CO-CREATING A NEW PUBLIC DISCOURSE
The role of journalism in countering disinformation

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Acknowledgments

Abstract

This article presents a research project developed with the objective of identifying innovative ways in which the media and journalism sector can create a system for a leveled public discourse as a tool to counter disinformation. The methodological approach adopted was that of semi-structured interviews, conducted to twelve experts from five different fields that act as stakeholders in the disinformation issue, namely, academia, civil society, media and journalism, policy-makers and the social media industry. The interviews consisted of seven questions, divided into five thematic areas: trust, context and sources, journalism in times of crises, media and journalism business models and democracy. Interviews were analyzed from a qualitative, exploratory perspective. Results can be summarized in the following main points: 1. Research about disinformation sources and the actors behind it needs to be deepened. 2. The activity of sharing information about public events online, which is currently called citizen journalism, shouldn't be considered journalism and should be renamed citizen observations. These observations can be a good source of information for professional journalists, but the ethical way of treating it should be included in journalistic standards. 3. Increasing transparency in the entire process of creating and publishing news is key to making disinformation less relevant. 4. As media companies can be used to pursue a political or economic objective, it would be recommended to make their agendas clearly visible to consumers. Creating a world database that shows media companies' funding and showcasing relevant actors could be a firm step in that direction. 5. Quality journalism requires sufficient funding and good working conditions for journalists, especially those working amidst humanitarian crises. 6. Including moments of dialogue between journalists and citizens in journalistic routines would be a way of making media function as a place for public leveraged discourse. 7. Given the recent (and not so recent) changes in the media system, reflection upon journalism as a profession, its goals and boundaries, needs to take place.

We conclude that the solutions to counter disinformation should not be focused on eliminating disinformation but on strengthening people's abilities to control it, as well as having strong media systems, with spaces for social dialogue. As a consequence, disinformation would lose some of its influence in our societies.

Contents

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1   Introduction

The introduction of internet technology and the possibility to publish and access information on social media platforms has changed the way of narrating and perceiving our reality and decreased the reliance of people on journalists to get the news. This circumstance has led to declines in subscription rates, increased financial pressure through decreasing advertising revenue as well as a decline in public trust for professional journalistic outlets. In addition we have seen a rise in disinformation campaigns on social media platforms - the Brexit campaign 2016, the Russian interference in the U.S. 2016 election and misleading content about COVID-19 being among the most well known examples - which has further eroded the preconditions for a reliable information environment. This development has already shown alarming results such as an increase in societal polarization, influencing of individuals and skewing of public opinion which can ultimately endanger democratic societies. One way of countering disinformation is thus to provide a reliable and accurate information environment to the public.

The research question of this paper is thus aimed at identifying innovations in the media and journalism sector that focus on the creation of a system for a leveled public discourse as a tool to counter disinformation. The goal is to understand under which circumstances and with which innovative approaches the media system can regain trust from the public and serve both as a reliable source of true and unbiased information and of comment on political decisions without using the attention and coverage as a way of polarizing the public. Can the media help create spaces of dialogue and discussion for society that could set the basis for a new public discourse? To which extent can modern innovations prevent the problem of disinformation and restore trust in the media sector (Bridging Barriers, 2022)?

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 CRISIS IN THE MEDIA SECTOR AND THE DECLINE IN PUBLIC TRUST

The media system has come under scrutiny over the past years, partly caused by the spread of disinformation and the changes in the ways in which information is consumed by the people on the internet, in what has been called an 'informational or digital revolution' (Becerra, 2016) that started the 'Information Age' (Castells, 2010). In the early 2000s, information started to be shared and disseminated mostly via the internet, which meant that revenue for traditional media outlets sharply declined (Le Gall, 2021) and deepened an ongoing crisis in traditional media (radio, press, and television) and journalism.

Before information started to be consumed mostly online, advertising was the most important revenue factor for most media companies. As advertisers noticed the shift towards online content, with its advantageous potential to target precise audiences, advertising budgets were increasingly moved to the online sphere and traditional media outlets started to lose revenue sources. To cover for the losses, media companies started to add paywalls (mostly in the form of subscriptions) to the content they publish online (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015). This affected the consumption habits of many households that started to rely on free information from the internet, instead of spending income on high quality journalism, as shown by the declining sales of newspapers and demographic change of the audience of TV news (Grundy, 2022). Additionally, it has impacted journalism's work routines and has led to the pauperization of work conditions, the reduction of staff in news rooms and the increasing use of freelance journalists (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015).

Since the 1980s, there has also been a drift in the content production with new strategies to attract audiences. This included the softening of news and a tendency towards tabloidization, providing people with spectacularized information that acts more as entertainment (infotainment) (Otto, Glogger & Boukes, 2017) and a homogenization of cultural localism (Zelizer, 2011). These trends have been reinforced by the generalized application of algorithmic engines to news and media, as well as by the rise of social media and the competition to gain audiences it provoked (Radsch, 2022).

In addition to financial constraints, the traditional media system has come under pressure as the public's trust in the media has started to decline since 2007 (Edelman Trust Barometer 2022). In the most recent Edelman Trust Barometer Report, which was published in January 2022 media is

seen as a dividing force in society by 46% of the participants. Even though social media (37%) and owned media (43%) still rank lower in trust levels than traditional media (57%), the media industry is not perceived as an institution that can solve societal problems (Edelman Trust Barometer 2022). The Edelman Trust Barometer suggests that the decline in the public's trust in the media and government fuels a "cycle of distrust which threatens societal stability" (p.12).

As if these developments were not challenging enough, technological advances may enforce the already existing problem that the media industry is facing: with Artificial Intelligence programs such as the image generator Stable Diffusion or DALL-E 2 it will become possible to create almost any image from scratch and thus challenging the notion of what is real and what is not. As Mark Deuze explains, we are living a media life, where 'media are everywhere, and therefore nowhere' (Deuze, 2011, p. 139) and this creates opportunities but also constraints and threats, like disinformation.

2.2   DISINFORMATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF INFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Disinformation has been a relevant topic for both academia and international organizations for the last few years. Since the United States' 2016 election, fake news, conspiracy theories and alternative facts have become concepts widely discussed (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). However, disinformation comprises a wide range of phenomena, that includes from small nuances in the framing of news, to pure invention (Lazer et al., 2018; Wardle, 2018). Consequently, its effects can also vary, impacting with different strength in political systems and, most importantly, peoples' lives around the globe.

International organizations and academia both agree on the notion that information disorders can portray true or false information in deceiving ways, with or without the intention to cause harm (UNESCO, 2020). These differences are the basis of the classification between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation: the first is false information but spread without the will to harm (and can even be understood as true for the person spreading it); the second is false information (the person or organization communicating it knowing it) created to do harm; and the third is true information (or information based on reality) framed in a way that causes harm. Disinformation is, then, false information that is specifically conceived to harm people, organizations, or countries (Cooke, 2017; Report on the Expert Roundtable: International Law and Policy on Disinformation in the Context of Freedom of the Media, 2021) and it can include: putting information in fake contexts, imposter or manipulated content and

fabricated information (UNESCO, 2020). The European Commission has recently differentiated illegal and harmful media content, and according to these definitions, disinformation is always harmful content but not necessarily illegal (Fathaigh, Helberger & Appelman, 2021). In the range of the disinformation phenomena we can also find many information biases, such as polarization, impersonation, discrediting, conspiracy, trolling or click-bait and provocative emotional content[1] (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019).

Even though disinformation is not a new concept, the current media system and its characteristics help it thrive. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), the availability of cheap and sophisticated editing and publishing technologies, the once private information consumption made public through social media, the accelerated news cycle and availability of information in mobile devices and the real-time distribution of information between peers are some of the features that have allowed disinformation to expand and become a threat to societies. The ease and speed with which disinformation spreads in social media, which have acquired the status of the most influential source of uncensored information, remains an unsolved issue (Mthethwa et al., 2021).

Additionally, human cognition is distinguished by a dual-processing system (Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2012) that can give helpful immediate responses to stimuli but can also facilitate the wrong evaluation of information and, therefore, the acceptance of disinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2020; Sánchez Gómez & Paredes, 2020). As a consequence, in order to tackle disinformation, we need to consider these features, known as cognitive biases (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). The existing strategies that have been tested can be summarized in three categories: the long-term strategies, the short-term prior to exposure strategies, and the short-term post-exposure strategies. The long-term strategies consist of educating the public to understand how media and social media work and to give them tools to properly assess information, that is, media and information literacy or media education (UNESCO, 2013). There are numerous initiatives around the world that have applied media-specific curricula to students of diverse educational levels (Buckingham, 2006; Chen et al., 2018; Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Kachkaeva et al., 2020; Kinsky & Smith, 2013; Luan et al., 2020), families (Austin et al., 2015, 2018, 2020) and the general public (Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 2021), with promising

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[1] Polarization: amplifying differences or tensions between parts of society.
Impersonation: posing as a well-known person or organization, for instance, using a fake Twitter account.
Discreditation: attacking an adversary on a personal basis to delegitimize its point of view.
Conspiracy: creating or amplifying alternative explanations from events covered by traditional news media.
Trolling or click-bait: using strategies to lure a targeted group to react to a certain event or information.
Provocative emotional content: creating content that incites basic human emotions to get instant reactions

results. Nonetheless, this strategy needs to be applied jointly with other short-term strategies, specifically conceived to dismantle particular pieces of news.

One of these strategies is prebunking, that comprises giving a warning to readers or information consumers prior to the piece of information, alerting them about the possible fake or biased content and inviting them to be critical in their consumption (Cook et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2012, 2020). The other option, and it works best if combined with prebunking, is debunking or fact-checking, that entails the corroboration of the information and the inclusion of a message correcting it after the piece of news. This should include minimum reference to the false information, show the fallacies involved and always provide an alternative explanation (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). There are several studies that investigated the efficacy of this tool, with varying results (Chan et al., 2017; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Jang et al., 2019; Paynter et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2021).

While researchers have focused mainly on the characteristics and consequences of disinformation, there have been less initiatives that point to identifying its creators and promoters (Jurado et al., 2020; Sivasankari & Vadivu, 2022). One of the reasons behind this might be the difficulty to trace the origins of disinformation, as well as the obstacles in accessing information that comes from private companies, such as Google or Meta, or the privacy issues concerning its users. It is also significant that citizens -some consciously, some inadvertently- play an important role in the spreading of disinformation and can determine its speed and scope.

Despite the efforts to counter disinformation, it is still a global issue that governments and citizens need to be aware of and tackle with initiatives on different levels (governmental, private, individual, mediatic and educational, for instance) (Lazer et al., 2018; Report on the Expert Roundtable: International Law and Policy on Disinformation in the Context of Freedom of the Media, 2021). From afar, the danger posed by these phenomena seems shallow, but its reach is very deep and has had impact on elections (as mentioned above, for instance, US 2016, Brazil 2018), the growth of far-right groups, extreme nationalism, xenophobia and LGBTI+-phobic aggressions (Giusti & Piras, 2020; Guess et al., 2018). And the risks are higher in societies where freedom of expression and media are constrained by non-democratic regimes, because of the impossibility to counter disinformation transmitted by official sources. The challenge, then, is to find ways to diminish information disorders and adapt our tools to our evolving media environment.

As seen above, there are numerous initiatives that attack disinformation on its different facets, but the reach of the issue calls for integrated, multi-disciplinary and international solutions. One

necessary step to attain this is to assess how different stakeholders see the disinformation phenomena and its implications, and the innovations they propose to tackle them. The main goal of our project is to collect and analyze those views, to propose expert-based recommendations for a holistic, whole-of-society approach to counter disinformation.

3   Research Design and Strategy

Our research was developed using semi-structured interviews and an exploratory, qualitative analysis approach. Interviews were conducted on stakeholders identified as relevant to the topic from five different areas: 1) industry, 2) academia, 3) governments and policy makers, 4) media and journalism, and 5) civil society.

The selection of participants was done, firstly, through the creation of a non-exhaustive list of experts, gathered from literature and news, that was later on reviewed and enlarged with the guidance of an OSCE representative. Secondly, the potential participants were contacted and we applied the interview to the ones that were available to do the interview in the timeframe given, between September and November of 2022. In total, twelve professionals participated, in a total of ten different interviews. For a detailed description of the participants of the study see Appendix 1 - Selected Stakeholders.

The interview consisted of seven questions, distributed in five thematic blocks, to allow us to later compare results. The first block of questions focused on the topic of trust, and it tackled the decline in trust in the media and political systems around the world in two related questions: if journalists should be more open about how they reach the conclusions presented in their articles and whether this would be beneficial to restore trust in the media. The second block was about context and sources, containing two questions that deepened on the importance of contextualizing information properly and possible innovative reporting techniques to achieve it. The third block explored journalism in times of crises and it included one question about the option of updating journalistic standards to enhance quality in view of the boom of social media and the changes it encompasses in information consumption. The fourth block included two provocative questions about media's business models, the role of emotional content and sensationalism, and alternatives to create quality journalism outside of them. Finally, the fifth block included one question about democracy, regarding the contradictory points of tackling disinformation while guarding freedom of speech.

The interviews were created to be finished in 30 minutes and most of them were done in this timeframe. Others, though, carried out for as long as 1 hour. At the moment of the interviews, at least two of the researchers were present, to ensure the quality of the process and ease the

technical aspects, such as the recording. Participants received beforehand a document stating the uses of the data according to European standards and a brief explanation of what the research involved. They were asked to give their signed consent to be a part of the investigation.

Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed and the data was then processed using the textual analysis software Atlas.ti. Transcripts were coded using *ad hoc* code words to collect relevant information and allow comparisons between the interviews. The total number of codes used was 49. Additional comments summarizing and interpreting important aspects of the responses were also created. The second stage of the analysis involved re-reading the interviews and checking the coding and comments of another researcher. For each interview, one researcher was in charge of doing the first analysis and a second one acted as a controller, to make sure no relevant aspects were missed and to reduce bias as much as possible. The final step was to compare the results on two levels: stakeholder groups and individual questions, the results of which are presented in the following section.

4   Results

This section presents the results of our research, divided in two parts. The first subsection explains the trends observed in the interviews grouped by stakeholder type (academia, civil society, policy-makers, industry or journalism and media). The second subsection gathers the data collected for each question.

4.1 ANALYSIS BY STAKEHOLDERS

When grouping the codes by stakeholders and filtering those that have at least ten quotes, the responses to our questions reveal some differences. Even though there are codes that apply to all stakeholder groups, such as Media, Journalism, Social Media, People, Disinformation, Sources, Trust, Business, Innovation, which are the core concepts of our questions, some other codes appear exclusively linked to specific groups (See Table 1). Ethics, Fact-checking and Academia were only applicable in Academia stakeholders; Media Literacy, Public Discourse and Polarization were relevant exclusively for our Civil Society interviewees; Sharing was only pertinent in the case of the Industry participant; Quotes was just considered for Journalism and Media stakeholders; and lastly, self-regulation was only of relevance in the case of the interviewed policy-makers.

While this might not seem like a meaningful insight, taking into account the perspective and context of the shareholder groups, it shows their interests and how they interpret the questions in the light of their own professional backgrounds. The participants who work in research,

academia is a point of reference, as well as ethics (mainly because one of our experts studies Journalism Ethics) and fact-checking as a studied and proven method to counter disinformation. In the case of our interviewees from the civil society, they work on educating and providing tools to the citizens to work against polarization and creating new spaces for public debate on a daily basis. On the contrary, our participant from the social media industry has embedded the logic of social media platforms and, hence, considers sharing as a fundamental activity in the current state of the media system. Journalists and media experts talk about quoting and citing sources as it is part of their routines, whilst policy-makers emphasize the distinction between public tasks and what should be a part of self-regulatory actions.

Table 1

Codification by stakeholder group. Codes applied to more than ten quotes and used by only some stakeholders.

Codes	Academia	Civil Society	Industry	Journalism	Policy-makers
● Transparency			X	X	X
● News			X	X	X
● Credibility		X		X	X
● Ethics	X				
● Media competition		X	X	X	
● Bias		X	X		
● Opinions, comments and statements		X	X	X	
● Reliability		X		X	X
● Context			X	X	
● Freedom of Speech		X		X	
● Crises		X			X
● Democracy	X	X			
● Objectivity	X			X	
● Education	X			X	
● Emotion & Sensationalism	X	X		X	
● Content			X	X	X
● Accountability				X	X
● Media Literacy		X			
● Fact-checking	X				
● Friction			X	X	
● Public Discourse		X			
● Sharing			X		
● Polarization		X			
● Academia	X				
● Quote				X	
● Self-regulation					X

In terms of the business perspectives, we identified differences between the participants that are US based and those who are based in Europe (See Table 2). While the first group had better expectations for the success of media business models with private funding options and support

by individual consumers (for instance, through subscription models, M.B.), the second group considered that the solution to make quality journalism economically sustainable required different degrees of public involvement, contributing funds and support to media companies, particularly small ones (P.L.P., A.B., D.P., S.EK.).

Table 2

Stakeholders: names, initials and location.

Stakeholder	Location
Meredith Bloggsson (M.B.)	United States/Canada
Annabel Blodgett (A.B.)	Europe
Pier-Luigi Parcu, Sofia Verza and Konrad Simon-Bleyer (P.L.P.)	Europe
Stephen J. A. Ward (S.J.A.W.)	United States/Canada
Susanne El Khafif (S.EK.)	Europe
John Gable (J.G.)	United States/Canada
Joan Blades (J.B.)	United States/Canada
Marc Redondo Fusté (M.R.F.)	Europe
Barbara Weiland (B.W.)	Europe
Dietmar Pichler (D.P.)	Europe

4.2 ANALYSIS BY QUESTIONS

Question 1. Do you think that journalists should be more open about how they reach their conclusions about an event or a set of facts? Would this help readers come to their own conclusions about it and increase their trust in the media?

The first topic targeted how to reestablish and increase trust in professional journalists and the media. Even though the stakeholders fundamentally agreed on the idea that trust has to be strengthened, the ways of achieving it diverged between interviewees. The stakeholders from the social media industry Meredith Bloggsson (M.B.), policy makers Annabel Blodgett (A.B.) and Pier-Luigi Parcu, Sofia Verza and Konrad Simon-Bleyer (P.L.P.) and academia Stephen J. A. Ward (S.J.A.W.) mentioned that transparency of the editorial process could help limit the confusion of the audience about what kind of information they are consuming or being presented with. Other stakeholders, such as Susanne El Khafif (S.EK.) from the media stakeholder group, and John Gable (J.G.) and Joan Blades (J.B.) from Civil Society said that taking into account different perspectives and giving the audience the possibility to make sense of the information presented independently would be the basis for trust in journalism. Other stakeholders were skeptical about the question and raised issues such as self-censorship of journalists who work for a media outlet with a certain political agenda Marc Redondo Fusté (M.R.F.), or the pace of production of journalism that would make it difficult to reflect about the process of reporting while reporting

Barbara Weiland (B.W.). Dietmar Pichler (D.P.), representative of the stakeholder group civil society, added that journalists "are already too open to non-fact based [information/reporting]– you cannot call them opinions but statements".

Regarding the codification results, the most used codes for the first question were "Trust", "Media", "Journalism", "People", "Transparency", "Bias", "Credibility", "Ethics", "Opinions, comments and statements", "Difficulties" and "Objectivity". This shows that trust, according to our stakeholders, is very related to the transparency of the media and journalists (but also the readers) and their biases. It is also remarkable the emphasis on the distinction between what is information and what is just opinions or statements from a person's perspective, as seen in the comment by D.P. mentioned earlier. Finally, there was also an interesting discussion about objectivity, as shown in this comment by our social media industry interviewee M.B.: "I think traditionally and historically journalists have been taught to pretend that they're third party observers who are not involved at all in anything and I think it can actually be useful in terms of trust to discard that illusion and identify like what type of experience or what kind of perspective they are bringing to a story".

Question 2. Do you know any innovative reporting techniques that could contextualize information better?

Because disinformation can be created through a lack of context or missing context, stakeholders were asked whether they know of any innovative reporting technique that can contextualize information better. A.B. mentioned this is a subject that "is all the hype right now: how to contextualize", but at the same time, "it won't be a matter of policy for quite some time still to come", because the main focus is the contextualization of fake news, whereas the context for reliable information remains as a self-regulation issue for journalists and media. Other aspects were mentioned that support contextualisation. According to stakeholders from Academia and Civil Society, fact checking is an important part of contextualisation, even though this technically can't be defined as an innovation. Digital solutions such as the development of digital provenance tools were mentioned by A.B. and M.B. but both confirmed that the tools were still under development and are considered cutting edge research. S.EK. mentioned that the most important context is the education of the recipient. The more information the audience has about a certain topic, the easier it is for journalists to report and to embed their analysis into the established context. P.L.P. added that explainer stories are currently being used more frequently, which can be considered an additional tool to create more context of the reporting process.

The codes most used in the second question were "Context", "Innovation", "Social Media", "Sources", "Fact-checking", "Disinformation", "Difficulties" and "Media". The codes reflect the

difficulties in defining new techniques to provide context and how it could be more important, according to the interviewees, to focus on other things that surround disinformation and could reinforce or correct a lack of context, like fact-checking. Social media arises here as the primary target for contextualization, while traditional media are in the background, as explained by P.L.P.:

> "And media is a sort of weak barrier against this, not because they are less reliable than social media, they are much more reliable in general because they have a certain reputation at stake, some control instruments in their working. The problem is that they are less and less influential and less and less widespread in respect to the billions of people that use social media".

Question 3. Do you think that journalists should increasingly cite the sources of their analysis in their articles?

The majority of the participants agreed that journalists should increasingly cite sources of their work in their articles. A.B. noted that academic research often provides the only real evidence and it would give the audience a chance to double check the validity of the claims and positions of the journalist. Another important point was mentioned by D.P. who said that naming the sources gives the reader additional information about the category of information they are consuming. B.W. though proposed a different perspective and mentioned that journalists already work as knowledge intermediaries which means that they should explain where the information comes from but relieving the task of checking the sources from the audiences. For journalist M.R.F. citing sources and quoting whenever possible "is your life insurance" and J.B. says citing sources "increases your reputation for reliability".

The codes most conspicuous for question 3 were "Sources", "Objectivity", "Journalists", "Credibility", "Transparency" and "Difficulties". Under "Difficulties", there were mentions by our interviewee from the industry and A.B. of how citation is important but should only be done when it doesn't endanger the sources, for instance, when it's a whistleblower or someone that is under the protection of sources' confidentiality.

Question 4. Do you believe journalistic standards should be updated or reinforced to enhance quality journalism?

The question about whether journalistic standards should be updated to adapt to the changing nature of information conveyance, especially during times of crisis, delivered the most diverse perspectives. While five people (S.EK., J.G., A.B., P.L.P., M.B.) from all stakeholder groups said that updating journalistic standards wasn't necessary, the other five participants (M.R.F., D.P., J.B., S.A.J.W., B.W.) of the study confirmed that updating the journalistic standards would be a good approach. A.B. and M.R.F. among others pointed to the fact that journalistic standards are integrated in the journalistic process on a voluntary basis. However there was an agreement

among participants that citizen journalistic content should be increasingly included into journalistic practices. S.EK. mentioned that citizen generated content should be called citizen observation instead of citizen journalism because it has always been used by journalists as first hand sources, only that now it appears without the journalistic filter and without a wider context. Regarding journalistic standards, S.A.J.W. related them also with human rights and considered that journalists "are first and foremost citizens of the world, and we write for the welfare of humanity", so at the higher level, the standards to follow are those of human rights. In contrast, M.RF. talked about journalism in times of crises as "one more weapon" that can alter (and potentially worsen) the crisis.

"Journalists" and "Journalistic Standards" "Quality Journalism", "Social Media", "Crises" and "Sources" were the main codes applied for the fourth question. In the case of crises, the events most referenced were the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. The expansion of social media was one of the reasons mentioned that favor an update of journalistic standards:

> "There should not be (any) kind of competition between journalists, bloggers or social
> media activists, because what we need is, we need a kind of environment where we use
> journalism as a – so its uses, we can use journalism as a source, as a valid source. And then
> we can add it into the discourse on social media" (D.P.).

Question 5. Do you think other media companies should follow the example of Fox News to use emotionally engaging content and headlines to regain audience or are there alternatives to make journalism economically sustainable without using these strategies?

The participants all agreed that the strategy to use emotionally engaging content was not a recommended approach for media outlets to attract or regain an audience. M.R.F. pointed out that media companies are facing a dilemma between attracting the audience through an interesting and relevant headline or story in order to be financially successful. He confirmed that using emotional language and sensationalism is the easiest, or sometimes even the only way to do that:

> "All the attempts that have been made to make a serious media outlet, which tells the truth,
> both in print and on television, have not worked and they have to close down, because, what
> do you live on? Advertising. And if there are no visits, there are no companies" (M.R.F.).

The discussion that followed the provocative question about how media companies could improve their financial situation delivered a diverse set of answers. S.J.A.W and P.L.P. both highlighted the fact that journalism can be considered a public good and not merely a business

opportunity, which calls for public funds and public broadcasting reinforcement. S.EK. and A.B. placed their emphasis on the product of media companies, claiming that the better the product gets and the more financing sources media outlets will be able to find, the more successful the company will be.

The codes most used for the fifth question were "Media", "Business", "Emotion & Sensationalism", "Funding", "Media Competition" and "Journalism", from which emotion and sensationalism is particularly meaningful as it is the first question where it is an ubiquitous concept. As J.G. mentioned: "Even traditional media is already adopting (a) more sensationalist type of language".

Question 6. Do you think it is possible to have quality journalism outside of traditional media' business models?

Most stakeholders agreed that it is possible to create quality journalism outside of traditional media and that is already available to the public today. Participants like S.EK., J.G. and A.B. add that the production of quality journalistic content independent from traditional media outlets is indeed possible but only to the extent where editorial boards are not necessary. Due to extensive research and editing processes it is not possible to cover some stories by journalists who work outside of the traditional media context. Our social media industry participant, on the contrary, expressed that:

> "in the US some big journalists have left big organizations and moved to things like substack or their own blog where they can sort of monetize, they can write a weekly report and monetize that directly, so that's a subscription model, that is traditional, but what's new about it you don't have to be necessarily part of the big organizations, legacy organizations" (M.B).

M.R.F. was the only participant who didn't think it is possible to have quality journalism outside traditional media business models. He emphasized the fact that consumers weren't willing to pay for news and, as a consequence, it would be increasingly difficult for journalists who work outside of the traditional media companies to finance their endeavors. This is noteworthy, given that he is the only interviewee who works in television and has experience in big chains of traditional media.

The most used codes for this question were "Media", "Business", "Journalism" and "Funding", though, as we saw earlier, the responses around these topics were very diverse.

Question 7. What do you see as possible ways to control disinformation on social media without restricting freedom of expression?

The last question tackled a central aspect of the research objective. Almost all participants were hesitant in offering a solution because of the difficulty of limiting the freedom of speech on social media. J.G. mentioned that too much regulation and limitation by one central power could be as equally harmful as the current situation of disinformation. D.P. proposed to create a balance between increased media literacy and strengthening the consumers. P.L.P. and A.B. both suggested that public interest should be prioritized over economic interests but according to A.B. as long as business interests keep prevailing, a regulation of disinformation won't happen. B.W. pointed out that the source of disinformation is still largely unknown and that more knowledge on this topic would be needed in order to develop better actions. S.EK. points out the difficulties to regulate around disinformation:

> "So you may also be familiar with the disinformation surrounding the question of how to prevent calls for violence, racism, so-called child pornography, i.e. abuse of children on the Internet. That's almost impossible, and it has a lot to do with legal foundations that go in the direction of data protection, which ultimately also means the right to freedom of movement, which goes a little bit into each other, and it also has to do with technical dimensions, such as the fact that you can never prevent the server from being located in country xy and you have no way of controlling what goes out via it".

The central codes that characterize this last question were "Social Media", "People", "Disinformation", "Difficulties", "Democracy", "Freedom of Speech", "Ethics", "Innovation", "Journalism" and "Content". Content was mostly mentioned as one of the aspects most difficult to control without harming freedom of expression: "I'm afraid that those times when we would have this almost mathematical, very nuanced approach to what can and cannot be shared, we are way past that" (A.B.).

5 Conclusion

The main findings of the analysis of the interviews can be summarized in the following points.

First, we noticed that there is a lot of uncertainty about how the media sector should change and respond to the threat of disinformation. Additionally, stakeholders in different parts of the world might apply different solutions, adapted to their contexts (as we noticed in the different approaches suggested by our American and European participants). In relation to this, while there is abundant research about disinformation, there is a lack of investigation about its sources

and the actors behind it. Doing an effort in that sense is necessary to understand disinformation and find effective ways to counter it and this will require the cooperation between researchers and media and social media companies. Second, the use of social media platforms highlights the desire of people to share their reality and to co-create the narrative of it. But the resulting volume of information available blurred the lines between reliable and unreliable sources. Therefore, the term citizen journalism, which is currently used to describe the activity of users to share relevant public information online, shouldn't be considered journalism and should be renamed citizen observations instead. This is because citizen observations provide snapshots of an event, without the context and crossing of sources journalists add. Consequently, professional journalists are necessary to process the raw information, but journalistic standards need to be updated to include ethical ways of dealing with this particular type of sources. Third, encouraging an increase in transparency about people and journalists' backgrounds and sources, as well as transparency of the editorial process and higher accountability for news creation (information gathering, fact-checking, information verification, decomposing information into essence, explanation and classification) would limit the uncertainty about trustworthiness of sources. Transparency should also be increased about the economic or political agendas of media outlets. This applies especially to social media but also to traditional media. Fourth, work conditions of professional journalism should amount to the importance of its role in our society. The current situation impedes the development of quality journalism and leaves professionals unprotected in times of crisis. Fifth, given the previous point as precondition, including spaces of dialogue between journalists and citizens in journalistic routines, for instance, Q&A sessions where a journalist can respond to questions posed by citizens, would be a way of making the media function as a place for public leveraged discourse and it would be especially useful in situations of increased vulnerability to disinformation (election campaigns, diseases, outbreaks of conflict). Finally, at a general level, in order to tackle disinformation and the challenges related to it, journalism needs to be redefined and journalism goals and boundaries should be re-thought.

According to the anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist R. Dunbar, language evolved partly as a "mechanism for bonding large social groups, (...) because it allows us to exchange information about the state of our social networks" (Dunbar, 2004, p. 100). As society is becoming more and more dispersed and our social networks larger, it is crucial to strengthen people's ability to control disinformation by having a strong media system with spaces for public dialogue, which would reinstate social contracts. As a consequence, we believe, disinformation would lose some of its influence in our societies. Following Dunbar's argumentation, we

advocate for a contemporary journalism that acts as a communication bridge between people with the aim to ensure social cooperation towards a common goal.

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Appendix

1. Selected Stakeholders

Academia

We interviewed two researchers for the stakeholder group *academia*.

Stephen J. A. Ward, professor emeritus of Journalism Ethics of the University of British Columbia (UBC) was the founding director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin, former director of the George S. Turnbull Center in the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and co-founder of the UBC School of Journalism. Stephen J. A. Ward is an internationally recognized media ethicist, historian of ideas, and award-winning author and editor of ten books on ethics and media ethics. His research focused on topics such as the ethics of global, digital media, the rise of extreme media, and the impact of these trends on democracy. Having worked formerly as a war reporter combined with his academic expertise on responsible journalism made him a great interview candidate for our research.

Barbara Weiland*[2] is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication at a University with a research focus on deep fakes, disinformation, visual and political communication. She studies the effects of visual disinformation and deep fakes in the news on society and political events. Her research focus and academic expertise of political communication and visual disinformation offered interesting perspectives on disinformation and its effects on society.

Media

We interviewed two journalists for the stakeholder group *media*.

Marc Redondo Fusté is a meteorologist who is currently working for the morning program Aruser@s on the Spanish television channel La Sexta and has a PhD in information and communication studies at the University of Barcelona. He specializes in science communication and climate change. Marc Redondo Fusté has worked on various radio and television media outlets in Spain. Due to his experience as a journalist and his academic perspective he was able to provide great insights into the daily challenges of journalists and the role of journalism for democratic societies.

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2 *Name changed on request of the participant.

Susanne El Khafif is a journalist who is currently working as a reporter for the radio channel Deutschlandfunk in Cologne, Germany. She has more than 25 years of experience as a journalist having worked for the newspaper Rheinische Post, the radio stations Deutsche Welle, WDR and now ultimately Deutschlandfunk. She has lived outside of Germany, working as an author and reporter. During this time she focused on complex stories such as political and social analysis in the countries she was based in. Susanne El Khafif's participation in the interview was immensely valuable as we benefited enormously from her perspective and experience working as a journalist.

Policy Makers

We interviewed four people for the stakeholder group *policy makers*.

Pier-Luigi Parcu, Sofia Verza and Konrad Simon-Bleyer work for the Center for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) of the European University Institute, based in Florence, Italy. It is a research and training center co-financed by the European Commission that aims to develop innovative and relevant lines of research on media freedom and pluralism in Europe and beyond, and to provide knowledge support to policy processes. Pier Luigi Parcu is the director of the Centre and a professor at the European University Institute with a research focus on democratic and economic challenges of the media associated with digital platforms.

Konrad Bleyer-Simon is a Research Associate at the CMPF with a research focus on innovative ways to fund the media. He has a Masters degree in International Relations from Columbia University and has worked for NGO's and news media companies in Berlin, Brussels, Bushkek and Budapest.

Sofia Verza is a Research Associate at the CMPF with a research focus on the relationship between the media and policy making, national security and freedom of expression. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Perugia and has worked for many different organizations that are focusing on the topic of freedom of expression.

Annabel Blodgett*[3] is a representative member of the Secretary of the Committee of Increasing Resilience of the Media at the Information Society Department of the Council of Europe. She is working on issues such as strengthening the media, the information society and enabling an environment for freedom of expression. Her experience in standard setting within the area of

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3 *Name changed on request of the participant.

freedom of expression and the media ecosystem, as well as her focus on financial sustainability of journalism was a great addition to our research.

Civil Society

We interviewed three representatives from the stakeholder group *civil society*.

Dietmar Pichler is the founder of the Zentrum für digitale Medienkompetenz (Centre for Digital Media Competence) in Vienna, Austria. The Centre is working towards increasing and strengthening digital media competence of individuals by teaching a conscious and competent way to use social media both as a communicator and as a recipient. Their approach towards teaching users the ability to differentiate between true information, fake news and disinformation campaigns contributes to an open and evidence-based information society, which qualified Dietmar Pichler as an important participant of the research project.

Joan Blades is a co-founder of the non-profit organization Living Room Conversations which focuses on bridging divides through communication. She has years of experience in creating spaces for respectful civil discourse and overcoming political polarization. Due to her insights and experiences she provided helpful comments and thoughts to our study.

John Gable is the CEO and Co-founder of AllSides, which is a media solutions company that strengthens democratic society with balanced news, media bias ratings, diverse perspectives, and real conversation. AllSides displays the top news stories of the day from the political Left, the Centre and the Right in order to offer the reader the full picture and perspectives on one event. John Gable has a background in technology products, marketing, press, community collaboration and high tech management. His participation supported our quest to find an innovative way on how the media can counter disinformation.

Social Media Industry

We interviewed only one representative from the Social Media Industry. Interestingly we were met with notable skepticism from people who are working for the Social Media Industry at the time we were recruiting participants for our research. In late October, November when we were reaching out to participants and conducting the interviews, two major events at Twitter and

Facebook shook the Social Media industry. Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter[4] and the consequent layoff of half of the companies staff as well as Facebook announcing that they would let go of 11.000 employees worldwide[5].

Meredith Bloggsson*[6] is a senior data scientist at Twitter focusing on fighting platform manipulation and a teacher at the School of Information at a University in the United States. She specializes in platform manipulation and machine learning. She has worked for an organization that specializes in the issue of disinformation, where she was responsible for data science development. In addition, she worked on projects about modern artificial intelligence combined with thorough analyses of journalistic practice to best serve and inform advertisers, the ad tech industry, search and social media companies, and researchers. We contacted Meredith Bloggsson because of her experience in the media industry and fighting manipulation and disinformation online.

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4 https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-63402338

5 https://www.forbes.com/sites/roberthart/2022/11/09/meta-confirms-layoffs-11000-jobs-cut-at-facebooks-parent-company/

6 * Name changed on request of the participant.

CO-CREATING A NEW PUBLIC DISCOURSE
The role of journalism in countering disinformation

Policy Recommendations

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Media and journalism facing disinformation

Journalism has been facing a decline in public trust, which is part of a broader skepticism about the reliability of institutions as a whole. Researchers have identified the main problems in the information spaces and in media ecologies and the threats it poses to democratic societies. Challenges of deterioration of working conditions for journalists, reduction of funding of quality journalism, and the difficulties journalists face in competing with social media platforms cause a number of negative consequences. This has led to a deterioration in professional ethics and a race to produce vividly emotional content (clickbait) that gains traction and goes viral.

Disinformation has been a relevant topic for both academia and international organizations for the last few years. Since the United States' 2016 election, fake news, conspiracy theories and alternative facts have become widely discussed concepts. However, disinformation comprises a wide variety of phenomena that range from small nuances in the framing of news, to pure invention. Consequently, its effects can also vary, impacting with different strength in political systems and, most importantly, peoples' lives around the globe.

International organizations and academia both agree on the notion that information disorders can portray true or false information in deceiving ways, with or without the intention to cause harm.

Our research

The research question of the research paper is thus aimed at identifying, through qualitative research methods, innovations in the media and journalism sector that focus on the creation of a system for a leveled public discourse as a tool to counter disinformation. The goal is to understand under which circumstances and with which innovative approaches the media system can regain trust from the public and serve both as a reliable source of truthful and unbiased information that people turn to when in doubt and comment on political decisions without using the attention and coverage as a way of polarizing the public. The research project was developed with the objective of identifying innovative ways in which the media and journalism sector can create a system for a leveled public discourse as a tool to counter disinformation.

The methodological approach adopted was that of semi-structured interviews, conducted among twelve experts from five different fields that act as stakeholders in the disinformation issue, namely, academia, civil society, media and journalism, policy-makers and the social media industry. The interviews consisted of seven questions, divided into five thematic areas: trust, context and sources, journalism in times of crises, media and journalism business models and democracy.

Results can be summarized in the following main points: 1. Research about disinformation sources and the actors behind it needs to be deepened. 2. The activity of sharing information about public events online, which is currently called citizen journalism, shouldn't be considered journalism and should be renamed citizen observations. These observations can be a good source of information for professional journalists, but the ethical way of treating it is or should be included in journalistic standards. 3. Increasing transparency in the entire process of creating and publishing news is key to making disinformation less relevant. 4. As media companies can be used to pursue a political or economic objective, it would be recommended to make their agendas clearly visible to consumers. Creating a world database that shows media companies' funding and showcasing relevant actors could be a firm step in that direction. 5. Quality journalism requires sufficient funding and good working conditions for journalists, especially those working amidst humanitarian crises. 6. Including moments of dialogue between journalists and citizens in journalistic routines would be a way of making media function as a place for public leveraged discourse. 7. Given the recent (and not so recent) changes in the media system, reflection upon journalism as a profession, its goals and boundaries, needs to take place in an open debate among the stakeholder groups involved in this research.

In conclusion, through the experts' opinions, we confirmed the interrelation between journalistic standards, journalism funding and the decline of trust in media and democratic institutions. We concluded, also, that the problems of a long-term decline in public trust in the media and spreading of disinformation cannot be solved by limiting the distribution of media content.

Policy recommendations

From the conclusions of our research, we present a series of recommendations for the different stakeholder groups that were involved in this research. The policy recommendations are presented for the different stakeholder groups that are mainly targeted by the policy recommendations. The policy recommendations apply to all stakeholder groups and should be thought of as general proposals that can be realized in a collaborative manner and are summarized as followed:

Journalists and the media industry:

- Promote the transparency of the editorial process and higher accountability for news creation: information gathering, fact-checking, information verification, decomposing information into essence, explanation and classification.

- Encourage and support the cross-borders exchange of expertise and practices about positive results of implementation of alternative media financing and identifying new sustainable business models. Quality journalism requires sufficient funding and good working conditions for journalists, especially those working amidst humanitarian crises.

- Include spaces of dialogue between journalists and citizens in journalistic routines, for instance, Q&A sessions where journalists respond to questions posed by citizens, would be a way of making the media function as a place for public leveraged discourse. This could be especially helpful in situations that are prone to disinformation campaigns such as outbreak of diseases, national or regional elections and conflict situations.

Academia and Civil Society:

- Encourage and fund research about disinformation sources and the actors behind, facilitating the cooperation between communications and social media companies and researchers.

- Foster the transparency of the business and political agendas of media and social media companies. Creating a world database of media companies' funding could be a firm step in that direction.

- Endorse the reflection upon journalism as a profession, its goals and boundaries, to adapt journalism to the current state of the global media system.

Social Media industry

- Advocate for the discussion between social media platforms and other stakeholders about possible ways of making citizen observations distinguishable from media reports on social media.