants feel quite concerned (“high” level of concern). One of them said he was very concerned (“very high” level of concern), especially because they are social communication students and will most likely have to deal with this phenomenon in their professional future. The group stressed how important it is to check the facts and the credibility of the sources of information.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

v) reliable media:

As for the media they trust most when they want to get well informed, all without exception referred printed press as the most credible medium. In the students’ opinion, when the press makes a mistake, they immediately release a note about it, rectifying the facts and informing their readers about the incident. That demarche gives the press not only an image of responsibility but, at the same time, a greater credibility.

vi) impact of fake news

All participants accept that fake news have a serious impact on social life, but they argue that they have a much stronger impact on political and economic spheres. For the participants in the focus group, the main threats of fake news are their rapid capacity of proliferation and the way they are able to manipulate opinions.
vii) Areas more affected by fake news:

For the students, politics and social life, sports in particular, are the fields in which the creation, dissemination and sharing of fake news are more evident.

viii) Measures to fight fake news:

Students are aware that governments, institutions and companies are doing their best to protect themselves. They are also conscious that the European Union has developed several initiatives to prevent the propagation of fake news. The general feeling is that in order to eradicate fake news we need an educated population rather than to create a large quantity of programs to identify and remove those false stories, because it is ignorance and the lack of knowledge that support and protect this new reality.
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Bearing in mind the specific objectives established to better understand the fake news phenomenon, the focus group allowed us to unravel the following results:

(1) Higher education students are aware of what false news are – dissemination of false facts as if they were true. The eight participants agreed that the way information is written helps spot a fake story and allows people to tell the difference between rumors and fake news.

These results are in accordance with the conclusions of the Flash Eurobarometer 464 study conducted by the European Commission which indicates that in Portugal more than half of the respondents (56%) "are at least somewhat confident that they can identify fake news online" (European Union, 2018, p. 15).
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

(2) To identify the media used to disseminate fake news – the students who took part in the focus group argue that they believe that social media and instant messaging platforms are the media that are more prone to be used to disseminate fake news. Even though the data collected is not relevant enough for social networks to be considered the main disseminators of fake news, they are in consonance with a tendency that had already been mentioned in the study published by Obercom (2018a) in which social media were considered the second main source of news in Portugal right after 24-hour TV news channels.

(3) To realize how concerned students are with fake news – all the elements that took part in the focus group were concerned about the existence of misinformation and false facts, particularly because of their future job intentions. These results are in agreement with those described in the Obercom study which reveals "a very high level of concern: 71.3% of respondents refer that they care about what is real or false on the Internet" (Cardoso et al., 2018a, p. 61).
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

(4) To recognize reliable means of information – the discussion developed in the focus group made it possible to ascertain that print is the students’ most trusted medium when they wish to be informed. These young people believe that newspapers are the best way to avoid fake news, better than television and online media. Through the participants’ reactions and opinions, it is undeniable that most of them don’t trust the information shared through videos and on social media.

Again, these findings are in line with research conducted by Obercom: when people were asked to express their level of confidence in news communication brands, they chose RTP, the Portuguese public television, as the most reliable medium; the Portuguese newspapers Expresso and Público came right after in the list of names that public trust most. (Cardoso et al., 2018a, p. 57).
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

(5) To understand the impact of fake news – for the elements who have participated in the focus group, the greatest impact of misinformation is its rapid dissemination capacity and the fact that subsequent rebuttal of what was published and the due restoration of the truth may or may not be available to everyone and its power to tamper with public opinion.

On the other hand, the group also stressed the trivialization of the term fake news which might lead to a mixed use of such concept and to situations of defamation.

This is in clear accordance with what was put forward by the Digital News Report 2018 which states that "about a quarter of the Portuguese say they have seen people use the term «fake News» to discredit some news with which they do not agree or that convey opinions which are different from theirs" (Cardoso, Paisana & Pinto-Martinho, 2018, p. 11).
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

6) To identify fields that are more prone to suffer from the influence of fake news – the students’ exchanges on that matter revealed that, in their opinion, politics and society are the segments where the presence of invented news is more evident. As an example, they recalled the U.S. presidential elections with Donald Trump or the case of Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil. The Obercom report seems to confirm the students’ opinion, remembering that during the North American presidential elections there was a clear political exploitation of this growing tendency to disseminate "scattered, unfounded and false information" (Cardoso et al., 2018a, p. 29).

(7) To become familiar with ways to fight fake news – all participants in the focus group have a notion that measures are being taken to fight fake news. They are deeply convinced that education and debates on the issue conducted by media professionals, politicians and academics are the only solutions to slow down the uncontrollable expansion of this phenomenon.
CONCLUSIONS

- In addition to defining and to being able to spot fake news, young people reveal a high level of concern over that issue due to its rapid dissemination and its strong manipulative capacity.

- They understand that fake news have serious consequences in Portugal and worldwide and that they are more prone to be found in political environments.

- In this context of misinformation especially caused by online media, students turn to printed press to obtain reliable information and have become aware that the fight against fake news will be achieved essentially through education.

- It became clear that this problem will not be easily solve and that it will take people some time to come up with the right solutions.

- It is crucial to reinforce the confidence that citizens place in the media without compromising the principles of freedom and democracy.
Even though the scope of this study on students’ perception of fake news was limited by the size of the sample used, it was important not only to identify elements that played an important role in the analysis and reflection processes, but also to point out core focus areas that have been critical to better understand the influence of fake news in Portugal.

Therefore, in further research, it would be useful to conduct a broader analysis involving high school and higher education students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was financed by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UID/Multi/04016/2016. Furthermore, we would like to thank the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu and Center for Studies in Education, Technologies and Health for their support.
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THANK YOU