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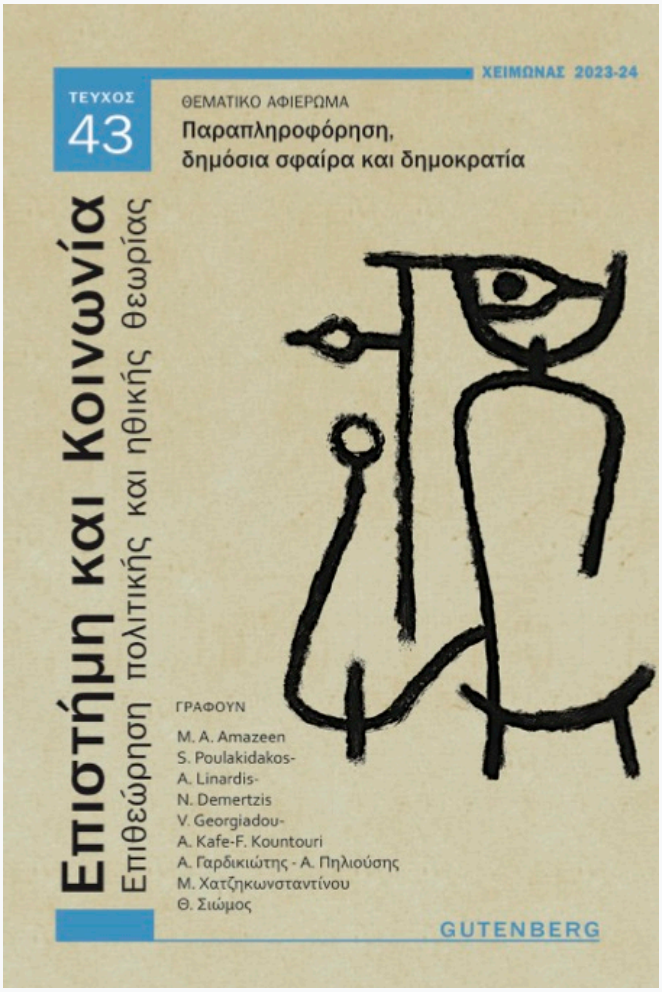

Disinformation matters. The media-experts' perspective on fake news, trust in media and counter strategies

Vasiliki Georgiadou, Anastasia Kafe, Fani Kountouri

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*Vasiliki Georgiadou**
*Anastasia Kafe***
*Fani Kountouri****

DISINFORMATION MATTERS. THE MEDIA-EXPERTS' PERSPECTIVE ON FAKE NEWS, TRUST IN MEDIA AND COUNTER STRATEGIES

The issue of disinformation is a growing concern, particularly due to the digital transformation of the public sphere and the media environment, compounded by the impact of COVID-19. This paper aims to explore various aspects of disinformation by analyzing interviews conducted with experts actively involved in either creating credible news or combating fake news during the pandemic. We introduce conceptual distinctions related to the phenomenon of disinformation and discuss the factors and actors involved in its spread during the COVID-19 era. Additionally, we highlight the impact of disinformation on the increasing distrust towards the media and propose counterstrategies for combating this issue.

* Professor, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences & National Centre for Social Research (EKKE)

** Postdoctoral Researcher, Centre for Political Research, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

*** Associate Professor, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

Introduction

Fake news, disinformation, and misinformation have become significant concerns in the political communication landscape, particularly in recent years. The rise of these phenomena can be traced back to events such as Donald Trump's presidency in the United States and the Leave campaign's victory in the UK's EU membership referendum in 2016. The Covid-19 pandemic has further accelerated the spread of and research into disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. Fake news, disinformation, and misinformation are often used interchangeably to refer to false or misleading messages that are presented as informative content (Guess and Lyons 2020: 10). Researchers and experts are working to identify the sources, mechanisms, and impacts of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in order to mitigate their negative effects on the quality of democracy and public discourse.

It is crucial for individuals to critically evaluate the information they encounter and rely on trusted sources for accurate and reliable news. Additionally, efforts from technology companies, policymakers, and society as a whole are necessary to address this complex issue and promote a more informed and resilient information ecosystem.

Scholars define misinformation as 'a claim that contradicts or distorts commonly accepted facts that can be verified' (Guess and Lyons 2020), or as unintentionally inaccurate and misleading information (Rubin 2019). According to Tucker et al. (2018), disinformation is a subset of misinformation that is intentionally spread. Disinformation aims to deceive and poses a threat to the integrity of knowledge, as stated by Pérez-Escolar et al. (2023). While misinformation can occur unintentionally, disinformation is intentionally crafted with the purpose of influencing opinions and promoting one political group over another (Tucker et al. 2018; Guess and Lyons 2020). Various forms of disinformation result in different kinds of misleading information. We

can adopt the categorization presented by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who argue that there exist various forms of disinformation, including satire or parody, misleading content, impostor content, fabricated content, false connection, false content, and manipulated content. False content, commonly referred to as 'fake news', is a form of disinformation deliberately created to mislead readers. These misleading articles are often shared on social media platforms with the intention of going viral (Pennycook and Rand 2019; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018) or are made to resemble legitimate articles from reputable newspapers (Guess and Lyons 2020).

The most crucial aspect of disinformation is associated with the intrusion of digital media in the public sphere. The digital age has altered the manner in which these messages are produced, disseminated, and understood, along with their potential impacts (Freelon and Wells 2020). There are several crucial aspects to the interplay between the transition to the digital age and the rise of disinformation, one of which is the merging of information, discursive possibility, and social networking (Bruns and Burgess 2012). This factor appears to determine the role that the internet plays in the dissemination of disinformation. Anyone, not only journalists and news media, has the ability to publish, curate, aggregate, reshape, repurpose, and define 'news' (Van Aelst et al. 2015). Digital media serves as both a free service to attract visitors to their news articles and a convenient tool for gathering news (Malik and Pfeffer 2016; Hermida 2013). Another critical aspect of the relationship 'between misinformation and the proliferation of digital media lies in the blurred lines between news and entertainment, the rise of numerous news sites, and the constant pressure of the 24-hour news cycle' (Desai et al. 2021). These factors may have an impact on professional journalistic standards and ethics. In this context, established media and journalists are willing to shift from their traditional gatekeeping role to one of gate watching, news moderation, and facilitation (Jarvis 2006; Reese and Shoemaker 2016). The above leads to another aspect of the relationship between disinforma-

tion and social media: online networking has the potential to blur the lines between professional journalism and citizen participation in news production and sharing.In this sense, the traditional journalistic practice of heavily relying on elite sources for credible information (Gans 2005), a recognized form of gatekeeping, has faced significant challenges. Media outlets and journalists have extensively utilized websites and social media platforms. Scholars have employed intriguing concepts to describe collaborative forms of online information creation and content production (Jarvis 2006).The term 'networked 4th estate' (Benkler 2011) encompasses the collaborative efforts of professional journalists, citizens, and social movements in creating a decentralized democratic discourse. This concept is often referred to as 'networked journalism' (Jarvis 2006), which combines collaborative and collective action to form what is commonly known as 'participatory journalism' (Hermida 2012).The impact of these issues on the rise of skepticism and distrust has prompted the discussion on the methods and strategies to tackle and counter these phenomena (Bennett and Livingston 2020; Shu et al. 2020). Therefore, the increasing mistrust in media and governmental institutions is closely connected to the consumption of disinformation and fake news. The relationship between distrust and disinformation is becoming more salient. Scholars argue that perceptions of misinformation and disinformation are linked to a decline in trust in news media (Hameleers et al. 2022). They also suggest that media manipulation is a secure method to erode trust in mainstream media (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Either distrust in the media is perceived as a factor that contributes to disinformation, or as an outcome of disinformation. Both perspectives are crucial for comprehending the phenomenon of disinformation.

Therefore, the relationship between distrust and disinformation is reciprocal, as disinformation can significantly contribute to the decline of political trust. The media environment, whether it is traditional mainstream outlets or online platforms and social media, can directly or indirectly influence public perception

of the trustworthiness and transparency of politics, politicians, and government officials. Both political scandals and cynical messages about politics, politicians, and government can also directly impact forms of political trust, such as trust in the government (Einstein and Glick 2015) or trust in news reporting (Graßl et al. 2021), contributing to public contestation regarding the trustworthiness of political actors, government officials, and the media. False or inaccurate information, whether shared unintentionally or deliberately fabricated and disseminated, appears to pose a challenge for professional journalism in inciting debates and prompting actions (Beckett 2017). The significant increase in fake news on social media (Bradshaw et al. 2020; Fletcher et al. 2018; Guess et al. 2018) and the deliberate use of social media to target, intimidate, and harass independent news media, journalists, and their audiences (Posetti et al. 2019: 10) provide a new opportunity to advocate for and reaffirm the vital significance of professional journalism in open and democratic societies. Media effects research indicates that exposure to fake news and disinformation primarily causes harm by fostering cynicism and apathy, as well as fueling extremism and affective polarization (Lazer et al. 2018). These less obvious effects of misinformation have rarely been examined. However, research conducted by Van Duyn and Collier (2019) indicates that even elite discourse surrounding fake news can diminish trust in the media and impair the public's capacity to accurately discern accurate news. As Beckett (2017) has argued, 'In my sector of journalism, fake news is the best thing that has happened in decades. It provides mainstream quality journalism with the opportunity to demonstrate its value through expertise, ethics, engagement, and experience'; however, the abundance of fake news on the internet, along with the difficulty of identifying fake news, has become a significant challenge to the quality of democracy.

In the case of Greece, the media is characterized by an excessive number of outlets, surpassing what a small market can support (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2021).The Greek media landscape is characterized by low trust in mainstream media, jour-

nalists, and news, as well as low readership. There is a high reliance on social media for accessing information, along with a significant concentration of media ownership. Additionally, there are close connections between mass media and politicians and/or political parties, contributing to a politically polarized press (Kalogeropoulos 2021).The two surveys conducted by the Reuters Institute (Newman et al. 2020, 2021) indicate that the media are still widely distrusted among Greek citizens. However, it is noteworthy that trust in news in Greece has seen a four-percentage-point increase (Newman et al. 2020, 2021), and trust in the press has risen by 14 percentage points between 2019 and 2020-2021 (Standard Eurobarometer 76-94).[1] Furthermore, Greece is regarded as one of the most susceptible countries in Europe to disinformation and fake news. According to the Media Literacy Index 2021 (Lessenski 2021) created by the European Policies Initiative (EuPI) of the Open Society Institute-Sofia, which assesses the potential resilience to fake news in 35 European countries using indicators for media freedom, education, and trust in people, Greece ranks at the bottom, in 27th place out of 35 countries. It is included in the fourth worst group out of five ranking groups, along with Turkey and several other Balkan countries. These countries possess a limited ability to address the impacts of fake news and disinformation, primarily because of their low rankings in terms of media freedom and education.

This exploratory research contributes to a better understanding of disinformation and the strategies to combat it from the perspective of political communication experts, mass media professionals, and fact-checkers. In the following sections, we first describe the methodological tools used to collect and analyze data regarding the disinformation landscape in Greece. Next, we turn our attention to the definition of the phenomenon, as disinformation frequently intersects with misinformation and fake news in public and political discussions. Afterward, we strive to enhance our comprehension of the aforementioned within the

1. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home

broader framework of media distrust and deception, along with its significance in democratic societies. Ultimately, we emphasize the crucial findings and areas of consensus among our interviewees regarding counter strategies, in order to formulate approaches to tackle the issue.

Methods and data

Our data comes from the research conducted for the project 'Enlightened Trust. An examination of trust and distrust in governance-conditions, effects and remedies', funded by the EU-Horizon 2020 and the work package investigating the role of the media in trust/distrust.[2] In the particular strand of our research, we focused on the different aspects and the counter-strategies of disinformation in all participating countries.The goal is to explore the degree to which disinformation is intentionally crafted and strategically deployed as a tool to instill distrust in political representatives, democracy, expertise, and science.

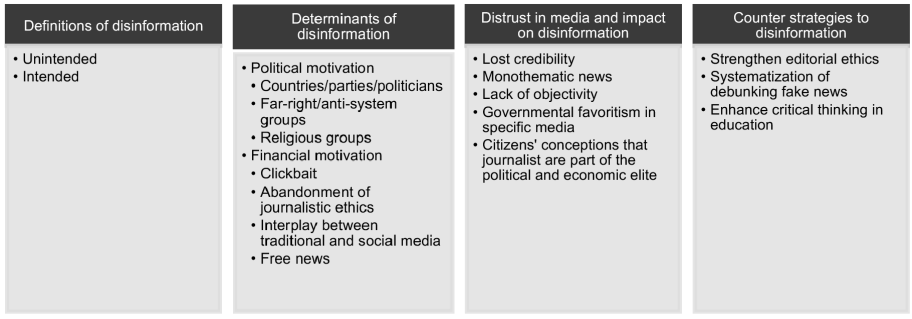
For the purpose of our research, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with media and communications experts that have been engaged, directly or indirectly, in the struggle against fake news during the pandemic (Döringer 2021; Soest 2023). Because of the exploratory nature of this research and the guidelines of this strand of the research project, we have chosen-experts on the field on the basis of their experience and work in journalism and their expertise in news validity and fight against disinformation and fake news. More specifically, in order to have a more detailed perspective of the field, we referred to experts from different media and communication ecosystems. We interviewed two journalists from public broadcasting media (TV channel and radio), two journalists from mainstream media (TV channel and newspaper), two experts from fact-checking initiatives,

2. For more information see the website of the research project https://entrust-project.eu/.

two journalists from digital media, one government representative and one expert from a scientific observatory on fake news in the EU. The interviews were conducted by two of the authors in February and March 2022, online using a digital communication platform. The average duration of the interviews was about one hour.

Following an interview guide, each respondent was invited to share their thoughts, opinions and experiences regarding the situation of fake news in general, how fake news affect trust in the political system, in experts and in journalism and what are the counter-strategies they suggest.[3] For the analysis, we followed a qualitative content analysis methodology in order to gain knowledge and new insights for the phenomenon of disinformation in the Greek media (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Schreier 2012). The coding scheme that resulted from the coding of transcripts follows the interview guide:

Figure 1. Coding scheme



3. The detailed interview guide can be found here https://shorturl.at/JUVX8

Disinformation or misinformation and fake news? Defining categories of unreliable information

While fake news has been present for a very long time, the phenomenon itself is an 'integral part of the media ecosystem' (Krause et al. 2019), existing as rumors and false stories even before the advent of the printing press. However, in recent times, fake news has evolved into a significant global problem that is challenging to mitigate. The easy access to information through online social networks facilitates the spread of information, including fabricated news. These false stories mimic the format of legitimate news media but deviate from the norms and standards that ensure accuracy and credibility (Lazer et al. 2018).

In the literature, fake news is defined as manufactured information that lacks the editorial norms and processes of the news media, guaranteeing the reliability and trustworthiness of the media product (ibid.). Fake news overlaps with misinformation, identified as false or misleading information, and disinformation, which is the deliberate spread of false information to mislead people (ibid; Jaster and Lanius 2021). During the pandemic, fake news became commonplace, especially on social media. The digital communication ecosystem has contributed to the spread of misleading information. False information created intentionally or unintentionally during the pandemic resulted from both distrust in mainstream media and the erosion of trust. However, the decline in trust in political institutions is not a general trend but is mostly linked to the political orientation of users exposed to fake news (Ognyanova et al. 2020).

By interviewing media and communication experts in Greece involved in creating credible news and/or fighting fake news during the pandemic, we aim to explore the outbreak of fake news and the spread of misinformation and disinformation in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since Greece has already experienced a major financial crisis leading to the production of fake news, inaccurate information, and 'conspiracy theories', a no-

tion related to fake news (Bernecker, Flowerree and Grundmann 2021), we wanted to find out whether the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these phenomena or gave them different characteristics.

Aligned with theoretical considerations tracing the historical roots of fake news back to the propaganda of authoritarian regimes (Fox 2020), our informants, reflecting on the propaganda of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, believe that we are now facing a new version but a continuation of this phenomenon. The historical depth of the phenomenon is the first response of our interviewees to their intention of definition of the phenomenon. Our informants make a distinction between disinformation and misinformation, claiming that misinformation is a phenomenon that occurred throughout the entire 20th century, especially during wartime. According to them, the example of Hitler's propaganda that pioneered fake news can be considered as the historical background and archetype of this phenomenon. In our time, the phenomenon is linked 'to the lack of verification of the journalistic sources' (Alternative media 1). An interviewee from public broadcasting argues that we can trace the existence of fake news as far back as 30 years ago when political actors and parties circulated information through non-papers to cover political leaders and decisions. According to our interviewee, journalists at that time weren't aware of this practice and therefore tended to reproduce the fake news circulated by political actors, who were the main and privileged sources of information at that time (Public broadcasting 2).

Our interviewees converged on their criteria that distinguish misinformation from disinformation. The first criterion is related to the conscious/unconscious, intentional/unintentional aspects of the dis/misinformation phenomenon, the second to its nature, and the third to the dynamics of its diffusion. Regarding the first criterion, misinformation, according to our informants, is false information spread regardless of the intention to mislead. In other words, misinformation is identified with the unintentional use of false information that can also have harmful ef-

fects, whereas disinformation is perceived as the intentional use of false information. So, while disinformation is the intentional spreading of false information, misinformation doesn't include intention, which is perceived as the non-intentional use of wrong or false information. Disinformation is the deliberate attempt to mislead the public in order to gain some advantage, while misinformation is the unintentional use of misleading information.

In the same vein, unconscious aspects of misinformation are related to strong links between the political and economic spheres and the media (Public broadcasting 2). Misinformation is also linked to stereotypes and biases. According to our interviewee from public broadcasting, biased information is produced unintentionally as journalists attempt to convey an ideological view to the public (Public broadcasting 2). Furthermore, the unconscious aspect of misinformation is related to the mass use of social media by people who aren't familiar with it, who misinterpret and unknowingly reproduce its content (Fact-checking initiatives 2).

In contrast to misinformation, disinformation refers to the deliberate use and spread of fake news in a bottom-up or a top-down way. In the bottom-up way, conspiratorial texts, hypotheses, or scenarios are published as if they were real news. In the top-down way, those who possess political or economic power can use fake news to downgrade or upgrade events, views, or scenarios to real events.

> Fake news is everywhere… I have also been a victim of fake news, mainly because I was in a hurry, because of stupidity, and I haven't cross-checked what I read, let's say, in the Guardian. I take it somewhat for granted because it was published in a credible medium. It's not even that anymore, even that is questionable. (Professionals 2)

The second criterion mentioned by our respondents is the one-sided information that lies behind the way the media tend to present news. At the expense of objectivity and a thorough examination of the facts, the media often select and present news

content that is of main interest to specific targets and media consumers. In this sense, disinformation is related to propaganda. Among our informants, one interviewee (Public broadcasting 1) perceives disinformation as part of the propaganda process. The journalist denies the distinction between misinformation and disinformation, claiming that there is research-based news that includes all the views on a subject. From his/her point of view, disinformation refers to the kind of news that hasn't accomplished their role, as they don't include all the views on an issue. The interviewee underlines the need to find out the narratives that lie behind disinformation. In this sense, the interviewee mentions an interesting example of how the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn created a story connecting immigrants, racism, hate speech, and spread it in the mainstream and online media. This type of information could not be overturned because citizens didn't have the possibility to cross-check it and reveal what was behind it (Public broadcasting 1).

Finally, regarding the third criterion, the spread of false information is linked to the digital intrusion into public life. The competition in the media field for clickbaits, the abundance of information, and the oversupply of digital media outlets have increased the need for eye-catching, hyperbolic headlines and fascinating information to attract the user's attention. In this case, eye-catching information is synonymous with misinformation:

> We have to get the fancy news not even cross-checked, in which I am not interested in as long as I present the news to the public so that many people can see the news and get impressed. (Fact-checking initiatives 2)

Determinants of disinformation in the media

A part of the literature concentrated on disinformation focuses on sources or intentions. Although it is crucial to identify the originators of disinformation, this is not an easy task. Kalsnes (2018) summarizes the originators and their motives in three categories:

political, financial, and social. Political motivation is usually connected with propaganda that political actors produce to either influence the public or harm their political opponents. This tactic is also used in interstate relationships with the aim of manipulating specific events, such as elections in another country or war.

Financial motivation is more recent and has risen with the increased use of social media. This type of motivation can also be characterized as a 'clickbait' technique, the goal of which is to stimulate public interest with fake, elusive but also attractive news to gain as many clicks as possible and thus increase advertising revenues.

Finally, social motivation refers to attracting attention or building status. Sharing fake news is a common practice among people who want to attract an audience and become influencers in a certain community by entertaining and/or provoking (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Recent research (Marwick and Lewis 2017) examines this type of disinformation in far-right communities where sexist and/or racist content provokes 'lulz'.

The above-mentioned aspects of intentional false information are also reported by our interviewees, but according to them, the originators of this type of information are not always traceable, especially when it concerns disinformation. In unintentional false information originators are easily traced because they are usually refuted and in some cases they are forced to make corrective statements.

Our informants, in alignment with research in the field, agree that the identity of the originators of disinformation is unknown. However, upon examining their motivations or intentions, it becomes evident that political actors are the most significant and salient players in the disinformation arena. These actors possess the means to spread fake news and disinformation, thereby increasing their saliency. Moreover, our informants distinguish between specific profiles of originators depending on the thematic scope of fake news. They attribute fake news to political opportunities, with political motivations and specific targets ranging from political personnel of the country to political

parties and other nations. Experts in tracing fake news argue that at the political level, it is very common to encounter fake news or disinformation regarding the governing party/ies. Usually, this type of information originates from or is disseminated by the opposition and its affiliated media. Disinformation and fake news are also prevalent in international relations between countries, especially during crisis periods. The recent invasion of Russia in Ukraine serves as an example of this type of misinformation, which has monopolized fact-checking initiatives over the past months. According to EDMO (2022), the 'Ukraine-related disinformation is the biggest disinformation phenomenon ever recorded by EDMO monthly briefs'.

> Starting from the simplest, somebody discrediting somebody else, so they can start spreading false rumors – which can be on a personal level, but then of course it can be intensified a lot on the political and/or on the state level. We are now seeing the situation with Ukraine, where fake news can come from both sides. (EU Fact-checking Observatory)

Experts in fact-checking, drawing on their experience debunking fake news, and professional journalists conducting investigative research on issues such as the pandemic, acknowledge that a portion of intentionally false information in Greece, fitting into the context of political opportunities, originates from far-right groups. These groups promote specific anti-immigration, anti-system, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, racist, and largely conspiratorial discourses. This type of disinformation does not have identifiable originators by name but is disseminated through specific blogs, web pages, and social media accounts that are interconnected. In other words, it represents a well-recognized form of information —particularly prevalent during the pandemic— that is reproduced from specific sources (web pages, blogs, social media accounts) by anonymous authors and originators, echoing the far-right discourse.

Furthermore, the anti-systemic environment, especially concerning the pandemic, encompasses an ideological mix of individ-

uals from both the far right and the far left, bound by a shared distrust in politics. Many of these sources have posted content not only questioning the implemented measures but also challenging the very nature of the pandemic. They have circulated articles asserting specific motives and conspiracies behind the spread of the pandemic and the mandatory vaccination.

> What I personally observed as a journalist during the pandemic, when I covered the first demonstrations against compulsory vaccination, which, in fact, were against vaccination in general, was that all the people shared a common sentiment: they didn't trust the state, not even 100%. There were too many far-right individuals present, specifically supporters of Kasidiaris. Additionally, there was a mix of anti-authoritarians, anarchists, and so on. So, it wasn't a case of ideological convergence. (Professionals 2)

> With the pandemic vaccines and chips, with immigration, the far-right organizations are winning the game, they are sprouting up on the internet. (Alternative media 2)

> There are clusters. Well, there are communicating vessels, i.e., pages that communicate with each other, which reproduce specific web pages, which reproduce… so it opens up like this. (Fact-checking initiative 1)

In this direction, of conspiratorial and radical attitudes promoted via fake news, our informants also stress the role of religious groups in Greece. The role of these groups in the spread of fake news is well-known, and their attitude during the pandemic was expected or, at least, did not come as a surprise to anyone. These groups promoted conspiratorial beliefs about the 'evil' behind the pandemic and how our faith in God can overcome everything. For that reason, many clergy members prohibited the use of masks inside churches and did not follow the rules regarding the pandemic. Although the official Church of Greece, through public announcements, called on the congregation to follow the rules for protection from the pandemic, there was a part of the clergy that reacted to the prohibition of church ser-

vices and were extremely against the vaccination program. They circulated conspiracy theories about the mark of the Beast/Antichrist that would be inserted into the human body via the vaccine (Issaris et al. 2023).

> Well, it was very impressive because when the Old Calendarists' church conducted services during the lockdowns, everyone inside didn't wear masks, without any precautions, right? On the other hand, the priest of the local church —because there is also a regular church— is forced to enter the discourse of the Old Calendar priest because he is afraid that he will take away his clientele. (Alternative media 1)

> Okay, regarding fake news in relation to the pandemic, we're not discussing the important role of the church. Or, if not necessarily the church as an institution, certainly too many people. I mean, I've been in too many groups when I've done corresponding reports on conspiracy theories and so on. We talk about too much orthodoxy in Greece in Facebook groups that are all about the vaccine being the devil, it's the mark. (Professionals 2)

Moving to the financial aspect, experts use the term 'clickbait' news to describe the new landscape in mass media, highlighting increased competition and the media owners' need for profit. They recognize that the competition among media outlets to publish or broadcast news first has led to the 'light version of disinformation, the mistakes' (Fact-checking initiative 2). Many media organizations, whether online or offline, and journalists have not followed verification procedures and a code of ethics due to the pressure of competition and the pursuit of financial gain. This has resulted in flashy but unverified news and disinformation.

> The media have settled with this situation. They will publish a corrective statement, and that's it. They will change a word or a phrase, thinking it is fine. However, they are not disturbed enough to implement a procedure for checking the information they publish. (Fact checking initiative 2)

They also stress the declining role of traditional media, connected with the salience of social media in news reports, and how this imbalance contributes to the rise of disinformation. This interplay between the transition to the digital age and the rise of disinformation can be summarized in three interesting aspects. The first is the reinforcement of competition in the media field. The explosion of the internet contributed to the creation of a plethora of information websites and the transformation of citizens into small reporters (Fact-checking initiative 2). In this environment, anyone —not just journalists and news media— can publish, curate, aggregate, reshape, repurpose, and define 'news'. The same mechanisms are also emphasized in the literature. Some authors indicate that the first-hand reporting of events as they occur and the instant assessment of the newsworthiness of events, combined with the web's massive use for ongoing discussions, construct an ambient news environment (Van Aelst et al. 2015).

The above leads to the second aspect of the relationship between disinformation and social media and suggests that online networking has the potential to blur the boundaries between professional journalism and citizen engagement in news production and sharing. The information doesn't follow the traditional path of old media, where a professional journalist, a member of a journalist's association, followed a specific trajectory in publishing credible news (Fact-checking initiative 2). Digital technologies and social media platforms empower users to create news content, although this content may lack credibility and accuracy, forcing traditional media to adapt user-generated news into their content. Networked journalism is gaining ground in Greece due to the extensive spread of social media and changes in media consumption habits, primarily during the economic crisis.

The third critical aspect of the relationship between disinformation and digital media is the blurring of boundaries in the use of sources that has led to the overabundance of information flows, coupled with the economic gain created by clickbaits. For many of our interviewees, the abundance of information is a critical parameter leading to misinformation. As one interviewee states:

> I believe that an excess of information can lead to misinformation. Suddenly, there is a vast amount of information that has not been evaluated by professionals. These experts can determine the accuracy of the information, identify its source, and assess its credibility. (Government representative)

The same sentiment is echoed by other interviewees who highlight the infiltration of fake news and propaganda into the realm of information production. The role of journalists is crucial as a counterbalance to misinformation and distrust. Gatekeeping and cross-checking, considered core journalistic responsibilities in an era of abundant online information are defended by our respondents based on fundamental journalistic norms. This includes non-partisanship and accountability, and vice versa. As Reuters proudly states, 'Our reputation for accuracy and freedom from bias rests on the credibility of our sourcing'. If journalism aims to defend the public interest, it should act as independently as possible, striving to avoid biases, maintaining impartiality, adhering to verified facts, utilizing credible and transparent verification methods, and refraining from taking sides on issues of public controversy, including politics.

Apart from the consequences related to digital journalism, another mechanism contributing to the spread of disinformation is mentioned, associated with the economic aspect of information. An informant states that a segment of society has forsaken traditional media because people didn't want to pay for them. The journalist explains that the debt crisis in Greece led consumers to stop buying newspapers due to a reduction in their salaries. The journalist posed the question as early as 2012, 'whether people don't want to pay because they don't trust the media, or people don't trust the media because they don't pay for the information'. However, the decrease in salaries meant that many citizens opted for free information through private TV and the internet instead of paying for news. As he concludes, 'I believe that in Greece, a whole generation grew up without paying for the information they read'. (Alternative media 1).

Effects of the pandemic. Trust in journalism during the pandemic

Generally speaking, the pandemic has contributed to rebuilding trust in the news. According to Newman et al. (2021), trust increased by an average of six percent during the Coronavirus pandemic, bringing trust levels back to those of 2018. However, the situation varies widely from country to country. In Greece, trust increased by four percentage points during the initial period of the pandemic but remained considerably lower than in many other countries in the European South and the Balkans (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Romania) (Newman et al. 2021: 82-83).

Our informants see this situation as an opportunity, albeit a missed one. They attribute responsibility to both journalists for not resisting to the spread of unscientific views in the media and to national scientific authorities for not taking action against practices like those followed by the media. The pandemic 'gave them a second chance to regain their lost credibility. This opportunity was lost. That's the problem; Greeks don't trust the media…' (Fact-checking initiative 2).

They precisely define what is meant by a 'missed opportunity': Although mainstream media acted as a conduit for information from international organizations such as the World Health Organization and domestic institutions like the National Public Health Organization to the public, many of these media outlets, as well as numerous local and fringe media, allocated sufficient space to the anti-scientific views of anti-vaccinators, often without refutation and counter-argumentation. In the pursuit of viewership, readership, and media popularity, credibility has been sacrificed:

> I'm from Thessaloniki, where local channels disseminate misinformation about the pandemic from morning till night. Similarly, radio stations in the region are actively spreading misleading information throughout the day. Has the National Broadcasting Council intervened? Has any journalists' association spoken out

> about these media practices? Have other journalists come forward to highlight this problem? (Fact-checking initiative 2)

The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis has been accompanied by an explosion of disinformation and fake news related to Covid-19, particularly on social media. The results of a survey conducted by the Journalism Lab of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki during the initial period of emergency measures demonstrated that the majority of respondents (62%) were influenced by fake news, while the corresponding percentage dropped to 50% in April 2020. A survey conducted during the second lockdown (Prorata, May 5th to 10th, 2021) shows interesting results regarding disinformation and fake news. According to the findings, 4 out of 10 respondents state that at least half of the internet-based information to which they are exposed on a daily basis is either false or misleading. They also estimate that the main sources of disinformation are private interests and large media groups.

Furthermore, the large majority of respondents believe that media in Greece aren't objective enough, and television broadcasters don't criticize enough the decisions taken by the Greek government. This is a result of the 'traditional government-oriented model' implemented in Greece, allowing for strong state interventions and governmental interference in the media sector (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2021).

All respondents agree that the pandemic was a crucial point for journalism. Media became monothematic, focusing almost solely on the pandemic. All respondents admit that trust in journalism was already very low in Greece, and a large part of the public was opposed to what is called 'systemic media and systemic discourse' (Alternative media 2). The distrust in mainstream media alienated the public and also made them skeptical and reserved about the information they were receiving. Therefore, the pandemic did not dramatically change the public's trust in the media but contributed to the existing distrust. 'I think that essentially the pandemic came and consolidated a rift that had been looming for the last one or two decades' (Alternative media 2).

Three factors related to information management, along with a more political factor related to the government's handling of information, contributed to the strengthening of distrust. Firstly, the news about the pandemic was often contradictory, with numerous conflicting opinions on measures implemented by governments worldwide. Secondly, news about the pandemic monopolized the newsfeed for months, intensifying a general sense of suspicion, skepticism, and ambiguity regarding the pandemic and vaccination. There was also a belief that the media couldn't be trusted because they were hiding something. Thirdly, many of the distrusting audience members complained about the way the media covered the pandemic, as only arguments about the effectiveness of vaccines and the spread of the virus were displayed without presenting any other perspectives.

Another issue related to political management concerns how the Greek government financially supported mainstream media during the pandemic. This matter polarized public discourse and sparked a political debate between the government and the opposition, with accusations regarding the criteria the government used to finance certain media while excluding others. As a result of this dispute, many people believed that the financial support for media not only had political criteria, as the opposition claimed, but also had a manipulative motivation. They thought that the government intended to control information regarding the pandemic and vaccination.

In addition, there are two more general aspects of citizens' perceptions regarding journalists that enhance distrust in the media. The first conception is the role played by journalists during critical periods of political life, especially during the debt crisis in Greece between 2010-2019. The watchdog role of journalism has been severely blunted during such critical periods when information and journalists are expected to play a crucial surveillance role. Journalists didn't manage to present facts, provide answers, or prevent issues. Generally speaking, media in Greece are characterized by the lack of a strong journalism culture, a disadvantage reinforced during the debt crisis. Our interviewees

state that during the debt crisis, journalists didn't manage to respond to the problems of the period.

> We understood that something wasn't working well due to the questions posed by our colleagues from foreign media. How could people trust journalists? We woke up in the morning, and the country had signed a memorandum. Isn't it the media's fault? Obviously, the media are to blame. Do you want me to remind you of earlier times? Do you remember the history of the stock market? I was doing political reporting at the time, and every evening we had a briefing with a top government official about the stock market. And then the stock market crashed. People were devastated. How can they believe us then? (Public broadcasting 2)

The second aspect of citizens' conception is related to the fact that they consider journalists as part of the political and economic elite. Citizens don't trust journalists working in the mainstream media because they believe that these journalists are neither independent from the interests of the elite nor impervious to political or economic influences. This lack of independence is strongly associated with what is called 'interplay' (in Greek: 'diaploki' διαπλοκή) between media owners and political power centers.

This perspective aligns well with the 'closed information systems' or 'elite discourse networks' perspectives (Davis 2007), which suggest that policy elites (politicians, officials, and journalists) form networks that are relatively shielded from the wider public (Davis 2011: 109-111). The corrupted role played by journalists in this interplay turns citizens to social media as a medium that is seen as more familiar, pure, and resistant to pressures. Because citizens don't trust mainstream media, they turn to alternative sources of information.

Therefore, mainstream media, composed of professional journalists, are perceived as more credible than those working for online news sites and blogs. The fact that distrust is expressed toward mainstream media orients citizens to trust digital media more, despite digital media being more vulnerable to misinformation.

Counter strategies

Tackling disinformation is a collective effort that involves various key actors. Governments can enact legislation against the spread of fake news. Media outlets can strengthen editorial standards to block and/or detect misinformation and disinformation. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in promoting transparency. Individuals and the public bear responsibility for the spread of fake news, and technology companies can contribute by creating fact-checking mechanisms to prevent the creation and diffusion of false information.

Epistemically responsible and trustworthy individuals, who are information seekers and socially responsible, may be justified in adopting 'news abstinence' and regulating their re-posting behavior if they believe they are acquiring non-genuine (fake) news that harms or exposes others to risk (Wright 2021; Goldberg 2021). The process of verifying the accuracy of news, either as an ante-hoc or post-hoc procedure, aims to identify errors, false information, untrue details, and misleading content to protect users and mitigate the diffusion of false beliefs. The spread of false information could undermine trust in mass media, science, and political institutions.

In our discussions with respondents, we aim to cover the full range of this topic. Processes of fact-checking, as well as the existence of organized documentation departments in mass media that promote the systematization of the 'hunt' for untrue stories, the debunking of fake news, and the verification of factual information, are rather marginal in the Greek mass media landscape:

> No, there is not [fact-checking]. If it is done, it is done on a case-by-case basis, occasionally, there is no such thing [as fact-checking]. (Government representative).

However, all informants believe that action should be taken to combat disinformation and debunk fake news because, in Greece, 'the problem is huge compared to the rest of Europe'

(Fact-checking initiative 1). Some interviewees think that the EU 'can play a role' (Professionals 2) in fighting fake news 'from the top [(the European level] to the bottom [the national level]'. Our informants, irrespective of their professional status, also favor self-regulatory mechanisms to combat fake news and disinformation. It is considered a virtue for skilled professionals to check their sources so that 'nothing should be published unless it has been checked a thousand times' (Professionals 1). One of the most experienced Greek journalists, who is also an informant, emphasizes that traditional media could reduce the effect of disinformation on trust. Traditional media, acting like editorial machines, can reinforce cross-checking and the credibility of news. By the term 'editorial machine', the interviewee describes the capacity of a media organization to employ well-trained and experienced editors, well-connected to both politicians and experts, with access to reputable and credible sources. As our interviewee underlines, editorial machines, to the extent they existed in the past, were heavily affected by the debt crisis. Since then, Greek media don't make use of specialized departments, which is a crucial factor leading to distrust. As an interviewee states, the use of highly specialized editors could be a solution to the distrust problem, but it is not always the solution to ensuring validity. Journalists from the public media, however, who have held leading positions, have a more centralized model in mind regarding how to ensure the validity of information and avoid disinformation:

Although some of our informants discuss the dimension of a top-down logic in terms of quality control of information, such a process can easily become manipulative and is, therefore, rejected. Those informants who play a role in the decision-making process and/or observe the issue from the perspective of public policy highlight the role of media companies that, despite the financial costs, invest in the field of information quality, documentation, and prevention of disinformation.

Fact-checkers, however, believe that cooperation with the state in certain areas of information exchange —without violat-

ing personal data— could contribute to the fight against disinformation. They explain that they were available to cooperate with state institutions, such as the Ministry of Health during the pandemic, to promote the message against the 'tsunami' of misinformation and the fake news about the pandemic. Despite wanting to help the Ministry of Health and public institutions pro bono, 'to help their work, not to help ours', their offer was ignored, even though the World Health Organization asked for the contribution of fact-checking organizations to immunize the public and public opinion against fake news and disinformation.

However, the increased speed of information nowadays and the competition between traditional media and social media make cross-checking news and sources of information a difficult task. This point is also recognized by fact-checking initiatives, which acknowledge the time-consuming component of fact-checking. According to their view, this acts as a deterrent to adopting a structured and organized fact-checking process.

Given that fact-checking and ensuring validity are typical responsibilities of an editor-in-chief, our informants who had taken on such a role mentioned the importance of intersubjective trust as a counterbalance to their more or less centralized style of media management. According to our informants, trust is an alternative means of dealing with uncertainty regarding the validity of information. Intersubjective trust (i.e., trust between the editor-in-chief and journalists in senior positions) limits uncertainty and, therefore, the risk of disinformation, which is more likely to occur in the context of a non-centralized management style in media institutions.

After a period of time, once trust had been established, an interviewee admitted that there was no longer any top-down control but rather a process of being informed by media executives and the most influential journalists whom they trusted in terms of what would be broadcast by a radio/TV channel.

It is important to point out that, in addition to the state and state institutions, fact-checkers were also distrusted by traditional/critical citizens, as well as by the journalists' union, which

showed almost complete ignorance of their tools and working methods. Some newspapers also viewed fact-checking initiatives with suspicion or even disdain, considering them as 'government whitewashing' or 'censorship' initiatives.

Opinions about the profiling and attitudes of citizens vulnerable to fake news are divided among our informants. The fact-checkers agree that there are closed communities, small in size, that share certain attitudes and beliefs: they are anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and anti-Semitic. They participate in international networks that became more pronounced during the pandemic in the context of the so-called anti-vaccination movement. However, interviewees from the alternative media landscape point out that communities you wouldn't expect are vulnerable to fake news stories. Lower trust in the media is linked to fake news:

> '[…] people who have distanced themselves from the media a long time ago' are prone to fake news. 'Their culture has been shaped by the private media of the past thirty years …' (Alternative media 1).

Our informants involved in fact-checking initiatives highlighted the difficulties they faced in preventing the dissemination of fake news to the public, which often goes unnoticed by both the public and the media. 'In simple words, it is not enough to refute untrue stories; it is also extremely important that this refutation is properly communicated to the public' (Lamprou et al. 2021: 435).

Conclusions

For our respondents, the factors contributing to disinformation are closely linked to the political motivations of political parties and special groups, including far-right factions, etc. Additionally, financial aspects play a significant role. Therefore, the foremost factor contributing to disinformation lies in the ascendancy of social media. The spread of information through social me-

dia, the reinforcement of competition in the media sphere, and the blurring boundaries between professional and citizen journalism are among the primary catalysts for the emergence and spread of disinformation.

The roots of these expressions are to be found in the attenuation of traditional media experiencing a profound crisis globally. A substantial number of citizens no longer trust traditional media, turning instead to the internet and social media, which are becoming the main sources of information. This trend is not unique to Greek media; traditional media worldwide are facing a decline as audiences increasingly shift online. Greece is disproportionately affected by this trend, even more so because of the financial crisis and the stringent economic policies implemented by the Greek government. The harshness of austerity measures and the ambiguity of the recovering effects of bailout programs on the Greek economy increased citizens' distrust towards the government and political institutions. The widespread perception among many Greek citizens that journalists were an integral part of the elite system raised concerns about their impartiality, further undermining media trust.

Amidst the financial crisis, trust in mass media and journalism sank dramatically, and despite the ongoing recovery during the pandemic, media trust in Greece remains below the European average. Similarly to Serbia but different from other European countries, in Greece, trust in traditional media is very low, while trust in social media is considerably higher. The coexistence of low trust in traditional media alongside significantly higher trust in social media in Greece presents an opportunity to delve into the broader relationship between overall trust and trust in social media.

Our informants express a sense of pessimism regarding the prospects of recovery of trust in media and journalism. They believe that distrust is deeply rooted in socio-political structures and the functioning of democracy. According to them, rebuilding trust can only occur gradually, necessitating policies related to improving education, particularly for the public and journa-

lists. This includes efforts to improve journalist remuneration and consolidate the independence of the media sector in relation to political and economic influences.

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