

# Disinformation Perception by Digital and Social Audiences: Threat Awareness, Decision-Making and Trust in Media Organizations

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The effects of disinformation in the media and social networks have been extensively studied from the perspective of reception studies. However, the perception of this media phenomenon expressed by different types of audiences in distant geographic locations and with different media cultures has hardly been addressed by experts. This theoretical review study aims to analyze the relationship between the actual level of disinformation and the perception expressed by the audiences themselves. The results of the study reveal, firstly, that users of social networks and digital media do not perceive being surrounded by an excessively worrying volume of disinformation, a fact that contrasts with the data recorded, which are visibly higher. This situation reveals that the audience tends to normalize disinformation, which is intensively consumed on a daily basis and does not seem to worry the public in general terms, although some differences can be detected depending on variables such as gender, age or education. On the other hand, paradoxically, audiences visibly express rejection attitudes towards the channels that disseminate false information, with media outlets being the least trusted, despite recognizing that social networks are the place where more disinformation is generated and circulated at the same time.

Keywords: disinformation perception ; fake news ; digital audiences ; social media ; media organizations

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Disinformation is not a problem of recent emergence but is a matter that concerns the media in a larger measure as compared with other actors involved in digital communication. The proliferation of news that is fake, misleading or that includes erroneous or inaccurate data is already a problem in many information systems where media organizations compete with other communication companies whose function is not strictly informative but purely relational or related to entertainment. This is the case for social networks, where news is often created and disseminated by unknown agents at a much faster pace than in the media.

The publication of inaccurate, unverified or false information by some media outlets does not help to increase the level of trust placed in them by the public. The truth is that both misinformation and disinformation in the media are perceived by audiences as an attack on the right to receive truthful information, a right that is constitutionally guaranteed by the rule of law.

Disinformation, in particular, not only damages the reputation of the media that is accused of not being objective but also citizens' lives, since the impact of fake news can be felt in many social decision-making processes.

In this sense, the consequences of disinformation have been analyzed in scientific research of a political nature <sup>[1][2][3][4]</sup> but also in the media <sup>[5][6][7]</sup> about the concept <sup>[8][9][10]</sup>, the contents <sup>[11][12][13]</sup>, the sources <sup>[14][15][16]</sup>, the distribution channels <sup>[17][18][19]</sup> and the multiple strategies to fight against disinformation, among which media literacy stands out <sup>[20][21]</sup> <sup>[22]</sup>. The effects of disinformation have also been discussed from the perspective of reception studies; however, there is a very small number of investigations that address in depth the problem of disinformation from the audience's viewpoint through the so-called "perception studies".

The experts agree on the fact that studies have hardly been undertaken on the way the public deals with fake news and what is the perception that they really experience <sup>[23][24]</sup>. As argued by Yang and Horning <sup>[25]</sup>, the perception of disinformation that circulates, especially among users of social networks, is likely to influence their behavior and their attitudes towards the news published by the media. Thus, when the audience feels disinformed, negative feelings of manipulation and other reactions like media rejection and lack of interest in reading the news arise.

Tandoc, Lim and Ling <sup>[26]</sup> also carried out research on how the audience reacts when exposed to disinformation and the role the public plays in the dissemination of fake news, whether consciously or unconsciously. The authors suggest that

disinformed people who believe fake news is true can contribute to the propagation of misleading information, which is the consequence of a wrong perception of the level of disinformation experienced by some individuals. Another relevant study is the one developed by Blanco-Herrero, Amores and Sánchez-Holgado <sup>[27]</sup> on the way disinformation is perceived by individuals depending on variables such as age, gender, education or social class, among others. The results show a lack of correlation between the disinformation perceived and experienced by some audience segments, like older individuals, whose perception of disinformation is higher and more negative than the one perceived by young people, or women, who proved to be more skeptical towards disinformation than men.

This bibliographical review study aims to complete the research carried out by experts in the past, summarizing and clarifying how the audience of different media outlets, social networks and other digital environments perceive disinformation. In this regard, the aim is to shed a more powerful light on the way disinformation impacts the audience of different media: to what degree does disinformation truly concern citizens, to what extent does it influence decision-making processes and in what way does it damage confidence in digital and new media. In that context, specific factors like political voting, audience decision-making on social and public issues and the public's reaction to government or institutional disinforming news stories are analyzed.

The research questions of this work are in accordance with these goals and are listed as follows:

- Q1. Is there a correlation between audience disinformation perception and the public's actual level of disinformation?
- Q2. Can audience disinformation perception influence on relevant decision-making processes?
- Q3. Concerning disinformation, are traditional media more distrusted than social networks?

The main objectives of this work are to know how disinformation really shapes the lives of people globally, to analyze the results of previous research on the problem of disinformation from a conceptual point of view and to draw useful conclusions for digital news consumers.

This study is relevant because, for the first time, a compilation of the main empirical contributions published to date that address the subject under study is carried out, an academic area little treated by experts, possibly due to the complexity of undertaking research work that involves multivariable analysis <sup>[28]</sup>.

The results of the study reveal, in the first place, that digital media and social network users do not have the impression of being surrounded by an excessively worrying level of disinformation. This could be explained by an excess of confidence on the part of the users, who tend to perceive themselves as more capable of resisting the effects of disinformation than others, or by the habituation to a high level of disinformation, which is more and more accepted as normal. Consequently, the disinformation that is consumed on a daily basis does not seem to worry most of the public, although some differences can be seen depending on variables such as gender, age or education. Finally, the audience expresses a remarkable rejection towards fake news and traditional media, who are the least trusted, despite the fact that social networks are the place where the most disinformation is generated and circulated at the same time, according to the public.

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