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Abstract. This article examines the impact of the fake news phenomenon in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. More precisely, it shows what negative effects they can have on a society, how the evolution of new technologies has simplified the dissemination of fake news, what measures the European Union has adopted against them, and how important media literacy is in the context of increasing audience resilience. Specialized literature suggests that rural residents, young people, the elderly, people with disabilities, and the less educated are the public types most vulnerable to disinformation. With this in mind, the author chose young students as his study group to investigate whether they are indeed vulnerable to disinformation or not. Moreover, the author chose two different categories of students to investigate whether the following profile (real or human) influences their perception of the fake news phenomenon. The basis of this study was an interview guide that was applied to a number of 16 students (8 real profile students and 8 human profile students). The results of this study showed that young students know the motivations behind the spread of fake news and disinformation, they know that social media have amplified the spread of these two phenomena during the pandemic, and they are aware of the negative effects they have produced at the level of society as well as individually. Also, young students do not know the concept of „side reading”, the vast majority check information only after reading it, but use other techniques to check information.

Keywords: Fake news; Disinformation; Social media; Fact-checking; Young students.
INTRODUCTION

What began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, would change the way hundreds of millions of people live. Shortly after the first cases of the disease were reported (29 at that time), the virus was immediately identified as a new type of coronavirus and received the official name of Covid-19 or SARS-CoV-2 (Whitworth, 2020). As of March 10, more than 48,000 cases had been confirmed and approximately 3,000 deaths had been reported globally. On March 11, the World Health Organization announced that the world is facing a Covid-19 pandemic as of today (Khan et al., 2021). However, another crisis was announced to be at least as dangerous, namely the information crisis or infodemic. According to the World Health Organization, “an infodemic is an avalanche of information, including false or misleading information encountered in digital and physical media during a disease outbreak. An infodemic can have negative effects on society by intensifying or prolonging outbreaks when people are unsure of what to do to protect themselves and those around them” (World Health Organization, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented situation, and because of this, people wanted to be informed as quickly as possible about this virus (where it comes from, how it manifests itself, how it can be treated, etc.). A very important thing that any person should keep in mind when seeking information is the source of the information. Thus, in a study carried out by the Reuters Institute, in Romania, the main sources of news came from: “the online environment (including social media) 84% in 2021; television 79%; exclusively social media 58%; print media 17%” (Radu, 2021). The online environment is still an unsafe one because it is not sufficiently regulated in terms of preventing and combating disinformation. Numerous studies have shown that fake news can negatively influence the allocation of human or financial resources in a crisis (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Also, other studies have found that the inefficient allocation of resources can lead to feelings of mistrust, alienation, or even cynicism (Balmas, 2014).

The present work aims to answer the question “How did the fake news phenomenon influence the Covid-19 pandemic?”. To answer this question, the author chose a qualitative research design. Because the Covid-19 pandemic is a recent one, there are still not many works that research aspects related to the resilience of the Romanian public in the face of the online disinformation phenomenon. More precisely, the study aims to understand to what extent young people in Romania know and apply the mechanisms for recognizing and combating disinformation.

Disinformation and fake news

According to some prominent authors and institutions, disinformation can be defined as the product of three techniques for influencing opinion, namely: propaganda, advertising, and intoxication (Volkoff, 1999). Disinformation can be found in the form of false information or even rumors that are knowingly created and distributed (Jayakumar et al.,