MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE MISINFORMATION

Nídia Salomé Nina de Morais & Filomena Antunes Sobral
CONTEXT

- Producing and receiving information has become a common habit and digital generations have found multiple different forms to communicate.

- Online misinformation has become a reality and where the dissemination of false information is becoming increasingly significant, young people are more and more likely to be influenced and manipulated by news that are but distorted and deceptive.

- Fake news are spreading all over the world and have become a relevant issue that should be regarded as a major object of study in higher education institutions and namely in communication studies.

- Young people who spend a lot of time on the Internet are particularly vulnerable to the kind of manipulation: What do students know about fake news? Where do young people get their news from?
CASE STUDY AND OBJECTIVES

“Media and communication students’ perceptions of online misinformation” is a case study conducted in a Portuguese Public Higher Education Institution and whose aim was to identify the student’s perceptions of fake news.

Specific objectives aimed to identify:
- the participants’ level of confidence in news media,
- frequency of fake news consumption,
- areas affected by fake news,
- channels used to share fake news,
- precautions that have to be taken before sharing any kind of news,
- factors that help spot fake news,
- factors that contribute to fake news spreading,
- factors that may motivate the creation of fake news,
- students’ opinion on fake news.
METHODOLOGY

- In **methodological** terms, the study falls within a qualitative research paradigm: a case study was developed.

- The application of a survey by **questionnaire** was the instrument used to data collection.

- The questionnaire was developed with reference to the European Commission's report on 'Fake news and disinformation online' and consisted of 12 questions.

- This questionnaire was validated by experts and was implemented using Google Drive and was made available for response between May 20th and May 27th, 2019.

- 49 students attending a Bachelor's Degree in Media and Communication answered the questionnaire.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Participants:

Most of the participants were female students and were between 21 and 23 years old.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Participants:

When asked about the field in which they would like to work in the future, most students reported they would like to work in television (43%). Working for online digital media came second in the participants’ choices (29%). The areas that seem to be less attractive for future professionals in the field of social communication are radio (12%) and printed press (16%).
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Degree of confidence in News Media:

The results obtained reveal that the vast majority of students seem to have confidence in the information they get on radio (83.7%), on television (75.5%), in newspapers and/or printed magazines (75.5%) and on podcasts (63.3%).

On the other hand, evidence shows that participants feel quite skeptical when asked about news shared on social networks (73.5%), found on websites (63.3%) and on online newspapers and magazines (51%).

Students consider that messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, are highly unreliable (46.9% of them feel “Not confident” while 24.5% feel “Not at all confident”).
**ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

- **Frequency of fake news consumption:**

  The results indicate that most students come across this type of information every day (42.9%) or at least once a week (30.6%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyday</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once a week</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a month</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely or almost never</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Areas affected by fake news:

In the participants’ perspective, topics related to society (news or gossips about famous people) (83.7%) and politics (65.3%) and sport (36.7%) are more prone to be affected by the dissemination of false news.

Economics (16.3%), science (12.2%), technology (8.2%) and health care (2%) are those where less false or manipulated news seem to be disseminated.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Channels used to share fake news:

According to the respondents' opinion, social media are the main channel used to share fake news: 81.6% reveal that they often are faced with this kind of news on social media.

Television, newspapers and YouTubers’ videos seem to be the channels that share less false news. Most students indicated that they have come across fake news “Not very often” (69.4%, 63.3% and 59.2% respectively) in those media.

Keywords: Fake news, disinformation, students, higher education, Portugal.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Precautions that have to be taken before sharing any kind of news:

Before sharing any kind of news, students often:

- check the way they are written (53.1%),
- verify the date of their publication (49%),
- check out the authors and whether or not the sources are mentioned (46.9%),
- take time to confirm where the different news were originally published (42.9%).
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Factors that help spot fake news:

In the perception of the vast majority of students who have participated in the study (71.4%), the development of critical thinking is one of the most important factors to help spot the presence of fake news.

The knowledge they get from school comes right after (57.1%).

They are also aware of the importance of specific training in digital literacy (51% think it is important and 32.7% very important).

The help one gets from family (38.8% considered it important and 18.4% very important).
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Factors that contribute to fake news spreading:

Users’ low digital literacy levels are, in the opinion of the vast majority of participants (71.4%), one of the main reasons that contribute to false news spreading.

In the perspective of 69.4%, social media also contribute to the dissemination of fake news because they allow the sharing of news coming from unconfirmed sources.

53.1% consider that the users’ desire to express their personal opinions and to slander other people’s opinions fosters the dissemination of fake news.

36.7% think that the dissemination of false news is related to the users’ need to share their ideological motivations.
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Factors that may motivate the creation of fake news:

As for the main motivations for creating false or manipulated news, the vast majority of students (79.6%) points to sensationalism.

Political (44.9%), ideological (32.7%) and economic motivations (24.5%) are the factors that come next.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
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<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political motivations</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological motivations</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic motivations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensationalism</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For fun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Students’ opinion on fake news:

One of the trends that arises from the results obtained is the concern of the vast majority of the participants (65.3% totally agree) with the need to develop more and more efficient regulation to help confront the fake news phenomenon.

Practically all students express their agreement (59.2% strongly agree and 38.8% agree) with the fact that the dissemination of false news is a way of manipulating attitudes and opinions.

Most of them also admit that they have already clicked on the title of a news and only then did they realize that it was a fake news (57.1% strongly agree and 40.8% agree).
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Students’ opinion on fake news:

There is also a strong tendency to agree on how easy it is to create fake news that seems credible to users (53.1% strongly agree and 38.8% agree).

There is no doubt that information overload blurs the distinction between credible news and fake news (53.1% agree and 34.7% strongly agree).
CONCLUSIONS

 renown objective of the study presented was to understand how a group of higher education students perceive the fake news phenomenon.

 renown results obtained with the application of the questionnaire, although they cannot be generalized, provide relevant information on the matter and allow the conclusions:

 renown When they were asked to specify the medium they trust most when they want to find a certain information, students show they place great confidence in the traditional media like radio, television and print (newspapers and magazines).

 renown On the other hand, social networks and websites seem to be the least trustworthy media when people want to access reliable information.

 renown The sharing of fake news is constant, notably through social media, and that the topics that are most frequently targeted by this kind of misinformation are those involving famous people and political issues.
CONCLUSIONS

Students who have participated in the study seem concerned about this fake or manipulated news phenomenon and assume responsible behaviors:

- In fact, the results suggest that young people check the way the different news are written, verify the date of their publication, check the identity of the authors and whether or not the sources are mentioned, and try to verify the media in which the news were originally published.

- The findings of this research suggest that users’ low digital literacy levels and their constant use of social media are some of the main reasons for the spreading of false news.

- Those findings also suggest that sensationalism and ideological and political motivations are responsible for the creation of this type of news.
CONCLUSIONS

ʘ Users’ desire to share their ideological motivations and to express their personal opinions and criticize others’ points of view are some other important factors that usually lead to the creation and dissemination of fake news.

ʘ One of the most important conclusions of this research is the recognition that a greater regulation to help fight the fake news phenomenon is truly needed.

ʘ In fact, the implementation of some kind of regulation is imperative because, as suggested by our conclusions, it is very easy to create false news that seems perfectly credible to users and that are capable of manipulating attitudes and opinions and because it is often very difficult to tell the difference between trustworthy news and fake news.
FUTURE INVESTIGATION

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.
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REFERENCES


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THANK YOU

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