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An Appropriate Set of Skills for Limiting the Spread of Fake News

Nicoleta ACOMI[1],
Luis OCHOA SIGUENCIA[2],
Ovidiu ACOMI[3]

[1] Assoc. Prof Dr Constanta Maritime University, Constanta, Romania, nicoleta.acomi@cmu-edu.eu

[2] Prof Dr Academy of Physical Education, Katowice, Poland, biuro@inbie.pl

[3] MBA, youth worker Association TEAM4Excellence, Constanta, Romania, ovidiu.acomi@team4excellence.ro

Abstract: The diversity of news distributed via social media communication channels exposes citizens to large scale disinformation including misleading and false information. In this context of the massive use of social media and considering the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 with regards to democracy, there is a strong need for analytical skills. The main problem is the reduced level of commitment of people to evaluate social media news and to develop the proper analytical skills.

This paper aims at exemplifying the utility of conducting survey-based primary research for identifying the most appropriate analytical skills for dealing with fake news. The research method consists of establishing and distributing a questionnaire targeting various categories of people. Feedback was collected through an online survey in 2020. The questionnaire included category questions aiming at analysing the responses from the age, youth category and time spent online perspective. This approach is thought to provide data of sufficient quality and quantity to meet the objective of identifying the most appropriate analytical skills for dealing with fake news.

The results of this study emphasize the views of respondents with regards to fake news approach, the extent to which various categories of people are checking the news before sharing, as well as the preferred criteria used for verifying the correctness of the news from social media. Based on the analysis of the results, the author proposed a set of solutions to empower youth to evaluate fake news and to detect disinformation campaigns across social networks.

Keywords: *Fake news; disinformation campaigns; survey; social media networks.*

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1. Introduction

The concept of fake news has its origins more than 350 years ago in the 16th century (Standage, 2017), but the current easiness of sharing information using social media platforms led to a flood of fake news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Propaganda, misinformation (Del Vicario et al., 2016) and fake news (Rubin et al., 2015) have the potential to divide public opinion, to encourage aggressive extremism and hate discourse and, ultimately, to undermine democracies and reduce trust in the democratic processes (Council of Europe, 2018).

The EU has been actively tackling disinformation since 2015 when launched the East Strategic Communication Task Force. In 2018, the European Commission outlined an approach and self-regulatory instruments to deal with online disinformation. In this respect, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla have signed a Code of Practice against Disinformation and prepared reports on the measures taken to comply with the code (European Commission, 2018).

According to the Flash Eurobarometer report on fake news and disinformation (TNS Political & Social, 2018), the level of confidence in messaging apps and online social networks is lower than the level of trust in online newspapers and news magazines in the majority of the EU states. As an exception, the online social media in Romania has a higher level of confidence than news magazines and online newspapers (39% compared with 37%). Overall, 26% of the EU respondents say they trust the news and information they access through messaging apps and online social networks.

At the same time, 39% of 15 to 24 years old young respondents thought that, among institutions and media actors, online social networks should be those to contribute to stopping the proliferation of fake news.

In this context, the paper aims at exemplifying the utility of conducting survey-based primary research using online social networks as general-purpose strategic knowledge (Bensley & Haynes, 1995) for identifying the most appropriate analytical skills for dealing with fake news.

2. Research methods

The research method consists of establishing a questionnaire (Babbie, 2012; Collis & Hussey, 2014) targeting various categories of youth and youth workers. The survey was chosen because of the role of youth in sharing news on social media platforms, and the value of the input from the youth workers which support individuals in acquiring analytical skills. This

method served to identify the gaps between the non-formal education field and the youth needs and expectations.

Before the survey, the research team conducted a focus group (Cooper & Schindler, 2013; Saunders et al., 2015) with youth workers and trainers, to inform the key elements of the survey, including multiple choice and open questions. The focus group also contributed to understanding the social media consumption pattern of youth and provided a high-level understanding of the needs and approaches for improving youth analytical skills. The focus group participants identified a range of methods that are used or can be used by young people to filter, assess or verify the online information.

Being aware that critical thinking and analytical skills are decisive for spotting the fake news, the discussions addressed the methods for essential skills improvement. Therefore, the results of the focus group contributed to developing questions relevant for the poll and to identify a range of formats of shared news, types of checks and methods for skills improvement.

The online survey was conducted from 10th January to 4th February 2020 among respondents across Europe. The participants were selected from the target groups of the organizations of the research team. They were invited to complete the survey face-to-face and via phone, e-mail and social media channels.

3. Findings

3.1. Composition of respondents

The online survey addressed youth aged 16 to 30 and youth workers aged 18 to 60+. It consisted of 118 completed responses, distributed as presented in figure 1.

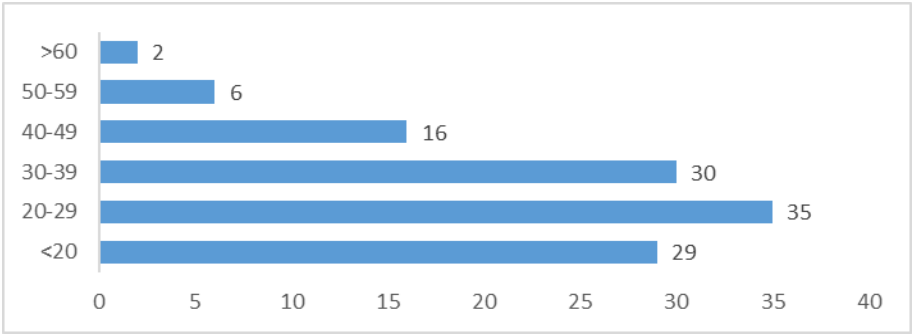


Figure 1. Distribution per age of respondents (*Source: authors*)

The country distribution of respondents was assessed using a category question and showed responses from 18 European countries: Romania, Poland, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Croatia, Turkey, Cyprus, Finland, North Macedonia, Scotland, Portugal, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Hungary.

Most of the respondents (figure 2) are from Romania, Poland, Italy, Spain and France which are partners for implementing a strategic partnership project, co-funded by EC through Erasmus+ programme.

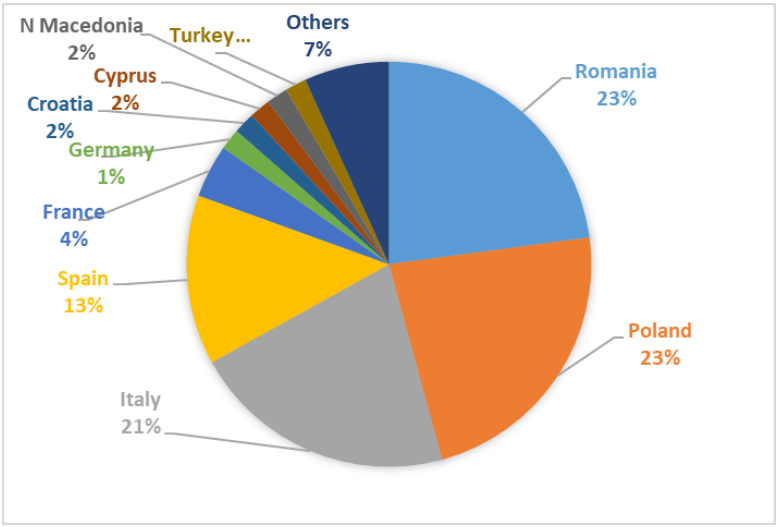


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents per country (*Source: authors*)

3.2. Results

The information below summarizes the feedback collected from different categories of youth and youth workers. The questions bank addressed general topics: frequency of sharing, time spent on social media networks, criteria used to verify the correctness of the news, skills needed to decide if news posts are fake or not. This approach intended to understand the most appropriate methods for empowering youth critically analyze fake news and further on, to design an attractive road map to spot fake news.

More than 1/3 of the respondents who were asked to indicate if they usually check the news (figure 3) selected that they very rarely or never check the source of information that share.

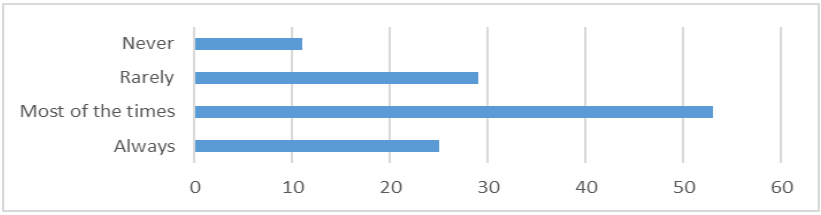


Figure 3. Frequency of checks (*Source: authors*)

From a wide range of topics that might be shared via social media networks, education, music, politics and democracy topics were selected by more than 80% of the respondents (figure 4).

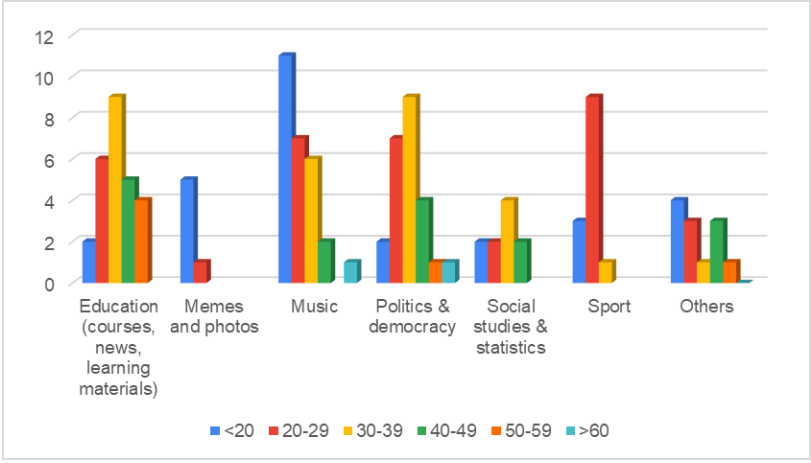


Figure 4. The topic of the shared news per age category (*Source: authors*)

By far, the largest number of youth and youth workers who were asked to indicate which format seems to be the most appreciated when shared, selected: images and memes (figure 5). Out of 38 persons that are not usually involved in youth work, only one person consider that text format is appreciated and nobody selected the audio format.

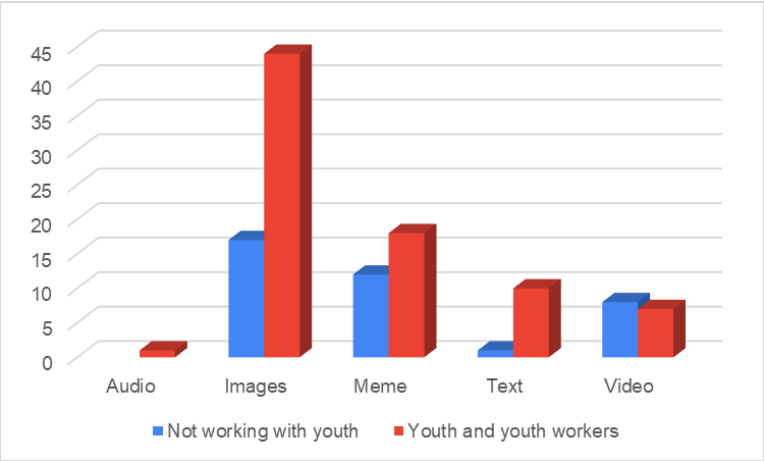


Figure 5. The most appreciated format per job category (*Source: authors*)

A large portion of the respondents surveyed thought that the most appropriate skills that would help them to evaluate news (figure 6) are critical thinking skills (Haryati & Hidayati, 2017) and tools to analyse sources of information.

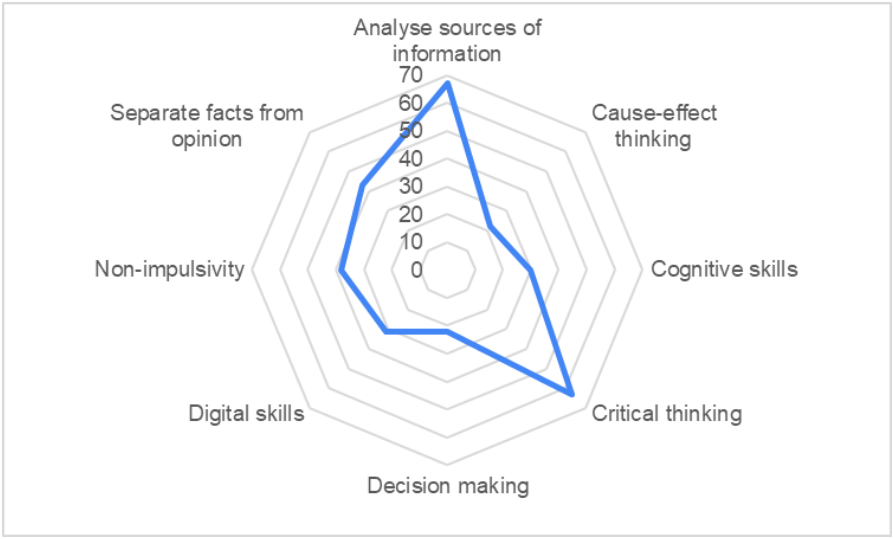


Figure 6. Skills needed to evaluate news (*Source: authors*)

Respondents considered that the most relevant criteria (figure 7) used to verify the correctness of the news from social media are: the source, the author as well as the date.

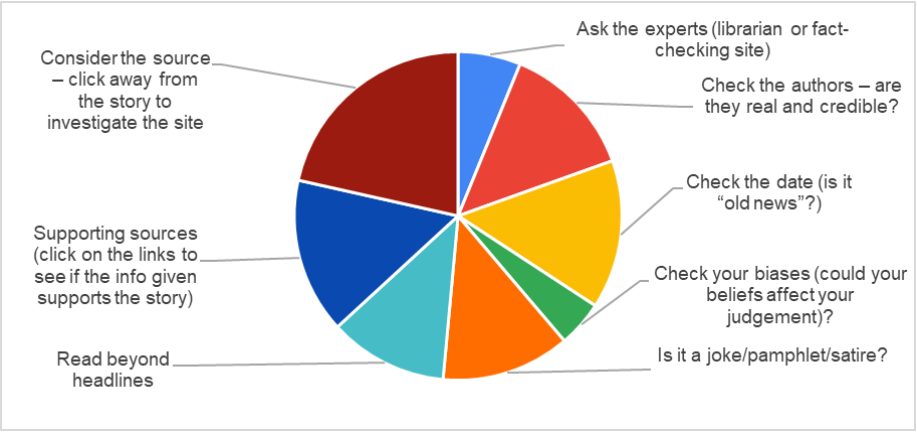


Figure 7. Relevant criteria to check the correctness of news (*Source: authors*)

More than 75% of the respondents that are spending 15+min online per day (figure 8) indicated that articles & books, presentations and workshops would empower them to better analyze news.

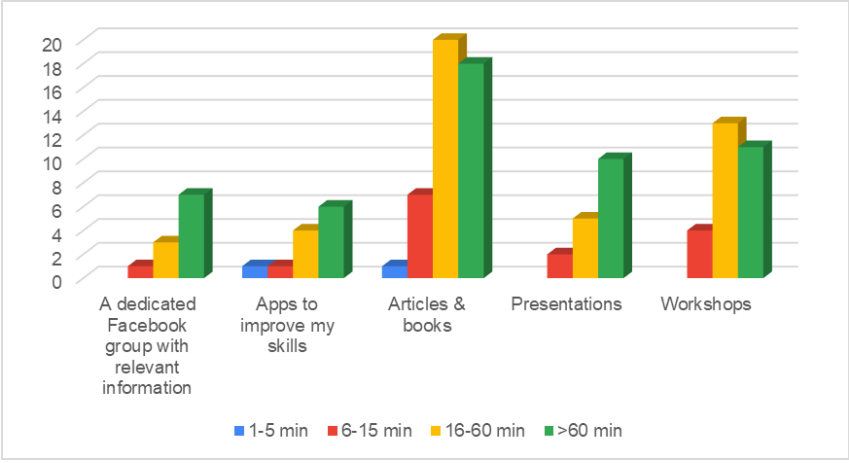


Figure 8. What empower people to analyze news (*Source: authors*)

Other options like education, common sense, good work ethic, and discussions with peers or web checks, were randomly selected by only one respondent as being appropriate to empower them to analyze news.

At the end of the survey, the respondents were invited to give some insights about personal or organizational good practices used for sharing news as well as actions for analytical skills improvement. Some of these are:

• "Maldito bulo" - a plug-in for search engines that helps you to identify fake news

• "https://sites.google.com/aap.com.au/factcheck/home" – a website for restoring confidence in the content through independent verification of the facts

3.3. Discussions

The approach of designing the survey based on a previously conducted focus group to identify the categories of youth and the types of questions addressed is thought to provide data of sufficient quality and quantity (Saunders et al., 2015) to meet the objective of identifying the most appropriate analytical skills for dealing with fake news, without statistical significance.

Out of the total number of 118 respondents, 80 were youth and youth workers, while 38 were persons variously working with young people.

Based on the results of the survey, the research team proposed a road map to guide youth and youth workers to evaluate news and possible disinformation campaigns before sharing them across social networks.

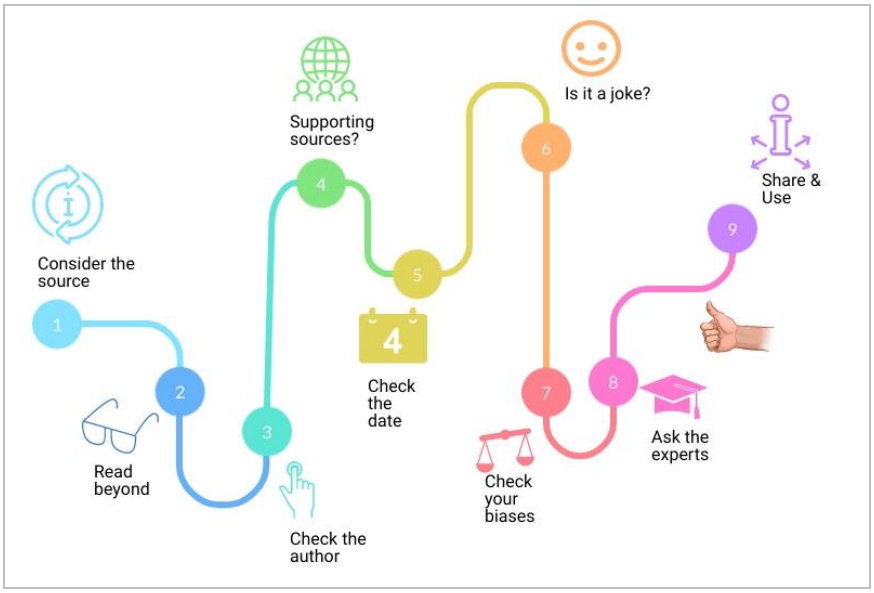


Figure 9. Road map to spot Fake News *(Source: authors)*

The purpose of the road map is to provide a visualization of the process that a person may go through from the moment of reading or receiving a post to the point when it shared.

4. Conclusions

Based on the precursory analysis of the results, the authors proposed a set of solutions to contribute to empowering youth to critically analyze news.

Workshops for analytical skills improvement. To improve critical thinking skills and to provide tools to analyse the sources of information, it is necessary to conduct workshops in schools, universities as well as youth centres. Facilitation of debates and discussions on topics like education, music, politics and democracy, which seems to be the most shared topics, would create engagement and will enable skills development.

Quick and accessible fact-check methods. Promoting simple and short ways is the key to enhancing analytical skills development. Because of the time needed "to ask the expert", the librarian expertise and fact-checking sites were ranked on the last place when it came to the criteria used to verify the correctness of the news from social media.

Non-formal education. The fact that education was not selected as a method that empowers respondents to better analyze news, and taking into consideration that articles & books, presentations and workshops were preferred for this scope, the authors concluded that the non-formal educational methods and extracurricular activities are solutions to improve analytical skills.

Acknowledgement

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