Individual Responsibility in the Process of Information Handling.
A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract. *The increased amounts of inaccurate, truncated or fabricated information flowing through different channels of communication indicate the need for understanding better the disinformation phenomenon, and how people are confronted with it. Considering that such understanding might indicate valuable paths towards mitigating disinformation impacts, the present paper presents the results of a qualitative study based on face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted in the end of 2018 with Romanian postgraduate students. The study portrays the disinformation phenomenon through interviewee's eyes. It delineates the main areas of concern, commonly shared opinions, adopted attitudes and self-protection behaviors. revealing a high level of awareness among Romanian youth with high education. The findings emphasize the importance of critical thinking. The study concludes that, apart from the tools provided by fact-checkers, technology companies and regulatory bodies, the increase of citizen's responsibility is needed to tackle disinformation and misinformation, because people's involvement is required to grow the level of critical thinking and media literacy at an individual and societal level.*

Keywords: individual's responsibility; citizen's responsibility; critical thinking; media literacy; misinformation; disinformation.

Introduction

Information fuels the engine that drives our century, but more and more frequently questions are raised about its quality, leading to global concerns (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). As the report released by European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) shows, at least half of the EU citizens participating in the 2018 Eurobarometer survey have declared they are coming across disinformation and *fake news* at least once a week, over 83% of them considering this situation a serious threat to democracy (EPRS, 2019). Highly similar, the results of the survey conducted by Mozilla Foundation on a sample of 58468 worldwide participants, reports that 77% of the respondents are highly and extremely concerned with disinformation spread (Mozilla Foundation, 2019).

Therefore, the disinformation, *fake news,* and *post-truth* have permeated our lives, being recognized as worldwide issues (Andrei, Zait, Stoian, Tugulea, & Manolica, 2019). Oxford Dictionary nominated the term *post-truth* as the word of the year in 2016 (BBC, 2016) and the term fake-news reached over 1 billion searches on Google in 2019. The issues related to the integrity of elections and the health of democracy indicate major threats. The discussions revolving around *digital virality*, a *vaccine against misinfomemes* (Gyenes & Mina, 2018), *digital dictatorship* (Harari, 2018) or *digital dementia* (Spitzer, 2012) portray the society and individuals as hopeless victims. New terms such as *clickbait*, *echo chamber* or *filter bubble* reveal to us a vocabulary aimed to describe a reality that seems more likely to be detached from the Brave

New World dystopia (Huxley, 1932) than belong to predictions for the bright future that had been made initially for the launch of the Internet. So, the promise for the emergence of an informed citizen, a citizen connected to the great debates of humanity, benefitting from the waking-up effect of shared knowledge, is now stuck with the image of a citizen, who is a victim of disinformation campaigns, or even worse - a prisoner of the grid.

How to deal with such impactful phenomena, if some of the nuances of what is generally labeled as 'inappropriately used' or incorrect information don't even exist in all languages?

That being the case, among the initial endeavors of mitigating disinformation impacts, the issues of terminology were addressed, in order to reduce confusion and decipher the intricate nexus between different types of misleading information. In this context, the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) officially endorses the information disorder framework of Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), distinguishing between three types of false (and/or harmful) information, as follows: "Mis-information: false information that is shared inadvertently, without meaning to cause harm; Dis-information: intending to cause harm, by deliberately sharing false information and Mal-information: genuine information or opinion shared to cause harm, e.g. hate speech, harassment." (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017 – cited in EPRS, 2019, p.5). Thus, EPRS (2019) recommends the usage of the terms disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information, aligning its position with the voices (Habgood-Coote, 2018) claiming that there are considerable problems with the prevalence of the *fake news* and *post-truth* terminology, and suggesting that we should not use these terms. In this regard, Habgood-Coote (2018) offers three arguments for abandoning the terms *fake-news* and *post-truth*, showing that these terms are linguistically defective (because they don't have stable public meanings), these terms are unnecessary (because they do not add useful descriptive resources to the language) and these terms are propaganda (because they have been used as political weapons). What the author tries to say is not that the content under these labels is not there, but that using these effervescent and artificially created expressions can contribute to the general confusion, perpetuating the bad consequences over societal health.

Also, a lot of space was given on the public and academic agenda to the debates focused on finding solutions for reducing disinformation impact. In this vein, EPRS (2019) and a large number of other studies (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Colliander, 2019; Ku, Kong, Song, Deng, Kang, & Hu, 2019; Wang, Tong, & Danovitch, 2019; Lee, 2019; Andrei, Zait, Stoian, Tugulea, & Manolica, 2019; Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017; Garrett, 2017; Søe, 2018; to exemplify just a few of them) have focused on diagnosing the phenomena associated with disinformation, trying to suggest potential ways of mitigating its impact. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) have considered a broad perspective, suggesting that the so-called *post-truth era* emerged as a result of a decline in social capital and trust, induced by the growing economic inequalities and the excessive polarization of media. The authors bring evidence on the role of disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information in public-health crisis (by fueling the controversy on vaccines), in undermining policies for carbon footprint reduction, or in increasing society's receptivity towards conspiracy theories. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) expect the potential solution to result from ample interdisciplinary contributions incorporating psychological principles and technology into a process they label as *techno-cognition*. Looking at causes and solutions, the authors refer to *echo-chambers* phenomena, which perpetuates the information conforming to people's pre-existent beliefs and biases, making the use of counter-evidence less efficient in the dispel of misconceptions. The argument of the echo-chamber distraction is also used by Garrett (2017), although he indicates a higher impact of the strategic use of disinformation in promoting certain interests (i.e. political objectives) comparing to the exposure-based effects of echo-chambers. As Garett (2017) deems, disinformation campaigns are the problem, not the audience fragmentation.

However, Garrett (2017) suggests three instruments of counteracting disinformation, as follows: (1) helping users to correct their peers; (2) accounting for accuracy in search engine results; (3) using technology to promote what Garrett (2017) calls civility. The author states that the use of these instruments might contribute to the slowing down of the hostile and false content spreading.

Although Søe (2018, p. 310) have presented the philosophical underpinnings postulating that "information is objective, true, it is communication and representation", and warned that "the full story is more complicated than mere detection of truth and falsity", EPRS (2019) have concluded that the decline of disinformation and the rise of information would be possible if corroborated measures are taken, at least in the following areas: the improvement of regulations and vigilance, the implementation of technical

changes, detection algorithms and fact-checking systems, as well as citizens involvement and the boost of media literacy at the societal level.

In the general context mentioned above, a qualitative study was conducted to explore the disinformation phenomenon, as seen by educated young people living in Romania. In the following sections of the paper, the research procedure, the results and the conclusions of the study are presented.

Research procedure

Perceptions and opinions regarding disinformation phenomena, as well as individuals' attitudes and reactions towards the inaccurate informational content, were investigated using a qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The study was conducted in November 2018 on a sample of postgraduate students (N = 20 participants, 60% female, 22-28 years old, Romanian nationality). The profile of study participants was decided according to the researcher's aim of exploring the views and attitudes on the discussed matter among educated young people living in Romania, who were born after the fall of the communist regime. Participants were recruited on the basis of accessibility, and their anonymity was preserved in the aggregated findings.

Each interview lasted between 110 to 120 minutes and consisted of face-to-face discussions conducted according to an interview guide meant to surface thorough information about the widest range of meanings held by study participants on the investigated topic. Each participant was asked to use visual representations (i.e. images, drawings, photos) accompanied by storytelling in order to express the ideas, thoughts and felt impressions on the discussed matter. Taking into account that storytelling centered on such visual representations reveals a person's metaphorical thinking (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the use of images was adopted in the present study to explore the topic according to the indications regarding metaphor elicitation proposed by Zaltman (1995). The approach was considered appropriate to surface the deep meanings embedded in interviewees' minds during the current investigation, given the role of metaphors in enabling people to articulate their views (Lakoff & Johnson,1980; Coulter & Zaltman,1995). Moreover, the use of metaphors in past studies resulted in valuable findings on a wide range of research topics: Kendall and Kendall (1993); Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008); Andrei, Zait, and Vatamanescu (2015); Jackson (2016); Danilet and Stoian (2017).

Therefore, the storytelling based on the metaphorical images was used in the present study to surface the profound meanings, which would otherwise have been more difficult to verbalize. In this way, the in-depth views regarding the disinformation phenomenon were unveiled, and interviewees' observations, perceptions, understandings, attitudes and self-protection behaviors against disinformation were discussed in a detailed manner.

Computer assistance was used during the interviews to handle the storytelling based on the metaphorical images. The interviews were conducted in the Romanian language, and all of them were transcribed. Finally, the transcripts of the interviews have been analyzed, and the results were reported in the current paper. Without insisting on the visual images or sensory metaphors used by interviewees to disclose their thoughts, the current report focuses on the verbalized discourse used to explain (via storytelling) the thoughts attached to metaphorical images, and therefore, the paper presents interviewees' declarations, which were English translated to allow for a presentation of quotes.

Results

The research revealed that study participants are highly aware of disinformation phenomenon, most of them indicating in one way or another the sensation of "living in a world where the probability of adopting a mistaken attitude is huge, because more and more often it is hard to tell which information is accurate and which is not" (P1, male, 28 years old). Moreover, 80% of the interviewees were very specific in highlighting the differences between intentional versus non-intentional sharing of misleading information and the degree of induced harm: "Although there is a clear distinction between the harm produced by those presenting the information in an intentionally wrong, or deliberately manipulative manner with the

purpose of leading public's misconception or mistaken attitudes, and those offering misleading information as a consequence of their ignorance or naivety, but without bad intent, we can easily notice there are damaging impacts on the audience which are inflicted by the former, but also by the latter" (P1, male, 28 years old). To better support this idea two of the interviewees (P6, female, 22 years old, and P13, male, 24 years old) brought some examples of "maleficent liars" who were able to carry out their fabrication based plans on long-term, highlighting the increased harm they have produced compared to "the circumstantial liars or the naive ones".

Regarding the experienced feelings, the most frequent mentions indicated highly negative states, such as doubt, worry, uncertainty, mistrust, frustration, desolation, hopelessness, and anxiety.

The most frequent keyword used by study participants in their discourse was "manipulation", followed closely by "mass-media", "propaganda", "brainwashing", "captivity" and "decay". Study participants indicated that "manipulative intents are the source of falsity, malicious lobby practices and facts distortion directed towards controlling others" (P2, female, 23 years old).

Most participants noticed the high amount of inaccurate content encountered in all types of sources while searching for information on a particular topic of interest. The process of information search made them aware of the magnitude of disinformation, arousing their generalized suspicion and distrust over media. They consider themselves "surrounded by uncertainty" (P4, male, 24 years old), because "there are people in high ranks, people from media, and ordinary people who are providing incomplete and distorted information, either with or without intent" (P3, female, 22 years old).

Although the recent literature related to disinformation issues (Andrei, Zait, Stoian, Tugulea, & Manolica, 2019; Colliander, 2019; EPRS, 2019;) are focused on the online context, the participants of the present study have discussed extensively the harmful contribution brought by traditional mass-media, especially by television. In one way or another, study participants opinionated that the content wired by television has a high impact in Romania, because "the TV is much more used than the Internet by a significant part of Romanians - mainly the older people and those living in rural areas" (P17, male, 24 years old). Therefore, the present study reveals a higher level of suspicion directed towards the content delivered by traditional mass-media, especially by television. In this vein, the TV channels are seen as "manipulator's arms" (P6, female, 22 years old) "constantly used to distract the audience" (P8, female, 25 years old), "to apply brainwashing procedures and transform the people into easy to control flocks of robots" (P11, male, 24 years old). Almost all interviewees (90%) mentioned that "a huge amount of either misleading or pointless and frothy content is wired to divert people's attention" (P20, female, 26 years old). "Because distracted people are more prone to believe what it is served as a so-called truth" (P17, male, 24 years old) the interviewees consider that mass-media outlets are used "to cover people's eyes and ears and prevent them from observing what really matters" (P16, female, 24 years old). As P19 (female, 25 years old) explained, "if you don't want people to see what's really going on, use the mass-media to build a wall around them, and most of them will definitely cease to strive to look beyond that wall".

Regarding the online environment, the most commonly used keywords were "surveillance" and "control". As P15 (female, 26 years old) explained, "the real danger is the increase of surveillance because it makes easier to set customized traps and get unlimited control". Most interviewees have suggested their concerns about this issue, which is considered the most problematic threat.

Some interviewees mentioned that disinformation is more dangerous than it seems to be at the first glance because "most of the time it is disguised in the catchy form of the benefits, and only later people can see the disaster. That is why society is so vulnerable. Because disinformation feeds people's false hopes" (P18, male, 26 years old).

As study participants indicated, a lot of people take the information as it is offered to them, because "they are somehow trapped, preferring the easy path of inaction and laziness instead of thinking and getting out of their comfort zone to search the missing parts of the puzzle" (P5, female, 25 years old). In this regard, study participants have indicated that "the vigilance represents a must-have in order to avoid delusions and mistaken decisions" (P10, female, 24 years old). They have mentioned the importance of "checking, and checking again the information you receive" (P6, female, 22 years old), the daily use of multiple sources of documentation for comparing the content of news and any topic of interest, highlighting the role of "spotting doubtful content and its sources" (P14, male, 23 years old). Also, some participants insisted on

the importance of debates and "discussions whenever things seem controversial" (P12, female, 23 years old), emphasizing the idea of exchanging opinions.

With no exception, study participants indicated that people should scrutinize more carefully the information they receive, but first of all, they should be more willing to see the reality, to make efforts to decipher it: "Maybe sometimes it's not easy at all to find out the truth. But we are surrounded by the information of all sorts! If you stay connected to the reality and use your brains, you can analyze the information you get, you can document yourself, and you can see if there is something fishy. Also, you can debate the subject with different people (P9, male, 27 years old). However, as P7 (female, 25 years old) pointed out, "first of all, people should want to see the reality. They should seek the truth, and they should strive to think for themselves". In this context, another idea that emerged from the interviews was the need for a collective vigilance: "You can protect yourself against disinformation if people around you are doing the same. You cannot resist it if most people around you are sleeping. So help them to open their eyes and switch on thinking" (P9, male, 27 years old).

Conclusions and discussion

The present research revealed how disinformation phenomenon is seen by Romanian postgraduate students (22-28 years old), depicting the main areas of concern, the opinions commonly shared, the attitudes and self-protection behaviors adopted by study participants to resist disinformation's assault.

Indicating a high level of awareness regarding the magnitude and the harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation spreading, the results have shown that study participants distinguish very clear between the intentional and non-intentional dissemination of false, distorted, inaccurate or incomplete information. They highlighted the deep sense of frustration, desolation, hopelessness or anxiety they have often felt, given the cumulative effect of disinformation and misinformation. In this regard, they emphasized the fact that intentional deceivers are using people's naivety as a double-sword for getting victims and spreaders, at the same time. They emphasized the deep harm produced at the society level exactly because of this situation in which those who fall prey to disinformation are in the same time in the position of a victim, but also in the position of making other victims who become in their turn facilitators in the ongoing process of obscuring the truth and inducing a wrong course of action.

Study participants indicated the online environment as the main source they use to inform themselves, but also the main area of concern. They opinionated that the most problematic threat is related to the abusive use of technology, which might upturn the online environment into a tool of manipulation, control, and surveillance, replacing the promise of an interconnected world with a dark society dismissing citizen freedom.

Although study participants indicated the online environment as their main source of news and information, they have emphasized the high impact of traditional mass media (especially television) on other categories of public (such as older people and those living in rural areas). Study participants have expressed their worries regarding the contribution of television in distracting and misleading a significant part of the population, indicating the high need for improving the journalism standards in Romania.

The findings of our qualitative research have shown that study participants consider that a '*do-not-trust-before-double-checking*' attitude represents a minimum sanitation requirement in the actual circumstances.

Although a person's prudence can sometimes prove ineffective, and a collective vigilance is needed, all participants in the present study have indicated that fighting against disinformation starts with critical thinking and contrasting the information from different sources. In this vein, the findings of the present study are consistent with literature indications (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Wang, Tong, & Danovitch, 2019; Ku, Kong, Song, Deng, Kang, & Hu, 2019; Colliander, 2019; Rayess, Chebl, Mhanna, & Hage, 2018; Flanagin & Metzger, 2008) regarding the importance of critical thinking, and person's responsibility of using it in order to countervail the effects of disinformation. In this regard, we remind the results of a recent study, which applied Cognitive Reflection Test to investigate the assumption that "susceptibility to fake news is driven more by lazy thinking than it is by partisan bias per se" (Pennycook & Rand, 2019, p. 39), concluding that "people fall for fake news because they fail to think" (Pennycook & Rand, 2019, p. 48). Several other studies (Wang, Tong, & Danovitch, 2019; Ku, Kong, Song, Deng, Kang, & Hu, 2019; Colliander, 2019; Rayess,

Chebl, Mhanna, & Hage, 2018; Flanagin & Metzger, 2008) reached similar conclusions regarding the importance of critical thinking, education and media literacy in counteracting disinformation.

In the accordance with aforementioned studies, the findings of the qualitative study we have conducted with Romanian postgraduate students indicated that apart from the tools provided by fact-checkers, technology companies and regulatory bodies, the increase of citizen responsibility is needed to tackle disinformation and misinformation, because people involvement is required to grow the level of critical thinking and media literacy at individual and societal level.

Our study brought to the fore the importance of enhancing the individual's responsibility, indicating that the role of involved citizens becomes highly important if these citizens are equipped with the necessary skills to fight disinformation. Therein, our result is supported also by the findings of Colliander (2019). As author shows, although factual information and counter-evidence have an important role in mitigating the effect of disinformation, an important influence factor is the conformity to others' views, which makes peer pressure more effective in either correcting or perpetuating misperceptions, the study indicating that the actions of the others are more effective than disclaimers in countering false news.

Since the ZMET interviewing method used in the present study uncovered the participant's subconscious thoughts, practical implications resulted from both the findings and the process of the investigation. The students participating in the study experienced the instant benefit of heightened awareness regarding the importance of the individual contribution that each person can make in the fight against disinformation and misinformation. As a result, further questions arose among participating students: What's the best way for us to contribute towards counteracting disinformation? What would be the most effective course of immediate action?

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