

Article

Disinformation at a Local Level: An Emerging Discussion

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Abstract: Fake news and disinformation are not a new phenomenon. However, in recent years, they have acquired great prominence on the public agenda, conditioning electoral results and generating episodes of political destabilization. Academic interest runs in parallel with the consideration of disinformation as a growing priority for governments and international organizations, due to its geostrategic relevance and its importance for national sovereignty and security. The interference of countries such as Russia or China in other nations' electoral processes, using new tools and methods to manipulate public opinion and proliferate cyberattacks have led to the creation of agencies or regulations aimed at curbing disinformation in some states. The UN, the EU and other countries' governments have tried to develop strategies to respond to this growing threat. The pandemic has accelerated the decline of local media, which leaves communities in a state of serious vulnerability. Reliable resources and sources around local information are scarce assets, information is increasingly consumed through social media, and in them disinformation easily proliferates. With this proposal, we intend to start a discussion around disinformation at a local level, something that has been absent in disinformation studies.

Keywords: disinformation; fake news; local media; local journalism; local communities



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1. Introduction

Fake news and misinformation are not a new phenomenon; they have accompanied humanity since its origins [1–3]. However, in recent years, they have become increasingly prominent on the public agenda, conditioning electoral results and generating episodes of political destabilization. This is illustrated by events such as the victory of Brexit in the United Kingdom and the arrival of Donald Trump at the White House in 2016, both driven by targeted and biased propaganda campaigns using groundbreaking Big Data technologies. The political and social phenomena of that year led to increased academic interest around disinformation [4–8], to the point that the number of articles collected in the Web of Science and in Scopus centered on this topic skyrocketed [9].

Academic interest runs parallel to the consideration of disinformation as a growing priority for governments and international organizations, due to its geostrategic relevance and its importance for national sovereignty and security. Electoral interference at the international level by countries such as Russia or China, using new tools and methods of manipulation of public opinion, has led some states to create agencies and regulations aimed at curbing misinformation. The United Nations, the European Union and the governments of countries such as France and Spain have attempted to develop strategies to respond to this growing threat.

In this sense, authors such as Milosevich-Juaristi [10] point out that for the Russian government, disinformation is an asymmetric and indirect military method in its war against Europe and the United States. In this sense, pre-revolutionary Russia was the place where the concept was conceived, and in the Cold War era these practices reached their peak.

Furthermore, Russia continues to be, according to this author, the country that deploys the most accurate and sophisticated methods and tools, which today include the use of social media platforms and the exploitation of the vulnerable aspects of Western democracies, such as their successive economic and political crises. Moreover, social, postmodern relativism is noteworthy, i.e., that there is no truth to facts, but only different types of narration, which can help discredit the system of liberal democracy, thanks, precisely, to the acceptance of doubt and a moral conscience.

The harms of disinformation have been especially evident after the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Despite governmental efforts to deploy an adequate communication policy in the context of a serious health crisis, an informational epidemic was occurring in parallel, with the proliferation of all kinds of erroneous news and falsehoods. This led the United Nations to launch a campaign to confront the problem [11]. At the beginning of the pandemic, the official Chinese media and the media financed by the Russian Government were used extensively to spread the narratives that were most beneficial to China about the origin of the virus. Months later, Russia began to deploy previously used disinformation tactics, calling into question the credibility of the democratic institutions in the European Union and the United States in solving the crisis, in order to generate instability and weaken Western democracies [12].

On the other hand, according to Pérez-Curiel and Velasco [13], the pandemic favored uncertainty and informational chaos, and it became a breeding ground for fallacies and political propaganda. In this environment, social networks reproduced the official discourse of confusion and even lies, favoring a climate of misinformation and instability. Furthermore, political hoaxes and disinformation became available to all audiences on the Internet. In these digital spaces, users behave as information prosumers who simultaneously share and increase the impact of disinformation. Since the beginning of the pandemic, these contents appear in the hundreds of thousands. In June 2021 alone, according to the European Commission, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter removed more than 100,000 pieces of misinformative content related to the virus [14].

The European Commission (EC) calls disinformation “an ecosystem of production, propagation and consumption of false, inaccurate or misleading information for profit or seeking to cause public harm” [15] (p.10). Some authors identify it as “the intentional dissemination of non-rigorous information that seeks to undermine public trust, distort the facts, transmit a certain way of perceiving reality and exploit vulnerabilities with the aim of destabilizing” [16]. Therefore, disinformation can be varied, and does not necessarily have to be entirely false. The determining factor is the intention with which it is generated and disseminated.

Thus, while authentic news is published with a legitimate intention of informing citizens for public interest, false news prioritizes the gratification it provides, highlighting the emotional component [17]. In addition, according to Correia and Amaral [17], in the case of false news there is a process of co-authorship with the public since its success depends on the perception of false information as real. It also implies the participation of consumers in its dissemination, which derives from a high level of agreement and shared beliefs, which are reinforced and amplified by the false news. The power of fake news -according to these authors also lies in its ability to penetrate social spheres, in an information exchange that strengthens social ties and relationships. Thus, social media platforms multiply this “rewarding” way of sharing news that is not verified, and that reinforces the set of previous beliefs that exist within a social group.

In a post-truth context, the construction of false narratives is based on the search for a break with the system, which is called into question, presenting a series of “alternative facts”. This is done with the intention of providing rationality and meaning by presenting them as information [17,18].

This phenomenon is not new, but technology has expanded its ability to deceive and manipulate public opinion [19]. In this context, the use of bots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) has exponentially increased the impact and effects of these campaigns. In fact, some

governments have generated specialized teams dedicated to computational propaganda, which is understood as a set of practices carried out by computer programs to persuade, by emphasizing the benefits of specific ideas, people or initiatives [20]. These teams generate comments on social media to reinforce their positions or divert attention to an issue. This is achieved by using sponsored accounts, websites and applications for the dissemination of certain messages, and also by creating content that supports their strategy and even use fake accounts to manipulate the conversation on social media [21].

On the other hand, AI can also “improve human processes and tasks in the online environment, such as detection of disinformation, bots, altered text and images, and manipulated audio and video material” [22] (p. 79). This idea is corroborated by other studies [23,24].

2. Theoretical Review and Discussion

2.1. Fighting Disinformation

The effects of disinformation on social, economic, and political stability have led to the implementation of specific policies from the institutions to combat it. The first attempts by the European Union (EU) in this regard date back to 2015. In this year, the European Council urged the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to prepare an action plan in collaboration with the member states and institutions of the Union, mainly aimed at countering disinformation campaigns from Russia.

As a result, a strategic communications division (StratCom) was launched to design and disseminate positive messages in the countries of the Eastern zone first, and later in the South and the Balkans. Two years later, in 2017, the European Commission created a high-level expert group to advise on the fight against disinformation, whose work concluded in April 2018 with the document “Communication from the Commission on the fight against disinformation online: a European approach” which outlined the most important global principles and objectives to raise public awareness about disinformation, as well as the specific measures that the Commission planned to implement in this regard.

In December of that year, the European Union presented an Action Plan against Disinformation, at the request of the European Council itself. Said plan contained a dozen concrete awareness-raising actions in the private sphere. These included the supervision of platforms, training and literacy activities, the creation of an observatory and the development of a strategic communications line based on the work conducted in this regard between 2019 and 2021. However, the European Court of Auditors considers that the plan has not been updated, and that it has not met the planned objectives [25], despite being relevant and having made important progress. The plan, in fact, did not serve to stop the wave of erroneous and false information that appeared after the emergence of the COVID-related health emergency in the first quarter of 2020. As a result of the vast amounts of false information, the World Organization of Health (WHO) published a series of recommendations to combat the infodemic.

The European Union invested around 50 million euros in policies to combat disinformation between 2015 and 2020, an amount that the Court of Auditors considers meager. One of the measures put in place is the “EU vs Disinfo” project, which has warned European institutions about the different disinformation campaigns launched from Russia, but the Court of Auditors is considering whether it should be integrated into the European External Action Service, due to the danger that existing criticism may be identified as the official position of the EU. They also point out that there is a lack of resources including insufficient trained staff, scarce long-term funding, no adequate monitoring and evaluation framework, as well as the need to develop a system to coordinate joint responses and common measures against disinformation.

Among the measures implemented was a Code of Practice on disinformation, with which the Commission established a framework for collaborating with online platforms. However, the Court of Auditors indicates that this code failed to hold online platforms accountable for their actions and their role in actively fighting disinformation. A Euro-

pean Digital Media Observatory was also created, before which the Court of Auditors is cautious, given the risk that it will not meet its objectives. Furthermore, there is no media literacy strategy on this matter, and there is a fragmentation of policies aimed at tackling disinformation.

Within Europe, countries such as Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom have taken some measures against disinformation in recent years, according to the guide published by Daniel Funke for the Poynter Institute [26].

At the global level, the United Nations (UN) launched, in 21 May 2020, after the epidemic of false and erroneous information about the pandemic, the “Verified” initiative, led by the UN Department of Global Communications. The general secretary of the organization, Antonio Guterres, announced that they would try to provide truthful information around science—to save lives—around solidarity—to promote cooperation—and around solutions—to support populations affected by the climate and health crisis, or poverty, inequality, and hunger. “Verified” has a network of “voluntary informants”, to whom the UN sends verified messages on different topics, to promote their replication. There is still no report on the success of this initiative.

2.2. Information Consumption

New information consumption habits have also contributed to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation, related to the decline of certain traditional media and the emergence of others, such as social networking sites. In this sense, the most recent studies on news consumption, such as the Digital News Report for 2021, prepared by the Reuters Institute of the University of Oxford, warns of a rebound in the consumption of information derived from the pandemic, and an increased interest in television news, compared to the sustained increase in online news consumption in recent years.

However, newspapers have suffered a steep decline almost everywhere, as lockdowns linked to the pandemic affected the physical distribution of the press [27]. This blow was coupled with the fall in advertising investment, exacerbating the collapse in the consumption of information through newspapers that had already been recorded for years. The Digital News Report shows the sharp drop in newspaper consumption in several European countries, including Portugal.

The report, which compiles data from six continents and 46 information markets, highlights the strength of the reliance on social networks to consume news, especially among the youngest citizens and those with lower educational levels. Messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram have achieved significant market shares.

On the other hand, the greatest attention of readers around the news on Facebook and Twitter is concentrated on conventional media and journalists, although these, considered reliable sources, are being overshadowed by influencers and other alternative sources on networks such as TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. TikTok, for example, reaches a quarter of those under 35 years of age (24%), while 7% of users of this network use it for news.

As for the increase in audiences registered in the first months of the pandemic across all the types of information media, audiences have been retained by the brands with the greatest prestige and credibility, especially in the Internet information market. However, the authors of the report reflect a long-term trend of growing disinterest in the news itself, which they describe as a “huge challenge” for the survival of the media. The challenge for the media is to re-capture that interest without lowering standards or resorting to sensationalism, they emphasize.

The Digital News Report also reveals a relationship between people’s roots in their local communities and levels of local news consumption. In this regard, there are important differences depending on the country. For instance, people in Austria, Switzerland, and Norway have a greater involvement in the local community, as well as consume more local news, and local newspapers are more valued.

The current crisis has particularly affected free newspapers, which are supported by advertising revenue and often distributed on public transport. The Reuters Institute analysis confirms that around the world local and national publications have been affected by cuts, layoffs, and closures, which in many places prevent them from informing the public.

2.3. Importance and Decline of Local Journalism

Local journalism is “that which is carried out from, for and by the same citizen environment” [28]. The existence of this mode of journalism presupposes the existence of a defined identity connected to a specific territory, and a specific commitment on the part of the local or regional media, a communicational pact with a territory that some authors have called proximity journalism [29,30]. Information providers and receivers share the same community in that territory, which can be urban or rural. They are part of this community, where they are integrated. Their identity is related to this community.

Local information feeds this identity, providing the members of a community with the necessary knowledge to behave as citizens in this environment. In this sense, local media influence the public agenda of regional and local communities, provide citizens with knowledge of their leaders and different policies and positions, and collaborate in the necessary task of holding these public representatives accountable.

However, the emergence of new digital media and the mobile access to all kinds of national and international information are resulting in a significant loss in citizens’ attention to local news, and this trend threatens the survival of local media, especially the traditional ones [31–34]. According to Nielsen [35], local news sources are now waging a battle for attention, in a digital landscape full of social content that is easily accessible through mobile phones. There are more and more media and technologies, but less local journalism. Additionally, revenue models for local news continue to be under significant pressure, facing competition from technology and social platforms [31].

The local media, who have traditionally been the absolute owners of the information market of the town or area where they operated, are witnessing the breakdown of their traditional business model. This model has been demolished by the digital transition, the emergence of news platforms and aggregators, and successive economic crises [36,37]. Furthermore, the pandemic and related crises have affected hundreds of local media and forced them to close their doors. This is noted by authors such as Ardia et al. [32], who describe the progressive closure of newspapers and the dismissal of thousands of professionals in vast areas of the United States, where counties and municipalities that have been left as authentic “information deserts”. A report by the Poynter Institute [33] points to the closure of 100 newspapers in this country during the coronavirus crisis.

Abernathy [38] reveals in a report titled “News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?” that the trend has been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. In the case of the United States, more than 1500 of the 3031 existing counties have only one local newspaper, which in most cases is published weekly. In more than 200 of these counties, there are no communication media. They are absolute “information deserts”.

Newspapers have also disappeared from areas that are considered wealthy, although the loss of headlines is especially massive in the southern United States and in poorer communities. More than 25% of local newspapers in the United States have closed since 2004, and many more have reduced distribution or periodicity. The communities with the greatest “media poverty” are also the lowest income and most vulnerable. The new digital start-ups are not providing these communities with the information flow they need, since they are focused on urban centers with the highest population density, while the public media hardly introduce their own content.

In addition to this, rural communities that have lost their local newspapers lack good broadband coverage, making it difficult to access information through the internet. Local television and radio stations tend to focus on national issues or serious events, including disasters and accidents [32] (p. 11).

In many European countries, local newsrooms have established new dynamics, roles, and work routines to meet the demands of digital audiences [39]. In Portugal, a study of more than one hundred journalists from 42 local media in the central area reveals that in the second decade of the 21st century, a total integration of the Internet, social media and mobile devices in local journalist's routines has been achieved [40]. Digital technologies are used by these journalists primarily to gather news to contact sources.

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, traffic on the websites of many of these local news organizations increased, due to the need of readers to find information about their immediate area. However, during the months of confinement, the same news companies lost considerable income from events, advertising, and sales at newsstands. In countries such as the United Kingdom or Portugal, the public sector had to provide financial support to the press and inject millions in financial aid to the media industry, which partly benefitted local media [39].

Moreover, the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report [27] states that local information consumption has varied greatly in the last decade due to the emergence of digital platforms and the disaggregation of information. In fact, the study reflects that in this period, the specific services provided by platforms, applications and specialized sites have increased, such as the weather forecast or the search for leisure or employment options. In the past, all these services were part of the added value provided by local newspapers and media. Social media platforms have also led to the creation of communities around certain topics, and local authorities and businesses use their own networks and web pages to offer news. Therefore, users find large amounts of information about their community outside of the traditional support of the news heading or local station.

The same study indicates that the traditional value of the news that users seek in local media is now focused on certain topics, such as local politics or events. This varies depending on the culture of each country. For instance, in countries such as the United Kingdom, for example, audiences are more likely to use search engines or websites to access data related to the weather or the labor market, and social media when looking for recommendations. Even when it comes to finding information about COVID-19, the most common sources are Google search results, social media, or government sites. In contrast, in Norway local newspapers are perceived as the most relevant source for political information, events, coronavirus information and leisure activities. Internet sites and search engines are considered more convenient solely for information about the weather and the local labor market.

Moreover, according to Ardia, Ringel and Smith [32], a change in consumer information demands has been evident for two decades, but the media have been reluctant to change a business model that had been successful for decades, neglecting innovation policies until it was too late. Along with news disaggregation and the lack of evolution among newspapers, the traditional advertising management model at the local level has been replaced by focused advertising, which is often managed by giants such as Facebook or Google. This shift has destroyed the business model of local media. In this sense, the possibilities offered by these platforms in terms of audience segmentation means that local businesses can ensure that they make the most of the investment. This has resulted in a shift from advertising options offered by newspapers, radios and television stations, which previously were the only ways to address the audience. The platforms have very specific data on the tastes, preferences and needs of different types of audiences, something of enormous value for advertisers, and that the media cannot offer.

"Newspapers don't have the data and therefore cannot deliver the same level of targeted advertising. As a result, companies have diverted their advertising efforts from traditional local news sources to online platforms" [32] (p. 13).

Digital platforms have also positioned themselves as new intermediaries between news producers and consumers, and they do not bear the costs of producing such information, but the benefits of distributing it. In addition, as recognized by local publishers

themselves, when placing their news in digital platform spaces, there is a loss of the information brand itself [41].

Even in the case of media that have opted for the subscription model to monetize the production of information, the time and means needed for the development of a good story are not profitable, since, once published, the news is replicated by other media and social networking sites simply by mentioning the first media source that launched it, which diverts readers to other media and, once again, to digital platforms [36]. This is especially detrimental to local media, which are discouraged from allocating human and economic resources to the coverage of such stories.

This transformation in the consumption and distribution of content has progressed in parallel with a decline in the dissemination of traditional media, and the dismissal of newsroom professionals. In the United States, the number of employees in newsrooms fell by 51% between 2008 and 2019, from 71,000 to 35,000, according to a report by the Pew Research Center. However, it is not just about one outdated business model being replaced by another. According to a study by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia Journalism School, co-published by Blanquerna University [34], the real problem is that the structure and economy of digital social platforms prioritize the dissemination of low-quality content. “Journalism with high civic value—journalism that investigates power or reaches marginalized and local communities—is discriminated against by a system that favors scale and shareability” [41] (p. 4). According to the authors of the same report:

“Technology companies like Apple, Google, Snapchat, Twitter and, above all, Facebook have largely assumed the role of news agencies, to become key players in the information ecosystem, whether they want that role or not. The distribution and presentation of the information, the monetization of the publication and the relationship with the public are dominated by a handful of platforms. These companies may be concerned about the health of journalism, but it is not their main purpose” [41] (p. 8).

In this context, editors have lost control of the distribution of information, which is left to the discretion of each platform’s algorithm. Therefore, platforms have the power to control how an agency or medium performs in the dissemination and distribution of their news. They have become the new gatekeepers, who decide what is and what is not relevant to a previously segmented population group.

2.4. How Disinformation Spreads

In the propagation of disinformative content, responsibility lies not only with the promoters of said content, but also with social media and Internet users, who have gone from being mere consumers to information prosumers [42]. Dissemination multiplies with virality, and this emerges from credulity and adherence to the postulates the content of these Internet users’. In the processes of spreading hoaxes, the emotions aroused in the public have a special incidence, which leads to the massive sharing of messages received. The structure of these messages is designed precisely to make them viral: these messages are short, easy and quick to read, containing colloquial language and exaggeration [43].

Traditional media also play a relevant role in these processes. These media are not only going through a business model crisis. In the new digital ecosystem, they have lost their consolidated role of influence. Their attempts to recover it include practices such as the publication of content that has been relevant and widely shared on the Internet, and information that has achieved the category of Trending Topics (TT) on social media platforms such as Twitter.

To achieve this, traditional media sometimes rely on information published on blogs or social networking sites, seeking to attract readers and followers. Thus, they enter a problematic cycle, since by covering these issues they expose themselves to the dissemination of disinformation. This is one of the ways in which disinformation spreads: false information that leaps from the networks to permeate the elites (media and politicians), which multiply their dissemination [44]. This is how the dissemination of some conspiracy theories has multiplied [45].

In addition, according to Marwick and Lewis [45], in the last decade hyperpartisan websites have appeared, fed by groups related to extreme and radicalized tendencies and ideologies, which have managed to disseminate certain messages taking advantage of social networking sites, by attracting users interested in these ideas and amplifying the impact of their messages, so that its contents are shared to a greater extent than those published by conventional media. These hyperpartisan websites mix decontextualized truths and falsehoods to create a misleading worldview [46]. This information is massively shared by those who feel that the news in question confirms their previous judgments or positions on certain issues [32].

The material of dubious origin that feeds these partisan theses is later used by politicians across the political spectrum, who use it on social media and make it part of the conversation as useful ammunition to prop up their positions, acting as amplifiers of these contents [9,45].

In this new dynamic, a conspiracy theory, for example, can quickly move from the fringe speculations of certain websites to the headlines of mainstream media. Even when the media echo these theories to criticize them, putting them on their agenda enables those ideas to reach thousands of people.

These media mechanisms have been harnessed by politicians such as Donald Trump to have a greater impact and spread certain theories, such as the alleged fraud in mail voting during the 2020 presidential elections. He did this through statements that were not based on real data, but were replicated or criticized by the mainstream media, expanding its dissemination [44].

Hyperpartisan forums and websites create memes and content on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube that are later shared, and play with functions such as Twitter Trending Topics to expand their impact, according to Marwick and Lewis [45]. In this context, a social platform such as WhatsApp is noteworthy, since in 2018 it became the main medium for the circulation of fake news in the Brazilian general elections, and which has also been used to launch false images and videos in the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India [43].

Furthermore, the media and journalists sometimes use these networks and social media contents as sources of information. Disinformation is also fueled by so-called bots, pieces of software that create content and interact with users on social media. These bots behave like real followers on politicians' accounts, spreading propaganda, generating scandals and controversies, and ultimately influencing political discourse.

Along with the disinformation that is disseminated online, which often moves from the digital sphere to mainstream media and political discourse, with campaigns being promoted by the media and political elites themselves. These campaigns were, according to recent studies, the main means of disseminating disinformation in the months leading up to the 2020 election in the United States, persuading millions of citizens of the existence of mail voting fraud, delegitimizing the results [44]. These are campaigns that are coordinated by the elite, where mass media, who are clearly partisan, participate. In this case, social networks and digital media echo their statements and actions, defining what is being discussed (agenda setting) and how (frames).

In the midst of this disinformation ecosystem, mainstream media face a time of great vulnerability. Marwick and Lewis [45] (pp. 40–43) attribute this to growing citizen distrust in traditional media content and to attention economies, which require making content viral to generate more clicks and more advertising income, along with the decline of local media.

2.5. Disinformation at a Local Level

As previously mentioned, the pandemic has accelerated the decline of local media, already affected by the digital transformation of its business model, which is now championed by platforms. In the United States, at least 30 local newspapers were closed or merged in April and May 2020, dozens of newspapers abandoned the print edition, and thousands of journalists had their working hours reduced or were fired [32]. In the same

period, in Portugal, the Union of Journalists warned of the worsening of the situation of local newspapers. Many suspended their publication during the pandemic, with most of them already “living, for many years, on the razor’s edge” [34]. The same happens in other geographies, such as Brazil. Due to a certain passivity in rethinking local newspapers sustainability in the last decade, with the consequent closure of many of them, there are who calls to that a process of “silencing the local public” [47]. Even so, it is important to note that trust in local media is higher than that of national media in several countries [30,48].

As we have seen, studies on disinformation have grown in recent years. Additionally, although the origin and the look have been on a national and especially international scale, the effects of disinformation and “fake news” are beginning to be felt primarily at the local level [47]. “The lack of journalistic investigation on issues that incisively touch everyday life has an immediate impact on municipal economies and on the psyche of the citizen” [47] (p. 21). Fighting disinformation largely depends on the vitality of local journalism [48]. In small communities, local journalists are often the only journalists that citizens will come across on their street, in their city. It is from the relationship between the two, in a closer proximity, that trust is built. According to the author, citizens no longer look at local journalists only as watchdogs but above all as neighbors. Boosting and monetizing a good neighborhood will be a way forward. “It’s harder to believe that everything is ‘fake news’ when the journalist you meet at back-to-school night, your kid’s football practice, or in the local coffee shop is not just your neighbor, but someone who is also reporting on important local stories that you know to be true”, he concludes.

Some examples that we find in the local media, can be considered to reinforce this issue of good neighborliness. This is the case of the heading “Há uma região que nos une” (There is a region that unites us), published in the Portuguese local newspaper *Região de Leiria* [30]. It publishes, every week, interviews with foreign citizens who arrived to this region to work and live; the same happens with Portuguese citizens residing abroad. This type of initiative helps local communities to get to know and integrate “the other” (who comes from another country, another culture, etc.). This is particularly relevant at a time when the world is witnessing a conflict between Russia and Ukraine—which started in February 2022—and which has led to an escalation of propaganda and disinformation. Human rights, emigration and refugees are increasingly in the news. These are topics that have already been studied, including in the local media [49,50]. If, on the one hand, it is recognized that these media do not ignore these themes, then on the other, it is emphasized that the voice that emerges is more collective (institutional) than individual (people or human stories). This is something that can lead us to question the extent to which local journalism is effectively exercised, that is, close to and with people. If it is true that sometimes it does not materialize [30], then it is also recognized that local media have an opportunity to be exploited there, especially considering the heritage of trust they have with the populations and the potential for collaboration [30,39,40,51,52].

This is corroborated by a recent report by the International Press Institute (IPI) [53], based on discussions with more than 35 journalists, editors, media leaders, and entrepreneurs who are transitioning legacy media and creating new local media voices in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. In this sense, the report analyzes the cases of new digital start-ups and traditional media in transition in Ukraine, India, Zimbabwe, Perú, South Africa, Mexico, Venezuela, Paraguay, Kyrgyzstan, Israel, Palestine, Hungary, Jordan, Pakistan, Argentina y Guatemala, and focuses on the engagement with local communities as the biggest opportunity for the local press future.

These local media outlets work to achieve a special relationship between journalists and local audiences, to generate trust and build an emotional attachment of “being on the same side” as their community [53]. The sustainability of local media demands a continued demonstration of their value to their communities. This must be the main purpose for local press. Additionally, the battle against disinformation may be a way to reinforce the role of local press in this sense. In disinformation war, local media play a key role, and

they can demonstrate it with more fact-checking routines, carrying out deep reporting, and debunking disinformation and misinformation.

This is because the IPI's report recommends practicing journalism with vision and a sense of mission that matches audience/community needs, to focus on the community's needs, to create a global network that supports local media challenges, and leverage the relationship of local trust to rebuild confidence in news media and lead the fight against misinformation and disinformation.

It should be noted that these media outlets often have fewer resources. Thus, if the scrutiny of powerful actors is already compromised without journalistic media in a certain region or city, it remains a challenge when they exist. In a scenario of growing online content circulation, the management potential of local journalists is like that of journalists working for national media. How do we do this? It seems to us that the participation of citizens and the local community could be a way forward to help combat misinformation at a smaller scale [51]. This is precisely what the MediaTrust.Lab—Local Media Lab for Civic Trust and Literacy aims to study and explore—ongoing project at University of Beira Interior, Covilhã, Portugal (2021–2024).

The decline of local media leaves communities in a state of serious vulnerability. Reliable resources and sources around local information are scarce assets, information is increasingly accessed through social networks, and in these digital spaces, as has been explained, misinformation easily proliferates. "In the vacuum left by the disappearance of local news sources, users increasingly depend on sources of information that are incomplete and, in fact, can be misleading" [32] (p. 21).

The platforms have acquired a dominant position in this market, positioning themselves as intermediaries between the producers and consumers of information, collecting a huge amount of user data, and becoming essential mediators in the advertising market.

In addition, for the dissemination of information, platforms use algorithms that offer news based on the type of public, seeking to capture readers through emotional appeals. This results in users who always consume the same type of information, generating information bubbles in which different points of view do not penetrate, and leading to polarization.

Platforms do not prioritize the problem of disinformation and have even asked the authorities for help in this area, considering that they are not legitimized to act as arbiters of the truth. However, they have avoided a passive stance in the face of an issue that damages their credibility. So far, they have implemented content moderation measures, hiring external technology consultants to eliminate toxic content [54], and reaching agreements with some fact-checking companies to tackle the problem, within their external verification program. In 2018, Facebook launched the Accelerator project within the Facebook Journalism Project. Its objective is to train local news publishers to make their business model more sustainable, providing them with training to create online communities and increase their income from digital readers.

On a smaller scale, Hepp and Loosen [37] propose *molo.news*, a relational platform for local journalism. While not designed with the aim of fighting disinformation, can be exploited for that purpose. "These spaces of relationality in the different configurations of a city open the perspective of journalism to reposition itself in relation to other local voices and not simply to equate to them" [37] (p. 10). In this sense, we think that making fact-checking more effective and combating disinformation involves collaboration between local journalists, content producers for other types of media and citizens in general. In resume, a good-neighbor relationship that promotes and strengthens bonds of trust.

3. Conclusions

Collaborative initiatives between companies and information professionals have continued to grow in the last decade, and have provided opportunities to focus on local information, as highlighted by Jenkins and Graves [52] as well as Wiltshire [31]. In this sense, media outlets and professionals, who have traditionally competed to get published earlier, more, and better than the rest, have perceived that some stories require them to

work collaboratively. Sometimes, these stories will only see the light if developed through the collaborative efforts and the collective resources of many professionals and companies. With this intention, a coordinated strategy is deployed, which harnesses human and material resources and cross-distribution channels, generating a greater impact.

Great stories require moving from the lone journalist model to collaborative journalism. This form of journalism not only involves journalists, but also other professionals such as designers, programmers, data analysts, among others. This type of collaboration also includes audiences and information consumers [55].

Over the last decade, various media organizations have found ways to work together to solve problems that have reduced the operational capacity of media outlets. Many professionals are working on initiatives such as international journalism consortia, thanks to which it has been possible to publish great stories such as the Panama Papers in 2016 or the Pandora Papers in 2021.

The Panama Papers, for example, were published thanks to the work of more than 400 journalists from 107 organizations in 80 countries, and this macro-display was recognized with a Pulitzer Prize [56]. Certain stories only come to light thanks to the pooling of resources and information, achieving greater visibility and impact through a coordinated publication and distribution strategy [52].

These great transnational research projects are just some examples of work models that are already setting the agenda for media outlets in Europe and the United States, but also in Africa, Asia and South America [57].

In Mexico, for example, the Tejiendo Redes Media Alliance was formed in 2018, comprising journalists from Chiapas, Mexico City, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Puebla, Guerrero, Jalisco, Sinaloa and Chihuahua, based on previous networking that generated projects such as En el Camino (for migration coverage) or Resistencias (to report on the defense of native peoples' lands).

The Investiga Lava Jato project is also noteworthy, as it brought together journalists from 15 countries in Latin America and Africa to investigate the payment of bribes and corruption practices linked to Brazilian companies with investments in various parts of the world, such as the construction company Odebrecht [55]. In Argentina, the Reverso project brought together more than one hundred media outlets to verify information during the 2019 presidential campaign. The Argentinian Journalism Forum also brought together professionals from six different provinces to prepare a report on the Argentine health system.

Globally, one of the most important collaborative journalism initiatives is the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), created in 1997 to provide resources to journalists from around the world, such as state-of-the-art technology, funding, and legal coverage. Research is shared on the Internet and can be disseminated without limits. Their achievements include reports such as SwissLeaks, a project that involved more than fifty media outlets and which uncovered the names of thousands of clients of the Swiss subsidiary of the HBSC bank who had evaded taxes, or Skin and Bone, focusing on the human tissue trafficking from victims in developing countries [58].

The case of ProPublica is also noteworthy. This is a non-profit organization created in 2007 in the United States that produces large investigative reports with a philosophy of strategic collaboration. Thus, ProPublica holds agreements with entities who publish their contents under exclusive conditions and others who reproduce these contents under a Creative Commons license.

In Europe, according to Parra [58], Journalism ++ emerged in 2011, a company dedicated to the development of journalistic content by teams of information technology developers, designers and journalists, whose key format is data-based stories. Journalism ++ not only shares the content generated, but they also work in collaborative content production. In this sense, there are so-called producer partners, who have access to state-of-the-art technological tools and in return assume functions such as data search, information analysis, channeling interviews with sources or generating informative projects under the

supervision of the organization. The producing partners also benefit from the transnational dissemination of the stories in which they participate.

On the European continent, there have been some more collaborative journalism initiatives. Jenkins and Graves [36] analyzed those carried out by the Bureau Local (UK), “L’Italia Delle Slot” (Italy), and Lännen Media (Finland). The three initiatives engaged former competitors with the shared aim of producing high-quality local journalism.

In this sense, the Bureau Local created a permanent network of journalists and non-journalists engaged in topic-driven reporting projects; “L’Italia Delle Slot” involved legacy and start-up news organizations that work together on a single extended investigation, and Lännen Media opened a collaborative newsroom, demonstrating the power of regional news organizations sharing content.

The journalists involved were able to report on topics they would not typically cover as well as engage with familiar subjects in more comprehensive ways. They have also learned how to better incorporate data and multimedia elements into their reporting [36,52]. Participants were enabled to manage competitive tensions and build trust and confidence. At the end, these initiatives enabled strategies that allowed journalists to connect with communities to tell their stories, strengthening local journalism.

As we have seen, the collaborative work of transnational platforms and consortia strengthens and the fabric of local media, in a network system that allows access to resources, sources, technological tools and methods that would otherwise be out of reach of these local media.

Not all cross-collaboration initiatives between media and journalists are successful. Some fail due to cultural reasons, since the reluctance of the mainstream media is still frequent when it comes to sharing resources and need to dominate the competition [56]. However, studying the impact of these initiatives as an opportunity for local journalism and an antidote to the proliferation of fake news is an emerging topic of discussion.

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