

Claudiu Coman

✉ <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6272-7414>
✉ claudiu.coman@unitbv.ro

Ecaterina Coman

✉ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5058-0766>
✉ ecaterina.coman@unitbv.ro

Transilvania University of Brașov

ror <https://ror.org/01cg9ws23>

Anna Bucs

✉ <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8932-5579>
✉ anna.bucs@gmail.com

University of Craiova

ror <https://ror.org/03s251g81>

Navigating the fake news landscape: Insights from a mixed-methods study in Brașov, Romania

doi <https://doi.org/10.15633/sce.01302>

Abstract

Navigating the fake news landscape: Insights from a mixed-methods study in Brașov, Romania

The present study examines public perceptions and understanding of the fake news phenomenon and its impact on society. Our research used a mixed-methods approach: a survey of respondents ($n = 155$) in the Brașov region of Romania was complemented by interviews with subject-matter experts. The questionnaire results reveal respondents' trust in various information sources and their ability to identify fake news. Key findings indicate that social media and television are perceived as the primary channels for the dissemination of misinformation, with political actors and journalists identified as the main actors responsible. The interviews provide a deeper understanding of the nature of fake news, the motivations behind its creation and propagation, and effective techniques for recognition and mitigation. Experts emphasize the need for public education, fact-checking mechanisms, and a collaborative approach involving individuals, institutions, and the government. The study contributes to understanding fake news and offers practical recommendations for policymakers, media professionals, and the public on navigating the digital information landscape and maintaining the integrity of public discourse.

Keywords: fake news, misinformation, information flow, media literacy, fact-checking

The present study investigates the phenomenon of fake news from a mixed-methods perspective. A quantitative research component was implemented through a questionnaire designed to capture public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to the consumption and validation of online information. To enhance and contextualize these findings, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with experts in the field, yielding nuanced insights into the mechanisms underlying misinformation and strategies for resilience. Information has served as a primary engine of development throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This dynamic has been sustained, in large part, by independent media outlets, which function as trusted stewards of the public interest and as a fundamental component of the checks and balances essential to democratic societies.

However, recent developments have placed journalism under increasing scrutiny. Political, technological, economic, and social transformations are reshaping the communications landscape in irreversible ways, raising

pressing concerns regarding journalism's quality, impact, and credibility. Compounding these challenges is the contamination of the informational ecosystem by coordinated disinformation campaigns—deliberate efforts to spread falsehoods and manipulate public opinion. This disruption is further intensified by the proliferation of “half-truths,” the dissemination of poor-quality information, and the widespread sharing of disinformation (intentionally false information) and misinformation (unintentionally false information).

In an era fundamentally transformed by rapid digitalization and constant technological advancement, maintaining an informed and discerning perspective on the flow of information has become increasingly complex. Businesses have also developed digitalization strategies (Karim & Wassim, 2019). The velocity with which data is produced, disseminated, and altered in the online environment poses significant challenges for both individuals and institutions. In this context, the mass media have experienced a pronounced decline in credibility. In recent years, not only has the spread of “fake news” reached alarming proportions, but institutional attacks on journalism as a profession have also played a significant role in undermining public trust in the accuracy and reliability of information. There are also pedagogical strategies in the era of digitalization that could help combat fake news (Chiu, 2021). As part of the global response to misinformation’s challenges, governments worldwide strive to identify strategic, sustainable solutions—an elusive “magic formula”—to counteract the adverse effects of fake news. The persistence and intensity of public debate on this subject underscore both its societal relevance and its research value. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the public perceives fake news, how individuals inform themselves about this phenomenon, and the role that media literacy and institutional trust play in shaping these perceptions. By collecting data from both lay respondents and professionals, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the informational vulnerabilities in digital environments and the practical means to address them.

In many regions of the world, trust in mass media and journalism has long been fragile, diminishing even before the rise of social media platforms. This trend is closely intertwined with a broader decline in public confidence in institutions, a phenomenon observed across numerous societies. Yet, the sheer volume of information now circulating online—often in the form of misinformation and disinformation—has generated a kind of contagion effect that

threatens the reputational integrity of journalism itself. These developments carry profound implications not only for journalists and media institutions in all their forms but also for citizens and societies at large.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon; however, in today's digitally mediated environment, it spreads with unprecedented speed and ease. Ethical journalists and trustworthy news organizations must extinguish the flames of this dangerous fire by exposing fake news for what it truly is: deliberate falsehood. In an age of high-velocity, freely accessible information—disseminated across social media platforms and the wider internet—any individual can assume the role of a content creator. As a result, citizens face increasing difficulty in discerning what is true from what is false.

Within this environment, newsrooms are striving to reclaim and uphold their historic role as gatekeepers—curators of verified information that facilitate the pursuit of truth. Simultaneously, the expansion of markets for strategic communications and information operations—including active disinformation and harmful content—has become a significant force within the informational ecosystem.

It has become increasingly clear that addressing the challenges posed by this disruption requires interventions of varying scales. One tempting response has been to introduce regulatory measures, a path many nations have pursued. However, advocates of free expression caution that such approaches may undermine the openness and participatory potential that digital technologies have enabled.

Some studies research the impact of fake news in society (Olan et al., 2022; Kaliyar et al., 2022) and its negative consequences; for this, some have created taxonomies (Simons & Manoilo, 2021), and it has been debated whether there are false fears or real concerns regarding fake news (McGonagle, 2017). Fake news refers to fabricated, distorted, or truncated information disseminated through traditional and alternative media, as well as on social networks, by a state or organization with a budget, strategy, and ideology to deepen existing social tensions and create confusion (Voicu, 2018). At the same time, fake news has always sparked controversies (Tandoc et al., 2021) and has become increasingly chaotic in today's world (Simons & Manoilo, 2021).

Interestingly, the rise of fake news undermines many efforts by various institutions to combat it (Lazer et al., 2018). This rise led to fake news becoming a powerful tool for manipulating the masses (Muqsith et al., 2021).

In the digital world, fake news is seen as a menace (Sonone, 2024), satire, and fabrication (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018).

To fully grasp the consequences of informational disorder for journalists and the societies they serve, stakeholders need to consider the profound transformation of journalism and mass media, driven by structural, cultural, and normative changes accelerated by rapid technological advancement and the widespread adoption of internet-enabled personal devices. The evolving relationship between the erosion of trust in journalism and the growing reliance on and engagement with social media platforms is significant.

As such, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: Fake news affects public opinion.

H₂: Media channels are rife with fake news transmitted to the public.

H₃: People suggest that fake news is used to manipulate public opinion.

Methodology

Based on the analysis of the existing literature, the following objectives have been identified:

O₁: Identifying public perceptions regarding the phenomenon of fake news.

O₂: Describing the mechanisms employed to combat it.

O₃: Identifying the channels where fake news is the most prevalent.

What we have found particularly important in the analysis we intend to conduct of the phenomenon of fake news and how it can be countered is the need to avoid an isolated, decontextualized view of the process. Understanding what lies beyond the audience's perception of the information is crucial, especially considering that the public often lacks a comprehensive understanding of the process. The events underlying the news stories may prove essential for grasping specific issues related to the process or even the phenomenon itself.

Therefore, fake news does not pertain solely to specific pieces of information or isolated issues. Survey respondents' perceptions of the phenomenon will thus be complemented by insights from field experts, particularly regarding the mechanisms that contribute to the development of fake news and those required to mitigate it. The research instruments employed included a questionnaire, used within the quantitative research framework, and a qualitative research method – namely, the interview – driven by the desire

to gain deeper insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Emphasis will be placed on complementarity and the mutual validation of instruments and data sources.

The present research, based on both a questionnaire and interviews, aims to determine the extent to which information dissemination can lead to a clearer understanding of the fake news phenomenon—its intended purposes, potential effects, and the actors who may employ it—and, through such awareness, to the identification of methods for mitigating the associated risks, as well as approaches to effectively countering it. Accordingly, the study is grounded in operationalizing and examining three key concepts: information dissemination in the online environment, the fake news phenomenon, and the strategies for countering fake news.

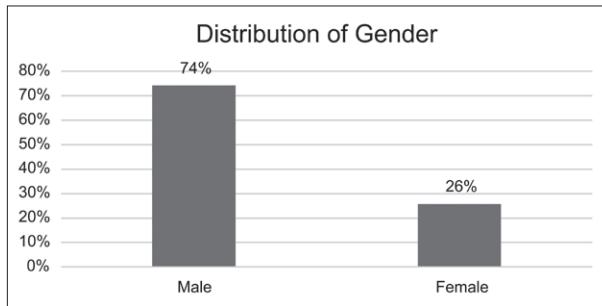
Specifically, the questionnaire assessed public perceptions of information security concerns, trust in sources, and various dimensions of the safety of news and information sources. Operationalizing the fake news phenomenon involved identifying public perceptions of its defining features, relevant actors, intended purposes, modes of dissemination, and potential impacts.

The third conceptual focus of the research was on counteracting and combating fake news. Operationalizing this dimension entailed identifying institutional responsibilities, measures taken to address the issue, and assessing public perceptions of their own responses to fake news. The survey was conducted between May and June 2020 to identify perceptions regarding methods of information acquisition and the fake news phenomenon.

Data analysis and findings

A total of 155 individuals ($N = 155$) responded to the questionnaire. Individual charts illustrate their characteristics—such as education level, gender, age, place of origin, and socio-professional category.

Figure 1 shows that most respondents were female (74%) and male (26%). Thus, we can realize that Women outnumbered men in the sample (74% vs. 26%).

Figure 1. Distribution of gender

The difference in respondents' backgrounds is not significant, with 54.2% ($n = 84$) from urban areas and 45.8% ($n = 71$) from rural areas. As a general observation, respondents were mainly students or professionals who required up-to-date information, engaged in professional activities that did, or were previously involved in activities promoting information dissemination in online environments. Regarding age, most respondents are young, ranging from 17 to 37 years old. The remaining percentage is made up of adults aged 38 to 62 years.

Figure 2 shows that the largest share of respondents has a higher education degree, with 59% of individuals in this category. This category is followed by 26% of individuals who have completed high school. The remainder includes 15% of individuals with postgraduate qualifications and three percent who graduated from post-secondary vocational institutions.

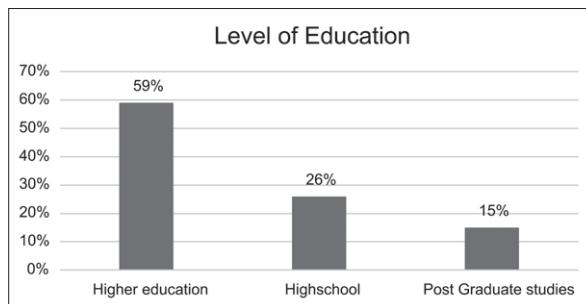
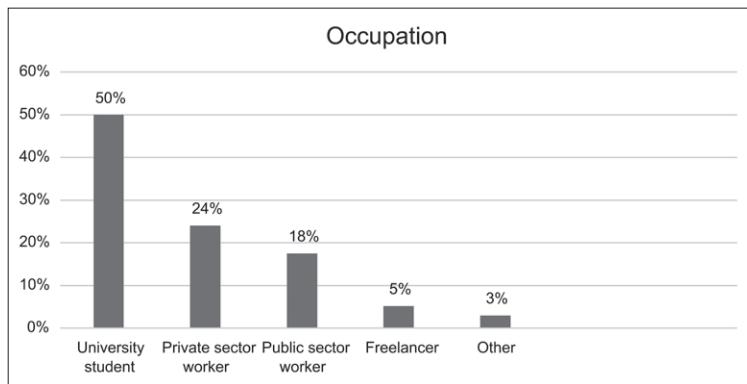
Figure 2. The distribution of the level of education among respondents

Figure 3 shows that the majority of participants were university students (50%), followed by private-sector workers (24%) and public-sector workers (18%). A smaller number identified as freelancers (5%).

Figure 3. The distribution of the occupation among respondents



Opinion regarding the fake news phenomenon and its emergence

Regarding H1, respondents believe that the phenomenon of fake news is not new. Still, it has never received as much attention as it has in recent years, especially since it has gained significant traction. At the same time, it is considered a tool for manipulating the masses:

Today's phenomenon is accelerated by technology, specifically by the ability to communicate on social media platforms and the freedom of speech that all citizens possess, enabling anyone to become an influencer.

On the other hand, it represents the norm that journalists face daily when encountering news and facts. One respondent's opinion suggests that fake news

There are gaps in disinformation and mass manipulation that represent a form of yellow journalism and propaganda, and they are particularly toxic and dangerous.

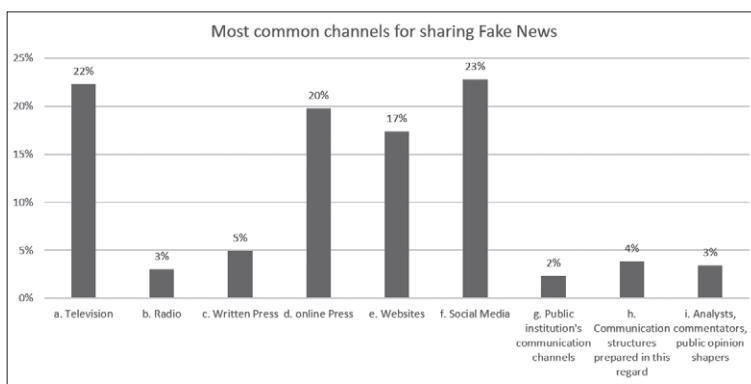
In the respondent's opinion, the emergence of the phenomenon, according to respondents, is due in part to the fact that:

Social media networks are the most efficient channels for spreading fake news. They cascade rapidly, often promoted by organizations or individuals who do not disclose their identities. Even manipulation strategies are devised through fake news, with clear, identifiable objectives.

Identifying the media channels responsible for the phenomenon of fake news

The online environment is favorable for disseminating information and, implicitly, fake news. For this reason, Figure 4 shows the most common channels for spreading fake news, according to respondents. Regarding H2, social media is in first place in this ranking, with 23% of respondents' answers. Television is the next medium in the results ranking by a tiny difference, with 22% of answers. Among the new media, online press and websites rank with 20% and 17% of responses, respectively, reflecting that respondents use social media and online press quite a lot to stay informed and keep up to date with what is happening. At the same time, respondents consider that communication structures prepared for this purpose, communication structures of public institutions, analysts, commentators, and opinion formers, represent relatively small segments in terms of the likelihood of fake news dissemination.

Figure 4. Respondents' Opinions on the channels that most frequently spread Fake News

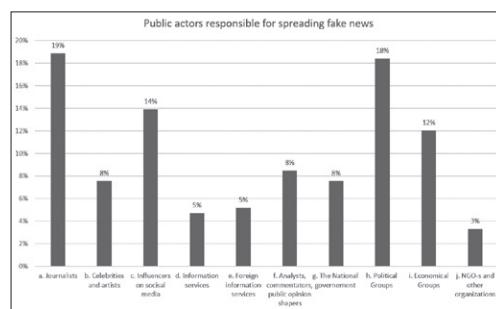


Public actors involved in disseminating fake news

Regarding public actors involved in disseminating fake news, respondents provide responses based on their perspectives and even classify these actors. As specialists in the field, they argue that various public actors disseminate fake news, intentionally or unintentionally. They note that, as journalists, they face fake news of all kinds daily, from the “harmless” ones propagated by colleagues or influencers who are less careful with source verification to economic ones, often generated by companies interested in falsifying market data to influence sales, as well as those launched by various groups with less honorable motives.

As presented in Figure 5, 19% of responses point to journalists as the public actors bearing the greatest responsibility for producing and disseminating fake news. By a minimal difference, 18% of total responses consider political interest groups the most responsible. The positioning of political interest groups in the top two positions both confirms and supports the respondents' answer to the question in which they were asked about the differences they observe in the way different news channels or sources of information report the same events, and where the answer chosen by the respondents was in first position with 68 answers claiming that political interests determine these differences.

Figure 5. The public actors responsible for spreading fake news



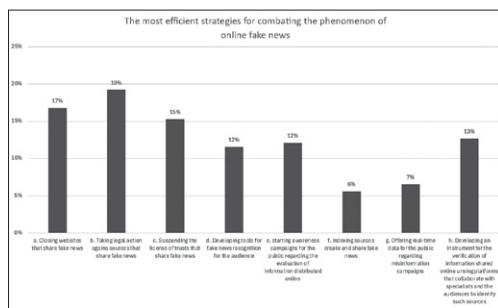
The following positions in the hierarchy of responsibility are the online media influencers (14%), followed by economic interest groups (12%), and analysts, commentators, and opinion makers (8%).

In an equal balance, 32 responses are from celebrities and entertainers and their own government, with lower values identified with responses regarding their own intelligence services, foreign intelligence services, NGOs, or other types of organizations.

Strategies and techniques against fake news

Strategies and techniques are crucial to combat and reduce the spread of fake news, and respondents provided clear answers on this dimension. First, validating the truth through personal investigation is one of the respondents' answers, aimed at avoiding distortion and viewing the facts from their perspective. Secondly, technology is considered a reliable ally in combating this phenomenon, which, from the respondents' point of view, is simultaneously both a tool and a weapon.

Figure 6. The most efficient strategies in combating the phenomenon of fake news



The bar chart in Figure 6 shows respondents' preferences for various methods to address fake news. The most popular receiving strategy (19%) was taking legal action against sources sharing fake news. This indicates that the majority of respondents believe legal consequences are the most effective way to combat fake news. The second most favored approach was closing websites that share fake news (17%). This suggests a strong preference for directly targeting the platforms that disseminate fake news. The third most popular strategy (15%) was suspending the accounts that share fake news, emphasizing the need to address individual contributors. While educational tools and awareness campaigns are seen as necessary, they are considered less effective.

Information flow as a means of the phenomenon's emergence

Regarding information flow as a means of the phenomenon's emergence, respondents believe that the online environment is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, easily accessible to everyone, and free. From this perspective, information, regardless of its type, circulates in ways that lead to the emergence of the fake news phenomenon and its consequences.

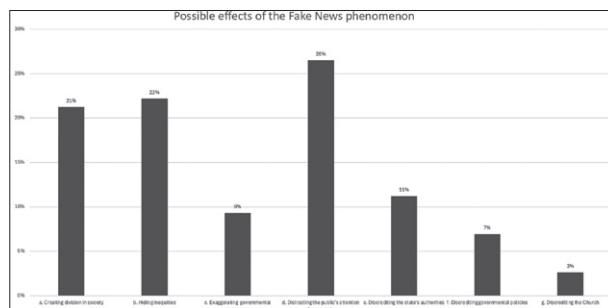
From another perspective, the fact that anyone can write anything, whether or not it is assumed, is seen as one of the causes of the information flow that led to the phenomenon's emergence in the online environment.

Possible effects of disseminating fake news

Respondents were very open in their responses to questions about the effects of fake news dissemination and appreciated that it can have many consequences. These range from making unfavorable decisions based on false news that we believe to actual tragedies. At the same time, it is thought that vulnerability to the impact of fake news is not determined by the user's age but rather by a specific dependence on the digital environment.

One opinion that stood out among the others regarding the effects of fake news was that it depends on the subject matter. Some information is of an entertainment variety and contains superficial details that have little impact on the audience. In contrast, other information carries profound connotations that can affect countries, industries, or even the global economy.

Figure 7. The effects of fake news on the opinion of respondents



The most frequently reported effect of fake news was its potential to distract public attention from relevant events (26%), indicating that participants view distraction as a primary function of misinformation, as shown in Figure 7. Hiding social inequities (22%) and creating division within society (21%) were also commonly identified, suggesting a perceived role of fake news in reinforcing systemic issues and polarizing public opinion. Notably, 11% of participants indicated that fake news may discredit state authorities, while 9% associated it with exaggerating governmental successes, implying a dual role in undermining and artificially enhancing institutional credibility. Fewer respondents believed that fake news discredits governmental policies (7%) or the Church (3%), indicating that these effects are perceived as less prominent or less relevant within the current media landscape. Overall, the responses suggest that fake news is primarily viewed as a tool for manipulation through distraction and concealment, rather than direct ideological confrontation.

Conclusions and discussions

The study provides valuable insights into public perceptions of the fake news phenomenon, its mechanisms, and strategies to combat it. Results confirm that fake news is perceived as a widespread and significant issue. While it is not new, modern technology and social media platforms have accelerated its creation and dissemination. Respondents view fake news as a tool for mass manipulation, capable of dividing society, distracting attention from important issues, and undermining trust in institutions.

Second, social media and television are identified as the primary channels for the spread of fake news. Studies indicate that young people obtain their news almost exclusively from social media (Ahmed, 2020), making them particularly susceptible to misinformation. Online press and websites also play a significant role in disseminating misinformation. These findings emphasize the need for vigilance when consuming information from these platforms. Third, journalists and political interest groups are perceived as the primary actors responsible for creating and spreading fake news. Additional contributors include economic interest groups, online media celebrities, and analysts or opinion makers.

Fourth, respondents suggest several strategies to combat fake news, including legal action against sources disseminating it, closing websites, suspending

accounts responsible for spreading misinformation, and promoting media literacy and awareness campaigns as long-term solutions. They also emphasize the role of technology in fact-checking and validating information. Finally, fake news's most commonly cited effects include distracting public attention from important issues, deepening social divides and inequality, and discrediting state authorities while exaggerating governmental successes.

Regarding the study's hypotheses, the findings provide consistent support for all three propositions.

H1: Fake news affects public opinion. This hypothesis is confirmed. Respondents believe that fake news is a powerful tool for manipulation, capable of shaping public opinion, creating societal divisions, and influencing decision-making. These results are in line with previous studies on the impact of politically motivated fake news on public opinion (Gjerazi & Skana, 2023) and during crises (Kim, S. & Kim, S., 2020; Crucian, 2023), even though our study addresses the topic in a broader context.

H2: Media channels are rife with fake news transmitted to the public. This hypothesis is confirmed. Social media, television, online press, and websites are identified as the leading platforms where fake news is most prevalent.

H3: People suggest that fake news is used to manipulate public opinion. This hypothesis is confirmed. Respondents consistently view fake news as a means to manipulate the masses, often driven by political, economic, and ideological interests.

The findings carry direct implications for public policy, education, and institutional communication. For policymakers, the evidence underscores the importance of designing integrated, multi-level strategies that combine regulatory, technological, and educational interventions. Respondents' strong support for legal measures — such as sanctions against sources of misinformation or the closure of websites disseminating false content — indicates a public demand for more robust governance mechanisms. Policymakers can respond by developing transparent legal frameworks that penalize deliberate disinformation while safeguarding freedom of expression. Moreover, governments could invest in technological infrastructure for real-time fact-checking and promote public-private partnerships with media organizations and social platforms to identify, flag, and reduce the visibility of false

or manipulative content. At the institutional level, national strategies for media literacy could be embedded in broader digital transformation and civic education policies, recognizing fake news resilience as a critical component of democratic participation.

For educators, the study's findings reveal a pressing need to integrate media literacy and critical digital competence into formal and informal learning contexts. Since respondents largely attribute the spread of fake news to uncontrolled online environments and users' lack of discernment, educational institutions should train students to evaluate source credibility, recognize manipulation techniques, and verify information before sharing it. Universities and schools can collaborate with media professionals to design interactive curricula, workshops, and simulations that expose learners to real-life examples of misinformation and teach evidence-based fact-checking methods. Teacher training programs should also include components on digital ethics and information responsibility, enabling educators to act as multipliers of critical thinking within their communities.

This study has several limitations. First, a convenience sample was used, which may not fully reflect the population's diversity in terms of age, occupation, and other demographic factors. Second, the data were collected in 2020 and therefore may not fully reflect current trends or changes in the dissemination and perception of fake news. Finally, while the study provides general insights into the impact of fake news on public opinion, further research with more diverse and longitudinal samples is needed to confirm and extend these findings.

In essence, this study reinforces the view that countering fake news is not solely a technological or regulatory challenge, but a societal responsibility that requires collaboration across sectors. The combination of legislative coherence, institutional transparency, and sustained investment in media education represents the most viable path toward rebuilding public trust and fostering an informed, resilient citizenry capable of navigating the complexities of the digital information ecosystem. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to address the fake news phenomenon. This includes public education, technological solutions, and collaboration among individuals, institutions, and governments to restore trust in information and promote informed discourse.

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