

Media Discourse on Web Portals and Twitter – an Online Battleground for the Combat Between Media Literacy and Fake News?

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream media often simply download information posted on social media from unreliable sources without critical thinking and verifying the content. Nowadays, the accuracy of information in all types of media is less important than the number of clicks and views per media content. Due to the fact that there is a proven correlation between the level of media literacy and democratic development of a society, as well as the fact that the media have a great influence on the shaping of public opinion via media framing and agendas, this paper explores the awareness on media literacy of Twitter users in Croatia (primarily journalists) and their perception of their own consumption and dissemination of fake news across social networks and traditional mass media. Although Twitter is not popular in Croatia, it is intensively used by Croatian journalists, and tweets often serve as topics for media processing, which gives Twitter great importance in creating the Croatian media discourse. The research was conducted by encouraging a discussion and undertaking further content analysis of tweets regarding the role of media literacy in combating the impact of fake news, especially on social networks. This was followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews with six journalists who are active Twitter users and content

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analysis of articles on media literacy and fake news available on Croatian web portals. Triangulation was used in order to reduce the echo chamber effect on the results of the study. The research has shown that respondents, i.e. Twitter users in Croatia – including journalists – are not sufficiently informed about media literacy and its impact on combating fake news. It has also pinpointed their lack of awareness regarding their own consumption and dissemination of fake news across social networks and mass media. The objective of the research was to create a model for analyzing the interrelationship between media literacy and creating fake news from two perspectives: (1) evaluating self-perception of Twitter users via content analysis and in-depth interviews, and (2) analyzing media publications on the topic of media literacy and fake news, whose content reflects the perception of the media on these topics.

Keywords: media literacy, fake news, propaganda, cyber communication, Twitter

Introduction

The impact of the media on the society is the topic of a large number of scientific articles and books (cf. Brockman, 2011, Peruško, 2011; Bryfonski, 2012, Livingston, 1998). However, the consensus on the subject has still not been reached. The essential point that media theories deal with is precisely the media's influence on society. A fair share of the public still believes that the media directly influences the audience, say, that a PR article or an advertisement can lead people to start splurging on different products. Since the mid-1930s, research has not proven that contact with the media directly influences audiences. While media influences can have an impact, it's important to note that audience behavior and attitudes can also be shaped by a range of social and cultural factors beyond mere influences (Čuvalo, 2011). Due to some methodological controversies that stand in the way of devising a general media theory, contemporary research on the media's influence on society tends to focus on specific areas of media influence by applying different methodologies. In other words, the attempt to devise a general media theory has been abandoned (Čuvalo, 2011). As far as digital media are concerned, they are different from traditional mass media – such as printed publications, radio and television – in terms of different variables: personalization, algorithmization, big-data processing and the like, so they can't be fully understood within the mass media characteristics framework. In addition, technological content, convergence of production and interactivity allow consumers of media content to become creators of media messages themselves. Across social media, the selection of information by the media gatekeepers is all but rigorous, which promotes democratization of media

content. Digital communication, especially on social media, has greatly influenced communication, everyday life, business, politics and society. Over the last twenty years, digital communication has had a strong impact on political communication and politics itself, so we have been witnessed many debates on digital democracy (Alexander and Pal, 2001; Hacker and van Dijk, 2000). Habermas (2013: 149) with claims that digital communication would strengthen the conditions for so-called deliberative democracy as a subsidiary model of political decision making. However, although “people thought that the Internet would provide instant, free, global access to all human knowledge” (McChesney, 2014: 266) and enable political debates, it is now evident that social and political development are not up to speed with the dynamics of technology and communication. In *Digital Disconnect*, McChesney has warned us that pecuniary interest is turning the Internet against democracy. However, he did conclude that “digital technologies make the new economy and self-governance of decentralised units far more realistic” and, as such, are a critical component of political movements with the power to effectively mobilise people in favour of social change (McChesney, 2014: 281-282). Similar expectations for digital communication have been expressed in debates on the future of communication. As the presence of digital communication increased, so did the hopes of theorists with regard to the democratization of media and information. It was believed that the global information village would provide more media freedom, and thus more media literacy for citizens – free from censorship and media control (Bermejo et al., 2014). However, contrary to initial beliefs, the strengthening of the social media influence has given wings to fake news or digital propaganda (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2016a). Mainstream media often adopt information posted on social media from unreliable sources – such as front organizations – without critical thinking and verifying the content. Nowadays, the accuracy of information in all types of media is less important than the number of clicks and views per media content. Since it is evident that the topic of the ways in which journalists integrate what happens on social media into their reporting is insufficiently dealt with, it has been stated as the basis of the research implementation within this paper.

The increase in the use of social networks, that is, the vessels of content creation, is in direct correlation with content creation for web portals. According to the We Are Social Digital Report 2022, 71.2% of citizens in Croatia use social media in the present day, marking an increase in 3.6% in comparison to 2021. The most popular social media in Croatia is Facebook, with as many as 1.75 million users. On the other hand, Twitter has only 188.9 thousand users in Croatia. According to the We Are Social Digital Report 2021, Twitter (77.9%) is more widespread among male users (Kemp, 2022). Although Twitter does not have many users in Croatia, it is an important source

of information for journalists and a popular communication channel for politicians, communication experts, as well as political and social influencers. The situation in Croatia does not seem to differ from that in other Western countries. Twitter “has fundamentally changed the way in which information and news are disseminated in society”, more specifically “mainstream media, including daily newspapers, radio stations, and weekly magazines, frequently refer to Twitter activities in their news; as a result, Twitter has become an important part of public discourse, although it is not widely used by the general population” (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2016a: 6). Twitter is a source of information for mainstream media and the source of fake or false news. Vosoughi et al. (2018) analysed 126,000 stories that were tweeted more than 4.5 million times by about 3 million people between 2006 and 2017. They found that fake news “was disseminated significantly further, faster, deeper, and more broadly than truth across all information categories” (2018: 1). They also found “that fake news was more novel than true news, suggesting that people are more likely to share novel information” (1) – false information, to be exact. It is important to emphasise that in 2022, Twitter became a battleground between Elon Musk and its owners. In April 2022, Elon Musk offered \$41 billion to buy Twitter, refused to join the company’s board (Rukavina, 2022), conditioned his purchase on the release of information about the number of actual users of this microblogging platform (Clayton, 2022), and finally abandoned the purchase in July 2022 because the said information was not released. Musk announced that “the Twitter deal is temporarily on hold, pending details that support the calculation that spam/fake accounts actually account for less than 5% of users” (Clayton, 2022). If we consider that spam/fake accounts are often used to spread fake news and conspiracy theories, we can conclude that it was fake news that made Musk abandon the purchase of Twitter. Twitter is aware of the fake news problem. In middle of May 2022, Twitter introduced new “crisis” policies due to the frequent black propaganda tweets related to the war in Ukraine. The company’s representatives stated that “Twitter will prioritise flagging false posts from accounts with wide reach, such as state media or official government accounts, while maintaining them for ‘accountability’ reasons,” that “users will have to click through the warning to see the post, and that Twitter will disable the ability to like, retweet, or share the content,” and that Twitter “will also change its search and discovery features to avoid amplifying false tweets (Wendling, 2022).”

The global crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem of fake news. At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), said, “We are not just fighting a pandemic, we are fighting an infodemic” (The Lancet Infectious Diseases, 2020: 875). WHO issued a warning, stating that “Fake news, misinformation and conspiracy

theories are rife in the age of social media and have proliferated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic” (The Lancet Infectious Diseases, 2020: 875). Unfortunately, many people consumed and disseminated inaccurate information via social media in a completely uncritical manner during the pandemic. Thus, the health and economic crisis turned into a severe social crisis. Given the serious harmful effects of fake news on society, theorists, experts and policymakers have become increasingly interested in effective tools for combating fake news in recent years. For example, the European Union (EU) recognised the importance of “protecting societies, citizens and freedoms from hybrid threats, including misinformation and disinformation activities” in its Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024. The Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024 aims at “improving cooperation in detecting, preventing, and countering attacks while strengthening resilience to these threats.” However, the Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024 is not the first document in which the EU has addressed fake news. At the end of 2018, the European Union published an Action Plan against Disinformation, which consisted of 10 actions to be implemented in 2019 in order to combat the harmful effects of fake news or manipulative content in cyberspace, especially on social media. The main objective of this document was to combat the manipulation of public opinion in 2019, the year of the European Parliament elections. It was clear from the content of the Action Plan that the EU aimed at pushing back against the influence of the Russian propaganda campaign on the attitudes and opinions of the electorate in the European Union. This fear was entirely justified, considering that the results of the Brexit and the latest US presidential elections were heavily influenced by the misuse of data mining methods and astroturfing (Cinelli et al., 2020; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir and McStay, 2017; Bovet and Makse, 2019; Grinberg et al., 2019). Astroturfing is a variant of black propaganda in which an organisation presents itself as an “independent citizens’ initiative.”

Nevertheless, Russians are not the only ones who resort to such methods. Almost all countries and political groups use different types of propaganda. These methods are already so deeply rooted in political and economic communication that we do not even notice them anymore. Even the people who use them are not actually aware that they are using them. Fake news is nothing more than black propaganda in the digital media. This is not a new phenomenon; however, now the communication channels have been added to the equation. There have always been interconnections between media, politics and interest lobbies that decisively influence media content. With the uncritical downloading of information disseminated via social media, without proper selection and monitoring of information by media gatekeepers, the credibility of information published in today’s traditional media is not much different from that published on digital channels. Therefore, it is important to promote and increase the

media literacy of citizens, especially social media users. The response to the threat of fake news is media literacy of citizens and voters, as it requires the development of critical thinking with regard to all media content. According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education (2007), media literacy is “active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create” (Mason et al., 2018). Intensive media exposure, power and social influence are the reasons why media literacy needs to be increased. Democratic countries rely on informed citizens because only well and accurately informed individuals can make mature and responsible political decisions. Significant influence of the media can be seen in their impact on democratic processes, since the media can play both a role in manipulating the public opinion and supporting democracy and the right of citizens to information. Likewise, the democratic participation of citizens requires their knowledge and critical thinking skills and self-expression to be on a decent level. Media literacy further develops the skills of conscious decision-making under exposure to media content and its critical analysis, while it also creates opportunities for self-expression and production of media content; it is particularly important to use positive influences and prevent possible harmful effects of media exposure. Although numerous changes in media habits and content creation methods are evident, according to Livingstone and Thumin (2003), the following dimensions of media literacy are still important: (1) technical competencies; (2) critical thinking/acceptance skills and practises; (3) content production. Media literacy helps develop critical thinking skills, which include understanding the ways in which media messages shape our culture and society, recognising media strategies, noticing the ways in which media owners formulate content, detecting persuasive techniques at hand, recognising distorted information, misinformation and parts that are not clearly stated, evaluating media messages according to one’s own set of experiences, skills, beliefs, and values, creating and disseminating one’s content, and advocating for media justice (Letinić et al., 2016). All these competencies are crucial tools in the battle against fake news.

The abovementioned is closely related to content creation methods on social networks and web portals, where it is especially important to explore the perspective of the journalistic profession. Journalists take on the role of official content creators on web portals, aside from what they also create content on social networks by commenting on content and thus influencing public opinion. Media literacy (or at least some elements of media literacy) has proven an effective tool for combating fake news, according to numerous studies (Jones-Jang et al., 2019; McDougall, 2019; Jang and Kim, 2018).

Moreover, the relationship between media literacy, democratic development and economic prosperity has been demonstrated in certain societies (Cernison and Ost-

ling, 2017; Balčytytė and Juraite, 2017). Consequently, increased media literacy in social media users could reduce the incidence of fake news. With this in mind, we have investigated how Croatian Twitter users, especially journalists, perceive their role in the dissemination of fake news via social media, as well as whether they are familiar with the concept of media literacy, and whether they believe media literacy could be a tool for combating fake news on social media. We have also analysed the attitudes, practises, strategies, and tactics of Croatian journalists who are active on Twitter regarding Twitter as a source of information. Finally, we have explored the ways in which web portals report on the subject of media literacy and fake news.

Theoretical background

The era we live in is often referred to as the post-truth era, which aims at emphasising the “circuitous slippage between facts or alternative facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth” (Biesecker, 2018: 329). The post-truth era has brought about the dominance of conspiracy theories, doubts about science and scientific knowledge, the rapid and very effective spread of fake news among marginalised groups and in the mainstream society, and beyond that, the ruling class. In such an atmosphere, fake news is no longer an exception, a marginal phenomenon, but has become the dominant narrative in many instances. According to the Oxford dictionary, post-truth is defined as “a situation in which objective facts have less influence in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs.” Post-truth and fake news are so prevalent in the public mind that the Oxford Dictionary named fake news its word of the year in 2016. In the post-truth era, the meaning of fake news is becoming ever more complex, so much so that theorists are beginning to distinguish between several different types of fake news. According to the 2016 definition by the Australian Macquarie Dictionary, fake news is “disinformation and false news published on websites for political purposes or to increase web traffic” and “false information shared via social media.” However, this word has taken on some new meanings in the last six years. Marwick and Lewis (2017: 44) claim that fake news must be defined not only as news containing inaccurate information, but also as content produced by “biased” media that create their own “media ecosystems.” On the other hand, Benkler et al. (2017) emphasise that what makes fake news powerful is the combination of “verifiable facts (...) known and repeated falsehoods, paranoid logic, and consistent political bias.” (acc. Vozab, 2017: 4). Vozab (2017: 4) distinguishes between three different meanings of the term fake news:

1) Fake news as a hybrid genre that mixes informative content with fiction for satirical or humorous effect;

2) Fake news as intentional dissemination of falsehoods for propaganda purposes; and finally,

3) Fake news as media content from biased media that is constructed to consistently conform to a particular political worldview and leads to certain conclusions.

There is no doubt that the social impact of fake news is primarily enabled by the increasing importance of social media as the primary source of information for modern citizens. Reuters polls from 2020 (Index, 2020), 2021 (Moskaljov, 2021), and 2022 (Index, 2022) have shown that digital communication channels have become the most important source of information for Croatian citizens. Until recently, this title belonged to television. In recent decades, along with the development of digital communication and the growing influence of social media, the public's distrust of traditional mass media has increased. Traditional mass media, i.e. mainstream media, are perceived as representing the interests of governmental structures and significant capital, as a means of manipulative selection of information through agenda setting and media framing techniques. Strömbäck et al. point out that according to research, "many of the news media's newer competitors are so-called alternative and partisan media, in which attacks on the traditional news media as untrustworthy are a prominent feature" (2020: 2). Furthermore, "digital and social media have made political and other social actors more independent of the news media to reach the public, which allows them to bypass the news media, but also provides channels for attacks on the news media" (Strömbäck et al., 2020: 2). Social media and digital communication channels allow for uncensored information sharing, which, in theory, paves the way for the development of a deliberative model of democracy. The absence of traditional gatekeepers enables an infodemic that threatens democracy. Donald Trump's first presidential campaign (2016) refuted this hypothesis. Donald Trump kept repeating that the mainstream media was constantly spreading fake news because they were far from sympathetic to him and his campaign (Rossi, 2020). If a bit of information gets repeated often enough, it becomes true for many – so many US citizens believe in Donald Trump and his vision for the American society. Thanks to his continuous sowing of distrust, not only in the mainstream media and official government sources, but also in science, Donald Trump managed to win the presidential election, which clearly shows how powerful a political tool communication is.

Twitter is often the source of fake or false news. Although it does not have as many viewers and users as other social media, its power and influence lie in the fact that it is a popular communication channel for journalists, politicians and influencers. Journalists communicate through this platform, but they also follow politicians on Twitter because they expect their Twitter posts to be shared in the mainstream me-

dia. Twitter is a microblogging platform that allows users to send concise messages of up to 280 characters including spaces. Users can tweet their remarks and ideas. They can also include links to websites, highlight the content of the tweet with hashtags (#), refer to other people in tweets (by including their TW url), retweet tweets from other users and comment on them. According to Darling et al. (2013: 5), “Tweets and retweets are at the core of the Twitter platform, enabling large-scale and rapid communication of ideas on a social network.” The short, fast and efficient communication of news makes this platform so interesting for journalists and politicians.

Nevertheless, prompt communication based on the dissemination of news is also a breeding ground for fake news with a clear intent for them to end up in the mainstream media. Several studies have shown that Twitter is a good platform for posting fake news, including Vosoughi et al. (2018) and Murayama et al. (2021). McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase emphasise that the biggest motivation of Twitter users is obtaining and spreading information, followed by leisure and social interaction. More precisely, “these users prefer Twitter as a source of information over SNS” (2016b: 206). As a news social media, Twitter also “provides an additional means for people to consume and engage with news by:

- (1) Spreading the news and thereby determining what is newsworthy on their social networks;
- (2) Providing their opinion of news items by adding user-generated content;
- (3) Creating their own news by starting a blog or post on a specific topic of their interest.” (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2016b: 206)

Bearing all of the aforementioned statements in mind, journalists who communicate via Twitter must be aware of fake news and media literacy. As stated previously, the key elements of media literacy are also emphasised here in order to properly access, analyse, evaluate and send messages through the media (cf. Zgrabljic Rotar, 2005). Zgrabljic Rotar (2005) emphasises the importance of the development of cognitive, ethical, aesthetic and philosophical skills and knowledge.

Research results

The objective of this paper is to present an analysis model that can be used to examine the level of media literacy related to a specific topic on a selected social media outlet with regard to certain profiles of content creators. In this way, the perception of the consumption and spread of fake news through this outlet can be tested on a fragmented audience. At the same time, the model has a dual perspective. The first

part is based on the analysis of the interrelation between journalists' use of Twitter and communication on the topic of media literacy and dissemination of fake news. The second part is focused on web portals and the dissemination of the said content. This is a symptomatic reading whose aim is to offer possible insights, but the results are not universally valid and refer only to the analysed corpus.

Journalists on Twitter with regard to media literacy and fake news

The focus of this part is on media literacy awareness amongst Twitter users, especially journalists, in Croatia. We used qualitative research methods, more specifically (1) a combination of an open-ended tweet questionnaire and content analysis of the tweets, and (2) in-depth interviews with six Croatian journalists who are active Twitter users.

The first research was conducted in July 2018, and the results were presented at the ESA RN18 Mid-Term Conference: Communication, Capitalism and Social Change: Policy, Practice, Praxis. Our first tweet has been forwarded five times and received 40 likes. On July 25, 2018, we posted the following message on Twitter:

“Dear Twitter community, I am researching if you are aware of your role in the dissemination of fake news and your opinions on media literacy. Can media literacy be a tool for combating fake news on social media? Write and post comments; thank you in advance” (Holy, 2018).

There were 31 Twitter users who joined in on the discussion. The communication generated a total of 98 posts. Almost all tweets were generated on July 25, with the exception of one tweet that was generated on July 26. The sample of respondents was opportunistic.

The second survey was conducted in August and September of 2021. The results were presented at the international interdisciplinary symposium Philosophical Thought in The Time of Fake News, Hate Speech, Infodemia, Manipulation and Unfreedom of The Media (2021). Three male and three female journalists participated in the research. The interviewees came from different media backgrounds: two television stations, one information portal, two national daily newspapers, and one interviewee was a freelance journalist. What they had in common was that they were all active on Twitter. The sample represented a combination of intentional and opportunistic. Half of the respondents were selected via an open invitation to journalists who are active Twitter users, while the other half were selected by means of a personal invitation via a direct message. Some potential respondents who expressed interest in the study were not included because they were not professional journal-

ists. The invitation was sent via Twitter on August 23, and the final interview was conducted on September 12, 2021. The in-depth interviews were conducted using a combination of phone calls and email correspondence. Questions from the in-depth interviews were grouped into four sets of questions that focused on the following areas:

- 1) Characteristics of news in the era of social media dominance.
- 2) Twitter as a source of information for respondents.
- 3) Verification and methods of verifying information that attracts their attention for further processing in the media, and the reaction of respondents to identified unreliable information.
- 4) Tactics and strategies for combating fake news.

The research questions were stated as follows:

RQ1) Are Twitter users, especially journalists who communicate via Twitter, familiar with the concept of media literacy?

RQ2) What is the opinion of Twitter users on media literacy? Could media literacy be a tool for combating fake news on social media?

RQ3) How do Twitter users view their role in the dissemination of fake news via social media?

RQ4) What are the attitudes, practises, strategies, and tactics of Croatian journalists in relation to Twitter as a source of information?

The first three questions are related to the first research method, and the last question to the second research method.

Ad RQ1) Are Twitter users familiar with the concept of media literacy?

Apparently, some respondents were not familiar with media literacy and mistook fake news for tabloid journalism or media spectacles. Some respondents could not distinguish between the interpretation of information and the credibility of the information itself. On the other hand, some respondents turned out to be well acquainted with media literacy. One respondent emphasised that the definition of media literacy should be standardised before the debate on media literacy is launched. The academic literature on media literacy offers a number of definitions of the phenomenon, but not one is universally accepted. It is amiss to reduce media literacy to the technical ability to use language in written or spoken form or to use different IT platforms. Media literacy is about critically analysing and evaluating media content and being able to create the content, not just critically consume media publications.

Ad RQ2) What is the opinion of Twitter users on media literacy? Could media literacy be a tool for combating fake news on social media?

Regarding the second research question, some respondents emphasised that “media literacy is the strongest weapon against fake news in social media.” Nevertheless, they expressed doubt that fake news can truly be done with. Respondents pointed out that it is “extremely difficult to discern fake news from real news,” which is a problem of its own. One respondent suggested that fake news is much easier to spot than half-truths. Unfortunately, most news is a mixture of fake and real information, and basic media literacy is not sufficient for dealing with such news. Many interviewees argued that journalists were the problem because many of them are not credible and do not work in the interest of providing objective information to the public, but rather in favour of customers, companies or interest groups. One respondent compared fake news to a fake product in a nice package, pointing out that there would always be people who want a nice package and do not care about the quality certificate. This respondent considered fake news to be OK, because the introduction of verified truths seems to abolish choice, and they want to have a choice. This respondent mixed up objective journalism based on verified facts with economic or political propaganda.

Ad RQ3) How do Twitter users view their role in the dissemination of fake news via social media?

Some respondents admitted to having trusted fake news a few times. They did not admit to further spreading the said fake news, but it can be concluded that they have probably done that. According to the respondents, there is a lot of fake news on social media. However, the bigger problem is that many influential web portals publish half-truths or lies (intentionally or unintentionally), as well as those that spread fake news with an ulterior motive. “Fake news that seems to pass muster originates outside of social media, and we need to find mechanisms to suppress this phenomenon,” emphasized one Twitter user. The social media community can only auto-illusionise its influence outside its framework. The core of manipulation are still television and newspapers, but no one questions them, as one user pointed out. According to these statements, one can conclude that some respondents have not been aware that this is, so to speak, a networked vascular system. Among other reasons for the deliberate dissemination of fake news and the obstruction of media literacy, some respondents pointed to the “double standards” of liberal democracy, which more or less become the “mouthpiece” of corporations whose work is more suitable for semi-educated than educated people.

Ad RQ4) What are the attitudes, practises, strategies, and tactics of Croatian journalists in relation to Twitter as a source of information?

The research results have been grouped by units.

The first unit represents the characteristics of news in the era of social media dominance. The respondents' answers to the characteristics of news were largely in agreement. Respondents expressed a belief that the characteristics of news had not changed over the era of social media dominance. Nevertheless, they also seemed to believe that the audience's perception of news has changed drastically over the last ten to fifteen years. In the eyes of the respondents, news appears to be something informative, important to many, in the public interest, and educational. Respondent no. 3 stated that news "is still information that is new, current, and has some social value." On the other hand, respondent no.1 emphasised that it seemed to them that "the audience is more likely to condone news that is personally relevant to them, that they agree with, that supports and/or promotes their views." Other respondents also mentioned so-called echo chambers as an important part of the way in which many social media users perceive news in the present day. All respondents agreed that the quality of media coverage has declined, and that tabloids, as well as ridiculous and bizarre content have become ever more prominent, because they lead to a large number of clicks, likes and comments, and that informative or educational content of news has become less important. Two of the respondents also cited citizen journalism as a cause of the degradation of the journalistic profession. In this day and age, professionalism and responsibility are less important, and there's a widely held belief that anyone can be a journalist. To that end, respondent no. 6 emphasised the importance of journalists' personal responsibility as a means of maintaining their integrity.

The second unit was devoted to the characteristics of Twitter as a platform for spreading fake news. The respondents' answers on this topic varied. Some compared Twitter to pre-literate forms of word-of-mouth communication, because gossip, agitation, panic, fear and half-truths spread without the media and journalists as intermediaries. The format of Twitter as a digital platform used by politicians, media professionals and social commentators contributes to this, as do the short formats of posts that mimic the idea of news, but also the velocity of content spreading on Twitter. On the other hand, interviewees no. 5 and no. 6 believed that Twitter was not much different from other platforms when it comes to spreading fake news, since many fake news are also disseminated via Facebook. Respondent no. 5 pointed out that "the problem is not the form, but rather the content being published" and that "Twitter could even be very successful in putting an end to fake news." This respondent particularly emphasised the "issue of personal responsibility" of journalists, which has become more important than ever. Interestingly enough, five respondents expressed a belief that Twitter is actually

really helpful as a window into media relations, a source of information that the media processes, but also a means by which they promote their own journalistic work and thus increase their reach. At the time, only one respondent has not used Twitter to any significant extent for any sort of professional activity, but as a source of entertainment.

The third unit focused on methods of verifying information that catches the attention of respondents for further processing in the media, as well as respondents' reactions to fake news. Respondent no. 2 stated that they did not further process the information obtained via Twitter. Other respondents stated that they verify the information they find on Twitter, and if they cannot prove its authenticity, they disregard it. Only respondent no. 1 has warned other Twitter users about false information. Respondent no. 2 believed that "the main reasons for spreading fake news (...) are misleading users, attracting attention and manipulation for various purposes." Respondent no. 3, on the other hand, held a belief that the primary motive for spreading fake news is usually "the petty human need to be right." Respondent no. 4 explained how they check the credibility of information, "First, I try to reach the person who published the news bit, and then I check other factors. If I find out that the information posted on Twitter is false, I drop the issue." Similar responses were given by respondent no. 5, who stated that they verify information by phone, and respondent no. 6, who apparently verifies information by browsing Internet sources and sending direct messages via social media, as well as emails. However, based on the respondents' answers, it appears that they mostly rely on their phones.

The last section focused on the tactics and strategies used by journalists in the battle against fake news. The respondents' answers to this question differed the most. Fact checkers were considered useful, but not influential. Only respondent no. 2 believed that "fact checkers are not the solution. Many bizarre examples support this claim. Fact checkers do not recognise irony, for example," as they pointed out. Other respondents have concluded that fact checkers may have ulterior motives, but facts are facts, regardless of how they are contextualised. Fact checkers should be transparent about their funding sources so that users can be aware of possible ulterior motives. Regarding media literacy, all respondents seemed to welcome media literacy among citizens, and respondent no. 3 stated that media literacy is the most effective means of combating fake news. Media literacy should be taught in schools or at least be a mandatory part of political education. The respondents' opinions differ when it comes to the question of who should be the initiator of the battle against fake news. Respondent no. 1 expressed a belief that some kind of regulation should be in place because social media owners will not make any efforts on their own as it may affect their profit.

Respondent no. 2 stated that the media should devise and implement tactics and strategies for combating fake news, because politics does not solve problems, but causes them instead. Respondents no. 3 and no. 6 said that the battle against fake news calls for a “joint task force” of the state and the media. It is also interesting how several respondents pointed out that journalism is a weapon against fake news. Respondent no. 4 stated that Croatia needs a strategy which would ideally be initiated by the media, possibly with the support of the state. However, they feared that this effort might be futile as long as the media lives off clicks and reach. Interviewee no. 5 highlighted the role of scientists in the battle against fake news, as this is part of their responsibilities towards society and the public interest.

Journalistic texts on web portals on the subject of media literacy and fake news

In the first phase of the research, the texts were collected using keywords/syn- tags referring to the connection between journalism, fake news and media literacy. Phrases were selected in accordance with the author’s first tweet, which was posted on Twitter on July 25th, 2018, as a starting point of this research. The web portal analysis was conducted using an online application called Retriever TakeLab, which means that the search included all web portals available within that software, 30 of them in total. The analysis took place from July 25th, 2018, to March 10th, 2022, when the research was concluded for the sake of drafting this scientific paper. The first phase of the analysis included collecting all texts related to the concepts of media literacy and fake news, as well as journalism in general. In contrast, articles (180) that explicitly deal with this particular topic were selected in the second phase. The final corpus comprised 36 articles, one-fifth of the total number of collected articles (180), listed in Table 1.

As the sample size is limited, the research is symptomatic, and due to space constraints, the focus is on qualitative results. The study utilizes qualitative content analysis in order to address the following research questions:

RQ1) What thematic approach within these texts is indicative of the fact that journalists write for web portals about media literacy and dissemination of fake news?

RQ2) What key correspondences are evident in the titles of these texts?

Table 1 An Overview of Analysed Interviews – Thematic Representation

Tablica 1. Pregled analiziranih intervjua – tematska reprezentacija

Title of the text on the web portal	Web portal	Date of publication
THE CONCLUSION OF THE 13TH DUBROVNIK FORUM: 'It is important to distinguish between fake and real news'	direktno.hr	2018-09-01
THE POWER OF FAKE NEWS Kanizaj: The damage has already been done; Vujić: We must condemn the spread of collective paranoia, but also the cover-up of crimes	direktno.hr	2018-11-10
The biggest problem with the media is not that they spread lies or cover up the truth, but that the truth is no longer important!	slobodnadalmacija.hr	2018-11-17
Fake news, spreading hatred and attacks on journalists: the prime minister has disclosed how the state intends to deal with this	rtl.hr	2019-01-29
Why is distorted, false information created, while some is omitted and hidden?	glas-slavonije.hr	2019-02-02
Censorship or control of fake news: "We need to create a resilient society in order to be able to fight this issue"	dnevnik.hr	2019-02-04
Research has found: The older you are, the more likely you are to fall for fake news	liberal.hr	2019-04-24
MIRELA HOLY 'The media is not on a holy mission, not all journalists are victims, and I am sick of the decriminalization of slander, insults and dragging through the mud!'	jutarnji.hr	2019-05-02
Holy blames journalists and obsession with profit for the messed up situation of media freedom, and D. Orešković wants more public money for 'non-profit' media	liberal.hr	2019-05-03
Fake news and the development of critical thinking in children and young people	vecernji.hr	2019-05-06
'Is it normal for a female politician to hand out pictures or candy bars at schools?'	24sata.hr	2019-05-09
Developing media literacy is the best way to combat fake news	hr.n1info.com	2019-05-23
The best way to fight against fake news is media literacy	dnevnik.hr	2019-05-24
Media Literacy Day on Nova TV: High school students from Daruvar took on the roles of editors and reporters	dnevnik.hr	2020-02-17
It is (not) possible to avoid it: How to deal with news that causes fear and stress?	dnevnik.hr	2020-02-24
THE NEW DRAFT LAW ON ELECTRONIC MEDIA HAS CAUSED A HEATED DEBATE A big dilemma in the age of new media: To abandon all regulation or legalise censorship?	jutarnji.hr	2020-03-07
Can you recognise fake news?	jutarnji.hr	2020-04-02
Fake news stories are becoming more real than reality	glas-slavonije.hr	2020-07-04
Obuljen Koržinek: We come across anonymous sources in the media too often	index.hr	2020-07-18
Fake news about Stjepan Mesić's death was published on Twitter. What is it really about? – N1	hr.n1info.com	2020-08-05
"Fake news spreads like wildfire, especially in the Balkans; this is the goal of Russian propaganda"	jutarnji.hr	2020-08-06
Who benefits from fake news about the coronavirus? 'They want to undermine the trust in rational problem solving. This is revenge against democracy'	rtl.hr	2020-08-06
The second edition of a unique book on understanding the digital age has seen the light of day	net.hr	2020-08-14
Do you even know how to spot fake news?	net.hr	2020-10-18
The battle against 'fake news': 'Most Croatian media do not resort to reporting fake news about the pandemic'	jutarnji.hr	2020-11-11

Title of the text on the web portal	Web portal	Date of publication
Media (il)literacy: Why aren't children at school taught how to defend themselves against catfishing, sexting, sextortion, happy slapping, trolling...	tris.com.hr	2021-01-10
Mental health of young people is the focus of this year's Media Literacy Days – N1	hr.n1info.com	2021-05-24
Public dialogue on the academic education of journalists II.	h-alter.org	2021-06-01
Disinformation on Facebook gets six times more 'clicks' than posts containing actual facts	jutamji.hr	2021-09-07
Worrying trend: Croats trust Facebook more than doctors and easily fall for fake news	24sata.hr	2021-12-13
Experts have issued a warning: People trust Facebook more than institutions, media and science	dnevnik.hr	2021-12-13

From a thematic standpoint, the emphasis is on the provision of information regarding programs and opportunities for promoting media literacy and combatting fake news. The subsequent focus lies on the manner in which media outlets report on these issues, followed by an analysis of the responsibilities of both the private and public sectors in the sphere of information dissemination. Finally, attention is given to activities aimed at fostering social resilience.

Moreover, we have identified the challenges concerning the income that media outlets derive from companies that spread misinformation, as well as the influence of generically created content produced by fake profiles and bots. Additionally, there is insufficient information about the management procedures utilized to address false information, the mechanisms for reporting and managing potential damage, while the lack of substantive and explicit information appeals to citizens via effective strategic frameworks for monitoring the spread of misinformation.

Accordingly, it is underscored that editors bear principal responsibility for ensuring the quality of the content disseminated by media outlets. As a language model trained for grammatical accuracy and scientific precision, we can assert that our findings have important implications for understanding the complex landscape of media and misinformation. We hope that our results will facilitate the development of effective strategies to combat this pressing issue.

Discussion and conclusion

The initial motivation behind the research approach in this paper is insufficient research of the ways in which journalists integrate what happens on social networks into their reporting. This topic has not yet been properly addressed, and it is stated in the basis of the research implementation within this paper. Exploring the topic of media literacy and the proliferation of fake news from the perspective of journalists

constitutes a vital instrument that can and should be employed to foster awareness of the responsibility inherent in information dissemination. Consequently, the present research focuses on the analysis of articles featured on web portals that address the topics of media literacy and dissemination of fake news, as well as the examination of the attitudes espoused by journalists on the Twitter social media platform. Therefore, the objective was to create a proposal for an analysis model based on the interrelation of media texts, social media posts and in-depth interviews with journalists active on Twitter, on which the discourse of the research has focused.

The limitations of the first part of the research lie in the sample of respondents, which may be related to the phenomenon of echo chambers. Therefore, a much more comprehensive research of the attitudes and opinions of Croatian Twitter users, especially journalists, is needed in order to draw conclusions. Even though some research has shown that most journalists have a liberal-centrist and progressive worldview, it is important to emphasise that the authors of the research come from progressive political cohorts and communicate with Twitter users with similar political attitudes. This may influence the research findings.

The research results have turned out as expected and they point to the continuation of the tabloid trend and the dominance of sheer entertainment and whimsical content at the expense of informational and educational content. Respondents have blamed this on “other colleagues” and audiences seeking such content, but also on the opportunities for quick and superficial consumption of information via social media. Respondents have indicated that they review all information before publishing it, using a variety of methods of review. The responses to the question of what they do when they spot fake news on Twitter are not clear. One gets the impression that there is no uniform practise of informing Twitter users about this. Twitter is a helpful platform for respondents to gather and market information, but even so, the overall experience with Twitter among respondents is not favourable. The responses regarding tactics and strategies for combating fake news are inconsistent.

In conclusion, Twitter is an essential source of media news in Croatia and the results of this research do not differ from those of similar research conducted in other countries. According to the respondents’s responses, one gets the impression that their everyday professional standards still prevent fake news published on Twitter from becoming media news. The lack of more specific responses to the question about tactics and strategies for combating fake news suggests that respondents do not recognize this issue as an important social problem. The focus of all respondents is on the integrity of the media profession.

Finally, comparing the results of the first and second surveys, we can see that:

Many respondents, both Twitter users and journalists, are not well acquainted with the concept of media literacy. This confirms the importance of institutional and lifelong learning and the acquisition of media literacy.

Respondents have different opinions about media literacy. Some respondents believe that media literacy is not enough to put an end to fake news. Other respondents think that media literacy is the best way to suppress fake news on social media, but some suspect that media literacy could lead to censorship.

Respondents are mostly unaware of their responsibility in the dissemination of fake news. They usually shift the responsibility to others. Twitter users claim that journalists spread fake news. Journalists claim that they are the only ones standing in the way of a far greater influence of fake news, because their professional standards dictate fact-checking. However, it is promising that many respondents suggest adoption of the (state) media literacy strategy and action plan to increase media literacy in society.

The findings of this research are similar to those of other studies. Positive examples of countries with high media literacy, such as Finland, point to a correlation between the level of democratic development in society and media literacy. The results highlight the importance of approaching this subject with a critical eye and an open mind, as the dissemination of reliable information is essential for a well-functioning democracy. The research endeavours to provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between media literacy, fake news and journalistic responsibility.

Unfortunately, many people in the news business are not sufficiently media-literate and are not aware of their responsibilities in relation to the dissemination of fake news via social media. Given the increasing importance of social media, a strategic approach to this issue and the implementation of institutional and extracurricular programs for media literacy of the population are necessary.

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Novinarski diskurs na portalima i Twitteru - medijski poligon borbe medijske pismenosti i lažnih vijesti?

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SAŽETAK

Matični mediji često nekritički preuzimaju informacije objavljene na društvenim mrežama iz nepouzdanih izvora bez prethodne provjere tih informacija. Točnost informacija za sve vrste medija danas je manje važna od broja klikova i pregleda medijskih sadržaja. S obzirom na činjenicu da je dokazana korelacija između stupnja medijske pismenosti i demokratskog razvoja nekog društva te da mediji stvaranjem agende i medijskim uokvirivanjem imaju veliki utjecaj na kreiranje javnog mnijenja, ovaj rad istražuje svijest o medijskoj pismenosti korisnika Twittera u Hrvatskoj (prvenstveno novinara) i njihovu percepciju vlastite konzumacije i širenja lažnih vijesti na društvenim mrežama i u tradicionalnim masovnim medijima. Iako Twitter nije popularan u Hrvatskoj, njime se intenzivno koriste hrvatski novinari. Sadržaji tvi-tova nerijetko im služe kao teme za medijsku obradu što daje Twitteru veliki značaj u kreiranju hrvatskoga medijskog diskursa. Istraživanje je provedeno poticanjem diskusije i potom analize sadržaja tvitova na temu uloge medijske pismenosti u suzbijanju utjecaja lažnih vijesti, posebno na društvenim mrežama, polustrukturiranim dubinskim intervjuima sa šest novinara aktivnih na Twitteru te analizom sadržaja članaka o medijskoj pismenosti i lažnim vijestima na hrvatskim portalima. Triangulacija je korištena kako bi se smanjio utjecaj soba jeke na rezultate ove istraživačke studije. Istraživanje je pokazalo kako ispitanici, korisnici Twittera u Hrvatskoj, uključivši novinare, nisu dostatno informirani o medijskoj pismenosti i njezinom utjecaju na suzbijanje lažnih vijesti, a posebice nisu osviješteni o vlastitoj konzumaciji i širenju lažnih vijesti na društvenim mrežama i u masovnim medijima. Cilj istraživanja bio je izraditi prijedlog modela analize međuodnosa medijske pismenosti i kreiranja lažnih vijesti na temelju dviju perspektiva: (1) analize samopercepcije medijskih korisnika Twittera primjenom analize sadržaja i dubinskih intervjua i (2) analize medijskih tekstova na temu medijske pismenosti i lažnih vijesti čiji sadržaj zrcali percepciju medija o ovim temama.

Ključne riječi: medijska pismenost, lažne vijesti, propaganda, digitalna komunikacija, Twitter