

FAKE OR NOT FAKE? PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATES ON (DIS)INFORMATION AND CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT *In an increasingly challenging media environment of post-truth and fake news, disinformation may impact the way young people perceive the world. In this study, we seek to understand how young people engage with news, their perceptions around disinformation, and how they see the relevance of critical thinking for their civic and political lives. Using a mixed method model, we developed a focus group activity with a total of 45 participants, based on the analysis of 562 questionnaires previously administered to first-year undergraduates of two Portuguese universities. The results show that although most students report limited critical analysis of information, they do reveal concerns about disinformation in their lives, suggesting a set of actions in order to combat fake news spread. Furthermore, the findings reinforce the need for news and media literacy that concerns a post-fact culture.*

KEYWORDS

YOUNG PEOPLE, DISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS, CRITICAL THINKING, NEWS AND MEDIA LITERACY

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INTRODUCTION

To understand disinformation and young people, it is important to question “what is seen as news” (Buckingham, 2000: 210) and what role information plays in the daily lives of the young. The rapidly changing ways in which news is accessed, especially through social media, demands a more comprehensive view of news uses and practices. It is argued that news media no longer shape the daily lives of young people as new “de-ritualized” practices take place everywhere, every time (Peters and Broersma, 2013: 8). Today, young people find information on current events in very different ways when compared to past generations, mainly by accessing through mobile phones and on social media (Gonçalves, 2015; Pereira *et al.*, 2015; The Media Insight Project, 2015; Melro and Pereira, 2016). Thus, in a convergent and multi-screen media environment, not only at the level of the contents, but also of the practices (Jenkins, 2015) – given the more incidental (Hermida, 2010; Boczkowski *et al.*, 2017), nuanced and diversified way news is accessed on social media (The Media Insight Project, 2015) – news information struggles to find “a” definition, if there is one.

Not only does news information, as a journalistic genre, compete and negotiate its boundaries with other fields, allowing the emergence of blurred categories, such as “infotainment” (Fidalgo, 2016; Otto *et al.*, 2017), but also the combined ways of accessing news on social media lead to a blending of information with other contents and practices, such as disinformation, social connexion, entertainment and parody (The Media Insight Project, 2015). Besides, as a social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 2004), news is a secondary discourse with personal and editorial judgments and values (Rodrigues, 1999: 31), in which the metaphors of objectivity and truth are disclosed through the transparency of the journalistic processes (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2004: 45) and “strategic rituals” (Molotch and Lester, 1999). Today, however, the question is not how journalism can be more close to the “truth”, but how important the “truth” is for journalism and for society.

Beyond a definition of (dis)information itself, it is relevant to understand how people engage with the news and how they perceive its role in their lives (Buckingham, 2000; Peters, 2012; Peters and Broersma, 2017). Following this perspective, we seek to explore undergraduates’ perceptions of fake news and (dis)information, since it is a recent and underdeveloped subject in the literature, especially in the Portuguese context. Furthermore, drawing on the news and media literacy framework, from a global paradigm (RobbGrieco and Hobbs, 2013: 22), this paper also addresses student perceptions of critical thinking regarding news information, as well as its relevance in the lives of the young, particularly in a fake news and post-truth world.

THE ‘REAL’ FAKE NEWS

Although the term “fake news” was initially used in the academic community to mark off infotainment contents from political satire programs, such as *The Daily Show* (Baym, 2005; Brewer and Marquardt, 2007; Crittenden *et al.*, 2011; Balmas, 2014), its definition

currently includes disinformation of various natures, which are still under discussion within academia. Hence, some recent studies tend to exclude satirical content and to focus on just one type of disinformation that is “intentionally or knowingly fake” (Klein and Wueller, 2017: 6), namely fake news articles that are fabricated for specific purposes.

Regardless of the complicated nature of the term “fake news”, dissemination on the Internet and the intention to make so-called “alternative facts” go viral are essential features that contribute to how disinformation is presented today. Although disinformation has always existed in the history of journalism, the viral spread of fake news through social media had its boom in 2016 after the “Pizzagate” scandal, during the US presidential election (Silverman, 2016a), which allegedly led to the election of President Donald Trump, due to a right-wing alignment of the hoaxes (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Starbird, 2017). According to Klein and Wueller (2017: 6), “the vast majority of fake news articles are written about public figures or controversial current events and shared via social media with the hope of going ‘viral’”. Among the motivations to spread fake or inaccurate contents are political influence and financial gain, especially through clickbait, as well as parody and other forms of social connection or even for psychological reasons in causing harm for harm’s sake (Wardle, 2018: 955).

In an article in *Science*, Lazer *et al.* define fake news “to be fabricated information that mimics news media content in form, but not in organizational process or intent” (2018: 1094). Thus, fake news is not ruled by any editorial norms and processes, which ensure certain accuracy and credibility of information, but overlaps with other types of “information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people)” (Lazer *et al.*, 2018: 1094). Also supporting the view that fake news might conflate with disinformation, misinformation and mal-information, the Director of Research for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism in New York, Claire Wardle (2017: 20), highlights the importance of distinguishing messages that are true from those that are false. In an attempt to outline disinformation and fake news, Wardle (2018: 953) identifies seven types of “information disorders”: (1) false context, when genuine content is presented with false contextual information; (2) imposter content, when genuine sources are impersonated; (3) fabricated contents, when false contents are designed to deceive and do harm; (4) false connection, when headlines, visuals and captions do not support the content; (5) manipulated content, when information is manipulated to deceive; (6) misleading content, when it is used to frame an issue or an individual; (7) satire or parody, when there is no intention to cause harm and is only to fool.

In a similar framework, Damian Tambini (2017: 3–5) of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) identifies different types of fake news, including news that is ideologically opposed or challenges one’s perspective. In this regard, several political or public figures and their followers have used the term “fake news” to refer to mainstream

¹ The “Pizzagate” scandal was begun by a group of young people from Macedonia who published conspiracy theories of candidate Hillary Clinton and other democrats being involved in a child traffic ring that operated at a pizzeria in Washington, DC, named Comet Ping Pong (Silverman, 2016b).

news media that do not align with their political-ideological positions² (Klein and Wueller, 2017: 6). In this respect, Tambini (2017) includes not only what has been described as false information itself, but also what is considered fake news, just because one does not agree with or feel comfortable about it (Newman *et al.*, 2017: 20). This approach reinforces the importance of individual perceptions in defining what news or fake news is. In her masters dissertation, Stella Zaryan (2017) highlights the need for a deeper understanding of what fake news represents to individuals and how these perceptions, along with their levels of media trust, have an impact in the definition of fake news. By conducting interviews through Facebook, Stella Zaryan (2017: 30) concluded that for many, fake news is not only fabricated information, but also involves issues around objectivity, false statements and news framing, evoking factual, political and ethical judgments. Aligned with this perspective, this study draws on the approach that young people's uses and perceptions on information and disinformation contribute to the understanding of what news and fake news are (Buckingham, 2000; Peters, 2012; Peters and Broersma, 2017; Tambini, 2017; Zaryan, 2017). Thus, we seek to find out how undergraduates perceive (dis)information, what their understanding is around motivations for fake news spread and what they think about its impact in their lives.

NEWS LITERACY IN A POST-TRUTH SOCIETY

The year of 2016 was especially populated with events, such as the US presidential election, the Brexit referendum in the UK and the Colombian peace agreement referendum, which marked the beginning of a post-truth era leading to questioning the impact of (dis)information in society. For the founding director of the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), Aidan White, that year has no precedent in the way news is produced and in the way the public seem disinterested in facts, humanity, media accountability, and truth (2017: 4).

According to an Ipsos survey conducted by *BuzzFeed News*, the vast majority of Americans who access fake news, and for whom Facebook is the main news source, believe in what they read (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016). On a smaller scale, in Europe, the Globsec report states that 10 million people from Central and Eastern Europe believe in fake news, and that young people are more likely to trust it than any other age group (2017: 9). Furthermore, the impact of disinformation on young people's life, especially on civic and political participation is still unknown. As mentioned by Lazer *et al.* (2018: 1095), "evaluations of the medium-to-long-run impact on political behaviour of exposure to fake news (for example, whether and how to vote) are essentially non-existent in the literature". For the authors, fake news can lead to an increase of cynicism and apathy or encouragement of extremism (Lazer *et al.*, 2018: 1095).

² In February of 2017, President Donald Trump wrote on Twitter: "The FAKE NEWS media (failing @NYTimes @NBCNews @ABC @CBS @CNN) is not my enemy. It is the enemy of the American People" (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/832708293516632065>).

Several efforts have been made to address fake news spread, such as the creation of fact-checking organisations or credibility mechanisms developed by social media companies. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), which includes 43 organisations from all over the world, assures that those entities follow the Poynter's code of five principles: non-partisanship and fairness, open and honest corrections, and transparency of sources, methodology and funding (Poynter, 2017). Also, since 2016, Facebook, Twitter and Google have developed their own mechanisms to identify fake or hate speech content across their platforms. However, the so-called "new gatekeepers" (Bell, 2014) have also been accused of using algorithms to filter and censor relevant information on erroneous pretences, as reported by the organisation Onlinecensorship.org (Melro, 2016). While those technology companies made agreements with American and European governments, along with news media corporations, such as the Trust Project (thetrustproject.org), in order to prevent hate speech spread, it is also claimed that these attempts might put freedom of expression at risk. The United Nations, along with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) stated in a declaration about freedom of expression and disinformation, that "general prohibitions on the dissemination of information based on vague and ambiguous ideas, including 'false news' or 'non-objective information', are incompatible with international standards for restrictions on freedom of expression" and therefore should be abolished (United Nations, 2017). Even so, the document highlights the importance of scientific and technological developments to combat disinformation, suggesting fact-checking services available to the public, especially during electoral periods, as well as the adoption of effective regulatory mechanisms in and outside newsrooms (United Nations, 2017).

Apart from the use of automatized mechanisms, media regulation, and third-party intermediates in combating the spread of fake news, it is fundamental to revise the role of news and media literacy in fostering critical thinking to promote civic and political participation. According to Lazer *et al.* (2018: 1095), people tend not to question the credibility of information and accept it uncritically instead, "unless it violates their preconceptions or they are incentivized to do so". In this regard, Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) question what is the role of media literacy in a spectacle and post-fact digital culture? For the authors, whilst many approaches focus on developing citizens' skills to be monitors of information – referring to the diversity of guides and initiatives about spotting fake news –, the priority nowadays, however, is not much about finding the truth itself, but to find personally relevant information that aligns with one's vision of the world (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017: 10). Therefore, in a post-truth culture, how important is it to know how to critically analyse news? As claimed by Sundar (2016) in *The New Republic*, since "online news readers don't seem to really care about the importance of journalistic sourcing" and trust what their peers share on social media instead, simply teaching how to detect false information represents a small fraction of a bigger problem. If this is the case, and if we are witnessing a new ecosystem of news uses and sharing, then "normative approaches to media literacy may fall short of effectively responding to the emergence of post-fact society" (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017: 10). Given the inefficacy of the normative

approach and aligned with a global paradigm of news literacy³ (RobbGrieco and Hobbs, 2013: 22), Mihailidis and Viotty (2017: 11) propose four considerations for repositioning media literacies to respond to the emerging spectacle and post-fact culture: (1) repositioning media literacies for spreadable connectivity, focusing on the connection between human beings, social inclusion, diversity and recognition beyond mainstream media; (2) repositioning media literacies as mechanisms for caring, in fostering pedagogy and practice from a relational and non-individualistic perspective of skill development; (3) repositioning media literacies as facilitators of everyday engagement, encouraging a sense of belonging to the community and promoting participation on local issues, instead of focusing on individual critical skill attainment, which reflects the idea of young people being prone to be more cynical and less engaged (Mihailidis, 2008); (4) reimagining media literacies as intentionally civic, approaching problems in non-structured ways but centred in its civic impact, addressing how media can be used to cause a realistic impact in politics, culture and society that define democracy.

However, despite its relevance in a context of fake news and post-truth, news literacy may not be the only answer to deal with disinformation. According to David Buckingham (2017), news literacy is not enough to address the problem of fake news. Therefore, he suggests that efforts should be made by technology companies, media organisations and governments for media reform. For Jason Hannan (2018: 2), there are at least two ways of framing the problem around disinformation: one is to focus on *the* media and the citizens through a more aggressive fact-checking by journalists and through news literacy; and the other is to focus *on* media, *i.e.* on technologies of communication and their impact in affect the structure of public discourse. Given these perspectives, we understand that addressing the problem of disinformation might require a combination of efforts that includes an active role of technology companies, news media, governments and, more importantly, the role of education, particularly in including news and media literacy to foster critical thinking of young citizens. However, framing the problem of disinformation with regard to young people requires listening to their voices for a better understanding of how these actions might take part in their lives. Furthermore, by questioning how students perceive critical thinking and its role when encountering (dis)information, this paper gives an insight for further studies on how news and media literacy can be framed in education in order to address disinformation and promote young people's civic and political life in a post-truth society.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is driven by the following research questions: (1) how do undergraduates perceive news and disinformation? (2) what are students' understandings of critical thinking

³ According to RobbGrieco and Hobbs (2013: 22), news literacy has been developed around two distinct paradigms: the American paradigm, developed by Howard Schneider of the Center of News Literacy at Stony Brook University School of Journalism, which focuses on a more pedagogical or functionalist approach, derived from the school of journalism, and debates issues around freedom of press, news values, objectivity, journalistic principles and analysis of news articles; and the global paradigm, as a branch of media education or media literacy, more focused on critical thinking, awareness and participation, debating issues, for instance, around critical analysis of media contents, ideology and power struggles.

and its relevance when encountering the news, especially in a fake news and post-truth world? To address these questions, we have selected specific data that were collected for a doctoral study about the role of the media and current events in the civic and political lives of young people. The broader study intends to understand the relationship between media and young people comprising two levels of research: one centred in student media uses and perceptions and other centred in the perceptions of media directors and news producers about young people's media practices and interests. In this paper, we focus on the level of the students, which combines both quantitative and qualitative methods through the administration of questionnaires and through conducting focus groups. At this level, the study followed a mixed method design, based on the explanatory model described by Creswell and Clark (2006: 72), in which the qualitative method was used to explain the quantitative results, previously obtained at the first stage. In this respect, the focus groups were conducted as a follow-up and complement to the questionnaires with the same participants, in order to better understand and explore a set of results. Here, we focus mainly on data collected from the first activity of the focus group. However, we also present briefly some of the questionnaire results used for the focus group discussion. The following table (Table 1) shows the association between the questions of the questionnaire, whose results were used to design the questions of the focus group's first activity regarding the study of student main perceptions discussed in this paper: news information, fake news and critical thinking. Even though questions about disinformation were not directly asked in the questionnaires, student perceptions of news information prompted insights on fake news that were then explored in focus groups

The questionnaire was composed of 40 questions (25 closed questions and fifteen open-ended questions), divided into seven thematic blocks⁴, and was designed to map student media practices, as well as to understand their perceptions about news information and journalism (such as media interests and media trust) and its connection to their civic and political participation. The questions were previously validated through a pre-test with a smaller sample of the population ($n=30$) in order to identify consistency problems and wording. The final version of the questionnaire was administered online through LimeSurvey, between February and June of 2016, to a convenience sample of 562 first year undergraduates of a selection of eighteen undergraduate degrees of different fields of study (Social Sciences and Humanities, Health and Sports Sciences, Engineering and Physical Sciences) from two Portuguese universities: Universidade do Minho (UMinho), in Braga and Universidade da Beira Interior (UBI), in Covilhã, which are located in two different geographic regions of the country (coastline and interior). Both the location and undergraduate degree were used as criteria for the sample composition in order to verify significant differences between students from different courses and students living in rural or urbanised areas. The sample of the study is composed of 332 females and 230 males with an average age of 20 years ($SD=3.4$).

⁴ Within the seven thematic blocks of the questionnaire, this paper focuses on blocks (E) characterisation of media practices on the Internet and social media and (F) characterisation of news interests, and perceptions on information and journalism.

Table 1. The connection between the questions of the focus group's first activity and the questionnaires

Perceptions	Focus Group questions (first activity)	Questionnaire questions
<p>News information and journalism (<i>Research question 1</i>)</p>	<p>How does news information on the Internet and social media differ comparing to those on traditional media outlets?</p> <p>Why would you consider news as a "reflection of reality"?</p> <p>(Media trust) Why would you trust more in the news on traditional media than online news on social media and Internet?</p>	<p>(Indirect association for contextualisation purposes) QE1,E2, E5 & E6 – Questions about the frequency of news access on the Internet and social media (closed questions) QF1 – How interested are you in the following journalistic genres: news (closed question) QF9 – What is your opinion about news and journalism? (open-ended question) QF7 – Please state your level of agreement on the following: ...news is a "reflection of reality" (closed question) QF3 – Please state your level of trust about current events on the following media: social media, online news media, blogs, newspapers, magazines, radio and television (closed question)</p>
<p>Fake news and disinformation (<i>Research question 1</i>)</p>	<p>What is this article about? (introduction) Is the news article fake or not fake and why? Why do you think fake news is published? In your opinion, how can the problem of disinformation be addressed?</p>	<p>The questionnaire does not contain questions about fake news or disinformation, but students made comments about it in the open-ended question QF9.</p>
<p>Critical thinking about the news (<i>Research question 2</i>)</p>	<p>What does it mean to you to have critical thinking when reading news information? What underlying powers are you aware of when reading media messages? How do you question and verify information on the Internet and social media?</p>	<p>QF6 – What does it mean to you to be an informed person: ...to have critical thinking (closed question)</p>

The quantitative analysis performed on the closed questions – containing qualitative variables (nominal and ordinal) – comprehended descriptive and advanced statistics⁵ using IBM SPSS. The open-ended questions, as well as the transcriptions of the focus groups were coded in QSR NVivo using a combination of predefined dimensions from the theoretical framework and an exploratory approach of content analysis, in which the categories emerged from the units of analysis (McQuail, 2003: 331). For this paper, we also conducted statistics analysis using Pearson's Qui-square and measures of association (Cramer's V) with the frequencies obtained from the content analysis of the focus groups.

After analysing the data of the questionnaires, the focus groups were conducted in the following year, between March and April of 2017, with the same respondents as in the case of the questionnaires, who were already attending the second year of their undergraduate degree study programmes. Like the sample of the questionnaires, focus group participants were from different courses and the groups were organised accordingly in order to determine if the course had impact on student perceptions when comparing between groups. In total, there were 45 participants from both universities, organised in eight groups up to ten members each, with an average duration of 64 minutes per session. The sessions were developed around two main activities based in two dimensions: information about current events and civic and political participation. The focus groups were transcribed and the names of the participants remained fictitious.

UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE AND (DIS)INFORMATION

In order to understand what young people perceive as disinformation, it is important to first introduce what they perceive by news information, as described in Table 1. In this respect, the findings from the content analysis of the questionnaire open-ended questions about student opinions on news and journalism ($n=496$) suggest three main complementary and non-exclusive perspectives: optimistic, when referring to the relevance of journalism in society (36.9%); conditional (5.8%), depending on the circumstances or news media outlets; and critical (52.2%), which include criticisms around media bias, sensationalism, agenda-setting, media trust, money-driven logic and exclusion of youth voices in media discourses. The critical perspective means that students hold a critical view on news and journalism, but does not necessarily mean that one thinks critically when encountering the news. We also sustain that maintaining a critical view on news media is different from being cynical and disengaged, since most students revealed high levels of news interest (58.9%; $n=526$). However, respondents also revealed a great deal of idealisation in their speeches, meaning they tend to answer according to what is socially acceptable and expected in the aims of the study (Buckingham, 2000: 202), building a gap between discourses and practice. In a study with teenagers, Irene Costera Meijer (2007) concluded the existence of a double viewing paradox in the perceptions

⁵ The statistics analysis undertaken for this paper include Spearman's rho correlations (rs) between variables of the questionnaire, with 99% level of confidence.

of young people about the news. While youngsters demand high quality information (sacrosanctity of the news features) and “are very aware of the social status and civic importance that are attributed to quality news” (Costera Meijer, 2007), they prefer to access more soft and entertaining information, as they tend to exclude themselves as an audience. Although the study of Meijer (2007) was conducted with younger individuals, the similarities to the findings of this study are evident, particularly regarding young people’s idealisation of the news and of the role of journalism in society, which appears to be more close to a functionalist and traditional view of what news and journalism *should* be.

For the purpose of this article, it is also important to state that even though these students access information mainly through social media on a daily basis (68.1%; $n=562$) – with Facebook as the most used platform for news access ($n=544$; $p<0.01$; $0.25\leq|r_s|<0.5$) –, they tend to place less trust in social media news (5.8%; $n=538$), when compared to traditional media outlets. In the questionnaires, when asked about their opinion of journalism, students reveal this lack of trust in online news by associating it with issues around immediacy, clickbait, misinformation, fake news, and entertainment. As an example, one student stated that: “[journalism] should be as objective as possible and it is losing its credibility due to social media” (Female, Communication Sciences, UMinho). Like this student, most of the respondents of the questionnaire hold an idealised and traditional view about objectivity and accuracy in the news, demanding high quality information, similar to Meijer’s (2007) findings. Thus, do these students fully believe in the information they encounter, or do they question it? If the latter, how do they question the news they come across?

The first activity of the focus groups followed a semi-structured script with a set of ten questions around perceptions about (dis)information, news as a “reflection of reality”, fake news, media trust, verification and critical thinking (see Table 1). To address these topics, the first activity began with the reading of a fake news article⁶ about the US presidential election in 2016 (“Obama Signs Executive Order Declaring Investigation Into Election Results; Revote Planned For Dec. 19th”), published by an imitation of the American broadcaster ABC News (www.abcnews.com) hosted in a Colombian domain (www.abcnews.com.co), on December 16th of 2016 (Illustration 1).

The issues around disinformation and fake news were particularly relevant to this study, since the data collection overlapped with a moment of great fake news spread, during the 2016 presidential election in the USA (Silverman, 2016b). The election and the then candidate, Donald Trump, were also the second most discussed topic by the respondents of the questionnaires, according to the content analysis conducted in that question⁷.

⁶ The fake news article was presented to students on paper, in both English and Portuguese (translated). They were also given a print copy of the homepage of the news website.

⁷ This finding refers to the open-ended question of the questionnaire: QF5 – Please tell us one or two news topics that you most conversed with other person in the last week.

Illustration 1.

Clipping of the fake news article selected for the focus group activity.

Source: www.abcnews.co

Obama Signs Executive Order Declaring Investigation Into Election Results; Revote Planned For Dec. 19th

By Jimmy Rockling, ABC News - December 12, 2016



President Obama has signed an Executive Order declaring an investigation into the election results and plans for a revote on December 19th. (AP Photo / Dennis Sytem)

In the news article presented in the focus groups, there were several elements that could help determine its falsehood, for instance aspects of the layout and the content, such as: (1) the source and domain of the Colombian website as opposed to the official ABC News homepage; (2) a different logo compared to the official; (3) the section of the homepage where the news was displayed – under “Fashion Week” rather than a topic related to politics; (4) the description of the homepage using humour and parody; (5) the biography and photo of the author also presented in a fictional way; (6) elements in the content, such as the style of the narrative, data inconsistency, fictional sources and false quotations.

After reading the news article, students were asked if they thought the article was fake or not fake and why, starting a dialogue about news, disinformation and critical thinking. Of the 45 participants of the focus groups, over two out of three (71.1%) thought the news was “not fake” (Table 2), mainly because it contained statements from well-known figures of the public sphere. The results displayed in Table 2 were obtained through the frequency of cases coded in the categories “fake” and “not fake” followed by a statistics analysis.

Table 2. Frequency of “fake” or “not fake” by students in each focus group* (n=45)

Group	Undergraduate Degree		Not Fake	Fake	Total
A	Communication Sciences, Management and Basic Education	Count	3	1	4
		%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	0.2	-0.2	
B	Biochemistry	Count	0	4	4
		%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	-3.3	3.3	
C	Architecture	Count	3	0	3
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	1.1	-1.1	
D	Sports Sciences	Count	6	0	6
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	1.7	-1.7	
E	Aeronautical Engineering	Count	3	0	3
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	1.1	-1.1	
F	Cinema and Communication Sciences	Count	1	6	7
		%	14.3%	85.7%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	-3.6	3.6	
G	Sociology	Count	10	0	10
		%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	2.3	-2.3	
H	Architecture	Count	6	2	8
		%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	0.3	-0.3	
Total		Count	32	13	45
		%	71.1%	28.9%	100.0%

* $p < 0.05$; $V = 0.82$

Apart from mentioning that the article was allegedly from a trustworthy news organisation (ABC News), another reason students mentioned regarding its “truthfulness” was the fact that the news topic was currently on the agenda and talked about by many. Therefore, the probability of an event like that occurring would have been high. As one student says: “in fact, there were many comments saying the votes were forged” (Female, Group G, Sociology, UBI). In the same group discussion, another student replied stating that: “regardless of what people said, the data collected showed that people really chose Hillary over Trump” (Female, Group G, Sociology, UBI). In the literature, it is stated

that fake news can emerge from rumours or hoaxes (Tambini, 2017), aligning with what people expect to be true. However, the fact that some of these undergraduates believe in information that is aligned with their opinions, either by hearsay or by concurring with their ideologies (Tambini, 2017), challenges the importance of critical thinking in a post-truth society. Since these students do not question the information they encounter, because the “truth” is what is close to their own beliefs, the pursuit for the truth might be less of a priority to them (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017: 10). Not only are these participants likely to believe in false information, but will probably share it with those around them, as mentioned in the following statement:

The truth is that we never waste much time checking the veracity of information. That is the truth. We read it, have an impression about it and will most likely pass that information to others without checking the facts. (Female, Group B, Biochemistry, UMinho)

Viewed in this way, some participants argue that verifying information is only circumscribed to specific situations, such as in student projects or when the subject captures their interest. Among the resources they would use to check the facts, students mentioned crossing information between different media sources and awareness of certain textual elements that might look suspicious, such as flashy news headlines and use of adjectives.

The thirteen participants (28.9%) who considered the news article “fake” or at least raised doubts about its veracity are mostly students of Communication Sciences (53.8%). As revealed in the statistics analysis for this question, there is a significant and strong association between the undergraduate degree course and viewing the news article fake or not ($p < 0.05$; $V = 0.82$). In particular, students of Communication Sciences (group F) are more likely to distrust information, but so are students of Biochemistry (group B). In these groups, students identified most of the elements described before that proved the news falsehood, namely: data inconsistency, a suspicious biography and the author’s photo, the description of the homepage and the fact that it was under a misleading section. The domain of the website, the logo and the validity of the quotations were not mentioned. Besides, these students also suspect the veracity of the article because they have not heard about this subject on other media outlets. This finding suggests that Communication Sciences students are probably better prepared and reveal skills of news analysis since they learned it within their university studies, which suggests the need for news and media literacy in other disciplines. However, it also leaves us with an unanswered and curious question as to why Biochemistry students also question more the information than other groups and, on the other hand, why Sociology students do not question it more. Does it have to do with their family background? Are Sociology students not being taught about the media at all?

Why fake news and how to deal with it?

When asked about motivations for the dissemination of fake news, most of the focus group participants pointed to issues of political power or influence, parody and economic profit. In terms of political influence, students stated that fake news can be used to raise

controversy in order to shape public opinion about a specific issue, denigrate the image of political opponents and to promote a political agenda. As for economic profit, students identified clickbait as the strongest reason, with the gathering of a large number of visualisations and shares over social media aiming to achieve economic gain. In general, the reasons highlighted by undergraduates seem to support the existing literature about the main motivations for fake news spread (Wardle, 2017). The following participant discourse sums up what other students also discussed across all groups:

In my opinion, there are several causes or there are several reasons. One, and probably the most dangerous of all is to cause misinformation in order to promote a political and ideological agenda for people who see their fears being confirmed and start believing in those who preach those ideologies or agendas. Another case of fake news, and perhaps it may be less relevant, is the parody type in order to make things up just to create confusion and spread it, for instance, on Facebook, Twitter, this type of social media to generate more likes, more clicks, more shares, and there are people who gain something with it (...). (Male, Group A, Management, UMinho)

Despite not being able to identify the veracity of a news article, fake news spread raised concerns among all the participants of the focus groups. For instance, this student considers it an alarming situation for society and journalism: "I think the consequences can be disastrous because it makes me rethink what journalism is, what veracity is, what news is (...)" (Female, Group A, Communication Sciences, UMinho). Furthermore, participants were encouraged to discuss what actions should take place in society and in media or technology organisations in order to work around the issue of disinformation. In general, our undergraduates suggested a set of mechanisms and measures to combat the spread of disinformation, which can be arranged in five different areas or spheres of action, as shown in the following table (Table 3).

Table 3. Spheres of action identified by undergraduates in the focus groups to combat fake news spread

Sphere of action	Actions	Examples of student comments
News media	Fact-checking and greater transparency of sources.	"...I think it needs more rigorous editorial guidelines and journalistic principles to be followed. Journalists need to be sure they speak to the right persons and that what they say is real". (Female, Group A, Communication Sciences, UMinho)
Social media companies	More active role and collaborative mechanisms of self-reporting.	"I think, given the power that social media have nowadays, they have to play a very active role in this matter because many people do not even read newspapers or go to a news website; they only see a little of what is shown in their news feed. And so, I think Facebook, despite not being a news media, can and should play a very strong role in this regard". (Female, Group A, Communication Sciences, UMinho)



Sphere of action	Actions	Examples of student comments
Fact-checking organisations	Creating or supporting third party entities dedicated to fact-checking.	"...and even an online platform that would allow us to insert the link to the news and we could know whether the news is fake." (Female, Group B, Biochemistry, UMinho).
Regulation, hetero-regulation and newsroom ethics committees	More regulatory mechanisms for journalists and news organisations.	"...there is a code of ethics for journalists that no one follows, thus there should be another way to regulate it". (Male, Group D, Sports Sciences, UBI).
Education (news literacy)	Developing critical thinking as a way to an informed citizenship.	"...despite journalists being responsible to broadcast information carefully, it is important that people don't be fooled by news and so they need to have certain awareness, a critical thinking to verify information and check for reliable sources to be informed". (Female, Group B, Biochemistry, UMinho).

In line with what was stated by the United Nations (2017), most of these students mentioned the need for a greater accountability of social media platforms without, however, limiting freedom of expression, as shown by the following statement:

For example, I'm not big fan about these measures against hate speech because if an individual wants to say what he wants, he should say it. Now, regarding fake news like these that try to pretend to be from real news organisations, I think Facebook might have a role (...) (Male, Group A, Management, UMinho)

Regardless of recognising the need for a more active role of social media companies, for some students it is still confusing to distinguish between news media and social media. In the questionnaires, over a quarter of the respondents answered "Facebook" instead of writing down the name of a news media organisation they use to follow on social media. This reinforces the blurred conceptions of news information in the online sphere. Furthermore, it is important to understand what undergraduates mean by critical thinking and what its significance is for their daily lives in relation to (dis)information.

CRITICAL THINKING IN A FAKE NEWS WORLD

In the questionnaires, the majority of the respondents (80.3%; n=534) agrees that being an informed citizen also means being a critical thinker. Drawing on this result, the focus groups' discussions intended to explore what young people understand by critical thinking and what role it plays when students encounter the news. In the sessions, participants primarily stated that critical thinking means questioning the information that is presented to them. This means doubting or being suspicious about its veracity, as opposed to believing faithfully in it, as explained by this student:

It is essential to have [critical thinking] otherwise anything we have been told, we will accept it as true, and it can be a big lie, as in these examples where we have been seeing half-truths and half-lies. So we should always have critical thinking to not accept everything they give us. (Male, Group E, Aeronautic Engineering, UBI)

From this perspective, it could be argued that despite the fact that fake news spread might impact student trust in online news – as previously mentioned regarding the questionnaires – disinformation can actually reinforce the need for a greater development of critical thinking in order to be an informed citizen. For these students, the dissemination of fake news stresses the importance of critical thinking and calls for a more active role of citizens. As this participant states:

I think this wave of fake news creates another important thing that is people having to take a critical attitude towards the news. Before, people read the news and almost believed in it because they were credible, but now, people have to filter it and to think if it's true or not and analyse it. And I guess that did not happen before. I think there has been a change in the role of the reader. The reader is not only a person who reads and receives information, but also has to play an active and critical role. (Female, Group A, Communication Sciences, UMinho)

Nonetheless, according to the previous statement, there seem to exist a before- and an after-fake-news spread, meaning that before fake news, critical thinking might have appeared less relevant – since information was viewed as more credible or trustworthy –, which denotes a limited understanding of what critical thinking and journalistic discourse actually involve. Though many participants recognised that they lack critical thinking skills about the news, they highlight that it should be fostered in schools, especially in higher education⁸. This is also shared by Communication Sciences undergraduates who claim to possess more developed critical thinking skills than the majority of their colleagues, due to the fact that they are attending this very course. In the focus groups, Communication Sciences students were also more aware of the statement about news as a social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 2004), entailing personal values and specific editorial guidelines, as opposed to reflecting reality as considered by the majority of the respondents in the questionnaires (52.8%; $n=516$). This highlights the importance of media education for a better understanding of media contents. Similarly, Vraga and Tully (2016) found out that undergraduates enrolled in media education courses revealed higher levels of media trust and news literacy, and therefore a greater capacity in understanding the impact of media contents.

Even though these undergraduates consider that thinking critically about the news means questioning the information, the findings from the focus groups reveal the existence of different levels of understanding regarding critical thinking skills. These skills were also lacking the most among students who showed little news interest and engagement. For some students, critical thinking means being able to identify underlying powers in media messages, such as political and economic forces. Additionally, it also means being aware of a set of textual and visual elements at the content level, such as checking inconsistent

⁸ Students referred to the development of critical thinking skills through media education in Portuguese secondary schools, especially by including it in the programme of a discipline called "Civic Education".

data, identifying overstatements and sensationalist styles, analysing narratives, identifying stylistic features, and analysing visual elements (visual grammar) and their meaning in media messages. Despite the fact that student understandings of critical thinking are relevant to the studies on news and media literacy, further studies should be conducted in order to evaluate different levels of critical thinking about (dis)information.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we argue that concepts of information and disinformation are not only defined by a functionalist perspective of news and journalism (Peters and Broersma, 2017: 12), but also by what individuals, in this case young people, perceive and value in information, and by their media uses. Therefore, by discussing media and (dis)information with undergraduates, this paper contributes to a better understanding of young people's practices and perceptions of news and disinformation, in a period that was especially marked by fake news spread and a post-truth culture. Even though fake news spread in Portugal had little expression, compared to the US, and in spite of the fact that the sample consists of a specific subpopulation of the Portuguese society – undergraduates –, our findings may add significance to the international panorama in media and education studies.

Regarding the first research question about undergraduate perceptions of (dis) information, our study reveals that despite disclosing a critical perspective about the news and a demand for high quality information, as part of an idealised and socially constructed speech (Buckingham, 2000; Costera Meijer, 2007), students hardly ever verify or question the information they encounter, unless it is about an issue of their interest or discipline. We also found out that the identification of truthfulness/falsehood of the news article was strongly and significantly associated with student undergraduate degrees. In this sense, Communication Sciences students composed the majority of the participants in the focus groups that were able to identify the news article as fake. These students also revealed greater understanding of the news production and analysis, partly due to being more familiar with the subject, which reinforces the need for news and media literacy in early education. Overall, both students in the questionnaires and in the focus groups raised concerns about disinformation in their lives and even though the majority of the focus group participants failed to identify the news article as fake, they were able to describe the motivations for fake news spread, such as political, economic and parody. Furthermore, they describe disinformation as being problematic to society, and, consequently, they feel the need for it to be addressed without compromising freedom of expression. In this regard, combining the literature (Buckingham, 2017; Hannan, 2018; Lazer *et al.*, 2018) with the student comments displayed in the results section, we suggest that the articulation of the following five actions from different fields of society might be beneficial to address the problem of fake news and raise awareness on disinformation:

- (1) *From the media and the journalists* – by a greater transparency of the news production and sources, and by verifying information before publishing.
- (2) *From social media/technology companies* – by adopting a more active role as intermediaries between the media and the public, providing greater transparency of the algorithms' purposes ("black box"), and by developing collaborative mechanisms of self-reporting for the community of users.
- (3) *From third-party agencies of fact-checking* – by establishing partnerships with news media organisations and technology companies in order to verify information.
- (4) *From regulatory entities* – by supporting journalistic processes and fostering auto and hetero-regulation inside and outside the newsroom.
- (5) *From news and media literacy/education* – by fostering news and media literacy under a global perspective (RobbGrieco and Hobbs, 2013) and in a post-truth framework (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017) in schools and with families.

Regarding the second research question, the questionnaires showed that critical thinking skills are seen by undergraduates as being important to be an informed citizen. This was also confirmed in the focus groups, where students expressed the need for greater critical thinking as an overall skill of questioning information, especially given fake news spread. However, in the focus groups different levels of understanding of critical thinking were identified regarding (dis)information, in which we noticed that Communication Sciences students are more aware of media content meanings. For undergraduates, thinking critically about the news means being able to identify underlying powers or forces in media messages and also identifying a set of textual and visual elements of the news, for instance, noticing data inconsistencies, exaggerated headlines and understanding the style of the narrative. Because participant comments on critical thinking reveal a greater concern in being able to verify information and detect false information, we understand that student perceptions on critical thinking seem to be more aligned with a functionalist or normative framework (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017), under an American paradigm of news literacy (RobbGrieco and Hobbs, 2013: 22). Though reinforcing the importance of critical thinking in a global paradigm, we agree with a repositioning of news literacy that is more centred in the connection between young people and their daily lives, fostering a sense of community for civic and political participation in a post-fact society (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017: 11). In this perspective, how can news and media literacy be fostered in schools and families while addressing changing practices and perceptions of (dis) information?

While acknowledging the limitations of the methods used in this paper, we believe our findings provide a basic understanding of the role of (dis)information and critical thinking about the news in the lives of young people. Furthermore, this paper opens the discussion about the impact of disinformation in young people's civic and political participation.

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LAŽNE ILI ISTINITE? PERCEPCIJE STUDENATA PREDDIPLOMSKIH STUDIJA O (DEZ)INFORMACIJAMA I KRITIČKOM RAZMIŠLJANJU

Ana Melro :: Sara Pereira

SAŽETAK *U sve izazovnijem medijskom okruženju tzv. post-istine i lažnih vijesti dezinformacija može utjecati na percepciju mladih ljudi o svijetu. U ovoj studiji nastojimo objasniti na koji način mladi ljudi pristupaju vijestima, kakva je njihova percepcija o dezinformacijama te koliko je, prema njihovu mišljenju, kritičko razmišljanje važno za njihov građanski i politički život. Na temelju analize 562 anketna upitnika koje su ispunili studenti prve godine preddiplomskih studija dvaju portugalskih sveučilišta formirane su fokus-grupe s ukupno 45 sudionika. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da studenti, iako priznaju da nedovoljno kritički analiziraju informacije, izražavaju zabrinutost zbog dezinformacija, sugerirajući niz aktivnosti za borbu protiv širenja lažnih vijesti. Nadalje, nalazi potvrđuju potrebu za pojačanom medijskom pismenošću u svijetu post-činjenica.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

MLADI LJUDI, DEZINFORMACIJA, LAŽNE VIJESTI, KRITIČKO RAZMIŠLJANJE, MEDIJSKA PISMENOST

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