Fake News or Disinformation 2.0? Some Insights into Romanians' Digital Behaviour

Alina Bârgăoanu, Loredana Radu[1]

Abstract: *This paper focuses on digital behaviour, self-assessment of vulnerabilities to digital disinformation, and patterns of trust as exposed by Romanian citizens. By corroborating the data of the first national public opinion survey on fake news and disinformation (implemented between February and March 2018) with the Special Eurobarometer no. 464 – Fake News and Disinformation Online – implemented in the same time frame (February 2018), we capture the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian citizens over the use of new media and news trustworthiness, and we also compare the Romanians' online behaviour with the average European's. As similar research reveals, digital disinformation affects resilience of citizens in Member States and in the European Union overall, it "threatens the democratic political processes and values" (European Commission, 2018: 12), the integrity of elections and political processes, and should therefore, be approached as a legitimate public concern. Our paper opens the floor for more dedicated research and applied policies - at both the Member States and EU levels - aimed at mitigating the rising and ever worrying fake news phenomenon.*

Keywords: *disinformation, fake news, online platforms, public trust*

1. Introduction. A New Communication Ecosystem

The year 2016 will go down in history as the one when the Brexit referendum took place and Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States of America. Notably, right after the Brexit referendum, then-candidate Trump announced (actually tweeted) that he would surely win the elections in what he called "Brexit times 10". The same year, the Oxford Dictionaries' international word was "post-truth", describing a situation "in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com). The Munich Security Report 2017, offered as a background document for the Munich Security Conference 2017 was aptly entitled "Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order?". (https://www.securityconference.de/).

One of the characteristics of the contemporary period is the revival of communication in public affairs – be they national, European or global in scope. Reconsidering the role of communication in framing and interpreting events, its stunning capacity to create, circulate

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and reinforce labels, as well as its quasi-domination over other social fields, such as finance, politics, diplomacy – is a remarkable development. Social sciences vocabulary, as well as that of ordinary people has been extended to accommodate new terms such as fake news, digital deceit, narrowcasting, filter bubbles, echo chambers, viral auto-bots, like factories, computational amplification, computational propaganda, precision segmentation and persuasion, psychographics profiling, data-driven micro-targeting, troll diplomacy and what not. These terms seek to describe and explain – sometimes more evidence-based, sometimes less so – "the new information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) – meaning the changes, even information "pathologies" that characterize the contemporary information, communication and persuasion ecosystem.

The new phenomena pertaining to the contemporary information, communication and persuasion ecosystem have started to capture the attention of high-profile politicians, decision-makers, or institutions. As we well know, the term "fake news" was elevated to the mainstream of global political discourse by President Trump during the Presidential campaign, who thus was conveying his dissatisfaction with what he considered "unrelenting bias and unfair news coverage" provided by legacy media such as CNN or New York Times. In January 2018, President Trump announced the "Fake News Awards", whose winners were (a combination between persons, media outlets and media stories): the New York Times' Paul Krugman, BC News' Brian Ross CHOKES, CNN, TIME, Washington Post, Newsweek (www.gop.com, 2018). Leaving this highly flamboyant and politically charged endeavour, the term fake news and the larger phenomena it encompasses ignited the interest of Pope Francis, who delivered a dedicated message for World Communications Day" (24 January 2018), entitled "The truth will set you free. Fake news and journalism for peace" (Pope Francis, 2018). Other high-profile contemporary personalities who have recently paid attention to the phenomenon of fake news, digital disinformation, information warfare, post-fact world are, among others, George Soros (2018), Kofi Annan (2018), Francis Fukuyama (2017), or Joseph Nye (2017). The topic of "fake news" has made it to rather unusual debate outlets, such as "Foreign Affairs", "The Economist", whose focus is rarely captured by issues related to communication, mass media, or online/ Internet platforms.

Attempts at regulating the spread of false stories in the online environment have started to surface more and more often, especially in the context of elections (France, Germany, Italy) and in January 2018 the European Commission convened a High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, whose report was released in March (European Commission, 2018). Based on this cursory analysis, one can safely say that both the term "fake news" (arguably a misleading one – see next section) and the larger phenomena of digital misinformation and disinformation, digital deceit, information warfare, hybrid threats, data warfare – have risen to the top of intellectual and policy concerns.

2. Fake News Or? Some Attempts at Conceptualisation

The term "fake news" – popular and worrisome as it may already be – is, according to many authors, even official documents, a misnomer (for official documents, see, for example, the Council of Europe Report, 2017, or the Final Report of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation). Without ignoring the "reality" of fake

news as a subset of larger communication and information phenomena, more encompassing terms have been proposed: "information disorders" (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017), "digital disinformation 2.0" (Bârgăoanu, 2018), "digital deceit" (Ghosh and Scott, 2018).

There are at least *eight reasons* why we consider *the term to be incomplete*, even misleading. Given the fact that evidence-based research regarding the changes brought about by platform companies and their technologies in the communication, information and persuasion ecosystem are just at the beginning, we consider such conceptual clarifications (scope and definitions) to be of outmost importance.

1. The first reason why the term "fake news" is a misnomer has to do with a thing on which we have already focused: the fact that it is highly politicized, weaponized and turned into an umbrella term under which different phenomena can be clustered, including those having to do with media bias, unfavourable, possibly hostile media coverage, even opinions. Leaving this extra-conceptual reason aside, we are left with at least seven reasons pointing to much more pervasive, dynamic, sometime toxic characteristics of the communication and information ecosystem.

2. "Fake news" is not (entirely) fake. The reality of digital disinformation defies the old dichotomy/binary classification "false – true" and spans a continuum defined by these two extremes – from completely false/completely fabricated to stories that are more factual, possibly completely factual. The mixture between different doses of "true" and "false" makes the phenomenon that we are talking about so difficult to detect, let alone to tackle.

3. "Fake news" is (not only) news. News – in the traditional sense of having to with something new – is still of relevance here, but one can encounter a whole range of (pseudo)-information pieces that do not fall under the traditional newsworthiness criteria: old stories brought to the present or repeated over and over again, in spite of the fact that no new developments have taken place; information devoid of context; opinions that are sold as facts; hyper-partisan coverage; conspiracies; rumours; moral outrage and moral panics; everything coupled with strong visual content (photos, videos, memes).

Until now, we are more or less in the field of traditional disinformation, which is consubstantial with the existence of mediated communication, especially with the spread of mass communication media in the modern period. The remaining reasons try to capture the metamorphoses brought about to these traditional phenomena by the ascent of online/social/Internet platforms and their technologies. In order to reflect what is new about the contemporary communication, information and persuasion ecosystem, we propose the term disinformation 2.0.

4. Unlike traditional disinformation, where pieces of "news" – no matter where they were placed on the false – true continuum – were discrete, "bits and pieces" that could be discretely identified within a limited flow of communication, and whose boundaries could be drawn along journalistic genres, when talking about digital disinformation 2.0, we no longer deal with these "bits and pieces", with boundaries, but with a virtually endless flow of "news" (in the traditional sense), opinions, emotions, reactions, pictures (of ours or of our peers, as well as pictures about the flow of events), online services. The online/social/Internet platforms on which news, opinions, statements, rumours, conspiracies, fabricated stories circulate are the same platforms from which the digital consumers spread info about

their latest achievements, find out about their friends' achievements, where they buy online services, engage in online dating etc. The flow of "fake news" – which, as we could see, is neither entirely fake, nor only news, is inserted into this practically endless flow hosted by the online platforms.

5. Another reason why we do not merely deal "fake news" is the fact that disinformation 2.0 also encompasses the digital behaviour that is traceable on the online/social/Internet platforms. This digital behaviour – in the form of "like", "react", "share", "post and repost", "tweet and re-tweet", "review" etc. – contributes to the digital amplification of the digital content – fake or not, news or not. The technological possibility created by the online/Internet platforms to host, document and further circulate our digital behaviour in relation to the digital content creates a completely different ecosystem compared to that of the legacy media, where feedback was limited, undocumented, hence difficult to grasp precisely.

6. The digital content, which already does not have precise boundaries, intermingles with a lot of personal or professional information, lies at the crossroads of facts, opinions and emotions, and is influenced by our traceable engagement with it – can be technologically amplified. One type of technological amplification can be done by means of bots, fake accounts, fake writers, troll and like factories, by the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning into endeavours to boost content, get more likes, more reactions, more shares etc. The recent revelations about the scale of the "black market" for fake online accounts, fake followers, "fake crowds", although in need of further evidence and further reflection, cover a new reality created by the explosion of online/Internet platforms (Confessore et. al., 2018).

7. The other type of technological amplification is done by what is called precision advertising, algorithmic advertising, data-driven behavioural segmentation, "psychographics profiling", computational profiling, computational persuasion or even propaganda. Long before the explosion of the Cambridge Analytica scandal into global public sphere, efforts towards exposing and explaining such phenomena based on rigorously collected evidence have made it to the academic research world (see, for example, the Oxford Internet Institute, that "since 2012, [has] been investigating the use of algorithms, automation and computational propaganda in public life").

8. One final characteristic, which is also a caveat regarding the consubstantiality between disinformation 2.0 and the explosion of platform technologies, online/Internet platforms has to do with the fact that, more often than not, "disinformation campaigns and legitimate advertising campaigns are effectively indistinguishable on [these] leading internet platforms" (Ghosh and Scott, 2018: 33); and the dominant tools, technologies and practices of digital disinformation are the same as those used by these legitimate advertising or persuasion campaigns: "listening to social media to map sentiment, pre-loading both organic and promoted content distribution, and coordinating across multiple platforms and sites in order to create a backlink economy that drives SEO - these are weapons of choice for disinformation. Once again, there is nothing inherently nefarious about these tools themselves. They are perfectly legal and for the most part even align with the economic interests of the platforms. All parties in this ecosystem benefit financially from successful advertising campaigns. They have developed brilliant tools to achieve more consistent persuasion. But they have also

opened the door to abuses that harm the public by weakening the integrity of democracy" (Ghosh and Scott, 2018: 25).

3. Digital disinformation: a phenomenon in search of more evidence

Most research on the new communication ecosystem is very recent, an aspect that already reveals the gap between the scale of the phenomena, on the one hand, and the related scholarly interest and dedicated literature, on the other one. However, in the light of some striking events (i.e. ISIS online propaganda, 2014 Ukrainian crisis, 2016 US elections, 2016 Brexit,) research on fake news has flourished and expanded beyond online newspapers and the traditional methods (such as content analysis), so as to capture online/Internet platforms (including YouTube), thus matching the dynamic and ever changing online behaviour of individuals/voters.

Spohr (2017) traced the links between fake news and ideological polarization during the Brexit referendum. Evidence has been provided that two well-segregated "echo-chambers" co-exist in the online media: users tend to focus on one narrative and ignore the other', no middle-course is possible in most situations. Amid this polarization occurred spontaneously as a result of user behaviour on Facebook, two variables are thought to influence the users' attachment to one or the other "echo-chambers": the distance between the sentiment of the same story or subject in two echo-chambers, and the emotional response of the users consuming the content (Spohr, 2017). In a similar vein, Bastos and Mercea (2017) collected approximately 10M tweets associated with the referendum and uncovered a network of Twitterbots comprising 13,493 accounts that tweeted the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum (e.g., #voteleave, #voteremain, #votein, #voteout, #leaveeu, #bremain, #strongerin, #brexit, and #euref). Bot activity is concerned with the imitation of human activity on Internet platforms by computer scripts. Researchers have scrutinized the impact of bots as an upshot of the intensity, reach, and speed of their activity, in addition to examining their network influence and the information dissemination patterns that characterized their actions during the last month of the EU referendum campaign. According to Bastos and Mercea (2017), the impact of a botnet may depend on whether it is embedded in a larger network of active users or, alternatively, restricted to a cluster of bots. Furthermore, the more engagement with human agents the botnet generates, the more likely it is to widen cascades beyond the botnet. The Computational Propaganda Project (www.politicalbots.org) attempted to trace the Russian involvement and junk news during Brexit (Narayanan et. al., 2017). By employing a data set of 5,811,102 Brexit Tweets (combination of pro-leave, pro-remain and neutral hashtags) the study was aimed to support communication specialists discern how bots were being used to amplify political communication relative to Brexit. The research concluded – rather shallowly, we might add – that despite poor evidence on Russian direct involvement in Twitter and YouTube pro-Brexit campaign, "a matter of concern however is the large number of accounts both human and automated, that shared polarizing and provocative content over the social media platform in days leading up to the referendum" (Narayanan et. al., 2017: 4).

In 2016, Stanford University initiated a research designed to offer the theoretical and empirical background to frame the debate on false stories/effects in 2016 US elections

(Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). By building on a 1,200-person post-election online survey and a database of 156 election-related news stories that were categorized as false by leading fact-checking websites in the three months before the election, researchers concluded that "the average US adult read and remembered on the order of one or perhaps several fake news articles during the election period, with higher exposure to pro-Trump articles than pro-Clinton articles" (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 232). These conclusions are complemented by evidence reported by Nelson and Taneja (2018), who by examining online visitation data across mobile and desktop platforms in the months leading up to and following the 2016 US presidential election, found that fake news audience comprises a small, yet disloyal group of heavy Internet users, who play an outsized role in generating traffic to fake news.

The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict has been scrutinized by Khaldarova and Pantti (2016). By looking at the narratives of allegedly fake news on Channel One (e.g. fabricated stories as extreme projections of Russia's strategic narratives), and the attempts of the Ukrainian fact-checking website Stopfake.org to counter the Russian narrative by refuting misinformation and exposing misleading images about Ukraine. One important conclusion has been that the sentiments contained within all individual Russian-, Ukrainian- and English-language tweets, which were categorized as either explicitly trusting or distrusting the news story, played a pivotal role in shaping users' opinions vis-à-vis the Ukrainian topics.

Departing from telephone surveys of Israeli voters in the context of the 2006 Israeli general election campaign (40 days prior to the election) and corroborating it with extensive content analyses of Israel's two main print newspapers, Balmas (2014) assessed possible associations between viewing fake news (i.e., political satire) and attitudes of inefficacy, alienation, and cynicism toward political candidates. The importance of this research is given by the difference it makes between "fake news" as such (as facts) and the perception of fake news as realistic, indicating that "it is the perception of fake news as realistic, rather than merely exposure to such programs, that impacts individuals' political sensibilities" (Balmas, 2014: 17).

Fake news has not been only analysed through the lenses of some alarming political events, such as those we have just described above. Research has also been dedicated to better understanding the news consumption behaviour pertaining to various categories of public, to grasping some communication patterns, or to contextualizing media effects theories under the influence of ever expanding online platforms. For example, Marchi (2012) examined the news behaviours and attitudes of teenagers. Drawing on 61 interviews with racially diverse high school students, he discusses how adolescents become informed about current events and why they prefer certain news formats to others. The results reveal changing ways news information is being accessed, new attitudes about what it means to be informed, and a youth preference for opinionated rather than objective news. As suspected, social networking sites and blogs have become the preferred source of learning about current events. Importantly, opinionated talk and "making fun of stuff" (satire/fake news) are also perceived as sources of news by the average youth.

When it comes about testing communication models in the new online eco-system, Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen (2017) investigated the agenda-setting power of fake news, by means of a big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016. Some emblematic research hypotheses have been tested, such as the degree to which fake news agenda will predict the

network issue agenda of partisan media. Furthermore, Tandoc et. al. (2017) have developed a conceptual framework to understand how individuals authenticate the information they encounter on Internet platforms. In this study, it is argued that individuals tend to engage in a two-step authentication process: first internal and then external (Tandoc et. al., 2017). Internal acts of authentication refer to an individual's initial encounter with online news. In this initial encounter – which remains sufficient only when the individual is satisfied with the authenticity of the information – individuals rely on three main authentication framings: the self, the source, and the message. However, if the individual is not convinced by the information's authenticity, then he or she proceeds to external acts of authentication, which could be either intentional or incidental, by relying on interpersonal and institutional resources.

4. Research Methodology

In this context, where more evidence-based research is needed, our goal was to observe and explain new media consumption patterns in Romania. In this regard, the following research objectives (RO) and questions (Q) were set:

RO.1. To investigate Romanians' levels of trust in relation of national and international institutions:

Q.1.1. Are Romanians trusting religious and security/public order institutions more than political institutions and the legacy media?

RO.2. To investigate Romanians' media consumptions patterns:

Q.2.1. Are Romanians using more the legacy media outlets than the online media for reading news?

Q.2.2. Are Romanians using more than the average European citizen Internet platforms for reading news?

RO.3. To investigate the self-perceptions on Romanians regarding their capabilities to identify fake news/fake stories.

Q.3.1. Are Romanians less aware of the fake news/fake stories phenomenon than the average European citizen?

Q.3.2. Is Romanians' digital behaviour riskier than the behaviour observed at the average European citizen?

In order to meet the research objectives and to answer the research questions, our study builds on a national public opinion survey (e.g. representative sample of 1107 respondents) implemented between February and March 2018 within the strategic project "State of the Nation. An innovative instrument for evidence-based policy making in Romania". The survey, which is *the first of its kind in Romania*, has been designed to capture the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian citizens over the use of new media and news trustworthiness. This national public opinion survey is further corroborated with the Special Eurobarometer no. 464 – Fake News and Disinformation Online – implemented in the same time frame (February 2018).

5. Findings

Most Romanians distrust other people and believe that Romania heads in a wrong direction (Fig. 1 and Fig 2.). These negative sentiments are quite stable in Romania. For example, general trust questions asked in Autumn 2017 received rather similar answers: 66.8% of the survey participants stated that Romania heads in a wrong direction. The same survey revealed that evaluation of life quality is rather low, with approximately 60% of respondents saying they are rather unsatisfied with the quality of their life.

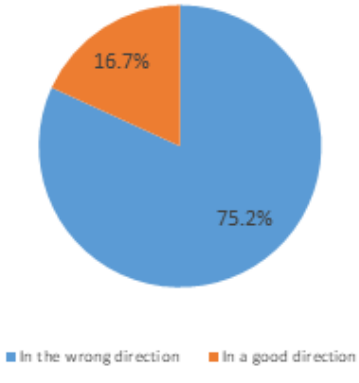

Fig. 1. Is Romania currently heading in a good direction or in the wrong direction?

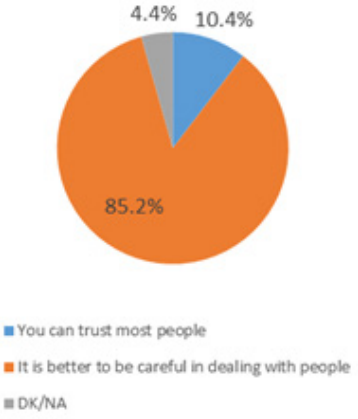

Fig. 2. Trust patterns in Romania

The Church and the Army are the institutions that capitalize most on citizens' trust, whereas the political parties and the judiciary system are positioned at the opposite end of the confidence continuum, scoring low or very low confidence scores (Fig. 3). Interestingly, legacy media (i.e. television, radio, newspapers) receive moderate levels of trust, scoring higher than the Parliament and the Government. Thus, the lack of trust in political institutions is partially offset by the high levels of trust in the Church, the Army and even legacy media.

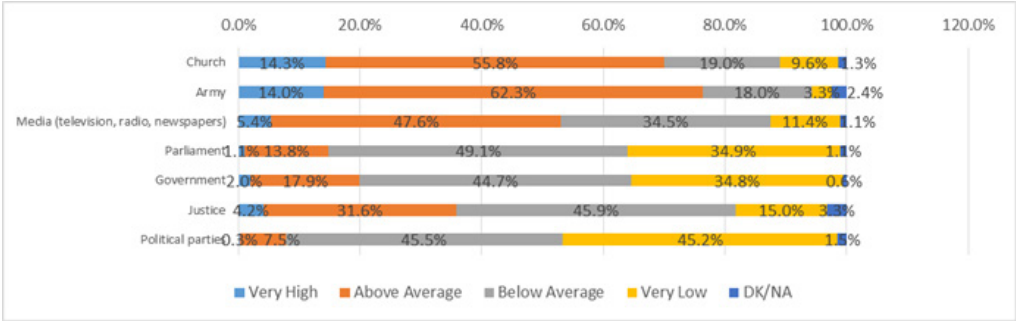

Fig. 3. Trust patterns in Romania - trust levels - evaluation of institutions

As shown in Fig. 4, the top media outlet that Romanian citizens tend to consume is the television and the TV news. However, the Internet (not necessarily the online newspapers, but rather Internet platforms) ranks third among Romanians' preferences, at a sensible distance from the print newspapers.

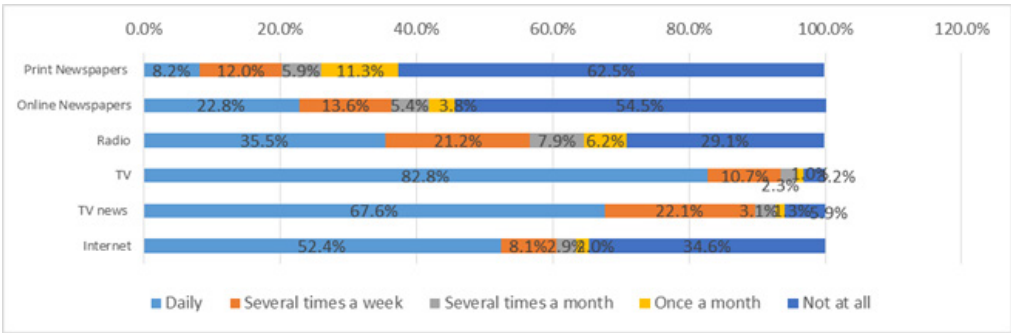

Fig. 4. Media consumption in Romania

Most Romanians use the Internet for reading news and/or for accessing their Facebook account. Facebook remains the top online platform in Romania (Fig. 5), with little differences in what citizens' age and education are concerned. Furthermore, almost 44% of the respondents declared that they use Facebook for reading news, with some slight differences between the undergraduates (i.e. 42% declared that they use Facebook for reading news) and the graduates (i.e. 49% use Facebook for reading news).

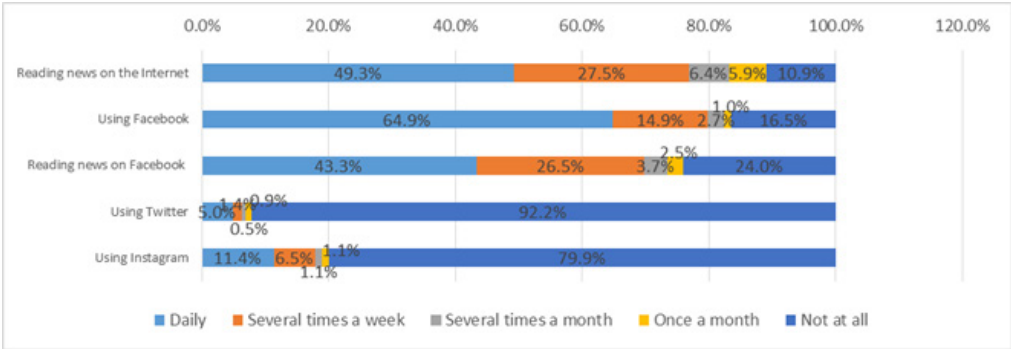

Fig. 5. Online media consumption in Romania

In general, Romanians tend to trust the information provided by news televisions, and the official statistics (Fig. 6). Online media enjoys much lower levels of trust than legacy media, with 45-53% of the respondents strongly disagreeing with the statement that information hosted in their Newsfeed, shared by friends on Internet/online platforms, or information from blogs and other online sites is trustworthy (Fig. 6).

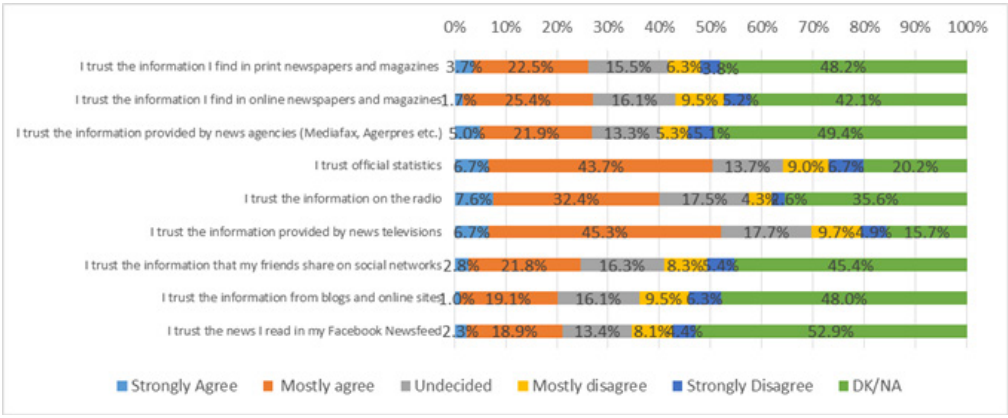

Fig. 6. Media trust among Romanians

About 45% of the Romanians believe that they often encounter fake pieces of information in the media, whereas around 30% think that these cases are extremely rare (Fig. 7). Thus, we might infer that the perceived proportion of the fake news/fake stories phenomenon is moderate to low.

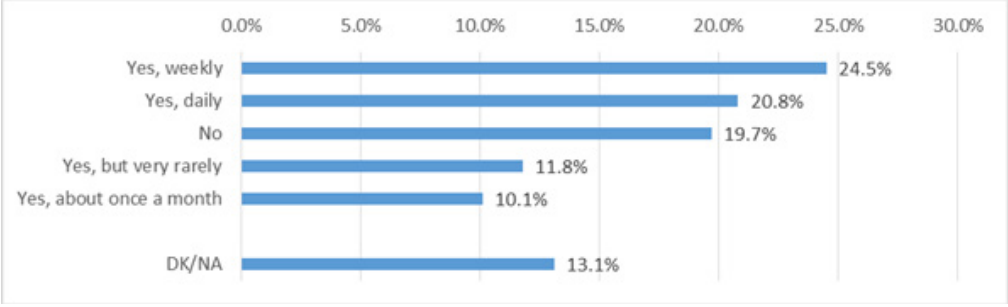

Fig. 7. – Frequency of news pieces perceived as being fake in the media

However, Fig. 8 leads to a sort of paradox. While Fig. 6 above indicates the highest levels of trust in the news television, Fig. 8 reveals that over 50% of the Romanians believe that the TV is the outlet in which they often encountered information that later turned out to be inaccurate. Internet is positioned second, but at an important distance, with 25% of the respondents agreeing that it is populated with inaccurate information, while online newspapers and social networks are perceived as presenting or generating fairly correct information (Fig. 8). Drawing on this, we might infer that, to Romanians, the perceived trust of media outlets is not necessarily linked (only) to the perceived accuracy of the news and data presented.

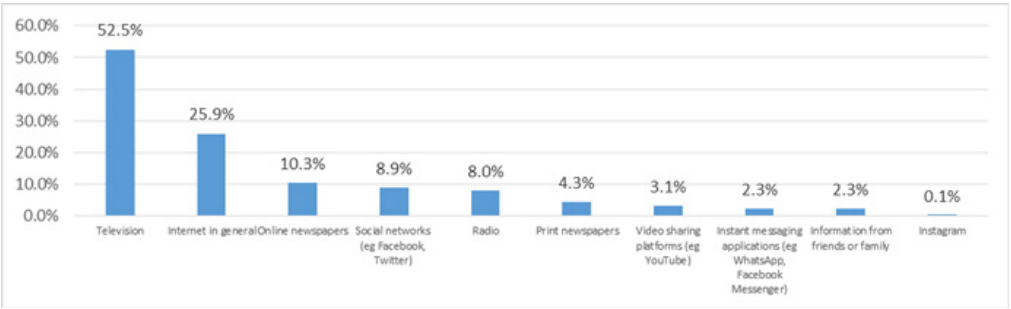

Fig. 8. – Types of media in which people often encountered information that later turned out to be inaccurate

In most cases, Romanians assess the accuracy of the news they read by relying on their pre-existing knowledge or even on their intuition (over 40%), by looking at the reputation of the journalists (over 30%), or by checking the information with friends and relatives (over 29%) (Fig. 9). Other objective fact-checking practices (i.e. comparing several sources or looking up the original news source) are rarely employed.

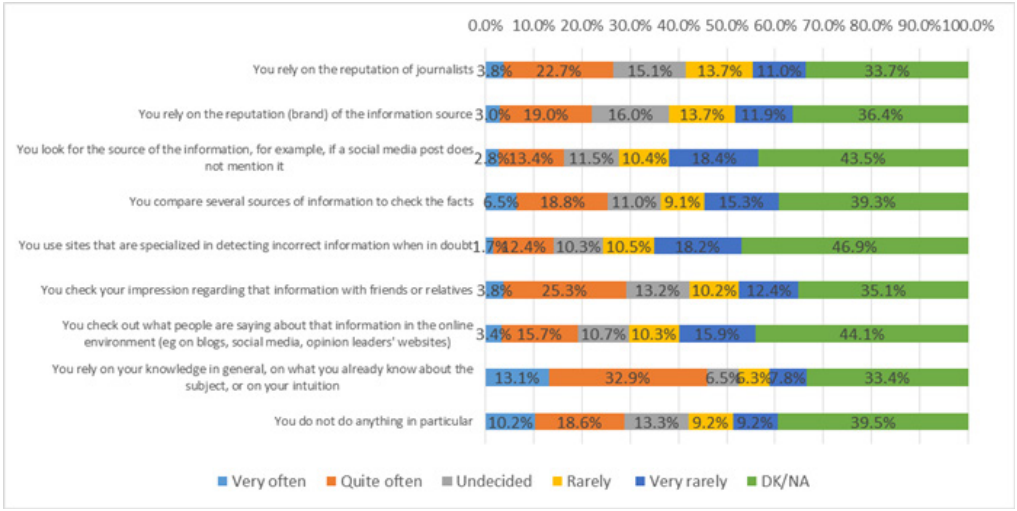

Fig. 9. – Frequency of using the following methods to tell if the information is inaccurate

As an additional proof of how Romanians underestimate the power of fake news and inaccurate information, Fig. 10 reveals that, on a scale from 1 to 7 (where 1 equals to a very small extent, and 7 equals to a very large extent), most respondents (over 50%) answered that their opinions are in a small to a medium degree influenced by inaccurate information (circulated either by legacy media or by online/Internet platforms such as Facebook). The high non-answer rate (18 %) leads us to the conclusion that the issue of how news trustworthiness shapes opinions and actions is not even taken into account by many Romanians.

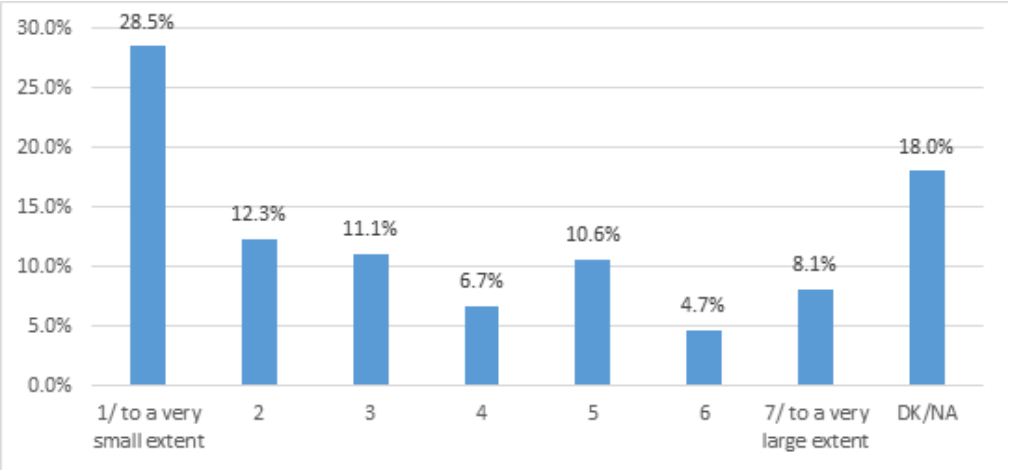

Fig. 10. – Estimation of how much people think inaccurate media information might influence their opinions in general

Even though legacy media outlets, such as the television, remain the most popular, Romanian citizens tend to consume more news circulated online, as compared to the average European citizen. According to Eurobarometer (EB) 464, 38% of Europeans do not use at all Internet platforms and messaging for reading news, whereas around 20% of the Romanians use them (especially Facebook) for reading news. In terms of trust, the same difference stands: among those who use online social networks and messaging apps, respondents in Romania (59%) are most likely to trust the news and information they access through these platforms, whereas respondents in Italy (19%), Germany and Austria (both 17%) are least likely to trust news and information available on online social networks and messaging apps. Romanians are also among the least aware about the fake news phenomenon. Whether at least half of respondents in all 28 EU Member States come across fake news at least once a week, only 20% of the Romanians declared that they come across fake news at least once a week. As in the case of most Member States, a higher level of education correlates with a higher level of awareness regarding inaccurate information and with increased abilities to spot fake news. Users with a lower level of education are more likely to say they come across fake news seldom or never; while they are also less confident identifying it (EB 464). However, the average Romanian is less likely than the average European to identify information that misrepresents the reality or is even false. Interestingly, Romanians are among those perceiving fake news to be a problem for democracy in general, being situated on the same level with Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, and Italy. Corroborated with a medium to low capacity to identify fake news, this finding could only be exploited in formal or rhetorical terms, at least as far as Romania is concerned.

6. Conclusions

All our research objectives have been partially or fully attained by both the data in the national survey, and the Special Eurobarometer discussed herein. In general, Romanians

lack the abilities to cope with the fake news phenomenon. On the trust scale, legacy media is perceived more positively than the political actors or even than the government. Despite low confidence exposed in relation to political and government institutions, media still enjoys comfortable levels of trust, being positioned closer to the top trustworthy entities – the Church and the Army. The overall tendency to distrust public and political institutions seems to have directed Romanians' confidence towards those entities that are somehow perceived as being either rather neutral or actively contributing to identifying or "hunting" all those to blame for the economic and social turmoil.

On average, Romanians prefer more legacy media outlets than the online ones. However, the most reactive demographic layers – such as the youth – are more inclined to favour Internet and online platforms, at the expense of the written newspapers or Television. Furthermore, the average heavy online users are also the least inclined to check information against the source or other media outlets. Even though the average Romanian would trust more the TV news than the online news, it is the same average Romanian that believes that the television has generated most news content that eventually proved to be contradicting the facts or the reality. Noteworthy, we could observe that, to Romanians, the perceived trust of media outlets is not necessarily linked (only) to the perceived accuracy of the news and data presented. An ideological component could be involved here, which will be covered by future research.

Most Romanians are not aware of the magnitude of the fake news reality and seldom use fact-checkers or other tools for verifying the information they access in the online media, which would entitle us to rate Romanians' online behaviour as riskier than the average Europeans'. This becomes particularly worrying among youth (16-24 years old) – the heaviest social networks consumers, which makes them the most permeable to online disinformation. Higher levels of education and urban or sub-urban residence positively correlates with increased capabilities to discern between real and false information. However, the average Romanian would scarcely inquire into the correctness or trustworthy of the information she or he finds in the media and would rarely check the information he or she reads. Journalist reputation remains a warrant of news trustworthiness, an aspect that could be used to mitigate the fake news stigma.

"Digital disinformation is a multifaceted problem, which does not have one single root cause and thus does not have one single solution." (European Commission, 2018: 14) Our research focuses on digital behaviour, self-assessment of vulnerabilities to digital disinformation, and patterns of trust as exposed by Romanian citizens. More applied evidence on the variables shaping the online behaviour and, also, on the technicalities at the "backstage" of disinformation is needed in order to support dedicated policies and actions plans. Any strategy to tackle digital disinformation should be grounded on evidence-based research, as only documentation and research can offer insights into the phenomenon, its scale, dominant practices, tools and technologies. Such strategies – either at Member State level or EU level – should resist the temptations of assigning blame, of acting against technology/Internet platforms and technological innovations, and of treating every problem of the political debate under one umbrella term – digital disinformation. Education in general and media education in particular represent the most sustainable means for

coping with the rising fake news phenomenon. In this regard, dedicated applied measures should be implemented at the policy-making level, so as to ensure long-term mitigation of a phenomenon that lacks proper management tools, despite its potential (documented) negative effects on democracy. Any expert or policy-maker engaging in the fake news "odyssey" should be aware that digital disinformation is a silent, yet effective enemy. As similar research reveals, digital disinformation affects resilience of citizens in Member States and in the European Union overall, it "threatens the democratic political processes and values" (European Commission, 2018: 12), the integrity of elections and political processes, and should therefore, be approached as a legitimate public concern.

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