MEDIA POLICY AND INFODEMIC: THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM IN A FRAGILE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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Abstract

An infodemic is a situation in which a lot of false information is being spread in a harmful way. It is a metaphor for virus-like spread of misleading information and disinformation. Although the term began to be used more often during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was officially diagnosed as the information crisis in the LSE Commission on Trust and Technology report in 2018. The report stated that the information crisis the world had faced was systemic, and it called for a coordinated long-term institutional response. Since then, the EU put a lot of effort in setting the policy framework to address this complex problem with countless social and economic consequences. After introducing the Communication and the Action Plan Against Disinformation (EC, 2018) the European Commission agreed on the key policy document – the Code of Practice on Disinformation (2018, 2022). The Code contains 44 commitments and 128 specific measures, in the 8 main areas, but none is related to journalism. The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of journalism as a profession of information verification, and a profession of publication the accountable and trustworthy information. EU media policy should provide a framework for trust in information society, and not platforms but journalism media should become the key partners in that framework.

Keywords: information crisis, infodemic, media policy, media accountability, journalism

Introduction: Information society captured in an infodemic

At a time when information is more available than ever, it is the paradox that we are living in an information crisis, moreover the time of infodemic. The term infodemic is originally coined by political analyst David Rothkopf (2003) in a commentary for the *Washington Post* and it was not used that often until the Covid-19 pandemic broke out worldwide in 2020. According to the

World Health Organization (WHO), the Covid-19-related infodemic was just as dangerous as the virus itself and WHO put a lot of effort initiating and elaborating the infodemic management (WHO, 2024). WHO defines infodemic management as „the systematic use of risk- and evidence-based analysis and approaches to manage the infodemic and reduce its impact on health behaviours during health emergencies." (Ibid.)

The London School of Economics and Political Science report stated that there are the „five giant evils" that enable and maintain the information crisis: (1) confusion, (2) cynicism, (3) fragmentation of audiences, (4) irresponsibility of platforms and (5) apathy (LSE, 2018: 10). In order, (1) citizens are increasingly unsure of what is correct and who to believe; (2) citizens are losing trust even in credible sources of information; (3) citizens have access to potentially infinite knowledge, but the amount of facts about whose accuracy they agree to be correct is permanently decreasing; citizens are thus divided into groups that form separate „truth publics" with their own parallel realities and narratives; (4) power over meanings is held by organizations that do not have high ethical standards of responsibility and exist outside the clearly defined coordinates of credibility and transparency; (5) as a result of all this, citizens decided to stay excluded from established structures of society and lose faith in democracy (LSE, 2018: 10). According to the conclusion of this report – „the information crisis is systemic, and it calls for a coordinated long-term institutional response." (LSE, 2018: 6)

However, it is a process that experienced its acceleration during the 2016 US presidential elections campaign. At that time, social networks Twitter and Facebook took the leading role in publishing and sharing false information. The so-called „fake news" became a practice and one of the main tools in political communication during the elections campaign. Later it was shown that it benefited the election result of Donald Trump (Parkinson, 2016; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). This fabricated information, published in the form of news, reported on prominent political and public figures, and linked them to controversial statements and events, which stimulated great interest even among the part of the public that, in principle, is not particularly interested in elections (Car, 2023). Such posts reached almost a million shares on Facebook and attracted a large number of reactions and comments. Although it was not only content that favoured the Republicans and Trump, but there was also liberal and left-oriented content that was apparently intended to harm Trump's campaign, the primary goal of this artificially generated social media communication was to provoke polarization and conflicts among citizens, inadvertently leading to increased mobilization of Trump supporters (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Generally, infodemic causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours. With unstoppable growing digitization which includes the expansion of platforms, information spread more rapidly. Sometimes, this can help to fill information voids more quickly, but can also amplify harmful messages. Due to all the mentioned threats, the EU put a lot of effort in setting the policy framework to

address the unstoppable problem of spreading disinformation. The European Commission's 2018 Communication introduced the „European approach to tackling online disinformation." (EC, 2018a) It was operationalised in the Action Plan Against Disinformation (EC, 2018b), and in the key policy instrument – the Code of Practice on Disinformation (2018, 2022). The Code contains 44 commitments and 128 specific measures, in the eight main areas: (1) Demonetisation: cutting financial incentives for purveyors of disinformation; (2) Transparency of political advertising; (3) Ensuring the integrity of services; (4) Empowering users; (5) Empowering researchers; (6) Empowering the fact-checking community; (7) Transparency centre and taskforce, and (8) Strengthened Monitoring framework. Obviously, non is related to journalism. On the other hand, European Commission decides to allocate a large amount of money to development of fact-checking as a new market within the media environment. Only in 2023 the Commission has published a call for proposals worth €850 000 to support EU fact-checkers in identifying and debunking disinformation (European Commission, 2023).

The aim of this paper is to elaborate the role of journalism as a profession, compare it with the role of fact-checking organizations, to identify the objectives of the media policy of the European Union and open discussion for future strategic goals and activities.

Fading role of journalism in the platform society

Different policy arrangements of media and technology lead to different outcomes in media environment. The growing political polarization in European countries, as well as in the USA, is partly attributed to the decrease in the quality and credibility of content in the news media, the spread of disinformation on platforms, and the fragmentation of media audiences that are closed into niches of very narrowly defined interests directed towards only a certain type of information. In the time before social media, in the second half of the 20th century when mass media, primarily television, became one of the main information components of society, news in the mainstream media tended to be neutral and inoffensive with the aim of attracting the widest audience (Briggs & Burke, 2005). Neutrality and impartiality are emphasized as professional journalistic standards (Calcutt & Hammond, 2011).

The internet has disrupted the established order of production and dissemination of information and news. The development of information and communication technology in the 21st century has enabled citizens to instantly share information with a large reach, and at the same time has enabled them to choose to expose themselves in this „information forest" only to those that fit into their personal value framework (Jomini Stroud, 2011). This first process started with a so-called „citizen journalism" movement (Glasser, 1999) and ended with the oxymoron of „fake news" (Car & Matas, 2021). This second process of multiple fragmentation of the public into „niche audiences" resulted in the isolation of citizens into groups within which they are exposed to only one angle of seeing a problem, event, or process (filter bubble). A paradox has thus occurred that

at a time when information is available to citizens on the widest scale and with the greatest reach ever achieved in the history of humankind, citizens are faced with the emergence of an „information crisis". It is a crisis which consequences are manifested in intensive changes in media systems (LSE, 2018). The result of these changes is the destruction of the institutional structures of media self-regulation and co-regulation, professional journalistic standards, and journalistic ethics, as well as legal privileges that support democratic processes of deliberation and consensus building (LSE, 2018: 7). What used to be public information has become a private sphere in which everyone chooses for himself what kind of content he or she will expose to and to what extent. At the same time, these contents are no longer professionally prepared by journalists and verified. In a media environment where media professionals have lost their dominant role, and artificial intelligence and the individual amateurs decide what content is 'worth' reading, banal, unverified, and tendentious content finds its way to easily conquered small, fragmented groups and suggests what they should opt for.

Especially in the last two decades, the political economy of news has significantly changed. Since news has become digital (Newman et al., 2023), many different subjects entered the arena of information and communication which is dominantly platformised (Poell and Nieborg, 2018). Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's definition of the platform society is based on four fundamental propositions: platforms are „fuelled by data," organized by algorithms, ruled by „ownership relations driven by business models," and „governed through user agreements." (van Dijck et al, 2018: 9-12) News is produced and distributed by a variety of actors beyond newsrooms and media companies. Platformisation is characterised with datafication, commodification, and algorithms-leaded selection. Platforms determine data, translate them into economic value, while algorithms use such data for selecting the most marketable contents or services to offer. The governance of each platform is determined by the specific version of these mechanisms they embed (Ibid.)

The European Union has followed the rapid consequences of these developments and created a comprehensive re-active regulatory package to influence the political economy of media and platforms. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the AI Act and the Media Freedom Act (EMFA), among others, have laid down new baselines for the operation of media and digital platforms. However, the role of journalism as the profession of publication verified and accountable information, is not highlighted, and journalism newsrooms are not recognised as the key partners or key actors in all segments of above-mentioned EU media policy.

It seems that the important partners, on the one hand, have become platforms which by the definition are not media but only technologically supported virtual space where information and communication is exchanged. On the other hand, there are fact-checking organizations that pop up like mushrooms after the rain, using lavish funds from the EU. Still, it remains

unclear what specific information such organizations should check: journalistic reports published in the media? or information published by various institutions? or information published by anonymous individuals on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook?

If we are talking about journalistic reports, if they are not double-checked in the newsrooms before publication, we should not even call them journalistic. The professional standards for journalism media or news media are clear. Unfortunately, today everything is named „media,“ and there is a large room for media policymakers to make clearer distinctions regarding the author's (un)professionalism. Amateurs are not journalists, and portals where amateurs publish texts should not be listed as journalism media outlet. Secondly, if it is about information published by institutions and organizations, it is the job of the court to punish them if it is discovered that they published disinformation. Therefore, it should be their internal professional obligation not to publish information before their services have verified it. And thirdly, if we are talking about information that individuals exchange on platforms, fact-checking such communication is just as fruitless as fact-checking a conversation in a bar, hair salon, or farmers' market. The only cure against such meaningless conversations, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories is – knowledge.

However, new calls for fact-checking projects, application development, fact-checking toolkits, etc. are continuously published. A question arises – what are the implications of such European and national media policies towards political economy of news production, distribution, and consumption? Why the development of a new fact-checking market is encouraged, while it is not clear what kind of information fact-checkers should check – those published by journalists, or those published by institutions, organisations, citizens, or anonymous individuals, e.g. YouTube videos on conspiracy theory topics. Instead, why don't media policies promote publicly funded media with independent governance structures? Such public service media usually provide, or should provide, accurate and public-oriented coverage while upholding the rights of vulnerable groups (Benson, 2019; Cushion, 2017).

Concluding remarks

In the evolving landscape of media, the emergence of fact-checking as a distinct market, substantially funded by the European Union, raises critical questions about the future of professional journalism and the reinforcement of its internal capabilities. This development prompts an examination of the broader implications for media policy in Europe and the expected outcomes of these initiatives.

Let us compare this situation with another public policy where citizens have tried to abuse the right to free speech. For example – public health. There are more and more pseudo-medical experts on social media and platforms who sell their experience and intuitive „knowledge“ in health, healthy diet, and dealing with various diseases and health conditions. The consequences of following

such pseudo-experts can be fatal. However, European and world health organizations are not combating them by establishing centres to check the accuracy of information published by these pseudo-health experts. Instead, public health policies prioritize the development of professional health institutions and the education of the public through public campaigns. Health literacy initiatives are designed to help individuals distinguish between credible and unreliable sources of health information.

In contrast, current media policy does not similarly emphasize the development of professional journalism or public education to differentiate between journalistic and non-journalistic content. The traditional role of journalism in publishing accurate information appears to have been diminished. Globally, the spread of fact-checking is viewed by some scholars, such as Amazeen (2020), as a reform movement within the journalistic community, necessitated by the decline of traditional journalism, the democratization of technology, and sociopolitical upheaval. Journalism is inherently a profession dedicated to information verification and the dissemination of trustworthy content. Deviations from professional standards are typically managed through laws and regulatory institutions designed to sanction and prevent such infractions. However, the current trend of establishing a separate profession of fact-checkers, often outside traditional journalistic institutions, raises concerns. It suggests a relinquishment of the core journalistic duty of verifying information, leaving it to non-professional entities, and then attempting to mitigate the resultant damage through fact-checking interventions. Distinguishing journalism media from all other kind of information, communication or entertainment media, applications or platforms would help creating media policies rely on professional expertise. The EU media policy should foster a framework that enhances trust in the information society, positioning journalism and especially public service media (see Car, 2024), and not digital platforms, as the cornerstone of this framework.

Restoring the value of published information is crucial. Historically, newspapers charged for their content, ensuring a level of accountability and quality. The prevalent model of free digital information has led to a decline in these standards. Journalism should remain a professional domain, staffed by experienced journalists, editors, and proofreaders who rigorously verify information and arguments (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). The role of these elite gatekeepers (Amazeen, 2020) is analogous to why only qualified professors should teach at universities.

The media industry today often promotes passive and uncritical consumption of content, prioritizing market interests (Ryan & Cook, 2015). If fact-checking is outsourced to specialized organizations rather than integrated into newsroom practices, the fundamental definition of journalism in the 21st century is called into question. The professional responsibility for accurate information dissemination should reside within journalistic institutions, not external fact-checkers. Strengthening regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms within the media industry is essential. A comprehensive public media literacy campaign could

help society distinguish between reliable journalism reports and unverified private communication. Media policies should differentiate journalistic media from other information sources, creating a framework that values professional journalism. Professional journalists by the professional standards should be equipped to verify information from multiple independent sources, contextualize it, and present it in a manner that is understandable to the public, all while adhering to ethical standards.

And finally, to emphasize once again, the demand for high-quality, professional journalism is more significant than ever, yet the profession faces an unprecedented crisis. The era when journalists could influence political and economic outcomes through investigative reporting is often viewed with nostalgia. These historical examples of journalism as a watchdog of democracy highlight the critical role of the profession in exposing corruption and fostering societal change.

In conclusion, the media policy framework in Europe should prioritize the development and support of professional journalism. This approach will ensure the publication of accurate and trustworthy information, thereby maintaining the integrity and accountability of the news media in the digital age.

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