

Coping with misinformation and 'fake news'

Our contemporary media and information societies are characterised by an "abundance" of information, often an overload of both online and offline information. The rise of social media, Facebook, Twitter... has radically changed the production of news and contributes to the rapid spread of various forms of "fake news" and different types of disinformation. Cases of misinformation, disinformation and malicious information can be found in many scenarios and affect the democratic public sphere. Moreover, disinformation campaigns in private chat groups are used as a political strategy, such as during the 2016 presidential election campaign in the United States, the Brexit campaigns of 2015-2016 in the United Kingdom, 55 and recently the war in Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Thursday 24 February 2022 was fuelled by a massive campaign of disinformation that continues as the conflict escalates. It was promptly dismantled by experts and factcheckers, but in the meantime a dangerous disorder of information has emerged. Another global process of (mis)information was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since April 2020, when it became clear that the entire world was suffering from an unprecedented pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, and in the fight against an 'infodemic', by disseminating scientifically substantiated information while trying to dispel myths. At the time of the COVID-19 health crisis, the spread of the "infodemic" was considered as dangerous to public health and safety as the pandemic itself. The UN Secretary-General was quoted as saying: "As COVID-19 spreads, a tsunami of misinformation, hatred, scapegoating and panic-mongering has been unleashed". The use of false, incorrect, and misleading information is considered a new influencing strategy that has a direct impact on the public social sphere. Phenomena of false, incorrect, and misleading information grow as diverse and different as individuals, communities and policy makers create them. These opportunities to create, examine and edit information are part of the democratisation of access

Propaganda and disinformation: powerful weapons in wartime

The mis-, dis-, mal-information we are flooded with regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine is enormous. Although it had never such dimensions, the use of misinformation and propaganda, as weapons of warfare, is not new. It has a long history. The problem has existed since time immemorial. History is full of examples where "fake" was passed for "real". The Trojan horse, a mythological archetype of deception, symbolically links classical antiquity to the very contemporary problems of our internet dominated world. Propaganda and deception are never so visible and dangerous as in wartime. Guns, tanks, and bombs kill and exterminate people and societies. But at the same time, there is a propaganda warfare that seizes hearts and minds and 'kills' civilians too. It is more aggressive than in the past, partly because it is heavily influenced by disinformation campaigns via the internet and mobile phones and it is also very diffuse, as new techniques such as Artificial intelligence (AI)-powered audio, image, and video synthesis - so-called deep fakes - make it difficult to distinguish deep fakes from reality. In these complex times, during which journalists and media are called to find and tell the truths that are visible to them, knowing that at the other end of the communication process citizens are looking for reliable information, it is not easy to achieve balanced reporting and to make conscientious decisions on how to meet these demands. Moreover, understanding, researching, and evaluating war-related media content requires a literate audience.⁵⁷ It is called a "hybrid warfare" in a joint statement for Ukraine (Perugia, 3 April 2022) that expresses support for both Ukrainian and international journalists and independent media that play a vital role in "covering Russia's aggression against Ukraine". It calls on governments and stakeholders to condemn Russia's attack on press freedom and the harassment of independent journalism, which denies citizens the right to access the truth. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has once again underlined

the essential role of independent, ethical journalism in helping citizens make vital decisions, informing the world and holding the powerful to account.

Misinformation affecting our daily behaviour

Older adults are concerned about this information disorder. The spread of misinformation can mislead people about how to behave in the event of illness or danger, reduce trust in the media and increase anxiety. As digital illiteracy is still less prevalent among the seniors than in other age groups, this could be one of the reasons why adults aged 65 and over are more likely to believe and share fake news. This attitude of relying on fake news can depend on several causes that are often interrelated.

In some parts of the world, the use of the internet is hampered by language barriers

Armenia is one of those countries belonging to a global language minority. For older people, the dependence on a foreign language is a remarkable barrier. Armenian is an Indo-European language without strong ties to other languages and with a unique script that dates to the fifth century. For many people, Armenian is a heritage language spoken in the household, while they use another language at school and at work. English has become a popular second language choice, but education in the English language was and is not available to everyone. As a result, a digital divide is currently visible between often young, English-speaking, and Western-oriented individuals and older Armenians. How to bridge this gap between socio-demographic groups? How can we create opportunities to ensure digital inclusion for all? One of the disappointments of today's seniors in post-Soviet countries is that they once worked tirelessly to develop the economy of the USSR, expecting the country to provide them with a decent pension. After the collapse of the USSR, however, their quid pro quo ceased to exist. The new states have not taken over the obligations of the former USSR. The average pension in Armenia is very low, even after several pension reforms. Many Armenian pensioners must continue working informally to supplement their income. A Hovsep Khurshudyan, president of the NGO "Free Citizen" Civic Initiatives Support Centre, who is a member of the Armenian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and a former spokesman of the Armenian Heritage Party, finds the situation regarding media literacy among the older generation in Armenia rather deplorable. Knowledge of languages is only one of the factors. Hovsep: "The older generation mainly speaks Russian, which was the state language of the USSR. Older people can usually only use Russian to reach some external information sources. These Russian-language media are usually controlled by the Russian authorities and contain political propaganda against the West, against Europe and the US, to influence public opinion negatively. The seniors are at risk of falling victim to various conspiracy theories. For example, propaganda against vaccination". Hovsep Khurshudyan felt this in his family when his mother refused to be vaccinated in early 2021, after listening to (mis-)information spreading manipulative and deliberately false stories and arguments against vaccination. As a result, in June 2021, at the age of 81, she contracted Covid-19 and suffered greatly. It was only when she felt that Covid-19 was not only real but could have very serious consequences for life and health that she agreed to be vaccinated. But it was too late; her health, which had been quite strong in the early years, was undermined. Hovsep's cheerful, active mother, with four children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, died at the end of 2021, on 23 December... Hovsep: "Meanwhile, large-scale social and cultural projects are needed to integrate the seniors in all areas of the country's activities. Especially in the field of education, including media literacy. Usually, older people depend on their children and grandchildren to help them access the internet and teach them the basic skills. However, not all older people have a computer at home or have a personal smartphone...".

A Huitfeldt H. (2020), Towards Better Adequacy & Sustainability: A Review of Pension Systems & Pension Reforms in Eastern Partnership Countries, Economic and Financial Affairs, Discussion Paper 131, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/dp131_en.pdf, accessed 8 May 202

Looking Ahead

Recent policy documents from international organizations have solemnly emphasized 'digital equity for all' and 'no one will be left behind'. However, these 'promises' do not seem to have been realized for older generations, who feel isolated and forgotten in today's ever-changing society. This is especially true for the participation of the senior generations in the digital age. Looking at the results of surveys on the practice of using the Internet, projects on media and information skills, it sounds like a refrain: older people are not or less than other age groups involved in digital communication. Governments and various services assume that 'everyone' communicates online and is skilled to do so, but the behaviour of older people does not confirm this and until recently, little effort has been made to strengthen that knowledge and skills among the older generations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became poignantly clear: in this 'digital age', a lack of digital skills leads to digital exclusion and consequently to social exclusion. It was an eye-opener for everyone involved in the welfare of older people and who strives to ensure the right of older people to participate in all areas of society. By the end of 2020, this urgent need of senior citizens seemed to have been understood. The conclusions of the Council of the EU of 12 October 2020 "Human rights, participation and well-being of older people in the age of digitalisation" and the conclusions of the Ministerial Conference of the Council of Europe on "**Artificial intelligence - Intelligent politics. Challenges and opportunities for media and democracy**" of 10-11 June 2021 can be seen as reference documents in which government representatives seek to ensure that also seniors always have the knowledge, skills and awareness regarding their safe and informed access to and exercise of rights in the digital environment.

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