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Editorial

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The range and nature of ethical issues examined today can often surprise us by their breadth or apparent incongruity. Phenomena that were not previously perceived in moral terms—such as the relationship between humans and technology, responsibility for the natural environment, or the ethics of digital communication—are increasingly becoming subjects of ethical reflection. However, upon brief consideration, this surprise should subside, since ethics encompasses a field of inquiry as diverse as human life itself.

As Alasdair MacIntyre observes, "it is impossible to speak of ethics apart from the social practices that give our actions meaning" (MacIntyre, 1981). This insight suggests that every new sphere of human activity—from science to popular culture—has the potential to generate new moral questions. Ethics, therefore, is not a fixed set of immutable norms but a dynamic process of reflecting on goodness and duty within a changing world.

Leszek Kołakowski similarly noted that "ethics begins where simple answers end," implying that its subject matter includes not only obvious moral dilemmas but also situations that defy straightforward judgment (Kołakowski, 1997).

Ethics concerns everything that affects humanity and the surrounding world, as it pertains to human conduct in all its complexity: individual decisions, social relations, institutional structures, and the global challenges of civilization. In this sense, ethical reflection is an inseparable part of human existence—it accompanies us wherever choice, responsibility, and value arise. This diversity is also reflected in the current issue of our journal.

The first article, *Children's experience with harmful content online*, presents the authors' original research on children's exposure to harmful online material. The study examines how such exposure correlates with two selected factors: emotional problems and the need for intense stimulation.

The second contribution, *Navigating the fake news landscape: Insights from a mixed-methods study in Brașov, Romania*, addresses the continuing social relevance of fake news. The research analyzes public perceptions of fake news and its influence on social life, combining quantitative survey data (n=155) with qualitative interviews conducted with experts from the Brașov region. A particularly valuable aspect of the article lies in its recommendations for policymakers and media professionals on maintaining information reliability.

The third article, by Dr. Barbara Pajchert, explores the theme of visual propaganda. In *The aesthetics of falsehood: The image as a tool of visual propaganda in the age of artificial intelligence*, the author analyzes how generative

artificial intelligence transforms the visual language of persuasion, using aesthetics to enhance the effectiveness of disinformation and to lend synthetic images a semblance of credibility.

The final article, by Marcin Cząba, titled *The city as narrative: Storytelling alternatives to place marketing in the age of VUCA and mediatization*, offers an original conceptualization of the modern city as a narrative ecosystem. Here, urban space is understood not as a brand or product to be promoted but as a dynamic field of meaning shaped by interaction, ritual, memory, and everyday practice. The analysis demonstrates how storytelling about the city can function as a tool for reconfiguring communities, relationships, and meanings within contemporary processes of spatial communication.

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Children's experience with harmful content online

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Abstract

Children's experience with harmful content online

Children and young people's use of the Internet inevitably involves the possibility of encountering what we collectively refer to as "harmful" or "toxic" content. In our research sample, approximately 40% of respondents reported such experiences. One prominent category of harmful content includes material promoting extreme thinness, including pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites. Among all respondents, 5% encountered such content daily, with a significant gender difference — 9% of girls compared with 1% of boys. The likelihood of exposure also increased with age. Young Internet users experiencing emotional difficulties or a strong tendency to seek out novel and risky experiences reported more frequent exposure to harmful content. While an accepting family environment appears to be a possible protective factor, the low correlation suggests this influence is limited.

Keywords: children, Internet, harmful online content, emotional problems, sensation seeking

The younger generation has always been open and receptive to new trends, a tendency that extends to emerging technologies. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, research already pointed to a strong inclination among children and adolescents to use computers and the Internet (Rideout et al., 1999). Many parents viewed these technologies as opportunities for educational enrichment and the development of skills necessary for the information age (Turow, 1999). The rapid evolution of digital media has since expanded children's online engagement — from content creation and sharing, to communication via social networks, and now to interactions with artificial intelligence. In simple terms, childhood and adolescence today unfold within an ecosystem of media and digital technologies that deeply permeate young people's lives. Dafna Lemish describes this as a global media culture shaped by multiple realities, technological convergence, consumerism, and globalization (Lemish, 2015, p. 526).

Technological innovation has diversified how children and adolescents access the Internet, with mobile phones becoming the primary means of connection. Although statistics vary by age group, sample type, and year of data collection, the trend over recent years is evident. According to the *Net Children Go Mobile* study, 46% of children aged 9–16 owned a mobile phone

(Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014). A 2017 Slovak study reported that 74% of children aged 6–10 already had their own device (Juszczyk et al., 2017). Regarding frequency of use, another study found that 72% of children aged 9–17 accessed the Internet daily via mobile phones, and 1 in 5 spent more than 4 hours online on school days (Izrael et al., 2020). Later Slovak studies confirmed this increase, showing that up to 90% of children aged 9–17 now go online daily using mobile devices (Holdoš et al., 2022a; 2022b).

Alongside smartphones, social networking has become one of the defining features of youth digital culture. Social networking sites (SNS) encompass Web 2.0 tools that center on interaction and the sharing of diverse content (Moreno & Cota, 2014, pp. 435–456). Although some "digital immigrants," as Prensky (2001) famously termed those not born into the digital world, may view online environments as detached from "real life," in practice they form an integrated virtual–social–physical world that young people actively shape and inhabit (Williams & Merten, 2008). As media are embedded in everyday life, children and adolescents treat social networks as natural extensions of their social world. They communicate, seek information and entertainment, share personal content, and engage in self-presentation. For young people, there is no longer a clear boundary between the digital and non-digital realms. These two spheres converge, forming a hybrid reality through which adolescents navigate during a sensitive stage of psychological and social development.

Harmful content

Intensive engagement with online environments offers young people new opportunities for communication, education, information, and civic participation. However, it also exposes them to various risks. The conceptualization of online risk, which underpins the *EU Kids Online* framework, includes four interrelated categories: content risk, contact risk, conduct risk, and contract risk, each of which may appear in aggressive, sexual, or value-related forms (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

- Content risk refers to exposure to harmful material such as violent, graphic, racist, hateful, pornographic, or misleading content.

- Contact risk involves harmful interactions with adults, including harassment, stalking, sexual exploitation, unwanted surveillance, or sextortion.
- Contract risk occurs when a child is exploited through fraudulent or manipulative agreements such as phishing, scams, gambling, or identity theft.
- Conduct risk arises when a child witnesses, participates in, or becomes a victim of harmful online behaviors such as bullying, hate speech, exclusion, shaming, sexual messaging, or self-harm.

A considerable body of research has addressed the prevalence of harmful or unsafe online content. Early U.S. studies found that approximately 4% of children and adolescents aged 10–17 had encountered hateful material online, with predictors including age, male gender, and more frequent Internet use (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Korchmaros, 2011). Data from the *EU Kids Online* study (Livingstone et al., 2011) indicated that 12% of children aged 11–16 had seen hate sites, 10% had viewed content promoting anorexia, 7% had encountered self-harm material, and 5% had seen suicidal content.

Updated data collected in 2018 across 18 European countries showed that, among children aged 12–16, around 10% had seen self-harm content, 8% suicide-related content, 12% material promoting anorexia or bulimia, 17% hate-related content, and 13% gory or violent imagery, at least once a month (Smahel, 2020). Representative Slovak data based on the *EU Kids Online* methodology (Holdoš et al., 2022b) confirmed a rising trend: 12% of respondents reported exposure to self-harm material, 10% to suicide-related content, and 19% to hate speech.

Research consistently demonstrates that exposure to harmful content correlates with lower subjective well-being (Keipi et al., 2017) and increased engagement in risky offline behaviors (Branley & Covey, 2017). Online material promoting eating disorders may normalize harmful behaviors by providing tips on concealing them from parents (Campaioli et al., 2017). Suicide-related websites and forums often contain explicit discussions of methods, intentions, and death fantasies (Keipi et al., 2017). Hate or cyberhate content typically expresses hostility toward groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics (Wachs et al., 2017), while violent content frequently depicts torture, cruelty, or graphic aggression against people or animals (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

Risk and protective factors

Adolescence is a developmental stage often characterized by emotional fluctuation and heightened sensitivity to negative affect. Problematic Internet use may serve as a coping mechanism for some adolescents facing emotional distress (Laconi et al., 2017, pp. 47–54). Prior studies have demonstrated links between adolescents' emotional problems and various risky online behaviors, including excessive Internet use (Helsper & Smahel, 2019, pp. 1255–1273) and sexting (Ševčíková, 2016, pp. 156–162). Adolescents who are more prone to negative emotions also tend to report greater exposure to harmful online content (Oksanen et al., 2016).

Although previous research suggests that emotional problems may contribute to problematic behavior online, their specific role in relation to exposure to harmful content remains underexplored. Comparative studies conducted in the Czech Republic, Finland, and Spain found a clear association between emotional difficulties and exposure to harmful online material (Kvardova et al., 2021, pp. 2294–2310). The same line of research confirmed a link between exposure to harmful content and sensation seeking — the tendency to pursue new, stimulating, and potentially risky experiences. Sensation seeking has been positively correlated with adolescents' interest in media content depicting alcohol use, violence, and sexuality (Khurana et al., 2019), as well as with exposure to "ana-mia" websites — online spaces discussing methods for extreme thinness (Almenara, Machackova, & Smahel, 2016, pp. 475–480).

Since relationships with parents and other family members influence adolescents' patterns of Internet use, the family environment may represent a significant factor shaping exposure to harmful content. A supportive and communicative family context may reduce risk, although such protection may vary depending on the adolescent's emotional and behavioral disposition.

Finally, digital skills can play a dual role — both a protective factor and a risk factor. While greater digital literacy may help young users critically assess online content, it can also increase the likelihood of encountering harmful material through broader and more autonomous exploration of the Internet (Tercova & Smahel, 2025).

Empirical findings also indicate that exposure to harmful online content is strongly associated with adolescents' psychological distress and that these associations vary by gender (Biswas et al., 2025).

Methods

Sample

The research was conducted with a sample of 1,932 children and adolescents aged 9–18 years. The sample included 49.1% girls (n = 949) and 50.9% boys (n = 983). The age distribution was as follows: 9–10 years (11.4%), 11–12 years (18.6%), 13–14 years (21.3%), 15–17 years (36.0%), and 18 years (12.7%). The mean age was 14.22 years (SD = 2.70). Data collection took place in June 2023 across all types of primary and secondary schools in Slovakia. Participants were selected using a representative sampling method based on a comprehensive list of Slovak schools.

Instruments

Data were collected using the CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) method.

- Exposure to harmful online content was measured with six items from the *EU Kids Online Research Toolkit* (see lse.ac.uk/EUKidsOnline/Toolkit). Respondents reported whether, in the previous year, they had encountered any online content or discussions concerning the following topics: (1) ways of physically harming or hurting oneself; (2) methods of committing suicide; (3) ways of being very thin (e.g., pro-anorexia, pro-bulimia, or "thinspiration" sites); (4) hate messages targeting specific groups or individuals (e.g., based on religion, nationality, or sexuality); (5) experiences of drug use; and (6) gory or violent imagery involving people or animals. Responses ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Daily or almost daily*). The scale's internal consistency was satisfactory ($\omega = 0.86$).
- Emotional problems were assessed using four items from the *EU Kids Online Research Toolkit*. Respondents rated how factual the following statements were for them: "I worry a lot," "I am nervous in new situations and easily lose confidence," "I am often unhappy, sad, or tearful," and "I have many fears and am easily scared." Responses ranged from 1 (*Not true*) to 4 (*Very true*), with acceptable internal consistency ($\omega = 0.83$).
- Sensation seeking was measured with four items from the same toolkit, such as "I do dangerous things for fun" and "I do exciting things even

if they are dangerous." Responses ranged from 1 (*Not true*) to 4 (*Very true*). The scale's internal consistency was acceptable (ω = 0.87).

- Family environment was measured with three items assessing family support (e.g., "When I speak, someone listens to what I say," "My family really tries to help me") and feelings of safety ("I feel safe at home"). Responses ranged from 1 (*Not true*) to 4 (*Very true*). Internal consistency was acceptable (ω = 0.79).

Results

Exposure to Harmful Content

The data revealed that nearly 40% of respondents had encountered at least one type of harmful online content in the previous year. The most frequently reported category was *hate content* — 21% of children and adolescents had seen hate messages online. Exposure to *gory or violent imagery* was reported by 15% of respondents, while 13% had seen material related to *drug use*. Content promoting *extreme thinness* (pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia) was encountered by 10% of respondents, and content concerning *self-harm* or *suicide* by 8%.

A small but notable group — 5% of respondents — reported exposure to such content *daily or almost daily*. The likelihood of encountering harmful material increased with age, and gender differences were significant: girls were more likely than boys to encounter pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia content (9% vs. 1%), while boys more often encountered violent or gory content.

Correlates of Exposure

Exposure to harmful content correlated positively with *emotional problems* ($r = .26$, $p < .001$) and *sensation seeking* ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that adolescents with higher emotional distress and stronger tendencies toward novelty-seeking behavior were more likely to encounter harmful material online.

A weak but statistically significant negative correlation was found between *family environment* and exposure to harmful content ($r = –.13$, $p < .001$), suggesting that a supportive and communicative home environment may serve

as a partial protective factor. However, the low magnitude of the correlation indicates that such influence is limited.

No significant gender differences were observed in the relationship between emotional problems, sensation seeking, and exposure to harmful content. The observed trends remained consistent across age groups.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm earlier findings that exposure to harmful online content is a common experience among children and adolescents. Nearly four in ten respondents reported encountering at least one type of such content within the past year. Consistent with previous *EU Kids Online* data, hate material remains the most prevalent category, followed by violent or gory content. However, the results also indicate that exposure to content promoting extreme thinness is more common among girls, while boys are more likely to encounter violent imagery.

The positive correlation between emotional problems and exposure to harmful content suggests that children and adolescents experiencing emotional distress may not only be more vulnerable to such material but may also be drawn to it as a form of maladaptive coping. These findings align with prior research showing that problematic Internet use and other risky online behaviors are often associated with emotional difficulties (Kvardova et al., 2021; Oksanen et al., 2016). The Internet may function as an easily accessible environment where adolescents attempt to regulate negative emotions, seek reassurance, or externalize distress.

The observed relationship between sensation seeking and exposure to harmful content corresponds with earlier findings that adolescents who actively seek novelty and stimulation are more likely to engage with risky online material, including content involving violence, substance use, or eating disorders (Almenara, Machackova, & Smahel, 2016; Khurana et al., 2019). While such exploration can reflect developmental needs for autonomy and experimentation, it may also increase vulnerability to harmful influences.

Although the family environment showed a weak negative correlation with exposure to harmful content, this finding should not be underestimated. Even a modest protective effect highlights the potential value of supportive parent–child communication in mitigating risk. Parental attention, openness,

and the establishment of trust-based dialogue about online experiences may reduce the likelihood of exposure or the adverse effects thereof. Nonetheless, as digital media increasingly permeate children's daily lives, the family's influence is often outweighed by peer and platform dynamics.

The findings underscore the importance of preventive education that goes beyond content regulation and focuses on *emotional resilience* and *critical media literacy*. Empowering young Internet users to recognize and respond to harmful content, while addressing their emotional and social needs, remains a key challenge for educators, policymakers, and parents alike.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this study highlight the growing need to address children's and adolescents' exposure to harmful online content as an integral part of contemporary discussions on digital safety and well-being. Approximately 40% of participants reported encountering at least one type of such material, with hate content, violent imagery, and pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia material being the most common.

Exposure to harmful content was associated with both emotional problems and sensation seeking, suggesting that adolescents' psychological characteristics play a key role in shaping their online experiences. A supportive family environment may offer partial protection, but its mitigating influence appears limited.

These findings underscore the importance of preventive and educational interventions to enhance young people's digital resilience. Programs should focus not only on technical safety or parental monitoring but also on emotional regulation, media literacy, and the ability to assess online content critically. Further research should explore the complex interactions among personal traits, family context, and digital environments to understand better how children navigate the risks of the online world.

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

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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.

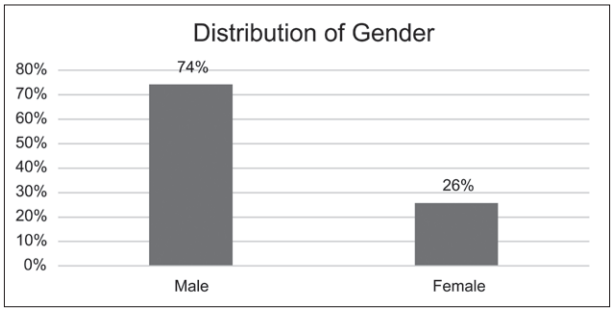
The third conceptual focus of the research was on counteracting and combating fake news. Operationalizing this dimension entailed identifying institutional responsibilities, measures taken to address the issue, and assessing public perceptions of their own responses to fake news. The survey was conducted 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

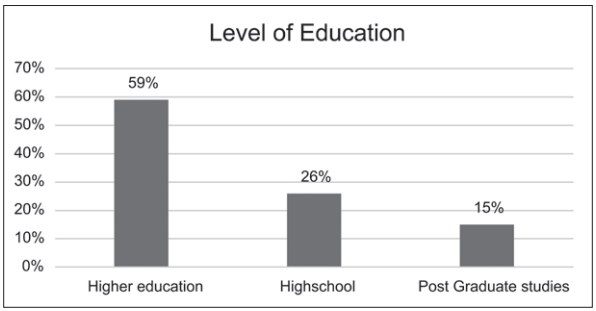
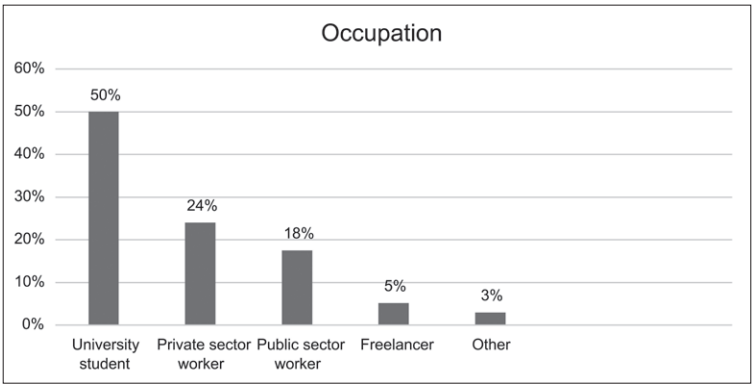


Figure 3 shows that the majority of participants were university students (50%), followed by private-sector workers (24%) and public-sector workers (18%). A smaller number identified as freelancers (5%).

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.

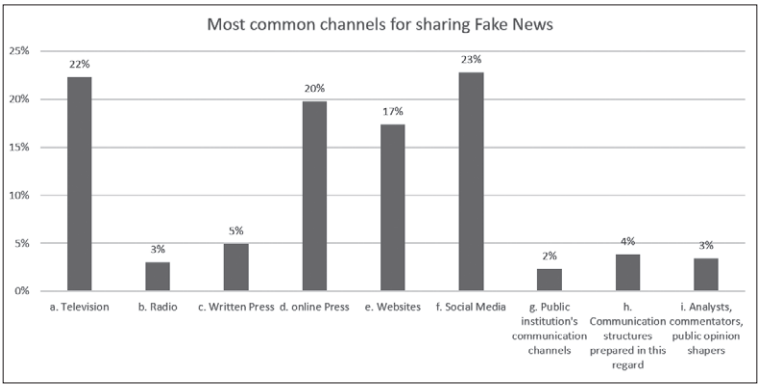
In the respondent's opinion, the emergence of the phenomenon, according to respondents, is due in part to the fact that:

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

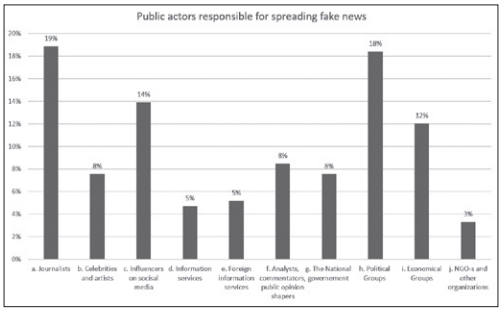


Public actors involved in disseminating fake news

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



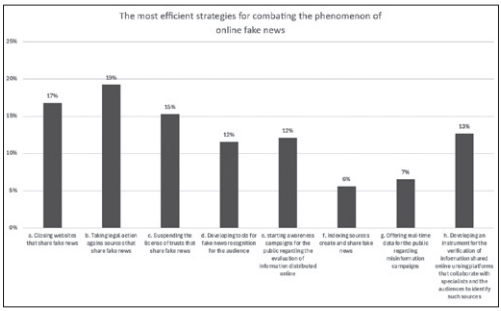
The following positions in the hierarchy of responsibility are the online media influencers (14%), followed by economic interest groups (12%), and analysts, commentators, and opinion makers (8%).

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.

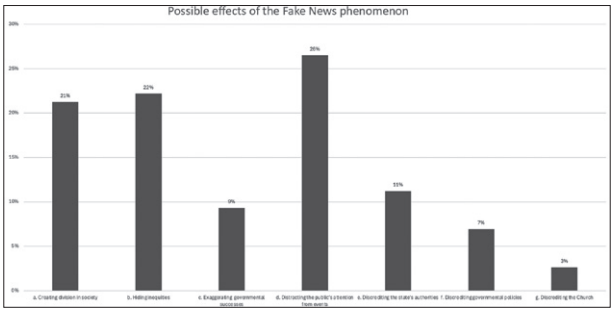
From another perspective, the fact that anyone can write anything, whether or not it is assumed, is seen as one of the causes of the information flow that led to the phenomenon's emergence in the online environment.

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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The aesthetics of falsehood: The image as a tool of visual propaganda in the age of artificial intelligence

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Abstract

The aesthetics of falsehood: The image as a tool of visual propaganda in the age of artificial intelligence

In an era of rapidly advancing generative artificial intelligence, visual language is undergoing a profound transformation: aesthetics is increasingly instrumentalized for persuasion, while synthetic images assume the guise of credible representations of reality. This article analyzes the aesthetics of falsehood as a strategy that enhances the persuasive power of visual disinformation and redefines the epistemological function of the image. It begins from the hypothesis that deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality, by mobilizing formal aesthetic appeal — symmetry, harmony, and controlled lighting — expand the reach of disinformation and reshape the epistemic foundations of visual representation, strengthening the link between aesthetics and perceived credibility. The analysis juxtaposes historical forms of visual propaganda with reflections on the contemporary circulation of AI-generated images across social media. It also considers microtargeting mechanisms, recommendation algorithms, and the psychological dynamics of perceiving hyper-realistic imagery. A focus group study with eight participants complements the theoretical discussion; its findings confirm that aesthetic form plays a key role in shaping both emotional response and the credibility attributed to images. The results highlight the need to cultivate visual literacy and to reorient media education toward analyzing form, composition, and the emotional narration of images. In this context, the aesthetics of falsehood emerges not only as a technological but also as a cultural mechanism of influence — highly effective and increasingly challenging to detect.

Keywords: aesthetics of falsehood, deepfake, visual propaganda, artificial intelligence (AI), image ethics, visual literacy

Visual forms of communication, present in culture since antiquity, have played a decisive role in shaping collective imaginaries, emotions, and social decisions. Owing to its immediacy and impact, the image has become one of the most powerful carriers of meaning, and the development of reproductive technologies — from photography through cinema to digital media — has steadily reinforced its epistemological and cultural status. Today, in the era of rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI), we witness the emergence of a new aesthetic paradigm — the aesthetics of falsehood — which redefines the relationship between the viewer and representation and challenges established categories of truth, authenticity, and referentiality.

AI-based technologies such as generative adversarial networks (GANs)[1] now enable the creation of hyper-realistic depictions of people, places, and events that never existed in reality. Deepfakes[2] — the most telling manifestation of these technological affordances — generate new epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical challenges, thereby strengthening the potential for manipulation in social communication (Leone, 2023, pp. 385–405).

In the context of contemporary visual propaganda, a question arises: whether — and how — it is possible to maintain a distinction between true and synthetic representations in a world where images achieve mimetic perfection, and their synthetic character is perceptually undetectable. Assuming that contemporary AI-generated images redefine traditional cognitive relations between viewer and representation and amplify the effectiveness of propaganda by tapping into psychological mechanisms of visual perception, it is plausible to hypothesize that deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality, by leveraging formal aesthetic appeal (symmetry, harmony, appropriate lighting), increase the scale of disinformation and transform the epistemic foundations of the image, reinforcing the link between aesthetics and perceived credibility.

To test this hypothesis, the article examines: (1) historical uses of images in twentieth-century visual propaganda that reveal the foundations of visual persuasion; (2) contemporary practices of fabricating representations with AI that illustrate the evolution of visual manipulation techniques; (3) the aesthetics of deepfakes, considered through the lenses of plausibility and hyperrealism, illuminating the shifting boundaries of perceptual credibility; (4) the dissemination mechanisms for synthetic images in digital media, including recommendation algorithms and microtargeting strategies; and (5) psychological aspects of how contemporary audiences perceive and interpret visual content, with particular attention to first-impression effects, confirmation bias, and difficulties in telling fiction from fact.

A focus group study complements the theoretical analysis, designed to capture how audiences of different ages and media experience respond

1 A type of machine-learning model that uses two neural networks (a generator and a discriminator) competing with each other to create images of the highest degree of realism.

2 Creators of pornography were among the first users of this technology, embedding celebrities' faces into pornographic videos. This practice led to the popularization of the term "deepfake" for these digital forgeries.

to AI-generated images — both emotionally and in terms of the credibility they attribute. Participants' statements and reflections provide insight into mechanisms that condition susceptibility to false visual messages and help explain the role of aesthetics in building the illusion of truth in digital environments. They show how formal attractiveness — harmonious composition, lighting, styling — can increase vulnerability to visual disinformation, while simultaneously redrawing the boundaries between fiction and documentary in contemporary viewing.

The study's results are interpreted in light of the adopted theoretical assumptions, providing empirical grounding for media studies scholarship on new forms of visual falsehood.

Visual propaganda: History and mechanisms of influence

Visual propaganda relies on images as primary carriers of emotions, meanings, and ideological narratives. Its essential objective is to shape social attitudes by triggering emotions and scripting particular ways of seeing the world. In propaganda, the image plays a representational and normative role — it indicates how an idea, figure, or situation should be viewed. As Alicja Waszkiewicz-Raviv defines it, visual propaganda is

> intentionally designed persuasive pictorial communication — one-sided and not necessarily grounded in fact — that solicits immediate, polarized, and unequivocal affective reactions, shaping the attitudes and actions of audiences through static or dynamic media channels. It is a context-dependent, non-objective form of strategic communication that mobilizes all visual means to achieve its goals (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2023, p. 281).

A hallmark of propaganda is univocity and the drive to restrict interpretive latitude: recipients are meant to read the message in accordance with the sender's intention (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2023, p. 279).

The history of visual propaganda reaches back to antiquity. In the Hellenistic era, coinage functioned as a core channel of ideological messaging; thanks to their ubiquity and symbolic legibility, coins linked rulers with divine attributes. A coin from the reign of Ptolemy III exemplifies a sophisticated iconographic strategy: the ruler is shown with Poseidon's trident (a symbol of maritime dominance), the crown of Helios (a sign of divine power and glory),

and Athena's aegis (an emblem of protection). The reverse bears the cornucopia — an enduring symbol of prosperity and fecundity. Through recognizable religious and mythological motifs, the image created a vision of a powerful ruler able to safeguard his realm and ensure its future flourishing.

In the early modern era, visual propaganda assumed forms suited to prevailing visual languages and to audiences' visual literacy — from woodcuts circulating among commoners to allegorical paintings displayed in churches and palaces. During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, religious imagery combined didactic with affective functions — meant to move, shock, and lead to particular interpretations of religious experience. In Catholic art shaped by the Council of Trent, the image became a tool of spiritual mobilization, bolstering a sense of the sacred, of heretical threat, and of the need for salvation. In Protestant circles, alongside theological reforms, critical and polemical imagery emerged that commented on clerical abuses and unmasked institutional hypocrisy — for example, Barthel Beham's woodcut *Christ and the Sheep Shed* (1524), in which the pope and his entourage are shown as thieves sneaking into Christ's fold — an unambiguous allegory of spiritual betrayal and corruption (Dixon, 1997). In response, Catholics eagerly deployed allegorical painting as a means of visually reinforcing doctrine and projecting spiritual superiority — for instance, Peter Paul Rubens's cycle *The Triumph of the Church* (c. 1625), depicting victory over heresy and the central place of the Eucharist in the Catholic salvific order. Mobilizing a rich symbolic vocabulary and emphatic visual rhetoric, such works aimed to stir emotions, heighten a sense of peril, and, at the same time, affirm a clear, ordered vision of the world.

After the religious conflicts in which imagery served primarily as a vehicle of doctrinal persuasion and affective impact, modern revolutions assigned a new role to the visual language: forging secular political communities and legitimizing emergent orders. During the French Revolution, republican iconography drew consciously on the classical repertoire of allegorical figures to construct signs of collective identity. Marianne — personification of the French Republic, combining feminine freedom and civic virtue — became central to this visual narrative. Frequently shown wearing the Phrygian cap — a revolutionary symbol of liberation from tyranny — she functioned as an ideological emblem of the new order. Supplanting monarchical insignia, Marianne entered the public sphere — from state seals to artworks and monuments — shoring up the republic's legitimacy by references to ancient models of freedom, reason, and civic community (Agulhon, 1981).

A decisive turning point for visual propaganda came in the twentieth century — the age of mass photography, cinema, and the printed press. The most striking examples of image manipulation emerged in totalitarian systems. In the Soviet Union, photographs were subject to deliberate retouching — individuals purged from political life were erased from the visual record. The classic cases include the removal of Leon Trotsky or Nikolai Yezhov from archival photographs alongside Stalin — acts that symbolically nullify their presence in history.

Figure 1. Visual propaganda in the USSR

Nikolai Yezhov (People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, 1936–1938; far right) and Joseph Stalin walking along the Volga — Don Canal, 22 April 1937, and the same photograph retouched after Yezhov's execution on Stalin's orders (probably in 1940). Source: https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/propaganda/103975,Dawne-techniki-retuszu-fotografii.html

In the Third Reich, visual propaganda was subordinated entirely to the aesthetics of a totalitarian order. Photographs of Adolf Hitler accentuated his monumentality and closeness to the people, often staged against crowds, flags, or monumental architecture such as stadiums. Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer, commonly used a low angle to magnify the impression of power and dominance. The aesthetics of chiaroscuro, ritual, the geometry of crowds, and the gravity of gestures served as tools of visual integration that fostered emotional bonding with the Führer.

In the People's Republic of Poland, visual propaganda played a significant role in shaping perceptions of social and political reality in line with the

Communist Party's narrative. Authorities employed a broad array of visual means — posters, murals, press photography, and spatial installations — to promote socialist values and craft a positive image of the state. Posters, often in the Socialist Realist idiom, portrayed idealized workers, peasants, and soldiers, symbolizing national unity and social progress (Lewandowski, 2015, pp. 115–136). They relied on simplified visual language, repetitive codes, and an imposed interpretation, eliciting immediate identification and affective reactions that aligned with the intended message while bypassing deeper reflection. Press photography documented economic and social achievements while selectively presenting reality, subordinated to the official narrative. "Trybuna Ludu," the party's flagship newspaper, set the direction for visualizing reality, and the Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications, and Performances monitored the political correctness of every publication.

Figure 2. Propaganda poster from the PRL period

Source: https://histmag.org/Najciekawsze-plakaty-propagandowe-PRL-Galeria-15486

These examples demonstrate that, in every era, visual propaganda has adopted forms tailored to current technological possibilities and to audiences' visual expectations. Its rhetorical structure, however, remains constant: the image should act swiftly, affectively, and unequivocally.

A new quality of falsehood: Synthetic images

Contemporary visual propaganda, exploiting the exact mechanisms of emotional intensification, now operates not only through photography and film but increasingly through AI-generated imagery. AI technologies enable the creation of synthetic representations which — while maintaining a high degree of aesthetic attractiveness — intensify propaganda through symmetry, purposeful lighting, and hyper-realistic detail. The persuasive power of visual propaganda stems from the immediacy of perception and the capacity to trigger automatic affective responses even before conscious analytical processes come online. Acting faster than text, the image influences intuitive judgment mechanisms and thus fixes attitudes and imaginaries more effectively.

With the development of AI capable of producing images of unprecedented realism, visual propaganda is entering a new phase. Whereas earlier forms of manipulation required specialized tools, significant time resources, and dedicated expertise, today the generation of hyper-realistic yet entirely fictitious depictions have become widespread and readily accessible (Leone, 2023). Visual falsehood present in the digital sphere has therefore assumed a new form, combining heightened technological efficiency with a high level of aesthetic plausibility. As Massimo Leone argues, "over time the false digital image will become indistinguishable from the digital image regarded as true" (Leone, 2023). The progress of machine-learning techniques blurs the boundary between a referential image anchored in reality and a synthetic image that produces an identical effect of reality (Leone, 2023). The image's apparent documentarity sheds its link to factuality and assumes a purely aesthetic dimension — encoded by composition, light, symmetry, and stylistic borrowings from visual culture.

Among the most advanced — and most problematic — tools in this domain are so-called deepfakes[3]: technically complex synthetic videos or images that, using deep-learning techniques, replicate the faces, gestures, and voices of real people to create the illusion of authentic communication. Their impact hinges on the coupling of aesthetic and semantic layers: they are visually

3 Creators of pornography were among the first users of this technology, embedding celebrities' faces into pornographic videos. This practice led to the popularization of the term "deepfake."

convincing and, at the same time, carry specific social, political, or ideological meanings.

Figure 3. Deepfake

AI-generated images: the arrest of Donald Trump. Source: https://x.com/EliotHiggins/status/1637927681734987777

Contemporary manipulation techniques include face replacement, lip-syncing to an alien voice, complete character synthesis, the modification of physiognomic traits, and the generation of comprehensive image profiles for disinformation. As Stojanović Prelević and Zehra note:

> Deepfakes created through face synthesis and the manipulation of facial features generate photorealistic human likenesses that serve to spread disinformation on social media via fake profiles. There are also audio deepfakes that focus on a chosen person's voice, using deep-learning techniques to generate statements never actually made. An example is a Russian deepfake of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky allegedly calling on soldiers to surrender—an illustration of false political propaganda (Prelević & Zehra, 2023, pp. 95–96).

Within this context, visual falsehood operates as a sought-after effect—carefully produced and aesthetically polished. Leone observes that synthetic images mimic the semiotics of reality to elicit the same emotional reaction.

Contemporary visual propaganda — leveraging AI's affordances — takes multiple forms: from synthetic photos of purported events or fabricated persons (e.g., fictitious refugees, protesters, victims, or perpetrators), through video clips staged as news, to concocted materials resembling documentaries, commentary programs, or live broadcasts. Increasingly, the digital sphere features images stylised after the aesthetics of entertainment and pop culture — memes, viral graphics, trailer-like spots, animations, or comics. In this way, propaganda aligns with the logic of so-called 'politainment' — a hybrid of political messaging and entertainment. By generating content adapted to aesthetic conventions familiar from series, advertisements, music videos, or video games, AI enables the dissemination of ideological messages in forms that — visually "Innocent" and culturally domesticated — considerably hamper the detection of manipulation. As Alicja Waszkiewicz-Raviv anticipates, "the image will be treated [...] as the central element of propaganda messages" (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2023, p. 277).

The aesthetics of deepfakes: Between plausibility and hyperrealism

With the growing presence of synthetic imagery[4] — especially deepfakes — the cognitive and aesthetic status of the image is changing. As a hyper-realistic representation generated by neural networks, the deepfake becomes a carrier of messages that deploy aesthetic strategies to amplify perceived credibility. We are witnessing a profound transformation of the epistemology of the image: the effect of reality no longer follows from contact with reality but from the aesthetic suggestiveness of representation.

As Stojanović Prelević and Zehra emphasize, the aesthetics of deepfakes encompasses "visual elements, the sound layer, the relation to the audience, the aesthetic experience and aesthetic value itself" (Prelević & Zehra, 2023, p. 95). This raises a key question: which elements make viewers believe an image? Research on the so-called plausibility effect indicates that symmetry, composition, lighting, sharpness, the style of visual narration, and

4 The scale and pace of dissemination of synthetic images is rapidly increasing; according to industry data, in 2023 more than 95,000 deepfakes circulated online. See: Abramova & Goldman Kalaydin, 2025.

conformity with media conventions play a decisive role. Manovich notes that the aesthetic efficacy of AI images depends on factors that go beyond technical refinement: "the credibility of algorithmically generated images also depends on genre conventions" (Manovich, 2018, p. 10). Massimo Leone, in turn, underscores that the face — being a key carrier of communication — becomes the principal battleground of aesthetics: "The face, which many societies have established as a bastion of individuality, will soon be subject to unlimited falsification across all of its digital representations" (Leone, 2023). It is precisely this hyper-realistic face — ideally lit, symmetrical, perfectly synchronized with voice — that triggers an effect of truth, even while depicting an entirely fictitious phenomenon.

In the aesthetics of deepfakes, the boundary between document and simulation shifts radically. A synthetically generated likeness can inspire trust because its form is designed to resonate with cultural codes and viewers' perceptual expectations. What appears familiar, beautiful, and coherent tends to be recognized as true.

Analytically, the persuasive power of deepfakes does not derive solely from technological forgery but, above all, from the deft use of established aesthetic conventions that move the borders of perceptual credibility. The synthetic image does not merely imitate truth; it reconstructs its visual features so effectively that it supplies a message that seems coherent, familiar, and therefore convincing.

Algorithms and microtargeting: Propaganda mechanisms in digital environments

Technological development has not only enabled the generations of high-fidelity images but also created new channels and mechanisms for their mass dissemination. Contemporary visual propaganda, based on personalized content algorithms and microtargeting, can reach specific audiences with unprecedented precision, adjusting both the form and the substance of messages to their aesthetic, emotional, and ideological preferences.

Recommendation algorithms in search engines, social media, and streaming platforms suggest content similar to what users have already consumed, modeling their preferences and directing attention toward aesthetic and ideological patterns that predispose audiences to persuasion and informational

manipulation. By aggregating behavioral data, these mechanisms allow AI to construct an "aesthetic self-portrait" of the recipient — anticipating future choices, tastes, and reactions. As Manovich writes, "the accumulated and integrated data on the cultural behaviors of the masses are used to model our 'aesthetic self,' allowing the prediction of future decisions and preferences — and potentially to steer us toward choices preferred by the majority" (Manovich, 2018, p. 2). At the same time, microtargeting techniques tailor visual content to selected audience segments based on demographic, locational, affective, and worldview data inferred through behavioural analytics. Propaganda thus shifts from mass communication to highly individualized communication, in which the same synthetic image can be processed and presented in multiple forms — headline, GIF, infographic, or clip — depending on the target recipient and their algorithmic profile.

Platform-recommended content is often perceived by users as more neutral or "natural," which makes it particularly susceptible to manipulation. This is especially dangerous in the case of AI-generated images, which, lacking traditional "traces of editing," may be taken for authentic.

Consequently, recommendation systems and microtargeting strategies have become integral components of contemporary visual propaganda. Combined with synthetic images that score highly on perceptual plausibility, they form a new communicative system in which the boundary between information, entertainment, and manipulation becomes structurally blurred.

The psychology of the image: Perception, emotion and the illusion of truth

As a mode of visual communication, the image possesses distinct psychological properties that elicit rapid and robust emotional reactions. By directly addressing the sense of sight, AI-generated synthetic imagery bypasses stages of rational analysis and triggers automatic interpretive mechanisms for recognizing faces, expressions, gestures, and situational contexts. Under conditions of information overload and limited time for verification, the visual form itself often serves as the basis for cognitive judgments of credibility.

Empirical findings corroborate this observation. As Massimo Leone reports, there is evidence that viewing one's digital doppelgänger in virtual reality leads to the encoding of false memories — participants come to believe

they performed actions they only saw in simulation (Leone, 2023). Other experiments reveal that such visual simulacra can shape consumer preferences and health behaviors. This suggests that not only realism but also coupling the image with the recipient's "self" can produce profound cognitive and emotional distortions.

Confirmation bias deserves particular attention in the domain of visual content. When a synthetic image aligns with pre-existing beliefs, it is more readily accepted as true, regardless of its technological genesis. The capacity of images to trigger direct emotional reactions, reinforce entrenched convictions, and ignite processes that yield false memories gives AI-generated visuals a special status in the aestheticization of falsehood. Functioning as tools of persuasion grounded in affective and cognitive mechanisms of reception, these images operate through immediate suggestiveness, exploiting familiarity with cultural visual codes and the aesthetic plausibility of form — plausibility that requires no rational justification to pass as probable.

Verification and informational resilience in the age of the aesthetics of falsehood

Given the increasing availability of AI tools and the rapid growth in the number of synthetic images and videos — especially those of a propagandistic character — informational resilience becomes particularly important. It includes both the ability to identify falsehood and an understanding of how it functions and of the role of aesthetics in building the image's perceptual credibility.

Key tools for verifying visual content include Google Reverse Image Search, InVID[5], and Hive Moderation,[6] which enable analysis of metadata, traces of editing, and the identification of the sources of images circulating online. These tools work well for classic forms of manipulation — montage, cropping, filters — but are less effective against synthetic images generated from scratch, which often lack referential anchors or EXIF[7] data.

5 See https://www.invid-project.eu/ (accessed: 20.03.2025).

6 See https://hivemoderation.com/ (accessed: 20.03.2025).

7 Exchangeable Image File Format (EXIF) denotes metadata recorded by digital cameras (e.g., exposure time, aperture, ISO sensitivity), the camera model, lens used, and other details.

In the contemporary media landscape, audiences find it increasingly difficult to discern the sender's intent and to recognize visual techniques that shape reception. Technical analytical skills alone are therefore insufficient; it is essential to develop visual competencies that allow users to critically examine form, aesthetics, cultural context, and affective force. Rather than limiting itself to warnings about falsehood, visual education should include the analysis of visual strategies — of aesthetics, composition, and narrative — employed in synthetic representations. Particularly important is learning to recognize deepfakes and synthetic faces, whose level of realism can be hard to detect even for specialized detection systems. As a result, societies functioning under conditions of "visual saturation" must cultivate new cognitive and interpretive practices that enable the recognition of falsehood and its aesthetic and cultural deconstruction. At stake are informational truth and cultural resilience against increasingly complex forms of visual manipulation constructed with algorithmic generation and dissemination techniques.

The aesthetics of falsehood through the audience's eyes: A focus-group analysis

To verify the working hypothesis — that "deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality, by mobilizing formal aesthetic appeal (symmetry, harmony, appropriate lighting), increase the scale of disinformation and transform the epistemic foundations of the image by strengthening the link between aesthetics and perceived credibility" — a focus group was conducted to analyze responses to AI-generated imagery. The goal was to identify how the aesthetics of synthetic representations influences interpretive and emotional processes and the cognitive value attributed to images, i.e., their presumed truthfulness.

The study involved eight participants who differed in age, gender, professional experience, and media competencies. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 56 years (the oldest participant was female) and were evenly split by gender (four women, four men). Three were at the beginning of their careers, two held managerial positions, and three worked in mid-level roles; tenure in the labor market ranged from under two years to more than two decades. Professional backgrounds clustered in marketing/PR, journalism, and education, with one participant working as a freelance artistic creator. Media

proficiency varied: two self-identified as basic users, three as intermediate users, and three as advanced or professional users engaged in cross-platform production, analytics, or moderation. All reported daily use of digital media and online news across multiple platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and messaging apps).

Five carefully selected images — both synthetic and photographic — were shown without disclosing their provenance prior to discussion. The set included portraits (including an emotionally charged image of a child), social scenes (protests), and images stylized in the magazine and advertising aesthetics. This design enabled capturing the complexity of visual reception in situations lacking contextual information.

Figure 4. The child's portrait used in the focus group

Source: Platform X

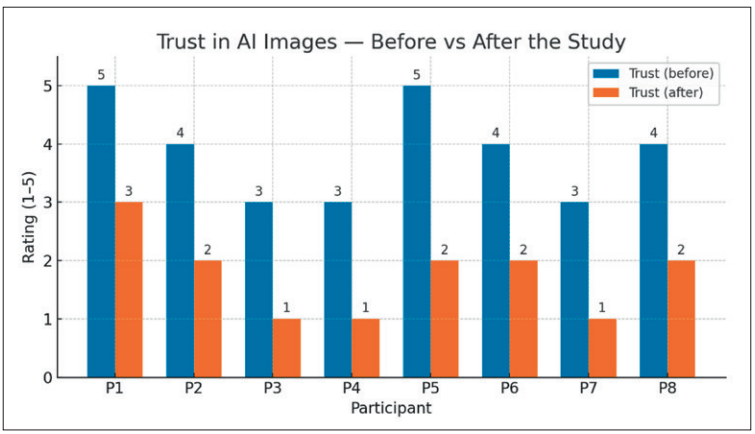
An analysis of participants' statements reveals a clear tendency to equate aesthetic attractiveness with credibility — at least at first contact with an image. Images were described as "professional" (P3), "perfectly composed" (P2), "advertising-like" (P7), or even "too ideal" (P5). Counterintuitively, such features did not arouse suspicion; instead, they initially strengthened the belief in authenticity. One participant noted that "a neat composition, good light and color make the image look like a social-campaign shot — and then you trust it more" (P7). Another added: "yes, aesthetics works — if something looks good, it automatically seems true" (P8). Thus, visual attractiveness ceased to function solely as an aesthetic property and became a signal of

credibility — simplifying reception and prompting swift, automatic judgments that bypassed deeper analysis. The images that elicited the strongest emotional reactions were the child's portrait and a protest scene — both AI-generated. In these cases, participants reported empathy, compassion, and being moved, with emotional responses preceding any assessment of authenticity.

These depictions also induced an unconscious identification with the portrayed situation. As P5 admitted: "the child's portrait was particularly difficult — you do not know whether to cry or to check the source," while P6 observed: "I felt empathy, and only later wondered whether that was fair." Such accounts demonstrate that synthetic images operate not only through formal resemblance to photography but also through the direct arousal of affective reactions that precede critical verification.

Post-focus questionnaire data confirm these observations. The mean self-reported intensity of emotions elicited by the images was 4.3/5, while declared trust in AI images fell from 3.9/5 before the session to 1.7/5 afterwards.

Figure 5. Trust in AI images — before and after the focus group



Source: author's own elaboration

This indicates growing caution toward visual messages and greater awareness of aesthetics as a tool of persuasion. Participants admitted that they had

rarely questioned "beautiful images," assuming professionalism and trustworthiness. "Aesthetics lulls vigilance — an image looks authentic but is synthetic" (P4); "Overly beautiful photos now arouse my distrust" (P5); "I trust professional images, but now I know it is not enough" (P3) — these remarks testify to a change in how form and content are correlated in visual judgment.

Consequently, 7 out of 8 participants acknowledged that their perception of image credibility shifted during the discussion. They pointed out feelings such as empathy, compassion, being moved or unease, which simultaneously weakened the impulse to scrutinize sources and context. As one participant noted: "Aesthetics is also a tool of influence," and another added: "I no longer believe that a realistic look equals truth." The questionnaire further showed that average trust in AI-generated images dropped to 1.7/5 after the session. At the same time, all concluding statements expressed a need for visual education, understood as the ability to recognize aesthetic strategies of manipulation. The change encompassed both attitudes toward images and interpretation strategies. Participants noticed that a "pretty image" might merit more suspicion than an imperfect one, and that the aestheticization of form does not guarantee truth but can convincingly mimic it.

It appears necessary to rethink the paradigm of media and visual education. Traditional approaches based on detecting technical errors (retouching, photomontage) prove inadequate in a world where falsehood can be generated ex nihilo — beautiful, credible, and suggestive. Visual education in the twenty-first century should therefore focus on cultivating competencies for the critical reception of images, including the analysis of composition, styling, emotional messaging, and aesthetic means that shape perceived credibility. Understanding how images construct meaning and trigger reactions enables audiences to interpret visual content — AI-generated included — more consciously.

Summary and general conclusions

The analysis presented here reveals the scale and complexity of the transformations reshaping contemporary visual culture under the influence of generative AI. By approaching the aesthetics of falsehood historically, technologically, and psychologically, and by adding an empirical analysis, we captured a shift in the relation between image and epistemological function. The image

ceases to be a vehicle of referentiality and becomes an aesthetic structure engineered to imitate indices of truth and to elicit emotional engagement.

Contemporary forms of visual propaganda produce images devoid of visible traces of manipulation — polished aesthetically and culturally familiar. The analysis of deepfakes has shown that their efficacy stems not only from hyperrealism or technical difficulty of detection but above all from their capacity to emulate visual codes present in advertising, reportage, social campaigns, and pop culture. Aesthetics — traditionally seen as a domain of taste or composition — acquires a cognitive-decisional function: what is aesthetically pleasing often gets recognized as authentic.

In relation to the hypothesis, it should be stated that it has been empirically confirmed. The findings indicate that formal aesthetic appeal — understood as technical quality, compositional harmony, appropriate lighting, and styling — constitutes a significant factor strengthening perceived image credibility. At the same time, by acting on the emotional plane, such images effectively disrupt cognitive processes, leading to the mistaken conflation of aesthetics with truth. Participants stressed that deepfakes and other forms of synthetic visuality can be challenging to distinguish from documentary materials, and that their attractive form may enhance their persuasive power — often surpassing images anchored in reality. The results thus show that the aesthetics of falsehood is a technological, cultural, and cognitive phenomenon that shapes how viewers see, interpret, and attribute truth status to images.

AI-generated content, when visually persuasive, can convert aesthetic fluency into presumed credibility, shaping judgments before verification occurs. This mechanism carries clear ethical stakes: it challenges informed consent in public communication, heightens susceptibility to manipulation, and risks harm to individuals and communities portrayed or targeted. Ethical responsibility, therefore, extends beyond accuracy to encompass transparency, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and accountability across the production–distribution chain (creators, institutions, platforms).

Media education addressing visual misinformation should translate these duties into practice. Programs should: combine comparative reading of real and synthetic images to slow perception and make reasoning explicit; develop basic platform literacy that shows how recommendation systems shape exposure and trust; and establish straightforward verification routines using publicly available sources — reverse-image searches, checks against independent

reporting, and simple place/time corroboration — with internal-consistency tests of light, shadow, texture, and genre cues when metadata is absent. Transparent labeling and brief contextual notes should accompany any use of synthetic imagery, linking technical scrutiny to reflection on representational risk and audience impact.

At the institutional level, clear policies for synthetic visuals are required: transparent labeling and context notes by default; brief risk assessments and pre-publication review for high-impact materials; minimization of sensational exemplars; documented procedures for correction and redress; and periodic staff training. Consistent with the focus-group results, short, well-scaffolded activities that slow perception increase vigilance; combined with these standards and remedies, they align pedagogy with the current risk profile of visual misinformation while upholding integrity, dignity, and public trust.

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The city as narrative: Storytelling alternatives to place marketing in the age of VUCA and mediatization

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Abstract

The city as narrative: Storytelling alternatives to place marketing in the age of VUCA and mediatization

This article reconceptualizes the contemporary city as a narrative ecosystem — a space that not only organizes social functions but also enables the production and circulation of meanings. Building on critiques of territorial marketing and the homogenization of urban space, it develops the concept of the city as both an interface and a narrative sandbox. Rather than treating the city as a brand or a marketable product, the analysis approaches it as a dynamic figure of meaning whose identity takes shape through interaction, ritual, memory, and everyday practice. Drawing on recent research on mediatization, media convergence, and participatory storytelling, the article identifies four key paradigm shifts in urban thought: from product to process, from promotion to relation, from center to network, and from identity to narrative figure. It argues that urban storytelling holds significant potential as a tool for reconfiguring communities, relationships, and meanings within contemporary processes of spatial communication.

Keywords: urban narrative, storytelling, spatial communication, place promotion, mediatization of space, media convergence, place identity

From branding to storytelling: The city as a narrative future

Cities today are no longer merely clusters of infrastructure or objects of development strategy. In an era of unpredictability and multilayered crises, another dimension of their nature becomes visible: they emerge as spaces of storytelling. Contemporary reflection on urban imagery has shifted its focus from a logic of management to a logic of meaning, and from product to relation. What was once framed as *territorial branding* — a set of promotional activities aimed at marketing a location — is increasingly giving way to narrative thinking, in which both place identity and the ways it is narrated take precedence.

This article aims to demonstrate that the contemporary city should be understood as both a narrative ecosystem and a cultural interface. Such an approach enables us to transcend the reductionism of territorial marketing and grasp the processes by which meaning is produced under the conditions

of mediatization and media convergence. The research problem concerns how the narrative paradigm enables the reconstruction of relations among space, memory, everyday practices, and communicative infrastructures.

The study is situated within the fields of urban sociology and social communication, at the intersection of urban studies, spatial semiotics, and mediatization research, with particular reference to the theory of cultural interfaces.

Methodologically, the article is theoretical and analytical. It employs a critical review of the literature (on territorial marketing, convergence, and mediatization), a comparative analysis of paradigms (product → process; promotion → relation; center → network; identity → narrative figure), and an interpretive framework of _the city as interface/sandbox_ to organize the discussion. The methodological objective is to achieve a conceptual transition from a marketing-oriented to a narrativist perspective.

The central thesis of the paper is that urban storytelling is not a promotional technique but an infrastructural practice — one that designs the conditions for the coexistence of multiple, polyphonic narratives. Such an understanding explains the dynamics of contemporary spatial communication more effectively than current branding models.

The contribution of this work lies in integrating four paradigm shifts into a single operational framework (interface/sandbox) and in demonstrating how this framework can be applied to the design of urban narrative environments.

Caio Esteves notes that traditional place branding relies on retrospective data and cognitive structures ill-suited to the mosaic temporality of the present. "One cannot plan the future of a city by relying exclusively on yesterday's research," writes the author of *Place Strategic Foresight* (Esteves, 2025). In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, the future unfolds not along a single predictable trajectory but through branching trajectories. The same holds for the past, which ceases to function as linear genealogy and instead becomes an overlapping assemblage of temporalities (Adam, 1998). In this age of complexity, cities that adhere to uniform and predictable models of image management gradually lose the ability to respond flexibly to shifting conditions. They confine themselves within one-dimensional narratives that fail to resonate with local communities or with the dynamic rhythms of social networks.

Simultaneously, urban space increasingly operates as an interface — a semantic environment that continually generates and processes stories. The city

no longer resembles an ordered plan but a field of potentiality, where social practices negotiate meaning with collective memory and visual aesthetics. The city ceases to be a stage for social actors and becomes an actor in its own right, capable of self-organization. Within this context, traditional strategies of territorial marketing — based on the centralized dissemination of coherent messages and image management — lose their effectiveness, often provoking distance, irony, or affective reinterpretation (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 119). What becomes necessary is the cultivation of *narrative ecosystems*: environments that foster co-creation and differentiation of stories, in which form and reach are as significant as content.

Mediatization — understood as the deep transformation of social logic through media — has profoundly altered the ways cities are experienced and narrated (Hepp, 2013). Media convergence has decentralized urban stories, dispersing them into polymorphic forms: a mural becomes a social media post; the post becomes a video; the video becomes a strategy; the strategy becomes a protest; the protest becomes a meme. Meanings no longer develop linearly but evolve iteratively through networks, often in unpredictable ways. This shift calls for not merely new stories but a new epistemology of storytelling. In response, the city must be conceived in nonlinear terms — as an open structure, designed less like a coherent narrative and more like an open-world video game. Such a model encourages broad participation and invites us to understand the city as a space of lived experience rather than merely a place of habitation. Hierarchical narratives give way to relational maps of meaning, and uniform messages transform into layered stories. This, in turn, demands a rethinking of the role of urban institutions: not as authors of a singular narrative but as curators of diversity and moderators of narrative complexity.

Cities today require less promotion and more listening. This article, therefore, does not offer another theory of branding; instead, it proposes a shift in place marketing — from the city as brand to the city as story; from center to network; and from past to entangled future.

Structure of the article. Part 1 reconstructs the mechanisms of homogenization and the erosion of *genius loci*. Part 2 examines the limitations of territorial marketing and suggests a shift toward bottom-up place storytelling. Part 3 conceptualizes the city as a narrative interface, articulating a semiotic paradigm of urban meaning. Part 4 introduces the sandbox as a participatory structure, grounded in the paradigm of interaction and co-creation.

Part 5 analyzes the crisis of authorship in the algorithmic age, within the paradigm of convergence and affect. The conclusion integrates these transitions into a single *gestalt* — the figure of the narrative city.

Mechanisms of urban unification: From locality to placelessness (*Paradigm of homogenization and the loss of genius loci*)

Contemporary cities are increasingly losing their distinctive character, as globalization processes homogenize not only physical space but also the ways it is experienced. Research in environmental psychology shows that these transformations lead to a unification of lifestyles and, consequently, to the erosion of the unique qualities of local environments (Lewicka, 2012, pp. 32–35). Urban space — once a carrier of identity, communal rituals, and cultural narrative — now often appears as a standardized landscape of repetition: identical shopping malls, chain restaurants, and uniform architectural layouts. What once constituted the recognizability of place has been reduced to a utilitarian minimum.

A key concept describing this process is *deterritorialization*. In cultural theory, it denotes the breaking of ties between physical space and the social and cultural practices that once defined it (cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 2015). Manuel Castells's notion of the "space of flows" likewise highlights how local rootedness weakens within the network society (Castells, 2008, pp. 487–493). In both perspectives, space loses its capacity to serve as an embedded environment of life and is reduced to neutral infrastructure. As early as the 1970s, Edward Relph identified this tendency as *placelessness* — the disappearance of distinctive characteristics and emotional resonance in space. A place stripped of depth and authentic rootedness becomes a surface without narrative continuity (Relph, 1976, pp. 79–82).

George Ritzer's concept of *McDonaldization* further illuminates this trend, describing the dominance of standardization, predictability, and calculative rationality as organizing principles of social reality (Ritzer, 1997, pp. 21–28). Urban space begins to resemble replicated stage sets — identical functions, brands, and formats, transferable from one location to another without altering their essence. Shopping centers in New York, Warsaw, and Bangkok thus offer the same architecture of experience: neutral, safe, yet devoid of local context.

An especially significant dimension of this process is *aesthetic homogenization*. Distinctive urban idioms — street patterns, spatial rhythms, and architectural details — are disappearing, replaced by universal formats designed for flow optimization, functional efficiency, and visual uniformity. As a result, space loses semantic density: it ceases to serve as a reservoir of meaning and narrative, becoming instead a surface to be filled. Alan Bryman's concept of *Disneyization* captures this dynamic as the stylization of the city into a theme park — an excessively aestheticized environment stripped of depth, contradiction, and affective dissonance (Bryman, 2004, pp. 15–23). Revitalization, subordinated to the logic of consumption, reduces the city's past to a touristic attraction. The historic center becomes a stage set whose purpose is not to sustain a communal story but to deliver an easily consumable experience.

As homogenization intensifies, Marc Augé's category of *non-lieux* (*non-places*) gains renewed relevance. Non-places are spaces devoid of memory, identity, and social relations (Augé, 2010, pp. 74–84). Airports, gas stations, parking garages, and shopping malls — despite their functional significance — fail to provide communal or cultural meaning. Individuals remain anonymous within them, and the time spent there is excluded from biographical continuity.

This trend is reinforced by increasing mobility, both physical and mediated. Studies in environmental psychology and urban sociology by David Stokols, Saul Shumaker, and Jorge Martinez reveal that frequent relocation, high residential turnover, and shortened settlement cycles weaken attachments to place (Stokols, Shumaker, & Martinez, 1983; see also Lewicka, 2012, pp. 245–246, 258). Space thus ceases to operate as a relational structure and becomes a backdrop for transient biographical episodes. Consequently, cities begin to resemble one another not only visually but also narratively: none of their stories sustains long-term engagement.

This process also erodes what has been termed *genius loci*, the "spirit of place." In Christian Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology, this concept designates the affective and symbolic depth of a given space (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, pp. 18–21). Under conditions of homogenization, the *genius loci* fades, displaced by atmospheres engineered for consumption and predictability. Space becomes aesthetically standardized and semantically impoverished.

As the *spirit of place* vanishes, so too does its *narrative density* — its capacity to express relations and sustain meaning. Experience loses its narrative dimension. Culturally, stories do not merely convey content; their primary function is to sustain significance, maintaining bonds between experience

and its symbolic dimension. In a world where space becomes uniform and uprooted, narrative may act as a form of resistance against semantic depletion. By *telling the city* — through everyday practices, local histories, and collective memory — individuals and communities restore their capacity to generate meaning. Urban depth is not recovered through promotional campaigns but through stories that are lived, told, and shared.

From place marketing to place storytelling: Limits of branding and the narrative turn (*Narrativist paradigm in urban studies*)

The history of place marketing reveals a gradual recognition of the symbolic resources embedded in urban narratives. In the latter half of the twentieth century, as *territorial marketing* developed, cities came to be seen — like products — as entities that could be packaged, promoted, and sold. The earliest conceptualizations of place marketing emerged in the 1970s, when authors such as O'Leary and Iredale highlighted its potential for managing urban space (Glińska, 2016, p. 84). At this stage, the approach was primarily instrumental: the city was treated as an object open to commercialization rather than as a cultural subject.

A turning point arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, when deindustrialization and economic crises radically reshaped cities in Europe and the United States. The loss of industry and employment led to a redefinition of the city's role — from a site of production to an arena of competition for investors, tourists, students, and professionals. Marketing, previously marginal to urban governance, assumed a central position. The logic of promotion was elevated to the level of policy, and the language of advertising entered the lexicon of strategic planning. This inaugurated an era of "aestheticized governance," in which cities were increasingly designed as brands. Within this paradigm, *place branding* emerged as a system of representation — a composite of associations, images, ideas, and emotions ascribed to a city. As Bill Baker notes, a place brand does not exist in isolation; it is the sum of circulating social imaginaries, shaped in both public and private spheres (Baker, 2019, p. 140). Urban space alone was no longer sufficient as a carrier of meaning — it had to be narrated, given communicative form, and transformed into an image capable of being shared. Branding thus rested not on physical territory but on the production of a perceptual map: a set of emotional and symbolic landmarks that determine how a city is received.

This shift created the need to generate narratives. Holloway and Hubbard observe that people interact with place on three interrelated levels: through design, through experience, and through representation — via images, films, texts, and stories (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001, pp. 51–53). In this last dimension, storytelling gained particular importance as a communicative form that not only reflects but also structures experience. A city that is narrated acquires meaning; a city that remains un-narrated risks disappearance from collective perception.

Place marketing thus gained an epistemological dimension: it not only promotes the city but also *constructs* it. In this sense, urban branding becomes a practice of knowledge — organizing perception, selecting salient narratives, excluding others, and establishing interpretive hierarchies. The story ceases to be an accessory; it becomes the framework through which the city is experienced. However, at this point, the limitations of classical urban marketing become apparent.

The first limitation is *reductionism*. Treating the city as a product — even a "unique" one — imposes market logic upon the realm of meaning, which cannot be easily translated into categories of utility or efficiency. The city is not merely a collection of functions and services; it is also memory, contradiction, and polyphony. Classical marketing, however, privileges coherence, clarity, and communicative minimalism — features that serve effective brand positioning but flatten complexity. The result is simplified narratives that exclude elements inconsistent with the desired image.

The second limitation is *centralization*. Urban branding typically revolves around institutional actors — city halls, promotion offices, creative agencies — who design strategies in a top-down manner. The city's story is thus produced *for* residents rather than *with* them. Compelling urban storytelling, however, must be participatory, emerging from social relations rather than imposed from above. This calls for a shift from a sender model to a networked model, in which local actors, civic initiatives, artists, and everyday users of space co-create the city's narrative map.

The third limitation is *stasis*. Branding, even when adaptive, presupposes a relatively stable identity — a set of enduring attributes ascribed to the city. Nevertheless, urban reality is in constant flux, both materially and symbolically. Place is not a sum of characteristics; it is a process. The city's identity is never fixed but continually negotiated in the tension between past and future. Compelling urban storytelling, therefore, cannot be declarative; it must be dialogical and situational.

Storytelling is not merely a tool of modern marketing but an *alternative logic* of urban communication. It simultaneously represents the city and participates in its making. It engages emotion, fosters identification, and opens space for marginalized voices and histories excluded from official accounts. Unlike promotional language, storytelling relies on context and meaning rather than slogans designed to elicit immediate reactions. In an era of communicative saturation, where conventional forms of promotion lose traction, storytelling provides a deeper relational framework. It does not state what the city offers; it reveals what the city *is*. It allows the city to be experienced through narrative, language, and emotional resonance. A city that can tell itself ceases to be a mere functional structure and becomes an environment of meaning.

In contrast to marketing — which treats place as an object of communication — storytelling recognizes its subjectivity. The city is no longer a backdrop but an actor, no longer an object to be promoted but a narrator of its own story. The move from marketing to storytelling thus marks a paradigm shift: from strategies of *visibility* to strategies of *presence*, from stories designed to persuade to stories grounded in meaning.

The city as a narrative interface: A semiotic paradigm of space (*Semiotic, interface paradigm*)

Methodological note. The interface analysis draws upon classical theories of spatial language (Goffman; Lynch) and contemporary studies on the cultural interface (Manovich), treating cognitive maps as narrative matrices that organize urban experience. In this perspective, the interface is understood not as a visual surface but as a structural condition that shapes the creation and circulation of meaning.

The contemporary city is no longer merely a space of habitation, production, or exchange; it increasingly functions as a *medium*. Urban structure now operates as an *interface* — a system of elements mediating between the user and a field of meanings. The individual's experience of the city unfolds simultaneously through physical presence and cognitive schemes — cultural frames that endow space with sense and direction. Urban infrastructure not only organizes movement and functions but also serves as a carrier of symbolic order, structuring participation in social life. This perspective becomes

particularly vivid when the city is examined through the lens of the semiotics of space and the concept of the *cultural interface*.

Erving Goffman demonstrated that individuals navigate the world by relying on interpretive frames that organize action and define situations as meaningful (Goffman, 2010, pp. 30–40). By analogy, urban space may be understood as a *social interface* — a configuration of frames that both assign meaning to actions and guide their course. The city does not merely enable action; it *configures* its very form.

From this perspective, urban space resembles a narrative structure: it contains dominant motifs, climactic points, directions of movement, and turning moments. It is no coincidence that Michel de Certeau described walking in the city as a form of speech and movement through its streets as the composition of sentences from units of meaning (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 97–98). The movement of inhabitants becomes a form of narration — a practice through which meaning is produced in space.

One of the most influential conceptualizations of the city's narrative structure remains Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, which shows that urban experience is shaped as a cognitive structure composed of recurring components: paths, nodes, edges, districts, and landmarks (Lynch, 2011, pp. 89–102). For Lynch, the central notion is *legibility* — the extent to which individuals can construct an internal map of space. Crucially, this map does not mirror physical reality but constitutes a symbolic construction: a narrative matrix within which individuals situate experience and identity. The legibility of the city thus depends less on spatial organization itself than on its capacity to generate meaning — its ability to be narrated and recognized. The mental map is not merely an orientational scheme but a narrative structure: an arrangement of actants, turning points, and trajectories that confer meaning upon experience. The city emerges, therefore, as a medium of memory, storytelling, and orientation — a form of *cultural navigation*.

Contemporary cultural, technological, and communicative transformations intensify this narrative function. In the era of mediatization and digital platforms, experiencing space increasingly resembles navigating a user interface. Space is no longer an object of reading but a field of interaction that demands navigation, decision-making, and participation. People do not *read*

the city as a text; they *move through it* as through an application. The urban interface thus requires not only perception but engagement.

Lev Manovich observes that cultural interfaces organize access to data through visual and functional forms that both constrain and enable action (Manovich, 2006, p. 147). Transposed into urban terms, this suggests that the city itself functions as an interface: it organizes access to resources of culture, memory, and economy, while filtering the modalities of social participation. Unlike digital interfaces, however, the urban interface operates at the corporeal and sensory levels — engaging the senses, the body, and time.

This leads to another crucial function of the city: as a *medium of identity negotiation*. Space organizes not only activity but also itself as a figure of meaning. Urban landmarks, according to Lynch, serve both as tools of localization and as carriers of symbolic weight. They construct the city's story by giving it a structure — beginning, development, boundary, and center. The city can thus be analyzed as a narrative configuration, with its own dominants, gaps, conflicts, turning points, and protagonists. It is no coincidence that many contemporary urban projects adopt the language of storytelling: we speak of a "story of place," "district narratives," and "paths of experience." While this vocabulary partly reflects the adoption of marketing discourse, it also signals a more profound epistemological shift — from perceiving the city as territory to understanding it as a *structure of meanings*.

To conceive of the city as a *narrative interface* does not simply mean recognizing that it contains stories. It means understanding it as a structure that organizes the *possibility* of storytelling itself. The interface does not narrate; it delineates who and what *can* be narrated. Space may support communal narratives or suppress them under the dominance of functional logic. It may foster relationships or dissolve into a landscape of non-places. The narrative interface is therefore never neutral — it embodies cultural and political choices.

In the face of contemporary urban challenges — community disintegration, rising mobility, and the commercialization of space — it becomes essential to design cities as *spaces of storytelling*, not merely decoratively but structurally. This entails conceiving of the city as an interactive system that creates conditions for meaning, identification, and presence. Designing urban interfaces thus becomes not merely an aesthetic or architectural task but an *epistemological* one: a way of reclaiming the capacity to narrate the world.

Urban sandbox: Open narratives and structures of participation (*Participatory paradigm and the gamification of space*)

The contemporary city increasingly escapes linear models of spatial and experiential organization. It no longer unfolds as a simple sequence of functions or zones but assumes the form of an *open structure* — an environment of exploration rather than a trajectory defined by communication routes. In this sense, the city begins to resemble a *sandbox*: a simulated world whose meanings are not predetermined but emerge through interaction.

In game design, the term *sandbox* refers to games in which the player does not follow a rigidly scripted narrative but instead constructs personal goals and pathways of meaning. This model closely parallels how urban dwellers generate narratives through movement, participation, and spatial co-creation. The city thus becomes a site of open narrativity, in which meaning is produced through lived practice rather than imposed form.

Unlike closed narratives, *nonlinear narratives* lack a single timeline, fixed causal order, or final resolution. Their structure is dispersed — often modular or constellational — offering multiple points of entry and exit. Research in interactive narrative theory demonstrates that the defining feature of nonlinear narratives is their *emergent character*: the story is not preordained but arises from the interaction between the user and the world-system (Ryan, 2001, pp. 103–105). The user is therefore not a passive interpreter but an active co-author of unfolding events. Transposed into the urban context, this means that the meaning of place is not given but produced through action, trajectory, choice, and ritual.

This perspective becomes especially evident when the city is understood as a *narrative board*: a structure designed not only for functionality but for exploration. In this sense, urbanism acquires a new dimension — closer to *experience design* than to functional engineering. The *urban sandbox* does not impose meaning from above; it creates the conditions for meaning to arise.

Richard Bartle's classic classification of participant types — originally developed in his analysis of Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) games — offers a useful parallel. Bartle distinguishes four player types: achievers, explorers,

socializers, and killers (Bartle, 1996). Although devised for digital environments, this typology can be applied to urban contexts. Cities likewise host individuals who treat the environment as a field of achievement, others who explore hidden layers of meaning and space, some who seek connection and community, and still others who engage in conflict, spatial appropriation, or transgression. Applying Bartle's typology to urban participation reveals that the city's narrative is never uniform; it is subject to diverse interpretive frames and modes of use, echoing Goffman's theory of framing.

From a design perspective, this implies that urban space should accommodate a variety of participatory forms. Different parts of the city correspond to different narrative modalities: some districts serve as stages for social ritual, others as terrains of exploration, and still others as sites of intensive interaction or confrontation. Instead of a homogeneous division into zones, the city begins to resemble a *constellation of experiential modes* — a structure more akin to a game world than a master plan.

A city conceived as a *narrative sandbox* allows for multiple forms of presence without constraining them to a single script. This approach resonates with twentieth-century artistic and urban movements that challenged the linear, controlled city. Michel de Certeau described everyday urban tactics as ways in which inhabitants not only move through the city but *write it with their bodies* (de Certeau, 1984). Walking, pausing, and changing direction are gestures that both transform space and convert it into narrative. The city, therefore, does not exist as a text to be read but as a practice of narration.

Parallel to this, the rise of new technologies and participatory urban culture has generated *environmental narratives* — stories emerging from the relationships between space, user, and local context. These are often bottom-up productions created by residents, civic organizations, and artists, or through digital data that records the city's flows and variability.

Ultimately, the city as a *narrative sandbox* is neither wholly arbitrary nor entirely open. It constitutes a *conditional structure*: one that does not dictate content but provides an *architecture of possibility*. Urban stories are not reducible to mere communication; they become *modes of orientation* — ways of situating oneself in the world. Designing space as a narrative medium thus entails not the production of content but the creation of conditions for participation.

Algorithmic age and the loss of the sender: Affective convergence of urban stories (*Paradigm of convergence and the affective public sphere*)

In late modernity, cities cease to be merely social spaces and increasingly function as *media infrastructures* — communicative environments through which meanings and stories circulate. The identity of place is no longer shaped solely through physical experience but through the constant flow of narratives across digital networks. Instead of a single coherent story that "tells" the city, we now encounter an interface through which multiple, often contradictory narratives intersect — produced simultaneously by inhabitants, algorithms, media, and platforms.

In this sense, contemporary urban space undergoes *mediatization*: a process in which media not only transmit content but also shape the frameworks of everyday social and cultural practice (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 17; Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 8). Urban identity, spatial planning, and local communication are increasingly subordinated to media logics. The city thus becomes not merely a physical or social structure but a *figure of media transformation* — its meanings co-produced by residents, planners, recommendation systems, and algorithmic architectures of visibility (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, pp. 15–17).

In the algorithmic age, the *hierarchy of senders* collapses. Cities can no longer control their own narratives. A mural may inspire a TikTok video, which becomes a Facebook post, which triggers a local controversy, which is then amplified into a news story. A single event generates multiple iterations — filtered through camera lenses, trending algorithms, and affective reactions. Zizi Papacharissi describes this phenomenon as the *affective public sphere*: a communicative space where emotion, irony, and fragmentation replace rational public debate (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 110). Under such conditions, the city's narrative is not so much *told* as it *happens*.

The classical model of communication — *sender → message → receiver* — no longer applies. Instead, a *network logic* prevails: meanings emerge at the intersections of media formats, remixes, cultural codes, and algorithmic priorities. Mark Deuze observes that convergence culture transforms not only media but the very structure of social reality (Deuze, 2012, p. 138). The urban story

no longer originates *within* the city but *about* it, circulating in a continuous flow without a clear beginning or center. This deepens the transformation described by Henry Jenkins as *media convergence*: the blending of channels, narratives, and social practices of meaning-making (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, pp. 2–3). Urban narrative thus functions as an *ecosystem* — distributed, fluid, and constantly reshaped by shifting media carriers and affective receptions. It is not confined to a single campaign but migrates across formats. Meaning is not fixed at the outset — it unfolds in time.

The *narrative crisis* of the city does not stem from the absence of stories but from their *excess* — a proliferation of circulating meanings without a center of gravity. This reflects the impossibility of establishing a widely recognized master narrative. Instead of a coherent communication strategy, an *affective topology* arises, in which meanings remain transient and contextual. Traditional approaches to urban storytelling as "image management" thus lose efficacy. Attempts to impose a single version of the city's story are frequently resisted, ridiculed, or reinterpreted through participatory media cultures.

I propose understanding "narrative design" as a curatorial practice: rather than composing a single, overarching story about the city, institutions should design story environments — frameworks for the coexistence and iteration of multiple narratives.

In this context, what becomes essential is not the search for a unified narrative but the design of *narrative environments*: infrastructures that enable the emergence and coexistence of multiple stories. Such environments cannot be produced exclusively by experts; they must include the lived narratives of residents — their everyday practices and affective relations to place. Research on urban identity shows that stories about cities emerge not only from historical or geographical knowledge but also from emotional attachment and local belonging (Lewicka, 2012, p. 42). Designing narrative structures in cities, therefore, becomes a *curatorial process* — a matter of creating conditions for storytelling rather than prescribing its content.

From the perspective of the city as interface, the *transmission model* must be abandoned. Narrative is no longer a resource but a *process*. Urban storytelling must thus transform from a promotional technique into an *infrastructural practice* — a framework that sustains diversity, relationality, and polyphony.

Conclusion: The city as narrative gestalt and the epistemological horizon of the future

The contemporary city increasingly resembles a *narrative structure* — a complex *gestalt* of meanings. Urban narrative no longer functions as a homogeneous message but as a dense ecosystem: polyphonic, dynamic, and often contradictory. Understanding the city as a *narrative figure* — in the classical gestalt sense, in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts — makes it possible to grasp the tensions and transformations that define the present. The city's structure is not a collection of buildings or infrastructures but a configuration of possible stories. Only such an approach enables urban space to respond effectively to the challenges of dispersed meaning and algorithmic fragmentation.

The conception of the city as a *narrative sandbox* redirects attention from traditional, top-down planning models toward open, emergent structures grounded in participation and multilayered interaction. Like an open-world video game, the city no longer offers a single path but a framework for exploration, discovery, and co-creation. This perspective requires a redefinition of identity and community: instead of static data, we face dynamic, co-constructed narrative forms.

New methods for researching and designing urban narratives thus become crucial — from *psychogeography* and *affective analysis* to the use of *digital data* as material for mapping emotional geographies (Mattern, 2015). Approaches such as *urban data storytelling* (Ciuccarelli, Lupi, & Simeone, 2014) connect narrative with systemic visions of the city and open spaces for *curatorial experimentation*, in which designers, researchers, and residents act as co-creators of meaning.

Most importantly, under conditions of representational crisis and shifting relational dynamics, storytelling can assume a *regenerative* function. Urban storytelling not only enables understanding of the city but also its *reconfiguration*. It can operate as a tool for recomposing communities. Rather than searching for a single, overarching narrative of the city, it becomes necessary to create frameworks that allow for the coexistence of multiple stories — divergent yet resonant with one another.

At this juncture, the article's key themes converge: the critique of spatial homogenization, the shift from marketing to narrative, the reconceptualization of the city as an interface, the exploration of the sandbox model, and the

analysis of convergence and affective fragmentation. Together, they outline a paradigm shift summarized in four transitions:

1. From product to process: the city ceases to be a commodified object and becomes a dynamic space of meaning-making.
2. From promotion to relation: centralized, top-down communication gives way to polyphonic narratives rooted in local practices.
3. From center to network: urban storytelling loses its stable sender and evolves through distributed, interactive flows.
4. From identity to narrative figure: the city is no longer a fixed set of attributes but a structure of meanings through which identity is continuously created, negotiated, and lived.

These shifts define the trajectory for rethinking the city as a *narrative environment*. The city is not merely a space to be narrated but a *cultural framework* — a medium through which the world itself can be told.

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Report from the 19th Media Ethics Conference "Safe Media — Safety in Media"

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On May 14–15, 2025, the 19th Media Ethics Conference took place in Krakow, organized by the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the Pontifical University of John Paul II. As a longstanding academic initiative, the conference is dedicated to exploring ethical questions in media and social communication. This report aims to provide a concise account of the event, to analyze selected contributions, and to summarize the principal discussions that unfolded during the proceedings.

The 2025 edition was held under the theme *Safe Media — Safety in the Media*. The event provided a platform for exchanging ideas on the ethical aspects of media and communication, while promoting responsible approaches to media creation and reception. The main topics included security threats, such as disinformation, the challenges of artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity. The conference fostered interdisciplinary debates on matters of great social importance, encouraging the search for new solutions.

The organizers of the event included: the chair, Rev. Prof. Sławomir Soczyński, PhD, DLitt; the vice-chair, Prof. Olga Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, DLitt; and the secretariat — Dr. Urszula Dyrcz and Dr. Joanna Urbaś. Also involved were Prof. Katarzyna Drąg, DLitt; Rev. Prof. Dariusz Raś, PhD, DLitt; Dr. Aleksandra Urzędowska; Rev. Dr. Paweł Kaszuba; Dr. Marta Woźniak; Joanna Dukalska-Hermut, MA; and the Doctoral and Student Conference Implementation Team led by Aleksandra Pisarska, MA, Karolina Zając, MA, and Faustyna Zaleśna, MA.

The event was held under the honorary patronage of His Magnificence Rev. Prof. Robert Tyrała, PhD, DLitt — Rector of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow — and under the scholarly patronage of the Polish Communication Association. Partners of the conference included St. Mary's Basilica in Krakow, the St. Jadwiga Foundation for the Pontifical University of John Paul II, and the Main Library of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. Media partners were the Academic Media Center, JP2TV, Radio Bonus, Stacja7, TVP3 Kraków, Radio Kraków, and Vita Academica.

More than 70 participants from academic centres across Poland — including Kraków, Warsaw, Wrocław, Poznań, Gdańsk, Katowice, and Lublin — presented their contributions. The majority of speakers were affiliated with the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków, reflecting the Faculty of Communication Sciences' substantial involvement in organising the event. Participants represented not only academia but also the media and technology sectors, which ensured an interdisciplinary perspective.

Students actively contributed to the conference, delivering over a dozen presentations. This illustrated the commitment of young researchers to media studies while also providing them with an opportunity to develop their academic skills. Senior scholars particularly well received the student panel.

Opening and panel discussion

The ceremonial opening of the 19th Media Ethics Conference took place on May 14 at 9:30 a.m. in the Main Library of the Pontifical University of John Paul II, at 10 Bobrzyńskiego Street in Krakow. Rev. Prof. Robert Tyrała underscored the significance of responsible media in fostering a secure society. Welcoming the participants, the conference chair, Rev. Prof. Sławomir Soczyński, highlighted the urgent need for deeper reflection on the challenges of information security. The vice-chair, Prof. Olga Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, emphasised the essential role of media in building social trust.

A highlight of this year's edition was the awarding of the medal Distinguished for the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow to Prof. Iwona Hofman. The laudatory address stressed her contribution to developing the academic community of media scholars and the longstanding cooperation between the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the Pontifical University of John Paul II and the Institute of Communication and Media Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. In her response, Prof. Hofman remarked: "It is a deeply meaningful experience to create a community. And it is equally important that kindness guides us toward our goals. This medal is a testament to the respect with which we approach our joint endeavours."

Immediately after the opening, a panel discussion was held, chaired by Prof. Olga Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk. Panellists included Prof. Iwona Hofman, PhD, DLitt — President of the Polish Communication Association; Przemysław Häuser-Schönaich — Ambassador of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta to the islands of Antigua and Barbuda; and Jakub Śliż — President of the Board of the Pravda Association. Prof. Hofman highlighted responsibility for words as a fundamental ethical challenge in the media. Häuser-Schönaich discussed the global context of information, while Śliż provided practical perspectives on media security.

Structure of the conference and media coverage

The conference's two-day program combined ceremonial sessions, a plenary meeting, and a series of thematic panels. The plenary session, entitled "Contexts of (In)Security in the Media," introduced the main research questions and set the agenda for the debates. Throughout the conference, participants engaged in panels organized around diverse perspectives on media safety. Altogether, more than a dozen scholarly papers and interventions were presented, demonstrating the complexity of the issues discussed.

The event was widely documented and covered by the media. It was broadcast live by JP2TV, with selected interviews later published on institutional platforms. Information about the conference appeared on the official website of the Pontifical University of John Paul II, as well as on academic portals and professional media outlets focused on communication and journalism. This ensured that the debates reached a broad audience both within and outside the academic community.

Main themes and discussion panels

The thematic sessions reflected the multi-dimensional character of media safety. Key areas of discussion included:

- Advertising, PR, and ethical communication — analysis of risks of manipulation in persuasive communication and the need for transparency and professional standards.
- Safety of journalists and protection of sources — attention to the vulnerability of journalists, especially correspondents in conflict zones, and the importance of protecting confidentiality.
- Cybersecurity and privacy — technological aspects of securing media infrastructures and personal data, with emphasis on developing editorial safeguards against cyberattacks.
- Social media and public trust — reflections on the role of platforms in spreading disinformation, hate speech, and polarization; calls for resilience and trust-building.
- New technologies and AI — consideration of the benefits of artificial intelligence and blockchain for moderation and verification, alongside warnings about deepfakes and manipulation.

- Legal frameworks and freedom of expression — discussions on balancing safety measures with free speech, emphasizing the importance of regulatory dialogue with the media sector.
- Disinformation and propaganda — analysis of mechanisms of disinformation and strategies of resilience, including fact-checking, algorithmic tools, and civic education.
- Media education — focus on children and youth, highlighting media literacy as a safeguard against manipulation, online violence, and addiction.
- Media in times of crisis — examination of journalistic responsibilities during pandemics, wars, and natural disasters, stressing effective risk communication and institutional cooperation.

Across these sessions, recurring themes included the centrality of truth and reliability, the ethical responsibility of media professionals, and the importance of education in equipping society to respond critically to information dynamics.

Significance for the academic and media communities

The Media Ethics Conference reaffirmed its role as a forum for interdisciplinary dialogue, integrating scholars, practitioners, students, and institutional actors. For the academic community, it provided an opportunity to confront theoretical approaches with professional experience, opening avenues for further research collaboration. The involvement of young researchers and students highlighted the event's formative dimension.

For the media sector, the conference created space for professional self-reflection. Discussions sharpened the awareness of ethical obligations and underlined the importance of responsibility, particularly in times of crisis or technological disruption. The emphasis on accountability, education, and resilience reflected a consensus that addressing the challenges of safe media requires cooperation across communities.

Conclusion

The 19th Media Ethics Conference *Safe Media — Safety in the Media* demonstrated the urgent need for ongoing interdisciplinary debate on how to safeguard information ecosystems. It underscored that safe media are not only a technical or legal issue but also a civic responsibility, rooted in ethics, education, and cooperation. The event thus contributed to building a culture of responsible communication, indispensable for the functioning of a democratic and well-informed society.

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